

...Sealing Away Hope

"We cannot simply abandon them! We must go back!"

"And do what? Die ourselves? Is that how Hammerites work? Better that we all die than leave some behind? Can't you see it's no use?"

Sarievo was red in the face, every vein standing out like it was ready to jump free of his skin and attack Brother Thurm. Thurm looked just as agitated, but by contrast he was white as a ghost, and had a look in his eyes like the whole world was coming to an end. "Is it truly hopeless then? Is that what thou dost see?"

"Thurm, no one here would more gladly go back in there and pull Daelus and Ivan and any of the others from the spiders' grasp than me, but what about Carro and Freeling, Dent, Luis, Brother Angelo, Brother Bexin, and Brother Bob, not to mention Ivan's men? They're all dead. You were forced to watch just as I did. Each one of them died so we could escape. Hell, didn't you see what Brother Bob did? I thought he was done for sure, but he got up, drove the bloody spiders back one more time, and we got away. We can't go back now. We just spent the past six hours fighting and running for our lives. Only the four of us made it out. Tillus needs a healer, or there will only be the three of us."

"Yes, thou art right. We must thank The Builder for his providence."

Just a minute ago Sarievo said that I was going to be fine, but now he was saying I'd die if I didn't get help—typical. I couldn't lift my head to see what had become of my legs, but I had spent the past twenty minutes being dragged by the shoulders. I had seen what Brother Bob did too. They had already overtaken him. They were cutting off pieces the size of apples. He got back up, now in the middle of the advancing onslaught, and made such a nuisance of himself, grabbing the spiders, pulling off legs, swinging their bodies around with his bare hands, that the ones attacking us doubled back to put him down. Sarievo told us to run, but I couldn't run anymore. Brother Porter grabbed me and dragged me away.

"We must seal this way," Thurm said, looking at the pit we had escaped from, and then looking up at his machine which stood here waiting for us as most of us had gone to our deaths, "and mark this site as a grave."

Sarievo and Brother Porter didn't say anything. Porter was sitting apart from us, his face in his hands. I hadn't managed to thank him yet for saving my skin. Finally Sarievo came to me. He didn't look very good himself, with gouges and cuts all over his face, and the entire front of his tunic stained with blood from a gash in the neck. "I'm going to get you out of here. Thurm and Porter can operate the machine and close off this vile pit."

I wasn't really listening to him. I was looking up at some *things* in the trees, dark shapes, silhouettes against the night sky and other branches. They reminded me of mongbats, but were very tall and spindly. The largest had to be at least seven feet tall, but some were small enough to sit on its shoulder. Then I saw the wings, long translucent ovals. Something told me that Sarievo and Thurm's plans were not going to go so well. I tried to summon up a

warning, tell Sarievo to look up, behind, but all I could do was choke. They were coming down.

Somehow, he understood. He looked up, and as fast as I had ever seen him move, he had himself, Thurm, Porter, and me all hidden inside a long hollow log.

If they had seen us, they didn't care. I watched them land delicately all around the hole to the spider's realm; sticklike figures, unclothed, sexless, even faceless. Their wings folded up against their backs like a wasps, and trailed behind them like capes. Some of them had long spears, others hooked long swords. The smallest of them went and stood around the hole, twitching nervously, chattering at the larger. The larger were preoccupied with the machines, but only for a moment. They all became airborne once more, and dove into the hole one at a time. But there were more than those who landed; one after another, on and on, the creatures dove into the hole, until finally all was still.

"The hell with the machines," Sarievo said. "We all need to get out of here, now."

...Secrets in Mind

I squeezed through the impossibly tight crevice between the floor plate and the wall, climbing up to the next level of the Hammerite factory. Soon I would be back up to the machinist lab, and then to freedom. I fell to my back, panting, more an attempt to steady my nerves than catch my breath. I was covered from head to toe with blackened soot and grime. I had gained it from squeezing and sliding through the darkest recesses of the accursed place.

I could not stop what I had just seen from playing out over and over in my mind—those lights, the spells they were casing, those metal shapes, those creations, the way they moved—it was driving me mad. The mechanical beasts in the woodlands were mere *toys* compared to the unfathomable abominations the Hammerites had dreamed up from the most demented reaches of their black builders' minds. "Have to tell her. Have to tell her. *Have to tell her,*" I felt myself muttering over and over. I gripped my hands between my head, curling into a ball. What I had seen *must not be*; it should *not have been*. I could tell The Lady but *no one else*. Not another soul could know. It was bad enough that the Hammerite possessed this power, but for it to fall into another's hands? *No*.

I did not know what The Lady was planning. How was her plan meant to deal with this discovery? She seemed to know about it already, from the way she spoke, like she *knew* what I would find hidden deep below Soulforge, but needed *proof*.

I scrambled back to my feet, but found that I was still shaking. The sewers would be the fastest way to the portal. I didn't know how long it would take for me to escape the Hammerite facility, but once I was on the streets I would have to run as fast as I could to her. It wasn't just that I needed to tell her this

as soon as possible. I needed more than that. I needed her to *help me forget*.

"Can't—get it out—can't get it out," I stammered, wanting to claw my oversized eyes from my skull. Every instant, every aspect of what I had witnessed was spinning around in my brain, threatening to burst its way free. "She can. She can," I whispered, trying to build up the nerve to continue.

I leapt up, taking hold of a pillar, and scampering up it to the ceiling. No one ever went into these dark, dirty service passages. I would escape soon. I would escape soon. I would.

Chapter 16

Our Rightful Places

— Jyre: Gentle Dreams —

Day 6: 11:00 pm

Up and down, up and down, a gull floats on a lonely stretch of sea, the waves soft and rhythmic; a gentle breeze stirs the air. Below, a fish swims through the dark depths, its color lost in the murky water. A single bubble rises from its lips and drifts upward, towards the sun. As it rises near the surface of the water, it swells, filling itself up with light, as it slowly grows until it fills the entire world. Inside its translucent depths a boy can be seen; blonde of hair and strong of build, he giggles and chases after flowers that are not there. The sun glistens on his bare skin and the ground beneath him is filled with spring's blossoms. The boy yells and runs. The bubble vanishes as it breaks the surface to join the thousands of others that have gone before it. The gull still floats on the water, up and down, up and down.

"Silly Stillie," I mutter as sleep's claws grip me tighter.

The wood's grain runs the length of the door, its pattern unbroken. The surface is soft and warm, worn smooth by the passing of time, the handle is metal, forged into the form of a dragon, its wings beat the air and the door slowly swings open.

A box; black, square, and unadorned...It floated in the air before me as though awaiting my touch. I reached for it and carefully lifted the lid. It drew me inside.

I saw strange glyphs carved into the bark of an ancient tree stump, with words too small to read stamped underneath. I traced them with my fingers, feeling every notch and groove beneath my skin. Something came free and nestled snugly in the palm of my hand; a tiny lump of metal. Peering closer I found it had the shape of a 'v'. The lump stretched out, and became a metal arrow.

The carving on the tree flared and sizzled. Flames filled my vision. When they died back I was standing outside the city, watching as the moon slowly slid beyond the horizon. An owl hooted in the distance. Below, a mouse scurried through the thick grass. Wings flapped, feet scurried. The ground rushed away in a blur. Claws snapped out, fur was shredded. I felt myself born away in the owl's mighty grasp.

The hands that held me were strong but gentle. A finger brushed against the side of my face. I looked into his eyes and smiled. Warm velvet wrapped around me, holding me in its warmth.

I awoke with the smell of rain in my nostrils and the comforting feel of softness beneath me. Lifting myself up, I sat in confusion as I took in the sculpted dark stone, the high ceiling, and the intricately wrought window. I then knew where I was; Daelus's tower. He had shown me up to my new room in person, making sure I had everything I needed before leaving me to get some sleep.

Springing to life, I made my way down to the kitchen. As I arrived, I saw that everything was how I knew it would be. A smile crept to my lips when I found him already there, bade him a good morning and sat down across from

him. Then, someone put their hands down on my shoulders.

"Good morning, Jyre." The words came from behind me, yet they were spoken in Daelus's voice.

I felt my blood go cold as I watched Daelus, still across from me, staring over my shoulder with a haunted look in his eyes. Slowly I turned my head to see the hand resting just to the side of my neck, and followed it up until I was staring into the face of...Daelus. My throat contracted painfully. "But—

I looked back at them and could no longer tell which was which. Somehow the table had vanished. One of them reached for the sheath at his belt and drew steel. "Who are you?" one of them said. The other Daelus drew his sword as well. He began to circle his doppelganger slowly.

My confusion and panic mounted until I could no longer hold back the scream that welled within my lungs. It echoed through the room, accented by the clash of sword against sword as the two Daeluses fought to the death. I held my face in my hands, trying to shut everything out, hoping that when I opened my eyes and moved my fingers away everything would be back to normal. When I could bear it no longer, I looked, but found I was no longer in Daelus's home, but standing alone in the audience of an amphitheater, with the two Daelus's engaged in swordplay in the blood-stained arena below.

I need to reach them and make it stop. I didn't want either of them to die. I tried going over the row of seats in front of me in order to climb my way down into the area, but my foot caught on something hard and sharp, and I stumbled over forwards into darkness.

I felt stone upon my face. I pushed myself up, and found that I was no longer in the arena, but in a cobble paved street. There were houses crowding me on either side, their upper stories leaning out into the road and cutting out any light the stars might have provided. My bare feet were covered in stinking sewage from the overflowing gutter. I was cold, half-dressed, and starving. Daelus nor his doppelganger, whichever one was which, were nowhere to be found.

I ran. I didn't know where I was going, I just knew that I had to find Daelus, and forward seemed to be the best way to go. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a cart filled with beautiful red apples. I ran over and snatched one as quickly as I could, but a Hammerite spotted me before I could have even a single bite. I ran, trying to lose him in the streets, but this wasn't a part of the city I knew. Where the ground was dry it threw up choking clouds of dust and where it was wet it sucked at my feet and slowed me down.

The houses were wooden wrecks kept together by a few rusty nails.

"Lost, little one?"

I jumped and spun around. There was someone standing in the shadows cast by the overhanging buildings. Was it the Hammerite I had worked so hard to escape? No; not that I could see. He was studying me, with eyes that seemed to glitter with an inner light. I knew somehow I had to get away. "N-no." I started to back up, but almost slipped on something soft and squishy under my left heel, and stopped. "I-I was just...taking a walk."

He was smiling, and moved closer to me. "No need to be scared. I mean you

no harm." He knelt down close so I could finally make out his face. He didn't look scary at all in fact something about him put me at ease. He looked young, barely old enough to grow his own stubble, yet at the same time seemed so much older. When he took hold of my arm I didn't try to stop him. "I have somewhere warm where you can sleep tonight, if you want...and a nice hot meal...and a bath to soak in."

His voice was soft and comforting, but those glittering eyes felt like a warning. Still, when he smiled...

"Come home with Ranson now, little one. Come and get yourself warmed up..."

I grabbed the bars of the cage and shook them in desperation. The Lady just laughed. The heat rising up from the fire below singed my skin. Wherever flesh met metal it bubbled up in blisters. I was screaming and shaking the bars in mindless panic. The cage ratcheted lower.

The log popped and sparked as Ranson threw it on the fire. I could feel myself sweating from the heat the small fire produced, but it was better than another night sleeping on the streets. Ranson sat himself down on the arm of the chair and put his arm around my shoulders. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled....

"Jyre! Help me!" I heard Daelus cry out.

I stared through the bars of my cage at Daelus and sobbed. I couldn't move. Towering above Daelus was the monster that I had faced in the forbidden district. It oozed and slithered before him, pounding like thunder and with a roar that sounded like trees snapped at the trunk. Daelus glanced up at me in desperation before cowering at the beast's legs.

"Jyre, please!"

I let out a sob. The scroll was on the ground outside the cage, but I couldn't reach it. All I had to do was read it, and the monster would go away again. Nothing else could kill that beast! I reached and I strained, and even as I saw the monster's horrible hand reach down and pluck him off the ground, I was helpless. Too late, I was too late...

"...Time you got to bed." Ranson's voice was sweet and gentle and my eyelids were heavy.

I continued to stare into the fire, too relaxed to move. "I'll just sleep here," I mumbled as the flames danced...

The tears were hot on my face as I watched the monster throw Daelus back at the ground. He struck like a rag doll, and then was completely still. Not satisfied, it scooped him back up, twined its other hand around his arm, and began to pull. It came off like a twig from a branch. It laughed, and laughed, and tossed Daelus's arm straight at me. I couldn't even duck as it smacked into the cage, splattering me with hot blood. Still in the monster's grasp, Daelus finally let out a scream as it took him by the head. I screamed along with him. Everything I saw was blurred. Everything I heard pounded at my brain like a giant hammer. My heart was racing and I was certain that any second it would burst!

Ranson's hands were on me. I couldn't push him away. The closer he came,

the more impossible it seemed to push him away.

I heard the sound of bones cracking, and then Daelus screamed no more. Then there was a fountain of blood, spilling out of Daelus's headless neck and onto the dirt below. The beast dropped the body, letting it flop to the ground lifelessly, and then marveled at its prize; Daelus's head...

Ranson's hands were all over me, pulling away my clothes, touching me. My limbs no longer obeyed. He pushed his sweaty body against mine; kissed me. Then I was sinking again, fleeing him...

I watched with blurred, red, trembling vision as the monster dropped Daelus's head into its mouth. It then turned to me, and with that horrible voice it said, "You have released me...your fate is sealed, foolish human, as is the fate of this world."—

"Jyre!" The voice was urgent, and close, but not frightened or panicked. I found myself thrashing violently. My face was wet and my throat was sore. I looked up to see the concerned eyes of Heppet staring down at me. "Wake up, wake up Jyre!" he then said with a smile.

"I..." any second I expected to feel Ranson's body against mine, or to see the monster tear another limb from Daelus's body, but there was only the crackle of the campfire, the stars in the sky, and a pain in my back from a root which hadn't seemed troublesome when I first lay down.

"Night terrors," he said. "They say you should never wake someone up during them, but I think that's rubbish. I wish people would wake me up!"

I was still catching my breath. "Thank you," I muttered.

He started to go away, but I called out after him. "You have bad dreams too?"

"I think everyone does," he said, sliding back over to sit next to where I was lying.

"No one ever tells me that."

"Most people have nothing to dream about that's so horrible that it needs talking about."

"I always dream about something. I wish that sometimes I wouldn't."

"No, don't wish them away. Something, some force somewhere is trying to tell you something. Listen. Pay attention to them. Don't wish them away."

I smiled a little, and the memories of the dream were already fading. I just wished the memories that inspired the dream would fade. As soon as I closed my eyes again, all I could see was Daelus's head being torn from his body by that monster. I shivered, forcing the idea away. Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he had to be safe.

— Sheam: Ranson as Ransom —

Day 6: 11:00 pm

"Ghost, for the last taffin' time, make sense, or shut up." From the look on their faces, many of the men present objected to my use of language, which just made me want to curse more.

They let him sit down, but that was about it. He had one of those braces that was basically two boards with spaces cut for both wrists and a neck, jointed at one end and locked at the other. I didn't know what it was called. The whole thing was chained up, and connected to his ankle bracelets, so that he couldn't move his legs in any direction very far or he'd cause himself to tumble over. The funniest part was that he wore it so casually that he almost seemed more comfortable in it than he had in the nice clothes he wore back at the hotel. He didn't answer me right away, because he was trying desperately to scratch his jaw with one outstretched finger.

Els was trying to pay attention, but he was being pestered over and over again by various others who now all seemed to see him as the be-all and end-all of good advice for the night. James would say something like, nature abhors a vacuum, and it abhors a power vacuum even more.

"Okay, here it is, as simple as I can make it," Ghost finally said after satisfying his itch. The way he talked with his hands even while they were attached to his neck by a board almost made me crack a smile. "I have this curse; established fact. It makes the dead rise and the living die, because the undead hate the living, except as a meal. I've been trying like crazy to get the curse broken, and somehow wound up in the company of this spooky sorceress type piece of work in the woods, who gives me this crystal and tells me that it's a temporary fix, and if I wanted a real one I just needed to do one little tiny favor for her. Being the working man that I am, I decided it wasn't a bad price, so here I am. The favor; bring her little boy Ranson, who owes her money or something. She wanted him alive, but said dead would be fine too, so I still plan on making good on the job."

Crowley uncrossed his arms, and puffed out a few rings from his pipe. "The sad thing is; I think he actually was more intelligible this time."

I wasn't ready to give Ghost a pat on the head about it. There was still something he hadn't told me, and he knew it. He was avoiding eye contact with me. It probably wasn't very important, but I wasn't going to let him get away with it. "You still haven't told me one thing. You owe me something."

"Er, yeah, that." He stammered, knowing that I meant the choker. "I am afraid that it was stolen from me."

"What?" I asked with an angry wince. "Someone stole it from you?"

"That thing is crazy, Sheam. It's better off far away anyway. Yeah, it was stolen from me, and I really don't know if I can get it back."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do."

"How important is this?" Crowley cut in. That irritated me, but he was right.

"We can deal with it later," I said, not letting Ghost off the hook by a long shot.

Crowley continued. "The last time you explained it you mentioned something about an attack by Ranson's men."

"Yeah, only it made no sense. If you ask me, it's a setup or something. I

don't know why he'd set up his own men, unless they're decoys. Best guess; he wants the scary lady to think he's attacking her at one place, so she'll defend it. Then while he's throwing away his idiots at the fake battle, he'd be sneaking in the back and slitting her throat."

Crowley jumped in. "Only our meeting tonight forced him to change his plans, and come here instead; and die."

"They're still going through with it," Els said. "Which means Ranson's plan can still work, except that we don't know how he was planning to get close enough to The Lady to kill her while her forces were diverted."

After another few puffs Crowley added, "We need to find out what that plan was, fast. What if Ghost's curse can raise Ranson's corpse, and then we ask it?"

"Hah-hah, no," Ghost said after making a crude face at Crowley while his back was still turned. "Clearly you've never met a zombie before. They're about as conversational as a case of herpes, and twice as hard to get off of you once they've decided you're tasty. Oh, big hint here, cover your ears if you don't want to be spoiled; they think *everybody's* tasty."

"I don't think we need Ranson's plan. I think we have a new plan," I said, and then looked to Els to see if he was on the same page as me.

"Can we trust Ghost?" was Els's reply.

"Trust me with what?" Ghost said, glancing back and forth between us. "Sure you can trust me. Of course you can!"

"Ghost is a man of simple tastes," I said, letting that smile finally escape. "He likes gold, alcohol, and sex, and maybe not in that order."

Ghost audibly balked. "Hey, am very offended by that statement. Please do not slur me in such an obscene fashion. Let me be abundantly clear in this correction. I like sex with beautiful women who have large breasts. And I like it more than I like gold. The verdict is still out on the alcohol, but I like that more than gold too."

Els started to laugh, not a condescending laugh either, but an earnest one. He even slapped his knee. I thought I saw Crowley give a little chuckle too.

"Of course, the funny thing about women, gold, and alcohol," Ghost continued, obviously feeling that the reaction of the two men was an invitation to continue, "is that the more expensive the booze is, the better it is. But the more expensive the women are," he then wrinkled his nose up and fanned his hand at it, "awful, awful, awful."

"Can it," I told him, doing my best not to let him know that I was laughing right along with them. As soon as he quieted down, I told him what was on my mind. "This is what we do. The Lady wants Ghost to bring her Ranson. Well, that's exactly what he's going to do. Put him in a body bag and take him to her. Then once you've been paid in full, Ghost, cut her throat."

Ghost shook himself. "Whoa, hang on a second. Obviously you've never seen an army of freaks and weirdoes who are ready to skin and eat the poor bastard who killed their royal highness. I don't go on suicide missions, at least, not if I'm asked to!"

"Don't be coy, Ghost. I remember what you did to Cragscleft. Do you

honestly think that this would be any harder?"

"Uh, yeah, and I remember it too. Let me see if I want to do it again. Uhm. No."

"If you're afraid, you don't need to go alone," Els said. "A small group could go along with you, shadowing you, and help you escape when the time is right."

He shook his head vigorously. "Listen, there's a fine line between cowardice and stupidity, and I am on the side of that line which is neither side, meaning, I am neither, nor *either*. I bring her Ranson's moldy old body. Fine....Done....Will do....In fact, if we weren't sitting here now, I'd be plotting how to get to your cadaver cart, piling him into a sack, and sneaking off with him into the night so I could do just that; so, no arguments there. The part where all of us are seeming to have a failed communication on is the part where you expect me to do something *after that* which will probably get myself killed, and assuming I am not killed, not really better off than I was before."

Els sighed. "Is this were we offer you some combination of drink, money, and women as a reward?"

"Done; all of the above," Crowley piped in. "Whatever, you want. I—do—not—care. We're wasting time. Els and a handpicked few follow Ghost as he delivers Ranson's corpse to The Lady, and then somehow get close enough to kill her. Once the head is gone, the whole cult will fall apart. End of story."

"But not before she lifts my curse," Ghost piped in. "Or nothing you can offer me will be of any good, Mister Fuzzy-beard."

He waved his hand around like Ghost's words were smoke and he was trying to fan it away. "Fine, whatever; but I trust Els will know when you are betraying them, if you so choose, and will kill you as well."

"Of course," Els said.

"Of course," Ghost mocked silently, while doing an exaggeration of Els's usual over-serious expression.

"Ghost won't betray you," I said, walking over to him and giving his restraints a good tug to jostle him. "Because if he does, he knows I'll find him," and then I pulled him closer so that his eyes got big and he whipped that smile off his face, "but I won't kill him. Oh no. I'll make him *live* to regret it." No one was making faces after that.

"I'll pick my men," Els said, getting up. "But if you don't mind, I'd like to begin by visiting the man who would have been my first choice, who sadly is now unable to come with us except in spirit." We all watched him go. Anyone who cared knew that he was going to go pay respects to his friend, Moody.

I let go of Ghost's restraint. "Lord Crowley, please make sure this one is ready to go. We can't exactly use him if he's in shackles. And, try to remember, he's dangerous, but for now he's on our side."

Ghost found his smile again, winked at me, and then turned to Crowley with a big toothy grin.

As I was walking back to where Agent West was waiting patiently, he stopped being so patient and came to meet me half way. "Sheam," he said

from somewhere under his long, stiff black beard. "Othello has been asking to speak with you."

"I was just going to ask. To be honest, I really am not in the mood to talk with him, but I am curious about what you plan to do with him."

"He's being recalled. Punishment may come later, when James returns from his expedition, but for now he'll be put under house arrest. He simply wishes to apologize to you."

I had to look away from West. I didn't want the look in his eyes to sway the decision I had already made. "Tell him I accept his apology, but a visit will have to wait until all of this is done. Tell him..."

"He begged you to come."

"...tell him that I would not be able to afford him the focus he obviously needs right now, and that he will get it as soon as all of this is over." I walked away before West could argue. I wanted to go to him and comfort him, but I also didn't want to be playing nursemaid right now. Besides, I wasn't sure that I had finished being angry with him for nearly getting us all killed. I didn't know where I was going, though. I had walked to West to get away from Ghost, and now who was I going to go to get away from West? I didn't have to think about it for long.

"Lord! Ranson's body is gone!" a guard cried out from across the courtyard. He and several others came running.

"Gone! Stolen, or did it get up and walk away?" Crowley shouted back, even louder.

"We don't know!"

"I didn't expect you to, you taffer! Alert the castle guard, and the district watch! Fan out, all of you. Search every path and alley! Track him down!"

"We're not going to let those bugged-headed taff-bags get away!" Ghost shouted to Crowley, just as loud, even though he was standing right next to him, and then added in a more conversational voice, "Better unlock me, guv, so I can lend a hand, eh?"

"No! You're not going anywhere!" he shouted back, but then I couldn't follow the rest because Els was at my side and talking urgently into my ear.

"Is that it? Is it called off?"

For a second I wanted to say, "I don't know," but then I remembered that I was in charge. "No, of course it's not called off. One body will do as well as any other, for our purposes. We have some of Ranson's men. Find one close to Ranson's size and shape. Kill him if he isn't already dead. Disfigure him so they can't recognize the face at a glance."

He seemed shocked at my plan, and he was right to be—I was shocked I had said it. But now wasn't the time to be taking the moral high-ground. He just nodded and went.

But now Crowley was shouting at me. "How much do you trust this Rembrandt of yours? Could he be in on this? Maybe he didn't kill Ranson as thoroughly as we thought. Maybe he helped them escape?"

"This castle is likely crawling with Ranson sympathizers, and you want to point the finger at one of mine? Look to your own stock, Crowley, before you

start making accusations!" I couldn't believe I was defending Rembrandt, but it was just a drop in the bucket at this point.

He let out a growl and stamped his teeth together, but more out of general frustration than anger at me. He stormed off and went back to attend to Ghost's unshackling.

I dropped myself down to the nearest thing which would pass as a seat, sinking my fingers into my hair and pushing my fingernails into my scalp. When I looked up, I saw everyone still running this way and that, torch bearing guards on the walls high above with spyglasses looking out into the city for any sign of the escaping body. They wouldn't find him. Ranson ran his operation under Crowley's nose too long and too well for that.

The minutes ticked by, but I didn't want to rush Els as he paid his last respects to Moody, so I just waited it out. When he finally returned I saw that he had been occupied with other matters, for now he was dressed in black, rugged leather armor. It seemed to bring him a little more alive; I noticed he was standing taller.

He approached me and spoke at once. "I have chosen my team, but I am afraid it isn't very interesting. Rembrandt was my first choice, since the tales of his daring rescue of damn near everyone were only getting taller and taller. He agreed, though I don't think I've ever seen anyone look more bored at the prospect of a damn-near suicide mission. I asked West, but he said he could not, since he has many duties to attend to under his current assignment."

I nodded, thinking Rembrandt a good pick, and also glad that he wouldn't be sticking around, savior or no. "Who else?"

"Common Soore; he actually sought me out, and became an obvious choice. Did you see the way he moved when all hell broke loose and he had his swords in his hands? The man's a killing machine. I'm damn glad he's on *our* side."

I hadn't noticed, but believed him.

"Another is a gentleman named Memnon, who I haven't met yet, but Peppersmith insisted was an expert on pagan lore and customs, and that he would be useful. I just hope he's not some bookworm who trips over his own boots at the first sign of trouble. If he is, I can always send him home before he gets us killed. I also got a few volunteers from Crowley's guard, but I told them no. I don't want numbers for numbers sake. Us four will have to do."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to come along at least until you cross over into pagan territory, or wherever it is that Ghost will meet with the pagans to be escorted to Delphine."

"I would caution against it, but I was also thinking it be good if one other came with us, to return to base once we've reached a milestone and report on our progress. So, yes."

I nodded. "I'll need to change. I'll be fast. I'll meet you back here in ten minutes."

— Lytha: The Hammer's Song —

Day 6: 11:00 pm

*O Builder, mine heart is fixed:
I wilt sing and give praise, even with my glory.
Awake, lyre and harp:
I myself wilt awake early.
I wilt praise thee, O Builder, among thy people:
And I wilt sing praises unto thee among all thy people.*

Ten by ten, they were stacked, men in red, books and beads in hand, heads bowed to touch iron rails, singing out, praising,

*O Builder, bless us!
For thy mercy is great above the heavens:
And thy truth reacheth unto the clouds.
Be thou exalted, O Builder, above the heavens:
And thy glory above all the earth;
That thy beloved mayeth be delivered:
Save with thy right hand, and answer me.*

I walked among them, plain to the eye but cloaked to their mind, so that if any happened to lift their praying heads and cast their gaze my way, they would see nothing but a hole in their consciousness. "O Builder, save us!" they chanted back. Save them, indeed.

From the pulpit, far to the front, one of theirs sang,

*Wilt not thou, O Builder, who hath cast us off?
And wilt not thou, O Builder, go forth with our hosts?
Give us help from trouble:
For vain is the help of man.
Through Thee we shalt do valiantly:
For, He it is, that shalt tread down our enemies.*

Following the clues given to me by Delphine's led me to a castle in the cliffs by the sea. It stood on massive stone blocks, tall and proud, spanning the gap between one peak and another. The long road wound up to the first of the two, which seemed to be a series of towers, turrets, and buttresses clustered around an enormous gate.

*O Builder, we praise thee!
Hold not thy peace, O Builder of my praise;
For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are
opened against me:
They have spoken against me with a lying tongue.*

This gate led to a bridge, which spanned the gap between the two halves.

It was quiet as I crossed it, with only the sound of the distant chanting; the song now sung before me. The orange glow of their many lights stretched out before me, every towering window of colored glass and intricate pattern ablaze. This chapel, one of the oldest I had ever seen, seemed somehow closest to their hearts.

*O Builder, hate their lies!
They scorn me with words of hatred; and fought against me
without a cause.
For my love they are my adversaries:
But I give myself unto prayer.*

As I walked up the aisle, completely masked to their minds, I could feel their hymn pass through me as if it were a wind off the dry dunes by the shore below, stinging my face and passing through my cloak, causing every part of my body to tingle and itch with the sensation.

*O Builder, hear mine prayer!
And they have rewarded me evil for good,
And hatred for my love.
Set thou a wicked man over him,
That evil may be at strife with evil;
And let The Trickster stand at his right hand.
When he shalt be judged, let him be condemned:
And let his prayer become sin.*

I looked far up ahead to the man, no, a simple boy, standing at the front, dwarfed by the lectern, singing out with the voice of an angel, I could not help but reach out to him, to taste gingerly whatever flavor his mind presented.

*O Builder, condemn thy sinners!
And to this I beg of thee, do unto the sinner:
Let his days be few; and let another take his wealth.
Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.
Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg
Let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places.*

Even as he put his heart into the hymn, it was simply words to him, simply notes to hit and timing to achieve. No one had ever explained to him what any of it meant, why he sang it, where it had come from, who it had been originally written for or about. All he knew was that it was important. Perhaps, that was all he needed to know.

*O Builder, punish thy sinners!
Let the thieves catch all that he hath;
And let the strangers spoil his labor:*

*Let there be none to extend mercy unto him.
Neither let there be any to favor his fatherless children.
Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following
let their name be blotted out.*

And as they chanted back to him, mouthing out phrases most of them were barely conscious of, rehearsed, learned responses to phrases repeated so many times as to lose all meaning even to those who did know the origins, I could yet still feel the blind devotion, the unquestionably steadfast, iron-willed devotion to something none of them even really understood.

*O Builder, show no mercy!
Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with thee,
O Builder; and let not the sin of his mothers be blotted out:
Let them be before thee, O Builder, continually, that he
may cut off the memory of them from the earth.*

I was at the front now, seeing the casket of Brother Adam, the Inquisitor, presented before the congregation like a trophy. I circled around it, reaching out with one hand to feel the carving of the wood, until I could see his face. It was remarkable how well they had erased what I did to him; what we had done do him.

*O Builder, rid the earth of thy sinners!
Remember these sins for all eternity, O Builder:
But wipe the memory of the sinner from the minds of
mankind.*

But I didn't feel remorse, or jealousy, or even pride. I really didn't feel anything of my own. I was being filled up, cast out to sea in the ocean of these Hammerites, their song surrounding me like the air in my lungs. I did not feel overwhelmed, nor did I feel myself swayed. I felt simply that I was different from them, and as the tide washed over my head, I felt it impossible that I was even truly here, in this same space, at this same point in time as they. I was somewhere else, a hundred miles away.

*O Builder, keep thy sinners in torment!
This sinner was one not to show mercy, but persecuted the good
and honest man, that he might even slay the broken in heart:
Show to him the mercy he hath shown, show to him the
cruelty he hath shown, for this is the fate he hath earned.*

And yet I could feel the wood carving under my fingertips, and feel the heat of the candles, and the way the air shook when the congregation chanted back,

O Builder, let them know thy cruelty!

I turned, looking at them all. Every one, young and old, bearded, shaven, white haired, black haired, fair haired; they all looked the same to me, even the boy who sang to them, the same. But their minds were not the same. I sensed one, somewhere out there, who could barely form the words of the chant. His mind was elsewhere, heated with rage at an insult taken but not intended, a time years ago, a grudge he still held, some petty squabble he still clung to but set aflame anew by a reunion with the offender, seated in the row before him. I wanted to tear it out of his brain, slap him across the face and tell him to forget it, but instead I gave it a twist for him. By the end of the night, it would twist his mind to such corruption that he might take a life over it.

As he loved cursing, so let it come unto him:

As he delighted not in blessing, so let it be far from him.

As he clothed himself with cursing like as with his garment:

So let it come into his bowels like water,

And like oil into his bones.

I found another, this one with a different affliction, confused over feelings of desire for someone he had seen during the day, someone he knew was forbidden to him. Maybe he had seen this person many times before, but to his mind there was only one event, one corrupting passion which balled up and choked him, making him unable to know anything else. Again, I wanted to pull it free, cast it away, and free him from this clog, but instead I pushed it deeper in and higher up, took even more of him and stuffed it inside, so that it would only be a matter of time, days, weeks, or hours, before he stopped caring what was and was not forbidden, and took what he wanted, whether it was offered, or seized by force.

O Builder, giveth thou what they deserve!

My eyes were drawn upwards, seeing the great hammer icon suspended over the congregation. It was just like the one where I killed the Inquisitor, only rather than on top of the roof, it was smaller, and hung by a chain above their heads. The sight of it amused me. Were they worshipping a living God, not so unlike the Gods and Goddesses of the pagans, or where they bowing down before a lifeless block of wood wrapped in an iron shell?

Let it be unto him as the garment which covereth him, and for a girdle wherewith he is girded continually:

Let this be the reward of mine adversaries from The Builder, and of them that speak evil against my soul.

My eyes traced the path of the chain, and saw that it could be scaled. I

quickly leapt to it, caught hold, and climbed hand over hand the oversized links of cold metal, until I was embracing the icon itself.

O Builder, reward evil with evil!

I wasn't going to cut it down, nor deface it, or leave any sign that I had even been here. I just wanted to be closer to them—to be more tightly inside their minds and hearts. It was smaller than the other, but still big, and chained at the ends so that I could easily lie across its top, but with the back of my head and lower legs hanging free. I stretched, feeling the cool metal against my back, feeling my spine tingle and the pinpricks against my skin. I let out a long sigh, arms outstretched to either side, raking my fingernails across the surface.

*But do thou for me, O Builder, the Lord, for thy name's sake,
Because thy mercy is good, deliver thou me and the blessed;
For I am good and just, and my heart cryeth out for thee.
Without thee I am gone like the shadow when it declineth:
I am tossed up and down as the locust on the wind.*

I could no longer see them, but I could feel their minds even more tangibly. I arched my back slightly and stretched my arms out wider as I reached out to them. I found one, filled with jealousy, wishing that the honor and adoration now given to his fallen brother belonged to him instead. He was sure of his greatness, sure he deserved it all; and yet, was sure that should he die, it would be no more special than the death of an 'ordinary' Hammerite. I took that jealousy and made his hands heavy with it. It would be his driving force in life, his obsession: every day it would be his focus and every day his torment. There was another, idle, bored, wondering why his precious time was being wasted. His work was more important, he thought. The dead are dead, why should it concern him? It too would become his obsession. Always precious, this time of his, always his greatest need. Any who would take it from him would be his rival, his hated enemy. Any who wasted what little he gave them would be seen in contempt, and scorned. In the end, he would be driven mad.

O Builder, hear my needs!

I let out a gasp, shifting my back slightly as a tremble of joy seemed to wrap around my spine. My legs hooked around the chain at one end of the hammer, and one of my outstretched arms reached out to cling to the other, holding myself steady as I felt the sensation of pleasure render me unsteady. But I did not stop. I left none of them untouched. I stopped looking for extraordinary examples and began just going through them one, two, three at a time, finding whatever their minds presented that I could twist and squeeze. As my breath quickened I did not slow, but only went faster. I gripped the

chains tighter, pushed and rubbed my back against the hammer idol, my free arm trembling violently with each new mind I conquered.

My knees are weak through fasting; and my flesh is empty and frail. I became also a reproach unto them.

When they looked upon me they shook their heads. Help me, O Lord, Master Builder:

*O saveth me according to thy mercy;
That they may know that this is thy hand;
That thou, Builder, hast done it.*

"O Builder, show thy mighty hand!" Still they chanted their chorus, but it no longer felt like that sandy breeze. It was now hot like fire, and wet, like the roar of a beast. Yes, I had made them stronger, vicious, aggressive, but they would be useless.

But still, there was one among them whom I had left for last. I knew his mind well, for I had visited it before—The Lord of all Hammerites, the High Priest. My work against him was already done, for as he had tried to rid my body of the creature that possessed it, I turned his magic against him and watched as he stripped the spirit of The Builder from himself. He was now a cold, empty, passionless man, more a walking construct of wood and metal than anything else. Grabbing hold of him was like picking up a burnt piece of wood that seemed to only be singed, but was instead burned through to the core, much lighter than it should have been, and crumbling to the touch. Still, though he was defeated, he was not yet destroyed. I knew there was one last thing I could do to him, that would hurt him more than any bodily harm.

Let them curse, but bless thou:

When they arise, let them be ashamed; but let thy servant rejoice.

Let mine adversaries be clothed with shame;

*And let them cover themselves with their own confusion,
As with a mantle.*

Faithless, spiritless, passionless, there was only thing left to him; his works. This castle was his work, and the work of his father's, and his father before him. I would cast it to the ocean, and he would tell me how. Pride, the greatest of their sins, was also the most abundant. This castle was constructed with pride as its bricks, and that pride would tear it down. The two halves, and the bridge between them, acted as one; no two could exist without the other. It was a great symbol of Hammerite faith, but also a prideful display of their arrogance. Were the three of equal strength, it would have been secure, but the one, central construct, the bridge that spanned the peaks, had a weakness. It could be undone by removing a single stone. He knew it. Everyone here knew it. Any learned Hammerite who set eyes upon the castle would know it, and now I knew it too. But I also knew that the

entire weight of all three parts rested on this stone.

O Builder, we shalt rejoice in thee!

I let my breath slow, though I could still feel my heart race long after I let go of the chain and clutched my hands to my chest. I would do this. It would truly only kill a very few of them, but that was of little importance. Once the collapse began, as long as it took, the entire structure would surely fall into the sea. There would be nothing they could do to stop it. They would have to watch as one of their greatest creations—which is truly all they had of their Builder—dissolved before them.

*I will greatly praise The Builder with my mouth;
Yea, I will praise him among the multitude.
For he shalt stand at the right hand of the blessed,
To save him from those that condemn his soul.*

I dropped down to the floor, right in amongst them, and still they were blind to me. Lifting myself up, I walked slowly the way I came. The bridge containing that single stone, a keystone, was just before me. I rubbed at my wrists, knowing what I had to do. As I departed, I heard them chant one final phrase,

O Builder, we, at thy right hand, praise thee!

— Ghost: One Stiff's as Good as the Next —

Day 7: 12:15 am

Either the cramped bit of street near the clock tower in Stonemarket was some type of mystical crossroads between the netherworlds, or Delphine closed her eyes, pointed at a map, and picked the first name she could read. Sheam and the four guys who were stalking me were nowhere to be seen. I didn't know if I liked that or not. At least when the pagan contacts came it wouldn't look like an ambush, but if they decided to ambush me I wouldn't mind having a few swords to back me up.

I was tucked away in a nook behind a lamppost. The gargoyles on the clock tower, which was neither as impressive nor as good at keeping time as one would hope, were irritating me, because they were here and those stupid pagans were not. The body they gave me, I never asked who it was, stank already, and was going to stink more and more if I had to wait any longer. As far as I knew it was already a zombie, and the only thing keeping it from clawing open the bag and clawing open me was the charm around my neck. It was a good thing the idiots back at the castle didn't break it!

Maybe she didn't expect me to be here this early, or maybe these two guys walking up were them. No, they just kept on walking. That was another reason why I didn't like this spot; people came through here. How was I

supposed to know which ones were the pagans? What if a watchman came over and asked why I was standing next to a pull cart with a body in it? Actually that was unlikely. When you had a pull cart with a body in it, no one ever asked you any questions. That gave me a good idea. Maybe for my next break-in, all I'd do is show up at the front door with a pull-cart with a body in it. After this curse was broken, I'd have to try it.

When I saw two unusually tall cloaked figures, one of whom was far too skinny and the other looked like he was also carrying two small rowboats under his clothes, I figured that I had my guys. They came right over, didn't say anything, but actually started to sniff the dead body in the cart. Either these were the pagans, or just some really sink weirdoes were out tonight. "Look, this is my cart, so..." I began to say, trying to play it off like I wasn't sure these were the guys sent to bring me back to Delphine.

The one with the rowboats made a sound like a dog that just had his favorite bone taken away from him, so I just shut up. "Guess it's your cart now, eh?"

The tall one began to walk backwards, beckoning me to follow, while the big one took the cart—I now saw that the two huge masses were just his arms, his huge hairy bulging with muscles arms—and began to pull it along like it was a loaf of bread tied to a string. I crept along, following carefully. I didn't know where the others were, so I didn't have to worry about not looking at them and giving away their location. Of course, as luck would have it, I casually glanced up to the top of a big pipe which crossed over the street, and saw the lot of them huddled there like crows on a clothes line. Now I had to play it off like I hadn't seen anything. Of course, my escorts didn't seem to care at this point.

They were leading me down a narrow street in pretty much the opposite direction I expected, since rather than going to a more quiet area, they were heading towards a main road. I tried to look natural as I walked out into the open with the three (counting the cadaver of course) strangest traveling companions I could have hoped for. The occasional rough sort passed us by giving a wide berth, and the occasional watchmen tried to seem macho by pretending that this sort of thing was normal.

The tall one insisted on walking backwards keeping both of what I assumed to be eyes trained on me. It didn't really matter: I wasn't going to try to look for Sheam and the Bloods again, because I didn't want to have to try to act like I hadn't seen them again, so I just returned the favor and stared right back. I was glad it was him glaring at me and not his friend. His friend looked like he could tear me down the center. The tall guy just looked like he could stab me through the chest with his arm.

After a long walk down a short road, they turned off into a narrow passage, and then an even narrower one, so much that I didn't think the big guy was going to get through, and I knew the cart wouldn't. He stopped, lifted the body up over his shoulder, and slid through the opening like he was covered with grease. The tall one followed, having to duck down considerably to get through, and then I just waltzed right in. A winding stair

was before us, and unfortunately mister skinny decided he didn't need to watch me anymore, because it would have been funny to see him walking down the stairs backwards. When we got to the bottom, I saw another one waiting for us, and he wasn't in a cloak.

We were in some kind of sewer-like place, though I didn't know of any sewers that were at the bottom of a stair, so I was probably wrong. The electric lamps here were giving off a greenish light, so I probably would have thought it was a sewer even if there weren't pipes everywhere and shallow, open canals running this way and that. The guy here waiting for us seemed human enough, though the way he hung his head and arms told me he didn't really want to be.

"Quicker than expected," he said, opening his eyes really wide, just in case I wasn't sure that he had any. "The Lady will be pleased." He then went over to big guy said, "Let me see." The body was dropped onto the ground, and then rolled over so the head was up. He fiddled around with the bag for a second before getting a knife and cutting it open, and looking at the face which had been pretty cut up in order to keep it from not looking like Ranson.

"Was all of this...needed?" He said, looking up at me and pointing at the face with a spinning finger.

"He had done most of it to himself, actually," I said, making it up on the spot. I really couldn't think of any reasonable way his face could have gotten like that, with the exception of me being a sicko who liked to cut on dead people. No, *that* guy worked for Crowley.

"Ashamed of the gifts bestowed upon him, no doubt," the pagan said, buying it, I guessed. "Come."

And we went. I really wanted to peek over my shoulder to see where my stalkers were, but I just kept on walking.

— Sheam: Following a Stranger —

Day 7: 12:30 am

"Sheam, I think you had better go back now. This could get far too dangerous from here out."

Els was long overdue for ordering someone around, and it seemed I was next.—Once a guard captain, always one.—I was surprised that the other three took so kindly to him. "I thought the plan was that I go back when we reach pagan territory?" I said in a hushed voice, hoping he'd take the hint.

He did, and replied in an even lower one. "This is pagan territory. These corridors are marked with their glyph warnings. It's a message for the local thieves' guild to stay away, there, and there."

I looked, and sure enough, those were glyphs, but that didn't mean the rest was true. I was just being belligerent because I didn't like the idea of suddenly going back to just being the girl who gets locked in a hotel room for her own safety.

"Go on, Lady Sheam," Common Soore said in his unusually gracious tone. "I'll look after my friend Els, here. And I'm keeping an eye on this one," he

said with a wink as he thumbed over his shoulder at Rembrandt, his arm still in its sling, who was cleaning his nails again with the same dagger he used to kill, or merely stab, Ranson. For a man who cleaned his nails as often as he did, he sure was filthy looking.

"Good luck, all of you," I said, giving the stranger, the pagan expert of Crowley's acquaintance, a nod and a brief smile.

"Yes, definitely, definitely, the man said as he examined the glyphs Els pointed out. "Though more specifically, the message is actually keep your goats from grazing in my garden, but that was the original, archaic use, and has come to mean in general a warning to—"

"Can we have quiet, please?" Els said, shutting him up. "Let's go. Good luck, Sheam, with whatever awaits you."

I watched them go. Naturally, when they turned up dead, or never came back, my first thought would be, I should have gone with them, and not, thank goodness I didn't go with them. After they had vanished from sight, I turned around to ascend the stair.

I was back in The City. There were no cloaked men of odd size and proportion to be seen, or any corpses or any sign that very soon very bad things would happen. It was just another night, in just another street.

I began to walk, and with a quick start, I turned around just in time to see a shadow to go along with the noise I had heard. Someone had rushed down the stairs. I glanced all around me, and saw nothing else out of the ordinary, before rushing down them myself. I wasn't going to let my people fall victim to an ambush.

Soon I was back in the room where Ghost had met with the third pagan, and Els had told me to go back. The water nearby had been disturbed. I crossed the room, and peered down the corridor leading to the whole grand adventure, and saw a distant figure sprinting away.

I had no idea what I would do if I caught the stranger, but there was also no time to find someone else to do the job. I took off after him.

I wasn't gaining on him, but as far as I could see the tunnel was straight as an arrow, so he would have to get very far away before I lost him completely. Then, when it seemed as if I could sprint after him no longer, I noticed that he had stopped. The stationary figure seemed to be regarding something ahead of him. From his stance it was possible that he was backing away. I reasoned that he had seen the party up ahead, and now realized that he was trapped between a group of intruders and a solitary intruder giving chase. If I were him, I'd take my chances with me.

Sure enough, he had doubled back and was running towards me. My first instinct was to panic and run too; but I stiffened my resolve, hoping a bluff might turn him around to try his chances with the group that had not yet seen him. Els had recommended that I arm myself, just in case we ran into trouble, and now I was glad I had. It was a short, short-sword, but it would have to be enough. I charged towards him, holding the short blade away from me so he could easily see it in silhouette, letting my boots sound out a mighty racket. For the moment, the only thing I had to assure myself was that he had not

attacked me before he rushed down the stairs. If he meant to get into a fight, he could have back then.

He wasn't turning around, but he wasn't slowing down for a confrontation either. With the way I was running and he was running I still couldn't get a good look at him, but he was smaller than me, which wasn't necessarily reassuring.

I pushed my fear to my lips, shouting, "Stop, you!" but I wasn't sure if I had actually managed to say it. 'Don't back down,' I urged myself, 'or you'll never forget it.' At the same time the thought, 'You fool! You're going to get yourself killed!' crossed my mind.

Somehow, the first thought won out. Just when he seemed like he was going to charge straight into me I pulled my sword—it reminded me of my chef's knife—in front of me like it was a lance. He cut sharply to one side, attempting to slip past me.

It should have been successful, but somehow I managed to spin my arm around just in time to clip his shoulder as he sailed past. It wasn't enough to hurt him, but it did send him spinning out of control, smashing right into the stone wall as he twisted to avoid the blow. I nearly lost my balance in the process, but avoided smashing my *head* against the wall.

I saw now that he was more of an '*it*' than a he. The lower jaw did not match the upper, and was shaped differently comparing one side to the other. Eyes bulged unnaturally from a blackened face that panted for breath. I tried my best to hide my revulsion, and reassure myself that this creature seemed far more afraid than it should have been. I quickly moved to block his way to freedom, my sword point between it and me.

It was none too soon. An instant later he was back up and running; but this time, in his original direction, back towards the party. If only to assure him that he could not escape the way he came, I chased.

— Lytha: The Pull —

Day 7: 1:00 am

The castle was now high above me. I left my cloak, boots, and gloves behind me at the riverbank, and from there went from rock to rock into the swiftly flowing water, looking up at the bridge's belly. I could imagine it vividly. The bridge would buckle, and weakened, the two sides would fall towards one another, pulled down by the collapsing bridge's weight. Then all of it would crumble as tower struck tower, and fall down to the gap below. This river, just another piece of the great river that flowed through The City, let out into the ocean here, and would swiftly carry anything that fell into it far out to sea; including myself if I fell off this rock. I could see where I had to climb to get at the bridge from underneath. It would not be hard.

With my climb surveyed, I went back to the riverbank, left my boots, gloves, and cloak behind, and began to climb. I went, climbing faster and faster, using jutting root, hearty shrub, or just any rock I could get my hands around to propel me upwards. Soon I reached a narrow path cut into the rock

face, no doubt left here from the Hammerite construction crews many years ago, and found my progress faster still. At last, when I came to a narrow outcropping, I felt no need to climb any higher, and knew that I could simply *go to the keystone*, which I now saw clearly before me.

The idea that it was a *single stone* that held up the entire castle was slightly misleading, for this single stone was as large as many of the towers themselves, and cut from a mountainous monolith. I studied it for a moment, feeling suddenly incapable of carrying out this plan.

"What are you waiting for? Here is your enemy, greater than the Hammer Lord himself. Do."

I felt my face hardening. I knew what *It* wanted me to do. "*Lead,*" I thought back to *It*.

I lifted my arms up to it. I felt as if my fingers could wrap around it and pull it from its place. My arms tightened, grew heavy, stiff, and felt as if my bones themselves were stretching. Then the green came. The slivers split out of me from my forearms, wrists, palms, even fingers. There was no pain this time, and no blood. There was just the tightness, the feeling like my skin was being pushed from my muscles, my bones separating, my flesh stretching.

Soon it was forgotten. I watched as the green tendrils, not so much vines anymore, but fingers, went to the stone and spread over its surface. They crawled over it, looking for the slightest crack, any weakness, any gap or crevice to grow into, and expand. Quickly the finger-like vines went about the edges of the stone, where mortarless joints were kept tight by gravity alone, and the weight of the entire castle. Still, there were gaps, and the vines found them. I closed my eyes, and found I could *see* what the vines felt, knowing every inch of that stone, knowing the quarry where it was torn from the mountainside, knowing the mountain that bore it, and knowing the chisels and hammers that cut it out and forced it into this shape.

I became less and less aware of my own body, and more and more this stone. It was strong, very, very strong, but it was not my enemy. It was my ally. The stones that surrounded it and put their weight upon it were the enemy. The vines spread; I spread, digging in between them and the keystone, fanning out, taking it.

"Yes, yes. This is right. This is the way."

It did seem right. It seemed like this is what it was all *for*.

I worked, and worked, digging, squeezing, and searching. It went on and on, and for a time, it seemed that it was no use. The stones were too strong. The weight was too much, but still on and on that voice pushed me, demanded me to continue, insisted that this was the way.

I only became aware of my body again when I realized that there was no longer ground beneath my feet. The vines had grown so strong, so massive, that I was being lifted up from the outcropping. I curled upwards to the keystone as the vines flexed and shifted, needing every inch of length available to push and twist and pry at the stone, and with my body pulled from where I stood and dangling beneath it, it had no more length available, only my strength to draw on.

This was nothing like the work I had done in the congregation. I did not feel the euphoria, the rush of exhilaration; I felt faint.

"It is not enough! Not enough! You must let me do more! You must let me help you!"

Its voice was more loud and clear than ever before. I wished for the voice of Thalia, to tell me what to do, but I was afraid I could not hear her over the shouts of *It*.

"Let me do it. Let me have you. You cannot do this while you still hold me back."

"No," I whispered, but my stomach leapt into my throat as I felt one of the vines slip slightly from my skin, like it would break off and drop me.

"You must. Don't you see? If you do not, you will fall. Only I can save you now!"

I felt another slip, and another, and then I saw streams of blood flow down my arms. The vines were beginning to reject me. I then understood what I had begun; *It* had trapped me. I now *had* to give myself over, or I would *die*.

"No," I squeaked, suddenly feeling my arms burn like they had been cut through by knives. "No you won't do this. If I die, so will you."

"Why would I want to live like this? How can you expect me to go on living like this? Don't you realize how much you have tortured me? I would rather die than go another moment your prisoner! Let me HAVE YOU."

The blood from my arms was now coating them, flowing down my whole body, and dropping from my legs in streams. "What do you want me to do?" I whispered against the agony.

"Nothing! Decide in your heart that you are mine, and then do nothing! I will save you. I will recreate you! You will be immortal, a Goddess! It will no longer be you, and I, but one being. You will never feel madness again!"

Inch by inch I slipped, the vines withdrawing from my skin. I tried to hold on with my hands, but they were slick with blood, frail and weak, and the vines smooth as glass. "Thalia, what do you want me to do?"

"There is no Thalia! There never was a Thalia! Only me! I am telling you what to do!"

"Thalia," I said firmly, though I could barely do so with how hard I was shaking, and it took the only strength I had left. "What do you want me to do?"

It only screamed louder and louder at me. The vines were now free of my wrists and hands, with only pieces in my arms still keeping me from falling far into the raging river below. Like a mouse, squeaking timidly in the distance, I thought I heard Thalia's voice. *"Call to him."*

"Ghost," I cried in the back of my throat. "Ghost can't help me now."

"No one can help you now, because you do not need any help! You have me! Give yourself to me, I command you! Do this, and you will be able to rip the stone from the castle with your bare claws, and ride it as it collapses into the sea, calling out your victory to the winds, triumphant, immortal, a Queen among beasts and over man, the governess over life and death itself! No petty man can

help you!"

I wanted to give in, I yearned to give in, but I found I could not. It was not Thalia. She was barely even with me anymore. She was gone, dead; devoured by *It*. It was not me, either. I had no reason to refuse. I had nothing to live for, no cause to fight for. I should give in. I must give in. But I couldn't. What then? Call to him, Thalia told me with her last breath. "Ghost..." What of it? He had saved my life. Why would that change who I was?

"He didn't save your life. Your life was over. He gave you a new one."

My face ran hot with tears, which trailed down my neck and mixed with the blood. "Ghost!" I screamed, though it felt as no more than a whisper. "You can't have me, demon," I seethed, "I won't let you have me."

"Why? Why won't you? Because you belong to him now? Are you so much a fool as to believe that?" The voice echoed and repeated in my mind, louder and louder each time, threatening to drown out my own thoughts.

"No, I do not belong to him; only to myself. I cannot give you what **he** gave to **me**. I would rather die."

"Then you will die!" it screamed, like a hundred knives cutting up the inside of my brain.

"Then I will die," I said, barely a whisper, and then stopped struggling, to wait and watch for the last vine to let me go.

But maybe I would not have to even wait that long. I felt my body go numb, watched as my vision darkened, all the sounds of the wind go silent, the smell of the sea fade away...

...and then a strong grip around the throat take hold of me, push me back, slam the back of my head against something hard, once, twice, again, over and over, until the back of my neck was hot with blood and I had to scream from the pain. I was then thrown away, tumbling defenselessly as I went head over heels, only to slam into a hard, rough pillar.

Only it wasn't a pillar; it was the trunk of a tree. I was in the woods. I knew them—these were the woods near Thalia's cottage, and my attacker...

I knew that mask of death; eyes great and black and deep, and masses of teeth lining unfolding jaws. I remembered falling into those great and horrible eyes like a pit had opened up below me. It was the same one I had chased, fleeing Thalia's home after her death, and the same, in the vision, only that time I had been the one fleeing. It was here, before me; the Vile Slasher.

It stood tall, so very tall. The feet, big, fleshy things like an ape, but with talons like a hawk. The legs bent up with two knees, one backwards, one forwards. The hands were just as horrible, but with long green tendrils falling from the wrists, almost like hair, almost like vines. The body, stacks of muscle wedged between protruding bone, quite female, but hard and curveless. The head, which I could almost not bear to look at again, was ridged and beak-like, deep pits for eyes, a jaw like a snake's but with teeth like a jacknall.

"This is what you wanted me to become?" I said, trying to laugh, but finding only fear in my voice.

"I am what you are. You are the parasite that I must be rid of, before I can

become truly myself!" I had not recognized the voice in my head, but now that It was outside, before me, I felt with horror that it was simply my own.

"It cannot kill you, Lytha!" I heard Thalia's voice, somewhere from behind. "She cannot simply kill you, or she would have let you fall into the sea. She brought you back here, into this moment, to conquer you. You must fight her!"

It laughed, wrapped Its claw around my body—I could do nothing to fight back—lifted me up, and thrust my body against a tree. Only this time I heard a horrible cracking, and a pain in my body which flooded my brain and made me scream out, but a garble of blood was all that came. I looked down to find a broken and jagged branch protruding from where my stomach had been.

"Of course I can kill you. I just did!"

"No Lytha, It can't kill you. Nothing It can do here can kill you. But you will feel the pain; you will feel every ounce of the pain. You have to fight It!"

"Why can't you help me," I murmured out, certainly feeling like I was dying. There was no way to escape. My lower body hung lifelessly. My arms were too weak to pull me off the branch.

But then I wasn't on the branch anymore. I was behind the Slasher, and there, over Its shoulder, impaled on the tree just as I had been, was Thalia. The sight brought me to my knees, and I cried out to her.

"I can help you, like this," she said, her voice just as weak as mine had been.

"Fool!" the Slasher screamed. It spun around, and before I could escape, I was again in Its grasp. This time, It just ripped me in half, the claws hooking into my ribs and my hips to pull me in two.

But before my destroyed body could even land, I found myself staring across the clearing at the mutilated remains of Thalia, her eyes still open, locked onto mine, filled with conviction. I was standing, whole, healthy and strong. The Slasher screamed once more, and charged me. I looked up from my sister, watching the beast bear down on me, and decided I was not going to let It kill Thalia in my stead again.

I narrowly missed Its claws this time, and I found that I had claws of my own. With daggers in both hands, I slid under Its swing, catching both knives into Its hard, thick skin, tearing through between two ribs, before tumbling away on the other side. It howled. Steaming red blood gushed from its wounds. It came for me again.

I tried to move away, but It was too fast. I plunged my daggers into Its leg as It stomped at me, but its movements broke them from my grasp, embedded in its flesh. It grabbed me, its whole hand big enough to go over my shoulders and under my arms, and pinned me to the ground. "Not going to make it so easy for you, foolish whelp." It dove for me, catching my forearm in its teeth. Its breath hurt as much as the crush of the jaws and stab of its fangs. Before I understood what had happened, It had pulled its head away, my arm still in its mouth, chewing and crushing it. I could feel every bite, even though it was no longer attached to me. All I could do was cry, and scream. I could not struggle. I could not stop it.

"It's still your mind," said Thalia's voice in my ear. "It will be what you make it."

I blinked, and a length of shiny metal flashed into my mind. An instant later the Slasher screamed, not its usual call of rage, but a cry of pain. I watched as its head nearly exploded in steam and fire, and my arm, the Hammerites' shiny metal splint still attached to it, fell free to the forest floor.

But It was recovering, shaking its head, but then becoming still. I could see where the metal, which had burned Delphine before, had eaten a hole in the side of the creature's already horrible face. "It will take more than that..." It said, stomping back over and kicking the metal away. I jumped up, not letting a missing arm slow me down, and went for the splint. It didn't seem to really grasp what I was doing, because it just let me go. I found it, took it with my left hand, the only one I had left, and ran back to finish the job.

I swung at It furiously, but it was fast. Once or twice I caught It in the leg, burning it badly and sending splashes of blood into the air, but I could never get off another hit like I had done with my daggers. At least I had It on the defensive, more concerned with avoiding the touch of the metal than it was with doing me any more damage.

My hope was shattered. It swatted the splint out of my hand, and took me back in its grasp just as quickly. "So," it said. "What do I need to do to this body to get it to turn into Thalia, hm?"

"What good is that to you," I screamed and spat.

"If I twist off your head, that won't do me any good. I can't cause a head further pain. But if I..."

It took my other arm and pulled it off. With just a quick snap, I found myself whole, behind it, and once again armed. "Perfect," It muttered, turning to face me, but holding my old body, now Thalia, in front of me. "I will allow you to understand what it is that you are truly doing," It told me. "For every wound you inflict upon me, I shall recreate on your sister, here. We'll have to forget that I have already ripped off her arms." It then started to laugh.

I was frozen. I looked up at the body in his hands; it was Thalia, really her, just like the face I had worn not long ago. "Do not..." I let escape from my lips.

"Do not...this?" It ran two talons around her ribs, cutting deeply and letting the blood pour down in splashes. Her face twisted with the pain but did not cry out. "Or this?" It said, stabbing her in the leg with a single claw, so that when it drew its hand away, I could see clear to the other side. "Or this," It said, bringing that same bloodied claw to her face, forcing the razor tip into her mouth, and then ripping her cheek away with one stroke.

I drove my dagger into my own eye.

"You can't torture a dead body," I said, looking on as the beast now clung to air. Thalia's body, the dagger still in the eye socket, was now where I had just been standing.

*It snarled, and came for me again. "Too clever for me, are we? I'll have to stick to torturing **you**."*

I ran. I did not try to fight it, I just ran. It could not defeat me, but it could keep me here forever. As far as I knew, this was all happening in a split second. It would go on and on, It killing me over, and over, and over again, until I finally gave in. If I broke down and gave up, asked it to stop, told it to do what it

wanted, that would be the end. I would be gone. It would have my body and finish the job I started at the Hammerite castle. I knew it was only a matter of time. It would break me. The Hammerites had. Brother Adam, my eternal, hated enemy, on whom I had my revenge, at least taught me that. I could break. I would not let it happen again.

I was in Thalia's cottage. In my mind, it hadn't burned to the ground, but was exactly the same as I had left it. The doors and windows vanished. I could hear it ram into the side of the house, screaming for me to come out. I went to the chest, still in its place, not buried beneath the tree. I tossed away the robes, and took up the short staff with the amber piece. "What does it do?" I asked, hoping Thalia could still hear me.

"What do you want it to do?"

"Kill that thing."

It pounded on the wall, making the whole building almost lift from its foundations with every strike.

"Then that's what it does."

Good enough for me. I held it out in the direction of the pounding, and watched as rays of yellow light shot out from the amber in all directions, and then focused into one. The side of the building burned away, and with it, outside, the monster fell to its back, howling with pain, its flesh black and bubbling. I ran closer, almost on top of it, and repeated the action, now at close range without a wall between it and the wand. It screamed, the flesh sizzling and popping like boiling water on a stove, its limbs thrashing about in agony.

But I did not watch the thrashes closely enough. The green tendrils around its hands came at me from the sides, and sized the staff from my grasp. I fought back, but found it lifting me from my feet and smashing me into the ceiling, which shattered from the force. I fell, and the staff flew into the sky, disappearing into the trees somewhere in the distance. I could not think about going after it, because the Slasher was on top of me again. "First your swords, then Hammer magic, now Pagan magic. You try everything, but don't you see it only slows me down? I will outlast it all."

It had me, but I knew it wasn't going to kill me or start pulling limbs off, I expected something far worse. It had me closed in, nowhere to run. Why didn't it just do what it was going to do?

"You seem to be under a mistaken impression, Lytha," It said, leaning down close so that its head was near mine. "You think that this figment that attaches itself to your dead body is Thalia. You think that she is helping you, that she is protecting you and sacrificing herself so that you have a chance, but you are wrong."

I did not speak. I didn't want to listen, but I couldn't escape it.

"The Thalia that you see here is just in your imagination. You thought that there were three, but there has only ever been two. Vile Slasher, Queen of Fangs; these things I am called, but they are not my name. You know my name, Lytha."

"I do not," I whispered. I was on the floor now, huddled against the wall, kicking at the floorboards to get as far from It as possible, but could go nowhere

else.

"My name is Thalia. There is no other Thalia."

"You aren't my sister. You are the demon that possessed her."

*"There is no demon, Lytha! Only me, **Thalia!** Can't you hear my voice? Don't you recognize it?"*

I had recognized her voice. I thought that it was mine, but I was mistaken. It had been Thalia's voice all along. But I did not answer. I didn't want to let it know...

"I can hear everything in your mind, Lytha. I know that you believe me, and that you've given in already. I will not break you like the Inquisitor did. You will give yourself willingly. In fact, you already have."

It was so close now. The green was all over me, wrapping around my legs and over my stomach, pulling me in.

*"It was not your revenge; it was mine for what he did to **me**. It was my actions all along."*

I couldn't even think. Everything in my mind was Its. It had me. It was over. The green that wrapped around me looked just like what had come out of my own wrists. It now wrapped around my arms, seeking a way back in.

"Yes, I can feel you are resigning. Now that you know the truth, you see that I have never been your enemy."

"No," I whispered.

It didn't seem to hear me.

"I said no," even softer, even as the green cut my arms open and began to creep inside. "No, you are not Thalia, and no you can't have me, not because I won't give myself to you, but because what I have can't be given to you."

"Hush now, sister. This is how it must be."

"I already told you. I can't give myself to you, because I am not me anymore."

"You speak nonsense."

I smiled. "Yes." My arms were now filling with the green...I knew it was almost done. "Yes, he also speaks nonsense, usually."

A look came upon Its face, which could have been mistaken for confusion. And then, two big hands came at It from behind, one that gouged it in the eyes, and the other that grabbed hold of its lower jaw and pulled it open. The Slasher was pulled from me violently, the green ripped free of my arms far more painfully than they had gone in, but it was almost a pleasure in comparison. I watched at it fell backwards, mouth locked open by the strong grasp, big gloved fingers digging deep into the eyes, with a laugh of satisfaction that threatened to shake the house the rest of the way down.

"Ghost," I whispered with tears in my eyes.

The Slasher was pulled to the ground, and then Ghost, nearly twice the size of It, so big that he pushed the roof away with his back, threw its jaw to one side with his left hand, and threw the top of its skull to the side with the other. "Hi Lytha!" he said as It continued to howl and scream, tearing at him with its claws, fighting back with frantic speed, and yet Ghost didn't seem to care. He was beyond this, so completely outside its realm that it could have been an

insect swatted under his palm. He hammered his fist repeatedly into its body, cracking bone with every punch, every strike sending its limbs into another fit of fruitless attacks.

*"You told me that The Inquisitor broke me, demon, but you were wrong. There was nothing for him to break. The day Thalia died; the real Thalia, I died as well. Maybe my body was still alive, but I **truly** died that day in the cottage. But then Ghost brought me back to life. **That** life was never something you could take from me."*

The giant Ghost stood up, and pulled the body of the Slasher up with it. The head was just a gory stump of throbbing brain and spurting blood. The torso had been mashed to a pump, so that the limbs just held on by tendons and split bones. "I think It's dead," Ghost said with a grin, and then laughed, and laughed, and laughed. It wasn't an angry or cruel laugh. He wasn't glad he had killed something, or caused something pain. That wasn't Ghost. He was just happy. I found that I was laughing too.

"Watch this," he said, and then started to wad the remains of the Slasher into a ball. First he pushed the head into what remained of the torso, and then the other limbs, and finally began to push and kneed it until it was a rough seed of oozing flesh. But he continued to crush it, down, tighter, smaller, until he could fit it into the palm of his hand. "Hm," he said, and then held it out to me. "What should I do with it now?" he said.

"Put it here," I told him, and he did as I asked, placing it on the ground. Back in my hands were the two weapons I had used, Thalia's staff, and The Inquisitor's splint. First, I jammed the splint into it, watching it sizzle and burn just like it had when it was alive. Then I took the staff, and with the splint still in place, unleashed the rays of light on it, until layer after layer of it burned away, and only a hard core remained.

I took it up, looking at the smooth yellow surface, and my reflection in it. It had been burned away; all that remained now was Thalia. "It was wrong," I said to Ghost, who was now the proper size. "It wasn't Thalia at all."

"You don't think so?" Ghost asked.

"Because I knew Thalia; I knew why she fled from the pagans, why she handed herself in to the Hammerites, and why she eventually took her own life. She was trying to free herself from It. Even if the Slasher did have her, body and soul, there was still a part of her that was her and her alone, otherwise she could never have done these things." Still, there was something more, evidence even stronger that convinced me that I was correct. "All of her words were not figments in my mind. She was really there. Now, she is right here in my hand. With the Slasher dead she is no longer forced to linger in my mind as an enslaved spirit. She may finally rest."

Ghost smiled, and put his arm around my back, his proper size again. "What are you going to do with her?"

I looked it over. Even as I held it in my hands, it grew smaller and smaller. I listened for her voice, somewhere in the distance, telling me goodbye, but her voice never came. I knew that she had gotten one last message out, before the end. She had told me what to do every step of the way. When it seemed it would

get no smaller, and was just the size of a marble, I went to the chest. I put the robe back inside, and then laid the staff and my splint in it as well. Finally, between them, I put the sphere, closed the chest, and locked it...

...And the last piece of green slipped free of the skin of my forearm, and I began to fall. Somehow, I managed to catch hold just as the tip passed by my fingers. I reached up with my other hand, and caught hold of another piece.

Then the world flooded back to my senses in a rush; the vertigo of hanging below the Hammerite bridge and high above the river that squeezed and rushed between two cliff peaks; the smell of the ocean air; the feel of the harsh, wet wind on my body; and the warm bath of my blood all over my arms and hands, neck, all the way down to my legs and toes. I nearly laughed out loud at the thrill of it all. Then I looked up and saw that the vines were dead, brown, cracking, and falling loose. Losing my good sense for an instant, I screamed out, "Yes, to **hell** with you!" with all of my breath.

But then I felt the dead vine I clung to slipping. With a crack and a groan, it was letting go of the keystone I had failed so completely to dislodge. I doubted that I had budged it even an inch.

I had no other choice but to climb. I reached up, trying to gain a higher grasp on it, but my hands were still slick with blood, and the wounds that the Slasher had left with them, pushing out of my skin, were real. They stung horribly, but would not sting as much as hitting a raging river from this height, if I was lucky enough to not hit the rocks instead. With all my strength, which was shockingly and distressingly little, I climbed, one hand after another, up into the tangle of dead plant. Every time it seemed I had made progress, a foot, two, maybe a dozen, I felt the vine's grip on the stone loosen, and fell back down just as far, if not twice as much. I worked, my flesh throbbing with the pain, my muscles aching, trying to save the life I had just so vigorously defended.

Every now and then I thought of the things that the Slasher had done to me, pulling off my arms one by one, impaling me on that branch, ripping me in two, and then the pain of the climb seemed trivial. Even more, I thought of the Inquisitor and his torture, and then the agony I was now in seemed no more than a nuisance.

But still, every piece of headway was coming to nothing. The vines were cracking and disintegrating faster than I could climb up them. I was certain that I was now twice as far below the great arch of the bridge and getting lower every second. In one last, futile effort to save myself, I began to climb frantically, no longer paying mind to how secure or unsecured each length of vine felt, just desperate to get free of it and up to the solid, steady, relentless stone.

The vines snapped and sprang. I felt my stomach turn upside down as I fell. Still I held onto the vine, in a desperate hope that there was still some part of it connected. It jerked tight under my weight. I looked up, seeing one last scrap of it that had burrowed deep within a gap between the keystone and its neighbor. Then I saw the outcropping I had stood on, where I began

this whole mess, and felt the way the vine swayed. I went with the motion, leaning with it, encouraging it, and before long, swinging with it. Every swing brought me closer to the outcropping and also lower down, as the vine slipped from the stones. I swung far away, so that my back almost hit the sheer cliff wall on the opposite side, and then forward, so that my bare toes could almost feel the dirt of the outcropping under it. But then as I swung back, I felt the drop, felt the vine slip, and then I tumbled in freefall.

The motion of the backwards swing sent me away from one cliff wall, but not far enough to strike the other. I only could see the river approach me for an instant as I fell. With the impact, I felt that I had been shattered, but knew that I was not. I now knew what it felt like to be ripped apart, and the pain all over my body assured me that my entire body was still there. But the motion did not stop. The river seemed to be flowing just as fast as I had been falling, and hitting a rock that either jutted out of the surface or was hidden below it could be just as deadly. But I needed to hit one, or that would not have been my only fall. The river itself went off one more cliff before it fed out into the ocean. Even if I survived the second drop, I would be swept out to sea.

I braced myself, and allowed a collision with one of the rocks. I let my body slam into it, fearing that any attempt to grab it would simply break my arms. The wind was knocked out of me, and I could have very well broken a rib, but my arms were still functioning. The river was wide. There were few rocks between this one and either shore. I had no options left. I pressed my head against the rock, trying to catch my breath. At least the water was washing the blood away. I wondered about taking my chances with the sea. I wondered about trying to reach the shore. It was a horrible joke the Slasher had played on me. Put me into a position where I had to accept it, or die. And then, after I defeated it, tempt me with the possibility of escape, only to dash it at every turn.

— Ghost: The Call —

Day 7: 1:40 am

“Muh?” I blurted out as I twisted around senselessly. “Lytha?” I said, just as senselessly.

The three pagans stopped, and turned to look at me. “What?” said the only human of the three.

“Uh, uh, nothing,” I said, feeling a cold sweat come over me. “Just I, thought I heard someone...calling my name.”

“We be followed?” he asked, coming to where I stood and looking behind me.

“Uh!” I blurted, spinning around and hoping to hell that Sheam and the Bloods were better sneaks than all that. The corridor was empty; not that it was very well lit. “No, not as I can tell—been checking back every minute or two, too.”

He turned back to me, getting up into my face so I could smell his nose-breath. “Who is Lytha? Have I heard this name before?”

"Just a...uhm, lizard."

It didn't look like I was going to have to answer yet, because a fourth pagan just joined us, emerging from a side corridor we had almost reached. He wasn't as big as the big one, or tall as the tall one, or human as the human one, but he looked meaner than all three. "Whaaaaat?" he bellowed.

"Gatekeepuh," the human one said, turning for me in a flash. "This one brought Ranson, just like The Lady said!"

"Ran-son," it bellowed, sort of like a big man-shaped bellows might sound. "Giiiiive."

The body was tossed to it, like maybe a sack of flour, and the gatekeepuh caught him with one big, scaly, clawed hand. He snorted and peered close. It looked like I was in the clear—my friend had probably forgotten all about Lytha by now.

But I hadn't, that was for sure. I knew I heard her voice, clear as anything, and worse, she sounded like she was terrified. It wasn't a, hey old buddy Ghost, I see you there, sort of calling out, it was a—"I am yelling your name with my last breath!"—kind of calling out.

"Not!" the gatekeeper belched, and threw the body down. "Not Ran-son! Faaaaaake!"

"Whoa, hang on a second!" I shouted, but they seemed to take his word over mine. The human guy was behind me, the tall one to the left, the gatekeepuh behind, and the big guy to the right, which meant I was completely surrounded, if four people could completely surround me. They were doing a *good job*.

"Whatchoo mean it's a fake, Gallup? How you know?" Even though he was questioning his buddy, he had still drawn his knife, which looked like it had gone to knife school at the beheader's academy for hurting-a-lot-before-they're-dead. The tall one had a long sword with a crazy hook at one end, which I did not want to have an introduction to, and the big one probably was already armed, with his arms.

"I seeeen him, this naaaaaht him." He then pounded the ground three times and shook his fist at me. "You not foooooool me!"

To be honest, as bad as this seemed, I was still very preoccupied with Lytha's scream for help that made my blood turn to ice, except where it was boiling. "Look, fellahs," I said, holding my arms up. "The face is all messed up. How can you be sure it's not him?"

"How can you be? Maybe you're not tryin' to fool us; maybe you're just a fool!"

I wasn't going to try to sort this out. I also wasn't going to wait for Els and the boys to decide I needed my skin saved. This Gallup guy was the gatekeeper, or rather the gatekeepuh, so they were as close as they needed to be to getting where they wanted to go. "Okay, listen up, Gallup, shortie, tallie, uh, big-ee, I don't think we've been properly introduced. My name is Ghost, and wherever I go, crazy, taffed up shit happens. Welcome to my world." And at that, I pulled the crystal from its string around my neck, and threw it to the floor.

They all looked down at it, and then back up to me. I cracked a little grin, and looked down at it myself. It hadn't broken. "Taffin' Del-taffin'-feen-bitch-ay and her taffin' unbreakable shit," I muttered before I cracked the heel of my boot into it, shattering it.

"What's that, poison gas or sum'in?" The human one said. The big guy started to sniff the air. Then the body that wasn't Ranson's jumped up and bit him in the neck.

"Boo! Ghost strikes again!" I shouted as I made a mad dash for it. Even though she was a bitch and her stupid crystal didn't break as easily as she told me it would, she was still right on the money about the zombies already being ready to go, but just being 'held' temporarily. Even with a mutilated face, that corpse still had teeth!

Then I was tackled by a guy in a long coat, my head went bump on the wall, and I said, "Shit!"

I heard the twang of bow strings, the whistle of arrows in flight, and then the bang, bang, bang, kaboom of arrows that were not necessarily equipped with fire crystals, but most likely were. I tried to get back up, but my tackler, probably Common Soore, had other plans. "Just where do you think you're going, burrick-ass?"

"Away from the zombie, crayman-dick."

He had to let me up though, because the fire-arrows only slowed the pagans down. The tall one, no longer cloaked, seemed to almost be made out of wood or something, because he was on fire, the normal arrows were just sticking into him, and Els was now having to hack at him like a woodcutter going at a tree to make the bastard go down. Thankfully it seemed he had done this before, and that hooked sword never caught him.

But then the big guy, also uncloaked, though the lack of cloak only revealed more hair and more muscle, charged us, with the zombie amazingly still attached to his neck. Els dodged out of the way, but after Memnon tossed a glass ball filled with green liquid at him, he stopped right in his tracks and fell to the ground, like his muscles were just balloons and someone was popping them. It seemed to be affecting the zombie too, which was shriveling up just like he was. That was some nasty stuff.

The little guy was swinging his long, crazy dagger this way and that, trying to hit Rembrandt, probably thinking that just because the guy had his arm in a sling, he was helpless. But with every stroke it just brought him one moment closer to the split second where Rembrandt buried his short, rather sane dagger right into the guy's forehead, going into his skull like it was just a melon rind. It was nice to finally get a demonstration of what he liked to do with the knife he had so effectively intimidated me with during the interrogation the other day; nice that it was being demonstrated on someone *else*.

Soore ran up to Gallup, who was cowering on the ground with very bad burns from the fire-arrows and probably didn't enjoy the sight of the muscle-man being turned into pudding. With a kick to disarm him, another to push him to his back, and then a long, pointy sword as his throat, Gallup was

anxious and willing to be as amicable as possible.

"Well gang, looks like my job here is done!" I shouted, and then got ready to make a dash for it. They couldn't stop me now, I had a head start.

But someone else could. As soon as I twisted around to go into a sprint, I had to slow the hell back down to keep from hitting the man who had appeared out of nowhere; running at me full charge. He had a much harder time stopping, falling backwards and skidding across the floor several feet until he was before me. "Hi," I just said, and then Els and Memnon overtook me and surrounded the guy.

"Not an ambush," Els quickly said, holding the tip of his sword to the guy's throat. He was a tiny, misshapen little figure, but no more strange looking than the others had been. "Just at the wrong place at the wrong time!" he growled.

"A messenger, I'd guess," Memnon said, looking him over like he was some kind of animal. The guy was acting like an animal too, cowering and slobbering, making all sorts of gibbering noises.

But the party wasn't over yet, because running up from behind him was a very tired and very out of breath Sheam. "Hi Sheam!" I called out, beaming.

"Got you!" she screamed at the little runt. "Can't...get away...that easy!"

"You were supposed to be staying behind!" Els shouted back at Sheam.

"And you're supposed to be following the pagans, not killing them!" she shouted back.

"Ghost blew it! They figured out it was a trick!" he said when it was his turn.

"My friends, perhaps..." Memnon began, but was then cut off by Els, who maybe wanted to do what Memnon was going to suggest before it could be suggested. He began shouting at the pagan, demanding to know what he was doing. The bastard just cowered some more.

I just wanted everyone to stop yelling and let me get out of here. They wouldn't believe me if I told them, but Lytha needed my help. I didn't know how or why, but I knew I had heard her call my name, and I wasn't about to let all my work saving her go to waste.

"I'd just like to say," Rembrandt piped in, and then cleared his throat to make sure everyone heard him interrupt. "Just like to say that while you kids were yelling, my good friend Soore here managed to convince my good friend Gallup here to show us the rest of the way, provided that we give him an honorable death when we don't need him anymore. I think it sounds like a good deal."

It sounded like a good plan, and all the more reason why they wouldn't need me around. "Hey Remmy," I shouted to my former interrogator. "I owe you a drink."

He bit his thumb at me. That guy was a class act, all around.

"Yes, good," Els said, and then glanced to Sheam, and then back to the squirming pile of rags. "Alright, one more time, what's your business here!" he shouted.

— Sheam: The New Plan, Same as the Old Plan —

Day 7: 1:50 am

“He slipped past me once, but I didn’t let him get away after that.” I offered, seeing that Els was going to get nowhere with this guy, who possibly couldn’t even talk.

Without as much as a ‘thank you’ or a ‘good job’ Els hounded the creature some more. “Are you a messenger? What news do you bring Delphine? Come on, out with it before I gut you!”

“Please no! Please no! Please no!” it stammered. “Have to tell! Have to tell! Have to tell! The Lady must know! Must know! *Mechanist!*” It then clasped both hands over its mouth.

“What the bloody does *Mechanist* mean?” Els muttered, looking up at the others.

“Maybe he said *Machinist?*” Rembrandt offered. “That’s the official title of the workers who put together the heavy machinery for the Hammerites.”

“Maybe,” Els whispered, and then shouted, “What about it? What do you have to tell her?”

“Said too much, said too much!” the creature bawled, and then began to cough and choke. It doubled over onto its hands and knees, with one hand claspng his throat. Horrible retching noises followed, accompanied by what sounded like cracking bone. Its jaw opened unnaturally, and then several heavy red masses dropped from its mouth. I had to look away in revulsion; it had begun to vomit its own organs. I could hear the others remark quietly in disgust as silence took the group. The messenger was completely still; dead.

“Whatever this news of *Mechanist* was, it was more important that we not know than she know,” the studious looking gentleman observed.

I couldn’t say or do anything. I just covered my face to shield my eyes and nose from the smell. Both accounts failed; I couldn’t un-see what I had seen, and the grotesque odor was impossible to escape from.

“Turkey’s flown the coop,” Rembrandt said, suddenly far too close to me for comfort. I still had to look at what he was pointing at, or rather, what he wasn’t pointing at; the empty hallway where we had come from.

“Where the devil has Ghost gone?” Els said, dropping his sword and punching the stone wall.

“Uh, one guess. That way,” Rembrandt said jokingly, still pointing at where Ghost wasn’t.

“We have to go after him,” the studious man said, looking frantically around, maybe wondering why no one had taken off in pursuit yet.

“No, Memnon,” Els said. “Let him go. We don’t need him anymore. The Ranson guise is done for, and we have a new guide. Besides, I can’t have a maniac like that on the team. He’d get us all killed.”

I wanted to agree with him that Ghost was a lost cause, but all I could do was think about getting away from the inside-out body. “Alright, I am going. Good luck, Els. Try not to get yourself killed.”

Els picked up his sword and was cleaning it off. “We need to move before these bodies animate. I don’t know the range of Ghost’s curse, or how long it

takes, but I don't want to find out."

I walked away, for the second time tonight. I felt like it took forever to get back to the streets. There was one last thing I needed to do tonight, and I wasn't looking forward to it. For that reason, I knew I couldn't put it off until tomorrow. I needed to debrief Othello. At any moment I expected to run into Ghost, who maybe had a change of heart and decided not to abandon, again, everything we had been working for. I was alone in the streets, thinking about two idiot men, both of whom had made a sport of finding new and exciting ways to depress the hell out of me.

— Ghost: The Call is Answered —

Day 7: 3:00 am

The faster I ran, the surer I was that Lytha had called out for me, and that if I didn't get to her in time, she would be dead. Getting back onto the streets was no problem. Knowing where to go next was the hard part. But when I got there, I found I didn't even need to think about it. My body picked a direction for me, and then I ran full tilt to the southwest coast of The City, where the mountains met the shore. I knew that Lytha had some mental thing going on, so I wasn't going to question any of my instincts. If she had called out to me over all the distance, then this was the real deal.

I had never gotten across The City that fast before. Wherever I found a closed gate, I found a way around. Whenever I found an open one, I rushed past the guards so fast they didn't even have the chance to say, 'Who goes there?' Night watchmen expected shady suspects, not cross-country sprinters. By the time I got to Shoalsgate I still had two districts to go, but I had to stop and pant and wheeze and steady myself to keep from throwing up. I was used to running for my life, so it was really no big deal. Running to save someone's life was the new part. When I looked up, I saw an apothecary. "Huh," I uttered. The next thing I knew, the shop had a new brick in the window, and I had pockets filled with every thin red vial I could find. I just hope that this guy wasn't a quack and put something *else* in the red ones.

I took one down at once, and got a burst of energy like someone had loaded me into a catapult and sent me flying. I didn't take the next one right away, but instead waited until the effects had completely worn off; meaning I was panting and wheezing again.

I made it to the edge of The City. I could see the mountains on one side, and the sea on the other, and right in front of me was where I wanted to go. As I tumbled down from the wall and quaffed another red potion, I remembered something about a big deal Hammerite base in this direction. "Oh, Shit Lytha," I muttered. "Not this again. When I find you, I'm going to have to beat some sense into you."

Soon enough the castle was in sight. Without thinking though, I was off the road and heading down to the coast. "At least she's not up there," I muttered between breaths.

I got to a winding road that would take me down to some cliff ridges

before the drop into the sea, and as I turned a bend and came to face to face with the river, I spotted her immediately. I didn't know how I could see her from so far away, but it was definitely her clinging to life just a few hundred feet from the waterfall that spilled out into the ocean. I kept running. It was so strange, knowing where to go, but not knowing. It was like she was drawing me to her like, just like a...something or another. Just like a bad analogy. I didn't know. It wasn't like anything I ever knew about!

I had to pace myself to keep from jumping right off cliffs and breaking my legs. She had held on this long, she could hold on for—but what if she couldn't? What if this literally was the last second she could hold on? I jumped.

My ankles weren't broken, but my knees sure hurt. I got back up, and made a mad dash for the river bank. Then I had to slow down to keep myself from falling in.

I couldn't tell if she could see me or not. She could have been in that river for hours, or maybe just minutes. It didn't matter. I looked frantically for something to help me do this, but there was nothing; a few small shrubs, some rocks, nothing. Then I saw some dead vines that were just piled into a heap a few dozen feet up stream. "How courtliest!" I said, though I wasn't sure if I used that word right. I found a long sturdy length, tied one end around my waist, and tied the other end to the heartiest shrubbery I could find. Then I dove in, quite a bit upstream from where she was.

The current very nearly was the end of me, but I was in a fighting mood! All I had to do was let go of my rock, and I would be taken right to her. I let go. I was taken for a wild three second ride before crashing into the same rock she clung too. Startled, she opened her eyes and started at me, like she couldn't believe it.

"Hi Lytha!" I shouted, so she could hear me over the roar of the river. "Hold on tight," I then said, as I coaxed her off clinging to the rock and into clinging to me. "Now, don't let go. I'm going to get you out of this. But to do it...I am going to do something crazy." At least, I thought it was a little crazy. It made sense in a weird 'how things ought to happen' sort of way but I had never tried it with a raging river!

She didn't answer. Good; I didn't want her to. I looked up the river at where the vine was still tied to that shrubbery. I tested the tie around my waist. "Count to three," I said to her. She clung even tighter. "One...two..."

It was just like swinging from a rope, only sideways, instead of up and down. I let go. Just like I thought it would, rather than being carried down the river, the vine stretched out only so far, and before I knew it, we were swinging towards the bank as the river pulled us along. We were going so fast, we nearly were pushed right up onto the shore. We weren't quite, so I still had to hoist her up to the dry rocks, and then pull myself the rest of the way out. Then I lay on my back, panting.

"What a ride!" I said as soon as I caught my breath enough to talk.

"How did you...how did..." she panted?

"I heard you calling. I came."

"Good man," she said between breaths, and then, "That's the *fourth* time you've saved me."

"Fourth? Uh, I only counted two... oh right, the jacknalls, but that's still just three times!" I said, laughing a little and turning my head to look at her.

"I can't count," she said with more of a laugh.

"Well," I said, losing my freshly caught breath to laughs that just wouldn't go away. "You can always...count on me!"

She seemed to choke on her fit of laughter, arching up her back and going into a fit of coughs, but then she started laughing again. I grinned, seeing her real face back and realizing the choker was gone, and the metal splint too. I didn't really care where the choker was right now; I was just glad to see her real face again and what's more, to see such relief in her eyes. She seemed completely changed. She seemed like she had been in the woods, totally collected, like I expected *the* Lytha to be. But more than that, she seemed happy; actually *happy*, like a huge weight had been lifted from her. "That was weird," I finally found myself saying.

"What was," she said, her laughter dying down and turning her head to look at me."

"The way I was drawn to you; I just knew you were out here and needed help."

"I think you're in my head," she whispered. "But in there, you're twenty feet tall and..."

She didn't finish her sentence, though her smile grew wider and a mischievous look came into her eyes. She took a deep breath, looked away from me, and up to the stars, with that smile still on her lips. "My clothes are soaked. I can't stand it. Help me get these off, would you?"

"Uh, sure," I said. She must have been pretty worn out. "How long were you hanging on out there, anyway?" I asked as I reached for the bottom edge of her tunic. She sat up a little and turned her back to me.

"I don't know: ten minutes? All night? It's all a bit of a blur."

"Must have been longer than ten minutes. I was running for two hours at least to get here." She helped me get her tunic off over her head, leaving just a thin strap across her back. Then she started to undo her belt.

"I was in a lot more trouble than just the river. The river was actually the least of it. Get my leg, would you?"

I took her cuff and pulled on the fabric to help her get the trousers off. They really didn't want to cooperate though. She was right about being soaked; these trousers must have had a couple of gallons of water in them at least. They weighed a ton.

"Ah, so I guess I missed all the really bad stuff."

"No, you didn't at all," she said, kicking them off with one last thrust, now wearing just a narrow garment around her hips. But before I knew it, she had pushed me down, and put her face right in mine. For a second she didn't say or do anything, just stare into my wide-opened eyes. "Your clothes are soaked too," she said.

"Oh," was all I could reply, and it finally sunk into my thick, fat skull. Then

it was really all I could say, because she had grabbed me by the back of the neck, and pulled me into a kiss. She pushed closer, sliding one of her leg over me, and bringing her hands to whatever fastening on my armor she could find.

"But," I said, just as she parted from the kiss. "It's still night. What if zombies find us? . . ."

"Don't worry, Ghost," she said with another small kiss. "I'm a hell of a lot more dangerous than zombies."

— Sheam: Open Wounds —

Day 7: 3:00 am

A guard let me in, and closed the door behind me. I was in the sitting room of an apartment, a wide space with a low ceiling, wood-lined walls and carpet under my feet. I could see him at the other side of the room, lying on a cushioned bench set into the wall before a large window. The faint light from the street-lamps outside pouring through the foggy glass barely illuminated his profile. Still, I knew that he was turned so that most of the injuries to his face were turned away.

I quietly walked around some chairs and a sofa, until I was several feet from him. That's where I remained. I wasn't sure if he was awake; he was lying perfectly still, with both hands folded over his chest, one leg up on the bench, and the other bent at the knee with his foot on the floor. I nervously held before me the object which had caused me to visit The Circle before coming here. "I brought you your metal mask," I finally said.

Othello jerked a little, just slightly, and then with a smooth motion spun to sit up, with his head slightly turned to keep it in profile to me. With the darkness of the chamber I wouldn't have been able to see anything; he was a silhouette against the faint electric green of the windows. After a moment he stood, giving a quick bow before saying, "Thank you."

I took a few steps forward, holding it out to him, with my eyes fixed on the mask rather than him. He took it gently, after a second's pause. I took the same number of steps backwards to where I had been standing. By the time I looked back up at him I saw that he had put it on, much to my relief.

"I wanted to apologize for my unforgivable conduct," he finally said, slightly louder than he had been speaking.

"Why apologize if you see it as unforgivable?" I replied, rather than simply accepting it.

He didn't answer at once. "I simply wish to express that I understand if you cannot forgive me."

I nodded slightly, and found myself folding my hands in front of me. He still held his head turned, even though he now wore the mask, even though it was still too dark to see anything but his mussed hair. "Can you forgive Ghost?" I asked, though I felt like a hypocrite for it. What Ghost had done to me was nothing in comparison.

"It was wrong of me to take out my bottled anger on Ghost. He has done

nothing for me to forgive. In fact, I need to apologize to him.”

“But you’re still angry,” I said, quickly. “And attacking Ghost did nothing to sooth that anger. In fact, maybe it only made it worse, because you realize now that he isn’t the one you’re actually angry at. All he did was, uncork the bottle—allowed you to let the anger out.”

“Yes,” he replied quietly.

“Who are you angry with?” I asked, trying to soften my voice. I was here to talk with him, not judge him. When no reply came, I ventured, “Are you angry with Rembrandt, for only getting a broken arm?”—Nothing—“With Somno and his men, for failing to keep the zombies at bay when they came?”

“No,” he replied even more quietly.

After hesitation, I asked, “With Daelus for putting you in that place to begin with?”

His head lowered, but did not speak.

“With James for assigning you to work with Daelus to begin with?”

“I have only myself to be angry with. I could have kept my wits about me when the undead came, and through acting sensibly, remained uninjured. However, I panicked.”

“You don’t seem the type to ever panic,” I replied.

“That may be how I seem.”

“You also don’t seem to be the type to fly into a rage without thought for the safety of anyone around you.”

“Why?” he said, with sudden volume. “Because I’m always so quiet? Because I always hide away how I am feeling? Am I just a machine, like one of the Hammerite’s machines, designed to work and do my job, in spite of everything that happens, in spite of...” he stopped, as his voice grew in volume and started to shake.

“I see,” I said quietly. “You’re angry with James for putting you back to work so quickly after this happened...for...making your condition useful.”

He didn’t reply, but he didn’t need to. He would have rejected that theory if it wasn’t true.

“I am not here to judge your fitness for duty and pass sentence, Othello. I am here because you asked me here, and because I wanted to bring you your mask.”

“I know. I am sorry for growing angry again. I know now that I am unfit for work. James gave me the option before, to stay off duty. I felt like it was wrong for me to simply sit and sulk, feeling sorry for myself. The surgeon and apothecary did everything they could, for speed. If I had requested that they slow down their procedure, the scarring would have been much less severe. No, I am the one who urged them to repair me as quickly as possible, so I could resume duty. I am the one who urged James to put me back on duty. Now, with this mask, I look much more like the machine I always acted like. I am angry only with myself.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I could understand his need to get back to work, to not dwell on self pity, but to do so at such great personal cost was unthinkable. “I should get going,” was all I could think to say.

"Thank you for your visit," he said, but remained motionless.

I turned to go, and began walking around furniture to the exit. One thought made me stop, and turn back to him. "I accept your apology."

"Thank you," he said from across the room.

"There is something better than a mask which may be able to help you, but it's been lost. I hope it will be found again, soon. It's a magical device that can alter the way a person looks. It could possibly make you appear whole again, as long as you wore it. It...Well...if I can get my hands back on it, I'd like to give it to you."

"Please let me know," he said quietly.

I didn't want to mention it, but I had something nagging at me which wouldn't go away. His talk of being a machine only reminded me of it. "I am sorry to bring it up," I began, "but do you have any idea what *Mechanist* is?"

"No, I don't think so," he replied, actually sounding like his old self.

"A pagan messenger said it right before taking his own life. It's been suggested to have something to do with the Hammerites."

"Try asking Andrew. The guard outside can show you where he lives. It's the same building."

"Thank you,"

This time I actually did leave, being let out by the guard after knocking. "Can you tell me where Andrew lives, so I can visit him in the morning?"

"Do no good to visit him in the morning," the guard said knowingly. "He's even more of a night-owl than Othello. If he's not still awake, I'm a roast chicken."

I was guided up four flights of stairs, to an apartment door not unlike Othello's. I knocked twice, and then waited. The guard (not actually a guardsman, but a lower agent tasked with keeping watch over Othello in case he wanted to break his house arrest) had already left to go back to his watch, though I was sure it was unneeded.

I heard footsteps approaching the door, and then a pause, followed by the thud of a deadbolt. The door opened a crack, with the bearded face of a young man looking out of it. "Hello?" he asked carefully.

"Andrew? Agent Othello said that I should come and talk with you. My name is Sheam, and..."

"Sheam?" he said with surprise, "by the Builder, Sheam, in the flesh, after all this time! Come in, come in!"

I think I actually blushed at the excitement in his voice, and the attractiveness of the face. He opened the door quickly and urged that I come in, which I did. He was younger than Daelus, but still older than me, with a full black beard and long straight black hair that came down past his shoulders. He was dressed rather simply, in taste that matched James's own moderation of anything either too black or too colorful. Something about the way he moved, though, seemed off to me, like he was not in full control over his body. "Come, have a seat," he said, pulling one out for me at a small table. The apartment was messy and cluttered, but only half as much as James's would be. It was similar to Othello's in design, but where his was filled with

fine furniture and delicate wood inlays, Andrew's was mostly simple carpentry and ugly, blocky pieces. I noticed similar windows, but Andrew had them completely covered by heavy drapes, and several tables laid out before them, completely covered with small bottles and flasks.

"I must ask that we be quiet, however, as the little one has finally gotten back to sleep; more nightmares. If you will excuse me for a moment," he said before going over to the table with all the bottles. He moved quickly in spite of the way his legs seemed to not obey him half the time. I watched quietly as he began to mix several different fluids into a glass, and drink it down quickly with a shaking hand. He took a long breath, and then slowly, very slowly, came back to the table to sit with me. Other than the way he moved, I couldn't tell what was wrong with him. "I am sorry for that," he said. "I need some extra medicine when I get too excited."

"I am sorry for exciting you," I said quietly.

"No, no, it's quite alright. James had just told me so much about you. I'm afraid I never dreamt in a million years that you would knock on my door some day."

I smiled just slightly. "I had a question, and someone told me I should ask you. Do you know what the word *Mechanist* means?"

His smile quickly faded, followed by silence. He looked like he was about to speak, but then just let his mouth hung open with a far-away look on it. An instant later he snapped back. "I used to be a Hammerite, you see," he just said, and then paused, waiting for my reaction.

I gave him none, because I wasn't sure how to react. He could have said 'I used to be a baker,' for all I cared, but clearly this was a fact he was self conscious over.

He resumed. "As a scribe, sometimes I would hear things. The *Mechanist Project* is something that died and has been resurrected several times. I do not know much about it, only that some strong voices within The Order feel as if it is venturing too far from The Builder's wishes for his people."

"I see," I replied. "Does it have anything to do with their machinist labs?"

"The fact that they put their machinist labs and factories into full production led me to believe that the factions within The Order were leaning back towards a direction which would make another resurfacing of The Mechanist Project possible, but the two are not directly connected, no. The only similarities are the tools and materials; complex machinery, all metal. However I believe The Mechanist Project deals with designs several orders of magnitude more complex than the machinist works. I am afraid that's all I know. It is an extremely guarded secret, kept away from prying eyes with the utmost jealousy. Please excuse me."

Without any other warning he got back up, and was again at his table mixing something. I waited quietly until he sat back down, with a long sigh. "Are you alright?" I ventured.

"Oh," he smiled, "Yes, fine—just dying."

I had no idea if he was joking or not, but something told me he was making light about something serious. "I'm sorry," I nearly whispered.

"Something's wrong, up here," he said, pointing to the side of his head. "It's common, actually, many people get it, just usually much, much older. The physicians don't really understand it, but the alchemist and apothecaries can fight the symptoms. It just delays the inevitable. I wasn't expected to last this long. I think having the child around has given me a will to keep going."

"I'm sorry," I said again, though much more quietly. I found I didn't want to look at him anymore, either. He was too young, too healthy looking, to be dying, and yet the way that he moved told me that there was definitely something very real wrong with him.

"I am afraid I can't tell you any more about that," he said. "The network has often looked into it over the years, but Hammerites are considerably more disciplined about secrets than most people, so all we know is that it exists."

"Okay," I said, and then stood up. "I am sorry to bother you."

"No bother at all," he said, standing up as well. "Will you be leaving so soon?"

"Yes," I said, glancing at the door. "It's late, and..."

"Say no more," he replied, opening the door for me. "Just, please visit again some time. James speaks *very* highly of you."

I was blushing again, but I didn't know if I was flattered or being made uneasy. I felt like a cruel trick had been played on me, that life had offered me the acquaintance of someone interesting, but promised that I would be hurt badly if I dared to actually care. "I will, and thank you," I just said, stepping through the door.