

In which a tree is felled...

"Oh, Vivia, you're alive after all!" The Lady said with an air of amusement in her voice.

I went before her and prostrated myself, touching my forehead to her feet. "I was merely stunned," I reported. Though I was blind, her presence was so strong that I never had to wonder for an instant where she was or what she was doing.

"Nonsense," she said, and then to my great shock, she actually sat on the floor before me. I lifted my head slowly to acknowledge her, though my shut eyes beheld nothing. "That blow dislocated your jaw. And yet here you are, speaking again."

"Shaman's powers are great, and yet, I cannot help but feel as if it would have been better had I died," I said, leaning back finally to rest on my heels with my knees folded before me. She sat with her legs gently to the side, also bent at the knee.

"I understand," I told her. "To die in the service to your Goddess is the greatest of all honors; but you will get your chance, I promise you."

"It is not merely that," I said, glad that she understood, but holding more dire things on my mind. "I have had a vision which troubles me to the core."

"Oh?" she said, placing her open palm against my knee. "What have you seen, Vivia?"

"A great vault has been opened; a door that was meant to remain shut. A fortress has been breached. A prison has been opened wide. I fear that we are somehow responsible. It was we who gave the keys to this vault to our enemy, and now an even greater enemy may yet arise."

She was silent for a time, though I could feel her eyes upon me. She was not angry at my words, but I could feel a slowly creeping dread come upon her. "You speak of Scina's Monument," she finally said.

"Milady?" was all I could reply, not wishing to cloud her wisdom.

"My scouts reported that the Hammerites were attempting to tear the great stump, the source of the magic of The Villa, from its roots. I knew what this meant, and chose to allow it. If the legends are true, then this was a sin of my fore-mothers in dire need of addressing. It was time for the monument to fall. If the hammer-fools possessed the might to do so, then we would take advantage of this."

"Milady," I said, feeling a panic grow within me and my skin begin to crawl. "It is not merely Scina's enemies, the denizens of the underworld, which the vault contains. The vision has revealed *another* to me."

I felt her grow concerned. "Another? What did you see?"

In which doubt is cast...

"Thou art going to ask if I do know why thou didst call me here, and I shalt say no; and then thou shalt tell me, so please skip to that part. I am expected at Brother Adam's funeral service shortly." My colleague Brother Oberon was sitting across from me at a narrow wooden table. I was growing impatient. Somewhere between donning my ceremonial robes and beginning my journey to Fort Saint Steinklaw the First, he had maneuvered me into a meeting with him. I also noticed that he was not dressed for the funeral, though I did not mention it. I knew that it would be in poor taste to not attend, but Brother Oberon was a man of impeccably poor taste.

"Because I do fear for our order; and, I know not whom to trust. Surely the Master Forger hath noticed a change come over our Father Rafael?"

"Of course; he mourns the death of his friend, the Inquisitor. Who amongst us would not be?"

"It is not as simple as that," he insisted, one fist slightly raised. "He is a resolute man and never before driven to emotional collapse. I believe the true danger comes from his failed attempt to exorcise the demon that killed The Inquisitor."

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my hands over the top of my belly. "So thou believe 'tis regret over failure that drives him to folly?"

"Worse! I believe that he hath been wounded in much the same way that caused the death of Father Markander. This foul demon hath somehow infected his body and heart with a crippling, wasting disease, and it wilt only be a matter of time before he too delveth into madness just as Markander didst!"

I didst not answer at first, wishing to think it over from my memory of what happened to Father Markander and my experiences with dealing with Father Rafael over the past day. "I am unconvinced," I finally said, "but of an open mind. Please, tell me more, but not now. I must attend the funeral. Since I see that thou art not, thou canst spend the interim time devising a way to win me over to whatever it is thou wish to win me over to, which I assume is thy end."

"I carry only the good of The Church as mine aim," he said sternly.

"As do I, which is why I am willing to hear thee out, rather than strike thee down as a blasphemer against our High Priest. Meet with me tomorrow morning, and we shall discuss this most dreadful topic. If thou dost not mind, I shalt bring some others whom I do trust implicitly."

"Agreed, Brother Carmichael."

In which a daughter is cherished...

At first The Lady hesitated over where to attach the Hammerites' rod to her creation, but soon I saw her affixing it to the arm much the same way as it had been attached to Thalia. Even with it removed from her sister, The Lady needed powerful gauntles to touch it. Foul smelling steam rose from where the rod made contact with the other parts. I eventually learned that this was in the nature of the creation; to be equal parts carefully, meticulously, planned and crafted pieces that fit together with absolute precision, and random assemblages of essentially junk that would be wedged and hooked and tied into place.

"Come, Cicada," she said to me, curling her finger in a beckon. "Look upon my daughter."

I came, as I was asked, and I looked, as I was asked, but I could not be made to understand. I had watched her assemble this daughter of hers slowly, over years, never asking its purpose, never even desiring to guess, and now, as I looked over its awful beauty and its delightful horror, I found that I simply had no desire to know its purpose. My mind could not accept such a thing as this *having* a purpose.

"She is complete," The Lady said to me, almost a whisper. "The juice of the fruit flows freely through her. She even breaths. And yet, what is a body without a spirit to fill it?"

I looked down at the construction. I could not bring myself to think of this thing as a *she*. As The Lady had said, I could see the way the deep purple liquid trickled steadily through the *body*, clinging to its surfaces, apparently not needing the tube-like arteries of flesh and blood creatures. I could see the ever so slight rise and fall of its chest, the way the pieces in the neck seemed to fluctuate in rhythm to the rise and fall. Had it been covered with skin, I might have suspected it be alive.

"That is all that remains, and even if it takes another seventy years, I will see to it that this comes to pass."

I remained silent, thinking that my slow, crude speech had no place near this *daughter*. I instead simply watched as The Lady gently stroked the face, neck, and chest of her creation, nearly cooing with delight. She was on her knees; her head held mere inches from the created head as her eyes constantly glanced this way and that over the mechanical and haphazard surface. If I was not already in awe of this creation, I would have been in awe of the way The Lady regarded it.

Chapter 14

A Fine Mess

— Thalia: Fleeing It —

Day 6: 8:00 pm

The light came on...

The light went out...

In the distance I heard a noise. A pounding of metal on metal and then a grinding as surfaces were dragged against one another. I lifted my weary head slowly and opened my eyes. Something was wrong; different. I didn't recognize where I was. The cell did not look the same with the door opened.

"I've got you," she said as she put her arms around my shoulders. I didn't know who she was, but she felt familiar.

"This one..." The voice in my head leapt from the shadows of my mind; how deeply had it hidden itself, so that I barely remembered it was even there "...will do."

"Thalia," I heard her sob as she undid my shackles, "how could they do this to you?" My hands hung lifelessly from broken wrists as she parted them from their metal homes.

"Lytha," I gasped, realizing finally what was happening, "no...You can't have her."

The voice of It stung at my consciousness and flooded my senses, pressing itself somehow between her and me. I could feel it reaching out its tendrils to her, greedily caressing her mind with its influence. "She will be mine. You cannot stop me, ruined old hag!"

I clenched my teeth, but found I did not even have the strength for that. I was being lifted up onto Lytha's shoulder, and felt her trembling beneath me.

There was blurring, like I could no longer fathom where I ended and It began, where It ended and she began, "Such rage, such strength and power, yes, this one will do..."

"You will not touch her!" I commanded it, but knew I was powerless against it.

"It is far too late for that..."

I found myself on the ground, heaving as if in a seizure. At some point I had simply lost my mind and fell, dropping helplessly into a vision of things past.

"And now I have ye both!"

I held my head between my palms, squeezing with shaking arms. "Lytha," I whimpered, "where are you? I thought you came to rescue me..."

"How could you let this happen?" It was Lytha's voice now, clear as a bell, not It, "You let it take me! You let this happen to me!"

"No!" I cried, forcing myself up and trying to remember where I was. A road, no just a foot path, I was going back to The City. I had only left Delphine's company an hour ago. I ran.

I ran down the path only until it turned to the side, and then I kept running forward, jumping through the trees and into the thicket. I ran. I sensed water up ahead. I couldn't just thrust Lytha back where she belonged without it; I didn't know what that would do to her, to me, to *It*.

I don't know how long I ran. My thoughts were a jumbled blur; I didn't know if I was awake or dreaming, if I was Lytha or Thalia, or if *It* had taken control, but still I ran. I only hoped I could put the pieces together before it was too late. I should have known. *I should have known* that I wouldn't be able to keep this up for long.

I nearly fell into the stream. I picked myself up from where I had fallen, on hands and knees, and stared into the water, ready to pull the choker off, and saw only a rushing blur. I was too far uphill; the water was flowing too fast. I couldn't see my reflection.

I got back up, and ran. I followed the stream downhill. I knew that eventually it would come to a basin and be still. My moment of clarity soon faded again. I didn't know where I was running or why, if I was running to or away from something, how far it would be, how long I had been running, or who I was. I just knew I had to keep running. In time I felt sure that something was chasing me. I felt *It* somewhere behind, overtaking me minute by minute. I felt *her* at my side, running along with me, but I did not know if it was *she* or *I* that was running beside. We just ran.

— Jyre: Stories of Stone —

Day 6: 9:00 pm

I couldn't remember the last time I sat by a campfire. During the last winter in The City I always stayed inside, and winters back home never seemed so bad. The only time I was out in the wilderness and I really needed one was when it was raining, and then of course it was too wet to light a fire. It seemed like a waste to me. It was hot enough so that we didn't need one, and it would only give away our location. Heppet said it would keep wild animals away from the camp site, but I felt like that was a made up reason just to get the stupid kid to shut up. James said that he needed some light in order to write in his journal, which I believed, but he was only doing that for a few minutes before he put it away and rolled over to fall asleep. Petra never said anything.

I didn't want to sleep. I was uncomfortable out here, and didn't like sleeping near people I didn't know either. I didn't make eye contact with either of them, just sat on the ground by the fire with my knees up to my chin and watched the flame. I had been won over. The campfire was pretty much the only thing that was making this moment bearable.

"Heppet," James suddenly said as he rolled slightly upright. He hadn't been asleep after all. "I just remembered something I had been meaning to ask you. The stump...how long ago would you say the tree had been cut down?"

He looked over suddenly. I think he had been staring at Petra, while pretending to not be. It was the only reason why I was glad she was here—otherwise he would have been staring at me. "I hadn't really thought about it, but if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say ages ago. Centuries."

"Fascinating. Thank you Heppet." James rolled back over, and once again

I couldn't tell if he was asleep or not.

Heppet looked up into the stars for a moment, and let out a sigh. I craned my neck as well to look up at the stars between the branches. There were so many of them. Usually all I could see were clouds illuminated by the reddish glow of the city lights, but out here it was almost like home again. I looked for familiar patterns in the sky, and wondered if I even remembered them. "Beautiful night," he said.

I was about to reply when I noticed he was staring at Petra again; he had been talking to her, not me. She hadn't replied though—maybe she was asleep, or maybe she was ignoring him. I smirked, glad that she had rejected him. Why should he be talking with her anyway when I was right here? "What stump," I said before I even knew I had decided to.

I expected him to ignore me, but he instead smiled broadly at me and put his finger to his lips. "I'll tell you if you promise it won't leave this campsite."

I tucked my knees up tighter to my chin as I nodded, and then listened to him as he spoke of his vigil in the woods watching over Daelus. I found that I liked him at once now that I knew that, but I had to keep Zin's words in mind as he spoke of Daelus and the Hammerites, and trust that it was true. Finally when he got to the part where he was selected to enter the grotesque villa, I interrupted.

"You are a pagan?"

"In some senses yes, in some no. It's a bit like music. You can have all the strings and woodwinds as you want, but as soon as you add a single drum, it's no longer chamber music—it becomes something else. But if you have a collection of drums, it doesn't matter how many mandolins you add to the set, it's still drum music."

I felt like he was talking about me somehow, but I didn't interrupt, just frown.

"I was born to a pagan tribe, but I left," he said.

He was quiet then, but I didn't want it to be the end of the story. "Why?"

He smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile, "For a woman."

"Oh..." I let him have his silence then, afraid of what further words would stir up in me. "How old were you?" I said as the thought leapt from me.

"Not too much older than you really. Of course I couldn't go back. She was a city-head, as they say, and I was a traitor for going with her."

"Is she still alive?"

"Oh yes, yes, I imagine she is. I was a fancy of hers...a pet. She had always fantasized about a dangerous tribesman you see. It's a shame it had to be me."

That made me want to cry; how could people be so cruel to one another? "I am sorry," I squeaked.

He went on from there, talking about the horrors he discovered inside the villa. I clenched my eyes shut, wishing for him to stop, but felt that I needed to hear it. This was The Lady he was talking about. Everything I had feared about her was true. She was more than just a sorceress who experimented on people; she was a butcher. As he finished his story, I felt a great emptiness

inside of me. Of all things and people of this world, how could something so awful, be allowed to go on? How would it be to just remove them, make them blink out of existence and erase the fact that they had ever lived? Were there not gods capable of this mercy?

"Now," he said, after he had told me about Daelus's triumph against Brother Chispin, which for a brief moment made me forget about all those other hopeless thoughts, "do you want to hear a *real* story?"

"Why? Is this one real and that one not?"

"That one was just me telling you what happened yesterday. It was small talk. *This* is a legend."

"Oh," I said faintly, and found myself leaning forward in anticipation.

"I remember it from when I was a boy, but I hadn't thought about it until I saw that great stump. We have many legends about great trees, but one more than any fits. It is not ancient history, though it involves times and things so ancient—mankind was not even a thought in the cosmos. Do you want to hear it?"

I nodded, though I was already terrified.

"Millions of years ago, there was a woman named Scina, who was called Faery Queen."

"Like The Lady," I said, interrupting like a foolish child.

"Only this was the first Faery Queen, and she ruled over the glades and the caverns for hundreds of years; until one day her authority was challenged by another. Long have the spiders and the spider-ilk been second to the fae, and their insectine brethren, and so they rose up against her. There was a creature, a being of unfathomable horror from a time and space before this world was born, eons before the first man and woman felt soil between their toes and wind in their hair. It lay slumbering at the base of the earth, deep below the great mountains, waiting to be called."

As the words 'unfathomable horror' went through me I felt a pang of panic travel of my spine, a lingering reminder of *something* which I knew terrified me, but I could not remember.

"It is said to have a long, segmented body like a centipede, but with twelve long legs like a spider's. A long stalk-like neck ended in a head like a lion's, but with the face of a man."

I felt the hairs at the base of my neck standing stiff. I didn't want to hear this story, but couldn't bring myself to ask him to stop.

"Somehow, the spider-ilk woke it, and bid it to gorge itself on their young, that it may use the strength it gained from them to destroy the Faery Queen and end their subversion."

"Eat their own young?" I said with disbelief.

"This demon, called Kith-canoe, gained the powers and magical strengths of those it devours, no matter how weak within the host, becomes manifest in incredible power within it, but briefly. Spider young hatch by the millions, and so these millions were made into a broth for the demon, which it drank down, so hungry from its long slumber. A progeny would be lost, but the race would survive, and future generations would rule over the fae, rather than be

ruled.”

I couldn't feel sympathy for a race which would take such horrible measures for revenge, but I could certainly understand their need for it.

“And so the queen herself was challenged; and they did do battle. For nine days and nights they battled deep within the earth, their mighty blows of power carving out hundreds of miles of caverns as they clashed. Finally, it seems the two were spent; for as powerful as Kith-canoe was, the Faery Queen was also powerful. It was a stalemate. But the Faery Queen knew who it was she dealt with, and knew that in time she would need rest, and it would go on and on, and so she proposed a concession, on the terms of a pact with the spider-ilk.

“Kith-canoe did not know of the Faery Queen's weakness, and so it heard her out, hungry for its next meal and not truly concerned with the fate of its spider summoners. She promised that spider-kind will be freed from their place in her society, and that the great subterranean land they had created through their battle could be used as a new spider nation, and left alone. Offerings and sacrifices would be given to the spiders and he, their new god, regularly. It agreed to this deal, and the spider-ilk rejoiced in this victory. The first gift offering was a great wall of glass; a mirror, erected that the new god of spider-kind could admire its beauty.”

I wrinkled my nose, disgusted at the thought of something so ugly admiring itself.

“It was done. Kith-canoe was a stranger to vanity, and so the prospect of this excited it. It would be its undoing. The second gift was meant as a feast for the demon god; a small creature which was said to have the most unique flavor, able to be appreciated only by a demon. It resembled a large male fowl, with featherless fleshy wings and a long barbed tail of a lizard. The rest of its body was devoid of feathers or skin, but bore leathery scales. Its eyes were enormous, like great saucers. It was a cockatrice, and is one of the rarest of all creatures—said now to be long extinct. Its gaze turns all that meet it into stone.

“But its powers were paltry compared to the ancient might of Kith-canoe, and so it was devoured without a second thought. It was pleased, and thanked the Faery Queen for this most delicious offering. But it was a trick. The powers of the meal manifested itself into the demon, and when it went once again to admire itself in its mirror, it was turned to stone!”

“That was...easy,” I said, feeling a bit disappointed at the anticlimactic ending.

He laughed. “It always sounds easy when someone else has to do it!”

It was true. I rested my cheek on my knee and felt silly for the stupid comment. “But this is just a myth, right? It's not even true.”

“I thought so myself, until I saw that stump. You see, once the spider's new demon god had been petrified, and all of the spider-ilk that had stood up against Scina gathered in the caverns, she had a great tree placed to seal them all inside. None of the spiders would be able to touch the tree, for its sap was a poison to them. So for a million years that tree grew strong, sealing off to

the world the lair of the petrified demon and those that summoned it.”

I tucked my chin in closer to my knees, gazing at him over the shape they made in my vision, like two round hills with the setting sun, the campfire behind them. “But you said the tree was cut down. A tree like that couldn’t be cut down.”

“I didn’t think so, but I am frankly surprised that the stump in the villa was cut down. I don’t think anyone could have done that, either, and yet there it was, just a huge stump. People are careless, and really, really stupid. They only think about what’s going on right now, and think that things that happened millions of years ago no longer matter. I see it all the time.”

“But,” I said, already questioning “if this happened millions of years ago, before humans existed, how does anyone know about it?”

“Oh,” Heppet said. “The story was probably passed down through the ages by the fae, and then told to humans eventually.”

That sounded reasonable, though I wasn’t even sure how many years a million was. I also wasn’t sure how something that happened millions of years ago could matter, but I didn’t argue with him. I didn’t want to think about his story anymore, but images of the stump filled my mind and drowned out all of my other thoughts.

— Sheam: The Leaning Castle —

Day 6: 9:00 pm

I was confused at first, but as my eyes adjusted to just what I was seeing, I realized just how little of The City I had seen in all of my life here. At first it looked as if the castle had been torn from its foundations and dropped on its side, but then I realized that it had just been built like that. I imagined a great hill resting where the western side of the castle now stood lofted into the air, but it had been etched away bit by bit, either as quarried stone or just cleared to make more room, and now a tumble of other structures now occupied that space, as if building blocks stacked haphazardly by children. I braced myself for our reception to be as lopsided as this structure.

“This way, madam, sir,” said a man standing before us as we disembarked from the stagecoach. At first I thought it was the same one who had greeted us at The Circle, but then I realized that their uniforms simply made them all look alike.

I remained as quiet as Othello as we were led up the walk. As we got closed to the castle I kept feeling as if I should be leaning to the right in order to make the building seem more *correct*.

The gate was closed behind us, sealing us into the courtyard. The great door into the structure beckoned, and the entourage wasted no time in escorting us. We were led into a large hallway of great bulging stones and flickering oil sconces. “No,” one of the servants said as he stepped out quickly to meet us. “Not this way, go around, and then upstairs.”

Our guide followed directions without a word. Soon we were walking up a spiraling tower stair, which, unless I was truly disoriented, actually was

leaning. Another door shut behind us, and a large man turned to face me. He was tall and broad, though his heavy clothing possibly made him seem larger than he was. A massive fur coat hung from his shoulders, coming down to his knees, which were clad in long tan stockings. His large bearded jaw bulged forth from his face, with a pair of tiny black eyes sizing me up.

"Lord Crowley," I said finally, having sized him up as well.

"Lady Sheam," he said in reply, and then put his closed fists at his hips. I crossed my arms over my chest.

He finally broke off from his gaze and strutted across the room, away from me. "The timing of your offer makes me wonder how much you know," he said.

"We know some things; all is doubtful. Our timing is not calculated, but it is urgent."

"I am not certain why a museum and library is interested in me and my club," he said, turning back to me with a sudden change of tone and expression. It was almost like he was putting on a game face.

"Being a museum, a library, and an art gallery, affords us access to many connections."

"Connections are important, you are correct, but how would these connections be of any use when we are dealing with life and death here? How could...an *art dealer* be of use when lives are on the line?"

"The Circle has many faces, Lord Crowley. The one you see and is seen by most is the dignified one of a cultural sophisticate, but behind it, the cunning face of an information dealer. Little goes on within The City that escapes our network."

Crowley lifted his chin a little, frowning with one side of his mouth. "What use it this supposed network to the creator of a collection of trifles; lovely work all, yes, but trifles nonetheless?"

I lifted my chin just a little higher, but smiled ever so slightly. "Of what use is a band of ideological activist to a respected nobleman?"

At that he lowered his face and glared at me. "We band together because of a common goal and a common dream; a city free of the terror of the occult and a mankind free of the taint of witchcraft and animal-morphisms. What is that to a collector?"

I leveled my gaze at him, and did my best to appear stoic. "That is not the issue, here. As you said yourself, lives are at stake; lives of your people, and lives of my people. We are already deeply involved in this, just as deeply as you are."

Crowley frowned fiercely, and narrowed his eyes. "And just how deeply am I involved in what?"

With my slight smile erased, I replied. "You've started a war; a war that was not meant to be. The pagans meant to attack The City by surprise, catch us all off guard and slaughter us, but you preempted that attack, and it cost you dearly when they sought to silence you. We became aware of it by accident; a single piece of artwork was purchased, but that was the only tip our network needed to uncover a vast conspiracy. It was through this

network, gained from our connections as a collection of *curios*, that we were made aware of the seriousness of this situation. It is through these connections that we have learned of Lady Delphine, and the position you are now in with her." So much of that was guile, almost a bluff, pretending to know more than I actually did, exaggerating the situation as more vast and more dire than I knew it to be, but I did not feel that any of it was untrue. Much of it was unproved, but from what James told me, I feared it was all true.

The fierce look on his face vanished as quickly as he had put it on. "I seem to have kicked over a hornet's nest. I knew that there was the possibility of bloodshed, and everyone who joined knew that they were putting their lives in danger, but I could not anticipate the slaughter..." he was growing in anger. I remembered Daelus telling me about the scene he discovered days ago, the Bloods meeting that had been reduced to a bloodbath...no pun intended.

"We also know of the help you sought in retribution for this conflict, which has possibly backfired..." Ouch, no, I had my timeline—Ranson had already joined with the Bloods prior to that massacre.

"Just what *is* this network?" he asked, though he seemed more earnestly curious than hostile. "I still have a hard time believing that your master is a simple collector of cultural relics, even though I have been persuaded that you are serious about your knowledge. What does he actually *do*?"

"He is not so different from you, really. He too has an idealized vision for The City, though he does not target pagans specifically."

"He is not from here. What interest could he possibly have in our affairs?"

"I cannot speak for him on that matter, but only assure you that he does."

Crowley stopped. The conversation had moved so quickly, so energetically, with both of us speaking without pause to even consider, that I hadn't realized that my folded arms were squeezing me so tightly I was having trouble breathing. I hoped he couldn't see just how tense I was.

"So your master, Lord Thresh is offering to join The Bloods?" he said finally.

"Not as such; we are offering an alliance, not a union. We share resources to a common end, nothing more, nothing less."

"To be quite honest, the man you see before you now is but a shadow of my true self. Were situations different I would be planning out this allegiance with you at once; for I can certainly use all the help I can get or the deaths of countless more souls who have pledged to this cause will be on my hands."

"What is stopping you?" I said, wanting him to answer and not offering insight as to what I already expected.

"This bastard, Ranson; I took a risk with him and I lost. He claimed to have been a victim of Delphine who escaped, and everything he told us checked out. He knew a hell of a lot, and it's helped us a great deal, but it's all been defensive thus far. We've anticipated further attacks and were always ready for them, even set a few traps, but it's been defend; defend; defend. He says that we need more numbers if we are to go on the offensive, but we've already lost so many, and I cannot conscionably bring new men and women

into this fray when I know how dangerous it is. He's been recruiting without my consent, and they follow *him*, not me. He's got a power to him; people flock to his words. He uses his deformities to draw sympathy. So now even the originals, people who I thought I knew and trusted, are either standing behind him, or questioning whether *they* can be the next Ranson. Everything is falling to pieces around me, and I can feel the enemy breathing down my neck, closing in for the kill..."

"We can put a stop to that.—Tonight. Ranson is driven by madness and will stop at nothing, see as many people die as he needs to, to get what he wants. With this allegiance you will have the support you need to cut him and those who follow him off, and let him see what happens without your support; let all of them see." I had no idea how I would do any of that, but it seemed like a convincing argument. I had made it this far by the tip of my tongue; I'd take it farther.

"I wish I was as optimistic as you are." Just then another man walked into the room. He wasn't wearing one of the uniforms, nor dressed royally. He had a stiff dark green tunic which came up high around his neck, a long face which seemed to be mostly nose, and side-burns which ended abruptly before his chin. He was whispering something to Crowley, which I could not make out, though I was certain that I heard the name Ranson said several times.

I had almost forgotten that Othello was with me; he had been so still, so silent. I felt him press closer, bringing his hand to the small of my back. Somehow; that made me, feel like I could relax. I uncrossed my arms, and found myself leaning into him.

But it was not an expression of reassurance. As soon as I had pressed to his hand he traced out something against me, drawing letters with his hand, W—E—S—T. Realizing what it meant, I caught another glance of the man whispering to Crowley just before he left. James's agent, West, seemed to be very well-to-do within the Bloods. But what was Rembrandt up to?

"The time is now right," Crowley said, wiping his brow. "I am afraid I have a test in store for you, but you are at once a subject and an agent of this test. The next few hours will, I am afraid, define the future of this society. I have called a meeting of whom I feel would make the best lieutenants. My biggest mistake has been a lack of hierarchy among us, but I simply did not expect the group to grow this large, so quickly. I will rectify that tonight. I want you to be there; I will introduce you as you have presented yourself, an offer of allegiance. But, it will be up to you to make your case before them. This is not simply a test of you and your abilities of persuasion—it is a test for *them*, to see how they react to this proposal. I fear that some of them may prove to be poor choices for lieutenants, and I know some are loyal to *him*, but they may yet surprise me. The promise of actual power may snap them out of their blind loyalty. I need a half dozen strong personalities, at the very least, to stand up for order within The Bloods."

"Might I suggest an addition to this pool of possible Lieutenants?" I said, afraid I was about to go way out of bounds, but had to try it.

"Oh?"

"There is a man who has proved very valuable to our side of this conflict, and more than that, he is a friend. He has leadership experience, and his bravery is unquestionable. He is currently in your company, but not as a member as far as I am aware. In fact, I believe he is in your custody. I am of course talking about Captain Els."

He became visibly upset, but did not explode like I feared he might. "Ranson is terrified of that man, and I know why; he could easily replace him as our expert on Delphine. As of now he rots in the dungeon in Ranson's outpost. I have no power to have him released, as all of our ranks which have control over that situation are completely loyal to that worm."

"Perhaps then tonight, if all goes well with this meeting, the first task of our alliance will be to spring Captain Els from his imprisonment."

I nodded, feeling like I had finally gotten somewhere. "When does this meeting take place?"

"Come with me, downstairs. It began several minutes ago."

— Ghost: Like I'd Never Left —

I slammed the door open with a shout of "Aha!" Drunken heads and heads that probably wished they were 'drunken' turned to look at me briefly, and then went back to their drunkenness. "Ah...ha!" I said again, though less dramatic and an instant before the door swung back and caught me in the shoulder. "Ah!"

"Hoy Ghost!" shouted the barkeep from under that solid mass of black tar he called hair, "twice in nearly a week? Now you present me with a conundrum as to the foundation of this unexpected frequency. If I must postulate, I suppose—"

"Mac," the barkeep's name suddenly popped into my head after I was certain I didn't know it. "I never have a taffin' clue what the taff you're rattlin' your bone box about. Stiff drink, will you?" I piled myself onto the barstool, and remembered with a palm to my forehead that I really didn't come by here that often, and my dramatic reappearance was a bit stupid.

I would have watched what he was pouring into my tankard, as I was sure his idea of a stiff drink was to stiff the customer, but the finger trailing across the side of my neck made any thought more complex than 'finger across the side of my neck' impossible. "Oh Ghostiekins," came wafting into my ear, with all of the sensuality of a bitch cat moaning in heat, "don't I get a hello?"

"Betty!" I nearly shouted as I turned around so fast it nearly knocked her off her stool.

She started giggling as she righted herself, which somehow involved sitting on my stool and not her own. "Ghost! From the look on your face I'd think you hadn't seen me in a month. I knew I was good, but I guess I am *just that good*," she mewed with a wink.

Something was clearly wrong with me, because somehow everything that came after the *finger on the neck* moment was kind of boring. "Well to be

honest, I nearly died about seven times this past week, so if I seem excited, well I'm just excited to be alive!" Maybe it was that stupid charm Delphine gave me. I certainly felt my old self before I put it on. *That kiss* that I knew Lytha gave me while I was barely awake definitely had an effect. "Mac!" I demanded to take my mind of that, "where's my taffin' pint!"

Betty was going to have all the time in the world to gab now, because my tankard was planted firmly in my mug and it wasn't going anywhere for just a sec'. "Oh Ghostie, it's so good that you're here, we needed your help and we knew that you were the only one who could help us!"

I've heard that line before. I was still drinking; *glug, glug, glug.*

"Laurela's been kidnapped! It was an evil, evil client of hers; we haven't seen her for days! Oh Ghostie, I can't imagine what he could be doing to her!"

But I could imagine what she could be doing to him.—Still drinking.

"I told everybody, just you wait 'til Ghostie gets here, he'll fix 'im up!"

I slammed the empty stout back down on the bar, tapping the rim twice saying, "Something's wrong with my cup. It's empty. *Fix it.*"

"Oh Ghostie, haven't you heard a word I've said?" she deplored, starting to hang on me like she was ready to faint.

"Betty, yes, I have, and seriously, this isn't the first time you've thought that Laurela's been kidnapped."

"But it's been days!" she whined, "and, and..."

"Maybe the guy's got stamina!"

"It's different now, Ghost! You see..." she trailed off and turned to look over my shoulder. Someone else was coming.

"Is this him?" the young man said, "is this the guy you said could help us?"

I twisted around as far as I could to see a very girly looking man with blue eyes standing there with his lower lip thrust out like it was begging to be punched, but then I stopped caring, because Mac finally got around to filling my taffing tankard. Bottoms up!

"Yes Tobikins," she said, and started to tug on my sleeve. If I spilled my drink, gods save you woman. "Ghostie, this is Laurela's boyfriend."

I nearly spilled my drink at *that*. I looked over at him again and tried to size him back up: about five and a half feet tall, narrow shoulders, dark hair over his eyes, and feet pointed out from each other. "You poor, poor bastard," I said.

"Yes, it is awful; I haven't seen my Laurela in at least thirty two hours!" He didn't even have to check the clock. He had the time memorized. I bet he was counting the seconds.

"Not what I meant," I said, taking another long draft; but not nearly taffin' long enough.

"Ghostie I told him all about you; how wonderful and brave and strong you are; how you aren't afraid of nobody and can take on four Hammerites in a fight! Ghostie, he's in *love* with her!"

I put my cup down with a sigh, the kind of sigh I remember Raggie giving whenever his wife told him that she had already told him ten times to do something. I could see this wasn't going to go away. "Betty, why the

taff...every time some poor sick taffer falls in love with you, you turn into the ice-queen-bitch of The City and don't rest until his heart is in as many pieces as great Podus's iron horse. But if it's Laurela, you turn into a weepy eyed romantic waif?"

She did look like a weepy eyed romantic waif.

"And you, boy, you do know that Laurela is a bed-breaking, curtain-tearing, throw-me-in-the-back-of-the-carriage-I-am-ready-to-go-now *whore*, and she's probably taffing this guy's *brains* out right this second?"

Strange, he also looked like a weepy eyed waif, but he found his tongue. "I don't care! I don't care what she does! This is different this time, I know it! This man is dangerous! He's hurting her!"

I sighed, and wondered why I hadn't managed to finish my second helping yet. Oh, that's right, all this *talking*. As much as I was smart enough to keep the business of girls like these as far away from my concerns as possible, and as much as I suspected that the bloke simply had deep pockets and the girl was taking him for all he's worth, the idea of some ugly brute beating on that girl did make my blood boil. "Look," I finally said, "you're breaking my heart, but I am on a mission right now, and I can't break it off to go on a wild goose chase."

"So you won't help us," he said, sticking his lip out even more. "Laurela could be being molested right now and you will do nothing! Betty said you were a *hero!*"

"It's her *job* Tobi-kins! It's how she gets *money!* I steal gold from *dead people*. That's how I get money. I'm not a taffin' *hero.*"

Betty slipped away from me and began to pace around the room like an impatient housewife. Out of nowhere, Drew the Shoe made the stool next to mine groan like Laurela probably was right now. "What the taff Ghost, you bolluck sucking piece of burrick shit, you won't help this kid out?"

"What the *taff* Drew," I came back, "and I taffed your taffin' mother last night. What the fish piss is this to you?" I had to shoo away several flies immediately; man this guy kept a collection.

"And I was busy bugger-taffin' your father, making him cry like a little taffin' girl. I thought you were a sport, you cowardly pile of goat puke. Can't you see this girl needs your help?"

"Yes!" both Betty and the wee man said in unison.

"I already told you, I am on a bloody mission right now!"

"Then what the taff are you doing sucking on Mac's teat, like it was my Doberman's taffin' sheath?" Drew said, smacking the bar.

"This is part of the mission, and if you weren't so busy wetting your nose on this little boy's runway you'd be able to see that *I am on the taffin' job*. Sitting here, in this bar, is part of the mission. Drinking from this tankard which *still isn't empty yet* is part of the job. Telling you to go taff yourself on a *swamp-found moss arrow* is part of the taffin' job! Now are you going to leave me the gods-damned bloody taff alone, or am I going to have to show you how much scarier than a *gods-damned bloody* Hammerite I can be?"

"I thought you were nice," Betty said, running over to punch me in the

shoulder.

I signed and leaned away from the bar. Truth was I was doing everything I could to be a hard ass to keep from breaking down. This kid was going to have to learn the hard way, so maybe I should step in and show him just what he was getting into. But...“I’m sorry. Look, fellas, I am really sorry that I can’t help with this, but this mission I am on is really bloody important. I’m talking about hundreds of lives here.” I should have said my own life, but that would have sounded selfish. It wasn’t a lie; hundreds of lives really were in danger from the zombie hordes I could summon up. “But okay, you’ve won me over; if Laurela is still with this guy, kidnapped as you say, by the time I finish this job, which should be tonight, I’ll do what I can, okay?”

“at’s a spirit you bull-milk guzzling scum!” Drew shouted, smacking me in the back. “Oh Ghostie, I knew you’d come around!” Betty crooned. “Oh I am so happy you changed your mind, sir!” The little boy squealed.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, finally getting around to the thing I had been planning to do since I sat down—finishing my second drink. “But that just means you all need to sit tight and let me work, okay? I’m looking for someone.”

Betty was bouncing up and down, as if she needed a way to remind me that she had no *brassière* on. “Mm, I know everybody, Ghostie; who you lookin’ for?”

“I’m sure you do, Betty, I am sure you’ve *known* them all. I’m looking for this guy, Ranson.” I didn’t get a reaction from any of them so I kept going, “seems he’s the indentured man-servant to this great terrifying smoking-hot broad, a witch if ever I’d laid eyes on one, and I mean the real deal here, like spell-casting type witch. Anyway, the bloke skipped out on her, tidied up with her enemies, and she wants him back for his just rewards. So I need to track down this group called The Bloods and find him; they’re supposed to have recruiters in bars, or something.”

“Oh yes!” she cried, “They were here a few hours ago. They didn’t realize that business in this bar doesn’t pick up until at least midnight, so they decided to come back later. But I’ve seen them recruiting in other bars and the line was around the block! Everyone wants to join after what happened to The Hammers!”

I cracked a grin. “What happened to the Hammers, eh?” I was famous and I didn’t even know it. “I don’t suppose any of you joined, eh?”

“Oh no Ghostie, I couldn’t; my mother, remember?”

“Eh, I don’t know anything about your mother.”

“I know *your* mother!” Drew said with a cackle.

Out of turn, the pipsqueak piped up. “No sir, I didn’t think to, for my heart has been so wrapped up in Laurela that I have not been able to think another thought!”

“Well you guys are no help. Okay, which bar did you see them recruiting at, Betty?”

“Just down the street, as Pink’s Winery and Ale.”

I grimaced. That place had a cork up its ass. “Think I can get in there without them throwing me out?”

"I can get you in!" the boy said excitedly, "If you *promise* to help Laurela afterwards!"

"Eh, no promises. I'll take my chances. At least no one there knows me, so that'd be a good start. Okay, I'll meet you two, not you Drew, taff the *hell* off, here at this time tomorrow night. If I am not here, well,"

"Well?" she purred and pawed at me.

"Then I'm dead."

"Sir, just in case you have a chance to look into it tonight, I am sure she is being held at 56B Morlan Way."

"Drew the Shoe, my good chap; contemplate the eventuality of a drink purchase or contemplate the eventuality of an empty bar stool, one or the other, my good chap!" Mac said, which made absolutely no sense. How did a guy that talked like that wind up being a bartender in a place like this?

"Right, right. Okay...Pink's Winery and Ale. Gods, I swore I'd never set foot in that stuck up place." I tossed Mac some coin and pinched Betty's hand before she went for it, would have shoved Tobi-kins out of my way if he hadn't scurried away like a roach fleeing a lit lamp, and only turned around to shout to Drew, "Tell your mother I *love* her!" to which he laughed and flipped me off.

Tobikins was trailing behind me like a post puppy as I headed for Pink's. When I got there I saw it had lamps and tables outside, with tablecloths and everything. I slid in between seated customers and waiters in fancy outfits carrying huge platters on one hand to the front door, with the boy still in tow. I lifted myself up to peep in one of the windows, and saw that inside was all lit by candles on tables, filled with the low roar of civilized conversation, and smelled of too much perfume. Yeah, they'd never let me into this place. I pulled up a chair at one of the empty tables outside that had a view through the window, and continued to scan the scene, with Tobikins mimicking my every movement. There wasn't anything in there that looked like recruiters, but I had no idea what to expect there. I supposed there could have been some guys sitting at a table with a banner across it that said 'Join the Bloods Today!' and a big book full of names and a line of people trying to sign, but I didn't see anything that looked like that. Was I even in the right place?

"Don't worry Mister Ghost," he said quickly with his squeaky voice. "I'll tell them you're with me and they'll let us in."

"Ugh, yeah, right," I said, ramming my palm into my face.

He piped up as soon as a waiter was passing us by. "Uh, sir, excuse..." The waiter ignored him, and began to take the order at a table that had *civilized* people sitting at it. He tried again, saying, "I say, pardon me..." only to have similar luck with a comely waitress. By the time a third servant was approaching, I beat him to the chase.

"Hey," I said, waving my hand and smacking my palm against the table to make a loud *bang*.

The waiter blinked, and stopped cold in his tracks for just a second. "I will be with you in a moment sir," he said as he tried to get by.

"Just slow down, I'm looking to sign up with The Bloods, and I heard here's the place to do it."

He stopped again, looked at me, looked at Tobikins, frowned a little, and said, "Back room," before pointing to the alley and continuing on his way.

I craned my neck and saw a sign right next to the alley that said "Back Room" with an arrow under it. I lifted myself from where I sat and was down the alley in a jiffy. At the back of the building I found an open door, and a hallway within that seemed pretty dark. I figured I'd either end up in the back room, the wash room, the kitchen, or in trouble.

I stepped into a room full of people. Many were standing, some were sitting, all turned to look at me for a moment before resuming their conversations, though at a bit more of a hushed tone. It was still posh as hell, but I hadn't been kicked out yet. I took a few steps inside and paused, again not sure that this was what I was expecting. A short fellow came forward from the back of the room, saying, "welcome, welcome, you are just in time...you must have heard!"

"Er, yeah, I heard this is where you go to join The Bloods."

"Right you are, friend. Now if you'll just follow me..." This was weirding me out, but I guess it was no more strange than where I was for most of the day. I followed him through the crowd to a table, with a few guys sitting behind it, and a big book of names on top of it, and a big banner across it that said, 'Join the Bloods Today!'—wow.

"Aha good citizen," cried one of the guys from behind the table. I barely noticed him, since the person next to him was a dame in a corset who seemed to think that painting lines on her chest was going to make her seem fuller. "Heard of our cause have you? You did hear about the pagan attacks on the Hammerites yes? Horrible! And they still do nothing! Well we won't just stand by; sign our book here, and you'll be the first to know about every part of our plan to retake the city from these beasts, and in fact—"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, "I know all that already, so save your breath pal. Just tell me where to sign up. I'm not one for talking or rallies or pep talks, or standing around being sociable. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm armed to the teeth, and every minute my weapons aren't drawing pagan blood is a minute wasted of my time, so are you going to put me into the action or not?"

The woman made an 'ohhh' face, and the guy grinned, saying, "Tilde, get the *red book* please." He shut the book in front of me and slid it aside, while the woman pulled out a much smaller book which wasn't red at all, and opened it to somewhere in the middle. "We have a special registry for those who are all business and no talk," he said, dabbing the quill in some ink and hanging it to me after a few twirls. "Just sign at the bottom of the list and Tilde here will escort you to the war room; I understand there's even a plan tonight for a strike."

"Now we're talking," I said, wondering if Tilde actually thought she was attractive. I took the quill and went for the first blank line. I scanned the signatures first, and the ones I could even decrypt I couldn't recognize. I stopped for an instant before I put down my name, and quickly changed my mind.

Name: Mister Fenster T. Wot
Address: The City
Occupation: Pagan slayer

"Thank you Mister Wot, thank you so much." "May I call you Fenster?" "Right this way please!"

When she turned me around I found Tobikins staring up at me like he was expecting me to give him a doggie biscuit. "What?" I demanded.

"I got you in! Are you going to go find Laurela now?"

"Like taff you got me!" I shouted in his face. "Get lost, kid, before I cut out one of your kidneys and shove it down your..."

He had already vanished in a puff of I-just-shit-myself smelling smoke.

"Come on," the guy at the table said with a laugh, "Save it for the pagans, brother!"

Tilde led me out the back of the back room into an even more back back-room (which made the first one not seem very *back* anymore). It was pretty dark inside.

"Check him," someone said from the darkness, and then several people were all around me, poking and prodding. One had a measuring tape and was checking the lengths of my arms and legs, another was in my face with a light making me open my eyes and mouth, another had me pull my gloves off and was inspecting my hands. I played along, trying not to get too impatient. They were smart to check to make sure I was human I guess; I figure some pagans could try to slip by and then go on a killing spree.

— Thalia: Our Faces —

Day 6: 9:00 pm

I stumbled onto the water's edge like a starving person before a plate, but as I drew near, I hesitated. What would I see reflected in the surface? Eyes shut; I drew closer, until I knew the clear calm surface was below my face. I opened my eyes.

With a cry of panic I pulled away. I did not know what I had seen, but it was not my face; something horrible instead. I gathered myself up to try again, remembering why I was here, and what I was trying to do. Delphine had it all wrong. She thought I was complete; I was nothing of the sort.

I saw my face; the face of Thalia, in the surface. I felt my breathing and my pounding heart slow as I took it in. But, my hand still trembled as I reached for my neck, and the string of large beads around it. Once more I gathered myself up, hardened my nerve, and with fingers wrapped around it, pulled it off.

— Lytha: Our Faces —

Day 6: 9:00 pm

It broke free of my neck easily, and as my hand which clutched it pulled away from me, I felt it slipping through my fingers. I watched it, eyes wide with uncertainty, as the momentum of my pull carried it beyond the arc of my hand's travel, and quickly out into the air above the surface of the lake. With the tiniest of splashes impossibly far from the bank, it was gone beneath the surface.

I could only spare an instant's regret for losing it, as I quickly peered down to the gently rippling water. It was my own face; I was back, I was me again. I nearly collapsed before my own visage, steadied only by a single arm. My left hand was upon my face, feeling it, rubbing it to make sure it was real. I was panting again, my heart pounding. My hand went to my right shoulder, and for a dreadful instant, I was not sure what I would find there. My arm was bare, unadorned, no metal splint, nor even wounds to reveal its legacy; though the slightest hint of scar persisted. It had not all been a vision. I was not at the pond near the ruins where I had left Ghost. All of the events of yesterday—happened.

You would let her have you, but not me?

Oh Lytha I am sorry, I am so, so sorry, please forgive me, I had only your best at heart.

Can you feel how strong you are now? How powerful you are? It is because of me, not her! It is because of me!

"Shut...up," I whined, clutching my head between my hands. "Just shut up, both of you..."

You are mine now...all that time we were one, as you were forced in here with me by her...

"Quiet!" I growled, and leapt to my feet. It was right. I did feel strong, and clear, and resolved. I ran. I could see the Hammerite's mind inside my own, like it was now a little book I kept with me, able to be perused at will. Was this *It's* power or my own? Was there any longer any distinction?

I saw where I needed to go; where *we* needed to go. The Hammerites had a secret stronghold, a refuge, kept apart from The City, kept secret from the pagans, but the Hammerite prisoner, Chispin was his name, the one closest to the Father of the Hammers, had betrayed the secret to me. There I would go, and there I would bring chaos and horror to the lair of the Hammer Lord.

— Sheam: The City-Born Pure-Bloods Meet —

Day 6: 9:30 pm

It seemed to be a dining hall, but instead of one large table there were many small ones, each narrow and long so that three men could sit side by side at it, but not wide enough so that a second set could sit across from them. They were arranged in a rough semi-circle, some rows of seats behind them, with a small lectern at one end of the arc, so that when you stood at it most of the group was before you and to your left, and no one was to your right.

Crowley was right—the meeting had already begun without us. It was a testament to just how disenfranchised he had become to his own group. I didn't have time to take in everyone, at most a dozen men, who were seated and already arguing amongst one another before Crowley had me escorted in and was presenting me to the group. He went to the podium and indicated that I should sit, with Othello standing behind me.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming, and I am sorry for being tardy; I was preparing our honored guest, Lady Unexumbra Sheam to meet with you all, accompanied by her escort, Sir Othello. You may already be aware of our colleague from her work at The Circle of Stone and Shadow, under..."

As much as I should have been listening to his speech; my mind wandered. The people he had gathered here were a truly eclectic bunch. Only seven were seated, with others hanging in the background, trusted accomplices, observers, interlopers, or somewhere in between. I studied each of the seated men in turn. The one at the opposite end of the semicircle from me seemed a nobleman just as Crowley, with a shiny blue coat and a powdered wig. The man next to him was completely different; a long, scarred face with an eye-patch, a tussle of black hair that spilled over his shoulders, and a heavy dark brown coat which looked as well worn as his face. Beyond him was a simple looking fellow peering out from over spectacles, plain of feature and bald, dressed in a simple tradesman's tunic. Farther down the line was a large man with an impressive beard wearing his chain armor as if it were part of his skin, the dangling edge of his cowl almost covering his eyes. The man beside him again was a complete contrast; though sporting a similarly impressive beard, this one was long and spindly, dressed in a richly embroidered black robe and had long pointy fingernails which tapped at the table. A plump, fat man followed who breathed through his mouth and needed to wipe his nose; he took drinks every five seconds even though it seemed his cup was empty, dressed far less royally than some before him but still much more elaborately than the tradesman; a merchant I reckoned. My eyes quickly went to someone standing towards the back of the room, as an image of a scarecrow popped into my mind; Rembrandt.

"...so, that is why I am certain that an allegiance with The Circle will allow us to move forward and bring this conflict, both the one within our society and the one with the witch Delphine, to a close."

Feigned, disinterested applause followed. Crowley moved away from the podium and sat down next to me, as the group murmured faintly words they did not mean for me to hear. I half-recalled his speech, which covered most of the ground we had covered in our previous conversation, though he spent far less time presenting The Circle as something that could actually help them than I had to. Finally one of them spoke, the armored gentleman.

"Would Master Nightfall be able to commit the Silver Gryphons to the task?" he said in a surprisingly aristocratic voice.

"The Gryphons are under the command of Captain Wendle, who is in service to Lord Canard of Hightowne, so their commitment through this allegiance would have to be worked out between Lord Canard and Lord

Thresh."

"Won't need 'em," said the man with the eye-patch turning his head almost completely in profile to look at me. "The Circle's got plenty of muscle as is. I've dealt with it before, on the wrong side I might add. I can vouch that they mean business. Be strange to be workin' *with* them for a change."

"I object," the portly man said with a voice that sounded like a bouncing rubber ball, and had to flap his tongue inside his mouth several times before he resumed speaking. "The Bloods is a respectable society, of the utmost class; we cannot ally ourselves with The Circle on two rather ironic accounts; their connection to the underworld, and mysterious simultaneous connection to The Hammerites. Both create a volatile situation which we must avoid. Why, even now The Circle building lays in ruins by the Hammerite's hands."

The crowd erupted into commotion at this, even as I said, "Both of these two connections are of the utmost..." but had to stop because no one was listening. I stood, went to the lectern and said in a much louder voice, "Both of these two connections are of the utmost value to this group." Thankfully, they settled down and stared at me. "The so-called 'ruins' you observe The Circle in now is the result of a test which has only strengthened our allegiance with The Hammerites. Father Rafael himself oversaw the inspection which guaranteed to him beyond a shadow of a doubt that The Circle does not support pagan beliefs. I have *in writing* a profession of their solidarity with us, which I would be happy to present to any of you who doubt my words. Furthermore, our connection to the underworld is the sole reason why we have been able to confront Delphine at the very source; even now our agents work to break into the heart of her stronghold, and to strike at her directly." The words were coming faster than I could think them, half-lies mixed with truths mixed with outright fabrications, but it seemed to be working. The negative tone of the group was fading. I even saw some nodding.

"Can it be true?" the man in the dark robe said, finger twirling his long beard, "you have discovered Delphine's lair itself?"

"Yes, it is true. In fact, that is the very reason why I am here and not Lord Thresh; he marches with a group of brave Hammerites into the heart of Delphine's territory this very moment. He will strike at the root, but it is still up to us to clear away the branches. Her influence in The City is strong, and reaches far and wide; even into this *very society*, I am afraid."

That resulted in another explosion of activity, far worse than the first one. But one thing was common throughout; the name Ranson was being dropped.

"Yes, Ranson," I said, even louder than before. "He plots against her, yes, but sadly his pagan taint is strong and he brings their magical influence wherever he walks. He sews chaos and distrust with him, even if it is not in his will to do, it is in his *blood*. He belongs to her, and he always will, no matter how much he hates her. By allowing him into your ranks, you have invited her magic in amongst you, her bewitchery to creep into your minds and sew disorder and treachery. He must be cast out."

"Ranson is a great leader, and will lead us to victory against her!" the bald man cried, but was quickly shouted down.

"Then why has he met with nothing but failure? His girl failed to bring us this supposed scroll, if it even really exists. He's done nothing for us!" was the one with the eye-patch again, who in spite of his admission to being a former enemy of The Circle, seemed to be one of my greater supporters.

"He's increased our numbers a hundredfold!" said the man in the powdered wig.

"Yes, with ruffians in bars, socialites in parlors, street musicians, beggars, even children; these supposed numbers he has added to our ranks are little more than fadsters, incited to a cause by fear tactics on Ranson's part, and frankly useless to us," said Crowley himself in a huff of near-rage. "Their only purpose, and mark my words for these are dire ones, their only purpose is to die. Yes, there, I've said it; he is building a human shield for himself. They will follow his trail, killing everyone in their path, and the more bodies he puts between them and him, the more time he has to slip away. Ranson is no *Blood*; he is a self serving opportunist, who has turned this society into a bloodbath."

"No pun intended!" called out the man with the eye patch.

And again the group erupted into dispute. "I can help you take this society back from Ranson," I tried to say; though it seemed no one was listening.

"What if we don't want to take it from him!" called a man from the back, one who wasn't even seated. The arguing grew even more loud and heated. All I could do was to sigh and look at my hands.

"His stunt with the Hammerites was totally out of line! We should have him hanged just for that!"

"The Hammerites needed to be taught a lesson! They're so vulnerable and they don't even know it!"

"A dead Hammer's a good Hammer anyway; they're as bad as the pagans!"

"Ranson is a visionary and will lead us to a new era!"

"Ranson's still working for the witch I tell you!" He's trying to sabotage us!"

"Will you just listen to yourselves? This is exactly what she wants!"

It was going to be a very long night.

— Ghost: One Can Play at Two Games —

Day 6: 9:30 pm

After I had been given a seal of authentic humanness, I was rushed out the back-back door of Pink's and taken across the district to a dive under a pawn shop. A few seconds later I had been pushed into a locker room full of cutthroats and ruffians. The guy who shoved me in was gone before I could turn around; he must have been scared. Apparently the briefing had already been given, and everyone was gearing up to get to it. Well, they were going about it all wrong; not a single torch or pitchfork to be seen. These looked like real amateurs. Half of them had managed to put their armor on backwards.

"Hey, you," I said, catching a guy about a foot taller than me by the shoulder. "I came in late, what the taff is going on?"

"Ranson tells us that he set another trap for the pagans," he said with a voice like a tuba. "Said there's an outpost out in the woods that needs cracking, so he knows the pagans are going to attack it, and then we go attack them and crack them."

"That makes no sense," I said in disbelief. "Is it a pagan outpost or our outpost? If it's a trap why...no, I can't even ask. It makes no sense!"

"Look, I just do what they tell me. You shut up and do the same and we'll both get to kill some filthy pagans. Deal?" He turned back around and continued on his way.

"Hey, where is Ranson anyway? Is he leading the...whatever it is we're doing?"

He turned back reluctantly, saying "Don't know. Suf's in charge tonight, but he's not going either; just us brutes. Say, you're kinda scrawny..."

"Yeah, I have this disease; it makes my body turn into shriveled walnuts. You'd better get away from me if you don't want to catch it," I said with a crooked grin. He walked away a little more quickly.

To find Suf I just had to listen for the sounds of a busybody. I didn't really want to be noticed, so I tried to lie low, going this way and that through the gang of people, waiting for anything that sounded like a stuck up git giving orders. Sure enough, I spotted him, rambling on and on to one of the thugs about marching formations. He wasn't scrawny, but he looked like he'd never picked up anything heavier than a food-laden spoon in his life. He had a neck-beard and a pair of freshly cut gashes down one of his cheeks; probably had cut himself while shaving or something. I waited, keeping an eye on him, and soon he began running (if I could call that waddle running) from man to man asking if they were ready to go. He kept rubbing his palms on his armpits. "Suf I presume," I muttered to myself, and tried to act inconspicuous. If I just scooted around behind his line, he'd skip me. I waited until the right moment, and then walked casually to the other side of the room, using various hulking masses to block his line of sight.

The guys began to file out, and I followed, though I kept a close eye on where Suf was. He was either going to come out last or stay inside. When I got out onto the streets, I quickly stepped out of line, ducking into a shadow by the doorway. The thug behind me saw me do it, but he didn't care. I counted them off as they continued to pour out into the street until at last Suf came out. He locked the door behind himself, oblivious, and still wiping his armpits.

The mob, probably all going off to get themselves killed, was a good distance down the street now. Suf was standing on the doorstep watching them like he didn't have any taffing better thing to do with his time. I could have sprung out, put a knife to his throat and said take me to Ranson, but I wanted to try to play it cool first. I had gotten really bad at playing it cool; hadn't done it in so taffin' long.

He pulled out a sparkler and lit up a smoke. Great; now I was going to

want one. After what seemed like an hour, he flicked it into the street and started walking. I let out a sigh and counted to ten. Cripes, this bastard was slow. Finally I started moving, walking so slowly I felt I was going to fall over, trying to keep a proper distance behind him.

He didn't go far; just two blocks, and then he knocked on the door to a building. Someone opened it up and let him in without a word. It was a fairly normal looking unit of a row-house at a glance, exactly like all of the others on this street. I quickly checked the address of the one he went into to make sure I wouldn't get confused.

It was 57A. That sounded familiar. Idly, I glanced at the place next to it, across a small alley. It was 56B. I saw at the corner the name of the street: Morlan Way. "Taff me! This has got to be some kind of joke!" I said out loud, wondering what the chances were that Suf would go into the building right next to the one where Laurela was supposedly being held.

I hammered my first into the bricks beside me, and decided to just not think about what I was about to do. I walked, forcing myself to be as casual as possible, across the street to the alley between the two buildings. "So, A on my right, B on my left, A has Ranson, B has Laurela."

I stared upwards. The buildings were a mirror image of each other, three stories tall, with various double-wide windows. As usual the ground floor didn't have windows facing into the alley, so I needed to find a way up if I was going to use them to get inside. There was a gated fence halfway down the alley which kept people using it as a through-street, and after climbing up it I was able to mantle onto a big ceramic planter outside a window of unit B, and after a moment of dangling feet I was smashing geraniums under my knees. With a bit of a tug the shutters came open just a crack. I peeked inside.

It was a small well lit room with some chairs, a desk, gas lamps on the walls, books on the desk, wallpaper, and a rug on the floor; a perfectly boring place. The window was locked. I looked across the alley to the opposite window, and saw that planter was empty. Mine would be too soon if I stuck around and longer, as I had managed to kick about half of the flowers into the street already. I told myself it was no farther a jump than that one time in the tomb of Conch the Third, so after a second of hesitation, I made a successful leap across.

These shutters also came open, revealing a far different room inside. There were just bare gas-lines sticking out where the lamps should be, no furniture, the wallpaper was hanging off in sheets, and still no people. It wasn't less boring, just different. This window, however, was not locked. I pulled it open and slid inside; I barely fit.

There wasn't much to investigate that I hadn't seen from the window, so I went right for the door. There was a light under it. I listened; nothing. The door was locked, but that was nothing to me. I gave the line of goop still attached to my shoulder a little squeeze, and out popped the world's smallest lock-pick. "Knew I kept you for a reason," I muttered as I made short work of the lock. Soon I was peeking down a dimly lit hallway. I could hear some walking and talking upstairs. I rounded the bend but had to stop myself

quickly; there was someone guarding the stairs, and he didn't look like he wanted to be bothered. I ducked into a side room, and considered briefly.

The room's window was looking out into the same alley. Across it, I could see the opposite window leading into 56B was wide open, light drapes moving slightly in the breeze. Why hadn't I just used that to begin with? Of course, no planter.

I leapt, and caught onto the windowsill by just enough of my fingers to keep me from falling down; but I was sure that if anyone had been in the room they'd have heard me. I slowly lifted myself to peek inside; this looked like a bedroom, but again it was empty. All I could hear was the hiss of the gas lamps. With a grunt I was inside, again barely fitting through the window, and more or less tumbling onto my face.

It was a posh little bedroom with everything nicely dusted and buttoned down, with a weird smell like they had been cleaning with chemicals. It didn't matter to me; it was a bedroom and that meant *loot*. I quickly identified what I had come to expect jewelry boxes to look like, but to my chagrin it was bone-dry. "Duh," I whispered to myself. "Nobody keeps a real bedroom this close to the ground floor." It was just a taffing guest room. Forgetting about my prospects of some extra treasure for my trouble, I reached for the door. After pressing my ear against it to check for anyone on the other side, I went.

The hallway was just like the one I had been in, only mirrored, and with fine carpet, well lit, and the smell of pine. Confident that everything in this unit was the exact mirror of the other one; I made a quick dash to where I knew the stairs were. To my overabundant luck, which meant that it was about to run out, the stairs were unguarded. When I got to the top landing I found that the third floor was much more open, with a wide hall and several open chambers on either side, and even more doorways. I squinted my eyes and tried to imagine it in dilapidated shambles, and where the guards would be if there were any. Then, feeling clever, I imagined everything a mirror image.

I went to a door, but heard some talking on the other side of it.

"Did you see what she was wearing when she came in? I can't believe it!"

"You know it's no good to question the master, he always has a way about him, you know."

"I know, but there's no accounting for taste. And I am the one who had to clean her clothes! Disgusting!"

Two old crones grumbling about Laurela, no doubt; they were probably both jealous because they never had a rack like hers. I checked the next room, hoping for a way back into the unit I actually need to be in. There was a window alright, but a glance around inside really made me think. How people could live in a house where every room was the same? It was just like the first one I had seen, but with a different arrangement, table, chairs, a sofa by the wall, and some artwork. I imagined every unit in every row house on every block on this street was just the same arrangement, or a mirror of it, and each room had the same set of furniture in it, but in a different arrangement.—Monotonous.

But hey, as long as there was stuff to nab I didn't care how monotonous things were. A quick survey let me down, though; I couldn't find even a copper between the sofa cushions. The servants of this place were jackasses! How dare they do their job well!

Dissuaded once again from my prospects of easy money, I looked out of the window to unit 57A. This time the window had drapes closed with a light behind them; I could see figures moving around. I couldn't just barge through the window into a room full of people, so I tried the next room. When I got back out to the main hall, I heard someone coming. I quickly went to the next room, opened the window, and paused. I was on the third floor now, so if I missed—no, taff that. The leap was identical to the ones on the second floor; the consequences of failure were just higher. I just jumped.

I caught onto the sill just like I had before. I managed to get the shutters out of my way, but the window itself was locked from within. I could have grabbed something off my belt and smashed it open, but I was too close to the occupied room. I would have to try the next window over.

I shimmied over, catching a groove between some bricks with my boots and getting a little more support, reached for the other sill, and held my breath. I gripped it firmly with one hand, let go of the first sill with my other, and pushed. I caught it; easy as pie. In seconds I was testing the new window; yes, open. It was dark. There were no voices. My good luck was certainly going to end soon, but it hadn't yet.

This room was just as empty as the others in this unit, though it did have a broken chair in the corner. The door was already opened a crack, but I didn't go for the opening, I went for the hinge. I pressed to the doorframe and peeked out the gap between the door and the back edge of the frame, looking out into the well lit but dilapidated hallway.

There was a guy on patrol, a big mean looking fellow, with a big mean looking sword which he held onto like it had a life of its own and he had to keep it from running away. The room with all the talking in it was still two doors down. I watched him patrol back and forth a few times to get the hang of it, waited for him to be in the right spot, and then made a dash—straight for him.

I came up to him from behind and with a good solid whack to the head; he crumpled to the floor with only a grumble and a huff. "Heh," I said, cracking my knuckles. "No blood, no zombie. There really is something to this whole knocking-out thing; gotta try that more often."

Now my ear was to the door with my prime target beyond, or so I hoped. Someone was talking, but it sounded like only Suf. "I sent them the long way, so they should be getting to their target point in exactly six hours. Their convoluted path should alert every outpost Delphine has, so by the time they 'attack' the 'outpost', hopefully most of her forces will be there waiting to ambush them, leaving the back door open for our main force."

"Yes, Suf, I know. It was my plan, remember?"

"Er, right, I just wanted you to know that I understood it."

"Of course." The voice sounded really strange, like he was straining to

hold something back.

Suf resumed. "So this is it then; her last stand? Are you sure that this portal will lead you to her lair, and that it will be mostly unguarded?"

"I am sure it will lead to her lair, but not how well guarded it will be. This plan which you attempted to convince me that you understood was intended to draw as many forces of hers as possible out of the lair, giving us a clear path."

"Oh, oh, right, sorry Ranson."

Good old Ranson! He sounded like a real Mother Goose. I couldn't keep listening though; someone was coming. It sounded like they were coming from the stair, so my only choice was the other way. I leapt over the crumpled body where it lay, went for a door, counted my blessings, and scooted inside without checking it.

It was empty, and I didn't shut the door. I used the crack by the hinge to peek out into the hall. I saw the guy, but I couldn't make out his features because of a cloak. It looked like Ranson and Suf heard him coming too, because they burst out into the hall to meet with him. They were talking, but damn it, I couldn't hear them; too far away. I bet myself that I could get closer without actually using the hall.

Leaping from one building to the next had become routine now, and in no time I was in another pretty little drawing room with doilies and lace curtains. Compulsively I glanced at the silver candlesticks sitting temptingly on the mantle, just waiting to be bagged, only I had no taffing bag, and there was no way I was going to carry around a pair of bloody silver candlesticks for the rest of the night. It figured: I finally found something worth stealing and they weren't gods damned steal-able!

The coast was still clear in the hallway. I went right for the door which I knew led to the room opposite the one I wanted, (I could just picture in my mind the three dark figures standing outside of it talking) but as soon as I shut it, I heard footfalls and talking in the hall behind me. It sounded like a man and a woman. I went cold for a second, my hand still on the doorknob, as I realized they were coming this way.

Ignoring what seemed to be a wealth of treasure around me, I went straight to the window, unlocked it, and was outside, kneeling in the planter. I could hear the doorknob being turned. I closed the drapes behind me quickly, and pleaded with the wind to not blow them aside. The door opened, and closed. I could hear them talking again; the woman was definitely Laurela.

"It will definitely be worth the time it takes, but I am not at all certain about what will come after that." She was talking funny, like with a snooty accent. Maybe that turned the guy on.

I couldn't make out what he was saying; he was talking in a low voice, probably because he thought it turned her on, though having to 'turn on' your prostitute was a bit of a waste of time.

I decided to just jump the gap to the crummy unit, but when I turned to look I saw that the three of them were back in the room now. Taff it! I should

have just stayed in the hall!

"I am sorry dear, but there is such a draft in this room, might I close the window?" she said. Double taff it!

"Oh no dear, allow me," he said. I wished Drew were here to think of something suitably obscene to say. He was going to have to open the drapes to close the window, which meant that I was a goner unless I jumped. No, wait, if I jumped, he'd see me hanging from the sill on the other side, and I'd be a goner than too. I had shimmied over once, I could do it again, but this time the next window over was much farther.

I dug my fingers into the brickwork, trying to find where the mason had been the thriftiest with his grout. By just the outer edge of my boots and the tips of my fingers, I was out on the bare wall, breath held...waiting. I could hear him slide the window closed, and lock it. "Great mother-taffer-in-law!" I whispered as loudly as I could let myself.

Then I remembered the guard I had just let lie in the middle of the hallway, and was sure it was only a matter of time before he was found. Inch by inch I moved over to the next window, and found that it was locked.

The next window over was possibly miles away, but I had other directions I could go: up, or down. If I went down I'd still have the problem of the guarded stair in the other building, but if I went up I'd be on the rooftop and probably in much better shape. I went up.

It was harder than I thought it would be, but eventually I made it to the roof. I leapt across, back to the crummy unit. As I expected, I found a trapdoor, which I soon discovered led right into the main hallway of the upstairs floor. The three men were nowhere to be seen. I gave a sigh of relief when I saw the unconscious body of the guard, exactly like how I had left him. I figured if they found him they would have tried to wake him, and he would at least be in a less compromising pose. I took the initiative and lugged him into a side room, and closed the door behind him.

The room they had been in was quiet now, but the light was still on. I crept up over to it, and peeked inside, as the door was still open. No one. I was curious though. Inside I found maps of all sorts, drawn on, scribbled on, bits of messages, some cut from newspapers scattered around. There were circles and arrows drawn in with red ink. "Huh," I said, not nearly interested enough to make any sense of it.

"I know how we can get into Crowley castle without the guards knowing, a whole score of us, let me show you." Oh shit; they were coming back, and I had nowhere to hide, except—

I couldn't believe I was on a planter again, drapes drawn behind me, hanging on for dear life and afraid to breathe for fear of being found. Looking over my shoulder, I could see where I had just been similarly trapped. He had shut the window, but left the drapes open; all they had to do was look this way, and they'd see me. I tried not to look, but I couldn't help myself. The two were...dancing? What the taff? It looked like a waltz. It was Laurela alright, but she was dressed in a fine gown and her makeup was totally different. She actually looked really good.

In my moment of distraction I had stopped listening to what was going on in the room behind me, so I completely missed what their plan was. All I knew was that they were going to be breaking into some place called Crowley Castle, there were guards, a whole score of them, and probably it was all for no good.

"Alright, we've already wasted enough time. But before we go..." That had to be Ranson's voice.

"Yes sir?" said Suf.

"To the dungeon first; let's bring Els. Get the best restraints, and bring the taskmaster; I don't want our former captain getting out of hand. I think if I play my cards right, I can make a use out of him yet."

The door light went out, and the door shut. I was pretty sure that these units didn't have dungeons, so it meant he was going somewhere *else* before he went to Castle Crowley, which meant I had time to get to the castle before he did. I was back through the window into the room, and found that the door was locked. Thankfully I was on the inside, so I just turned the latch and pushed the door open—only it wouldn't budge. The bastards had also put a padlock on the other side—probably because this was where they kept all of their super-secret plans.

"Crap, taff, shit-taff!" I grumbled, and contemplated the wisdom of forcing it open. There was only one way to go; the usual way.

I was outside, contemplating my chances of surviving a three story drop without breaking my neck, when I heard the now all-too familiar sound of one of the windows opening. "Ghost?"

I looked up at the wild-eyed face staring at me from her window across the alley. "Hi Laurela!" I said, acting like we were just meeting by chance in the street.

"What are you *doing* out there?" she said, gathering her hair out of her face where it had been blown by the breeze as she leaned out the window. Her gown was low cut, and she was overfilling it. Lean some more, Laurela! Lean some more!

"I'm uh...here to rescue you!" I replied with a nervous laugh.

"Ghostie...I don't need...oh no, did Betty put you up to this?"

I really wanted to continue this conversation while not trying to hold onto a windowsill, but she seemed content, and I didn't mind the view. "Sure did! And this boy, Toby I think his name was, unless Tobikins is actually his real name."

"Oh no, Toby," she said, looking distraught. "Ghost, Charley didn't kidnap me. He...he didn't even hire me. Ghost please, *please*, do not tell anyone about this; *especially* not Charley!"

"Oh shit, Laurela, what the taff have you gotten yourself into now?" Whatever it was, it was less taff than what I was in.

"Charley doesn't know anything about me...I—I made up this story, and he's in love with me, and I love him too. We're going to run away together. It will be really happy, and I will never have to work again!"

"Laurela, look, I usually don't tell people what to do with their lives

but...okay, I am an idiot, and don't know the first thing about romance, but seriously, that boy, Toby, he's a bit of a taffer, but he knows *exactly* who you are and he is crazy about you anyway. So you're going to shove that in his face and run off with mister society here who doesn't know a damn thing about you, and you think that's better?"

"Oh Ghost, you simply don't understand!"

My muscles were twitching and straining trying to hold on. "Yeah, I usually don't. Look, fine, your secret is safe with me. I won't tell them a thing, and I don't give a flying taff who this Charley is and I am certainly never going to talk to him, so don't worry. You want me to tell them you're dead? I'll tell them you're dead. I'll tell them the Hammerites did it, and you and Charley can get out of town and there won't be trouble, okay?"

"You're such a sweetheart, Ghostie!" she cried, clasping her hands together like the moron she was.

I almost fell right then and there, but somehow managed to keep holding on. "Yeah..." I said, sure that my catch had now flown the coop by now. "Say, do you have any idea where Crowley Castle is?"

"Oh yeah, big place, about a mile north of here; just follow Abbersorrow Street and you can't miss it. It looks like; the whole building's on its side."

"Right. Okay. Thanks Laurela. Have a good life I guess. Thanks for all the good times."

"Oh thank you Ghost, thank you! You have no idea how much this means to me!"

"Yeah, no idea." I just let myself drop. I literally couldn't hold on for another second.

— Sheam: Move to Adjourn —

Day 6: 10:00 pm

"The question now stands, do we move our efforts now to combating Ranson's forces if we consider them a separate entity from The Bloods, as seems to be the common sentiment, or do we deal with them later and focus instead on what is truly the greater threat?" The armored gentleman, whom I now knew to be Sir Fieldings, had certainly taken charge of things. What he said was by no means a common sentiment, but by him saying so in such a firm manner I felt that Ranson's chief proponent in the meeting, the bald spectacled man named Guildous, now had little reason to be here.

"It is not even a question; Ranson and those that follow him are of no importance. If we are to cut them free, our sole focus must be ending the reign of the witch Delphine," quickly replied Peppersmith, the man in the black robe and spindly beard.

"I don't see why cutting Ranson loose means he's suddenly our enemy. So he doesn't see eye to eye with us—doesn't mean we have to fight a war on two fronts. Give him power over his own faction and then we work together! He does things his way and we keep our hands clean as you want." Lord Styles, the one with the powdered wig and blue coat, seemed to be living in a

fantasy world.

"Then you don't know Ranson's type. He will lash out at anyone and anything that he feels slighted him. He's unstable, vengeful and insecure; if he feels we've betrayed him even in the slightest, we'll all find knives in our backs." The scoundrel with the eye patch, oddly named Common Soore, seemed to be one of the more levelheaded at the table; it was a shame he didn't speak up more.

"This is why we must deal with him first, and then back to Delphine. If we do things right, it will be a swift blow to shatter his following, kill or imprison him, and then we get back on track," Sir Fieldings said, pounding his table.

"Must you always suggest bloodshed to be the answer?" The mouth-breathing fat man, McWorth, seemed to feel that his only purpose here was to criticize Fieldings. I wished he's just shut up.

"Everyone keeps talking about this crusade against Delphine as if we actually have a plan. Ranson has been our only plan. Ranson has all the answers. Now you want to cut off Ranson and proceed with the plan; well I've got news for you! Without Ranson, there is no plan! We may as well hang up our pitchforks and jump into our beds, pillows over our heads and backs to the door, ready to have our throats cut!" Guildous wasn't as finished I had hoped he was, but at least now he seemed to have accepted the fact that most present weren't fond of Ranson.

"Not anymore," Common Soore piped in. "Now we have The Circle on our side and if they don't have a plan of their own, well I've got two good eyes and one of them is baby blue."

Crowley himself finally spoke up. "Soore is correct, but there is more than that. At this very moment, a man named Captain Els is being held prisoner by Ranson. I am told that this is none other than Ranson's former commanding officer among Lady Delphine's former personal guard. He too has defected to the cause of The City and those of Pure Blood, but Ranson, fearing being replaced by this much more valuable ally, has captured him and holds him as a secret hostage. We must get Captain Els away from Ranson and alive, and then we will be in a far better position in every regard."

Sir Fieldings spoke up an instant after Crowley ended, his authoritative voice cutting off several other attempts at reply. "I too must offer a word on this; I have dealt with The Circle and their means and ends in the past, and I can vouch for their uncanny finesse in matters such as these. If I may be blunt, I feel that if there were no Bloods and it was solely The Circle who was on this path, victory for them would be certain. We are in a much greater position to harm them than we are to help them. It is imperative then that we ally ourselves with them; so that our own goals, which The Circle shares, will truly come to pass without our own balderdash bugging up the entire operation. We as a society are a disorganized mess, and to continue down the path we are on, will only aid Delphine in the end. It is time for a sharp about-face, join with The Circle, cast out Ranson and all who follow him, and save The City from this crisis."

"Here, here," Peppersmith and Common Soore replied in unison.

"My ears are just burning." The voice came from a back door of the hall, and quickly made my hair stand on end. It wasn't so much that I immediately knew it had to be Ranson, which in itself definitely gave me a sickening burst of adrenaline, but the inhuman quality of the voice, uttered low with an almost animalistic snarl. I forced myself to remain seated as some of the others quickly stood, including Crowley, Guildous, and Fieldings.

"Si'down," he said as he came into the light; a large hood pulled down over his face so all I could see was his stubbled jaw. Men who hadn't been there a moment ago were now behind Fieldings and Crowley, big hands on their shoulders forcing them back into their seats. Guildous was left standing.

"I thought you'd never get here!" the bald man called out. "You have no idea what I had to endure for your sake!" he whined.

"You sit down too," he said, pushing the man back into his chair himself. As he did this his cloak opened, revealing for an instant the hilt of a large sword that hung from his belt. "Very disappointing," he said.

"You're too late, Ranson," Fieldings said proudly. "We've decided it's over. You're out. You can take your men home now if you wish to escape this room without bloodshed."

"He's first," Ranson said, pointing a long gloved finger at the old knight. Before I could take in what Ranson had said I heard the crack of a crossbow bolt being fired, and Fieldings was pushed back in his chair with a quarrel in his throat. The room instantly erupted into chaos, with the seated men shoving their chairs away with shock and anger, only to have the points of armed crossbows pressed to the backs of their necks by men who filed into the room all at once.

Hands were raised in surrender, seats groaned as defeated men slumped back into them under the threat of death, and I caught my scream of anguish into my clasped hands. My eyes quickly went to Crowley, who had not only two men behind him with daggers to his back, but bowstrings pulled tight from every corner of the room, trained on him. Soore was now standing too, through a crossbow was trained on him as well. I could not see him, but I knew I felt someone behind me giving me the same treatment. I could not see Othello, as he had stayed behind me the entire time, but I felt a little better in my certainty that he was there. Where had Rembrandt gone?

"The only thing that doesn't matter anymore, are the eight cowardly men in this room who plot and scheme behind my back." Ranson said. "Oh and how can I forget the woman meddler who thinks she can make a difference? Who sent you on this fool's errand to your death, child? Did that little *bitch* Jyre get her way with Nightfall after all?" I didn't answer, but his gaze upon me was more threatening than whatever weapon was at my back.

"As for your precious Captain Els," he said, waving his finger for someone in the back of the room to come forward. I watched as a cloaked, hooded, and masked man approached with his hand gripping a chain that was slung over his shoulder, a prisoner close behind him. I could not help but bear my teeth as I watched Els, the man I shared my imprisonment under The Circle with being led in, chained neck, arms and feet. He was cut, bruised, dressed in rags

with torn skin, limping as fast as he could with his escort tugging at him. "It is extremely lucky that I found him before he found you."

Crowley found his voice. "Whatever lies you are about to say, Ranson, don't waste your breath. I know the truth and there's nothing you can do to change my mind."

"Give me a minute to finish and then dear old Crowley is next," Ranson said as he jutted out his jaw at him. "It is indeed lucky that I found Els, who had already betrayed The City to another pagan cult whom he was handing over power to in return for his betrayal of Delphine. We would indeed have been able to look forward to the hanging of a witch, but at an even greater cost— rule by voodoo doctors and a fate far more cruel. I only keep him alive now because now I face a war on three fronts; Delphine, these voodoo doctors, and now my own former kin. Well, the third at least will be settled tonight."

Voodoo doctors? Moody, I immediately thought. Twisting lies with truth. My fear for Els's battered state now grew tenfold for Moody, for surely his own mistreatment had been far worse.

"I will give each of you an opportunity to be on the winning side. If you wish to remain a member of The Bloods, with me as your leader, raise your right hand with your thumb, as proof of your humanity, extended. Everyone else will die."

I held my breath, remembering my own words to Els just days ago when attempting to escape from the Hammerites. I needed, lie, betray, even beg, in order to protect my own skin. I only hoped I would be brave enough. As I watched the men around me choose, thumbs quickly going into the air; my eyes continued upon their path to the source of something I knew didn't belong—a rope?

Several Minutes Prior

— Ghost: Lofting Goals —

Day 6: 10:00 pm

Thanks to Laurela's tip, I had time to run into a general store on my way to the castle to pick up a few unconventional supplies. The building itself was pretty much how she said it would be; one of the stupidest looking castles I had ever seen. I could not follow Ranson and his buddy in through their secret way, so I had to improvise.

The place was rather well guarded, but the guarding was lopsided. I could tell that security was favoring the great-hall looking structure to one side of the castle grounds, so I figured that was my best bet. Thanks to the nifty gloves I had just purchased, scaling right up the stone wall was now a piece of cake. (All that time I spent hanging from the bricks talking to that idiot Laurela had given me time to think; wouldn't this be a lot easier with the right kind of gloves?) In no time I was up the wall and peeking over the top, watching guards move to and fro.

Then I noticed something weird; a bunch of guys who didn't look at all like they were supposed to be here were filing into a small door on the side of a canal which ran next to the castle. From my vantage point on top of the wall, their little secret entrance had been betrayed. Maybe when this was over I'd have to have a chat with the captain of the guard and tell him that this would have been a great spot for a guard tower, to, you know, watch your own taffin' secret entrance.

In no time I was on the roof of the great hall, and no one was the wiser. I was sure that Ranson and his gang of thugs were probably where they wanted to be by now; I just hoped it was where I guessed they'd be going. Roofs like this always had some type of window or hatch or chimney to let people like me in where they're not supposed to be. I just had to find it.

The roof was barren, so I resorted to dangling from the eaves. I found a big wide open window, and thanks to the warm-up session a little while ago, getting through it was no big deal.

There was a ton of people below, but I wasn't ready to start figuring out what was what just yet. The crisscrossing rafters gave me a lot to work with. All I needed was a counterweight. As luck would have it, oh generous luck, there were numerous statues circling the room at around thirty feet up, some of which would do nicely. I selected my target with care; a big guy on a horse with only the back two hooves touching the ground. Why it hadn't fallen down ages ago was beyond me, but tonight was going to be the night. I crossed over the rafters to it quickly, dropping down to catch the horse by the head, finding it just as unstable as I had hoped. Then I realized how stupid that was to do, since the entire thing could have come crashing down just then.

I dropped into the alcove behind the statue, tied my newly purchased rope around it over and over again with about eight knots, and then, rope still in hands, climbed back up to the rafters and ambled my into place.

Sure enough, Ranson was down there. It looked like a fairly tense scene. He was strutting about, his armed thugs surrounding a bunch of men at a table. One already lay dead, and I was sure more were to follow. Only one thing stuck in my mind as out of place; a single head of yellow hair seated at the table.

Ranson's movements were proving to be very predictable; he was pacing around behind the backs of the seated men. I took the other end of the rope, specially treated when I bought it, and tied into a neat little noose. I draped it over the rafters in just the right place, being extra careful to not touch the actual noose. I tested the rope's ability to slide in place, which seemed good, and hopped back over to the statue. Slow and careful, I began to lower the noose so that it would be at head level just when Ranson walked under it.

A toothy grin passed over my face as I watched him take just the right step. I let the rope slide free in my hands. A look of shock came over him as the noose actually knocked his hood right off. I grinned even more, almost let out a laugh, as he quickly pulled the noose off his head. Then his look of anger quickly turned into one of panic as he realized that he couldn't let go of the

rope. "Good old moose glue," I shouted with a cackle, and then heaved at the statue with all my might.

"Bombs away!" I shouted with as much oomph as I pushed, feeling the oh-so satisfactory crack of the statue breaking free and losing itself to the gravity's might. I nearly fell down with it myself, catching hold of the edge of the alcove just in time as the mass of stone went into a freefall. There was just an instant before the rope's slack was used up and it went tight with a satisfying crack. I watched with glee as Ranson, his face now agape with panic, was lofted into the air with both hands glued helplessly to the noose. I leapt back into the rafters and was on top of him just as the statue crashed into a thousand pieces in the middle of the gathered men.

"Night, night!" I said as his head came into range of my swinging fist. With a crack more satisfying than even the falling statue, his catty eyes (just like Delphine had promised!) crossed and closed, ending his thrashing struggle. "Come to Ghostie!" I reached down and caught him by the arm, pulling him the rest of the way up and over my shoulder. With a twitch of the wrist the rope was cut, but then I realized that arrows and bolts were hitting the rafters all around me, accompanied by more shouting than I cared to listen to. "Off we go!" I yelled with the same drunk enthusiasm, and made a dash for the window. I'd figure out how to get the skinny on the scroll for him in *just* a bit.

— Sheam: Salvation From Above —

Day 6: 10:15 pm

I couldn't believe my eyes. The rope led to a noose which was being dropped on Ranson's head. Its weight pushed his hood away, revealing a mane of white hair speckled with black and ghastly yellow eyes, only to be pulled away firmly by both hands which then could not be unclaspd. I immediately understood as I saw yellow fluid oozing in between his fingers, his tight hold on the rope strong enough to force the liquid out of the sponge-like fibers. A split second later I heard a loud crack, and then watched with wide eyes as a statue of a horse fell through the air.

It became almost impossible to follow Ranson's fate as the statue crashed into the ground, landing right into one of the tables with men scattering away in every direction. I was showered with debris, some of it large enough to have done me in if not for Othello's quick move to shield me. I tried to look back up to find what had become of Ranson, just in time to see a figured clad in black sock him in the head. I let out a shriek of recognition, "Ghost!"

The men who had been holding us hostage turned their projectiles to the air, firing all at once into the rafters. Crowley's loyalist didn't waste a second, turning on their would-be murderers whose weapons were now empty in the moment of confusion, fists flying and daggers drawn. Othello again shielded me from the chaos, working desperately to first pull me out of the room, and then when that seemed impossible, to keep me out of harm's way through simple maneuvering. As a blade came to my face I watched him move, catching the arm that swung it and twisting it sharply to disarm the man and

send him to the floor in agony.

Now uniformed guards were filing into the room, no doubt previously kept at bay for fear that their lord would be murdered at their provocation, disarming and dispatching Ranson's men with sword and boot. I looked up once more just in time to see Ghost, Ranson now limp over his shoulder, escaping through an open window above.

"After him!" someone cried, though I had no idea who, and soon Othello was forcing me to move with the crowd to keep me from being trampled. We were moving outside.

— Ghost: He's Heavy —

Day 6: 10:16 pm

I could have sworn I heard someone call my name, but it didn't matter. I was looking for a place to drop onto the other side of the wall with my catch, but these damned arrows were getting hard to dodge. One flew past my ear, and I instinctively jerked away. Ranson's body shifted in my grasp to the left, towards the courtyard, and I was thrown off balance. The next thing I knew I was tumbling head over heels back into the courtyard, my catch tumbling along with me. I landed on my back, shouted "bugger!" and then quickly found a dozen angry men rushing to me.

"Stop!" a familiar voice cried out. Sheam?! "He's on our side!" she yelled. "I'm on *someone's* side!" I yelled in reply. Some of the men didn't seem to care what Sheam said, but others surely did, and the ones who had tried to grab me and rip my throat out were now being pulled and pushed away by others. I didn't know what was going on, but I did want to get Ranson back into my hands and get the hell out before Sheam had to explain why I was on their side, since that wasn't in my notes.

Things seemed to come to an amazingly unanticipated level of sanity as I was pulled to my feet and the hood pulled off my head. I saw a very angry looking Sheam bearing down on me, which made me smile uncontrollably. She wasn't wearing the choker anymore, that was for sure, but she was dressed up like she meant business and if my heart wasn't already pounding, it would have been with a single look at her. "Hi Sheam!" I laughed in greeting. I was in for it now.

Some big guy in a fancy fur coat burst forward, nursing a bleeding arm that had probably gotten stabbed in the chaos. "Do you know this man? Did you plan this all along?"

He seemed to be talking to Sheam, but she didn't answer. She just looked conflicted. I couldn't blame here; I figured this wasn't how she wanted things to go, and she probably wasn't very happy to see me anyway. In her moment of hesitation someone else stepped forward, going around her. It was a man in a dark coat and a feathered black hat, but the craziest thing about him was this creepy porcelain mask that covered his whole face. "You," he said in a low, strangely familiar voice.

I glanced over at Sheam, who seemed as surprised as I was that this guy

had stepped forward, but then quickly looked confident again. Everyone had quieted down, no doubt really concerned about what was about to happen. I don't think anyone was going to suppose that I was actually on their side after this.

He lifted his hat off and dropped it to the ground. He then reached behind his head and untied the mask. I could see his eyes staring at me through the eyeholes; they had a scary manic look to them. He grabbed the mask by the forehead pulled it off. I swallowed hard.

I recognized him at once. One side of his face was a mess of torn flesh, the results of a zombie's bony fingers and undead strength. His cheek was completely gone on one side, showing clenched teeth all the way back, and though both eyes still gazed at me with that horrible manic look, the skin around the eye on that same side was all torn away. "You're the one who did this to me..." he whispered faintly, his entire body shaking with rage.

"Othello," she said softly, her voice sounding sadder than I ever wanted to hear from a woman.

Without any other warning he lunged for me, furious hands around my throat, eyes wide with rage, pushing me to the wall, squeezing. The crowd quickly erupted into chaos, people lunging for us, swords being drawn again, bows stretching.

"Othello, no!" Sheam screamed, running to pull him off of me, but all I could hear was her shriek and someone lunging at her. It was Ranson!

— Sheam: Both by the Throat —

Day 6: 10:17 pm

Before I could get to Othello something went over my head and came tight around my neck. There was a moment of intense panic I was pulled backwards. The crowd parted from me, and my captor. I could feel the glue from the rope sticking to my neck and the loop of the noose growing tight. "Got you," Ranson's voice hissed into my ear. I tried to fight and kick at him to get free, but he was too strong, and I was already feeling my lungs sting from lack of air. Othello, help me, I wanted to cry out, but couldn't find the breath to.

"And how will this alliance go now that The Circle's pretty mistress was killed by a Blood? Stand down, all of you, or she dies!"

I continued to struggle, kicking, clawing, but he was behind me and holding me firm. I couldn't twist around. My hands and feet met only air. Ranson's men rushed to Othello and Ghost, putting daggers to them both so that even if Othello did come to his senses, it would be no use. I thought I heard Ghost shout through Othello's iron grasp, "You idiot, help Sheam! Help Sheam!"

He twisted me around so I could no longer see them, making me face Crowley instead, who looked terrified. "Ranson, we can cut a deal," Crowley said. "It doesn't have to end like this."

"Any deal will include your life Crowley, so don't be so quick to try and cut

one. There will be no deals. I am in charge, and now whoever I say dies, dies.”

I couldn't fight any longer. My vision was going dark, his words were sounding distant. But then, there was a quick bang; bright light blinded me. Another bang followed, and then another, and another. I heard many voices cry out in shock. I felt Ranson being pulled away from me, and the noose around my throat went loose. I fell, twisting around in place just in time to see the faint silhouette of a scarecrow pull the silhouette of Ranson around to face him. A small blade was in the scarecrow's hand, which he plunged silently into Ranson's chest, and then pulled out again just as quickly. Ranson fell.

I came to my senses a second later, trying to pull the noose free of my throat, but found it glued in place. My high collar had saved me though, as quickly unbuttoning it allowed me to loosen the rope enough so I could breathe, coughing and gasping for air. I felt the big hands of the scarecrow Rembrandt go around me to gently lift me up. “Easy there,” he said as I came to my feet.

I saw Agent West similarly helping Ghost, with Othello lying still on the ground, his upright face still revealing just how disfigured he was. He had fallen onto the mask I had given him, breaking it in half. I saw the blackjack in West's hand, convincing myself that he was just knocked out, not dead. What agony he must have carried around with him in order to have snapped like that. As horribly as he had acted, I could only feel pity for him.

I uttered “Thank you,” to Rembrandt, who I still didn't trust in spite of his lifesaving gesture, and reached for the knife which was still in his hands. He gave it to me and I, not really caring that it was covered in Ranson's blood, cut the rope away from my collar. The top was already ruined, but I didn't want to have a noose hanging around my neck.

“Take that thing away,” Crowley said, ordering some of his guards to drag off Ranson's body, “and take them into custody,” indicating Ranson's thugs who were now outnumbered and out-positioned in the castle courtyard by the entire force of Crowley's men. “Also, take Styles and Guildous too, so they can have some time to think about where their loyalties lay.”

The two men began to protest, but had little choice as they were now being escorted at sword-point away. “What about him?” Crowley asked me, indicating Ghost, who was also being held at sword-point by his guard, though he looked happy enough to be breathing not to care too much.

“Sheam and I go way back,” Ghost said, his eyes shifting back and forth for a way out. “Don't we Sheam?”

“Shut up, Ghost. Lord Crowley I have no idea what he is doing here, but we can deal with him easily enough. Would someone please find Els and make sure that he's freed from his bonds. We're going to need Ghost to do a little explaining, I think, but just to be on the safe side, strip him of his weapons and keep him in cuffs. He is not the most...trustworthy man I know.”

I looked like I was breaking his heart, but I think he was far more concerned about where Ranson was being taken. Nothing had gone as I

expected, but in spite of the chaos it seemed like the deal was made. Crowley's men were pulling daggers and bombs off Ghost in handfuls. I saw Els, with his bonds removed, being escorted into the courtyard by Soore, a bloodied sword still in his grasp. Othello, still unconscious, was being carried off with West, no doubt to be given a stern talking to by his fellow agent. Rembrandt had vanished just as mysteriously as he had appeared. There was a million things running through my mind to do, but one did win out. I went to Els.

"Are you badly hurt?" I said. "Do you need a doctor? An alchemist?"

"I'll be fine," he said in an exhausted, hoarse voice. He nodded to Soore, who was supporting him, and the man let go allowing Els to stand on his own.

"And Moody?" I said, almost afraid to ask.

"Dead. Ranson's thugs killed him for sport. He went bravely. Never cried out or asked for mercy."

My hand was at my mouth, suddenly finding myself on the verge of tears. "Oh no," I gasped. "I am so sorry Els."

"I thought I saw...did I see things right? Is Ranson dead?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"Put down like the dog he is," Soore added.

"That's something then." He looked like he was about to fall over, but the guard was quick to support him. "Sheam, is there any chance...has there been any word?"

"Jyre is safe, Els. She's with an old, trusted friend. She's fine."

A change quickly came over him. Suddenly he didn't look so beaten, so much on the verge of complete collapse. He stood upright again, not smiling, but regaining a bit of dignity to his face. "Thank you. Thank you for that."

"Come on. We'll get you fixed up. I think we have a lot of work ahead of us, but one tide just turned."