

A Brief Rejoicing...

"Missus Henrett, please," Jossimer said, patting the old woman on the back, "You may release me now."

We had just gotten news from James that the boss was alive and well and somehow-or-another back with the Hammerites out in the woods. It didn't make any sense to me, but James wouldn't tell us something if it wasn't true. If Jossimer wasn't skeptical, then none of us had reason to be. I had just watched with amazement as Mrs. Henrett had broken out the good wine, poured us all a glass, and then gave Jossimer a bear-hug when the man dared to reveal how worried he had been. It was funny, since she was half his size.

"Cheers!" I said to my wife, as I clinked my glass with hers. It had taken me hours to get her to stop shaking after she had tried to resuscitate the boss, only to have his body pulled from her and locked up. She had even gone and convinced herself that James and Jossimer wanted him to die.

"Cheers," she said back, a little red in the eyes but with a smile on her face. We both drank.

"How long 'til we hear some more?" Jarah called out, after polishing off his second glass.

"Jarah please, I have only just received this message ten minutes ago, and already you request more information. Be satisfied that all is well!" Jossimer scolded.

"I was afraid you were going to tell him to get back to work," I said to Jossimer with a laugh. "Truth is we're all tired as snot. Now that all of this is over, why don't we let the Gryphons go home and we get some shuteye?"

My wife pinched me in the butt. She probably wasn't going to let me get any shuteye. I knew what was coming as soon as we got home. Take out the trash!

"I will allow the Simon Brothers to have the rest of the day off, provided you rest and come back to work tonight in peak condition. That includes Missus Simon and Missus Henrett as well, of course. The Gryphons will keep watch in your stead, and will be dismissed once the night shift begins."

My brothers all hooted and hollered, raising their glasses in the air and requesting more. Mrs. Henrett was happy to oblige.

A Brief Rebuking...

"No, it's too soon."

Balastar Ramirez regarded his uncle from across the room. The Lord sat slouched in his chair before a plate overflowing with meat, picking at it gingerly as the heavy wooden chandelier overhead swung in a slight draft. The Nephew stood at the opposite end of the table, with patched cuts and gashes still visible on his stoic face. The monocle dropped from his eye at the rejection. "But The Circle lies in ruins!"

"And there's no proof that Nightfall won't be back tomorrow to rebuild it."

Wait until you have proof that he is not coming back.”

“What proof do we need?” he urged, leaning forward slightly.

“An obituary. A casket. A funeral. In other words; him being dead.” Lord Ramirez glared at Balastar with his twisty mustache hair bristling out wider and wider every second.

“Send more assassins. It could work the second time.”

“I don’t know anything about assassins,” Ramirez said as he began to chew on a bit of meat that he placed delicately into his gaping maw.

“No,” Balastar said sarcastically. “Of course you don’t. Why would you want to have anything to do with a failure like that?”

“You can include yourself in that list of failures, boy!” he growled.

Balastar seemed to shrink a little, and then replaced his monocle. “It wouldn’t do now, anyway. He is out with the Hammerites. When he returns, however,”

“When he returns,” Ramirez said, pointing at him with a long, pointy bone. “You will do as I ask you to do. I make the plans around here, not you. Remember that, boy.”

Balastar muttered something which I couldn’t hear, but it sounded like he had said “heir.”

“What was that?” Ramirez barked, losing a bit of food into his beard in the process.

“Nothing. I will leave you now to your feast. Be sure to summon me when you wish to order me around, Uncle.” He turned and left without asking to be dismissed. I nervously turned to look back at Lord Ramirez, but only saw him sinking his teeth into another chicken wing.

A Brief Reckoning...

All around me was molten metal and wafting fumes. Workers shouted over the hiss of the steam and the bubbling of the iron. I watched, silently observing, as a tremendous crane lifted a glowing red vat high overhead, before pouring its contents into a massive form. Many did this, one after the other, always perfectly choreographed, always in step.

It could have been day or night; no windows allowed a glimpse of the truth. It could have been deep underground. For all I knew, it was. The chamber was vast, stretching out into the distance, with rows of hanging lamps illuminating the factory floor. The vile Hammer-heads called this the *machinist* lab. I had worked my way to the heart of The City, to the wretched Soulforge Cathedral, and the factories it hosted. It was *here* that the metal beasts which *tore* through the wilderness were born. I was not here to observe this. We had already discovered the machine’s weakness. My mission was to discover something *more*. The Lady sent me because I was the *best* for this; fast, silent, and most of all, my eyes remembered *everything* beheld by them.

Hand over hand; I went farther up the big chain which had brought me to

this vantage point. Once on the fat metal beams which spanned the ceiling, I could travel anywhere within, unseen. So far all we knew about this place was conjecture, ideas, rumors. If my mission was a success, we would know the truth. The Hammerites would not stop with their lumbering hulks of steam and iron like the ones that tore through the wilderness. Their appetites had been wet. We knew they were designing something *else*, something *worse*, and The Lady, nay, *I*, would not allow that to happen.

I saw many pipes coming up from the ground. I did not understand their workings, but I felt that there had to be *more* factories below this one, somewhere *deep*, somewhere *hidden*.

Chapter 13

Building Bridges

— Nightfall: Brother Thurm's War —

Day 6: 12:00 pm

"No, no! Stop!" he shouted, but it was too late. A single link in the chain snapped, sending both sides flying violently in opposite directions. When the brief moment of panic had settled, it was quickly established that no one was hurt.

"It's not working," Sarievo said to me, as if stating the obvious was in his list of many services. After my abrupt appearance had gone unnoticed, I formed a tale which I hoped would draw the least suspicion from Brother Thurm, but it was unneeded. He was so absorbed in what he was doing I could have told him that I spent the morning on the moon and he would have replied with the same absent dismissal.

The first attempt had already ended in failure. The two surviving machines had both made it to the site of the villa, but due to the depth and width of the moat we could not get them close enough to attack the stump directly. We hooked the first of the two machines, which had been outfitted with the deforestation equipment, onto the stump with all manner of chains and attempted to drag it away simply by putting the machine to full power and pressing the locomotive to travel in the opposite direction. All we had managed to do was get it to lean several feet when the machinery gave out, valves burst, and the entire mechanism was deemed too damaged to use any longer without considerable danger.

So the second machine was now being employed, but in a different way. One of the wrecking arms had been converted into a rudimentary crane which we had lofted up and over the stump, and were attempting to pull it straight up out of the ground rather than drag it to the side. We had gotten the machine so close to the moat that the support piles had been employed—basically long metal poles driven into the earth to keep the machine from moving. If it shifted just another foot forward, it would drop right into the moat and be lost.

The crane's arm itself was being supported by wedge-shaped scaffolding constructed from wood recovered from the smoldering burn pile of the villa's remains. The arm itself did not need to move in order to work, so in order to allow it to extend far enough across the moat to a point above the center of the stump; the wooden scaffolding was built to keep it firmly in place. As the machine worked, the chain would coil around a spinning spool, with the other end wrapped around and spiked to the stump. The first attempt had loosened it from the ground to such a degree that, if we all pushed with our backs, we could make it rock slowly back and forth. This allowed several chains to actually be looped around some of the thicker roots, to complete the grasp. In theory, as the chain pulled, the truss (and thus the crane arm) would hold firm and the stump would not, instead being pulled from its roots. The truss and the grip on the stump (after several failed attempts) were both holding firm. On the other hand, the chain kept breaking.

There seemed to be an unending supply of chain however. More was being put in to replace the broken lengths, as if simply doing the same thing

over and over would somehow change things. To my, at least temporary, relief Thurm commanded that everyone hold off and resume digging until he completed a revised set of figures. At least, with the digging, the longer it took to make the machine actually do the job, the less dirt would be around the stump holding it in place, which, in theory, should have made the job easier. Thus far it didn't seem to be having any effect.

He had worked in the small command compartment of the machine for about five minutes when he began shouting orders again, sending his engineers and the undercover rangers into action, dropping their shovels and shifting the location of chains and feeding more fuel into the fire of the steam engine.

He pushed the lever which shifted a gear to draw the chains into play and then another to engage the gears and to begin pulling the chains. The machine lurched forward as the chains grew tight threatening to crush the truss (or drive it into the ground), but not doing so. Everyone watched with bated breath as he pushed the lever a little more, and a little more, right to the edge of the self imposed limit of strain the machine could take. In spite of the truss the crane arm was bowing to the strength of the stump, which was going nowhere. I turned my eyes back to Thurm in his command booth, half expecting the fellow to give up at any moment.

He stared down at his sheet of calculations, sweat glistening off his wrinkled, brow, dripping down onto the page. He caught his writing stick as it rolled off the side of the work surface, and placed it back at the top. Face clenched with both hands, he stared. He whispered numbers and calculations to himself over and over. "It's right," he whispered. "Why isn't it working? We're pulling straight up. Straight up..." He looked up again at the chains tied and hooked into the stump, at the dials at the control panel, and back to his sheet of calculations. Again, he caught the writing stick just as it was about to roll off the edge and onto the deck. He was about to put it back in its place, when he paused. He resumed, placing it where it was, but rather than return to his calculations, he watched it. Again, it rolled off the desk to one side. Instantly, he slammed his fist into the page of equations, shouting "Aha!" before scooping the implement back up, and claiming another, a long measuring stick.

He leapt from the command chamber to the ground. After using a measuring stick, he quickly dug several shallow troughs interconnecting the large puddles, and then observed quietly as the water filled the gaps, but none of the puddles drained to fill another. "The ground is level," he whispered to himself, and then spun around to face the machine.

He moved with astonishing speed, going directly to one of the metal support legs which were holding the machine in place. He placed the measuring stick on the ground, and compared the distance from where the support leg pierced the earth to the height of the chassis. He rushed to the next and did the same thing, repeating the measurement over to himself several times to commit it to memory. When he had measured all four, he leapt back into his workspace. He tore away his sheet of calculations and

discarded it with prejudice. He began working on another, fervently, his hand twitching with motion as he worked against straightedge and angled square, diagramming, calculating, equations written and solved one after another, followed by another diagram and another chart, all the while a steady flow of whispers escaped him; numbers, calculations. His sweat was getting into his eyes but he did not wipe it away.

As abruptly as he first leapt from his post, he dashed to a nearby panel. Dials were adjusted and tweaked, gauges were referenced, and then his hands went about a lever. With a great “umph!” of effort, he pushed the lever two notches to the right. The mechanical arm which was tugging at the tree shifted just as slightly, causing the entire wooden truss to shift and groan, but not break. “Now, straight up,” he muttered. Then, his eyes set like stone upon his wooden, rooted adversary; he took hold of a different lever, the one controlling the machine’s power, and pressed it forward.

The sounds of snapping cables reverberated through the air, but it was not chains breaking this time, it was roots! The machine shook along with its adversary as each root holding it fast to the earth snapped one by one, and with each the entire stump rising into the air by a yard or more. Finally, Thurm pushed the lever even farther, past the power level we had previously deemed safe.

With a sound like a lightning bolt striking right where we stood, the enormous stump rose into the sky. The entire machine rocked backwards, the front end lifting clear from the ground high enough for me to run under it. Just as loud but not nearly as unexpected, the stump and the machine came crashing back down to the earth, the crane-arm falling back to strike the wooden truss, shattering it. All the woodlands around us trembled with the sudden impact.

The sounds of cheering were like squeaks of mice in comparison. “We’ve done it!” Thurm shouted, though he could just as easily have been saying I’ve done it. My machine and I, I was sure he meant.

“Well done Thurm, well done.” I said, approaching as he leapt from his booth.

“Aye, thank thee Brother Daelus. It had occurred to me that power was not so much an issue as angle. However, my original calculations assumed that the machine was on a perfect horizontal, which was clearly not the case, so, I...”

I let him explain. He didn’t need me to understand, only listen.

“Brother Thurm! Brother Daelus!” shouted one of the engineers from the pit. “A passage!”

— Ghost: By Any Other Name —

Day 6: 12:00 pm

I awoke with a start; *the zombies are after me!* I scrambled, but got tangled up in something warm soft and fluffy. “The taffin’ hell?” I scoffed as I realized I was surrounded with animal furs. Then I remembered it all;

running from the temple, Lytha pulling me away into the night...*That kiss.* Being led to this encampment, and then suddenly becoming so tired I couldn't keep my eyes open.

I tumbled around until I was right side up, and began checking my pockets for anything missing. To my relief I found the star right where I had left it, still all shiny and perfect and cursed. Something was missing through. I padded my pants and the pouches on my belt, trying each one without luck. Where was the bloody choker! Sheam would never forgive me if I didn't get it back to her! Taff me!

There was a commotion outside, which woke me up. It sounded like all hell was breaking loose, and somehow I wasn't the one causing it. I was in a big tent of some kind, along with some bags and piles of things. As soon as I noticed the opening to one side I got some idea of what was going on out there; shouting and cheering, but in an angry sort of way. I wasn't part of it and I didn't want to be—but where the hell was Lytha?

Someone was coming. Thinking things through about as much as I always did—not at all—I dove for one of the piles of sacks at the edge of the tent, and hoped that it would hide me. I could peek out a bit from around the edge to see the opening.

She pushed her way into the tent, and then closed the flap behind her. It was Lytha! I rammied my knuckles into my teeth to keep myself from calling out to her. It was *not* Lytha! I could see the choker around her neck as plain as anything. She had stolen it from me! Whoever this was, it looked like she really didn't know what Lytha looked like, if it was even a she. Though the approximation was enough to fool me at first glance, the details were all wrong. Lytha was *much* more attractive.

She spun around in place looking every which way for me. She probably thought that I would still be asleep. Wherever Lytha was and whatever this other woman had done with her, she was probably lying naked somewhere—she was wearing Lytha's clothes!

Her back was to me. I felt suddenly very spry. I leapt from my hiding place and tried to tackle her, shouting "Got you!" as I went.

She spun around and let me slide right on by, only to twist around again and flip me over on my back, before ramming her elbow into my throat. Shit! I landed with a "Gak!" as her eyes and hissing face flashed into view above me. She was not happy! "Who are you; and what have you done with Lytha!" I demanded, which was exactly what I had planned to say if my tackle had actually worked.

"Ghost, you idiot! I am Lytha!"

"Burrick-shit!" I growled, not really caring if I splattered on her face. "You stole the choker! You're disguised as Lytha and trying to trick me!"

"Will you keep your voice down!" she hissed again, this time leaning close to do it into my ear. All of a sudden my body seemed to totally change its mind about the compromising position I found myself in, and I totally forgot what we were even talking about. "It is me. I am using the choker to disguise myself as someone *else* to trick *them*!"

"But..." I stammered. "How did you know about it? How did you figure out how to work it? Lytha didn't know anything about it."

She seemed to soften up, which again caused me to forget what we were talking about. "It wasn't that hard, Ghost. I'm not a half-wit." Great; that meant that I was.

She lifted up from me a little. It was strange; I had a hard time believing if it was really Lytha trying to look like someone else who looked a lot like her, or if it was someone else who...oh taff it! "Prove it!" I said with a disapproving frown.

She lifted up even more and shoved her shoulder in my face, bolted metal and all. "Oh damn," I said, feeling like a complete ass. "Sorry..."

She got off of me and dragged me with her, standing up and fixing my outfit where she had twisted me up. Why do women do that? "I'm sorry I took the choker from you. If you'll let me explain you'll see that I'm doing this for you."

"Give it back," I said without really listening, but at the same time finding I was unable to just reach up to her neck and rip it off. I was a murdering bastard, but that was just too far. Then it hit me; "Wait, what, for me?"

"This woman, Delphine, is my sister, but we're estranged, so I couldn't go to her as myself; I had to appear to be Thalia, my other sister. I'm disguised as her right now."

My jaw had to have been hanging open just a little. "Wait, what? You've disguised yourself as your sister so you can talk to your sister because this sister hates you but doesn't hate the other sister?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I said," she replied. "I think she can help you with your curse, and me with...with my arm." Her eyes went to the ground, and her whole stance changed. It looked like she was ashamed or something.

I was pretty angry, but was finding it hard to argue. "Listen," I said, as I always did when I started talking without really thinking about what I was going to say. "I stole that from someone too, but I really need to give it back, because I promised I would. So just...just give it back to me okay?" I felt like that was the worst argument ever, but now it was out there.

I didn't like how she looked. It wasn't right and was creeping me out. "You're going to have to wait just like you're making her wait," she said in a condescending tone. "A taste of your own medicine, maybe?"

"Wait, how did you know it was a she?" I said, losing whatever it was I was about to say, which I was sure would have been a lot better.

"Of course it's a she. Otherwise you'd never think twice about giving it back," again in that condescending tone. She was right though. "Now you listen," she said, grabbing me by the front of my shirt and pulling me right up against her. "These people are dangerous—really, really bloody dangerous. Those things that attacked us; they're outside, and there are more of them. These are the trickster's rejects. If you don't follow my lead and do exactly as I say, you'll be dead before you can say a taffer's nursery rhyme."

I was just staring at her wide eyed and mouth agape.

"But I know that their leader can break your curse. She's good at what

she does. She may ask you...no, she's going to ask you to do something for her though, and you'd better shut up and just do it. It won't be as bad as living with the curse for the rest of your life, I can promise you that, but you probably won't like it."

I closed my mouth and smirked, "Not used to having people order me around."

"Get used to it," she snapped. "And here's your first order. My name is Thalia. Say it."

"Thalia," I said, certain that I would forget it in two seconds.

"Yes, Thalia...If you breathe the word Lytha and anyone hears you—maybe even me—this will all be over and your skin is going to be passed out like a cheap party favor. I am Thalia, not Lytha. You've never even heard of Lytha. Do not talk about me. Do not say anything about me. If anyone asks you anything about me, play dumb. I *know* you can do that."

"Heh," I said, "sure yeah, play dumb; I can do that Lytha—*Ooh sweet merciful taffin' shit*," I said as I fell off her knee to the floor, clutching my crotch—"You horrible taffin' bitch!"

She knelt down next to me, pushing on my shoulder to hold me in place. "Next time it won't be my knee," she hissed with a scowl.

"Alright, alright, Thalia, Thalia...I won't forget.—Thalia-thalia-thalia-thalia."

She sighed and got up, just watching me lie before her in my suffering.

"Thal-ia, thal-ia, thal-ia, thal-ia, thal—ia-thal—ia," I said, chanting it to the tune of *The Marching Ants*. "Who is that...that other name? I don't even know it. Never even heard of it. Starts with an L you say? Don't know anyone by an L name. Except Laurela of course, but she's just a whore."

"Funny," she said, now standing at the tent's exit. "Are you going to be able to stand anytime, maybe, today?"

"Yeah, yeah, just, give me a moment, I'm used to these," I said with a grunt as I forced myself up.

I hobbled over to the edge of the tent, which Ly—er, Thalia was holding open for me. Outside it looked like what I'd expect to see when the circus went broke and had to shut down. All of the other tents were being pulled down, and it was being done by all sorts of freaks and weirdoes. A lot of them had fur, many were just plain old animals, and all of them looked like people I wanted to stay the hell away from me. "Ehh," was all I could think to say.

"She will call for us when she's ready," Lytha told me. Thalia! Damn it! "Until then we just need to lie...wait."

"Wait?" I said, and then realized what she meant. Someone was coming straight for us; and not just any someone, six feet of black cloth and woman. Somehow I knew that I was now face to face with the robed figure I had seen last night commanding those *things*.

"Ah, I see our guest is awake," she said in a voice that simultaneously made me want to write poetry and drown myself. "But I thought the rest we gifted you with would recuperate you. You seem, ill somehow."

"Oh, heh," I said, knowing exactly what she was talking about. Lytha was

like a statue now. Was she going to bail me out or was I going to have to fend for myself? Thalia! Taffin' damn it! "Just woke up with a bit of a...cramp. I'll be fine. Thank you, by the way, for the...nice bed." Somehow I felt like I was talking to some sort of royalty, like a countess or something, but at the same time like I was staring down a hooded snake that was making it clear that I knew exactly how long its fangs were.

She folded her hands loosely right below her breasts. "Thalia tells me that helping you is of great importance to her. Given that you have done so much for her, I can assure you that I will do everything within my power to rid you of this curse."

And now I felt like the snake was a spitter too, and I was well within range. Still Thalia—aha, I got it this time!—was doing nothing to help me out, so I just went with it. "Thank you," I said, trying to sound dignified. The words felt funny in my mouth.

Then she turned to Lytha. "I must occupy myself with trivial matters I am afraid. Prisoner transport, orders, and the re-sanctification of this natural ground once we have departed from it. I promise I will attend to you both as soon as I am able; possibly within the hour, or in short order beyond that. For now, you may sit, relax, and enjoy the time. There is food, and drink, for you both. Very soon there will be much to do.

"Thank you. It will be good to know what food tastes like again," Lytha said in reply. (Thalia! Thalia-Thalia! That was it; my family jewels were history.)

She slid away, like she was gliding, or like she had little wheels under that gown instead of feet. If I imagine them squeaking, it made her seem less chilling. I was going to give up on the whole Thalia thing. I would just refuse to say her name one way or another to keep from slipping up. I couldn't think of her by some other name. Right now she wasn't looking at me, but watching the woman in black go. I really wanted to see her without that choker on. She was so collected now; so much everything and anything I had hoped to expect from the legendary Lytha; only she was wearing someone else's face. Maybe, if I got her alone, she would take it off for me.

She glanced at me, and then looked away. "Come," she said. "I have a lot of explaining to do."

— Thalia: Overlap —

Day 6: 1:00 pm

"How dare you? How dare you!"

Lytha's voice bit and clawed at my mind, at every moment growing stronger with rage. Just as I felt I was about to lose control, she always faded into the background, leaving me feeling empty; a cruel betrayer.

"How can you stand there and lie to him? To him! He trusted you! You'll lead him to a fate worse than death! How could you betray us both to her?"

"She will use you up and throw you away. Can't you see? It's just like before! You're of use to her and then you'll be a threat! She'll have you

destroyed!"

Was it Lytha or the creature calling to me? Sometimes I could not tell the difference.

"She'll send you back to the Hammers!"

"Curse your wretched flesh! You deserve what you get!"

I forced it away, pushing harder and harder, all the time feeling as if I was sure to lose, this time would be the last time and that would be it; but then it was always over and I found myself again.

"...or in short order beyond that. For now, you may sit, relax, and enjoy the time. There is food and drink for you both. Very soon there will be much to do." Delphine's voice brought me back to the here and now. I felt a shaking deep inside, but fought it off completely. I would not betray Ghost or Lytha to her. It was I who was using Delphine; not the other way around!

"Thank you," I said. "It will be good to know what food tastes like again." Slowly I turned to look at Ghost. His eyes were fixed on her. I could hear his mind working away as it always did, a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions that were pleasant in their simplicity, but at the same time intimidating in their ferocity. I knew he was trying to decide what to make of her. He had no way to know; undoubtedly he had never heard of her and if he had he wouldn't have cared. His was not a world of gods and demons; only of himself, his goals, and whatever it was in between them. Even without touching his minds I could feel his thoughts turn to me, and so I looked away before he caught me staring. His eyes were working over my face, now trying to decide what he thought of me. I felt that intensity which I had found so fierce. I was still; keeping my eyes fixed on the departing Delphine and invited him to continue examining me.

No...It was Lytha; not me, that he was looking for. I felt a guilt creep over me as he stared, feeling as if his mind were no different from his hands caressing my face. Lytha was right; this wasn't fair. I had to stop him.

"Come," I said, abruptly looking to him. I caught his eyes for a second, but it was enough. I turned away before he could see me blush. "I have a lot of explaining to do."

What was I going to even tell him? I had no idea...I suppose I would find out soon enough. We did not have much time before Delphine would call for us, and I felt I needed to prepare him in dealing with her.

— **Nightfall: The Gap** —

Day 6: 1:00 pm

One by one we squeezed through the narrow crevice left by the uprooting of the stump. Bare earth was mixed with clay brick and sculpted roots. We were in what seemed to have been a narrow stair previously, spiraling down to unknown depths. The risers and treads were attached to the outer wall of the cylindrical shaft with a central opening from top to bottom, threatening possible death in the event of a misstep. The steep passage had been invaded by the roots, which had certainly wrecked havoc with the brickwork, and

with them dislodged, little was left but a tumble of debris. Passage was extremely difficult.

Torches were lit for the descent. We were already perspiring from the noon heat, but it was worsened with the close quarters to the earth and the flames of our light sources. The loose soil we were forced to squeeze through became mud against our bodies. By the time we had descended, by my mark, nearly five stories below the surface, calls from the leading group below told me that there was a space at the end of the stair, and that we were getting close.

After what seemed like an eternity where I could barely breathe and the flicker of the torch in my eyes brought more blindness than illumination, I found myself free in an open, cool, dark space. Several of the Hammerites and rangers had come out ahead of me, lifting their torches high above them in an attempt to illuminate the massive chamber we now found ourselves in. Thurm emerged from the tight descent a moment after I did, coming quickly to my side, mouth agape in wonder.

"Such remarkable brickwork," he uttered in a breath. "See how the makers designed it so that the roots which pushed through the surface and dislodged the blocks only madeth the structure stronger rather than weakening it.—Amazing!"

As my eyes adjusted to the light I realized that we were in a wedge shaped chamber, with the two walls and roof all sloping in drastically to the direction we came. A sensation of dread crept over me as I realized that the tree may have been placed there, centuries ago, in order to seal off the passageway below it. What saga were we only coming across the appendix of? Where were we? Who planted the tree to close this passage off? Who had chopped the tree down? Who decided to build a villa on top of it? If matters weren't so pressing and of limitless variety, I would have James research the answers to those questions at once. Now, sadly, was not the time.

The opposite side of the chamber spread wide, and as the ceiling grew to a great height, columns spanned the distance. Layers upon layers of root encircled the columns like leafless vines. I wondered how true Thurm's assertion was; that it was designed to have the intruding vegetation enhance the structure rather than destroy it. It seemed like a radical concept to be heard coming from a Hammerite. The group pressed forward, with more entering the room at every moment until it seemed like everyone was now down here.

Up ahead the ceiling vanished into darkness, though I reminded myself that no matter how high it seemed, it could be no higher than the stair we just descended; for above us was still the cleared lot of the former Villa, and a pair of wrecking machines. It was the way the floor vanished into darkness that had to be considered.

The Hammerites in front were at the edge of a great span, holding their torches before them in an attempt to gain understanding of this space which confronted them. As I approached the edge of the drop, I was met with the glum reality of our impediment. Though the chamber continued for some

distance ahead, our progress was halted by a gap which spanned the entire breadth of the chamber, and was clearly too wide to be leapt across. As I scanned back and forth along the lip of the drop, I noticed a place which was rough and unfinished. I walked to it, inspecting, and quickly decided that a stonework bridge once rested against this spot. Lifting my own torch high and peering across the expanse, I could make out the remains of the bridge's other side. A great deal of the opposite end was still intact, making it clear to me that whoever had worked to destroy the bridge was standing where I was now. I could have guessed that it was done by the same ones who planted the tree, but it didn't seem particularly relevant. We could go no farther.

"Hrm," Brother Thurm huffed as he came to the edge of the gap. "It doth appear as a puzzle," he said to himself, stroking at his short white beard furiously. A few of the other Hammerites, all Thurm's engineers, were muttering amongst themselves. It was not the murmur of fretting or defeat. They were brainstorming.

"Hail brothers, perhaps one of these fine columns couldst be dislodged from its place, and brought down upon this gap to span it and carry us across?"

"Nay dear brother, for hast thou not noticed that no mortar is present betwixt the stones of these columns. Were they to be dislodged, merely scattered stone would result. Furthermore, dost not forget our machine rests above our heads, and to weaken the structure would surely cause it to come caving in!"

Brother Thurm's eyes were intense with concentration as the problem was turned over in his mind. As his underlings continued to muse, he was calculating. Finally he spoke. "Mine brothers, who doth know the entire length of chain which hath been brought with us and currently rests above?"

"A combined length of four furlongs, brother; forty separate lengths of chain, if thou dost count the lengths we left behind at the ruined machines."

"Aye, I do now remember. So, two are with us above, though several lengths of the chain have already been ruined. We do have the means to repair the broken lengths and even join the lengths into longer ones." He looked over his shoulder, back in the direction we came as he thought.

"Yes indeed brother, if we wert to use the fires from the engines, this couldst be done simply."

"We must return to the surface and gather the chain, and form it into lengths long enough to reach from the machine above to the opposite side of this rift." He gestured his hand in the direction of the opposite side, and then paused, again thinking. "And how far is this span..."

"I estimate six yards, brother...perhaps seven."

"We will need to be as close as possible to the true span," he said, gazing above at the brickwork overhead. "The masonry overhead is irregular; otherwise simply counting the bricks wouldst betray the distance. But there is another way. To tell the exact length, the strongest amongst us must throw one of the chains to the opposite side, so that the far end of the length toucheth against the very edge. We shall count the number of links between

the end of the chain and his hand, to determine how long our bridge will need to be.”

“It will be a contest!” one of them remarked with excitement.

“Indeed it will be!” Brother Thurm replied with a grin. “Others amongst us must work to prepare the stone for the bridge. My machine is equipped with a long drill which can be used quite delicately against stone, for the tip is the finest diamond. We must pull out whatever stone we can, as long as it has two flat, parallel surfaces, and bore a hole through it with this drill large enough for the chain to pass through. If we work quickly, this bridge can be constructed before the sun sets. Tomorrow we will all be able to inform our brothers how we built a bridge without ever setting foot on the opposite side!”

I and the rangers stood in silence as the Hammerite plan was explained. I felt I could see where Thurm was going with this, though I was sure I would never have been able to come up with it myself without hours of contemplation in a comfortable arm chair; if even then. Without another word the group had split up. Some had set out at once to gather bricks that had fallen from the ceiling, and places in the walls where more bricks could be scavenged. I joined the group which was heading back up to the surface in order to collect the chains and craft them into linked lengths. It was not a question of would the plan work, these were Hammerites after all; it was a question of what we would find once we crossed to the other side.

There was a more important question, however, that I should have been asking; should we even be down here? I kept silent, partially doubtful that it would be possible to tear the Hammerites from their task, and partially fascinated with their plan, hoping to see it a success. The truth was: I saw no other path at the moment. Chispin still had not returned from his fool’s errand (nor had Ivan from his humanitarian one), and there were no other paths. Only one thing was certain; someone did not want someone else from passing through here, and we were halfway to defying that wish.

— **Thalia: The Painted Man** —

Day 6: 2:30 pm

“So basically once this Delphine breaks my curse and solves your problem too, which you don’t even know what is, we’re out of here and taking down anyone who will try to stop us.”

I nodded before taking another bite of the purple fruit. I wiped the thick juice off my chin with my wrist. “Yes,” I just said, thinking that a decent way to boil down our past hour and a half of discussion.

“Well why didn’t you just say so!” he said, tossing another pit into the huge pile he was building. This glade wasn’t going to be able to produce enough fruit to sate him.

“Things like that don’t seem simple to me, I suppose. It is...good, that you are able to...” I felt the words tangling up in my mind. I didn’t want to call him a simpleton, but that is where I felt like I was going.

"Cut through the bullshit?" he said.

I smiled, and nearly choked on my meal, "Yes, exactly." I stopped mid bite, sensing something at once. "Stay here," I commanded, and then leapt from my place on the ground, clear across the stream and into the thicket on the other side.

It was that same feeling; of being back in that cave with the underground forest. Only now it was more than that; I almost felt as if I could smell it. I leapt and dodged through the woods, moving as fast as I could afford while still being as silent as possible.

I felt it again, but something much more strong; a mind. There was someone nearby, a man; a powerful one, a sorcerer perhaps. I felt a rattle of movement nearby and then confusion; like it had split apart and was running in three directions at once.

No, I could not be fooled; these were decoys. I quickly honed in on the real target, and charged. In an instant I found myself bearing down upon a moving mass of green and brown; a man indeed, though dressed in heavy camouflage. I leapt to tackle him to the ground, but found him too strong to be brought down so easily. I felt his muscular back flex beneath my arms as he only sped up. I twisted my legs around to trip him, and we tumbled. I regained myself before he could, and was still holding on tight. I rammed us both into a large tree, so that the top of his skull made contact with the bark. He wasn't fazed; he spun around and slammed me into the tree, so that the back of my head cracked into the bark just as his had. Then he leapt away.

I also was not fazed. I leapt for him again, catching him about the waist. He fell flat on his chest, but was quickly reanimated. He contorted in my grasp, kicking me, and then spinning back around to catch my neck between his thighs. If I had hesitated for an instant my throat would have been crushed. I pulled a dagger from my belt and jabbed it at his thigh, but he slipped away just as quickly as I had attacked. I nearly struck my own neck.

My attempted attack had bought him precious seconds. I pushed myself from the ground and resumed the chase, but forced myself to stop before I even knew why. I caught a vine only by pure chance at the last second, jerking myself to a halt before the edge of a great cliff.

He sailed through the air, his cloak of leaves flying free of his sleek muscular body. I watched in astonishment as he caught onto the highest branches of a tree and grabbed, as if he were a monkey. He turned to look at me, sensing that I had given up my pursuit.

His face was feral, but still held a deep humanity to it. It was painted with small marks and glyphs which encircled his eyes, trailed down his cheeks and onto his lips. I sent my mind out to his, as if I was throwing a spear, but it found nothing. He was gone. I panted for breath, searching with my mind for where he could be, but feeling nothing now but the wild untamed land. I had only a sense that this would not be the last I would see of him, and that he was definitely *not* one of Delphine's.

It seemed as if I was fated to chase people in the woods and never come out the victor. I ran back to where I had left Ghost so abruptly. "Ghost!" I

cried, feeling a strange vacancy up ahead. I approached the clearing by the stream; saw the piles of discarded pits, and no Ghost. "Ghost?" I called out again. No reply. I took another breath to calm myself, and began walking back to Delphine's camp.

— Ghost: An Invitation —

Day 6: 2:30 pm

"Lytha!"...nothing. "Damn it, where did you go?"

"Why are you searching for *Lytha*?"

Oh shit. I spun around; Delphine. "Hi," I said, and then spun back around. Think, Ghost; think. "I caught a lizard, and Thalia said I should name it Lytha because it reminded her of someone, but it ran away!"

She laughed, tilting her head back and bouncing. "Why would she name it *that*?"

"I uh...already told you why."

"Where is dear Thalia?" she said, sliding up to me.

I turned back to look at her. I wasn't used to women being as tall as me, which meant I wasn't used to having to look straight ahead to look them in the eye. It kind of bothered me. "She uh, went to get more fruit."

She laughed again, but this time she kept her mouth closed and her eyes locked on mine. "You shouldn't answer questions you don't know the answer to."

I grinned and shrugged, wanting to back away just slowly enough to not look like she creeped me half to death. "Lots of folks tell me I shouldn't do stuff."

"Please come with me, Ghost. I have something I need to discuss with you, and we really don't need Thalia for it."

I cringed. "I'm not going to be keeping any secrets from her," I said, and then realized that was a really stupid thing to say.

"Not at all, but time is short, and this task is vital. I am afraid we cannot wait for her to return." She turned around and walked. Lytha warned me that Delphine was going to ask me for a favor. I guess Delphine wasn't going to be passive about it, at least. I glanced one more time in the direction Lytha had run, and saw nothing. Shrugging, I followed.

At first I didn't know where I was, and then I realized that these pagans were really good at covering up behind themselves. There was no trace that there had ever been tents or a fire or anything in the clearing anymore. I could just imagine their shamans running around, bags of grass seed in each hand, tossing it up into the air as they danced and sang 'grow grass grow!' And then they peed on the grass and up it came!

"Why do you laugh?" she said, looking over her shoulder at me.

"Uh," I had to think again. My daydream about peeing shamans was probably not a good thing to talk about to anyone, ever. "I am just so damn happy to be meeting you!"

She gave me a strange look, but not strange because she was a pagan

priestess or goddess or whatever, but strange became she was female. Without another word she turned around and kept walking. I kept following.

"So, Thalia tells me that you're going to help me with my curse," I said, hoping that was still part of the deal and this wasn't just a favor she was expecting out of the goodness of my heart.

"I will appoint all of my power to it. As I have said, it is very fortunate that you are here. I have a certain problem, and before your arrival I was certain that not one of my followers had the talents needed to solve this problem. So you see; it was fate that guided you here. Fate, that you shall solve my problem; and fate, that I shall solve yours."

"Yeah," I replied, looking around for any sign of the dozens and dozens of pagan things I had seen earlier. As far as I could tell, she and I were totally alone in the woods, walking somewhere. "Fate sure is good matchmaker. It's a good thing he doesn't charge."

She laughed again. "Why didn't Thalia mention to me how funny you are, Ghost? I really am not the type to laugh, but here I go again." Oh, I knew the type. She was buttering me up. Well I wasn't going to buy it. I'd sleep with her, kill for her, and steal for her; and not in that order, as long as she broke my curse, but I wasn't going to let her butter me up. No, nobody forms my opinions of other people but me!

"So right, the curse," I said, not wanting a subject change. "Just what do you think you'll need to do?"

"Well, to begin with, I will need to see the star."

I frowned. I didn't like giving my stuff away unless I was getting money back, but she made sense. I flipped it out of its hiding place and held it out to her. She took it, and then gestured for me to come and walk by her side rather than behind her.

"A work so beautiful, which can cause so much destruction," she said, turning it over in her hands.

"Yeah, heh; kind of like Thalia right?"

She laughed again, tilting her head back like before. For some reason she seemed to have more teeth than maybe she should have. "Yes, quite right." But then she got serious again. "I warn you...my work on it could possibly destroy it."

I had to force myself not to care. Actually, I did. If anyone destroyed it; I wanted it to be me, but I kept my mouth shut on that one. "Whatever you need to do," I said. "I just am sick of seeing zombies over my shoulder every damn night. It's been a solid week of this and, to be quite honest, I was pretty much ready to do anything to get myself un-cursed by the first night. So I'm fairly desperate at the moment."

"Mmm, do not worry, Ghost. I am sure I will not be asking you to do anything you have not already done before." She held the star tightly in her hand, stroking a gem idly with the other.

"So what's the job that you need me for?" I said, really wishing she'd get to the point. It was like I said to Lytha—I like to cut through the bullshit.

"A man in my employ has...disappointed me. I gave him a very important

task, trusted him with a very, very important goal, and he takes what I taught him and tries to use it against me. He has sided with those who hate our kind and wish to see us all slain, and now plots to wage war upon us."

I didn't like the way she was using 'us' and 'our kind' as if it were her, her pals, and me too included in that group, but I let it slide and kept my mouth shut.

"His name is Ranson. He was a trusted pupil. I gave him many gifts...taught him many things. I sought to make him better than he ever could be on his own. But he turned out to be unworthy of my gifts. He is a small man with a small mind and small ambitions."

"So what...do you want me to kill him? You know he'd just pop up as a zombie right?"

"No," she said, her voice growing low and kind of frightening. "I do not want you to kill him. Bring him back alive if you can. But before you do, I need you to discover what became of the mission I sent him on."

"Sure, interrogation then?"

"How it occurs is of no concern to me. I wish him returned alive, and I wish to know the fate of his mission, but you will not be punished nor will your reward be relinquished if he should happen to die. I know he has...suicidal tendencies. I just hope the information can be gained before his death."

"Okay," I said, wondering when this was supposed to get hard and, well, "Why it was suddenly all up to me?"

"My children are all marked. We do not preserve our bodies and appearances so that we can simply walk about The City as humans. That is why I need you; you are, as they would say, still of pure blood. It is the only way you will be able to get close to him without alerting them. You are a stranger. He will not know that you work for me."

"I'm not really much for deceit," I said modestly. "I don't know what you're expecting, but I am more of a knock him out, tie him up, drag him over kind of guy."

"Do as you see best."

"So how do I find him?"

She took a deep breath; but then, it looked more like she smelled something. "I sense this clan, these Bloods as they call themselves, will be easy to find. Once you find them, he too will be easy to find. He bears our marks. He will look as if he is not quite human; changed. These were the gifts I bestowed upon him. I promise you, he will be unmistakable. If it helps, his eyes resemble a cat's."

"So that's it? Find this guy; bring him here, and you break my curse?"

"Try to find out what became of his *quest*. *That* is what is most important. I urge you to do this in the possibility that he is killed, and then I will never have my answer. With that in mind, yes, that is it."

"So what was his quest?" I was expecting her to get tired of all my questions, but she didn't seem annoyed. It was a good thing too; I wouldn't have to ask so many damn questions if she'd just tell me without me having to

guess all of the important need to know details!

"I sent him to find a scroll. It belonged to my ancestor, and now I need it back. There is great power within it. I fear for the fate of the world if he were to attempt to use it himself."

"Sounds rough," I said, feeling a bit stupid when it came to fate of the world kind of things. I was of the opinion that everything I knew could suddenly blow up, the world would just keep on going without really noticing. "Well I hate to be the bearer of obvious news, but we only have about five hours of daylight left. Unless you expect me to zip over to The City and zip back with him during that time, well there's going to be a problem."

"I can ward you against the undead for a single night. This is not a break to the curse, but a suppression of it. Those who are dead near you will still rise, but the magic will prevent them from becoming animated. This is also why we have been walking. The caravan is up ahead. We are nearly there."

I had hardly noticed. We sure were coming up on a caravan. A line of pagans was making their way through the woods slowly; slow enough for our lazy pace to catch up, but it was understandable considering that some of the pack animals had what looked like small houses on their backs. She led me up through the line, until she got to what looked like a really underfed burrick with a big chest strapped to its back. She tapped the donkey-sized lizard by its ear, or at least that hole in the side of its head that should have been an ear and it stepped out of line and crouched down.

She opened the chest and pulled out a small little thing. I couldn't really see it, so I stepped closer. It was just a crystal on a string. "This embodies the suppression." She handed it to me.

I turned it over in my hands. It was about the size of my pointer finger from the middle knuckle to the tip.

"It is very fragile. Keep that in mind in case you suddenly desire to raise the dead. If it is destroyed, the spell is destroyed with it."

I frowned and pocketed it.

"Wear it around your neck," she said, looking a bit disgusted.

"Oh, err, sorry," I said, and looped it over my head.

"It is *fragile*, and if you sit on it and shatter it, not only will the spell be broken, but you will have jagged bits of crystal piercing your flesh."

"Hey, don't have to tell me twice," I insisted.

"Thalia should not be far behind us now. Being reacquainted with her has given me a certain sense to her movements. Do not worry about her; she will find us. But now you must go. Do not waste time, for I cannot guarantee that the power of the crystal will last a second night."

I figured it probably would, and she was just saying that because she wanted me to hurry the hell up and deliver her boy back to her. After all; how long had it been sitting in that chest waiting for me? This was an all purpose undead ward charm; it wasn't made especially for me. Still, I'd rather an all out cure for the curse rather than a band aid, so I wouldn't press my luck with the charm. Plus I would need to come back here anyway to find Lytha again. "And for one last really important detail you've maybe not thought of; you

guys are clearly on the move. How do I find you once I'm done?"

"I will send messengers to wait by the Stonemarket clock tower at midnight. I trust you will not escort a host of zombies to the rendezvous."

"Yeah, not, if I can help it. Okay," I said, turning around "which way to The City?"

She touched my shoulder with her finger. At first I was expecting to feel strange or to see sparks fly out or some other magical effect, but then I realized she was just pushing me. I let myself be pushed and found that I was facing about perpendicular to the caravan's path of travel. "Okay..."

When I glanced back over my shoulder, she had already walked away. Well, this was it; my big chance. The task seemed simple enough, and hey, for once it had nothing to do with Hammerites!

— **Thalia: Our Roles Reversed** —

Day 6: 3:30 pm

The ground sloped downwards. The trees grew taller and more dense. The woods were now an impenetrable wall on either side of a narrow passage between them. The light grew dim as the gap between the walls vanished overhead, thick vines coating hearty branches, blotting out the sun. I hurried; I could feel them up ahead.

It was the end of a long chain of travelers, pack animals loaded to their limit with beast-men urging them on down the corridor. I slowed now as I overtook the tail of the line, crossing back and forth wherever there was a gap, looking for Ghost, or Delphine.

I saw her up ahead in the distance; my eyes could have been deceiving me but her mind could not be mistaken. I quickened again, rushing to her. "Where is Ghost?" I asked, stopping just a few feet from her turned back.

She did not turn to look at me. "I sent him on his way. He gave me the star, and I gave him a mission. I expect it to go well."

"Where are we going?"

"We are returning to my laboratory. Maybe, there...I can discover a way to help you both."

"How far is it?"

"Very far...but we will be there soon. Thalia..."

I stopped. I could feel her mind shifting around uncomfortably; something was coming.

"...what did you tell Ghost about Lytha?"

I didn't have time to think about what Ghost had or hadn't said to her. I felt a great well of power and hatred surge from me, rushing to her like a swarm of deadly insects. I was upon her mind, and struck the thought from her head as if I were an eagle snatching up a mouse from the field. It was over before I even knew I had done it.

She seemed to waver a little, miss-stepping slightly in her stride but then regaining herself quickly. I found myself even more adversely affected, unable to breathe for a moment and forced to halt completely for fear of

falling over. I waited, and watched her. I was terrified; I had never even thought about doing something like that before, and now it happened without me even thinking. I had no idea if my attack against her mind would do more damage than her suspicion that I was Lytha.

She continued walking, as if she had forgotten that I was even here. I was content with that, but I would have to be on my guard. I followed from a distance, sometimes slowing to let more of the caravan overtake me, sometimes walking briskly. I lost all sense of time in this wooded twilight, with the slow rhythmic motion of the beasts, the chant-like sound of panting breath.

The ground was sloping downwards, growing steeper with every step. The trees above began to lean in, so that it was slanted and curved trunks above our heads rather than branches. I could hear them groan and rub against one another as the wind blew, sending a chill across my skin.

I looked back ahead, and saw that I was quite near the front of the caravan now. No, that wasn't right; those ahead were simply gone. I blinked in disbelief as another creature vanished into a pulse of dim red light and, was gone. It had to be a portal of some kind, or a shroud. I understood why Delphine was so anxious to send him along on his way; he would not be welcome here.

The group directly ahead of me vanished the same way, pulsing into a red cloud that quickly subsided as they vanished. Before me was nothing but blackness as two great tree trunks crossed only a dozen feet above my head. I paused, looking into the darkness as another group passed through, and then another, and another. Soon I would be alone.

I looked over my shoulder at the way we had come. Even the dim twilight seemed dazzlingly aglow compared to the passage ahead. I searched the wood for some sense that I was being followed, but felt nothing. Turning ahead to the gateway once more, I stepped through.

It felt like nothing more than if I had inhaled a breath of hot air. I looked about myself quickly to see where I now was, finding it immediately alien. It was a large chamber of bare stone and crude bricks. Everywhere I looked the chamber was illuminated by gaping rifts in the floor from which deep red light spilled out almost as if it were liquid. I could feel the floor vibrate with a distant, constant rumble. The scent of sulfur hung in the air.

The caravan was still up ahead, though I could see it splitting up and going every which way through side passages which wound in every direction. Crude stone stairs spiraled up into the darkness overhead, some delved into the cracks emitting the light, all busy with the comings and goings of men and beasts. I walked slowly on, at every moment expecting one of them to mistake me for an intruder and call for an alarm, but it never happened.

As I walked I passed an opening leading to another cavern, this one lit with an almost blue glow. I saw men dressed in skins and reeds, dancing wildly amongst a field of tall, jagged stones. The blue glow came from a trail of steam-like material flowing from the men to the stones. In astonishment I could see them move in time to the dancers, like a sea of long daggers

swaying silently in the breeze. Another creature entered the room, a hulking brute, shaped like a man but with a long pointy face and teeth that glinted in the blue light. He reached down and ripped one of the stones from the ground. He swung at the air with it, the sharp surface singing with the motion, testing it in his grip before tying it to his belt and departing the way he came.

I felt someone move in beside me; it was like a warmth that crept under my skin; Delphine. "Beautiful aren't they?"

"The dancing or the swords?"

"The dancing, the swords; the one who took the sword is Ch'kth'ik. He is one of yours."

"I don't want him," I said dryly, turning to look at her. "Why have you brought me here?"

She smiled. "No, Thalia. You came to me. Like you did before, and like you will again. But this time, I do have somewhere I need to take you."

I followed her as she went back to the main, long chamber, still busy with the caravan's dismantling and dispersal. She went to one of the beasts, an ancient, decrepit burrick, and touched it at its ear. It moved to follow her. I walked with her and her pack animal up a winding stair which wrapped around the perimeter of the chamber, until we reached the upper level and turned off into a smaller corridor. It grew more and more narrow and dark, until I was certain that her beast would be stuck, until it finally opened back up into a large, surprisingly well lit chamber.

The smell of sulfur was gone, however it would have been welcome compared to the odor of old rotting meat which permeated what I quickly realized was the laboratory she had mentioned. Many cracks ran up the walls to the ceiling, filled with glowing crystals of many colors. Crude tables and shelves lined the walls, covered with devices and artifacts which I could not even guess the nature of. She placed her hand on the beast's head, having to reach up above her own to do it and it knelt to the ground, growing impossibly low and flat, as if the entire trunk of its body was folding in on itself. Soon it was no higher than one of the tables. There was no reason to think that her experiments and gifts were limited to humans.

"Our guest will be along any time now," she said, moving some parcels from the pack on the back of the beast onto her work surfaces one by one. "We must entertain him, and then, I have much work to do if I am to restore you."

"What do you mean, restore me?"

She paused what she was doing, looked over to me and then clasped her left hand around her right shoulder.

I looked down at my shoulder. The metal splint—I was sure getting it out would be worse than having it put in. I *did* want it out though.

A sick, confused feeling overtook me as a group of creatures entered the room, carrying with them a large stretcher made of bound branches. I found it difficult to look at the battered and bound Hammerite tied, with his arms and legs stretched out, to his flat wooden jail. I felt my blood boiling as I

watched them from the corner of my eye, lifting the stretcher up so that the man was vertical, and propping it up against the wall.

Finally I looked. He was not struggling, nor was his face twisted into an expression of fear or despair. He was clearly alive; big, regular breaths made his chest rise and fall. The lower half of his face was still bound tight with blood-soaked reeds. I hated Hammerites and all who knelt to them, but torture?

The sight of the Inquisitor bound to the hammer by my own hand stung my mind, but it was a memory not my own; nor was it Lytha's. The creature inside me, the Vile Slasher as they called it, was responsible for that.

Are you so easily fooled? It was you! It was you who did it! You cannot blame any other!

Torturer! You are as bad as the Hammerites! No better!

You kill for revenge? No! You kill for pleasure! There is no such thing as a Vile Slasher—only YOU. It was YOU who did it! You are the cursed, evil one!

I felt myself shaking and reaching out to grab a hold of something. This had to end. I could not stay in control of Lytha much longer; not because I would lose to her, but because *It* would consume her. Soon there would be no Lytha to give this body back to, only *It*.

But what would happen to me if the Hammerite device was removed? It had to be a force of very powerful Hammer magic to have such a devastating effect on Delphine. She was calling to me now. Reluctantly, I came to her side by the prisoner.

"He will not speak. I doubt he has much to share anyway...the Hammerfools know so little that is not a lie anyway."

He seemed asleep, but he was awake; I could feel it. His mind was working, slowly, calculating, biding his time. He felt he still had a chance. Delphine was right; he was a fool.

She had something in her hands. They were small, spiky seeds. She took them gently and tipped her hand out onto his chest, where they fell and clung like sandburs. Then she took something else; it looked like some type of crystal, and put it into her own mouth. She closed her mouth, inhaling deeply, and began to chew. A second later she let out a breath, with thick, dark fumes rising up from her mouth and nose. She leaned in close to the seeds and blew the purplish smoke onto the seeds, and then stepped away.

They trembled and sprouted, growing animated after an instant of vibration. Long tendrils drew out away from the man's chest, only to flip back around and plunge deep into his skin. He let out a muffled cry of shock and pain as little streams of blood began to pour down his body, first several, and then dozens as the growth spread. Soon it was wrapping itself around his body and outstretched arms, little red blossoms forming that belched forth blood just as his wounds did. I watched with sick fascination as it spread and grew thicker and thicker, his struggling, squirming body powerless to call off the onslaught. His jaw and teeth gnashed against his bonds, deep cries of pain emanating from the back of his throat. His eyes were clenched shut with the fury and the horror of it.

"The annua will ensure that he cannot speak, nor think a dishonest thought. The plant's venom is remarkably effective, even against the most resolute." Her smile widened, her fingertips licking against her chin slowly. "But to be quite honest Thalia, I haven't given any thought to what I want to ask him." She began to laugh, lips closed, chest bouncing as the musical tone flowed out of her.

I looked back at him. He was calming, giving in, either realizing how powerless he was or simply weakening from loss of blood. I could feel that Delphine was correct. His mind became as clear as a crystal orb. I almost felt it inviting me, beckoning for me to enter a place of clarity and serenity.

"But why ask him anything..." she said, inching closer to me, placing her hand lightly at the base of my neck, "...when you could just so easily take all that he knows."

The suggestion was all I needed before I found myself falling helplessly into his mind. It was like being in a world set in slow motion, where everything was transparent. I fell deeper and deeper, none of the usual friction or currents to guide my progress or halt my descent. I felt within him great planes and fields of anxiety. Buried away in the deepest recesses of his mind, locked so tightly so that he himself could not dare even think it, I found his terrible secret; doubt. The Order of the Hammer was filled with doubt. Conflicts, factions, disagreements, distrust. The Order was dying, and he knew it.

"What do you see?" she whispered into my ear, her lips nearly against my skin. "What does he have for you?"

I pulled away, like a diver who felt he no longer had enough breath to reach the surface. I found myself standing as I had before, though now the puddle of his blood had reached my feet. "I saw...chaos. The Hammerites are..." I turned to catch her gaze, not believing what I was about to say, "...they are being destroyed from within."

Her lips spread into a great smile, her dozens of small thin teeth parting ever so slightly as a faint cry of joy escaped her. "And I had only to push, and tug, when the time was right. Viktoria and her brute of a lover were both such fools."

Her cry of joy quickly turned to a hiss as she tore herself from me, quickly going to the Hammerite with one of those jagged stones appearing in her hand out of nowhere. "I have one more use for you," she said, and with one fierce stroke, struck the man's hand from his wrist.

Again he erupted into a flurry of struggle, but his thrashing was second place to the rush of activity from the plant that was feeding from him. The vines quickly spread to his open wrist, delving into it like a hundred rats feasting upon a carcass. Within moments he had settled down again, a fresh and much stronger dose of the toxin filling him.

She held the big hand in hers like a prize. Blood was draining from it, flowing down her arm and onto the floor. She was whispering to it, a smile creeping over her face each time she paused, the fingers of her other hand tracing symbols onto the palm until the digits began to twitch and stir with

new life. She let out a satisfied, "mmm."

"The parasite will keep its host alive for as long as it can; it needs the blood to be hot in order to feed, so if we have any other use for him I am sure he will still be breathing. Come Thalia, I have something marvelous I must show you."

She left the room, and I followed quickly; more simply not wishing to be left alone with the Hammerite and the plant. As she moved the walls parted to allow her passage; I had to hurry to slip through before the way closed.

I was being led deeper and deeper into her laboratory, until we finally came to a room that looked quite unlike any I had seen in this place. The walls were smooth and glassy, and reflected a great volume of pure white light coming from a source unseen. At the far end of the room were several trees, standing at a dozen to fourteen feet tall, and covered with large blue fruits so that their branches sagged right to the ground. At the center of the room was a table, though Delphine blocked my view of what was atop it. Once I was nearby, she moved away.

A shockingly grotesque creature was lain upon it; no, not a creature, but a creation. As my eyes grew accustomed to what I was looking at, I felt I knew what it was. It was an assembly of humanoid shape roughly four feet from head to foot. It was not made of sculpted wood as a marionette, but of dozens of wildly dissimilar parts. The head was crafted from bits of sculpted metal, stone and wood; each individual part appearing to be meaningless when taken alone, but assembled forming a caricature of a human face. As I examined it I realized that it was not only made from crafted parts; bits of flesh and bone were worked into its design, joined with the other parts, forming the shoulders and ribcage, arms and legs, all the way down to an odd number of irregular and long toes.

"This is our family's second-most closely guarded secret. You are looking at nearly seventy-four years worth of labor, begun by Tempia, its tutelary genius, and soon to be completed by me." As she said this, she walked over to its side, and placed the Hammerite's hand down where the doll's arm ended. The hand, quite large by even human standards and drastically disproportionate to the doll, which had a slighter, feminine stature, was still twitching and trembling just as it was when Delphine had revived it. She quickly jerked it upwards, plunging the sharp point of the unfinished arm to lodge between the bones at the base of the hand.

In an instant the entire doll seemed to come alive; the arm trembled just as the hand did. The back arched, the mouth seemed to draw itself open to let out a silent cry with empty eye sockets wide to the ceiling. It fell back into place as quickly as it had come alive; back flat against the table, mouth closed and brow low. All was still.

"I have never seen something so horrible," I whispered, unsure of how this could be possible considering the horrors I had witnessed, but at the moment truly unable to grasp anything more terrible than this creation. But then I noticed the tubes. Lines of small tubes were connected to the doll's head, neck, and back, trailing off the table and onto the floor to an apparatus

at the wall. Each tube was connected to a jar, and in each of the jars was one of the blue fruits. They were in various states of decomposition, black juices filtering down through the bottom of the jars to fill the tubes and flow into the doll.

"Yes," she said, "The juice of the fruit as it wastes away is its blood. This is a very rare plant and deeply magical; it senses the state of the world. When chaos predominates, then the fruits turn dark blue and grow heavy, bearing the branches down to the ground. When order is in abundance, the fruits are small and yellow, far more plentiful, and the branches reach for the sky. Both are deeply poisonous to the tongue. As you can see, the thoughts of our Hammerite friend are quite believable. Chaos is strong with the world now. Deceit and distrust abound. In every place where order ruled, chaos now creeps like a spreading infection. Now is our time unlike any other. Now is the time when the world shall become host to its new Goddesses."

"What are you going to do with that thing once it's finished?" I asked, not daring to look at it again.

"She will be the vessel that ushers in a new age," she said simply, and then paused, like she could hear something. "Come!" she uttered.

Again, I followed. We walked back the way we came, passing by the Hammerite captive and back into the main chamber. Delphine walked briskly, like she was in a hurry. The room was even busier now than before; but now with many more men than beasts; women and children too.

"Cicada, speak!" she demanded, coming to her familiar henchman.

"Our coercers found the villages right where you said they'd be, a count of nearly eighty. We have the group from the first village here and the other is standing ready for your command."

She looked out over the crowd with an impartial expression. If I had not listened to the report myself, I would have mistaken them for part of the original group; there was no distinction in their appearance, clothing, or the way they conducted themselves.

"You there!" she called out, pointing to one of the villagers closest to her. "Whom do you bow down before and thank for the harvest?"

"It is to the Faery Queen that I beg for mercy," he said in a slow raspy voice.

"Then you will fight proudly. Cicada, have this group and the other, every last one of them armed and otherwise outfitted for battle. In the chance that Ranson does march his gathered force against us, he will expect to be engaged. Keep them stationed at camp until our scouts inform us of Ranson's movements, and when that is known, move them to where Ranson expects to find us. We will be somewhere else. He does not know that I can move the portal—see to it that he never learns this. This engagement will distract him properly for your counterattack with our true forces."

"It will be done mistress."

"Now, Thalia," she said to me, drawing my attention away from the crowd. "It is about time you were freed. We must return to the laboratory." We went back the way we had come, but I found that she was leading me into a new

chamber. She brought me before what looked like a stone table. "Please, lie down upon it," she asked softly.

I ran my fingers along the surface, testing it. It was cool to the touch, and hard, like marble. Anxious over what was to come; I lifted myself up and turned to rest my back on the stone, unfolding my legs so that I was flat against it. Suddenly it seemed to grow softer and softer. I was sinking into it, first like it was malleable clay, and then almost like a thick liquid.

One by one, we were joined; shamans and priestesses, who gathered silently around me to examine my infliction. As they stared, Delphine crouched down and spoke softly into my ear. "I fear that my work has only increased my sensitivity to their magic; an unlucky side effect of the process I am subjecting myself to. However I believe my trusted servants may be of use."

They whispered among themselves, all too frightened to actually touch it. I tried to remain calm, patient, and keep myself from leaping away and telling them that they were wasting their time. In truth, I was afraid that having it removed would have terrible consequences.

"It must be done without harming the arm," Delphine urged. "She needs them *both*."

One of them stepped forward. His neck was long and on his face he wore a mask made of skull; several different pieces possibly from several different types of animals stitched together into a fearsome display of eyes and jaws. He crouched down, peering at it, and then slowly, reached out to touch it with his bare finger. He pulled it away quickly, but then reached out to touch it again, keeping his finger there longer, before finally grasping hold of it like it was the handle on a pitcher.

"You can't just yank it out," I scolded with irritation. "Do you know what a threaded screw is?"

He pulled away, hissing to Delphine in a jabbering tongue I could not understand. He raises up a small clay figure; a chaos doll of sorts. I tilted my head to see it better, and noticed that he had placed a twig in its arm which could possibly represent my splint.

I frowned, thinking for certain that the concept I had asked him about was completely beyond his comprehension. He began waving his free hand about the clay figure in the other, chanting and swaying. Quickly I felt the surface I rested on begin to change, maybe not in shape, but in feeling; like I was resting in a giant hand. He finished his incantations; his waving hand slowed, and with a quick stroke, plucked the twig from the doll's arm.

The feeling of the hand beneath me subsided quickly. I felt nothing else. I twisted my neck to see the metal splint still in place, and then looked up at him with a look of boredom.

He threw a tantrum, throwing the clay figure onto the floor and waving his arms in that same jabbering. Delphine dismissed him quickly with a wave of her hand, causing him to tumble out of the room like he was no more than a pile of dry leaves.

"This Hammer magic is far too great for his petty crafts," one of the

priestesses said through lips that looked like they had been sewn shut. The upper portion of her face was wrapped in a black cloth, with only the bottom of her nose and below visible.

“What do you suggest, Vivian?”

“It must be dealt with as it expects to be dealt with, according to the rules of its magic. Thalia mentioned it herself; the art of the *threaded screw*. That is undoubtedly the spell that holds this artifact in place.”

Delphine replied, “Yes, I am very familiar with it. It is a simple thing to operate once the needed reagents are created, though how to create them is far beyond my knowledge.”

“We are missing an important piece vital to its design. It is called a *driver* of some sort, a type of wand I believe, capable of manipulating the part in ways impossible to the hand.”

“Yes,” I said, sighing at their ignorance. “That is right. Do you need me to run to The City and fetch one for you? Should I pick up some fresh milk while I am out?”

“Ghost’s sense of humor is rubbing off on you,” she said in my same bored tone. That really wasn’t true.

“I believe I have one of our own tools that will do,” the priestess said, holding out a long, twisted rod before her. It came to a sharp point at the end she aimed at my arm, and split halfway to form a Y, each part at the top resting against the tops of her open hands. Her head was tilted back, followed by the rest of her body, curving away from the rod that now hovered above her open hands. She drew her hands way, and began to hum. The rod trembled at first, and then began to spin silently in place, the sharp end still pointed to me, but the split end churning the air like a piece tied to the end of an unwinding string. It spun faster and faster, soon humming just as loudly as she was.

I could feel the metal in my arm begin to hum as well; and a great pain deep inside my arm followed. I hardened my nerve against the torture I knew was to follow. The hum grew in greater and greater pitch, and the pain grew more and more distinct; two points, where the metal attached to my bone. I tried to grip hold of something, but found that I neither could nor needed to; the surface was holding me tighter and tighter. I wanted to lash out at her mind, stop what she was doing to me, but I forced myself to stay within. It would be over soon, I kept promising.

I felt movement. The metal was loosening, drawing itself away from me. I felt a warmth wash over my skin as blood flowed freely from the quickly reopening wounds.

And once it is out, then what will you do? Run! You will not need them anymore! Run!

You owe this to them—you must serve them now!

Don’t let her do this! It could be the only thing keeping It at bay! What will happen to you once it becomes loose!

Soon It will be free and It is all there will be!

This is what you want; It is strong; You are weak; You belong to It.

I couldn't stand it anymore. My rage and fear coalesced into an unstoppable motion, rushing at the priestess with all of my might. I could feel her blinking out like a candle's flame snuffed between two wet fingers. But then there was something else in her place; a force far stronger broke my blow, causing my mind to spin away out of control.

And at once it stopped. I heard the metal piece strike the floor with a reverberating echo, washing over me again and again as I lay there panting for breath. I forced my eyes back open and turned to see; Delphine was standing in the priestess's place, her hands slowly coming to bear upon the still spinning, but slowing, rod. I could see the others gathered around a fallen body on the floor.

"Is she dead?" I asked, trying to lift myself up to see but found I was too weak.

"Possibly," Delphine replied, not turning to look. "But what is more important is that for an instant, we were in the presence of a Goddess."

"What," I groaned, and again tried to lift myself. The surface felt different; it no longer clung to me. As I felt and lifted myself to look, I saw that it was still indented with my shape, but the shape had grown ever so larger than me. I was reminded of how I slipped free of the Hammerite's chains; then my body had seemed to shrink.

"As you were freed from the restraint, you became your *true self*. It is unfortunate that Vivia had to be the one standing in your path as you did so. But alas, it was only for an instant..."

"I am sorry," I said weakly, again trying to look at where the fallen woman lay.

She rushed to my side, crouching down so that her face was next to mine. "She understood the risk. A mortal's death at the hands of a Goddess is hardly a death at all; it is a gift. Can't you see there is nothing in your way now? Your power has far surpassed my own. Even Viktorja would not dare defy you. Your journey is complete! I am so happy for you sister..."

"Thanks," I uttered quietly, wondering when the pain in my arm was supposed to go away.

"If only you could learn to control it..." she said, looking me over with astonishment on her face.

"What makes you think I can't?" I sneered.

A thick square of leather hide was retrieved from her supplies, which she used to carefully take the metal rod from the ground as she stooped. She held it lightly before her, examining it. Then she stood upright, looking at me with a mix of mild surprise and curiosity. "Then why apologize for an act you had full control over?"

I did not offer an answer for that. I just knew that the pain was getting slowly worse. One of her other shamans came to me, opening a small sack and placing black things on my arm. I could feel them moving around, cold against my blood soaked skin, but the effect was noticeable. The pain was subsiding. "You are the assassin," he said, "the power in you exists only in killing." I did not know if he was trying to tell me something or just making

an observation.

Delphine spoke from afar. "When you have recovered, please come to me. For now I must be left alone with my thoughts, but I trust that soon I will know the answer to my ponderings."

I watched as they all left, a pair of them lifting the body of the priestess with them. Her jaw was hanging slack, only held in place by the thread which had sewn her lips together. Who was she, and what had led her through her entire life to be fated to such a meaningless death?

The room seemed darker, suddenly, and the sounds more quiet. Soon I was alone, with only a distant rumble and a dim red glow to illuminate the cavern. Soon, even those were gone; darkness, silence.

It is gone. The Hammer device is gone. You are freed.

Yes, freed. I am freed.

No! You can't have her!

I already do.

I regained consciousness without realizing that I had lost it. I was no longer on the strange surface in the laboratory, but lay out on what felt like moss, except it was dry and warm, in a small dark chamber. It was too dark to see, so I just felt, reaching one arm over my chest to inspect where the metal splint had been. It was gone. My arm was wrapped in something that felt like leaves; waxy and smooth to the touch, but seemed to cling to my skin without any form of wrap or tie. I left them in place, not anxious to begin bleeding again.

A dull ache lingered, and my arm was stiff, but otherwise I was fine. I had been afraid that removing the splint would kill me...

I pushed myself up from where I rested, shuffling carefully to the only source of light, the small, cavernous passage.

I was halfway there when a figure appeared before me; a small man who was only wearing a loin cloth. "You wake now, Delphine awaits."

"What time is it?" I asked, feeling like I had slept for ages.

"Time?" he said, tilting his head slightly.

I sighed. "How long was I asleep?"

"Not know. Only sent to speak when you rose."

"Is it still daylight outside?" I was becoming impatient.

"Out...side?" he tilted his head the other way. I could see that this was useless.

"Are you going to take me to her?"

He shook his head. "Not I to go before The Lady. Only to tell you she awaits."

"Fine." I walked past him, seeing that the corridor was much lighter up ahead. I could hear him following, sounding strangely like dry grass rubbing against itself.

When I came to an opening, I thought at first that I was in the main chamber once again, where the caravan had dispersed and where Cicada had brought the villagers, but I saw now that it was much different. There was a quiet to the chamber, and none of the dull red glow. Instead, crystal

formations crisscrossed the walls gave off a pale blue light, with flecks of something, from a distance it looked like dust, trailing down to the ground. I was coming in about halfway up from the floor of the chamber, and as I looked over the edge to see how I would precede, something rushed by me.

I leapt out of the way, eyes wide with shock at the tall man who was a blur of motion. As I watched him fly out into the chamber, I wondered how I had mistaken him for a man at all; propelled by large, round, transparent wings, with arms and legs resembling those of an insect. In an instant he was gone, vanished into one of the many tubes which lined the corridor walls. I then realized that the sound of his passage, a whooshing buzz, was persisting, though faint. I looked out into the chamber again, this time leaning as far over the edge as I could without fear of falling, and looked up.

The roof of the chamber was indiscernible from the motion. Hundreds, if not thousands of creatures identical to the one that had rushed past me were swarming through the air, each moving in their own direction, going about their business. I realized where I was now, where Delphine made her quarters; this was the hive of the fae.

There was a ledge leading around the perimeter of the chamber to be walked on, and so I followed it.

The ledge sloped upwards as it curved, until it met an opening similar to the one the winged man flew through. I left the light of the chamber behind as I climbed, higher and higher. The corridor ended up ahead, but I had a feeling that I needed to press on. I could sense her now up ahead, just a little farther.

The stone doors opened just as they had done in the laboratory. The interior was lit with a pale yellowish green hue, coming from hundreds of tiny mushrooms which coated the floor like grass. I stepped inside and looked around, a strange place filled with drapes of what looked like silk hanging from the ceiling and trailing to the floor to create irregular partitions. I found that the mushrooms could be walked on without crushing them; they were quite resilient. I could see her silhouette moving about on the other side of one of the layers. "I'm here," I said.

"Awake, so soon," she said, not moving to reveal herself to me. "How do you feel?"

"How long was I asleep? Is it morning outside?"

"It is only just evening of this same day. I am glad that you feel so rested."

I wanted to move in closer and find her, but somehow I felt that the drapes of translucent fabric formed a maze; if I went in father, I would get lost. She still made no motion to approach me.

"I found use for the Hammerfool's artifact. What was, once a device of torture, is now a part of my masterwork. Their craftsmanship shall be part of what ushers in the end of their reign."

"That's...nice," was all I could think to say to that. It only made the doll all the more sinister.

"Many of my children are anxious to bring the news of the Hammerite Lord's servant to him, that they may witness his despair, but I told them all I

already promised you that task.”

I watched her closely. She was moving strangely, swaying ever so slightly, her spine moving like it were a stalk swaying in the wind. “I remember you mentioned a ransom,” I said.

She replied, her voice musical. “Yes, but in truth; there is no physical quantity that a Hammerite would possess that would be of any use for me. I would offer the prisoner back to them in exchange for his suicide, but I doubt very much that he would agree to that.”

“I’ve met him already,” I said quietly, for a moment again unable to tell my memories from Lytha’s. At the moment though, it didn’t matter.

“Have you?” she said, and halted her motion for just a moment.

“Yes...and we did battle.”

“What happened?” she said, almost sounding worried.

“I almost died...but...I escaped; and when I escaped I hurt him. I hurt him so badly...a wound that will never heal.”

“What wound, Thalia?”

“I stripped him of his divine favor. I ripped The Builder’s spirit from his soul.” And as I spoke, I realized that it was not simply Lytha’s memories that were being mixed with my own; *It* was there too. And the words I was speaking to Delphine were more *It* than myself.

Her swaying became almost a dance as she laughed a melodic tone. “It is no wonder, my fruit has grown so. Oh Thalia, you have already done so much for me without me even realizing it. Do you wish to finish the battle?”

“No,” I said, again feeling as if the words were not my own. “I do not want it to ever end. I will hurt him, and I will continue to hurt him, but it will never end.” The more I spoke, the less I felt as if it was even me. *It* was here, in my throat.

“Deliver him a message,” she said, her back arched so that her head was nearly upside down; her arms spread out to either side in similar curves. “Tell him that treachery abounds at every turn. He already suspects that there are many within his order that plot against him; make him feel that even his most trusted pupil was one of them. Tell him what we have already done to him, and reveal to him that he has been betrayed. Take his fears and suspicions and compound them. Mix lies with truth to tear his sanity from him. He will be aware of his loss; turn his empty feeling into fear and guilt. Soon the leader for the greatest force of Order will be reduced to a madman; paranoid, neurotic...psychotic.”

I felt myself smiling at the thought. This torture of the mind would be a perfect exercise for my abilities. “When I am finished,” I told her, “I will have him tearing his house asunder for fear of his kin’s plots against him.”

“We need more. We need worse. Have the Hammerfools turn against the city-heads. Force him to see his enemies in every congregation, in every street and tavern, in every castle and mansion. Once he is done tearing asunder his own house, he will turn to The City. Then his fear and paranoia will spread like a disease. He will be the harbinger of panic and suspicion. The City will tear itself apart.”

I felt myself being swayed by her words, but then I sharply twisted away; though I did not move a muscle. She had gone too far, and snapped me out of the trance I had fallen into. I would not be the instrument of her evil. I would break the Hammerites, not for her, but for myself. I would not bring this crusade to The City itself. I watched as she seemed to be lowering herself into a reclining position; myself as still as stone. "I should go now. I believe I know where to find him. He will be hiding, licking his wounds, afraid to be seen by his underlings in his state of weakness. I will go to him this very night."

Bits of light zigzagged around the curtains, coming quickly before my face. They stopped and hovered, revealing themselves to be small winged creatures; insect-like in feature but human-like in form. Delphine spoke. "They will guide you to my own personal back exit. It is your quickest route. I will be waiting here for your return."

I turned to look at her one last time before I left, but I could no longer see her silhouette. She was lying down. "When Ghost returns, in success, you will do as you promised and break his curse, and ask nothing more of him. He is not to be your servant."

"I swear to it," she said. "Because you wish it; I would do anything for you, sister."

I left, watching the little creatures spin and dance before me as they lead me on my way.

— Ghost: Back in Business —

Day 6: 7:00 pm

I had a good feeling about this. They always say, it's not what you know but who you know, and it looked like I knew a Lytha who had some very powerful connections. I was excited to finally be able to romp through The City after sundown like a free man, rather than slink away to some hidey hole like some child whose parents locked them in at six o'clock sharp so they could play the horizontal shuffle in peace.

I stood on the top of The City's wall, surveying the land before me like a king counting his subjects. "Oh yeah," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "Watch out City, Ghost is back in town."

On the other hand, it wasn't sundown quite yet. There was still another hour at least of sunset, and then I would be putting Delphine's little charm to the test. Her promise that it would only last me a day wasn't going to be much help to her. At the moment, the only reason why I wanted to go back to her at all was because I needed to see Lytha again. That; and I would kind of like to get that star back from her. It was worth good money!

There was no sense standing up on the wall watching the sun set like I was some boy who decided that the best way to get some action was to bring a girl up to a cliff and make her watch a pretty sky. I had no idea where to begin looking for these Bloods, but I had a pretty good idea where I wanted to start looking. It started with a "T" and ended in 'avern'. So, where would it

be?

Tippy Tillos? I still hated that place. Spice Mead's Inn still had good ale and distance didn't really matter tonight, but all of the barmaids were still ugly, and considering my acquaintances over the past week, my standards had gotten higher. The Drunken Mermaid? No, I wouldn't be able to ever go there again without thinking of that ass Nightfall. So then, it was The Cracked Tankard again. I still had friends there, and if I was lucky, they still stayed open all night long.

— **Nightfall: The Thurning Process** —

Day 6: 7:00 pm

I spent most of my time assisting those who were boring the bricks. I was preoccupied with the rangers blowing their cover, but thus far they had been so convincing that I often forgot which ones were Hammerites and which were rangers, if not for the differences in uniform.

We set to work straight away using blocks that the team below had found already loose and suitable for the task. Once all of those were topside, the rest were quarried directly from the walls, but only at places that Thurm deemed suitable to not cause a collapse. I could not vouch for their conduct, but a steady supply was offered to us at a pace greater than we could drill.

At first, at least, the initial drilling attempts met with failure. The rotation speed on the bit (a shaft as long and nearly as wide as my arm) had to be just right in order to prevent the block from simply shattering or to complete the hole in a reasonable timeframe. Even after the first block was successfully drilled the trial and error continued, in order to determine which technique could be employed to get the fastest results with as consistent success as possible. The engineer that Thurm had placed in charge of this group, Brother Bexin, was constantly complaining about the quality of block that was being offered to us. "Quarry thine own if thou dost wish!" was the usual reply.

Another group was sent to recover the chains from the derelicts. The chains were, naturally, extremely heavy, so it took many hours and dozens of trips to move them all. Some of the Hammerites and rangers traded off jobs frequently in order to keep themselves from wearing out, with the exception of Bexin who had become the undisputed master of block drilling. I did my time hauling chain as well, though I found I was rather useless at harvesting stone block from the underground wall.

Thurm on the other hand was entirely occupied by his calculations. First he needed to gauge the weight of the blocks, so he borrowed a finished one of average size and set about weighing it. Using salvaged parts, bits of metal rod and some of the smaller chain, he assembled a rudimentary balance scale. The measuring stick he had used to assure victory over the stump was placed on top, with several small parts (always bolts and nuts of which he knew the exact weight) in order to adjust the measure. They were tied in little sacks and hung from strings. He slid them back and forth, with the block on one

side of the scale and a length of chain on the other, again which he knew the exact weight of, until he found his answer. Beyond that I could not fathom his process, for most of it was on paper in various charts, diagrams, and equations, though I was fairly certain that he simply needed to determine the weight of the combined stone and chain bridge, as well as the tension force needed in order to hold it in place.

Once all the chains were recovered, an accomplishment that saw many of the men lay down in a fit of exhaustion before retreating to find a source of water nearby, work began to smelt the new links which would join the chains together. At that point I was working with the group that was laying out the chain to determine the exact length that was needed to form the bridge, span the distance between the bridge and the machine, and have the right amount left over to work into the machine's gears and be pulled. The aforementioned contest was indeed held, and did not take nearly as long as I feared. In the end, amidst much shouting and cheering, none other than Sarievo was the victor.

The narrow spiraling stair of course provided a problem, but since the drilling was being done almost exclusively by Brother Bexin and enough stone had been gathered to last him another hour, a score of us set about clearing the passage so that the chains would be able to freely travel without impediment. It was work that made carrying the chains seem like child's play. Now that a source of water had been discovered, two of the group were (both rangers, as matter of fact) charged with bringing enough pails of the stream-water to keep the entire group quenched through the hardest of the work.

Once the way was clear and the most efficient length of chain was determined, the open engine of the machine was transformed into a miniature forge and any hard surface which could withstand the beating became an anvil. The need to find water was of course twofold; for us, as thirsty as we were, and it would have been impossible to forge the links without water. As soon as each link was finished it was laid into place, and we began threading blocks onto them as if they were beads. They were placed flat up against one another, hence the need for parallel surfaces.

Work resumed on excavating block and drilling the holes once it became clear that we simply did not have enough, so it became a new assembly line, from wall to drill to chain, and on and on. Thurm was down in the lower chamber, surveying. He was measuring distances all over the chamber, determining the exact locations of everything, gap, walls, columns, ceiling, and so forth. Then he employed the machine above in a bit of mutilation. Employing one of the great powered saw blades, several pieces were cut directly from the nearby malfunctioned machine. For an instant I wondered why we weren't just chopping off lengths of the machine to use to span the gap, but then I realized that the stair to below was so tight, steep, and narrow, nothing anywhere near the size required to span the gap could be brought below. I contemplated that several lengths of metal cut from the machine could be somehow bolted together once they were brought below to span the

gap, but suspected that the craftsmanship could not be precise enough to guarantee that the assembled parts wouldn't break as someone tried to walk across it.

In the end Thurm produced two lengths of metal rod about four feet long with four holes drilled along the length. The six sections of chain, he explained to me, could be attached to this length by threading the holes and then placing a large bolt and nut onto the end to prevent it from slipping back through. This would create rigid parts for both ends of the six rows of chain-beaded bricks. Next, he fashioned two more lengths of metal, as long as the narrow stair would allow, which he claimed were to be used as bracings.

He and I returned to below to find that all of the stone and chain was in place, laid out with one end where the old bridge used to rest, with the other stretching away across the chamber floor, so that the new bridge was in the opposite orientation of where it would eventually be. He oversaw the placement of the metal rods, fussing over every detail. The bracing lengths were placed against the nearest columns. That is when I noticed the peculiar work Thurm had done to the end of the braces which were locked against the end of the bridge resting on the lip of the gap. Using the wrecking tools of his machine, of course, he had worked, twisted, pressed, and pounded the pieces into a curved surface, so that when the brace was placed against the rod, it formed a simple hinge. It was designed in such a way that when the rod was pulled, it would rotate rather than slide.

Now everything was almost ready. The six chains beaded with bricks extended from one metal rod, through the bricks, wrapped around the base rod, which was held in place by the braces, and then back to the chamber exit, up the narrow passage, and finally to the machine's gears, which stood ready to begin pulling. Even if one chain should happen to break, the effort would still be a success, but with six chains being pulled at once, one breaking was unlikely. All that was left now was the messiest work; coating the lengths of chain with grease to ensure that it all slid with as little friction as possible, as well as slathering the stuff on any brick surface the chains could chafe against. Thankfully, we seemed to have an unending supply of the stuff.

As much as everyone wanted to be below to watch the bridge rotate into place, a human chain had to be formed from the underground chamber back up to the machine to relay orders. Thurm, the grandmaster of this entire scheme, stayed below and I, wishing to be nowhere else, of course accompanied him. He had written his directions for the operation of the machine in his usual exacting detail.

That is, except for the first order. "Brothers, begin!" Thurm shouted, which was echoed over and over again until it reached the Hammerite operator.

For many moments all that was heard was the sound of chain links grinding against one another. As well laid out as the chains were, there was still a great deal of slack in the lengths which had to be worked through before the actual lifting would begin. Thurm raised his hand to his brothers, all ready, waiting for the moment to give the next command. I watched as

quickly, one by one, the stones locked together as the chains became rigid with tension. In an instant the blocks were all together, and the greased metal joint at the base began to groan. "Lift!" Thurm commanded.

All of us, including myself and him, began to lift at the now remarkably rigid slab. Our initial heave was successful enough to rotate the far end off the ground, but then the weight of the stone overcame our initial burst of strength. "Heave! Walk it up!" he instructed, and gained another burst of energy from the group as we pushed up and stepped forward, pushed up and stepped forward a second time, and then a third.

It was all that was needed. Once we had gotten the far end of the rotating bridge lofted above our heads, it had enough momentum for the hinged joint to continue the work. We held our breaths as we watched it soar overhead, reaching higher and higher to the apogee of its ascent, going slower and slower as it inched upward, the hinge groaning, the columns holding firm against the braces, until finally, ever so slowly, it crossed over the threshold of its ascent, and began to drop downwards across the gap.

My breath was still held. Images flashed through my mind of the bridge shattering to bits as it struck the opposite side, or missing it entirely and falling uselessly into the gap. The fall seemed to somehow take longer than the ascent, though it rushed with the speed of a falling stone.

With a thunderous crash which made the uprooting of the stump seem like a pin-drop, the stone bridge collided with the opposite bank of the gap. For an instant, all was still, save for the flickering of the torchlight against the billowing clouds of dust. The bridge was in place, and holding firm. A storm of cheers erupted from the men, shouting praise to the builder and declaring success. The order was quickly given to stop the machine, but lock the gears in place so that the chains would not budge a fraction of an inch, and then the men above rushed down to join us.

Thurm of course had to be the first to test the bridge, pressing the other men to be at ease and to quiet their merriments. Quietly and casually, he walked out upon the length of stone held rigid by nothing more than the tension in the chains. It seemed as firm as a monolith. Again praises erupted from the group, and again Thurm quieted them down, instructing instead for them all to join him in prayer to praise the builder for this victory.

"Brother Thurm," one of them finally said, "couldst not this technique be applied to buildings as well?"

"Indeed brother," Thurm said, pondering with amusement. "But it doth have to be done during the greatest of summer heat, thus that the metal links of the chains do be the most loose. During the winter cold, chains do shrink. Thou art correct; this doth indeed be a great method for construction. I shalt call it, tensioning, for that is simply what it is."

"Nay Brother Thurm," one of them called out—one of the rangers—"We shall call it Thurming! For thou hast invented it!"

A series of cheers and laughter followed, with Thurm shaking his hands and head modestly before them. "Nay, nay brothers. I have invented naught. 'Twas the Master Builder that did guide my thoughts and thy hands to do this

work. "Twas through his blocks and his chains and his tools that this is possible. Nay, his glory is greater still, for he has turned my machines, conceived as instruments of demolition, unto tools for creation. Truly nothing is beyond his divine providence!"

Shouts of amen followed, but then another call broke out, this time from a Hammerite, "We shall still call it Thurming!" he insisted, followed by even more cries of amen. Thurm was clearly turning red; I could see it even in the torchlight, but made no more attempts to dissuade the others.

— **Thalia: Interloper** —

Day 6: 7:00 pm

Delphine's private exit led back through the same portal the caravan crossed through, confirming that it was a magical act of teleportation and not simply an elaborate shroud. As soon as I had crossed the threshold, the faeries that had guided me doubled back and plunged back into it. I was alone, and with the sun setting and the extremely dense wood of the valley, it was quite dark.

I moved forward, walking at a steady pace but soon slowing as time wore on. Light from the setting sun was growing more and more scarce, and the thin rivulets of light creeping down between the trees were playing tricks on my eyes. I felt something; in an instant that same feeling I had experienced twice before flew into my mind. I nearly let out a shriek of surprise as dark figure appeared before me seemingly from nowhere; visible only as the man shifted in place. I knew at once that it was the same one who had escaped over the cliff.

He had caught me by surprise, but I could still move quickly. I lunged for him, dagger slicing through the air as he shifted out of the way with every stroke. Somehow he got his arm underneath mine and his palm came crushing onto my chest and a second blow crushing into my throat, knocking the wind out of me and staggering me backwards, coughing and gasping for breath.

He did not dive at me for another attack; he simply stood there. I regained my senses, panting for breath as soon as I was able to, regarding the smooth, artful way he moved with almost admiration. "This is the way," he said, though it was not clear if it was a question or not.

It took me a moment to be able to speak again. "Do you work for Viktoriya?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

"I serve the one true Woodsie Queen," he said, placing emphasis on each word as if he was striking a drum with them.

My eyes were playing tricks on me again. I could see the same markings on his face, but somehow they were different; they seemed to actually be moving. "This is the way," I said. "But it is guarded. You must be careful."

"You are not she. You are a third. This is not your place. You will allow me to pass?" he said, this time a question.

Allow him? I did not expect I would be *able* to stop him if I *wished* to. I

paused, wondering what sort of fate or deeds waited him within Delphine's lair. "Yes," I sad. "It is not my business to stop you."

He began to walk, but still keeping his eyes on me as he passed, not convinced that I wouldn't try to stop him.

"What will you do there?" I asked.

He stopped, and turned his head so I could see his profile. "I will see." He kept walking.

We were both on missions of chaos. If Delphine wanted chaos, then it would not do to stop him. She sought to turn the Hammers against themselves, just as she had done with her own kind. She probably felt that ridding the world of the Hammers would ensure her victory. I knew she was deathly mistaken. Her downfall would not be from order stomping out chaos; but from chaos being what it truly is.

— **Nightfall: An Unfortunate Arrival** —

Day 6: 8:00 pm

We were working hurriedly to prepare for a journey of indeterminate length; by now I had abandoned completely any notion of doing anything but exploring the underground realm. Though we risked failing the entire bridge, Thurm insisted that more work be done to ensure that a single break along the entire length of the chain would not cause it to come crashing down. This simply involved locking the chains in place at the base of the drawbridge in a similar fashion to how they were at the far end, and then cutting the chain so that only a break inside the bridge, a length totally protected by stone, would cause a collapse. It was a wise precaution; anything could happen while we were gone, we did not wish to leave any behind, and we did want to be able to go back the way we came.

When we were almost ready to go, there was a commotion at the edge of the clearing in the direction of the road. I looked up from my work, cleaning some mud off my armor, to see that we had company. Standing at alert, I surveyed the scene, fearing pagan invaders, but instead saw something that could possibly have been worse; Hammerites, led by none other than Brother Ivan himself.

I rushed to the scene, confronting Ivan as he bombarded every one of our group with questions in his usual angry, demeaning tone. His eyes flashed up as he saw me, with a burst of anger followed by cool resentment. "Where is Brother Chispin?" he demanded.

"We have seen nothing of him for the entire day. He took most of the force on a foolish march deeper into pagan territory. Other than that, I have no reckoning."

A moment after I did, Thurm arrived at the scene. Ivan made no gesture to acknowledge his presence, instead inflating his lungs to bombard me with another forceful question. Thurm beat him to it however, launching his own voice into the fray.

"Brother Ivan it is so good that thou hast arrived with reinforcements! I

had feared the worst for you, considering the previous news, and then the great delay of thy return!"

Ivan made ready to blare out another statement, but stopped, looked confused, and began again. "Previous news? No word hath been sent of the pagan attacks upon our temples to thee!"

Thurm looked dumbfounded for an instant, but it quickly faded. I held my breath, forcing myself not to glance at Sarievo at my side, or any of the other rangers who were still in their Hammerite disguise. Thurm also kept his eyes on Ivan, and then a change seemed to come over him. "I didst see it in a dream," he said at once, as firmly as if he was speaking about mechanics. "And upon awaking, I didst smell the smoke upon the air. The Master Builder is stirred by this heinous event. I couldst not help but become aware."

I couldn't believe my ears. I let my eyes wander, but not fixing them on any one man in particular. The several rangers were scattered amongst the Hammerite engineers, such that if I did not know better, I would have never been able to tell the two groups apart. The engineers made no motion or gesture to single out the rangers in their confusion; they all knew full well of the events which had led them all here, and yet they all remained silent with steady eyes. Slowly, urging myself to now allow my agitation to show, I looked back at Ivan, who seemed for the moment to be so full of himself that he may have been oblivious even if there were no display of solidarity before him.

"Then...I see thou hast proceeded as planned. Tell me! What hast thou done?"

"The Villa was destroyed," Thurm said to him, still in that strange stern tone that seemed too alien coming from him, "And a great force of pagan magic in the form of an ancient stump torn from the earth. Below it we discovered a chamber, with a gap spanning many yards. Through a feat of great engineering and perspiration—Praise, be to The Builder, we were able to conquer this gap, spanning a bridge across it in mere hours!" The previously silent group began to murmur once more, still drunk with the excitement of their accomplishment.

I looked back at Ivan. He was unmoved. He didn't care about feats of engineering or bridges; only of regaining control. The two dozen Hammerite soldiers at his back all seemed to share his expression of almost mocking disinterest.

"And no effort has been made to prepare the dead for their rest! In fact in thy absence and obliviousness, several of the bodies have been desecrated! Stripped naked and hidden! I shalt hold thee responsible for their fate, Brother Thurm, and thee, Brother Daelus."

At that point I couldn't help but take stock of Sarievo out of the corner of my eye. He was standing firm, not backing away nor displaying any body language which would indicate intimidation. I expected Ivan at any moment to identify the men among us whom he had never seen before. I knew that he and his rangers would maintain the act, even though it seemed clear that Thurm and his engineers were on to us, and even though Ivan and his new

arrivals would quickly murder us all if they suspected imposters who had stolen clothing from his dead brethren.

"Ivan, I am aware of this shame, but I had to press on! Brother Chispin...his march was to draw the focus of the enemy away from our endeavor, thus that we may work without fear of retribution and uncover the great mysteries that these pagans hide! And we still have no time to lose! Even now as we tarry upon this...conversation! It is possible that our goals slip from us. Please, allow us to continue with our plan, join us in his plan, and put thy objections behind thee!"

First, a lie to cover up for the rangers, and now a lie to cover up for Chispin's madness and reckless endangerment of his men; it seemed that Thurm was growing more and more the man with every passing hour—Nay, this was merely his true self coming out of hiding. I remained quiet, confident now that this could be handled without my intervention; for now.

"Very well, we shall proceed, but know that henceforth in Chispin's absence it is *I* who is in command of this expedition. Thy machines have done their part, and now thou no longer hast any authority amongst us. Form thy remaining men into my ranks, and we shall proceed with this expedition."

I watched in disgust as Ivan and his soldier underlings took command over our men, ordering them to make preparations that had already been made, meeting any talk to the contrary of their instructions with harsh words of retribution. Engineers were equipped as soldiers and treated as such, even though they lacked anything but the most basic training. The group, now, nearly forty strong, marched down the narrow stair to the bridged chamber and crossed over it two by two, as if it had always been there. This would not be conducted as a crafty infiltration and investigation, nor would any enemies we encountered be met with any type of tactics or forethought. Ivan would march us all through, and whatever dangers we faced would wash over us in waves. If we were lucky, we would be dead faster than I was certain Chispin and his men were. If we were not, we would be captured and tortured, mutilated and left to die from our wounds, or worse.

I shot a knowing glance over to Thurm, who met my gaze with steady, calm eyes. It was not a look of resignation to our fate; on the contrary, it was one of certainty that something must be done. I did not know what he was thinking, but if he could have heard my thoughts at that moment, I would not have been ashamed to have him know.