

To face a change in plans...

My blood went cold with the sound of her scream; a bellow of rage. I turned the corridor slowly, suddenly trembling with a cold sweat as she continued to growl, sob, and let out long calls of anger. "Mistress," I said as I came before her, crumpled to the floor.

"How can this be," she hissed at me, nearly choking on her words. "Thalia is dead. The *Queen of Fangs* is dead," and then added, "How could this be?" at the top of her lungs, so I could feel her breath as a great wind.

I still trembled at her fury, but knew that the news I brought was of equal importance to the disaster she already faced. "One of the fae whom you sent to the underworld has returned." I slid to the side so that her winged subject, a small, young specimen, might deliver the report personally. The creature prostrated itself before her, fanning its wings out in a beautiful display as the light hit the translucent membrane, revealing its hidden colors.

"Arise and speak," The Lady uttered in the fae's own tongue.

"Queen," it clicked and chirped, *"We did as you asked. We waited for the one of two signs: for the hammer-fools to either flee the underworld in terror, or for a day to pass, bringing certainty of their consumption by our estranged cousins below. We went into the underworld, sparing the miserable lives of those who escaped, but as we came upon the realm of the spiders, we found not what we expected. Queen, the progeny of the Spider Queen wails in a chorus of sorrow not unlike the bellows of pain we now express at the loss of the Queen of Fangs!"*

She looked at me with shaking, burning eyes, red with blood, trembling with anguish, and said nothing for a time. When she did finally reply, her voice had regained the majesty I commonly expected from it, though she continued to speak in the language of her subject. *"Impossible...The Spider Queen lived, persisting after all this time, only to perish at the hands of the Hammerites? And I allowed this to happen?"* As each word passed through her lips the majesty coalesced into ire, until she thundered with wrath.

"Nay, Queen, we do not know the reason for their sorrow, for their tongue is foreign to us. My nest-mates begged I return to you to deliver this news at once, and to promise that they shall not return until they have convened with the Spider Queen herself, or have proof of her death."

"Very well," she replied quietly. *"Please, leave me."*

"Yes, Queen." At that, the fae lifted into the air, and flew off.

"Krel'joss," The Lady said to me, eyes hard with fury. "Round up the jacknalls and deliver to them an order. Follow my sister's scent. Track her to her place of death, and then bring great *fury* upon those responsible."

"I will mistress, but,"

"But *what?*" she responded icily.

"As you know the jacknall think not of vengeance or feel hatred for crimes against them. They will not understand this order."

"I don't care. I know of vengeance and hatred for crimes against *me*. My sister has been *slain*, as a result of *my* beckoning. I *will not* allow this to go

unanswered! If the jacknalls do not wish to do this, find a pack that *will*. Now, leave me. I must be alone with my thoughts. So much has changed now."

"But Mistress, I beg you, there is one more thing, and then you shall not see my face unless you request it."

"Speak," she said, ever so softly.

"One of the old gates in the deepest reaches of this realm, where none have set foot for ages, has been used. Our far-seer has felt the disturbance its use has caused. This gate is *ancient*, and long forgotten. We do not even know where it leads...though some say it belonged to the time when Scina would demand tribute from the spiders."

She frowned, her eyes growing distant for an instant before snapping back to me. "Send a party to investigate."

"Yes, Mistress," I said with a sharp bow, and then left her.

To go our own way...

The most gracious nurses did take mine brother Tillus from us, and lay him in a bed for his care. Other nurses did attend him, and though his wounds grievous, I felt that he shalt yet live. Mine Brothers Thurm and Sarievo were now in the next room discussing, as I prayed at the bed of Tillus, though they thought that I could not hear.

"Brother Thurm, I am sorry, but I cannot go back with you and Brother Porter to Soulforge."

"But Brother Sarievo, you simply must! I cannot face the council alone, not after what hadst happened...I need thee to add thy story to mine own, so that we canst stir them to action! Daelus, Ivan, Chispin, and our other brothers, they canst not have died in vain!"

"Thurm...you know I am not a Hammerite, nor have I ever been. I was working for the aid and protection of Daelus. If I go with you to Soulforge now, it would be bad for you, and death for me. Keep this secret, please—Tillus needs the medicine of your church hospital. But when he is well you must also help him escape."

"Yes, yes, I do understand...this is a grave day for me, my friend, and I simply fear losing thee as I have lost so many today. I...wish I did not have to go face my superiors. That I could spend the entire week lost in grief..."

"That won't do either. Pull yourself together. Our part in this is done."

"What shalt I tell Brother Porter? He doth think highly of thee, and thy fellows. Just now he prays for Brother Tillus."

"Tell him I was recalled back to my duties, no more. It is not a lie. I will go to a friend now, the man who charged me with looking after Daelus. I must tell him what has happened, and have already delayed far too long. I think we shall meet again someday, Brother Thurm. Be well."

"And you too, Brother Sarievo, The Builder's greatest blessings upon thee, my friend."

To the builder I didst pray for Brother Sarievo, and all mine brothers that did fall today. I prayed for Brother Tillus, and his swift recovery. Of their conversation, I heard nothing. In fact, I did not even know that they had spoken.

To breathe once again...

We dropped Ranson's body onto the operating table. "He ain't gone stiff yet," I said as sweat fell off my forehead into my eyes like they had been splashed there by buckets. "That's a good sign, right?"

"Get his shirt open," The doctor said, holding both of his hands up in the air like he was afraid to touch anything. He wore big black gloves on his hands, all stained and caked with layers of old blood.

One of the others ripped open Ranson's shirt, to show the bloody mess underneath. My underarms were soaked, and so was my tunic down to the waste, but I still tried to wipe them off like usual. I couldn't do much else but watch. The doctor looked at some charts that he had rolled out over the table, body diagrams, showing what was under a guy's skin and inside his ribs. He looked it over, pointing at it here and there without touching it, and then glancing back at the boss's body with all of the blood all over his chest. "It seems I will have to..."

The boss suddenly arched his back from the table and took a loud, raspy breath, like the first time air'd been in his mouth for a year. It gave the lot of us a painful fright, and I think I even screamed.

"Tie him down!" the doctor yelled, and some of the others did, taking off their belts and giving Ranson a good tie.

"Thought he was dead!" I yelled.

"Why and *hell* would you bring me a *dead man*?" The doctor shouted back, and then yelled for a knife.

"How's a knife gonna help him? He'd already been stabbed! You gonna stab him twice and make it better?" I yelled even louder.

"I need to sew up his insides, which means I need to cut away more of the outsides! As for it working, that's between me and *the reaper*, now get over here and do as I tell you, or get the *hell out*!"

To meet an untimely end...

"So's this where the boss said we should go?" I said, looking around at the other Bloods and then looking at the way The City had gone all creepy and overgrown. I hadn't seen a place like this before, not in my part of town. I was told by Mister Suf it was a place that the pagans owned, that regular folk didn't come here, saying it were haunted, but that was rot—just filthy pagans stinking it up with their moss and crap.

"Yeah," says another guy, "sure gives me the shakes though."

"Hey, what's that?"

The lot of us that had been marchin' for the past few hours to go and kill us some pagans, like the boss said we would, all now had to stop and see what the heck was going on at the front, where the boys in charge were fiddling around with stuff we weren't supposed to know about. "Just kill 'em when you see 'em," I was told, and was glad for it too. They didn't tell me no different at my regular job, and that's the way I liked it. I was planning to get some souvenirs for the kids at home too, maybe if the pagans had a little runt I could slave it in and give us some help with the chores.

I had to stop thinkin' though, because suddenly at least five guys up in front jumped up off the ground, except it was really high and going backwards, and some big arm came pushing them up, like. Then the next thing I saw was spears, a lot of them. I was trying to move, but I was now pinned together with four other blokes who were all trying to get away from something, only there was nowhere to go, because each wanted to run from a different direction. I saw some more spears, and then the guy next to me let me push past him all of a sudden, though he was screaming like he had been hit. Then I felt a stab in my shoulder, and then another in my neck. I didn't see what hit me. All I knew was that...

To see the plan through...

"Empty, just as promised," I said, observing the surroundings with far more curiosity than I probably should have let show, considering my company. I didn't want the others to know how fascinated I was with all of this. Still, Els had befriended that medicine man, so I thought I was safe.

"Yes," he said, though didn't seem any less cautious. "Though I still see two guards over there," he pointed while keeping his arm from extending, "and I know there's two over there, because that's how I would assign them."

I was so thankful none of the group Els had picked had any zeal, because such a situation before us would likely drive any hotheaded man to undue bravery. The quiet one, Common Soore, leaned over to me and said, "Memnon, are portals like the one we passed through common?"

"It is hard to really say for sure," I told him after adjusting my glasses. "From what I have read, the components, usually called reagents, used to construct one are fairly easy to come by; but the craft to assemble them into a working portal and even the knowledge of rites and rituals needed to connect one opening to the other is a very difficult art. However for all I know, it is one of the simplest of their spells, and even an adept could make one."

He just nodded. Rembrandt looked restless, which I found mind chilling, because I had not once seen him look anything other than simply bored the entire time I had known him. He came up behind Els, who was still observing the stationed guards, and whispered, "So you're sure that this is actually the main avenue, and it's empty because they're all off fighting Ranson's army on a fool's errand?"

"That was the plan," he said, looking over his shoulder at the gangly silhouette.

"Wouldn't be too sure; I don't think these people are as foolish as all that. They may know it was a fake, met it with a minimum of force to curtail it, and positioned another force to ambush whoever the decoy army was veiling."

"Yes, but we're not Ranson's actual attack force. We came in through Ghost's entrance, which was meant to lead him right back to Delphine with her prize."

"Just keep an open mind," he said.

"Don't worry, I am. I appreciate your caution, but I know these people. I am on the same page as you."

"H'sh!" came from Common Soore. Overhead, a remarkable and horrible sight came into view. At least a dozen flying creatures, some tall and narrow, fae I was certain, and some ape-like with tails, mongbats of course, descended, but that wasn't the shocking thing. They were being followed by an even larger group; an army of the flying creatures all tasked with carrying an enormous object. The shape was unclear at first in the dim glow in the underground setting, but I soon identified it as an enormous *spider*. "What the shit is this?" Soore said in the lowest of breaths.

"I have no, no, no idea," Els said, just as quietly, now nearly flat against the wall in the crevice that hid us.

"Something no one could have foreseen," I tepidly observed.

"There's always a lot more going on than just, quote unquote, the plan," Rembrandt said with a snort, "Doesn't mean we should change ours."

"They're going...down that way," Els said, observing the flying party vanishing through a large tunnel that was darker than most of the others. "Maybe it leads to Delphine?"

"Or to the kitchen," came Soore.

"Whatever you plan, Captain Els," I said, "Please do not suggest we split up."

"Wasn't going to...Come on; we're following."

Chapter 17

Locks without Keys

— Nightfall: A Flicker of Consciousness —

Day 7: 11:00 am

My eyes stung, dry, with twitching frayed nerves. I couldn't see anything; just darkness, just a blur.

I found where my arms were only through the aching in my bones. I tried to push myself up, but my muscles began to tremble, and then shake, and finally gave way. My legs were no better. I was one piece, but useless for it. I had only the strength to realize that I was alive, and none to preserve that fact.

Time went by, minutes, hours. I tried again. My muscles tensed and contracted, forcing their will on my bones, and I moved. My palms were against stone, pushing. I lifted myself up. My senses were still just a blur in the darkness. Slowly, I lowered myself back down. If I wasted all my strength in getting up now, I would only fall back down again.

I rested. I let my limbs tell me what they needed from me. I breathed. More time went by, minutes, hours. I tried again. I could feel my head going upright. My hands left the stone, letting my full weight go on my knees. I was off the ground partially, steady enough. I waited; content to stay like this as long as I needed to.

I looked. There was only darkness all around me. In the distance, in several places, I could see glows of different colors, but none of it made sense to my mind. I looked, focusing, letting my mind clear, not forcing it, and allowing it to come on its own accord. I began to understand shapes, hollows, features of the environment around me in the dim light. But it was only shapes and features. I still didn't understand where I was. Slowly, I lowered myself back down. My legs were not ready yet. They had made that clear.

I listened. There was a vibration to the stone. Somewhere far below, the earth was unsettled. The floor resonated with this distant tremble. There was no other sound. I pushed myself up for the fourth time. As before, I was able to lift myself to my knees. This time, I shifted my weight to one knee, and then lifted the other leg to put my foot flat on the ground. I pushed up.

I was standing. I looked around. The shapes were gaining meaning. The voids were corridors and alcoves. The shapes were columns and protrusions. I could not see where the light was coming from, but it was not sunlight, or firelight, or from any fungus or molten rock.

I breathed. The air had a slight scent of sulfur; if there was any other, this smell masked it. My wits were returning. I realized my sword, casting rod, and hat were on the floor beside me. The circlet was still on my head, and the bag of ash on my belt. I was not only intact, but complete.

Wherever I was, I knew it was a *place*. The gate was meant to go somewhere, and the somewhere I was had a purpose. This is where people came to go through the gate into where I had been. It only followed that there must be a way *to here*, and that there was a way *back*.

But I was not ready. Again I lowered myself, but this time to sit on the edge of a small rise in the stonework. I breathed. I inspected myself for injuries, and found plenty, but none serious.

I was completely alone. No one knew where I was, and possibly no one knew if where this place that I was, even was. If any of my companions made it out alive, surely they would inform everyone that I was dead. They were justifiable in doing so, as there was still no indication that I would ever make it back to The City alive. What mad forces drove me to this place? Where would they drive me next?

My legs told me that they were ready, and they did not disappoint me. With only the impossibly dim light as my guide, I stepped away from where the portal had been, and found that there was only one corridor before me. Still uncertain, but physically able, I walked.

— Jyre: Dawn in the Wilderness —

Day 7: 5:00 am

“Jyre, wake up.”

That was the only reason I knew I had been even asleep. I didn't think I was going to be able to, after the nightmare, but the gentle push at my shoulder and the voice of James in my ear told me otherwise. What surprised me the most was that it was still dark. Then I remembered that the plan was to get up around 5, and I wanted to pout just for the sake of it. I sat up begrudgingly and found that the others were already eating, picking bits of meat off of a creature set above the campfire. Heppet gave me a few cuts of the dark meat, and told me that it was a rabbit he had caught overnight. I wanted to feel bad for the rabbit, but my stomach told me otherwise.

I was even offered some of the brown, fowl smelling liquid that the three of them all seemed to savor. James insisted with a far too cheerful grin that it would help me wake up, but I insisted that I was awake and wasn't going to get any more awake. Thankfully they hadn't wasted all of the water Heppet had found to make it, so I did get something to drink, even if it was just a sip. I wasn't thirsty enough to dare the coffee; I'd sooner drink mud.

The daylight was creeping up on us, soon reducing the glow of the campfire to just a few pale flickers. Everything was loaded up into packs which were carried by Heppet and Petra, who ended our time here by kicking some dirt into the dying fire. We began to walk, straight into the woods, with no path to guide us.

The underbrush was thin, so it was mostly pretty easy to walk through. I wasn't paying much attention to anything other than where my feet were hitting the ground, making sure to not step on puffer bulbs, trip on roots, or run into anything alive. When I did look up, I saw that the sun's rays were now cutting sideways across the woods, thin streams of misty light sliding between tree trunks wherever a gap could be found to the eastern horizon. That's when I caught Heppet smiling at me.

“What?” I said, after he didn't pretend to not be noticed.

“Just the look on your face; you look at peace here.”

“Hmm,” I said, and shrugged. I reminded myself that if I stepped on a puffer bulb, I'd never get the orange crap off my legs.

The walking seemed to go on forever, and I didn't even know where we were going. I wasn't sure if any of them did, really, but every now and again James would check some round device he kept in his pocket, which I assumed was a compass.

"Why does he keep doing that?" I quietly asked Heppet. "The sun is out. I know which way north is."

"Ask him," Heppet said with a smile.

"No, I would look stupid."

"Why would asking him make you look stupid, but not asking me?"

I just shrugged and dug around at the sides of my trousers, looking for pockets to shove my hands into.

"James," Heppet said without warning. "I was just wondering why you were using a compass, when the sun shows that north is that way."

James looked over his shoulder, and grinned. "A very good question: to illustrate, allow me to paint an analogy. Think of a game where you must hit a small ball with a stick across a field, into a hole barely bigger than the ball. It does not help to know that the hole is *that way*. You will strike the ball all morning and never get close to the hole. You must know exactly where it is, and so a flag is put into it. The compass is the flag, only our hole is not a field away, but many miles. It is also the most imprecise tool we will be using to find our way. The second most imprecise will be employed in just a moment...another mile or two should do it."

Heppet looked down at me with a smile, and said, "See? Asking doesn't hurt."

"He knew it was me asking, not you," I just said.

"What difference does it make?"

I didn't know. I knew it made a big difference, but I didn't want to tell him.

We kept walking. The ground was getting steeper and steeper now, always uphill. I wondered what it would feel like for someone who had never left The City to be out here, moving away from it step by step, not knowing what was in store for them. I imagined it would be exciting. That wasn't what excited me though; it was the smell of the air. It was the lightness I felt. It was the quiet; the blow of the wind through the trees.

The next time James stopped, he pulled some new objects from the pack at his hip; a small, smooth stone, and an odd metal piece that looked like a fork with two points, only they had square ends. I did not know if my ears were playing tricks on me, but as he held the stone I felt as if the air had changed, somehow. He struck the fork on a nearby tree, and then waited, watching both it and the stone. I gave out a little sigh and sat down on a big root, wondering how long this would take.

"Yes, we are quiet close enough," James said suddenly, looking up at the three of us. "These stones are sensitive to breaches in the fabric of nature. Whenever something else is disturbing it, and by something else I mean something far beyond normal human intervention, it resonates with the ripples in the fabric. I know the range is twelve miles, and we should at least

be thirteen miles from The City by now, so it wouldn't be interfering with the readings. Our objective is about eight miles away now. I can tell because the frequency of the vibrations can be measured with the tuning fork. Now, we know the distance, but still not the precise direction. The compass tells me which way is exactly north, but the direction of Tempia and Phaeros's retreat is unknown. However, if this second stone and tuning fork is taken approximately four to five miles northwest of here, and a reading is taken, and it is compared to a measurement taken the same distance from here to the northeast, I can use mathematics to triangulate the approximate position of our destination, using the two known distances. Once that is done, and we are then within four or so miles of the retreat, we must do this again, and form an even more precise guess of the location. With any luck, we should be there before three."

The whole thing just sort of washed over me, but I understood the part about us splitting up. I wondered how that would be done, really only wishing that he wouldn't pair me up with Petra.

"I'll take Jyre and head northwest, if you'd like," Heppet said. I held my breath that James wouldn't say no.

Instead he grinned, and handed Heppet another stone and a tuning fork, as well as a bundle of parchment and a stubby writing stick. He talked with him for several minutes using terms I barely understood, and maybe Heppet too, since he never seemed to run out of questions. As far as I could tell they were talking about how to use the fork-thing to measure the vibrations of the stone, and how to write it down. I guess it wouldn't do us any good if we went where we were supposed to and didn't know how to use the tools. It seemed a strange way to do things. When I wanted to find a place, I just followed my gut and went, and if I found it, good, but if I didn't, *oh well*.

"Let's go, Jyre," Heppet said, putting everything James gave him into his pack. Petra hadn't said a single word all day, and it didn't look like she was going to. She was just standing next to James, sometimes staring off into the distance, waiting for him to get his things back together and head off.

"Good luck, Jyre, Heppet," James said, waving, and grinning like he always did. "I'll see you in a few hours."

We changed direction. Now it was Heppet's turn to check the compass every few minutes. After I was satisfied that James couldn't hear us—actually more than, since he had been out of earshot for at least the past hundred steps—I said, "I don't know what we're supposed to be doing."

"Don't worry, I didn't really get it either, but James managed to explain it to me. You see, if he goes that way, and measures how far it is to the retreat, and we go this way, and measure, then we know how far we both are from it, and how far we are from each other. Three distances make a triangle. If you know the lengths of the three side of the triangle and where two of the points are, you can always find the third. Or, at least James can, with his math. I wouldn't trust myself to figure it out!"

"Like, if I am sneaking around a building, and I know it's a triangle...and I have seen one side, and I know what the other two sides are like, I can sort of

guess what's going on in the parts I haven't seen yet?"

"Yes, sort of like that."

"But I don't need math to do that..."

"Because you can see the triangle; it's made of bricks and is right in front of you. For us it's imaginary. It just exists on paper. That and it's many miles wide."

I trusted that James knew what he was doing, it was just so different than how I was used to doing it. I felt sure that if I went out here alone to find the retreat, and I had a feeling I knew where it was, I could find it. I wasn't going to argue though.

After we had walked for a while, Heppet spoke again. "Personally I just love a good adventure, and working for James always provides those. Petra is James's student, so her tagging along is no surprise. Is that it for you too? I got the idea there was a lot more."

Something about the way he asked made me want to answer. Maybe it was the detachment, or maybe it was because it seemed like he wanted to put us on equal grounds. He knew why he was here, and wanted to know why I was. Maybe it was because I liked the idea that, for once, I actually did have a reason to be, and wasn't just taking up space. I thought for a while, trying to figure out what I was going to say. "I knew The Lady, sort of personally. Well, not like that, just that I used to live in her house and knew what she was like."

"You lived in her house?" Heppet had drawn a long knife now and was using it to cut at some plants in front of us that were a little too thick to just push though. I wondered why he didn't simply go around.

"I worked for her guard. Even did patrol myself sometimes. So, I didn't really know her, but I know about her. More than any of you do." I felt a little pang of pride as I told him that, though I also hoped he wouldn't find me snotty.

"Ah, so you're our insider. How did James manage, to wrangle you up?"

I stopped, not liking the sound of that word. He got a few steps in front of me, holding away a branch as he went, before he realized I had stopped. "Do *what* to me?" I asked, slightly abashed.

"How did James find you and convince you to help us?"

"Is *that* what that word means?"

"Sure it does!"

I wasn't so sure, but I wasn't going to be a pest about it. "I guess I kind of got dumped on him."

"Okay, so I am going to need to play dentist, am I?"

"What's that?" I asked, stopping again just in time to actually avoid stepping on one of the puffers I had been dreading all morning.

"What do I mean by that, or what's a dentist?"

"All of it."

He leapt down off of a big log and nearly vanished. I climbed up over it, and found him on the other side offering me a hand to get down. I just started at his hand, wondering if he was going to answer.

"A dentist is someone you go to when you have a toothache, and he pulls

the tooth out for you. But sometimes you don't know which tooth is actually hurting, because the ache can go through your whole head, so he has to just guess. He could pull out half of your jaw before he finds the right one. Of course then, you're in so much pain from the pulling, it doesn't matter!"

I frowned deeply and felt myself grow slightly pale at the thought of it. "You made that up," was all I could say.

"Are you going to let me help you get down off of that log or not?"

I let him, taking hold of his hand and sliding down. It was a good thing too, because if he hadn't been steadying me I would have stumbled and fallen onto my face, right into a huge patch of the puffers. Then, feeling clever, I decided to correct him. "When you get a toothache, you go see the doctor, and he gives you some plants to chew and it makes it better."

"You're not thinking like a city-head. There are no plants to chew. If you have a problem, destroy it!"

"Why are we talking about this?"

He laughed, checked his compass again, and resumed walking. I had to scamper to catch up. "Right, what I meant was, sometimes you talk with someone, and you're curious about them. So you ask them questions. But sometimes the answers they give aren't very helpful. So you have to ask another, and another, and have no idea what the right questions are to ask in order to find out anything. I call that *pulling teeth*. You just keep trying until you get the right one, but by then there's so much of a mess you aren't better off anyway."

I didn't get it. "Are you telling me I did something wrong?"

"Yes! I've made it pretty clear what I am curious about, but you're telling me as little as you can get away with while still answering my question. So I need to ask more and more questions, and your answers will get littler and littler!"

"Sorry," I squeaked, "I'm just not very good at talking about myself."

"Well here's a good time to practice. How did you wind up working for James on this case?"

I was tempted to just give him another short answer, but I found that I was at a loss for what to say. I thought about what happened with Daelus, where I had nearly killed him, but instead of killing me or locking me up they pressed me into service. I didn't want to tell him that story. I thought of a worthy substitute, and before I knew what I was saying, one of the ugliest names I knew had escaped from my mouth. "I guess it all started when I met Ranson. He was the one that got me into The Lady's Company in the first place." I had started, and now I had to go on. I didn't want to make Heppet pull my teeth. "He was...a little older than you, I think." I wasn't sure what else I could say that didn't involve me thinking about things I didn't want to think about, but it was too late—they were already on my mind. "How...how old are you, anyway?"

He was cutting through a large row of bushes when I asked, and I almost hoped he hadn't heard me. "Nineteen, I think, at least, counting winters I am. What about you?"

I felt myself blushing, but I wasn't sure why. "Well, the last birthday I had was, when I was nine...and that was...five years ago, I think?"

"You could have just said you're fifteen," he said with a grin as he whipped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. The path was now clear, and we squeezed through. He took my hand again, even though he didn't need to, to pull me through. I didn't object.

No, that wasn't right, but I decided to keep that to myself. "So you *can* do math!" I said triumphantly as he got me to the other side.

"What? No, that's just adding! That's not math!"

"Old man in my village said counting was math. Adding is just counting in groups!"

"Shut up!" he said, pushing a branch so that it would hit me in the face. It wasn't nearly close enough, and I just laughed.

"Shouldn't we be moving a little faster?" I asked.

"I think we're okay. So you were telling me about how this Ranson guy got you a job with The Lady?"

"Right, yeah. He got me a job there...set me to work."

He stopped all of a sudden and turned around to face me, with a sneaky look on his face. "I'm gonna get those teeth," he said with a wink.

"Cut it out!" I just said, backing away a little, though I also couldn't help but laugh.

He slowly turned back around, never lifting that sneaky look, and resumed walking. He was quiet now, and continued to be quiet for several minutes. Not liking it, I decided to just speak up. "You know, I really hate being told what to do."

"It's called being fifteen, Jyre. You get over it in another four years or so."

That was twice he had gotten my age wrong, but I didn't want to tell him that. It felt mean to point out his adding mistake, and I felt better about him thinking I was older, even if it was just a little. "No, I know, I mean, I really hate it! But the stupidest thing was that I got a job doing that!"

"Name me one job where you don't have to be told what to do?"

I ignored that question and just kept going. "But worse than that, most of the things they got me doing were stupid! I mean, what's the better thing to do; spend ten minutes polishing dumb buttons or spending an extra ten changing out the old candles? Does a thief really care how shiny the guard's buttons are? I don't think I ever noticed when I was running from them!" I kicked a small stone. It bounced across the moist ground and hit a tree.

He just laughed at me. "I'll be sure to let James know never to ask you to polish buttons!"

"Are you going to listen or make fun of me?" I snapped.

"Both! But keep talking, or your teeth are mine!" he cackled. Apparently my snap was harmless to him.

"I didn't even know what my job even was, so I couldn't just do it every day, I had to wait to be told what to do. If I ever did what I thought was expected, I just got yelled at and told to do something else!"

"Sound like the way every snotty taff-headed noble does to their staff."

"Yeah, but this wasn't from The Lady, this was from Ranson!"

"But he got it from someone else, and took it out on you."

"I guess so. But, I mean, I don't think that my job actually really existed at all. I thought I was supposed to be a sort of maid for Ranson, but he had me sometimes fill in for him doing his patrols, even wearing the guard uniform as I did it. It didn't fit me, and all the other guards laughed, but if I didn't do it, Ranson would act really strange. He always acted strange when I told him no. Not scary, at first, just weird, but later on...very scary. He told me it would be worse for me if I didn't do what he said, and that what the other guards did to taff with me was nothing compared to what he would do. So I did it. If he wanted me to patrol for him, I did. If he wanted me to shine his shoes and buttons and cufflinks, I did. If he wanted me to bathe him, comb his hair, shave him or trim his nails, I did. But it didn't last very long, thankfully."

"How long?" Heppet's whole mood had changed when he said this. Clearly something I had said upset him.

"A few months I guess."

"That seems like a long time to be some prick's little bitch."

What he said repulsed me instantly, but a second later I found myself laughing, because I couldn't think of a better way to describe it.

He stopped walking. "Sorry," maybe not thinking it was funny even though I was laughing. "I didn't mean you are one of those, I mean that's how he was treating you."

"He was." I wasn't laughing anymore. I really didn't think it was funny either. I just didn't know what else to do.

"So what else did he have you polish?" He asked, resuming walking.

"Uh..."

"Well from what you described, if he had you doing anything he wanted, then from time to time he probably wanted more than just chores and grooming."

I had already decided not to get into that, but somehow he was going right to it..."Yeah," was all I said.

"You know, that doesn't sound so different from what I went through, with my city-head girl-friend. I was a toy to her...put on display, used however she wanted. I thought that the sex was my reward, but in the end it was just more of the same. It wasn't a reward at all...because all she wanted was to fulfill herself; all I wanted was her. Am I wrong that you and I are alike in that?"

"You're not wrong," I said, almost a squeak. "No, that sounds about right. Only...I never felt it was a reward. Just another thing I had to do. For me it was the times when he would sit me by the fire, tell me stories, tell me I was beautiful, and that he needed me. The—uhm—what he always did after that was like me paying him for the time he spent talking to me."

"That's sort of twisted," he just said with a sigh. "But yes, I get what you're saying. I remember times like that with her too, only she would be asking me to tell her stories about the pagans. She would always giggle. I thought it was because she was happy at first, but then I realized she was

laughing at us. Us quaint little savages...so amusing; we..."

"Twisted; I hadn't thought about that word. I think what you just said is that too; like, what I do with a rag to get all the water out." I wanted to keep talking with him, but I didn't want to talk about this anymore. I wanted to get my mind as far away from Ranson's bed as possible.

"You said it didn't last long. What changed? What happened then?"

"The Lady came."

"And that did...what, exactly?"

"Well, like I said, my job wasn't actually a real job at all. She did away with it. Guards are not to have personal servants. But she didn't fire me, either. She put me under the charge of the captain of the whole guards for the whole house."

"Okay..."

We came to a narrow gap in the ground, which was too wide to jump across and too deep to just go down into. A few feet away were some roots spanning the gap, and to my surprise Heppet just walked along across them to the other side like it was nothing. "Showoff," I said.

He looked back at me. "You think that was showing off?"

I walked across it, just as easily as he had. "I guess not," I replied smugly.

"I could walk across that, drunk, blindfolded, and with a weasel tied to my foot."

I laughed, nearly falling into the gap in the process, "A weasel!"

"Come on, we're falling behind," he said, and then hurried along. "But don't stop. Keep talking."

"Well, it gets really complicated from there." It wasn't really, I just couldn't bring myself to say Els's name out loud. Everything that had happened still stung so much; was still bleeding. For now, he had to remain The Captain, because otherwise I'd fall to the ground in tears.

Without warning, Heppet was suddenly in front of me, hands going for my face, shouting, "I'm gonna get those teeth!" with a wild grin.

"Stop!" I yelled. I tried to squirm away, but he had my face in his hands and was trying to pull my mouth open, laughing all the way. I gave him a good, solid kick.

"Oh taff!" he yelped and let go of me, dropping to the ground, though he was still laughing.

"Just be glad it was only your shin!" I yelled, and then found myself laughing along with him.

"Ah taff-it, taff-it, that still hurts," he said, rolling over, clutching his leg. "You're a damn good kicker!"

Then I felt bad, and went to him. "I guess I didn't need to kick you that hard...are you okay?" I said as I crouched down.

The next thing I knew, he was on top of me, but only like how a boy might wrestle another boy. "I'll get those teeth yet!" he said, in a fit of giggles.

"I'll bite your finger off!" I yelled back, trying to kick and knee him, but found him ready this time. But soon it had all come back to me—this wasn't the first time I had been in a play-suffle. Even though he was two feet taller

than me, I soon had the tables turned, and was now wrestling him to his back.

He stopped fighting me. "Now who's showing off?" he said, blowing a bit of his hair out of his face.

"You think that was showing off?" I said with a wink.

"Never met a girl who could wrestle like that," he said.

"I never wrestled with the other girls, just the boys. Half of them thought I was one of them, even many of the grown ups."

"Well, I would never mistake you for a boy."

I gave him another kick in the leg for good measure, and let him go.

"Come on. James is going to be really mad at us if we don't get this done."

He groaned as I helped him up. "Yeah, yeah, otherwise, he'll never let us go off on our own again."

"Oh, like he'd be able to stop us?"

— James: Divided for Mutual Benefit —

Day 7: 8:00 am

We had arrived at the very spot I needed, at least according to my calculations, as I had never been here before. Thus, the measurements were soon to be in hand. I had a limited number of tuning forks, each able to create a tone which, compared to the stone, represented three mile increments. The tone created by the vibrations of the stone would either match, be slightly higher, or slightly lower than the one producible by the fork. If it did not match, I would then try the next fork up or down; and if it still did not match, I would know that the value was somewhere between the two. Give that the increments were three miles, if the tone was much higher than the one produced by the second fork, *A*-note, which it was, but slightly lower than the third, *G*-note, which it also was, it meant that the value had to be approximately seven.

Therefore the cottage could be at any point approximately seven miles from my location, which proved my initial guess close, but a little too on the near side. While it was amusing to image an infinite number of cottages all exactly that distance from this location, it was not helpful. I would still need the other measurement, and that meant it was time to continue walking. Of course even with the second measurement there persisted the distinct possibility that the cottage could be in two locations, which is why we would conduct this exercise twice. It would do no good to assume that the cottage was seven miles away from The City, when in fact it was seven miles closer to it!

"Was it terribly wise, to allow the children to go off on their own?"

Petra rarely spoke, so I didn't take her words to be idle chatter. "Those two children have the combined life-experiences of several grown adults. I believe they shall do fine."

"I already know how to use the stones and the tuner. Why didn't you just send me with Jyre or Heppet and you take the other?"

"For the sake of your sanity!" I said with a grin while putting my

instruments and recordings safely away.

"Is it really that easy to ruffle my feathers? I always thought of myself as fairly imperturbable."

"Oh, you are my friend, you are. Do not worry about that. However, for the task ahead we need Jyre's senses and wits to be sharp, and she is currently haunted by a cloud of despair. Nothing dulls the wits like despair. Young Heppet is quite popular with the young ladies, and seems to have hit it off with her. I suspect in no time he will have that cloud of despair packing for the countryside!"

"I suppose by 'young' you actually mean 'teenaged' or else I will have to beg to differ about the way he has with women."

"You are hardly a typical example of your sex, Petra. I don't think you should be allowed to speak for it!"

"Heh..."

I was about to get a move on when something off-white on the ground struck my vision. I moved off to one side, and inspected my discovery. "Oh dear," I said, with it now in hand.

"Animal remains?" Petra asked, getting close enough to see what I held, but no nearer.

"Yes, and death through violence; judging from the erratic tooth marks, I would venture a guess that this beast was still alive and fighting while it was being eaten. Also, judging from the size of the tooth marks in comparison to the size of the bone, I would say that the attacker was an eighth the size of the prey, which indicates either a hunting pack, or an extremely aggressive smaller beast. Additionally, there seems to be no other bones present. I am no expert on animal anatomy, but I believe this is the remains of some type of deer. And these tooth marks...ah; here is one that I could possibly identify."

"Some type of wild cat?"

"No, the spacing and angle is all wrong for that. A feline's upper canines tend to be more perpendicular to the jaw, whereas these are at an angle widening outwards, resembling a simian. There is only one type of simian native to this area. These are the tooth marks of a mongbat. Notice the arc of the incisors, and the distance between them and the canines. Now we can only hope that Heppet keeps an eye to the canopy."

"This may be a silly thought, but I always imagined mongbats were simply large bats that had a passing resemblance to primates."

I grinned up at Petra. "I did not know you had a passing interest in zoology."

She shrugged, though knowing her; this was no indication that she did not mirror my enthusiasm. "I just like for strange things to make sense."

"And this is why I appreciate your company! To be honest, there is very little zoological about mongbats, I am afraid. On principal, mammals have four limbs, and both primates and *chiroptera* are included in that. This is why bats have wings but no arms. Since mongbats possess a total of six limbs (two arms, two legs, two wings) they clearly fall outside the natural order of things. They are a created species, being not only able to possess said six

limbs, but do so with the same dexterity as any with only four. It is not merely an anatomical issue, but a neurological one. The mammalian brain itself is only designed to coordinate four limbs after all, so what might the brain of a mongbat resemble? So: this is actually a topic better suited for sorcery, or specifically, transmogrification."

"It's a shame," she said as she inspected the quality of her bowstring, "that you no longer hold seminar. I miss those days sometimes."

"As do I, but we cannot forget the conflicts of interest. I am in a business now where much must be concealed, and I cannot reconcile that with a position which is fundamentally about disambiguation!"

"Most would. You just have a hard time being dishonest and honest at the same time," she said with a slight hint of a smile.

"Nonsense," I replied with a grin. "However, we must be getting on our way, before our traveling companions grow weary of awaiting us!"

— Sheam: A Study on Chaos —

Day 7: 8:00 am

"Dear, you must be exhausted. Why don't you get some sleep? Like you said yourself, there's nothing you can do anymore."

"Won't be able to," I muttered to Corinne as I shuffled around in my chair. "Brain's still spinning in circles." We had been talking for hours. Well, I had been talking to her, anyway, rambling on and on about what had happened yesterday, and how I had done my best, but still felt like in the end I hadn't accomplished anything. She listened of course, and very plainly informed me that my mission had been a success, and that there really wasn't any more I could have hoped for. Since I already knew all of that, hearing her say it didn't really help, but did serve to get me to snap out of my bad mood a little.

"Here, let me get you something to drink. Trust me, it will knock you right out."

"Okay," I replied meekly. She was already awake when I got here. She claimed that she always got up early, but I suspected that she may have been unable to sleep due to James being out in the field. I wasn't sure how normal it was for her to have to worry about him. I didn't think I'd ever be able to get used to it.

She came back quickly with a small clay jug, and poured a light green liquid into my cup. It was room temperature, and smelled like some kind of tea. I took a sip. I felt like I was in a grassy field with warm sunlight on my face, the smell of wildflowers carried by a gentle breeze. I let out a long sigh, and slid back farther in the chair. "Hope he's alright," I whispered.

She smiled warmly and closed several books which had been spread over the table, placing each one in a neat stack, with the largest at the bottom, all the way up to the smallest at the top. I enjoyed the sight of it, because it's exactly how I would have done it. "So, do I," she said, almost as softly.

"Why do we have to sit here while they go out and make us worry about them?" I said not so softly.

"Sheam, last night, had you a man of your own, *he* would have been the one at home sitting wondering if you were alright."

I scrunched my nose at this. "Every man I knew managed to turn up last night; all but the one I actually *wanted* to see."

She laughed softly, even though she knew I wasn't trying to be funny. "And last night I was here with my books, doing exactly what I needed to do, and doing it pretty well too."

"It's horrible; I spend so much time with the books and I never have time to read any of them."

"You did get them all out of the rain though, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said with a long sigh. "What will you do now?"

"Continue my research. I do not know how helpful it will be, but I am examining the numerology associated with the states of existence of the pagan deities."

I squeezed my forehead between my hands. "I am not sure I would have gotten that even if I was wide awake."

She un-stacked the books and laid them out before her in a row, again from smallest to largest, with the top edges all lined up evenly. "First of all, numerology deals with the significance of numbers in any spiritual, magical, or otherwise metaphysical context. In the case of my study, those numbers are specifically a quantity; how many deities there are, and how many are in which form. It may sound simple, but this heavy tome is really just a frustratingly simplified overview by biased observers," she said, laying her hand on one of the books.

"Well, what did you find out?" I took another sip of the liquid. Sadly, the first sensation quickly faded with every sip afterwards. I wondered if I tried some tomorrow if it would be back.

"That numerology is nearly meaningless when applied to the pagan beliefs."

"That...sounds like a frustrating conclusion to come to."

I heard the whistle of a kettle. Corinne got up and fixed herself some tea. I looked at the titles of the books. The one she had pointed out was called A Study of Numerical Significance in Eight Tribes. Another one was Conflicting Belief Systems—How Two Cults Waged War Over the Size of a Spoon.

"The size of a spoon?" I asked as Corinne sat back down with her steaming mug.

She smiled. "A catchy title that reports less than one percent of what the book is actually about. It was supposed to be a detailed compare and contrast between two warring woodland tribes, but instead it turned out to be a shining example of how an obtuse buffoon can completely taff up fieldwork. Even the insignificant case named in the title was presented wrong. The two tribes merely used different sized ladles during a cleansing ritual that was otherwise identical. It had nothing to do with the war—Sensationalist garbage."

"It really bothers me to think that a book like this, like any of these, could be full of nonsense. I admit I am using to thinking of them as being one of the

few things I can actually trust. But now..."

"I am sorry. Don't let me make a cynic out of you. I've just been reading these things for far too long. After a while it becomes easier to just critique the author than it does to get anything useful out of it."

"I guess so. But I was wondering why you said that the numerology of pagan deities is meaningless." I was curling up into a little ball in my chair now. I wasn't sure if the drink had done anything, but I did feel more relaxed.

"What everyone failed to consider when they approached the problem was that sometimes a measuring standard in a given context holds no true meaning. For instance; how would you measure the amount of time it takes for you to drink a cup of coffee with a ruler?"

"Stick the ruler in the cup!" I said with a chuckle, "and then count to five!"

"And you'll be none the wiser for all of your counting," she replied with a laugh of her own!

"Yes, I see what you mean. I would need an hourglass...or some clockwork..."

"And even the hourglass and the clockworks need to be measured against something. But we're digressing. What I mean is; you cannot use something like numerology, a concept as firmly rooted in Order as anything could be, to learn anything about pagans and their beliefs. Chaos rejects numerology on principal alone."

"I see..."

"Consider this. No one knows how many pagan deities there are, because no one knows what one *is*. We do not know what one is because every one of them is so unlike the others that the very title of "pagan deity" becomes a convention of the language alone, without meaning or context. We all know of the great horned and hooved Trickster God. We know he exists, or has existed, and have seen his works. But what of the Farlong Clan of the northwest woods; they worship a river god whom they claim purifies their water that flows upstream out of a marshland? Putrid, toxic water from rotting plant matter and deadly insect larvae, and yet when the stream passes by their village, flowing upstream, as if that wasn't enough of a miracle, the water is completely pure and healthy to drink."

"Well, The Trickster is a God, but he is also flesh and blood. Their God isn't. So..." I then stopped, not sure where I was even going with that statement.

"As you seem to have realized, that thinking leads nowhere. Which is higher? Which is lower? How to you call them both the same type of thing when there is nothing to relate them to one another?"

"Well, they're both supernatural."

"So is a zombie. But will we call a zombie a deity?"

"But a zombie has no will or mind or control over..."

"Do we know the river god has any of these things?"

"Wait, how do you know that the whole story about the Farlong clan isn't made up? I mean...it makes no sense. Water doesn't flow upstream."

"Is that the more unbelievable of the two claims?"

"Well, no, but it seemed like a reasonable place to start. I understand gravity. I don't understand making water pure."

"Do you understand gravity?"

"Of course I do. Things fall to the ground."

"Yes, but why, and how?"

I wanted to say, because they always have, but I knew that was a nonsense answer. As soon as I truly considered it, I realized that I really didn't know why. I only knew that things always did.

"You have the look on your face of someone who has realized that she doesn't know something, and have grown wiser for it," she said with a smile.

"Must be the drink," I said with a snort, but a small smile crept over me in the end.

"To get right to the point of the matter, there are a potentially limitless number of pagan deities, and no two of them could be readily compared as being within the same framework of existence, let alone the same types of entities. And the poor hopeful fools who set out to write some type of *bestiary* of the whole lot are as baffled as those who set out to write a pantheon, as those who set out to write a philosophical treatise, as those who set out to conduct a scientific debunking of the whole thing. This book," she said pointing to one sitting alone on the shelf, "is a grand paperweight, should I choose to open the windows on a windy day. It is a fruitless attempt to dissect and quantify the relationship between the Trickster and the Dryad. They would have better luck catching snowflakes with red hot tongs!"

"You mean Constantine, and Viktoria?"

"Those were the names of their human Avatars, which they kept even after they ascended, but yes. Of course, the pagans would not use any of these names; to them they are the Woodsie Lord and the Woodsie Queen."

"They have so many different names for the same thing. The Hammerites aren't like that," I observed.

"Yes, precisely; compare all of this to the Hammerites. *One* Master Builder, *one* holy hammer; together they make *two*. The holy paths of priests and warriors are reflected in these two, but add to that the *three* vocations; forgers, architects, engineers. Together they make *five*. Six ranks within each of the three vocations and two holy paths. *Seven* deadly sins, *Eight* divine virtues, it goes on and on from there. That is numerology. That is order. It's systematic, symmetrical, categorical, and so forth."

"I suppose I always expected that the pagans were the same way, but I don't know why. I figured...there were a set number of gods, and each had a role, and maybe they had counterparts or opposites, and..." I trailed off, now wondering why I had ever even thought that way.

"You are ahead of most. Most believe that there is only The Trickster and he is The Builder's exact opposite and there is balance between them. Balance, perhaps. But you could bring in a scale, put a fish on one side, and a metal ball on the other, and see that they balance out. It does not mean that the fish is in any way a counterpart to the metal ball. But, consider the Dryad. Even if it were only those two, how can The Trickster be The Builder's

counterpart and balance the scales and figure in her as well? Are they both only half of what The Builder is, but together make up his opposite? Maybe he's the counterpart of the Builder and she's the hammer? But she is not The Trickster's tool."

"I only said that because someone was talking with me about this sort of thing just the other day." I remarked quietly, when I had decided she was finished.

"Oh? Who was it?"

I let out a long breath, "Someone who's dead now."

An awkward pause followed. I hadn't known Moody, so I really didn't want to say any more about it. Thankfully she did not press me, but instead took both of our empty cups to the sink and rinsed them out. She seemed to be away for a long time, and during that time, I couldn't concentrate anymore on anything that was around me. I didn't remember much about her coming back to the table, or her leading me to a side room and moving stacks of books off of the bed there. I especially didn't remember falling into that bed and passing out.

— **Lytha: Unfinished Business** —

Day 7: 9:00 am

The cool ocean air washed over me, lifting away the beads of sweat and cooling my skin. The breeze, the sandy soil beneath me, and the warmth and solidity of Ghost's body beside me were all I felt now. The pain was gone. My mind was calm, silent. Ghost's thoughts tickled mine gently, a simple tide of wants and satisfactions washing over me like the wind did. He was awake now too, and it was a good thing. The intensity of his dreams nearly rivaled the intensity of what came before. I was very pleasantly exhausted. Even though we both rested there awake, we remained silent, content with one another's presence, having no need for words.

It had all finally sunken in. It was over, and I was free. Thalia was finally at peace, and the creature that our parents had summoned into her as a child was finally returned to the abyss. Not destroyed—a being like It could never be truly destroyed as long as reality still existed—but unable to return to this world until some day, in the hopefully distant future, when someone was again fool enough to channel its essence into a suitable avatar. It would be difficult, of course, for human beings like Thalia and myself were very rare, almost unheard of, and anything less than that would make a very poor host for the entity.

I shocked myself. How did I know all of that? I knew none of that before. Of course, Thalia had. She understood it completely, and so now I did as well. This was the first time I had a quiet moment to contemplate, and realize, that I now had all of Thalia's memories. It was imperfect of course, as imperfect as my own memory, where often I needed some sight or smell to trigger a forgotten event to come to the front of my mind. Still, I knew immediately that there was a memory which she always held close to the surface: a

memory about me.

Ghost stirred, distracting me from the memory, locking his eyes onto mine and smiling blissfully.

"See," I said, looking deeply into his sleepy, happy eyes. "No zombies."

He leaned a little closer and kissed the side of my face. "Yeah, no zombies—guess the church up there keeps them away or something."

"That was part of the fun, wasn't it? *Doing* it right below one of their most holy places?" I said with laughter in my voice.

"Yeah it was. Or doing it when you know a zombie could butt-in at any moment!"

"It's a good thing too. I wanted you all to myself."

"Well, you've got me—all to yourself."

I felt that those words were not meant lightly. In fact, they may have been some of the most deeply meant things he had ever said to a woman. At least, that's how he felt at the moment. Ghost was easy to read, but he was also very temporal. I could never know if he would be the same tomorrow. I wasn't going to worry about it now, though. For all I knew, I wouldn't be the same tomorrow either. Right now, that didn't matter; just this.

"So, what were you doing that got you into the river anyway?"

I smiled, and kissed his questioning mouth. "Best not ask dangerous questions," I said between his lips.

"Mmmm," he replied, which was the only proper response.

It hadn't really been Ghost inside my mind that appeared to destroy *It*. I knew that it was just an image of him, manifested as something powerful and beyond *It's* control. He had been exactly what I needed to win. And yet, as we made love on the beach, I felt more and more of his mind slipping inside mine. It wasn't like it had been with Thalia, where a direct, raw connection between two telepaths allowed a complete transfer of one consciousness into another's subconscious. Still, it wasn't completely different. I was close to him, physically, emotionally, and mentally, so it felt very natural, very real and right, to slowly draw his mind into mine, letting him feel what I was feeling, letting him know what I wanted and giving him what he wanted. He had no idea what was happening of course. To him, it was merely the best sex of his life. He had no idea I was greedily claiming his mind, pulling everything that made him himself into me, and cherishing him there.

A thought then broke me from my delighted recollection of our intimacy. Not my own thought, but his. I parted from him slowly, and as much as I wanted to just let this moment stay simple, I couldn't ignore the growing concern in his mind. "There is just one last thing," I said.

"It would be nice if I could get rid of this curse," he said, maybe reading the fact that I had read his mind.

I nodded. "The curse would make knowing you difficult."

"Well, we can't go back to the witch in the woods. I pretty much completely failed to do what she asked me to do."

"No, no neither of us ever need to have any business with her ever again. It's funny...I should think I would want to kill her, but that part of me has died

away. I really don't care anymore." Again, Thalia's memory tugged at my mind, wanting to come to the surface, but I had to hush it. Now was not the time. I wanted to focus on Ghost.

"So what do we do; The Hammerites?"

"I may have ruined our chances of that, too."

"I could just...you know, try *not* killing people."

"We would have to find some place to live where no one died," I remarked, humorously musing about the impossible.

"We would have to find a place to live, eh?" he said, catching words from my mouth that I hadn't intended to say.

I knew I was blushing. "Well I don't plan on getting rid of you. You're *far* too handy."

"Good enough for me, but yeah, you're right. Even if I never harmed another fly, all it would take is a barroom brawl and someone getting a knife in their back, and we'd have zombies in the streets looking for us. No, this curse has to go for *everyone's* sake."

"I could try complete mind control..." I said; not sure if Ghost even realized what I was capable of.

"The what—now—how? Mind control?"

"I've only ever done it for very simple things; suggestions. Tell a guard's mind to do something, and maybe he will do it. Make a freshly killed body speak. But I've never tried to completely take someone over."

"Sounds a little scary, if you ask me."

"Oh, I don't know," I said, kissing the corner of his mouth. "I think it could be fun," I added with a wink.

"We can save that for after the curse is lifted," he replied, maybe getting my drift.

"The thing is...for the past week or so, I wasn't myself. I was three different people at once. But my powers were immensely magnified during it. I felt like I could do anything. Now that it's over, now that I am just me again, I am not sure if I will ever be as strong again as I was just a few hours ago."

"Won't know unless you try; what did you have in mind?"

I stopped and considered. I was through with revenge. I didn't care about the Hammerites or Delphine anymore. All that mattered to me now was helping Ghost. It was an incredibly liberating feeling, knowing that my future had no longer anything to do with what did or didn't happen to those I hated, but it would have everything to do with only those for whom I cared. "If I can take complete control over a strong priest," I began slowly, "I might be able to use his hammer magic to lift your curse."

He looked skeptical. "Or you could get us both killed."

"We could both die at any moment, Ghost. Better to die for something important."

"Yeah, that's what I keep telling myself. So...we're doing this?"

"Yes, I think we should."

"When, now?"

"No, not now," I told him as I kissed his neck, "soon."

— Jyre: A Minor Siege —

Day 7: 11:00 am

“Stop; don’t move. Everybody duck down very slowly.”

Heppet’s words made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end, but I didn’t dare disobey. I felt my shoulders tensing up as my knees bent, my neck craning to see what it was Heppet was staring down, above and to the left of us. I thought I saw *something* among the branches; an odd shape I couldn’t identify, and the sound of something heavy pushing its way through the greenery. I wanted to run and hide, or at least find cover, but he had told us not to move, and my legs were obeying him, not my own fear. Looking for possible reassurance, my eyes went to James, who was crouching down and holding a steady gaze at the thing Heppet had discovered. Only Petra seemed to ignore him, and what he had seen, as she slowly paced a distance away from us, her eyes scanning in the opposite direction in even glances. ‘He said don’t move!’ I wanted to scream at her, but kept my lips tightly shut.

Heppet himself moved in lightning quick scampers, crawling up a half toppled tree trunk like a squirrel, and then looking around just as erratically before returning his glare to the unknown creature in the trees. In a snap he lifted his bow and let an arrow fly. I didn’t even see him reach for the arrow, he was so fast. A few yards away the animal-like shape hit the forest floor with a thud and the sound of dry leaves being crushed.

I wanted to jump up and run to him, but before I knew it Petra was in front of me with her palm to my face, silently telling me to stay. I wanted to bite her hand off. “It’s okay,” Heppet called back to us. “There was just one of them. I had to be sure.”

I didn’t hesitate to ignore Petra’s command. I ran over and beat her to Heppet, who was retrieving his arrow from the kill. What I saw made me sick to my stomach. It was a small furry man; maybe no more than two and a half feet from head to toe, with a long furry tail and big leathery wings like a bat’s. Its mouth was hanging open, full of sharp teeth. Blood was flowing freely from the side of its neck, where Heppet’s arrow had impaled it. I didn’t say nor do anything more, I just stood a few feet away staring at it.

“Good shot,” James said, arriving only a second after Petra. “Just the one; are you certain?”

He nodded. “For now I am. Do you think The Lady sent it after us? Do you think we’re being stalked?”

“Unlikely. She would not waste resources on such a trivial contingent such as us, when she is facing war with The Bloods. Secondly, she has no reason to even know this contingent exists, or our objective. Finally, I believe the mongbats that attacked the Hammerite expedition were armed. Curved swords, correct?”

“Mongbat,” I said finally. “That’s what that is?”

“Yes Jyre,” James said “The body of a monkey and the wings of a bat; quite an aberration.”

“I can see that,” I snapped. I actually didn’t; I didn’t even know what a monkey was, though I knew bats well enough. When I couldn’t stand it

anymore, I set a piercing gaze upon Heppet. "Why did you have to kill it?"

I didn't even have to look; I knew Petra was rolling her eyes. The change in her stance gave her away. Heppet on the other hand seemed to take me seriously. "Even wild, they are dangerous creatures. And where there is one, there will be others. Even if it hadn't attacked us, it would have found its pack and brought them all in for a meal."

"You don't know that," I said with an ever growing scowl. "Maybe it was just going to leave us alone."

He didn't answer. Instead he just finished cleaning off his arrowhead, something I had never seen anyone do, and put it back in his quiver. James was looking around on the ground for something, probably ignoring the stupid kid and her stupid ideas. Then I made the mistake of looking at Petra.

"You know, Jyre. This one was just about the right size to carry you off." I wouldn't grant her the satisfaction of knowing how much she was making me angry, so I turned away from her sharply. But she continued in spite of it. "The bigger ones would have gone for Heppet—more meat on his bones—but a runt like this would pick out the smallest in the group. In fact, I think its jaws are only just big enough to get completely around your skull. You'd be amazed at how wide they can open their mouths."

Flushed with rage, I was tempted to stalk off then and there. For some reason, her words about Heppet made me more upset than any rude thing she could have said about me being carried off and eaten.

"Can it Petra," Heppet said. Thankfully, she did. Heppet sticking up for me did nothing to calm me down, but at least it stopped me from getting more upset.

James came up from behind me, put a hand gently on my shoulder and said, "Let's be on our way." To my own surprise, I didn't shrug or jerk away, but instead felt my anger just fizzle out. I sighed, letting my shoulders sink with defeat.

We resumed walking. I put myself on the far side of Heppet from Petra, though I didn't look at either of them. I did notice that James found what he was looking for; a big twig of wood, and was whittling away at it with his pocketknife. No doubt this was to distract him from our bickering.

The only sound now was the constant scratching of James working away at that bit of wood with his knife. The only time he stopped was to take out his compass, and then he'd either put it away or direct us "degrees" one way or another, but I wasn't sure what temperature had to do with it. Heppet and Petra seemed to know what he meant, so I just followed their lead, Heppet's lead anyway. Whenever I couldn't stand it anymore I looked over to where he was walking, always hoping to catch him looking over his shoulder at me, but never seeing it. I didn't dare glance over at Petra. I couldn't even occupy myself with avoiding the puffers now. I hadn't seen one in miles.

Without any warning, Heppet and Petra both had their bows out and were firing into the sky. All around me the forest erupted into a chorus of howling cries that made my blood run cold. Before I even understood what I was seeing, two dark furry shapes hit the ground, with big wings twisting

lifelessly as they went. I saw a third one plunging downwards, but this one swooped down just inches from Heppet as he ducked and rolled away. I couldn't look to see what happened next, because I got the sick sense that I needed to duck too, and fast.

I dropped, my cheek hitting the dirt, just as a shadow came over me and away after the narrow miss. It hit the ground a second later, with Petra staring, and an empty bow in her hands.

Even though I was trembling at near panic, I somehow remembered that I had a bow too. Gathering myself up, I rolled over onto my back and, without trying to stand, took both it and an arrow from their places. I quickly whispered the chant Tanya taught me, commanding the short bit of wood to grow into the bow. Flat on my back, I knocked the arrow on the string, pulled it back, just as another one of the mongbats dove at me. With the painful regret of having to kill these creatures still in my mind, I let the arrow fly straight into it. The body nearly landed on top of me as it careened out of control and crashed into the forest floor. I was trying to get another arrow from my back, but now I was shaking so badly all I could seem to go was grab grass and dead leaves. There was a blur of motion overhead, and I nearly choked on my tongue; an arrow plunged into another mongbat directly over me. I had to curl myself up into a ball to avoid it. When I came to my senses a second later, I looked over, and again I saw Petra, much closer this time, pulling another arrow from her quiver and letting it fly into the fourth mongbat that was diving for me.

Now that Petra was standing above me, she reached down and caught my hand, pulling me to my feet. She didn't gloat or brag, or scold or anything, just pulled me up and then got another arrow. I didn't thank her either. Heppet was similarly defending James, and was surrounded by twice as many motionless or twitching mongbat bodies on the ground. James, like a mad fool, was still whittling away at that bit of wood, seemingly oblivious to everything going on around him.

I didn't see any more diving down at us, but I could still hear their howling calls from every direction. I knew they were circling around, using the trees to keep us from getting a clear shot, hoping to wear us down. I was just as angry as before, but this time I had no sympathy for the wretched beasts. I had another arrow ready, and picked out my target; a big one. I aimed and pulled the string back, following its erratic path as it wove this way and that through the trees to encircle us. As soon as I got a feel for its pattern, I let my arrow fly. With a dull thud it struck a tree trunk. Irritated, but not discouraged, I lifted my bow again and readied another arrow, following it more closely, trying to anticipate its every move. I focused on it, removing everything else around me from my mind. I let the arrow fly. This time it didn't even hit a tree, just sailed silently through the air. I wasn't even close. I let out a cry of frustration. I wasn't sure what was wrong...I was always such a good shot.

"Don't aim at it," Petra said behind me, just as she let an arrow fly. A mongbat fell. "Aim at where it will be. And don't take so much time to aim

and track it; your arm gets tired quickly, and it weakens your precision.”

I didn't want to take her advice, but I knew now wasn't the time to be petty. With almost a need to prove that her suggestion wouldn't work, I readied an arrow, aimed a few feet in front of the flying animal, and fired without letting a second go by. The mongbat let out a scream and spiraled to the forest floor.

Again, she didn't gloat; just kept releasing her arrows. Heppet, on the other hand, was smiling at me. Emboldened, I got another arrow, and this time I actually thought about what I had been seeing all along; Heppet and Petra weren't simply fast because they were good aims. They were good aims because they were fast. I didn't have a chance to test my new understanding further, because then the oddest sound completely threw me off guard.

“Hoo-hoo-hooo-hoooo.”

Confused, I looked over at James, who was actually blowing into the wooden bit he had carved, and was making the strange sound. The next thing I knew, the flapping and howling of the mongbats was gone, and they were nowhere to be seen. “What...?” was all I could think to say.

Heppet reached down and pulled James up from where he had crouched. “Monarch Owls eat mongbats,” he said simply. “I should have made one of these the instant I knew that there were mongbats in the area.”

“That little sound scared them off?” I said in astonishment, looking at what seemed to me to be no more than a wooden whistle.

“More proof that they are merely in their natural habitat here; they are well aware of not only what is good food for them, but also of what considers them to be good food,” James said with a grin. He was searching around on the ground again now, and called over to Heppet, “Even with animals, sometimes there can be diplomacy!”

“Who would have thought, that all of those books would have come in handy some day, eh James! You'll have to teach me how to make one of those!” Heppet said with a laugh. Just like before, he was retrieving his arrows from the dead mongbats. Petra was doing the same. I looked over at one of the beasts I had killed. As much as I no longer felt bad about killing the creatures, I didn't think I would have the heart to pull my arrow back out, even if it wouldn't feel it. I would just have to be short a few arrows.

As soon as I had made my decision, though, Petra was in front of me, pulled my arrow out of the body, and presented it to me with a blank look on her face.

“Thanks,” I muttered quietly, looking away from her. “And, thanks for saving me, and for the advice,” I said too, though I couldn't believe I was.

“Don't mention it,” she replied, and then moved on to some of the other kills to continue the retrieval.

“Before we split up again, which we will need to, I need to make a second owl-call so you and Jyre can be protected, should the mongbats find their courage again. In the mean time, I suppose, it would be a shame to let all of this meat go to waste. But don't take any more than we can eat before we make camp tonight. No point in carrying rancid meat!”

"We can eat them?" I said feeling *horrified*. They still looked like little people.

Heppet looked up at me as he knelt before one of the bodies, knife already in hand to skin it. "Either it will be us or the scavengers and the bugs. Either way, they're going to be eaten. Since it's our fault they're dead, it may as well be us."

I would go hungry tonight, then. I couldn't watch Heppet work, so instead I watched James whittle at the second piece of wood. He gave the first one to Petra, who was keeping watch in case the mongbats weren't as scared of it as we hoped. Heppet finished before James did, but James could whittle and walk at the same time, so we continued.

— Sheam: A Terrifying Rumor —

Day 7: 11:00 am

The brightness in the room stung my eyes as I blinked them open. The room didn't smell right; it was musty; moldy. The worst part was when I realized I had fallen asleep in my clothes. I hated it when that happened. Sitting up, loosening my collar and running my fingers through my matted hair, I realized that I had been woken up by a commotion in the next room. It had quieted down now, but someone was still next door talking with Corinne. It was a man, and I didn't recognize his voice. I just listened.

"What am I supposed to do?" he said. "These men were my life. All I have left is Tillus and Heppet, and I may yet lose them both too."

"I am sorry, Sarievo, but there is nothing I can do either. I would send a messenger out at once to send James the news, but only James knew where they were going. It would be impossible to find them now." Something in Corinne's voice made my heart race. I knew at once that something horrible had gone wrong. I didn't barge in though; I kept listening, holding my breath.

"So, all we can do is wait," he said. "And hope *they* at least come back safely."

"Are you certain, are you *absolutely certain*...?"

"Yes, Cor, I am certain. I saw the spiders take him. Those that escaped barely did so with our lives. I watched my men die one by one. A man wouldn't last ten seconds in the thick of those monsters. I am so very sorry Corinne, but there can be no doubt."

I was nearly on the floor, I was shaking so badly. I couldn't even interrupt them if I wanted to. I knew what they were talking about. They didn't even need to say his name. I remembered clearly when he said, 'I have to go now...I don't know when you'll see me again.'

"Does anyone else know? Has this gotten out yet?"

"No, no one. Only..."

"Who knows, Sarievo, damn it!—who knows?"

"The Hammerites, Thurm and Brother Porter. I didn't even think about it. I know he intends to report to his superiors. He must have already by now. I don't know if they will keep it under wraps or announce it to the world!"

"We can't let them do that. Too much is at stake. Not now...not when things are so unstable. News of Master Thresh's death would send the entire district into chaos."

Hot tears were streaming down my cheeks as I whispered "No, no, no, Daelus, no..." with trembling lips.

"You need to go, now, Sarievo. I will find aid for you if you wish. Stop Thurm if he hasn't reported yet. Petition the Hammerites if he has. Stall it; anything. I need to begin construction of conflicting rumors. We can't keep the news of this a secret forever, so when it does get out there needs to be at least a half dozen opposing stories to confuse the issue and keep anyone from making any snap decisions on the matter."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Daelus was gone and all Corinne cared about was how it affected the politics of Hightowne. I pressed my eyes shut and clutched my fists to my chest, trying desperately to not start sobbing. I couldn't think. I just couldn't. No, no, it had to be wrong. He couldn't be dead!

"Fine, I will go. I think I know where to find Thurm. I know he will listen to me, if he hasn't reported yet. But if he has...you have to know that I will be helpless."

"I know, Sarievo. And I am so, so very sorry for your own loss. I cannot even begin to imagine how much worse this is for you. But please, hold together."

"And you as well, Corinne. I know how much he meant to you and James."

"He meant the world to us; and Sheam as well. I don't know how I am going to tell her. She will be..."

I couldn't take it anymore. I let out a cry of despair and fell to the floor, sobbing. "It can't be, it can't be," I just kept saying as my chest heaved. The next thing I knew the door was opened and Corinne's arms were around me, stroking, comforting, but it only made me cry harder. "He can't be; he can't be gone."

Soon I was sitting on the bed with her. Sarievo had gone, and we sat in silence. Every time I tried to say something, "What happened?" or "I don't believe it," I just started to cry again. She told me everything she knew, and although I kept repeating over and over that it couldn't be true, I knew that it was impossible that he was still alive.

"Sheam," she said, taking my face in her hands and looking at me. Her eyes were almost as red as mine felt. "I know you do not want to hear this, but I need you to be strong now. I need you to get yourself together, because you are a very important person. I know you do not believe it, but this is so. Daelus believed in you. You have to take his place."

"That's impossible," I whispered between breaths. "I just sort papers and make lists. I am nobody."

"No. You are Lady Unexumbra Sheam. That person is no longer just a game you had to play for one night."

"Why can't James, or you, or him..."

"You know there is no one else. Or would you rather Schinler take over?"

"Please don't make jokes," I muttered.

"It wasn't a joke, Sheam. It was to make you understand that there is no one else. You need to go to The Circle now, and you need to be in charge. It's yours. Don't you realize that this was always Daelus's intent?"

"How could he have intended that? I only just..."

"You live there. Your face is the one everyone sees—not his. You know every inch of that building. You are the Lady of The Circle whether you want it or not."

"I just don't think I can..."

"It was too soon, far, far too soon. But we can't worry about that now."

This was all happening so fast. I didn't know what to think. I couldn't even believe Daelus was dead, and Corinne wanted me to take on his mantle? I couldn't do it. It was too fast, too soon. And yet, I found myself saying, "What do I need to do?"

"You need not do anything at once. Sarievo is going to try and stop word from getting out. I am going to get the gossip mill started, so that when word does get out, everything will be so confused that no one will know how to act. By the time we do, things will be ready. Lord Canard and Captain Wendle will know the truth, Jossimer too of course, but no one else. With any luck, the belief will be that he is simply on an extended business trip, and that you are managing things until he returns. Given time, most will forget about him and accept you as his successor."

"It all sounds so horrible...wanting everyone to just forget about him."

"It has to be this way. Otherwise...otherwise think of what Ramirez would do, or any other lord who has a dispute with Daelus. You would be their first target. Assassins would stalk you everywhere. And you would just be the first. No, it has to be this way."

"Can't we even have a funeral for him?"

"I am afraid not. Or if we do, it has to be very secret."

"I keep thinking that any moment I am going to wake back up from this bed, and find that..."

"Your life can change in a heartbeat, or someone else's."

"Yes. I know. Like the day I met him. Everything changed. And now...now..."

"Like the day I met James..."

"Oh Cor, I am sure that James will come back alright," I said, suddenly realizing that that had to be simply crushing her.

She didn't reply; only smiled at me. I could see in her eyes how terrified she was.

"What can I do?" I said. "Give me something to do, some way to help. I have to do something. I can't just sit here crying my eyes out."

"You can help me get the rumor mill going. I know you won't like it, but it has to be done. They need to be carefully crafted so that not one of them is completely believable, but that all of them are implicitly *likely*. They all need a thread of truth to them, a common element in each, and a certain level of scandal about them. That will ensure each spreads. With any luck, a half

dozen will become twenty dozen within a week, and the truth of the matter will never surface in any believable form.”

“Okay, I will help you.” I said, drying my eyes for the tenth time. “But if I suddenly start crying my eyes out again, we’ll need to find dry paper.”

— **Nightfall: Hunted** —

Day 7: 12:00 pm

I let my shoulder press against the cavern wall as I rested for a moment. The walk has been constantly uphill, through a wide tube-like corridor that at one moment seemed naturally occurring and the next definitely designed. I soon discovered the source of the light; luminous minerals. Some of it jutted out into the air in the form of crystals, usually blue or purple in color, but often it was embedded into the rock walls and only produced a strange glow. The light was always colored, so I was never certain if I was seeing what I thought I was. The corridor ran continuously, unbroken with the exception of various side passages that, so far as I’d gone, merely looped back into the main passage without branching off.

Not feeling rested, but with a restored will to go on, I picked myself back up and continued walking. I constantly wanted to throw away the casting rod; I had no more orbs and it was dead weight that only burdened me and knocked into my leg uncomfortably with every step. I never could though, because even if no more of those orbs existed in the world, I would always cling to the vague hope that someday more would be found, and then I would feel extremely disappointed that I had thrown away the only device that could use them.

I did not know if I had heard something, or if the cirlet was working upon my mind, but I had the distinct impression that I was no longer alone in the passage. Up ahead was one of the side corridors. I quickened my pace slightly and moved into it. Just a few yards away from the opening, I was engulfed in complete blackness. I would have had to walk with my arms extended before me if I chose to go on. That was not my chief concern, however.

They came, and brought light with them. From my vantage point I could only hear them and see the rays of their light sources. The length of the stride and the sound of the footfalls were distinctly inhuman, and nor did they resemble that of an animal. They passed by my corridor without me seeing them and without them seeing me. I was certain what was a walk of several hours for me would take them only a fraction of that time, since I had spent most of those hours hobbling and resting.

I now had a choice; continue moving forward and up, or follow the visitors and discover what they were about. I wasn’t sure if I could keep up, but I found that a new sense of urgency and danger restored vitality that time and rest had been unable to grant me. Back in the main corridor, I looked on to where they had vanished. I could still plainly see the light that accompanied them—the white glow was like water to my parched eyes.

Attempting some semblance of discretion accompanied by speed, I followed them, listening closely for any sign of them changing speed or doubling back.

For several minutes I followed without being able to make eye contact, due to the way the corridor twisted and wove through the earth. Even when I was able to finally catch a glimpse, I could not readily identify what I was seeing. Only when I had gained considerably proximity was I able to make any reasonable identifications and this put me at the risk of detection simply from the sound of my footfalls behind them, if they were listening for such a thing. My only advantage was, while they had light coming from crystals, similar to the minerals that occurred naturally throughout this place, only completely white, hanging from chains at their wrists, I was bathed in darkness, and so even if they turned their heads to look over their shoulder, I would remain unseen.

There were four of them. One was tall and slender, and appeared to be armored, though I soon realized that armor was part of its body. At a distance it seemed to be wearing a cape, but I soon realized that these were long, flexible wings, not feathered, but more of a membrane. I could not tell if it was male or female. The next seem much more clearly female, though her back was covered by large scale-like growths, even on her hairless head, and with a short tale hanging only halfway down her thighs. Her fingers were twice as long as a human's, ending in long black claws. The other two were in front, so it was difficult to see them beyond the two in the back, but they seemed to be basically humanoid; at least enough to wear clothing, though I was certain I saw more hair than was natural for men.

Once they were appraised, I was more comfortable remaining at a safer distance. Unfortunately as soon as I let my pace down, my body reminded me how far beyond my breaking point I had already gone, and how much time I still needed to properly recover. I found myself falling farther and farther behind, until the twists in the passage broke my eye contact with them much more frequently.

When I turned the next bend, expecting to see them, I found only eerie darkness. I had to pause and consider what could have happened. Either they had moved faster than I anticipated, hit another bend, and were again out of sight, or they had taken one of the many side passages which always seemed to loop back to the main corridor. Perhaps it was a shortcut. It was also possible that they knew I was following them, and were lying in wait; their light sources concealed. I had never seen them directly look back at me, but infrequently one turned its head to the side. It was possible that they had spotted me out of the corner of their eye, and did not make a fuss about it to hide the fact that I had been discovered.

I knew I could not lose them, since this passage now led nowhere. But if I was not careful I could easily pass them on a side passage, let them get behind me, and take me by surprise. I began to move much more slowly, and when I came to an opening to the left, I stopped completely to look and listen. After seeing their light sources, my eyes had adjusted to the brightness, so I was not yet accustomed to the extremely dim glow of the naturally occurring light.

My best tool was to listen, yet I heard nothing save the constant distant rumble. I had a feeling that the circlet only worked to my advantage when I least expected it to, so I could not rely on the fact that I sensed nothing. If there was something to sense, and I knew there was, surely it would be somewhere up ahead. I dismissed the idea and relied solely on my ears.

I took the side corridor. I did not remember if I had tested this one previously, as they all looked alike, but I felt uncomfortable remaining where they possibly expected me to be. I moved forward, concerned equally with the softness of own footfalls as I was with searching out any trace of their own from the rumble. My eyes were once again growing used to the darkness, so I was soon able to see that I was nearing the end of the side passage, and about to come back to the main tunnel. Still, they were nowhere to be seen. They could have doubled back while I was in the side passage, and were now behind me. I couldn't second guess. I continued the way they had been going, back to the defunct portal room.

After the passage of some time I thought I heard speech; whispering, too faint to know if it was in a language I understood, but identifiable as vocalizations. I held my breath and concentrated certain that it was coming from up ahead and yet unable to see any signs of it. I crept forward an inch at a time now, afraid to even draw my sword for fear of making the slightest noise. For all I knew they were setting up an ambush. A minute passed, and then two, and the voice was not heard again, nor any other noise or clue as to where my company had gone. Reluctant, I resumed my trek, thinking I had to be several minutes away from the portal chamber by now.

Was this a routine patrol, or were they sent to discover who had come through the portal? If it were a routine patrol they would not be so cautious. They were as fearful of their uninvited guest from the realm of the weavers as I was of them.

Uneventfully, I arrived and was gravely concerned. The chamber was exactly as I remembered it, but no sign of the four individuals. With my heart like ice, I gazed back into the corridor, unsure of what to do. Though there was only one way out of this room, some of the side passages up ahead did curve back to this place, only opening out above the floor level, and sometimes with openings too small for a man to fit through. They could easily have been in one of those side passages, watching me now from the safety of darkness. If this was so, why hadn't they sprung their trap? Or did they just want to see what I would do?

I wanted to scream out 'Show yourselves!' But I kept my lips tight. I still had no proof that they *knew* I was here. They could have reached the end of their investigation while I was in the side passage, and went back, none the wiser to my presence. I had two options; continue on my way or search each side passage in turn for any sign of them.

The whisper I had heard was *possibly* them deciding to split up and take the other corridors to watch this room. If I went back into the main passage, and they were observing, they would likely all converge back into the main passage and continue to shadow me. Would they be expecting me to enter

one of the side passages myself and confront them? I did not know, but it was what I had decided to do.

I went, and much more quickly than I had previously allowed myself. I took the first side passage I came to, went to the point which I guessed to be halfway to the end, located a spot as far from any luminous materials as I could get, pressed myself against the wall, drew my sword as slowly and silently as I could, and waited. I should not have to wait long. I didn't.

With devilish silence, I saw it come. It was the reptilian female. She was naked except for a belt, heavy with pouches, and a shoulder strap with scabbard; the sword, more of a long knife, was in her hand. I noticed a glow from one of the pouches on her belt, and decided that she must have put her light source inside. She made no appearances of slowing down, so I could only hope that she hadn't seen me. I had to make a choice...stay hidden and allow myself to get behind them once more, or confront her and end the game. Chances were small that she would go past me without seeing me. Chances were even smaller that they would allow me to get behind them again without them realizing it.

As soon as she was close enough, I moved. With my sword extended before me, I rushed before her, bringing my blade up to her throat, but not fast enough to cut it. As I had hoped, she realized I was coming at her a moment too late, and a moment soon enough to move. With a low hiss I had her pinned to the wall, the tip of my blade at her throat, myself out of reach of her knife due to my longer sword and longer arms. She gazed at me with large, green, unblinking eyes, uttering no more than the initial hiss of surprise. A second later I realized that my heart was pounding, my arm nearly trembling from the tension, and an almost uncontrollable urge to plunge the sword into her throat and be done with her. No, if I was going to do that, it would have been with the first stroke.

She seemed calm in comparison. The scales over her face were smooth, the coloring uncertain due to the dim light, her eyes large, with two simple slits for nostrils and a lipless mouth. When she hissed again I could see a row of tiny, nearly needle-like teeth. She had to have been human once; it made no sense for a female lizard-like creature to have breasts, even if they were nothing more than small bulges on the surface of her scaly chest. Realizing that, I spoke.

"Can you understand me?" I said in the softest whisper.

She nodded slowly. Her eyes still hadn't blinked, and I felt like I had been holding her hostage for at least a minute. Soon her companions would come looking for her.

"Were you searching for me?"

Again, a nod; followed by another hiss.

"What is this place?"

"Deep below the hive," she said after a moment's hesitation, in a remarkably human voice. As soon as she spoke, what before had seemed to be disquietingly human features on a lizard-like beast suddenly became much more disconcerting, as she was appearing more and more like a human

woman who had been transformed into a creature.

I heard something distinct behind me, and didn't spare an instant to look or evaluate. "One step closer and she dies," I said, nearly a shout, so loud that it echoed through the corridor over and over before silence returned. I could see them reflected in her eyes; three individuals, knives at the ready, but now frozen with concern for their comrade.

"Tell me where I am," I said, quieter than the last shout, but with much more volume and sternness than I had been using on the woman.

The growl I heard at my back sent shivers through me, a deep and hungry rumble, making it clear the anger the speaker behind me held back. "Come you through that portal, man-fool?"

"I came through a portal, yes. I went through it to escape a terrible danger. Now I want to know where I am." I still didn't turn around, keeping my eyes fixed on the eyes of the woman, and the reflection they held. If she was afraid, her gaze did not reveal it.

"Guest...to Lady Delphine," it uttered with a snarl. "Sent to find you, we, though you hid from us until now."

I heard a chattering behind me which I did not understand, a series of rapid clicks and chirps that made my skin crawl. The beast that had spoken snapped back, making a quick bark-like noise and then a drawn out snarl, before quieting down.

"We were sent to bring you to her," she said, her voice soft and melodic in comparison, though there was a slight level of hiss to every word.

"As a visitor or as a prisoner..."

"If you shed a single drop of her blood, it will be in pieces, man-fool!"

I could almost feel its breath on the back of my neck, looming ever closer. If it wanted to, it could have finished me off already. The only thing that held it back was the danger of me hurting the women. "Or I could cut the four of you to bits. I survived the spiders, I can survive the four of you," I said, putting a bold face on. I only hoped that my bluffing was not as exhausted as my body.

She spoke up answering the question he would not. "You are to be...our guest."

A moment passed. I did not know if her appearance of pure calm was part of the lizard-like transformation, or a true reflection of her mental state. I could not tell if she was lying. I thought briefly about what it would be like to continue on hidden, my breath held, nerves stretched to the point of madness, making my way through miles of unknown territory in the vain hope of escape, never even knowing if there truly was a way out of here. The alternative may have been worse; become her prisoner, or guest, if these creatures could be believed. In the end it came down to a simple fact; I did not believe I would be able to defeat these enemies if it fell to my sword to carry me out of this.

"Very well," I said finally. "Please, take a few steps back, lower your weapons, and I shall do the same."

The growling and chattering continued, but I could feel them moving

away, if only from the diminishing heat of their breath. I could not tell if they had lowered their weapons, but I was still not going to turn to look, because there would be a split second where I could see neither the woman nor her companions.

I drew a long breath, and slowly lowered my blade, until it pointed to the ground. "I will allow you to escort me to Lady Delphine..."

Just as slowly, she moved away from the wall, and circled around me until she was at the side of the beast, who I could now see properly for the first time; a seven foot tall monstrosity with patches of fur sprouting out of its erratic and bulging muscles, whom she nonetheless moved against for safety with the familiarity of a lover.

"...but I must warn you," I continued, "I still intend to fight for my life if I feel that it is threatened, and I do not intend to be parted from my weapon."

Just as I said this, the other two, one a scrawny imp-like creature with much more even fur and a long face with flailing nostrils, and the exasperatingly tall insect-like one that possessed no face resembling the faintest traces of humanity, moved to the other side of me. Their weapons down, they retrieved the glowing crystals from their belts. The beast and the lizard woman did the same. "It is many leagues from here," she said, "but I expect we will arrive without incident."

I slid my sword back into its sheath, intensely disliking the way they had surrounded me, but seeing no other choice they could have made. "Lead on."

— Ghost: Our Pick of the Litter —

Day 7: 1:00 pm

Lytha seemed to know exactly what to do with me. I was more exhausted than after my night escaping from the Boneboard, happier than that time when my two best friends stole a whole carriage of hard liquor, and more energized than I was after the first time I had broken into a tomb and come out with a priceless diamond ring. Afterwards we both gave our clothes a good scrub in the river, found a safe way down to the ocean's edge for a swim, and came back up to get them when they were dry. Of course, that *almost* didn't happen, since we were both feeling inspired for round *four*, but she noticed that the Hammerites were beginning march from the castle, and we both decided it was time to get going.

They were doing a very slow ceremonious precession out of the castle, which gave us enough time in between the marching of the first troops from the doors and the leaders pouring out to find a vantage point where we could watch safely, and make plans. They seemed to be going through great lengths to make something which should have been simple and easy as complicated as possible. They marched out in small groups, each in a tight formation, all stepping in unison, with various escorts who marched with them to the end of the long drawbridge, and once they were to the other side, marched back up to the gate, and escorted the next group the same way. Who were they trying to impress? There was nobody here but them, and two scoundrels spying on

them.

"Brother Paulinus," Lytha said with her hands folder under her chin, lying on her stomach with only her eyes peeking out over the rock that concealed us, "of Alcuin Abby. A scribe, concerned only with old books. Last night I convinced him that one of his novices has been stealing his ink, and today the boy will be punished severely."

"Crap," I said, leaning on my elbow, not nearly as relaxed as she was, but also not so careful to stay hidden, "Poor bastard."

The next group marched out, "Brother Ubez, of Saint Tatto's Church. A humble vicar, who spends the week fasting and the weekend preaching. I convinced him that he was not nearly holy enough, and that he should fast seven days a week instead of five. He isn't so humble anymore."

"He'll uh...starve," I said, obviously.

"Yes," she said, without a trace of regret or shame in her voice. "He is already frail. Maybe someone will convince him not to let himself waste away; or maybe not."

We waited in silence until the next group marched out. "That one looks special," I said.

"Brother Ludger, of the Engineering Seminary of Saint William of Gellone, he is highly regarded among the others of his group, but he is a petty, jealous man. He feels that he is underappreciated. Very soon I suspect that he will take his own life, in hopes that in the next he will be better accepted."

"Uh, did you convince him to do that?"

"No, I only convinced him to do it sooner. Why wait?"

"Are all of these guys messed up in the head?" I said feeling a little baffled that the whole church could stay together with this many crackpots.

"Every man, woman, and child has their own evils buried inside them, Ghost. They are not special. Last night I just did my best to bring all of it to the surface, blow it out of proportion, and make it dominate them. Well, the demon in me did it, anyway. For some the effects will be quick. I imagine there were many quarrels last night, and some nightmares. For others I have simply set them more firmly on their long road to self destruction."

"That's a little scary, you know," I muttered.

"Yes," she just said quietly. I still couldn't tell if she felt bad or not. It didn't seem right to me. I figure, if a person is your enemy, face them like a man and settle things either with your first or with blood. All of this mind stuff gave me the chills.

"So this guy is pretty high up, right? Do you think he could break the curse? Before he kills himself?"

"No, he works with cogs and axles and weighted chains. He is barely a spiritual man."

She named the next few that came out, though she stopped listing what she had done to them. Maybe she realized that it was bothering me.

"Brother Angibert, also a vicar; he might be able to lift your curse if it was as simple as a hex that made lizards find you at night and lay eggs in your ears. There's Brother Emilian who knows more about his drafting table than

he does scripture and Brother Adolphus who is currently defiling the youngest nun at the neighboring convent. Of course, that is not how she sees it. He would be more likely to make your curse worse. Brother Paschal, a man of a very pure, kind heart. He might be of use to us.”

“Really? No skeletons in his closet?”

“Only a love for the bottle which he fears is far worse than it actually is. Sadly he is a small man with limited spiritual reach. He might be able to help, but it could also kill him.”

“Well I’d hate to find the only Hammerite I have something in common with, and just end up killing him. Keep him in mind...let’s see who else comes out.”

She watched the next few in silence, but then when one came out, surrounded by a pack of no less than twelve soldiers, she perked up, coming out of her relaxed pose. “Brother Ymar seated on the council, clergymen, arch monk, healer and blesser of holy water; I think we have our man.”

“Yeah?” I said, looking down at the frail fellow with the long white beard who nevertheless marched along with the soldiers without a trace of lameness. “How did you taff up his mind, though?”

“I don’t think he was there last night...he must have arrived later, or had to step out during the event. I don’t remember him, so I don’t know much more than his basic identity. If you give me a minute to focus, I’ll tell you more.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. If you think he’ll do, that’s good enough for me. So what’s the plan? Wait until he gets to his church—”

“Saint Atroa’s.”

“...and kidnap him, or hold him hostage there?”

“We’ll decide when we see the church. Do we go now and wait for nightfall?”

I answered quickly. “If we wait for nightfall, there may be an angry mob of zombies outside the church trying to get in.”

She frowned. “Do you know if Saint Atroa’s has a graveyard?”

I wasn’t sure if I did, but then the answer came to me. “Actually, no, I don’t think it does. It has a crypt. I was offered a job to rob it once but turned it down.”

“Is a crypt worse or better than a graveyard?” she asked.

“Depends; we’ll need to case it.”

“Let’s go then!”

— Jyre: The House in the Woods —

Day 7: 3:00 pm

The smooth wooden boards felt pleasant under my legs. I plucked a wildflower from the tall grass which spilled up and over the edge of the porch, and twirled it between my fingers, letting it dance. Then I let it go, and with a puff of breath, watched it sail out into the overgrown lawn, filled with buzzing insects and other wildflowers. Across the lawn I saw Heppet walking, one hand against his chest, his thumb hooked under his quiver strap,

and the other resting idly on the hilt of his knife on his belt. He wasn't paying any attention to me. Like I had been a moment ago, he was lost in this place, taken by the quiet serenity and thoughts of home he couldn't go back to. I wasn't sure what kind of house he used to live in, but this one reminded me of my village.

I got up just high enough to look inside through the glassless window to see James still shuffling around the room with his magnifying glass, searching, searching. I rolled up my trouser legs so that I could feel the smooth grain of the wood against my bare skin. I was glad James had asked me to come along. I still didn't know what the use was.

I leaned forward until my chest was against the floor of the porch and my arm dangled off the side into the grass and weeds. I moved my hand over them, feeling the stalks and leaves brush over my skin, watching as they moved in waves as I passed over them. I rested my cheek against the back of my other hand, and sighed. My bare legs kicked freely at the air in a scissor motion, toes warmed by the sun's afternoon rays. I sighed again. Then Heppet came and sat down on the edge of the porch, next to me.

"You seem to like it here," he said gently.

"Mm'hm," I just replied, plucking another tiny wildflower and twirling it between my fingers, just like before.

He was quiet. His arms were out behind him as he leaned back, eyes cast out into the field that went on for miles in front of the white house. As soon as we came to that field and saw the house, old, run down, abandoned; I fell in love. At first I thought it had been painted white, but I soon discovered that the wood itself was just extremely pale.

"I wonder if we can find this place again," I said after a time, "later, when all of this is over. Come back here, just to stay. No reason...just to enjoy it." I was waffling. I got like that sometimes.

"That would be nice," he said, and from the sound of his voice I knew that he meant it.

I smiled up at him. "Maybe to stay; it needs a family again. It's almost like it's yearning for one."

He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. I don't know why I said that about it needing a family. I just had this image in my head of young children running and playing out in the field, tag, picking wildflowers, hide and go seek, catching bugs in jars.

"I can't believe that this place has anything to do with The Lady," I said after a long silence.

"Maybe there is more to her than you think?" he replied.

That response should have upset me, and set me on a long speech about how horrible she is, but this time I just muttered a quiet, "Maybe," and turned the whole thing over in my mind, "Maybe."

— James: A History in Fragments —

Day 7: 3:00 pm

After I conducted a survey of the house, I reviewed my notes. The front entrance led into the main living chamber, with a large fireplace in a central location, a few wooden chairs that looked like they had been made by an amateur carpenter, and doorways leading in every direction.

Directly opposite the front door was a doorway leading into the kitchen, with a wood burning stove, several basins, including one built up to be roughly at the same level as the stove, and a crude but sturdy table in the center high enough to be a work surface but low enough to also be a dining table. Open shelves lined the walls, mostly bare, but with many empty jars and rusty pans.

A back door from the kitchen led into a small yard in the rear, with a well, outhouse, a pile of wood that had become overgrown with plants and mushrooms, and the remains of a simple workshop with sawhorses, and worn, rusty carpentry tools still present.

Branching off from the living room to the right of the main entrance, so that it shared the wall which featured the large fireplace, was the bedroom. The fireplace was mirrored and open, so there was only one large fire pit in between the two rooms. A bed was still present, though the mattress and linens were overgrown with mold and mildew, giving the room and rest of the house a very unpleasant smell.

On the opposite side from the bedroom was a small hall that branched off into three tiny rooms, which together would have been roughly the size of the bedroom. Each showed considerable and alarming signs of wear and tear, which I only noted briefly and did not catalogue as part of my survey. Also, the only locks in the entire house seemed to be on these three doors.

I now had a series of clues, but did not want to make assumptions. "Petra, please bring Jyre inside?"

She had been inspecting a bookcase in the living room, surprisingly still packed with volumes, for anything of value. Sadly, all she had found thus far was leisure reading, and though it was an interesting portrait of the literary tastes of the residents, offered nothing I could draw conclusions from. Without a word she left her work and vanished out the front door.

A moment later, after nary a scuffle, Jyre shuffled in, eyes downcast, one hand idly massaging a finger on the other, as if she had sustained a minor injury in the use of her bow.

When I crouched down beside her, she lifted her gaze in slight surprise. With my hand on her shoulder, I said, "Jyre, I need you to take a look at a few things, and help me to understand them."

"I don't really know anything," she said, lowering her vision as it was when she entered.

"You may be unaware, but you are also unaware of what you are actually aware of. The senses are wonderful catalysts for the recovery of memories. Come; take a look at a few things I have discovered." I grinned at her, though she made no efforts to change her dispassion. On the other hand, she was not

protesting, which I considered a remarkable step forward for her.

First, I brought her into the kitchen. I had an interest in those jars. "Jyre, did you have access to the kitchen areas when you were in service to The Lady?"

She chewed on her lip for a moment before replying. "Ranson would sometimes send me down to get him things, but I didn't actually ever work in there."

"During any of your visits to the kitchen, did you ever see jars resembling these?"

She looked up at the shelf, but made no motion to move closer and inspect. After a moment she said, "No, I think they were all tin, not glass."

"Considering the rustic and 'home made' aspects of the rest of the cottage, I find it unlikely that they would use glass for something as mundane as food or ingredient storage." I took one off of its place, blew a layer of dust off the metal lid, and unscrewed it. It came off after only a moderate fight. As soon as it was open, an unfamiliar odor crept into my nostrils. "Jyre, would you mind smelling this?"

She came over slowly, and with a bit of reluctance, leaned over and took a sniff. She gave me a crooked frown.

"Is it at all familiar?"

She hesitated, but it seemed to me it was not because she did not know, but because she was having difficulty getting out what she wanted to say. "There were these halls lined with doors we were not supposed to go into. Every time I asked about them I was told to either shut up or that it was nothing important. One time I was walking down that hall. I was bringing a candle to fix a light that had gone out. I heard a loud noise coming from behind one of the doors, and I think a flash from under the bottom of it. I nearly dropped the candle, I was so startled! For some reason the smell reminded me of that, but I am not sure why."

"Could it be that the smell was coming from that room where you heard the sound?"

"Maybe...yes, that could be it. But only for a moment or two; I don't think I ever smelled it again."

She looked very unhappy, no doubt not fond of thinking about these things. I gave her a broad smile and nodded, saying, "That is most helpful. Thank you."

"What does it mean?"

"Most substances have their odor either magnified or altered and magnified when burnt. What did the sound...sound like?"

"Like, some sort of zap?"

"A zap, you say?"

"Like, what you hear sometimes when you turn on the lights, and the lights are old, only a lot louder, and longer. I heard the other guard say that it was a trap, and someone sprung it, that a thief was trying to sneak in, and got zapped."

"Interesting, I am unfamiliar with this smell myself, so I cannot produce

further conceptualizations. However, it is clear that they are not merely jars for cooking, which was the assumption I needed more evidence in order to dismiss. It is likely that this kitchen was used for alchemy, or even more likely, *witches brewing*." She looked around, maybe trying to understand the look of a common kitchen within the context I presented. "Of course, witches brewing; is merely alchemy with another layer of ritual and superstition thrown in, but I digress. Come, and look at something else."

Heppet was in the doorway, brandishing something he had discovered, "I found this in the lawn out front," he said, presenting to me a weather-beaten but ornate walking stick.

I took it carefully in my hands. It appeared to have once been painted black, though on one side, which had been to the sky, there was little trace of it on the tarnished but smooth wood. On the opposite side, still moist from the earth and caked with dirt, the paint persisted. The top was unmistakable; the horn of a goat, twisted slightly, pointed, and covered with intricate etchings. "Phaeros's walking stick, just as it had been described to me. But why would it have been left in the yard?"

"Not sure. I just stumped on it by accident; stepped on it, actually. I came in as soon as I did."

"Can you show me where you found it?"

"Yes," he said, and then nearly ran back outside. Jyre ran after him, and I followed at a more comfortable quickened pace.

He knelt down in the grass, and with his hand, outlined the exact location of the cane. The plant life had been torn where the cane had rested, indicated that it had grown to surround it, and Heppet needed to tear it free from its prison. "Is there anything else near it?"

"Let's see," he said, and then began feeling around in the ground. "Yes," he said after just a moment, "There's wood here."

"A door underground?" Jyre asked—no small amount of excitement in her voice.

"I don't think so. It doesn't feel sturdy enough for that. But it's covered up by the weeds really well. I need to cut it free." He then used his machete to cut and pry at the wooden surface, pulling it from the ground an inch at a time, until roots were snapped and dirt disheveled.

"It's just a board," Jyre observed, puzzled. Indeed it was, or more precisely, a roughly square surface of wood made by three boards connected together by smaller boards along the back. It was roughly two feet by two feet, and so ruined by being under the plants and dirt that nothing other than its shape could be identified.

"There's more," Heppet said, "I think I broke it." Indeed, his observations were correct. A second part of it, a fat stick which had been the post to the sign—which I now understood it to be—had broken off at the base of the sign, just as it had from the ground. A moment's further inspection revealed where the small post had originally plunged into the dirt. It had rotted and fallen many years ago, and was so claimed.

"I suspect that Phaeros left this sign here as a message to any who

approached, and left his cane as well as a proof that he was who he claimed to be, at least to those who knew him.”

“But what does the sign say?” Heppet said, brushing at the boards with his hands, unable to identify anything resembling writing. I watched for several moments as he worked at it, to no avail.

“The writing no doubt was burnt away by the rays of the sun long before it fell to the ground. I may be able to discover it through chemical analysis, but we cannot do that here. Thank you, Heppet, for this important discovery. Come, Jyre, we have more to investigate.”

I brought her to the first of the three rooms, the leftmost one if approaching from the living room. I said nothing, simply letting her observe without my own thoughts clouding her perception. The room was bare, with only a window on the opposite wall. The window was high enough up that Jyre would have had to stand on her toes to peek through it. All over the floor, walls, and ceiling were tiny etchings scratched into the wood, glyphs, some familiar, many unknown, but certainly pagan. There was only one blank spot on the floor, shaped like a rectangle, which extended up a short distance of the wall. The glyphs were numerous, however, directly above the blank spot.

After taking it all in, she turned to look at me, without saying anything.

“Before deciding anything, come see the next two rooms.”

I led her into the middle room. This one was the same configuration, with the glyphs, rectangular blank spot, though the glyphs were larger and less frequent, and they had a startling addition, scratches. The scratches were either made by an animal with very human-like claws, or a human with very claw-like fingers, but in either case the hands were small, and with a low reach, the scratches were on the floor and walls only. They were not haphazard, either. They were definitely focused on scratching out the glyphs, with one exception; a great deal of it was on the door, where no glyphs were etched.

While her reaction to the first room was pensive, her reaction to this second one was more overt discomfort. “What’s in the third room?” she asked, after she took this one in.

“Come,” I just said, and led her into it.

Though this room was basically the same as the others, it lacked both glyphs and scratches. What it did have, however, were an array of hooks on the ceiling, all of which had nothing hooked onto them, and in a pattern which suggested that though there was no blank rectangular spot that was missing glyphs, that area of the room was still of importance.

“Do you have any thoughts?” I asked her.

She didn’t answer at once, but when she did, she got right to the point. “Three children,” she said quietly.

“Interesting; why do you say that?”

“I saw where the beds go. Each was smaller than the last, too, so they weren’t all the same age. The one in this room was just a baby.”

“A fine deduction; what other clues led you to this idea?”

"The windows are high up, to keep them from crawling out."

"I see. Is this a common practice?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but I always snuck out of my room through the window, which was just a hole in the wall. Some of the other kids couldn't, because their windows were too high up. So I was only friends with the ones who could sneak out."

It was an interesting idea, but was inconclusive. There could have been other reasons for the position of the windows. I moved on. "What do you make of the—"

She cut me off. "Also, with a yard like this, there had to be children. It's so easy to imagine them out, playing."

I grinned. Her instincts were good. "What do you make of the other differences between the three rooms?"

"It's scary."

"Why do you find it scary?"

"It looks like the one in the middle room was a prisoner: the scratches on the door and walls."

"Why would one of the children be kept prisoner?"

"Maybe she didn't like it here?"

"Why do you say 'She'?"

She shrugged. "I've never seen a boy scratch like that. They pound and punch."

"A fair assessment; now, have you seen anything as part of these three rooms that reminds you at all, of the home of The Lady?"

"Yes," she squeaked, like this was a question she had hoped I would avoid.

I sat down on the floor, hoping it would put her at ease. "Please tell me everything you can remember."

She took a deep breath. "One day, Ranson told me to take a small package and put it in The Lady's room. I told him I wasn't supposed to go in there, and he told me to shut up and do it anyway. I had not met her at that point. She was away when I got there and still hadn't gotten back, so I wasn't really afraid. But when I got to the room, it was really creepy." She then stopped, and seemed like she didn't wish to say any more.

"Tell me why you found it creepy, please."

"Well, I had almost forgotten; but the first room made me remember. It was like a normal part of the mansion. Not much special about it. The bed was nice, of course. Furniture was fancy; paintings, carpets, everything normal. But when I looked close I saw that wherever there was bare wood, I saw things scratched into it. I didn't really think it was important. But now that I see it in that room, and I know what glyphs are now, I think that's what they were."

"Very peculiar, not at all what I was suspecting. Did you notice anything else?"

"There weren't any scratches, but I did see hooks on the ceiling, sort of like in the third room. Only there were things hanging from them. Bundles of herbs, I think from the smell, hanging from ropes. I thought it was strange,

but that was it. I had forgotten about those too, until now.”

I hunted for my pipe, (regretfully retrieved from its hiding place at home after Jossimer had gone and tempted me) produced it, and casually prepared a smoke. “Both of these things, the glyph decoration of the room and the hanging herbs, are common pagan practices, for an uncommon situation. It occurs when a person is believed to be possessed by a powerful spirit, and rather than trying to force the spirit away, they wish to preserve it within that person.” I now had the pipe lit, and gave it a good puff. “The herbs are usually the first defense, and the glyphs the final.”

“So, only one girl, but three different rooms?”

“Why do you say that?” I said as she sat down in front of me on the floor.

“Well, first she’s a baby, in the first room, and they use the herbs. Next she’s a little older, and in the second room, but she is afraid of the glyphs. Maybe they give her nightmares, so she scratches them out and won’t stay in the room. They have to lock her inside to make sure she sleeps where the glyphs are, so that the spirit doesn’t escape. Then she’s older and not afraid of the glyphs anymore, and goes into the third room.”

“I believe you are correct, but why not simply alter the same room? Why prepare a new one every time the girl becomes older? I believe your ideas about the progression are roughly appropriate, but I also believe there were three children. When each was born, another room was appropriated for their use.”

“I guess,” she said quietly.

“We do not guess, Jyre.” I said with a grin, “Unless we need to, of course,” I added with an even broader one.

“Found something else,” Heppet’s voice came from the hall. I quickly got up, and found him standing before me, beckoning for me to follow. I did so.

I arrived at the wood pile, with Jyre close behind. “These,” he said, “are the remains of more furniture. If you ask me, it looks like...well, see for yourself.”

I didn’t have to reassemble the pieces to be certain; tossed among the wood meant for the stove and the fireplace were the remains of three beds, two of roughly the same size, and the third little more than a large cradle. I imagined briefly a situation where the cradle had been reused three times, and as soon as each child was too large for it, a bed was constructed. “Thank you Heppet. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, only this!” He then lifted up a short length of chain from the grass, at one end a shackle, and the other a metal plate where it could be bolted to the wall. “Shackle is pretty small. Looks like it was meant for either an animal...”

“Or a child,” Jyre said with a shudder.

“Indeed. Come; let us see if we can find where this metal plate attached!”

Sure enough, there were four small holes in the wall close by where the bed would have gone in the middle room. Great lengths could have been made to ensure that the child did not leave the bed. Further inspection revealed that there were other places where metal plates had been attached to the walls, and a series of holes in the ceiling above the bed in a similar

pattern to the hooks. Jyre ran to the first room to check, and reported holes in the ceiling there as well. "Why did they take those hooks out?" I asked.

"There are three times as many hooks in the ceiling of the third room as there are holes in these. I suspect that there was a great need for more herbal protection in that room, before the glyhs could be put properly into place."

"This isn't making any sense," Jyre said, dropping to the ground in frustration.

"Quite the contrary, Jyre, I believe you have aided us in coming very close to understanding the truth. Three children, one of whom was a girl—"

"I think they were all girls," she suddenly added.

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling."

"There is always an intellectual catalyst for these types of feelings, Jyre. Please, examine it and see if there isn't some reason for this."

"Well," she said before trailing off, "It's just the way this house is."

"Go on. Evaluate this idea. Determine where it comes from."

"I just think so." But then an idea seemed to come to her. "It just doesn't seem like a place where boys lived. I think it's the workshop."

"Would a home with boys not have one?"

"No, but it would be locked!"

"Ah," I said, suddenly realizing where she was going with this.

"Because, the boys would want to play with the tools; they might mess things up and get hurt. If there were boys here, the workshop would be in a room, not just on the side of the house with a roof over it, and it would be kept locked up to keep them out."

"She's got a point," Heppet said with a laugh, "sounds exactly right."

"Invaluable observation, Jyre," I said with a grin. "Do you have any other reasons to support it?"

"A lot of the cabinets in the kitchen are low, so a child could reach. The mother probably had the girls help her with kitchen work. It's also really big, like it needed room for more than just one person to work."

"An interesting assessment; very well, we shall proceed with the concept that all three children are girls."

Heppet spoke up. "One was normal, one was crazy, and the third was special...if they had to move all the hanging herbs to that room, she could have been the most powerfully possessed of the three."

"A fair summary, Heppet, we know that Tempia was a witch, and that Phaeros practiced sorcery."

"Why would they use their magic on their own children?" Jyre blurted out in disgust.

"Why indeed! But there is something else from this house which we must learn. Remember that we were able to find it, and we found it using the tuning stones. There has to be something potent still here. The stones are, at the moment, threatening to rattle their way out of my pocket. It is considerably distracting. Come; let us look at the master bedroom."

Once there, I crouched down to the floor and pointed with the end of my

pipe. "Candle wax," I said, indicating several places on the floor. The wax had been cleaned up, but some traces still persisted. "Here, there, and there," I added, indicating a pattern around the bed. Jyre and Heppet observed in silence.

I picked myself back up and glared at the bed. "Heppet, if you would please push the bed aside?"

"Hmm," he remarked, and taking care not to get mold on his hands, gave the bed a solid shove. It took him a few pushes to move it from its resting place, but even after the first two I could see what I had expected to find. "That is a big glyph," he remarked, seeing it too.

After he stepped away, I moved in for a closer look. It was indeed large, needing the entire bed to conceal it. "It's still hot," I remarked cryptically.

"Seems cool enough to me," Heppet replied, placing his hand on one of the lines that had been burned, not cut, into the surface of the wooden floor.

"I mean the power of the glyph is still active. You can tell by the way these two bridging elements remain distinct. Were it to diminish, the burning would slowly continue to claim the wood, until the key strokes of power distorted themselves beyond their meaning. Do either of you recognize this glyph?"

"No," Jyre said at once.

Heppet then said, "Sort of; it reminds me of fertility symbols, but also, it was combined with a glyph that is usually meant to call spirits to your aid."

"I believe that is a sufficient explanation. It seems that Tempia and Phaeros were not content to conceive children, but sought to raise children that were possessed by spirits from birth. I believe they were not conducting experiments in those rooms, per say, but rather, attempting to tame the creatures they summoned forth from the other side, with Tempia's womb as the gateway."

"Creepy," Heppet just said.

I heard a knock on the doorframe, and turned around to see Petra had finally joined us. "Found these," she said, handing me several books from the shelf she had deemed noteworthy.

"Thank you, my friend," I said with a grin as I looked them over. "Ginus, Scina, Imak...literally, Legend of the Faery Queen," I said, reading the title out loud and then translating. I took the next one, "Silvarous, Vellus, Imak...Legend of the Vile Slasher. Both by the same author, ah, Phaeros Kendrick himself."

Petra explained, "Other books on the shelves pertain in some way to those two legends. The end result, apparently, was that he would pen the definitive anthologies himself. On the other hand, this one caught me by surprise."

She handed a third book to me, just like the others, but this one had the title, "Heerat, Arithmia, Fuenar..." and then looked up at her with surprise. "The Prophecy of Arithmia, also by Phaeros Kendrick." I opened it quickly, and found it all written in the same language that the titles were. I would be able to understand it, but it would take a long time to read. "Phaeros was many things, but he never claimed to be a prophet!" I proclaimed.

"No other books on the shelf seem to have any allusions to this *Arithmia*. I also have never heard this name before."

Heppet shook his head, "It's new to me."

Jyre shrugged.

I read aloud from a random page I opened it to, taking several moments to translate each word in my head, and then reciting it once I felt I had gotten the gist of the statements. "In these days order and chaos are not as easy to tell apart. Order, a thin face hiding the chaos within, and chaos a farce played out by those who desired nothing but permanence and stability—thus order. One must come to set things right: order as order and chaos as chaos."

"Since when is a delegate so concerned with order and chaos?" Petra observed.

"Indeed," I remarked back. "But remember, Tempia would be passionate about it, and he did love her very much. It would become his concern."

"Women have a way about doing that to you," Heppet informed us, with a wink to Jyre, who was still silent.

"Two legends, and a prophecy; three little girls; two female deities and a third with a rather feminine name as well, *Arithmia*—possibly related to an art or a skill, or a reckoning of skill." I grinned at my companions. "One who is 'normal', as you put it—The Faery Queen is renowned to be one of the most regal and stoic of the pagan pantheon. One is wild, scratching madly at the glyphs and the door—The Vile Slasher is a horrible beast indeed. Finally, desperate measures were taken, possibly not to deal with the most powerful of the three, but the *weakest*. The herbs, after all, were meant to contain the spirit possessing the human. This does not only mean that it is strong and is trying to escape. It could also mean that it is very faint, and there is a desire to keep it from being lost. I do not know anything about this *Arithmia*, but if it is a new spirit that Phaeros himself discovered, then it may not be at all at home in this world."

"Amazing," Petra said with an air of wonder in her voice.

"So this glyph is what the stones were reacting to?" Heppet rightly asked.

"No, I do not think so. Powerful as it is, I do not think so. Something is still hidden here. However, I must do something while we still have daylight. I need to take some measurements to determine our location, so that we can find this place easier, later. I want to bring all of those books back (even the leisure reading—I hate to see a book left behind!), but clearly we cannot carry them all ourselves!"

— Jyre: Above our Noses —

Day 7: 6:00 pm

I was exhausted, and my head was spinning from everything that just happened. Was it true that I was sitting in the house that The Lady grew up in? James seemed to think so. She had two younger sisters, and a father and mother who *summoned* her in some ritual. The strangest thing of all was that James *knew* her father!

"You don't look like you want to be here anymore," Heppet said, coming to sit down next to me.

"Yeah," I replied, looking up at him. "I wish I didn't know all of this now."

"It's always a pain...knowing things; kind of better to go without it."

"I know," I said, fiddling with my finger again.

"Did you hurt yourself with your bow?" he asked, taking notice.

"I guess so. I didn't notice it when it happened. It was probably when the mongbat was diving at me, and I had to fire really fast."

"Well be thankful you only have a sore finger to worry about!" he laughed.

"Yeah," I said with a smile. "Petra was right. They really did want to carry me off and eat me."

"I am pretty sure you taste better than me," he said.

"Uh..."

"Yeah, never mind," he added quickly. "Here, let me look at that."

I paused for a moment, and then showed him my hand.

"I can't even see a scratch," he said, holding it in both of his hands, turning it over close to his face."

"I know. I'm being stupid."

"No, you're just nervous. Here," he brought it up to his mouth and kissed it. "All better."

I smiled. "You would make a good mother," I teased.

"Wasn't exactly the job I was going for," he said with a laugh. He hadn't let go of my hand yet. I didn't pull it away.

"Maybe there's another cottage," I said, "somewhere out in the woods. Maybe I could find it. I don't think I want to come back here, but that doesn't mean I can't find somewhere else. Maybe we could even build one."

"We, huh?" he said, grinning.

I pulled my hand away. "Or something," I added curtly. I folded both hands behind my head and lay down flat on my back, looking up at the ceiling. "Wow," I just said.

"Wow what?" he asked.

"We spent so much time looking at the ceiling in the little rooms we never thought to look at it in the living room." The painting on the ceiling was an elaborate map of a city. The house was in the center, on a tiny street among dozens, with rows and rows of buildings fanning out to the edges of the room.

"Wow, that's crazy," he said when he saw it. "And we totally missed it?"

"Wasn't here before," I said in a whisper.

"Huh?"

"It's getting dark outside. We couldn't see it because it was too bright." I wasn't sure if that was true, but it was all I could figure out. "Only, why is this house shown in a city?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, there, in the center. Everything else is painted blue, but that one is yellow. Three rooms on one side, a big one on the other, one in the back, and one in the center, just like this house; but it's in the middle of a city, not the woods."

"I'll go get James. He'll want to see this!"

— James: The Final Secret —

Day 7: 6:10 pm

"James! You need to see this!" Heppet shouted through the doorway.

I handed my instruments to Petra, who could take the readings just as well as I could, and left her to finish the job of determining our exact position. We were not far enough from The City to use the stars, so we had to rely on various landmarks which could be seen from both here and The City, such as various mountain peaks. She silently took on the job, barely seeming to notice the commotion which prompted my departure. I left her side and quickly joined the others at the door. "What is it, Heppet?" I asked, though only needed a second to see for myself. Jyre staring up at the ceiling gave it away. "Oh my," I blurted.

"Jyre thinks we couldn't see it before because of the light!" he said quickly, nearly stumbling over his words.

"She may be right," I muttered as I went to the center of the room, peering up at it. "Why this is the same as the map in Daelus's tower!"

"He has a map like this too?" Jyre said, coming alive.

"Oh yes, but not painted on the ceiling! Yes, he and I both know this map very well. It is of an ancient city that vanished without a trace. My word...this map depicts this building as being in the very heart of it!" My mind was jumping with excitement as I realized that we had possibly found the source that the stones were reacting to. I knew this was no ordinary map on an ordinary ceiling in an ordinary house. "Here, help me with this chair."

I was on the crudely built chair and my fingers running over the painted surface. "Remarkable. Could it be...?"

I noticed at once that some of the abstractions around the depiction of this house were not merely decorations, but devices. Recklessly, I traced my finger over a pattern which encircled the house. I nearly fell off the chair flat on my back from the shock of what happened next.

The lighting changed. The dim red of the sunset vanished and was replaced by a disquieting blue luminescence. The ceiling painting ceased to be on wood, but on stone. Jyre screamed. Heppet called out in shock. I fell off the chair.

They helped me right myself, though I was barely able to take in their chorus of alarmed shouts. "I am not certain what happened," I said, but that was quickly becoming untrue. I could see out the open front door and windows, out into a wide city street, vacant, and an unearthly blue light bathing everything evenly, pouring into the room as if the light were liquid and not rays. The room was essentially the same, but actually completely different. The walls were beautifully cut stone. The floor was marble, and carpeted; the fireplace grand and ornamental. The chair I had fallen from was nowhere to be seen. The doorways leading to the other rooms were all still there, but rather than rickety wooden panels, they were finely crafted with

decorative inlays.

"James, what the *taff* just happened?" Heppet shouted into my ear while trying to calm down a very startled Jyre.

Captivated by the sight of it all, I replied, "I seem to have discovered exactly what was causing the disturbance. Apparently the entire cottage is actually an elaborate teleportation device. No, no, that is not true at all," I said, the reality of the situation sinking in. "We have not been teleported at all. No, we are merely took one step in a different direction...a direction *beyond our physical dimensions.*"

"That doesn't make any sense!" Jyre screeched.

"Indeed," I muttered, looking for something to stand on. "Heppet, please give me a leg up?"

He did so, lofting me just high enough to reach the painting on the ceiling. Quickly, before he could hold me up no longer, I redid what I had done before to trigger the teleportation. Nothing interesting happened.

"Clearly this was designed to go both ways, but the function of going back seems to be beyond me. Maybe in one of the books..." As I said this, I noticed that there was no bookcase. "Ah, never mind then."

"How do we get back? Where's Petra?" Jyre insisted.

"Petra was outside the cottage when we changed dimensions, so I imagine she remains there. Unless she can reproduce my action and follow us, all I can guess is that she will soon notice we are gone, and presented with no other alternatives, and no proof that we have either been killed or whisked away, return home. Gracious; poor Corinne. I do hope Petra is tactful!"

"How do we get back?" Jyre said, avoiding the windows like they were filled with ghastly, leering faces. I didn't blame her—the quality of light here made me sick to my stomach.

"I am not certain at all. However, where we are, we can be certain, is a very important element of our mission. After all, this was the great key that the cottage possessed. Whoever built it so long ago built it with the express purpose of bridging the gap between this world and the netherworld to which this ancient city was banished to. This is why Phaeros and Tempia lived there, and raised their children there."

"So what do we do?" she whimpered, glancing around in pandemonium.

"The same thing we were doing before. Observe. Analyze. Conclude. Come, Jyre, Heppet. I am familiar with this place. If you were ever to visit here, I cannot recommend better company than I."