

Abortion...

For a time, I lay in wait, moving when I dared, always hidden, always discrete. The time for that was over; the creation was before me. Quickly, I left my coveted place in the shadows and went to the table where it lay.

It was just as Viktoria of the Vines suggested; an atrocity against both chaos and order. It breathed, or seemed to, with parts moving slightly in rhythm. The limbs twitched lightly with senseless life. For an instant I pondered what it would be if this thing, this created yet living thing, was filled with the spirit the Fae Witch intended for it. Would it take servants or tributes? Would it have needs and desires? I doubted any of this; it would be a thing so alien as to be incomprehensible.

I uncorked the small black tube and then paused, looking for my target. On one side the chest looked to have been formed as crusted mineral growths in a cave, but curved gently to form ribs and a small rocky breast. On the other side, bits of ivory, and wood inlaid together with tiny strands of copper spaced evenly, again curving around the body as ribs, and then curling up into a spherical form to mirror the rocky one. It was between those copper threads that I saw my target, a black, leathery, beating heart.

I poured in the liquid. A stream of the clear stuff trickled over the copper ribs, dripping down steadily onto the heart. Plumes of vapor lifted into the air as the flesh sizzled and boiled away from the acid. The copper wires discolored, turning green, and then as black as the heart had been. The thick fluid which had been pumping into the creation now flowed freely onto the table, as the heart had decayed beyond the point of being able to contain it. Soon the thing's fluids emptied, pooling onto the platform beneath it and spilling out onto the floor. It had stopped moving, no more breaths, no more twitching. It was dead. Delphine's plans were at an end.

I had to escape quickly, and return to my Dryad. Its death would be apparent, and then a hunt would begin. Forgetting stealth, I bolted away.

Much sooner than I had feared, the Fae Witch's minions were upon me. The first who charged, sword slashing against air, found me upon him with my fingers grasping his head. A quick twist and his nerve chord was severed by his own vertebrae. The second dove for me just as recklessly as the first, but found only his partner's sword buried into his chest as I pushed the dead body against him. I was away from the first too, but more would come soon. I knew the way out.

Euthanasia...

"Where the devil are we?" Common Soore uttered restlessly. Els did not answer at once, for I felt he did not rightly know. Our attempts to follow the fae carrying the large spider proved impossible. They traveled at the speed of flight and used corridors adapted to ones whose travel was in three dimensions. We were pinned down for a time, and then realized that our window of opportunity had been lost. The corridors were filled with shouts of victory as wounded and battered pagans surged through the larger chambers, carrying with them trophies from the battle. Delphine's forces had been predictably victorious against Ranson's distraction, but unpredictably quick about it. As I observed those parading about, I reasoned that this group had possibly acquired the aid of other tribes for this battle, thus ensuring a quick victory.

We had finally escaped from all of that, only to find ourselves wandering what seemed like miles of forgotten passageway, lit only by our small torches. Without warning however, we were *somewhere* again, meaning we had either doubled back into Delphine's territory, or had come upon something totally new.

It was a long cavernous chamber, with the floor scraped smooth and bits of flame emitting from shallow holes cut into it. All around us were men and women, or creatures; some lying on platforms, some hanging from chains, and some standing perfectly still, all in some kind of trance. After I quickly scanned each of them I realized that these were human beings who were undergoing a slow transformation.

"I know this place," Els finally said, glancing to Soore, then to Rembrandt, and finally to me. "I am glad all of you can see this, now. This is what she did to Ranson. This was to be my fate as well. We've arrived at Barlosk."

Common Soore began, "But Barlosk is days of journey away. How did we...?"

"The portal, in the sewer," I replied. "There is no reason to expect a door that bridges through reality should have a range of mere miles. In fact for a time I was quite certain that we were no longer in The World at all."

"Yes, Memnon," Els said to me. "We are still in The World. Rembrandt, Soore, help me kill these things."

"I beg your pardon?" I blurted as I saw Els draw his sword and approach a woman on a table. In spite of the hair on her face and body, she was still quite human.

"We'll be doing them a favor," he said, and before I could believe what I was seeing, cut her throat.

"Hold on one moment, this doesn't seem right!" I shouted to him, running over to catch his sword arm before he moved on to the next one. "Are you just going to murder them all in cold blood?"

Common Soore hadn't moved to help Els, but he said, "Do it now when they're under and can't feel the pain, or do it later when they're awake and trying to cut your guts out. Assuming they die and not you, I'd say this is the

better way for them to go.”

Els just glared at me, not fighting back against my grasp, but not making any motion to continue. In spite of Soore’s agreement with Els, he wasn’t doing anything.

“Why’s this room not guarded?” Rembrandt asked out of the blue, as if he was unconcerned with what was going on here.

Slightly diffused, Els replied, “The guards are further up and back. This room was always kept silent and still—was supposed to be needed that way for the transformations. Now will you please let go of me?”

Sheepishly, I backed off, though I still felt that this was horribly wrong.

“Now listen, Memnon, I know for a fact that these people were forced into this against their will. They’re her experiments. Putting them out of their misery would be the most *right* thing we could do here.”

I found my voice again. “The city-dwellers were the experimental ones, and what she learned from testing on them was used to perfect the process she would then conduct on these, look—pagans. Look at the markings, and how they are dressed, and these scars here, and the sun-weathered skin. These are not her experiments; they are the fruits of the experiments!”

“Doesn’t matter an inch,” Rembrandt said, getting in between Els and his next victim. “It would be fun and all to watch Cap’in Els here go on a bloody rampage, but at the moment all you’re doing is creating evidence of our passage. Oh, look, everyone in this room is dead. Let’s put the entire place on alert and kill the murdering intruders. In case you never figured it out, us *sneaky* types avoid killing you *guard* types because we’re trying to avoid bloody footprints; not because we’re being *nice*.”

Soore’s arms were crossed, and his head turned so that all I could see was the eye-patch. “Memnon, is it because these people are defenseless, or because you see them as innocent?”

“Both! If they were in The City offsetting citizens, then I would be all for their removal by any means—but we’re in *their* territory. They’ve done nothing wrong. *I do not hate pagans*, I merely wish for them to stay away from us! By coming here and killing them, we’re doing—”

“Enough with the lectures and bleeding heart, Memnon!” Els barked. “Let’s go. Rembrandt is right. I just hope the *evidence* I’ve left won’t be noticed immediately.”

“So the question now is, back, or forward? Our mission is to kill The Lady, remember.”

“Forward. Maybe we can capture someone who knows where she is. Let’s go.”

We moved off. I wanted to thank Rembrandt, but I was certain that he was genuine about not actually caring if *anyone* lived or died.

Obituary...

"Do not blame thyself, Brother Thurm," Brother Oberon said to me with far more conceit in his voice than I wouldst have wanted to hear at a time like this. "Instead, praise The Builder that thee and Brother Tillus wert spared."

"And now?" I asked, expectantly. I was alarmed that of all the council, he was the only one present. Since it was not unusual for at least half the council to be at Soulforge on business at this time of day, I could not imagine what could possibly have made things so strangely quiet.

"A further expedition shalt be arranged to seal the hole and construct a chapel on those grounds. The road shalt be paved. I expect this expedition to get underway in no less than a month."

"A *month*?" I fumed with outrage. "In a month the entirety of the underworld couldst be unleashed upon us!"

"They didst not follow thee out, so I am confident that they shalt not venture out. Also, there are far more urgent matters here in The City which demands the full attention of our Order. I am afraid that this matter wilt have to wait."

"What matters couldst possibly—"

"That is *not for thee* to know. Also, thou art being reassigned. Thy new orders shalt be waiting for thee when thou dost return to the machinist labs tomorrow."

"New orders?" I said, taken aback.

"Yes. I cannot discuss it with thee now or here; perhaps tomorrow morning, yes in the morning. Now please, go back to thy rectory and get some sleep."

"Sleep," I muttered quietly. "What of services for our fallen? Surely we must honor them and retrieve whatever bodies we—"

"Duly noted; I shalt look into planning services when I am able. Thou art dismissed, Brother Thurm."

"Brother Oberon, *please*, where is Farther Rafael? Shouldst not—"

"Do not *concern thyself*," he said sharply with a glare. "Thou art *dismissed!*"

Disconcerted by Brother Oberon's rebuff I turned and left Brother Oberon's office. But as I passed through the cathedral halls I heard enraged shouting behind locked doors, thus I knew that something was terribly wrong. So I quickened my pace, departed, and headed home. In a short time I was back within the familiar halls of my rectory and then safe in my own cell.

While preparing to retire I admired how the evening light diffused through the colored glass of my cell's window when it was darkened by an odd shadow passing over it. Then I heard a knock. Alarmed, I went to the window and opened it. I found a man standing in the bushes outside in an unfamiliar dark uniform but with a familiar face. It was Sarievo!

"Brother Thurm!" he said in a hushed cry. "I wasn't able to catch you at the cathedral. Who did you talk to? What did you tell them?"

I was shocked, but still I replied. "I didst speak with Brother Oberon. I

tried to give him a detailed account, but he urged me on, stressing that his time was precious. He didn't seem at all concerned with I told him of all the men that we didn't lose, including Chispin, Ivan, and Daelus!"

"Blast and taff it; Oberon knows." He looked away, and then back at me, "What do you think he'll do? We can't let word out on the streets that Thresh is dead. It will mean chaos!"

"I know not..." I replied, growing more startled by the moment. "Please, Brother Sarievo, come within!"

"I can't. I need to go. I am sorry, Brother Thurm." At that, he was gone.

Chapter 18

Guests in Alien Realms

— Jyre: Myths Best Forgotten —

Day 7: 6:20 pm

I wasn't afraid. James said he knew this place, so I decided everything was going to be okay. Besides, I was numb with amazement at what I was seeing. It was a city so unlike *The City*, and yet, strangely familiar. The streets were straight and wide, always at proper angles to one another, not twisty and random like *The City*. They were hard paved with stone cut into perfect squares without any gaps between them, or cracked edges, or blades of grass sticking up between them. The stone looked like marble, but it wasn't shiny, and was more uniform in color. I could see where the square stones were worn slightly, rubbed smooth by the passage of thousands of feet and wheels over countless years, while other stones in less traveled parts of the streets looked newly faced and crisp at the edges.

The buildings themselves were tall and slender, and didn't bump into each other or try to compete with one another. It was all columns and arches and narrow windows that came to points at the top. Everything was white or shades of pale gray. There were no bricks anywhere, only the same square blocks as the street, but the ones on the buildings were slightly smaller and the gaps between the blocks even more invisible.

"It's so beautiful here," I remarked idly.

"I did not know you had taste in architecture," James said with a grin as he exited the house once more. We were waiting as he studied the map before we left, though I didn't have a clue where he intended for us to go. Maybe he didn't either, and that's why he needed to study the map.

"No I...I don't know what that is. I just meant...I don't know."

"There's a harmony to it," Heppet said, seeming just as amazed as I was. "Like everything fits, and belongs; and is peaceful, too."

"Indeed it is. Jyre, Heppet, do you see how the street slopes upwards in this direction," he turned, "and the way it moves in this one? Does it seem at all familiar to you?"

I just shook my head, not sure what he was asking. Heppet spoke up, though. "It's the same as were we were—the way the ground moves. That hill, there, and the dips in this direction, it's the same place, but the woods are gone and there's a city here."

"Yes, yes, correct. I had no idea, but we discovered the location of the city of Dereloth, or where it stood hundreds of years ago." There wasn't any excitement in his voice, in spite of his grin. Rather than the joy of discovery, there seemed to be a certain dread.

"Shouldn't there have been some ruins, though?" Heppet said, nearly spinning around as he looked all around him.

James began to walk. I could only follow. "No, because this city did not merely fall into rubble, nor was it swallowed into the earth in an apocalypse; it was erased from reality. But such an erasure cannot be complete. From there, it had to go *somewhere*, even *nowhere*. This is that *nowhere*. This netherworld is what became of Dereloth when it was removed from The World."

"But..." I said, looking at him, but had no idea what I was going to say. I didn't really understand. All I understood was that there was no echo when I put my boot down, and that there was no sun, no sky even, just a grayish blue color. Though it seemed dark inside the buildings, none of us cast any shadows. I was tempted to peek under my foot to see if it actually got darker where it came to the ground.

"There's no dirt. Everything is perfectly clean," Heppet observed, still looking around as we followed James like a pair of awestruck children. "Flowerbeds used to be here, even trees," he said, approaching a stone form that looked like it was once a planter; not a speck of dirt remained.

"Yes, the only things that were taken were things bent to their will. Plants and soil may have been willing co-existents, but if left behind they carried no mark. I imagine that these plants that used to decorate their street are what seeded the woods we were just in."

We continued to walk in silence. James didn't seem to be in a hurry, but he was definitely going somewhere. I gazed into empty windows as we passed, across small courtyards and bare gardens, through richly decorated fences of stone and metal, along with a smooth, slightly yellowish color material I could not identify. I thought it could have been ivory, but I had never seen ivory in pieces larger than my little fingernail.

"Whose will?" Heppet finally asked, and I realized I had thought the same question, but had been afraid to voice it.

James did not answer right away, but I didn't think it was because he couldn't remember. "The people who built the city of Dereloth were called the Bigeng. This city and everyone in it were banished to this place by the rulers of Karath Din, in league with those of Immacul." Did he actually expect me to know what any of that meant, or did he just say it to get me to shut up? I wasn't sure of it was it the strange non-light of this place, or if had James gone quite pale. His eyes darted around restlessly, quite unlike what I had quickly grown used to from him. He did not say anymore, though he did slightly quicken his pace.

"I think you're going to have to pull his teeth, Heppet," I said with a smirk.

They both laughed, which set me at ease. James's earlier calm had calmed me, but now I was starting to wonder how calm he actually was. With a knot slowly growing between my shoulders, I began to walk closer between them both.

The next building we past gave me that familiar feeling once again. It was comfortable and terrifying at the same time—had I seen this place in a dream? The building arched and towered high into the sky, much taller than many buildings in The City, except maybe in Dayport. In front of it were pillars, though they were holding nothing up. Across their surface was many carvings, some of it indistinguishable curved lines and dots, maybe writing, but some of it illustrations. Forgetting my earlier need to stick closer to the men, I wandered over to it, jumping a small gap that could have been a gutter or a planter, into the yard before the towering building.

It depicted men and women alongside strange beings, none quite human,

some fishlike, others looking like lizards, some horrible disfigurements with long pointy crab claws for hands and heads like bugs. Some looked like jacknalls, the boogiemen from children's stories back in my village. They were all together, doing various things in pairs that always included one human and one creature. I wasn't sure why, but I felt like they were worshipping some God, though that God was never shown.

"What is this? What myth is this?" I asked, sensing James's approach.

"It is not a myth, Jyre. It is not dissimilar to the displays in the Hammerite stained glass windows. The beings displayed here were depicting themselves. This building is a temple to Searowrenc, the Lord of Hurse. It is that unseen God that they worship."

"Beast-men lived in this city alongside humans?" Heppet said in astonishment.

"Once, when the temple was founded, they did. Though the beast-men were slowly (and unofficially) expelled, the temple hypocritically kept to their original ideals."

"Didn't the God become angry because of that?" I asked.

"There was much that the Bigeng did to anger Searowrenc. Come, we should not remain here." James turned and continued on his way, even though I wasn't satisfied. I had to follow though, since Heppet was leaving too.

"What did they do?" I called out.

"What angers a God the most?—Taking other Gods."

When I caught up with them I could tell that James was definitely moving faster now. "What other Gods did they take?"

He grinned, though it was not a jolly grin, "Things that were not Gods at all."

"We're pulling teeth again!" I whimpered.

"I don't know, Jyre," Heppet offered. "Maybe this is something we're better off not knowing." I looked over at him, feeling a little betrayed, but was reminded that this was no time for games by the look in his eyes.

"Just some stupid old dead Gods," I muttered, wanting to kick something in the street, but found the stones too perfect and clean for anything of the sort.

James spoke, but there was something haunting and unfamiliar about this voice. "*That is not dead, which can eternal lie.*—an old proverb maybe, but with a thread of truth to it. A God can never truly die, though we may presume to wish that they would. It stems from the fact that a God is also never truly born, nor alive in the same sense that we are."

I didn't continue the conversation; James was just rambling nonsense anyway. Even if Gods really existed, I didn't buy that crap about them caring about who worshipped them or if the people worshipped someone else. Why would Gods care anything about mere humans or beasts? No one ever cared anything about anyone beneath them. The more I thought about it, the more insane it seemed that people would actually believe there were higher beings out there that took some sort of interest in their lives. It was just some petty

need for people to feel more important than they actually were, like they were special or something. They wanted to feel like life had a meaning. I always hated those idiots; didn't they know that life had no meaning other than what we gave it ourselves?

In my brooding I discovered that I was trailing behind the others. It seemed like we were going nowhere. The road we were on was completely straight, vanishing into a haze both in front and behind. We crossed intersection after intersection, with buildings that were no two alike, but monotonous in their similarities. I did feel like they were getting generally taller, like we were moving into a denser part of Dereloth.

I had no idea how much time had passed. When we were in the cottage in the woods, the sun was going down. Here it seemed to always be twilight, only it was a gray, colorless twilight. For all I knew it was the middle of the night in the real world. I expected that I would get tired soon, but I was used to staying up all night, and had spent most of the time at the cottage lying around anyway, so it was no surprise that I wasn't getting sleepy.

We passed by a building which made me pause. It was smaller than the buildings around it, and set away from the road with a stone wall across the front of it meeting the two buildings at either side at the corners, creating a courtyard. The iron gate was wide open, and the front door beyond also open. There was nothing here—we were the only living things in this place—what was there to be frightened of? “Hey,” I just said to the men, and began to walk to the inviting door.

I didn't need them to follow, so I didn't turn to look if they were. If they went on ahead I could just run down the street until I caught up with them. As I passed through the gate I noticed how delicate the metalwork was. Bits of shiny stuff no thicker than flower petals formed into intricate curves and designs. I tore myself away and went to the door, a big heavy wooden thing not unlike the door to the house we had started in, but this one had carved panels of an intricacy which rivaled the metal gate. Each panel was an illustrated scene, depicting daily life, with figures carved so realistically I expected them to begin to move at any moment. Again, I had to tear myself away, and went inside.

The strange light existed within as well. The room within was square, with a door in the center of each wall. It was bare, simple, but I sensed that it was meant to be this way, not that it had been stripped or looted. A thing hung from the ceiling in the center that looked like it had been carved from crystals, probably a light source. Beside each door was a narrow tapestry, spanning the entire height of the wall, again depicting scenes just like the panels of the door had. I approached one, seeing detail that convinced me that the threads which made it had to be impossibly thin, if they were even threads at all.

I chose a door, and found that it opened easily. This room was similar, but had furniture. The furniture itself was far simpler than the decorations, each low to the ground and wide, with cushions placed on top of them where people could sit. Other than that, I could not tell the tables from the chairs.

When I walked around to one side, I saw something which made me stop for a moment; something out of place. A heap of fabric was on the ground. I went over to it, and picked it up. It seemed to be a robe, made for someone much taller than me, made from those same impossibly fine threads as the tapestries, with bands of decorative stitching flowing across its surface. An instant later I felt something fall from it, and when I looked to the ground, I saw what I could only guess to be an undergarment. I felt immediately troubled as I realized I was seeing several pieces of underclothes, along with what could only be shoes and stockings. I immediately dropped the robe to the ground with a gasp. My eyes darted elsewhere in the room and I saw similar piles of clothes, some even laid out in the shape of the person who had been wearing them.

"It seems that some were not evacuated," James said. He and Heppet had entered the room without me noticing.

"What happened to them?" Heppet asked, inspecting a set of the empty clothes just as I had.

For the first time, James seemed genuinely haunted. Again, I felt his silence was not because he did not know, but because he could not bring himself to say it. "They knew what was coming. Well, not what exactly, but that *something* was coming. Most fled the city, thinking to escape it. They could not escape of course...it could find one and all without consideration for their simple physical location. Some stayed, however."

"Why are their clothes here?" I muttered, wanting to phrase the question better, but too dumbfounded to get it out.

"A person's living body has a different metaphysical essence than stone or even a piece of dead wood or plant or animal fiber used to make thread for fabric. The force that swept over this place and expelled it from The World worked much more perfectly on the people themselves. They were *truly* swept away. Everything else, the buildings, the objects, the clothes, became stuck here, in between."

"But where are *they*. Where are all the people?" I insisted, growing frightened, though I didn't know why.

"The place the people went was an actual *place*, but that is really all I can say on the matter. Oddly, although it was a *place* I daresay that this no-place would have been much more favorable a locale for them. The few who wished to survive would have had to resort to cannibalism to do so, and even then the people would have only lasted so long, but at least then they could have died properly."

I retched at the mention of cannibalism. I couldn't imagine the people of a city this beautiful resorting to eating one another for survival. That was what barbarians deep in the woods did to other tribes they conquered, but I had only ever heard stories about that.

"What could they have done to have deserved that, and who could have made that kind of judgment?" I demanded, suddenly reminded of the way my village was just *gone* as well.

James sat down, like the weight of this conversation was too much of a

burden for his legs. "There are some things so unspeakably horrible, so alien to The World, that it would be better if The World ended than if these *things* were to be unleashed upon it. The people of this place were attempting to create a union with these *things*. There were those who did not wish for this to happen and it was within their power to prevent it, but by only the most drastic means."

"I think the people who did this were more evil than the ones who were trying to do that union," I muttered.

"Perhaps, but we have only one piece of evidence either way. The World still exists as a habitable place for mankind."

"I guess," was all I said.

"Is that why," Heppet began to say, and then stopped. "Is that why the pagan Gods and Goddesses often have a human or beast as an avatar, rather than entering The World directly?"

"Yes, though there are no rules that apply to the pagan Gods and Goddesses, and no two are remotely alike. In general though, yes, those being could not actually enter the world without either changing it, or changing themselves. By taking an avatar, they do a little of both; altering a piece of The World to suit themselves and altering themselves to suit the avatar. That is why every time a God or Goddess takes an avatar, even if it is essentially the same God, they manifest themselves in very different ways. It is a symbiosis between the Host and the God."

"But these people weren't doing that," Heppet continued. I wasn't sure how he always thought of such good questions.

"Both yes and no. Like I said, every situation is so different that it is hard to compare. In this case, that which they were attempting to form a union with required much more in The World to be altered than simply one avatar, hence the need to remove *everything* that these people touched, rather than merely the instigators. As long as one stone from their works remained, so did the influence of that which they wished to bring forth."

"Not Searowrenc," Heppet said. "The other God they worshipped?"

"Not a God, no; Gods, though they may be infinitely different from the living things of The World, are not completely alien to it. That is why we have Gods *and* Goddesses. The concept of male and female, which is natural to The World, is inescapable to these beings as well. In fact, it may even come *from* them."

"Can we stop talking about this, please?" I blurted out, feeling my skin crawl, and wishing James would stop talking about stupid things that I was determined to not believe in.

"That is probably best," James said with a small grin. "Also, I am uncertain how long a living thing such as you or I can actually survive here before our material, physical selves begin to rebel against the non-place-ness, but the fact that Phaeros developed a way to *get* here indicates that it is possibly just paranoia speaking."

"Is that where we're going," Heppet asked, "to find Phaeros? Do you think he's actually here?"

"I have no idea, but it seems like a good place to start. Who knows, maybe even Tempia. We shall see. Come, we must not dawdle. Even though it may not seem that way, I suspect that time is still moving by back in The World."

I followed James and Heppet back out into the street, wishing I had never let my curiosity get the better of me. Now I couldn't look at any of the buildings, into any of the windows, without imagining heaps of clothing laying there on the floor and furniture, marking the last place people stood before they ceased to exist.

When we got to the next intersection, James turned abruptly. Unlike the others, this cross-street ended in a large building, which was curiously lower than the ones around it. A big doorway beckoned straight ahead; it seemed that the purpose of this road was to lead us here. "What is this place?" I asked at once.

"Somewhere I suspect Phaeros wished to get to. If my hunch is correct, we may be able to determine why he wished so badly to reach Dereloth. Yes, it must have been an extremely robust imperative for him to do something which by all means should have been inconceivable. I wonder how he knew for certain that this non-place could even exist and by any means would allow him, or us, to inhabit it."

The door we came to seemed impossibly big, yet when James pushed (Insert comma) it opened smoothly. Inside was a long hallway that widened as it approached the far side, where another door stood. This one was even bigger. A path of stone blocks that were set lower ran down the center of the room from one door to the opposite one, with pillars on either side that went up into an arching ceiling. As we walked through, I began to notice that something wasn't right. There was a section of the ground that had been tarnished beyond the surroundings, but rather than being worn smooth, it was covered by thousands of evenly tiny dimples. I noticed that this was in a distinct trail, from one side of the room to the other, crossing our path. Where it met the walls on both sides, there was a distinct gap between the wall and the floor, that looked like it had been chiseled out rather than designed that way. It was as if an army of small creatures with sharp pointy claws had marched back and forth across the room from one gap to the other, always in formation, and always stepping in the same places.

James and Heppet had noticed it too, and were looking it over the same as I had been. James's eyes were wide, and his face had only seemed to grow more colorless. "What did this?" I asked him.

"Something on patrol; let's hope that it was made this way prior to Dereloth's banishment, and that the patroller is long gone. Come."

Just like the first door, this one rotated open easily when James pushed on it. Now we were in a round room, with corridors leading off in all directions. I counted eight. Immediately, I said, "It's just like The Circle."

"It is similar, yes," James said, the familiar grin finally returned to his face. "I am sure there is a good reason for that. Come, this way."

James led us to a strange room that was full of oddly shaped stones, strange objects hanging from the ceiling, and tables stacked with books and

scrolls and candles in various states of decay. As we walked further into it I saw that the floor was covered with various diagrams and pictographs, some carved into the stone itself, and some drawn on in thick powders of various colors. "This is quite unlike what should be here," James pointed out immediately before quickly going to one of the tables covered with papers. "I believe that we have stumbled upon Phaeros's trail, as I suspected."

I watched as Heppet made a perimeter around the room, looking around, inspecting everything, but touching nothing. James had not touched anything either, but was staring intensely at the table. Without cobwebs or dust, it seemed as if the room was still in use.

"This room was supposed to be a physical correspondence chamber, where groups from all over Dereloth and the other cities of the age could meet apparently in person, without going any farther than their local hub, or forum. I suspect that Phaeros hoped to use its existing abilities in perverse ways, taking advantage of the non-place-ness to touch other realms more easily and in unique ways. I suspect that it was here that the scroll was created."

"The scroll Ranson and The Lady wanted?" I asked, now feeling like I was no longer just a spectator.

"Mm-hmm," James replied, and then blew at the pages of an open book. He then gave a brief laugh, ran a finger down the page, and rubbed his fingers together, finding them perfectly clean. I figured it was an old habit—he already knew there was no dust here.

"James!" Heppet called out. "The same markings as in the other room, look, here."

James and I quickly went over, and found exactly what Heppet had said. There was a low crevice long the bottom edge of one wall, a river of the dimples, and another crevice at the other side of the room. "It is likely that we are not as alone as we would wish," James whispered.

"What is it?" I insisted. "And don't just say *something on patrol!* We're not stupid kids, we can understand things too!"

James turned to me, looking far more afraid than I ever wanted to see an adult be. "I regret that I actually do not know; only that it is likely to be something that Phaeros summoned during his attempts to create the scroll. The *being* he bound to it is not by far the only alien entity in existence. There are two possibilities; that whatever it was did this when Phaeros initially summoned it has been since done away with or contained, or that it has since then escaped from whatever confinement it has been placed in. Considering that the three of us are still able to distinguish between now and a moment ago, I'd say that time is very much alive and well in this non-place, and that at any point it could have out-witted whatever contained it."

Heppet spoke up, looking far more afraid than I ever wanted to see a *man* be. "Whatever it was, it has to be dead by now. There's nothing to eat or drink here. How could it still be alive?"

"You are assuming," James said, going over to a new table with as many books as candles, "that it follows the rules of life as we know it. It does not

necessarily need to consume plant or animal in order to sustain itself. It could dine on stone for all we know. Furthermore, it need not necessarily need to ingest additional matter in order to replenish itself, nor does it necessarily even need to replenish itself."

Heppet continued, "Then we don't really need to worry, if that's true, right? I mean, if it's lived this long without meat, then what interest would it have in us?"

"Need is not the same thing as want, Heppet. There is far more to a human being than simply meat. It could find amusement in our mental or emotional states, and take advantage of these things in ways that could be quite detrimental to our selves. In any case, we can no more assume that it means us no harm just because it has not met anyone for who-knows how long, as we can assume that going anywhere but here will take us farther from it rather than closer to it. The only logical course of action is to continue as planned, and be *extremely* watchful." I came up beside him as he flipped through one of the books, stopping at a page that was just as random as all the others, and considering it for a moment. If he could understand the gibberish on it, he was even crazier than I first thought.

"I guess. I'm just used to being able to know exactly what's going on around me." Heppet shifted uncomfortably, one hand under his quiver strap at his chest, and the other with his thumb hooked inside his belt. It was exactly the same pose he usually kept, but right now his shoulders looked about three inches more narrow.

James grinned, looking up at him. "Try to enjoy it while it lasts. Not knowing what's going on should be reacted to with interest, not discomfort."

"I'm going to look around," I said, going for the door. I was sick of seeing Heppet acting like he was scared, and even more sick of James not acting like he was.

"No you don't," Heppet said, racing around in front of me. "Splitting up? Are you crazy?"

I sighed and leaned away from him. "We came along to help James in the woods and in the cottage. Right now we're just bothering him with stupid questions."

"It should be possible to allow me to concentrate without actually splitting up," James called after us.

"And besides," I said, ignoring James. "I know you're a scaredy-cat, but I *want* to see what this thing is."

"I do not recommend that, Jyre," James called out from across the room. "Though normally I would applaud your curiosity and bravery, I feel that at the moment neither would serve you well."

"Well before you said there was a good reason that this place reminded me of The Circle. I want to explore some more and see if I can find some clues. Is *that* okay?"

"Jyre, come on," Heppet said, urging me to back away from the exit, but not actually touching me. He knew what was good for him—I could take him.

That's when I began to hear a noise. If the place had not been perfectly

silent except for us three, I might not have noticed it, but as soon as I stopped talking I heard something in the distance that sounded like *tekeli-li-tekeli-li*. Heppet had heard it too. I could see it in his eyes, though instantly I no longer blamed him for being afraid. I felt my pounding heart grow cold.

I twisted around quickly, just in time to see James *quickly* move away from the table and utter "Go, to the door, now!" I could not see anything, but there was now a powerful smell, like nothing I had even sensed before, that seemed to cut into my nostrils like needles.

We rushed into the central chamber, and turned quickly to go back into the streets. Unable to stand it, I turned to look at what we were running from. I saw a black slick flowing across the floor of the laboratory like water; but it was not simply flowing. I could see that it was hovering above the floor, standing on a mass of hundreds or thousands of little pointy legs, chipping away at the stone as it moved. At the edge nearest to us, the surface was bubbling, like boiling oil, but from each burst bubble came a tiny green stalk, each curving slightly in our directions.

It had been a mistake to look, because now I was dizzy with panic. Twisting back round, I cut into a sprint, but a moment too late I realized that I had broken off from James and Heppet, who had turned one direction, and I, blind in my panic, had turned another. "No, Jyre, this way!" James shouted, but it was too late. The thing was filling the room and breaking into long slithering pieces as it chased after us. I had to keep running.

The room I had run into was the same shape as the first too, but I was too busy to worry about anything but the door I saw directly ahead. I got to it and pushed, only to find that it wouldn't budge. The creature flowed in, a mass of tendrils, no, it was just dividing itself into extended streams sliding around obstacles rapidly as it sought me out, the constant *tekeli-li-tekeli-li* emanating. James and Heppet's conversation was still fresh in my ears; what could it possibly want to *do* with me? My mind swam with recollection of some other horror, something that clung to the back of my mind like a forgotten nightmare I had just woken up from, which was now somehow playing out before me.

Just then I remembered, *in*, not *out*, and rather than push on the door, I pulled. It came open easily, and no sooner had I gone through was it shut behind me. I didn't think the thing had hands. No sooner had I let out a breath of relief, I remembered the crevices at the base of the walls. I took off, glancing behind to see a row of black bubbles bursting at the bottom edge of the door, those thin green stalks twisting around to follow my moment—the things *eyes*.

As I ran, trying to get a sense for where this road might meet up with the one James and Heppet were probably on, I gave a cry of relief as I saw Heppet charging for me. "It's behind me!" I screamed at him in panic.

"What?" he shouted, his voice tinted with terror. "It's behind you? It's behind me!" He was right, I could see the extended eye-stalks just inches behind him as he ran full-gait. I nearly stumbled and fell with the shock of being surrounded, but the feeling of it looming behind me and the insipid

tekeli-li-tekeli-li drowning my ears propelled me forward. “Up!” he commanded, suddenly cutting to the left, towards a nearby building.

I cut right, but felt something burn like fire around my leg. It had a green stalk wrapped around my ankle. I fell hard to the ground, catching myself before my chin slammed into the stones beneath me. Losing all sense, I spun around, seeing the black shape rearing up from its tiny legs, looking like a misshaped carpet of spinning, twisting needles looming above me. I could not even cry out in fear, all I could do was be overcome by some memory of being swept away by a mass of tendrils that wrapped around me and pulled me from the ground, towards some dark, foul source that regarded me as no more than fly to pull the wings off of.

I blinked. Heppet lunged at it. He bounced off in a splatter of black slime and the thing paused for an instant, letting go of me. He fell and rolled, just as the part of the creature that was chasing him collided with itself, only making it swell up and merge. I was back on my feet, up on a windowsill, and frantically trying to find something higher up to grab and hold onto. I looked back at Heppet. He was trying to get back up, but dozens of the green stalks were wrapping around his legs. He was cutting them with his machete, but I could see that wherever one touched him, it burnt right through his pant leg and left dark gashes on his skin. I felt myself locking up, unable to go forward, but helpless to do anything for him.

He was screaming, fear mixed with determination. It reared up before him, any moment going to pile itself back down with all of those needles against his body. Where was James?!

It wasn't over him yet. I didn't know what else to do; I couldn't even think. I jumped. I landed on it in the same splatter of slime, causing it to fall back to the ground. It was too close though; it still caught his legs under that field of needles. He still had his wits about him; even though he was pinned to his back. He cut madly at it with his big knife, though it moved to avoid the blade more often than he actually cut it. I tried to roll off of it just as he had done, but I felt the razor-like pain of the stalks grabbing a hold of me. With a powerful kick Heppet had the creature off of him, freed. The force of the blow threatened to push me free, but only made it hold on tighter. I fumbled around my belt looking for my own knife, unable to remember where I had put it in my panicked state.

Heppet had my hand and was cutting me free of the stalks just as quickly as new ones went around his legs. By then I found my dagger—stupid, it was strapped to my thigh—and cut as well, finding the stalks surprisingly easy to break with the blade.

I was free, but it would be impossible to stay free; it had him again and by the time he was free it would have me again. “Start climbing!” I yelled, going back towards the building.

“I can't!” he screamed back, now trying to cut himself loose. It was starting to rear up again. I didn't want to imagine what it would do once it had one of us smothered under it. I didn't just cut, that was too slow. I reached out with both arms and began pulling the stalks off of him like I was

clearing weeds. They stung my arms with every stroke, like I was being lashed, but I was getting them off. He was doing it though, moving bit by bit to the building, and hoisting himself up. It already had too much around me by the time he was off the ground, but he kicked and kicked at whatever I couldn't cut or pull off myself, until I was climbing too.

We were escaping, I told myself over and over, willing my arms the strength they needed to reach higher than I thought I could and pull faster than I thought I could. The blocks of this building could not be scaled—they were too tight, too regular, the gaps between them impossibly small. We both had to go for any bit of decoration or molding or designed edge. Suddenly thoughts of Daelus's tower flashed into my mind, how impossible it would have been to scale the tower without the rope arrow, but the lower parts I could climb, because it was decorated so similarly to this one.

I glanced over my shoulder, to make sure we were actually escaping. I saw it still below, not chasing, but the green stalks quickly going along to every place where a drop of our blood fell, rubbing against it until the red was gone. By the time we were halfway up the building, the streets below were again spotless. The black splatter which we had knocked free of it had slithered to rejoin it. Even the bits that had gotten on us were mysteriously gone—it must have rejoined it during the struggle.

Soon, but far later than I had wished, we were on a balcony, panting for our lives. Heppet reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing. I put my other hand on his weakly, and then let go. I hoped it was the only thanks he would need.

"Wasn't as bad as I had thought," he said with a laugh.

"It's probably still coming," I said, straining myself to get up and look over the ledge. It was down there, but wasn't necessarily coming for us. Its green stalks, which it seemed to use for everything, were still searching out the stonework, maybe looking for more blood, maybe content with sweat as well.

"It's not a climber," he said, his voice still shaking.

"How do you know?" I insisted, my own voice shaking.

"Well wouldn't it be climbing after us by now?" he said, almost a whine.

"It is," I said flatly, watching below as it slowly reared itself up and pressed itself against the wall, oozing upwards, "slowly though."

"Taaaaaaff," he cursed, getting up. He didn't need to say anymore; I almost beat him to the door leading inside.

The halls inside were confusing, little ones connecting to big ones that didn't seem to have any function or purpose. We saw a stair, and went up it. "Where is James?" I said again, feeling more and more like doubling back to find him would be impossible.

"He was right beside me, and then uh, I..."

"You what?—you left him to go after me?"

"Yeah," he said. We were on the roof of the building now. It was tall, and had an astonishing object on the far side. It looked like a boat, only the bottom wasn't pointy to cut through the water, and a big but delicate metal frame over the top of it hooked onto a fat cable which spanned out into the

distance over the city, until it vanished into that same un-seeable haze that had obscured the ends of the main street before. "What the taff is this?" Heppet said.

"How should I know? So you just left James? He's got to be still in trouble!"

"We're still in trouble!" he shouted. He was right; I could see the green stalks poking up above the parapet of the building. Worse, it wasn't just on the side we had come up from; it was appearing on all sides. It had the building surrounded. A stoke of agony flushed through me as I imagined the entire building encased in black sludge; I had no idea how big the thing could get.

Heppet grabbed my hand, and I didn't protest. We ran for the boat. Jumping in, it gave just slightly, and I realized that it really was hanging from the cable, not just attached. "We don't know what this thing is!" I demanded.

"What does it look like? It's got to be some type of sky-boat. Help me with this lever."

I did, even though I protested. "Maybe this is the lever that makes it drop from the cable and smash us all to the ground!"

"Why would they make a lever like that? This has to be the release!"

"Machines like this need electricity!" I insisted. "It won't work!" I could see the green stalks over the edge of the boat; it was on the roof and coming fast.

"You don't know anything about machines!" he hissed, pushing and pushing at the lever, but it was no use.

"Neither do you!" I said, seeing what I could only guess to be a safety latch. I kicked hard against it, and then Heppet fell as the lever went free, smashing his face into it.

I think I screamed louder than he did. An instant after the lever was pulled, the boat was in motion. The building and the green stalks were just a blur behind us. I lifted up, peeking over the ledge, to see the city below flying by beneath. In all directions I saw towers and domes and arches, until that same blue haze, which I understood now to be the same as what I saw in the sky above, swallowed it all up.

"I don't get how we're going up," Heppet said, as if the fact that we had escaped wasn't good enough for him.

I just pointed where the metal framework met the cable, with a box of spinning gears and smooth discs and parts that rocked back and forth quickly. "Magic," I just said.

"It's not magic," he insisted. "It's...it's got to...I mean, we shouldn't be able to go this fast uphill."

"So it's magic," I just said, falling to my back. "Shut up. If you keep thinking about it, it will stop working and we'll fall and die."

He fell to his back too. The boat was big enough to hold maybe four people, so there was room. "Once this thing gets to where it's going, we'll need to go back and look for James," he said. "Maybe by then it will have forgotten about us and moved on."

"Or maybe it's traveling along the cable right now. We are the only lunch it's seen in like a hundred years or something. It probably won't give up."

"You're such an optimist."

"Is that like a dentist?" I replied dryly. I glanced over at him. "You busted your lip on the lever."

"Yeah—Gods, as if that was the only thing wrong with me. Come on."

I looked down at myself. One of my pant legs was completely gone below the knee. All over my legs were streaks from where it had touched me; they still hurt. They looked more like burns than cuts, like I had been whipped by a red-hot lash. "Probably be scars," I just remarked impassively. The marks were all over my arms and hands too.

"Yeah; every time we look at them we'll remember that thing. Hey, at least we match; sort of like we got tattoos together."

"Maybe," I said just as impassively, though I knew that he was just trying to be a friend, or something. I was too tired and too empty to really respond to any of it. I lifted myself up and peeked over the railing, expecting to see the city continue to zoom by, and remarked about how this city was probably bigger than The City. This one actually had a name, too: Dereloth. Instead, I shrieked and fell away from the edge.

"What?" he shouted going to the edge too. "Taff the Gods!" There was nothing in all directions but the one we had come from. I could still see in the distance the edge of the city, where the ground just ended at the edge of the last structure. Everything else, all around us, with the exception of the cable, was just blank; same as the sky, same as the haze.

"Where are we?" I said; not sure if I wanted to start bawling or shiver with fear or force myself to remain calm.

"Didn't you listen to anything James said? This *really* is no-where. There's the city and then just...nothing.—No-place."

I looked farther over the edge than I dared. "No," I said, feeling the urge to remain calm steady. "There's a road down there, so we're going somewhere."

"Yeah," he replied, as if he had thought of it just as I had, "and this cable has to go somewhere."

"It'll still be nowhere, just a different place in the nowhere." I sat back down. I couldn't stand to look into the nothing. It made me feel like I was dead.

"I wonder where we'd go if we fell off...I mean; would we just keep falling until we died of thirst?"

"Shut up!" I screeched. "Don't you dare—I'll have nightmares for a year!"

"Oh come on, as if you weren't going to already after that monster."

"Seen worse," I whispered, though I didn't know why. I just felt like I had.

Several Minutes Prior**— James: The Duel —****Day 7: 8:20 pm**

As soon as we were out the door, Heppet dashed off in the direction he thought Jyre would be. I did not protest or call out after him; in fact, he was doing exactly as he should do. On the other hand, I could not spare any faculties towards the assessment of their probable route of escape, should they, and I felt that they would escape, when facing the dilemma of how to convince this creature to leave me in peace to continue my exportation of Phaeros's work.

As Heppet ran, the form of the creature, which I felt obliged to designate 'The Patroller,' split in two, though I noticed did not ever completely divide. I was uncertain how distended it could become, but it seemed to be unable to actually divide itself, at least not willingly. Naturally, the part that continued to pursue me made continued observation of Heppet rather difficult. A wave of fetid air only hastened the urgency of my departure.

I quickly scanned my surroundings, attempting to identify a utility or depot which could be of use to me in detaining The Patroller, but the only one that seemed of use remained the one I was currently fleeing from. I hoped that if Jyre and Heppet were departing in the opposite direction, soon the creature would reach its maximum distention, and be forced to choose the direction that would yield two subjects, rather than merely one. It seemed cruel to prefer this, but the fact was that both of them were far more spry than I, and when it came down to speed, stamina, and agility, they stood far more of a chance of evading it in a direct physical contest.

Unfortunately, I was on the main avenue, so I could simply run straight ahead with The Patroller chasing after, whereas they could potentially become cornered in the intricacies of the back roads. The point was moot; I had no choice but to continue running until beyond the point of exertion. It was a good thing too, for in my state of nearly blind terror, I doubted that I could do more than merely run straight ahead.

In time, the mad piping which emanated from The Patroller grew fainter, and as I willed myself the courage to look behind, saw that it was indeed withdrawing. This was no time to halt my flight and double back, however, as any sign of doing so would surely cause it to reevaluate its choice to let me go. Thus, I continued to run in indulgence of my life-preservation instincts.

When the sound of piping could be heard no more and the sensation in my legs informed me that I soon ran the risk of simply falling on my face, I allowed myself to slow and take stock of my surroundings. To my great astonishment, and with the help of my excellent spectacles, I noticed in the distance that a cable I had noted earlier was indeed attached to a sky-dingy (usually pronounced as one word) and it was currently in motion. The only possibility was that Jyre and Heppet had used it to escape, either through a stroke of brilliance or extremely charitable providence. As commendable as my optometrist was, spectacles were not a spyglass, and by the time I did

manage to fetch my spyglass out of my pack and raise it to my eye, the sky-dingy was too far off to make out its passengers, if there were any.

Still, it was inconceivable that any but Jyre or Heppet had launched the vehicle without deliberate effort, and doubtful that one would leave the other behind. I had anticipated, but not counted on, the two developing a strong bond and I was confident that one would not abandon the other, especially after the way Heppet had rushed off to save her. Them abandoning me, well, that was a different matter! I feared we were even in that regard, however. An instant of persistence with the spyglass put to rest my contemplation, for I spotted a pair of dark dots appear which could only be two human heads. Satisfied that my companions were safe, though on their own for the time, I put away my spyglass and began to walk.

In short order I was back at the Dereloth Hub, my wits strained to the verge of madness attempting to ascertain the potential whereabouts of The Patroller. In my solitude, while preparing for the next encounter, I searched my knowledge for any information which could be of use against something so alien. I was, not surprisingly, coming up blank. A more pertinent concept for me to consider was how Phaeros dealt with it once it was summoned in such a way that it could eventually escape. The recreation of a condition by one ignorant of Phaeros's considerable skill and arcane knowledge was not something that could be counted on, but in my list of possible things to do next, that was the highest. Of course should I need to flee again it would not be distracted by more tempting targets.

Upon reentry I found the place quiet. I was unsure if the creature was compelled to produce its piping, or of it could be silent if it wished, or if the piping was no more than the vibrations of its locomotion, but nonetheless, quiet prevailed.

Certain that Phaeros, not to mention Tempia, would not have limited his conquest of The Hub to one wing, I ventured into another of the eight. As if led by intuition, I found myself in the remains of a menagerie, or more appropriately, a menagerie of remains. Within was numerous enclosures of all shapes and sizes, all constructed by means no doubt as mysterious as the means used to summon the creatures within, all of which were no more than corpses, or at least living things that posed as extremely convincing corpses. On further inspection, I found that most of them could no more be identified as dead by the virtue that they did not move as a small tree could during the freeze of winter.

Only a few resembled animals as I would know them, the rest odd conglomerations of matter which could no more be conceivably built, as could have grown naturally. I did not know what Phaeros's intentions behind this collection were, but it was possible that he was much better at bringing things *here* than he was at sending them *back*. My only comfort was that he had the sense to conduct his experiments in this netherworld, thus keeping The World safe from whatever he happened to unleash.

I found what I was searching for, behind two glass cages which looked to contain something between a legged orchid blossom and the frothy residue of

a sulfurous pit. (The two creatures—if they were such—appeared to be possibly from the same planar origin and were similar to one another in the way a dog was similar to an opossum; both seemed to be made up of the same stuff, but the proportions were slightly different.) I tore myself away from the curiously distracting specimens to what I had really wanted to examine, the possible confinement that The Patroller once enjoyed.

It was no more than a circle of inscriptions on the floor, with a diameter of about a dozen feet—possibly the creature's minimum size. The inscriptions most likely summoned up a powerful energy barrier that may have been the only form of confinement that would restrict The Patroller's movements. Considering that a physical cage was useless against it, the way it moved through the walls of The Hub was proof of this hypothesis, adding a physical cage around the one of energy would have been mere decoration.

I had several questions to consider. The first, how did Phaeros get it into its confinement in the first place, I could possibly never know. The second, how did the creature escape; I could possibly learn by inspection. Magnifying glass in hand, I studied the markings. It was a regular pattern, suggesting writing, but in spite of my working familiarity with Phaeros's utilization of languages, I could make no sense of it. It could have been words of power far beyond my own rudimentary understanding. I was no magician, after all.

Then I observed how blind I had been, or how stupid Phaeros had been; certainly this energy barrier prevented The Patroller from merely sliding across the floor, but what protected the stone directly beneath it from its invading passage? I set my eyes upon the interior, chiseled and chipped and dimpled as it was from many years of punishment at the 'hands' of The Patroller's needle-like feet. I quickly discovered that within the roughly three-hundred-and-fifty square-feet encompassed by the barrier, a crevice about the size of my flattened hand existed between two blocks. It might have taken some time, but I was certain that this was the mode of escape. It was possible that this had not been an oversight on the part of Phaeros; perhaps he merely needed the prison to hold for a certain amount of time? I felt that was as unlikely as his stupidity.

Another mystery remained; if The Patroller merely left the enclosure by going through the floor, why was the barrier no longer active? It occurred to me that the barrier might be tuned to this specific creature, and would only activate when it approached. Energy, even magical energy, had to come from somewhere and was not unlimited. It was likely—and Phaeros's style—that the barrier was designed to sap energy from The Patroller directly to fuel it. That could also explain why the stone floor was left exposed to its burrowing ability; the sapped energy could have weakened it to a point where it required decades to complete its tunnel. Maybe he did not expect it to live that long? I was uncomfortable with the idea of such a creature being imprisoned in such a way that would only last decades and not for all eternity, but for all I knew Phaeros had much more important things on his mind than one roving beast's escape forty years in the future. Just because it terrified me did not mean that Phaeros would regard it as any more than a

nuisance. He was, as I continued to remind myself, a magician.

I only needed to contain the creature for a thousandth of that amount of time—assuming I could leave this place, something I had no working hypothesis for accomplishing—but producing another energy barrier, much less coaxing it within, were not feats for one such as myself. An absurd thought came to me, which only compounded my hopelessness of returning The Patroller back into its cell; I had not yet seen the entire size of the thing. There was no reason to believe that it merely sat flat against the ground while in its cell. It could have occupied the entire volume up to the ceiling. The idea gave me chills.

I could not capture it, but could I kill it? I thought of the arrow, designed for a very specific purpose, but decided against it. There was no way of knowing if the forces of order and chaos held any sway against such a thing. I might be able to find something in Phaeros's laboratory to destroy it, but all I recalled seeing were scholarly affairs. Destroying it seemed unlikely. What, then, about simply leading it to a place (a silly concept, here!) from which it could not return? I surmised that should I reach the edge of Dereloth, I would discover naught but a vast infinite emptiness; no, infinite is the wrong term, for there cannot be an infinity of nothing, or can there? It was no time to internally debate the paradox of infinity versus nothing; it was time to begin pondering how to lure The Patroller off the edge and into that *infinite nothing*.

I gave a sigh of exhaustion, and lifted myself up from where I had crouched after wiping the sweat off my brow. My eyes twitched with the distant sound of the insidious piping. I had run out of time.

I spotted crevices at the bases of the walls where it would probably enter, and hid myself so that there was no line of sight to any of them. It could have been entirely futile. What mode of sensory perception could such a thing employ? If it did employ sight, hearing, and smell, would they be far beyond human capacity, or far below? I could not assume that my own senses could be a benchmark, for my idea of remaining perfectly silent could be an orchestra of deafening bodily noises to it. Furthermore, why limit to the human senses? Possibly it could detect brain activity, or heat, or any number of things unknown to modern science. I knew I was trying to occupy my mind to quell my fear, but it *wasn't helping!*

A thought occurred to me, and far from being another attempt at distraction, it was crucial to the matter at hand. If Phaeros had bent the function of this building to the purpose of drawing extra-dimensional life forms out of their respective realities into this place, then it should be possible to bend it until it broke. To what end? I did not know, but it was preferable to investigate!

I sensed that the piping had moved off; it had not returned to this room after all, though it was certainly afoot. I quickly made my way back to the study, pausing warily at each junction to listen for The Patroller. Once inside I shoved books and candles clear of the control panels. The language of the Rivata was based around The Mysteria, words of power that could reshape reality. It was a precursor to the modern-day glyphs. The control panel was

created in this way; to the unknowing it would seem to be nothing more than strange writing etched into the stone. I quickly saw that Phaeros had done some modifications, by chiseling out some characters and blocks of symbols, and scratching in new ones with what was probably no more than a soft rock he found.

I would not be able to revise the controls nor Phaeros's modifications of them. I did not possess the knowledge. What I could do, however, was corrupt it so that something probably *bad* would happen. I found the symbol for unity, a common enough example of *Mysteria*, and set about scratching it out. I should not have been surprised when it was not easy; it had probably taken Phaeros hours (if not days) of work to chisel out the unwanted passages. I didn't need to remove it, however, just *break* it. After working incessantly with my pocketknife, all the while my ears honed on the slightest sign of piping, I had corrupted the symbol to the point where I felt it had been rendered useless. This station was now unlinked from the others, the redundancies would no longer be in place, and whatever damage I did would not be corrected by any of the others.

I pushed anxiety and the need to rush far away, and studied the rest of the control panel for an inkling of how to do what I wanted to do. If this was the *real world* (real here being a substitute for *one I am the most familiar with*) my plans would most likely lead to catastrophic results. Here, I suspected equally catastrophic results of a far more passive nature. I felt that there was a limit to what could exist here, and was in fact counting on the results of this corruption being among those things which could not exist.

My hands followed my eyes from one *Mysteria* to the next, attempting to fathom its function, and then moving on. Most had no direct translation into the modern tongue, no more than the technological nomenclature of a Hammerite steam-engine would have a translation into the tribal chants of a pagan tribe. I spared most, scratching out only ones that seemed core to not the function, but only to the safety precautions.

The purpose of this place and the devices within was, of course, communication, to allow individuals to appear to be somewhere else, with an illusion so completely it might have been teleportation. The truth was that the result of the powers of the *mysteria* was teleportation, and the difficulty was reining it back so that it was *not*. The Rivata did not wish for Dereloth officials (or anyone else for that matter) to have the power to actually *teleport* from one part of The City to another. That was a power they reserved for *themselves*. The explanation of course was that this was for their own safety—if projecting your person into the next district's hub were true teleportation, you ran the risk of being taken prisoner or assassinated. A mere projection was perfectly safe, and thus diplomacy between the districts of Dereloth was possible.

I knew what the devices *could* do, but it was not my goal to simply teleport The Patroller into a neighboring district's hub, no matter how far that may be, it no doubt would find the way back far sooner than I would like. No, I had to push it farther, farther even than Phaeros had pushed it when he

had repurposed the devices into summoning. Of course he had pushed it with the precision of a *surgeon*. I was doing it with a *maul-axe*.

It was coming; I could hear the piping growing in volume. Was it merely patrolling this way, or did it know I was here? I assumed the former; otherwise it would have detected me in the menagerie. I could not experiment or test my alterations. I could not risk tipping The Patroller off to what I was doing. I could not fathom its intelligence; I did not want to underestimate it.

I could tinker no further; my alterations would have to stand. I had only to activate it at the right time; if I even understood how to do that! I would have to leave myself an instant to run, in case it all failed.

I saw it coming, spilling out from the crevice under the wall. It hastened over the floor with deftness in the path it had worn over the years. If it merely went on its way, it would avoid the center of the room where the projections would be focused. However, I would not have to worry about luring it; green stalks rising from its surface indicated that I had been discovered.

It was coming for me, piping a chant of enthusiasm. I had to wait until it was entirely within the ill defined region encircled by the workstations. I wished I had chosen one of the other chambers to do this work in, one with a larger projection floor, but I felt the alterations that Phaeros had already made were integral to my goals. I scratched the horribly dulled pocket-knife blade into the stone in an attempt to add extra line into the integral Mysteria which would cause the entire system to enter into a feedback loop—at least in theory.

It was speeding across the floor now, ready to reach out for me at any instant. I would not be able to wait for it to be entirely within the space. I had to risk it now; I strained my heels against the will to run, and passed my palm over the activation script, and watched.

It was difficult to observe exactly what happened; light was not meant to interact with such things and so looking only made me dizzy. The piping continued, but distorted into what I could only hope was either shock or pain. When I blocked the center of the room out of my vision with my hands, I saw the tail end of The Patroller reeling away, gushing black tar as it went as if it were water leaking from a pressurized pipe. Coming to my senses, I deactivated the device.

When I felt comfortable looking back to the projection floor; I found, much as I had guessed, that it simply was not there. The disorienting effect left by the utter nothingness, nothing compounded by nothing—as if my mind could wrap itself around such an idea—did not register as darkness or whiteness; but rather a stain on my vision left by whatever my eyes had beheld last, though rapidly decaying into chaos as my visual receptors had nothing to latch onto. It was not as alien a visage as when the device had been activated, but it was still completely foreign to both light and vision. It had done what I had expected it to—as if I had any reason to suspect anything—the feedback loop of the teleportation system created a hole in the

fabric of reality, as the contents of the platform were repeatedly teleported back into itself at a million times an instant before all of the substance completely broke down. As I had imagined before, were this to be done in the real world, there would be an extremely serious problem. Here, which was nowhere, it merely resulted in...To be honest, I wasn't even sure. My best guess would be a new state of nothing, which makes nothing appear to be something—I would have to consult some texts on philosophy and metaphysics in order to get a clearer idea.

Avoiding the hole as one might the lip of an active volcano; I navigated the edges of the room in search of the remains of The Patroller. I quickly found it outside the chamber, soaking in a pool of its own fluids, lying quite still. Based on how much was left of it and how I had never before even seen the entire body of the thing; I could only guess that the vast majority of its body had joined the stonework in oblivion, which seemed like a good name for what was more no-where than this netherworld. I thanked the physiology of the creatures of its native land that the destruction of part of it resulted in the death of all of it, before realizing that it could still be only stunned, and I had no reason to suspect that it wasn't working to heal itself and resuming whatever business it felt it had with me.

Though apparently victorious, I couldn't stay here. Touching the thing could possibly rouse it, and any attempt to shove the rest of it into the hole was suicide. I would take whatever books I could carry from Phaeros's study—if I could stand to be in there with the hole—and depart for greener pastures, so to speak. I only hoped that The Patroller would not be able to track me, if it was not actually dead.

Earlier...

— Lytha: The Good Priest —

Day 7: 6:30 pm

Cool, dusty quiet; even, smooth stones, covered by deep red carpet. Tapestries and drapes framing tall windows of small square panes allowed in beams of dim, golden light to illuminate it all. The dust played gently in the air, every speck unaware, uncaring that the proper direction was to fall down to the floor. The door at the end of the hall opened, heavy old wood resting lazily on thick iron hinges which groaned under the weight as they twisted. A man stepped through, frail fingertips barely touching the curved handle. With a gentle twist the door slid slowly closed behind him, the hinges groaning back to rest and the clasp clicking into its familiar comfortable place.

This man approached; his slow stride firm and steady in spite of the frailty of his hands. His legs moved unencumbered by heavy robes, wearing instead a simple priestly tunic which came down only to above his knees and of a color that matched the carpet and the drapes. The hood was down revealing an aged, pink face with wisps of white hair encircling his head like a withered crown. In his other hand he carried the beads of a rosary, habitually

turning them between his fingers.

My mind slipped into his like a glove; by now that was as habitual as the turning of his beads. I had done the same with every man we had come across to this point, slipping into their mind, triggering some need to be elsewhere, or simply making them blind to our passage, so that we were able to slip through unharmed, or more importantly, without harming them. Now it was his turn, but for him it would be different; he would be allowed to see us. He was the one we had come here to see: Brother Ymar.

Quickly I was reminded of the other powerful Hammerite minds I had been inside, but strangely found his utterly different. It was as a built structure, crafted with order, symmetry, cascading on to great depths, and yet apparent in entirety from a single glance. I found myself utterly disarmed; the hatred I held washed away in an instant, so thoroughly that I wasn't sure I had ever felt it at all. I found myself traversing corridor and stair and across beams and over arches around and around inside his mind in perfect tranquility.

I felt the tension in my body dissipate; my shoulders and back softening, as a calm swept over me. I wondered if I had ever known what calm was like until that moment. Then I remembered; I was here for a reason.

I found his inner dialog, and listened. I found his eyes, and saw. He was headed to the fount at the front of the cloister to do the daily blessing of the water. He was unable to focus on his prayers today, though he did not know why. Then, he saw me, his eyes lighting up just as my image flooded into his mind. The tranquility trembled, but did not shatter. First he saw me as an intruder, as a source of possible danger, noting the hooded cloak that covered my eyes and shoulders, and the weapons hanging from my belt and strapped to my leg—a flash went by and he saw me as a woman, noting the slightness of my jaw, the curve of my hips, the fullness of my breasts—then as quickly as the first thought vanished, the second did as well, replaced by a simple curiosity for a human being who stood before him. I was impressed at how quickly he sorted through his animal instincts, and returned to the simple tranquility.

I will not call for the soldiers, nor grow defensive, he thought to himself, *until I understand why she is merely standing before me silent.* “Is there something I may do for thee, child?” he said in a voice that matched the strength of his stride, rather than the age of his trembling jaw.

I willed for the hatred to return, feeling like a traitor to my own heart, but I found it would not. He was not like the other Hammerites, I convinced myself, and yet none other is more Hammerite than he. “Yes,” I said, and then pointed with my arm outstretched to a closed door beside me. “I have brought you a poor man in need of The Builder’s grace.”

He turned to look at the door, but made no motion for it, instead folding his hands before himself with the rosary between them. *Not an ambush*, he thought to himself, *she knows I would be helpless against her if she wished me harm.* “I understand that you are taking the only path you feel is possible, so I will not spend our time with questions. Please, take me to this poor man.”

I felt questions flowing out of him even though he chose not to voice them. *Why did she approach me in this way? Who could this man be? Why did he not come to me directly at the chapel, the rectory, or at the font as I blessed the water? How did one such as her get so deep within the compound?* I ignored these questions; I would not have answered them even if he had asked. I opened the door, allowing him to see into the darkened chamber within. He knew well where it led; a private study room lined with books, and hesitated only for a moment before walking inside.

I closed the door behind me, locking it with the key I had stolen earlier. He did not panic at the pitch blackness. In fact I found his continued calm nearly alarming, as if he held some secret plan to save himself that I was powerless to discern. An instant later I found I had uncovered it, leaving me at once disgusted and impressed—*I am the good servant of The Builder*, he felt deep in his very core, *none can truly do me harm*. As alien as it seemed to me, I knew that this faith was imperative to his ability to actually do what Ghost and I hoped he would be able to do.

A moment after the lock clicked firm, a spark lit a narrow stick, and a pair of reddened gloves carried a glowing bit of light to a candle's wick, and then another, and then a third. Ghost's face was revealed, and then his body, and then the table at which he sat and book laden walls that surrounded us. He reacted to Ghost almost as he had to me, but without the alarm, and far more faintly. "Hi," Ghost said bluntly. "So you're Brother Ymar?"

"I am," he said, and then before he could continue, I interrupted.

"Have a seat," I told him. He did so, sitting at the small round table, barely large enough to keep the two men's knees from touching. I stayed behind him, between his back and the door, not because I felt I needed to keep him from escaping, but because I didn't want Ghost to rely too heavily on me for this. I needed to focus on what was happening outside of the door, and make sure that anyone who came looking for Brother Ymar would forget that this room even existed. If I was drawn into a complex discussion, it was likely that I could miss something. It was still very uncertain as to how the death of *It* was affecting my abilities.

"I have a little problem, you see," Ghost began, "well actually a big, big problem, and no offence, but you're my last resort."

"I wilt see what I can do," he said.

"I mean, I know I should have just come to someone like you in the first place, but seriously, guys like me don't usually talk with guys like you, know what I mean?" he said with a faint, nervous laugh.

"Ghost," I simply said, pleadingly, and then slipped into his mind like a hiss into his ear, "*get to the bleeding point!*"

Ghost shifted uncomfortably and continued. "Okay, so, I have this curse. I got it when I was stealing from the Alarus Tomb, cut open a mummy, and stole this from the guts of a petrified old lady." He put the star on the table with a faint thud. It glowed like it had fallen from the heavens in the candlelight. I felt the priest moved by its beauty, but only for an instant, and then all was quiet again. "And now every night the dead rise and chase after

me, and, well, there's really no *and*—that's about it. I don't think I need to really go into what would happen if they caught me."

"I do see," the priest finally said. "And thou dost hope that I can rid thee of this curse?"

"That's the idea. I've sort of run out of other options."

"Hmm..." the priest hummed, bringing his hands together before him on the table, the rosary still grasped. "I wilt help thee, for I have no desire to have the dead ever walk the earth, but I do not know how difficult this wilt be."

"Well, I have my schedule clear. If you need to send me off on some quest to find some rare plant or artifact or something to help you; whatever—let's get this done."

"No, my son, this wilt not involve such pagan practices...prayer is the answer."

"Prayer?" Ghost said, scoffing.

"*Do you want his help, or not?*" I hissed into Ghost's mind. That shut him up.

"Yes, prayer; 'tis the only way the power of The Builder may overcome such a curse. I suggest meditation to accompany this prayer; the purest form being the stacking of one brick upon another, to form a wall."

"Building a wall isn't going to get rid of this curse, old man!"

"Thou art correct, it shall not. I am beginning to suspect that prayer may not be helpful to thee as well. A drink of water may save a man dying of thirst, but it can do naught for a man with no mouth!"

"Let's get out of here. We're wasting our time," Ghost said, getting up.

"Stop," I said, and wasn't sure if it was the force of my words or if I had actually mentally forced him to sit. Feeling around inside the priest's head, I felt I understood what he was saying in a way that his manner of speaking couldn't convey to Ghost. "Brother Ymar, my friend does not understand the way you speak, or what you are speaking of."

"I see. Ghost, it is not simply a matter of curing or removing thy curse. Thy soul must be first cultivated into a form which would allow the blessings of The Builder to take foundation, so that he might build a wall in thy *heart*, forcing this blackness from you. There is no simple quest or deed or *spell* which can accomplish this. Thou must first learn the nature of repentance, and then thou must learn how to be repentant. Until this is done, nothing can be built within you, for the land would be uneven; un-firm. Then thou must learn how to *ask* The Builder to find thy soul to be good, firm soil. After that, it wouldst be up to Him."

Ghost was devastatingly disappointed. Without thinking, he assumed that the priest would wave some wand or ask him to drink some holy water and all of his troubles would go away. He didn't realize that this, being the surest path to success, would also be the most difficult. It was possible that I had not realized this either—it was only clear to me now because I had one hand in Brother Ymar's mind.

"Okay, repentant. I can do that; it's just like being sorry, right? I am really

sorry I stole this stupid star. It's caused me so much damn trouble and I never even wanted it anyway—just the money for it! Can you do the prayer thing now and get rid of the curse, or what?"

The priest shook his head, and I found myself tempted to do the same. I wanted to speak for him, feeling his words flowing through his mind with perfect clarity, perfect organization, but I remained silent. "No, thou art only sorry that it hath caused you trouble, and that thou hast not gotten the money for it thou wanted. This is why I told thee, thou must learn *what* repentance is."

"This is going to take a long time, isn't it," Ghost said. "In fact; next you're going to tell me I need to become a novice or something and attend class, or something stupid like that, right?"

"If thou dost wish to be free of this curse, that is one possible path, but it still would not guarantee success. Only thou canst determine the levelness and the firmness of thy heart."

"Hey," Ghost said, looking up to me. "You can do mind things. Can't you go into my head and firm and flatten things out?"

"Maybe," I said, "but not without turning you into a mushroom. And besides, he's not even talking about what's in your head, he means what's in your heart."

"Boy, are you sure this mind stuff doesn't go both ways? It sounds like he's gotten into your head more than you are in his! I know what a heart is; it's a muscle in your chest that pumps blood. This firm and level crap is just nonsense."

I wanted to punch him, slam him against the wall by his throat, and cut gashes into his cheeks with my nails, but I wouldn't have done that even if the priest's mind hadn't been so soothing. Ghost was right, of course he was affecting me, but that was the whole point. The link could not exist at all if it couldn't go both ways. "What Brother Ymar means by *heart* is that part of you somewhere between your intellect and your appetite. Maybe conscience is a better word for it; am I right, Brother Ymar?"

The priest nodded. "Yes."

"But maybe..." I had a horrible thought, and squashed it, disappointed that my lips had taken hold of it before my better judgment could stop them.

"What? What maybe?" Ghost said quickly.

"There canst be no shortcuts, no tricks to quickly fix this," The priest said. "I believe firmly that thou canst be free of this curse, but thee thyself must change irrevocably if this is to occur. Thou must become a *good man*."

I wanted to reach into the priest's mind, scoop things up with both hands, and put them into Ghost's mind. Maybe things would take shape, and it would give him the understanding that he needed. I knew better, though; it would be strange unfounded thoughts and concepts without meaning or purpose, useless to him. On the other hand, it could drive him mad. I was afraid the priest was right; there could be no shortcuts here. The only way for the Builder's magic to help Ghost would be if he became a Hammerite himself, if unofficially, still in heart and soul. I did not think I could bear that. I could

not let him make the choice for himself; he wouldn't know what he was getting himself into. He would become a stranger to me.

Still, I found myself trying. Bit by bit I collected the essence of the priest's serenity and fed it into Ghost. At once I could see a change come over him, his gaze softening and his brow smoothing out. Then I began siphoning the orderliness, letting it flow into Ghost's subconscious like a flood; but one that creates rather than destroys. But then, quickly, it all disassembled, toppling into chaos as Ghost's mind rejected the foreign architecture, flushing away until nothing was left. I could have kept trying, feeding more forcefully, trying to overcome this natural defense, but I was afraid of hurting them both. I did not know what it would do.

A specific thought might help, a thought small and simple enough that it wouldn't be rejected, but would propagate itself and take hold. I searched for this idea of repentance, prodding and coaxing it to surface to the priest's consciousness, so I could scoop it up and move it to Ghost, like a handful of water.

I felt that I had it within my grasp, and then, sure of it. But what I thought would be a pour of water into my cupped hands became a fire that spread up my arms and dug into my heart. I was nearly pushed off my feet as it hit me, and yet, it was not the thought plucked from the priest's mind that had done the striking; it had all come from within me. I felt myself drowning in the memory of the slayings, the butchering, the killing in cold blood at the temples, the poisoning of the minds at the castle, even my revenge upon the Inquisitor....

I nearly let out a wail of remorse before I could push the thoughts away, wanting to drop it like a hot iron, but finding that it had already fused in place, my hands unable to let go. The next thing I knew I had Ghost on one side of me, Ymar on the other, both trying to help me from the floor. I tried to push them away, but felt too exhausted to manage anything but a feign attempt. As the shock subsided, the feeling of remorse did not. At the same time, I could not help but think that if I still had *It* within me, I would not have been defeated by a mere thought. Then, the remorse doubled, horrified that I could have possibly felt a desire for *It's* return.

Soon I was resting in the heavy wood of the chair. "Someone had to have heard her cry out," Ghost said, looking to the priest. I felt a genuine camaraderie from him to the old man, a trust, weather Ghost knew it or not. He was right; I could feel several minds homing in on this area of the compound, but felt powerless to stop them. Every time I tried, I felt the remorse lashing out at me.

"It was a bad idea," I whispered too faintly to be heard. The priest got up, and opened the door. Ghost nearly leapt to stop him, but then halted, overcoming his instinct. He saw the way the priest tended to me in my moment of weakness—for that, the man had earned Ghost's trust.

Ymar spoke to those who had gathered outside. "Brothers, worry not, for a penitent in my care hath merely cried out in repentance. All is well; ye need not attend to this." I heard some muffled replies, and then he came back,

"Thank ye brothers," and closed the door. He then turned to us, and said quietly, "There, we shall not be disturbed. I fear this matter may take some time..."

I looked at him, and then looked at Ghost, and then looked at the door. The sensation was fading, the priest's power over me, which I had now decided was the cause of the pain, was subsiding. I could feel the minds around us again, and feel control over their awareness. "We're leaving, Ghost," I said, getting up suddenly.

"What?" Ghost said, shocked. "But I think we were really close to—"

"No, we were far from it...very far from it."

"Lytha, please don't go," the priest said, his hands on my shoulder and Ghost's.

I froze as a surge of panic tingled down my spine. "You know who I am?" I said, my eyes meeting his.

"Crap, we're taffed!" Ghost said, but I held my hand up to him to stop.

"I suspected at once, and as we talked, I grew more certain; the final straw was the way thou reacted as I attempted to pull from my mind what words could not express, and the way thou reacted to it."

"You could feel what I was doing," I said, feeling the panic mount, but rendered frozen under the strength of his grasp, and the serenity of his mind.

"Not at first, but as I understood who thou were, and thou delved deeper, I began to understand what this presence was I felt within me. Do not be alarmed, my child, I meant thee no harm. It was not my will that thou be overwhelmed."

"I wasn't overwhelmed," I whispered, suddenly feeling more vulnerable than I ever had at the mercy of the whips.

Ghost just glanced back and forth between us, confused over why suddenly this was all about me. "So, uh, about my curse?" he uttered, almost a whimper.

I ignored him. "Brother Ymar," I managed, summoning ferocity to my panic, "If you know who I am, why haven't you had me destroyed?"

"I am a healer, Lytha, not a condemner. Mine path is of mercy, of reconciliation, not justice or vengeance. I know of what is said of thee, and yet I cannot fathom a demon within thy heart. I canst not imagine that the woman I see before me was responsible for the alleged deeds mine brothers speak of."

"It's a trick, Lytha, a trap or something," Ghost said, not even believing his own words, but saying exactly what the voices in my head would have said if they had not been silenced.

"I promise thee, I offer no traps. Search my mind. Thou shalt see that I am genuine."

"Ghost, calm down please. You were ready to trust him before. Why, not now?" Ghost didn't answer, just backed off slightly. I met Ymar's eyes steadily, gathering myself up to say my final piece. "Brother Ymar, it's all true. There was a demon within me, but it's gone now. You are wrong; I am responsible for it all. My hands are bloodier than any soul you are likely to

meet in your life. I am not here for myself; I am beyond your aid. I am here for my friend. You can still help him.”

“I can still help thee both,” he said, without a moment’s pause. “And, possibly, once that is done, thou canst help me.” I felt a fear rise within him; a buried dread rise to the surface. It was not aimed towards us, but I could not discern where.

“So, you’ll help us first, and then you want our help? What could a Hammerite possibly want with people like us?”

“People like us, thou say?” Ymar replied, lifting a hand to his chin. “There are only *people*, the *types* are illusions. Remember, my son, dear Lytha; the block that The Builder discards can become the corner stone.”

“How will you help us? We already decided that to break Ghost’s curse it would require he be immersed in your beliefs, but I just don’t think that ever happen.”

“Thy gift can provide for us, Lytha. We have already seen what I can do for thee...we shall take the next step. However, we can not continue here, now. The sun is setting, and I fear we have many hours of work ahead. These halls are not so holy that the undead would not disturb us. Please, meet with me at Soulforge tomorrow at dawn, and we shall see how to set all right. I shalt prepare a room for us where we shall not be disturbed. I trust thou shalt be able to find me.”

As he spoke, I felt something else behind his words; there was more to his plan than he was letting on, but I believed his aim was still not to trick or trap us. He was afraid of something, something very close to him, something he did not understand at all, but kept him up at night. Maybe he thought I could help him piece together the puzzle, allow him to discover what he knew was wrong, even though if he did not consciously realize it.

“We will meet you then, Brother Ymar,” I said, looking to Ghost, who nodded solemnly. He was disappointed, but was going to have to get over it.

— **Nightfall: Heart of a Goddess** —

Day 7: 6:30 pm

I heard a long, howling cry echoing in the distance. It sounded like a woman, calling out in despair, as if for the death of a child. I saw at once that my escorts had vanished from my sides, and when I looked to see where they had gone, I found myself totally alone in a wide corridor that was suddenly quite dark. A second cry came out, following by faint sobbing.

“Hello?” I called out, but only heard my voice echo into the distance, followed by silence.

Having no other choice, retreat meaning venturing back into miles of labyrinth, I ventured forward, nearly blind, until I saw a light shimmer in the distance. As I steadily walked towards it, it seemed to grow no closer, remaining merely an obscured blur of an image which cast hardly any glow on the cavern walls around it. I gained speed feeling nearly back up to full strength, hoping that I was seeing an optical illusion and that I was in fact

growing closer to it. I could feel a soft rumble in the floor, not like a tremor, but like something heavy was being moved nearby.

I quickened, and found that while the source of the light ahead was finally growing near, I was having difficulty focusing my eyes on it. It was not a single point of light, but an opening into a lit area, and it seemed that some sort of glazing that covered the opening was obscuring what was beyond. At last when I came to it, nearly dizzy from being unable to focus my eyes, I quickly discovered that if I unfocused my eyes and relaxed my vision, I was able to see through the opening perfectly.

I was looking into a large cavernous chamber that was illuminated brilliantly by various glowing crystals which jutted out of gaping cracks crisscrossing the walls. In the center of the room was a table, on which laid what at first glance seemed to be an assembly of rubbish, which upon further study seemed to be laid out in the shape of small a person lying on their back. Various flexible tubes trailed off from the table, to a part of the cavern I could not see from my vantage point.

I searched the glazing for a way to open it, but found it fused to the rocky walls at all edges. It was firm, so firm that when I pushed on it I felt as if I were pressing against solid stone. It was a material of immense hardness or its thickness, impossible to discern visually.

From the side opposite the trailing tubes, a woman entered the scene, her gait quick and stiff. Her head was bare, the smooth white scalp nearly glowing in the light of the crystals, and her lithe body wrapped in just a simple cloth, sheer enough that her silhouette could be seen when she passed in front of one of the glowing cracks. She was rushing to the side of the thing on the table, and began to work. I could not see the details of her actions, for I was nearly level with her and my view provided no vantage point for her hands as they actively rushed about the thing on the table, strain of concentration evident in her neck and forehead.

Then I saw the source of the rumble, as a dozen stick-like creatures dragged, their wings beating madly to ease the weight of their load, a massive bulk into the view, so close to the woman one of them nearly collided with her as she worked, seemingly oblivious to her company. When they moved away from it, dispersing into the air and out of sight, I realized with the twist of my gut that this was the remains of Gin'Geen'Ginin.

No, not remains, still she moved even as fluids drained from her body from the deep cleft my blast had left in her, legs sweeping gently to find their rest. It was not the thrashing motions of a dying beast, but possibly the longing for rest of a being who knows its end is near.

Before I could ask myself what this woman meant to do with the Goddess of the weavers, I saw her go to the side of Gin'Geen'Ginin's head, where the hole revealed her twisting innards, standing where two missing legs would have been. Quickly she took her long dagger, and began to cut at her body. It did not seem to be the actions of one trying to slay an enemy, nor a surgeon attempting to save a life; she seemed to be merely digging, cutting wider and wider the hole, to reveal more and more of the soft, squirming interior.

I watched, transfixed by horror and fascination, as the woman began to delve her entire arm into the Goddess's head, eyes closed, feeling for something with her fingertips, and then, blinking her eyes open for an instant as she found it, pulling out her prize. A throbbing mass twice the size of her hand was lofted high, and then the dagger quickly trimmed it of its many tubes and vessels which still connected it to the Goddess's body.

She set it down before her, arms slick with black juices, her garment sagging, weighted down by the filth, and began to carve into it with a new, clean knife. She worked quickly, hands twitching with speed, cutting off chunks and trimming off parts, until finally she uncorked a jug and poured clear fluid onto the mass of flesh. It could have been water, or some type of cleansing acid, for it was washed clean. Then she poured the fluid over her hands and arms, and resumed work.

With a needle and thread now, she stitched the pieces back together, turning it and folding it, her hands jerking back and forth so quickly they seemed a blur. In moments she had it nearly reassembled, almost no parts left behind, but now a mere fraction of the previous size. It also now held a familiar shape; that of a human heart. Without pause she went to the assembly on the table, and began working upon it again. I realized that she was undoing some of what she had done before, opening the tubes back up, making them ready to receive their new heart.

Finally, with her speed suddenly slowing to near stillness, she gently laid the heart into the chest of the assemblage. Resuming her speed, her needle and thread worked to switch the connections back into place, before her tools were harshly discarded and her hand, palm open, hovered over what now seemed to be an open ribcage. I could see her lips move, and then a light from within her mouth, which sunk into her body, illuminating from inside her skin as it slid down her throat, and then trickled through her veins down her arm to her hand, where it seeped from her fingertips. The woman's entire body seemed to lengthen, growing in height by almost a foot, even her face stretching. For a breathless instant I thought I could see many pairs of eyes flutter open and shut in rows down her cheeks. Even though all had been silent since the initial scream, I felt sure that I could hear—or maybe just feel—the beat of a heart.

She nearly collapsed, falling to her knees, catching herself at the edge of the table with her arms wide. Quickly she raised her body, which had now returned to normal, and moved to the end of the table, where the thing's head rested. She swept her still glowing fingers over the rounded wooden form that made the crown of its head and the entire body began to stir. Its back arched slightly; its jaw opened as if to take in its first breath in many minutes, and then it relaxed.

Tears now flowed freely from the eyes of the woman, though her body was steady and her lips tightly shut. She moved back to the side of the table, and turned knobs and worked mechanisms to slowly rotate the ribcage closed. The assemblage continued to stir, as if it were breathing heavily. She ran her hand across what I could only guess was the cheek, before turning to

it, to attend once more to Gin'Geen'Ginin.

With my attention on her, I had not noticed that the goddess was now nearly motionless. Her remaining legs were limp, and a great pool was now forming beneath her as her blood trickled away. The woman folded her legs beneath her, sitting, both arms wrapped around the spider's head, pressing her cheek against the body near one of her big lidless eyes. With her own eyes closed, I could see her speaking. Though I could not hear a thing, I recognized the movement of her lips, repeating over and over, "Thank you, thank you."

Time went by, and as the assemblage's movements grew more regular, more clam, Gin'Geen'Ginin's movements vanished altogether. Suddenly I saw a change come over the eight domed eyes, and though it was hard to perceive, I felt certain that the goddess was now dead.

The woman still rested there, still clinging to the spider's body, the pool now surrounding her folded legs.

The room quickly began to darken, or rather, the glazing beneath my spread palms began to cloud. Surprisingly, it did not grow simply opaque, but assumed the likeness of a smooth stone wall. I realized then that I had never been peering through a window at all—it had only been an image, not unlike a fortune telling mirror.

I immediately felt a presence behind me, my thoughts jolted to the here and now by the say-so of the circlet at my brow, and when I spun around, I found that was in a room quite unlike what I had traveled through to reach the viewing portal. I was in a simple earthen chamber aglow by a bed of fungus which coated the floor, decorated lavishly by simple drapes which encircled and crisscrossed the chamber, and moved slightly in some unfelt breeze.

A voice, belonging to the silhouette of a woman vaguely visible beyond the flowing cloth, said simply, "Welcome."

The woman, the very same woman, stepped into view, still dressed in the shear wrap, though now entirely clean, and her head adored by silvery white hair that covered her ears and forehead, and most of her shoulders. "Lady Delphine," I said, feeling the adrenaline coarse through my veins, but remaining still, only to give a slight bow of my head.

"Yes, though you are not, I believe, whom others have claimed you to be. The weaver mother Gin'Geen'Ginin believed you to be Kt-ith-rhk, but she was ill-informed. My father told me many stories of Kt-ith-rhk, and though your bear his scent upon you, I know that you could not be he."

"Your father?" I asked, still motionless, though she had taken several strides to approach me.

"Yes, my father, Phaeros Kendrick. I can see in your eyes that you know this name well."

"I do," I said, my conversation with James rushing though my mind, trying to piece together how this changed what we thought we had known.

To my alarm several creatures rushed into the room. They were just like the ones who had carried the spider Goddess, only waist high, like children of

their species. They carried with them several trays, laden with generous amounts of what my nose told me was food. A growl from my stomach nearly demanded that this be true. "I understand that you have had nothing to eat or drink for some time. Please, sit, eat, allow yourself to recover your strength," she said, in a voice that grew more musical with every phrase.

Two of the creatures, which I supposed to be fae, stood before me, holding aloft two wide trays that looked like they had been grown from crystal. One had slices of meat, appearing almost raw but with steady wafts of steam rising from them, a clump of light brown mushrooms laid in broth, along with an assortment of green vegetables which I could not immediately identify. The other tray had a tall goblet of the same crystal, full to the brim with a pale, clear, yellow liquid. I saw that Delphine was also being served, though her meal consisted of only the mushrooms, and a cup just like mine.

She reclined against a thick portion of the drapes which spilled over the floor, lying on her side, with her tray before her. I did not do the same, instead sitting cross-legged on the ground with the tray in my lap, after taking it carefully from the fae's hands. It had looked as if they were ready to collapse under its weight at any moment. Free of their load, they flew off, in a direction I noted, should I need to suddenly escape.

I had no utensils to eat with, but my stomach didn't seem to care. I was eating long before any warnings of poison entered into my mind, and by then it was too late, so I simply continued to eat, my thoughts occupied only with trying to recall my last meal, assuming I had even had a last meal at all. I couldn't remember. None of it looked like anything I would care to eat, even the meat could have been from any number of creatures I'd normally consider forbidden to consume, but all of it went down easily thanks to my ravenous hunger.

When I looked up I saw an amused look on her face, which she did not dismiss in spite of the undoubtedly confused look on mine; it only seemed to grow, in fact. Her plate was already empty, and her goblet half drained. Reminded it was there, I took it to sip, discovering it to be a sweet wine-like drink.

"Thank you," I finally said, attempting to wipe my chin with my hand.

"Watching your hungry enthusiasm was thanks enough. I am thankful that you are not one to talk while eating—something I find quite rude. But, now that you seem finished, it is time to talk."

"I imagine you want to know who I am and why I am here," I offered.

"Quite, but, since you are my guest, I will allow you the first question."

I was not anxious to tell her, but I hoped that if she had already decided she knew that, she would have told me. I was being put farther and farther off guard by her hospitality—I knew it—but considering my exhaustion, hunger, and lack of a plan, I felt powerless to do anything but succumb. "What did I just witness?"

She grew solemn, fixing her eyes on the wall before which I had been held transfixed, as if to tell me that she understood my question in spite of her long silence. "The events of several hours earlier; so, that you could see the results

of your handiwork.”

I was silent, again uncertain as to how much she knew about me.

“We knew something was afoot when the portal was activated, the one you used to escape the wicked beast. We also knew that the Hammerfools had uprooted the guardian tree. It was the quick wit and instinct of my children which led them through the realm of the weavers to their dying goddess. She had shut herself away from her own children, unwilling to let them see her in her state of defeat, but her cries of sorrow led the fae to her. Rather than finish off their hated enemy of old, they decided to bring her to me.

“It was very good of them. Though the weaver mother was dying, I soothed her pain, and she spoke to me. She told me of you, and the Hammerfools, and the wicked beast, and all that transpired.

“But then something dreadful happened. An assassin, sent by another Goddess, the Trickster’s Bitch, destroyed my life’s work, and my mother’s life’s work before me. With corrosive poison, he burned away the heart of my child, leaving it for dead. As I looked before the dying ruin of my most precious love, I knew only one choice, a choice that my fae, and that *you*, accidentally made possible.”

“So you took the heart of Gin’Geen’Ginin and put it...” I trailed off, unsure of what to call it.

“Into my daughter, yes; and, it worked.” I could see heavy, painful joy come to her eyes as she began to speak softly. “It worked. Her life was saved. They tried to kill her before she could even be born, but they failed. She lives, and soon, she will be born.”

“This...daughter....You built her?”

“That is a new question,” she said, the emotion fading from her eyes, and her shoulders relaxing. “I must ask you, now. There are many questions I could ask, but many I know half-answers to. I seek a full answer to a question that I cannot fathom the answer to. Why were you with the Hammerites?”

My stomach clenched, ready to rid itself of the strange meal I had just devoured. I should have been prepared for it, and readied a suitable story which would make sense given what she knew, but I had no idea how much she knew, and thus no idea what sort of story she would be believed. If she caught me in a single lie, she would know to distrust every word, every action. “If you are truly Phaeros’s daughter, and you know who he was and what he did, then you should already understand why I am with the Hammerites. Did he ever tell you of the two rules?”

She smiled a wicked smile, though the look in her eyes seemed to be one of conspiracy, not of cruelty. “So you *are* a delegate, just as I had guessed—nay—*hoped*.”

“Is that a second question?” I asked, managing the smallest of sly smiles.

“No, nor have you finished answering mine.”

“Very well, I shall lay things plain for you. It is our business, as delegates, to infiltrate society and ascend to places of influence and power, so that when the Rivata come to rule, they may do so invisibly, with the delegates as their

hands, eyes, and ears. That is why I was with the Hammerites; I was merely doing my job."

"I see," she said coldly, bringing a hand to rest upon her hip. "And yet you are no Hammerite. The way I understand it, if a delegate were truly doing his (or her) job, he (or she) would have become a Hammerite, and ascended to the position of High Priest, one way or another."

"We do things how we must," I simply said, unwilling to discuss the finer details with her. "And are you following in your father's footsteps? Do you wish to rule over all pagans to complete Phaeros's objective? I do not know how the Rivata would feel about that."

She laughed bitterly, but I did not sense it was out of anger. "I imagine the Rivata would care little for the work of a half-breed such as me. Only those of pure Rivata blood are delegates."

I was taken aback by this comment. I did not know if she meant it idly, or if she was being completely serious, but the tone of her laugh told me it was the latter. "Delphine, I do not know what it is your father taught you, but you have to know that what you are saying is meaningless. To be half Rivata...it is...*truly*, it is of *no* consequence. The ones you know as the Rivata, we delegates, such as me and your father; we are men and woman no different from the people of this age. The same blood runs through us. We are not creatures from another realm, nor are we a special breed of men from this one. You are, or were, a daughter of mankind, Delphine, not a crossbreed between man and Rivata."

She rose from her place of rest, her clothing shifting to cover more of her legs but less of her torso. "Delegate, I know what my mother taught me, and I see very well that it is wisdom un-beheld to you. Though you do not use the words, you speak of anatomy, of genealogy...yes, I know of these things. Do not think me as such a savage. What you must understand is that these ideas hold no true meaning. It is the opposite of what you say. If a Hammerite were to take a woman of my tribe, or any other tribe, sect, or clan of the woods and bear a child with her; would this offspring of theirs be anything but a half-breed? Would anyone alive today look at it and say, I look here upon the face of mankind? No. Of this I can promise you, and if those words were uttered, it would be a lie from the heart. It would be neither Hammerite nor Pagan, and bold in its un-belonging."

I did not argue further. I was not here to debate, and I felt that moment by moment she was distracting me from something vitally important. Until I could have a glimmer of what that was, I continued to play my role. "What you speak of is chaos. In this reality, it is not what physically *is* that matters, but only what is *perceived*. You speak of belief as taking precedence over reality."

She shook her head, and approached me slowly. "No. I speak of belief *as* reality. And this has nothing to do with chaos. This is the farthest from chaos that there is in my life."

"One mind's order is another's chaos," I said, and surprisingly, saw a smile come to her face. "I am sorry to question what it is that defines you."

She slid down to where I sat, her legs folded beneath her, close enough to reach out and touch me. "I would expect no less from a delegate. You are...of able mind, but much is hidden from you."

"Do not confuse our occupation with our race. Delegates are handpicked, and our employers delight in keeping things from us. In fact, I am sorry to continuously contradict you, but you have to know that no delegate is truly, in my *belief*, Rivata. We are *slaves*."

She had inched closer to me now, hand reaching out in a gesture that almost seemed compassionate. "And what do you think my people are, delegate? What of the Hammerites? Both are *slaves*, no less than you are."

"These are people who prostrate themselves before a higher being. I mean nothing of the sort. I mean slave in the sense that one man is slave to another. We are not the true Rivata. They, the five, are the delegate's slave drivers."

"And are these five slave drivers...in fact, men?"

"They once were."

"And I was once a woman, delegate. I am now a Goddess. And in being a Goddess now, it means I always was one. Those who would call me slave driver now lay prostrate before a Goddess. It is no different between you and them. In being their slaves, you are Rivata."

"But that is..."

"Delegate, please," she now held her hand at my lips, "you should know by now that using reason in a discussion with a pagan Goddess is like attacking an air elemental with a shape blade. It will only frustrate you. I do not wish for you to be frustrated. I wish for you to be satisfied."

"I will accept your point of view," I said, not in defeat, but in agreement that argument with her was bound to be pointless. If she had a reason to believe red to be green, there was no use saying, but it is not!

"I do not need your help, delegate. I had no idea you and I would ever meet. But my plans are never so set in stone that they cannot be improved by a stroke of unforeseen fate. Please, tell me, are there any female delegates?"

I could not help but think of Em at once, but Delphine had to know that she was dead. "None living that I know of, but it is a rule imposed upon us to keep our identities secret from one another."

"And you repeatedly break it. Yes. I had hoped that you had managed to stumble upon a female of your own kind. I cannot help but feel that you would be drawn to one another."

She was right. Even at the mention of a 'female delegate' the memory of Em's presence flooded my mind. "They fear that if we were to associate with one another, we may unite against them."

"I desire what they fear most, a kind of unity that would certainly go against their designs. My delegate, I am half Rivata, and a Goddess. You are Rivata. Think of what offspring we could bear."

My thoughts of Em vaporized like a plume of steam. I stood up sharply, eyes cast down upon her. "Are you proposing?" I replied, nearly aghast.

"Understand that I am going to be completely honest with you. I do not

need you. I do not desire you." She stood, her body nearly sliding against mine as she came to her full height. "But, you represent a best case scenario." She was closer now than even before, with her hand that was once against my lips now curling behind my neck. I felt unable to move; unwilling. "And that I do desire. And I think...it would not be so difficult a thing at all. Picture this perfectly, my delegate. Be abundantly clear in your own mind. Would we not create the very thing which could destroy your slave drivers?"

"You wish to create a *thing* with me..." I said, trying not to sound repulsed.

"It would be nothing like this world had ever seen. What has already been created would be a mere shadow of what is now possible. And think...would it be such a difficult thing?"

She was against me now. Her form felt so completely human, and yet so not; something in how it moved, the energy behind it, beheld so much more. My back was not to any walls. I was not restrained. I was not held in place. And yet, I felt unable to move away from her. Without speaking, I had answered her question.

"Yes. Yes, I know now. You will help me. You did not know it until this moment, but this is why you came. A child was to be born with or without you; but before, it *would* have been a thing...a bastardly entity pulled from the ether on tendrils, and forged into a tool. But now, and I see now that it could have been no other way, it will be a Goddess, radiant and beautiful...a new Goddess, without a name, without a people. You and I shall be the first to worship her. It would be as my parents *originally* intended, but unlike them, with my poor creature of a youngest sister, *we* shall not fail."

"I...I do not understand," I said, nearly stammering.

"You asked me before if I built my daughter, and the answer is yes. My mother, Tempia, designed her, and it was I, with the help of many loyal craftsmen, who brought this plan into reality. It was Tempia's own heart that beat inside my daughter's chest until the assassin destroyed it. It was fate, a pure stroke of fate, that you would deliver to me the means to undo this dreadful stroke, that the heart of Gin'Geen'Ginin would now forever beat in the chest of this new Goddess. Now you shall do far more; you shall also help me provide a soul."

"And Gin'Geen'Ginin willingly allowed this?"

"For a part of her to live on, yes; for the promise that the weavers would be treated as my own children, that I would make amends for the sins of Scina, that I would repay this debt tenfold, yes. I will keep this promise to her, so long as her heart beats in the chest of our creation. I can keep this promise, because now the grace of the new Goddess will also be tenfold.

"Before you came, the plan was to petition the spirit to bring us a soul that could be manifested in my daughter, so that she may be born. To be blunt, we would have had to take what we were given. But now things are different, we can summon a soul the natural way, as a man and a woman. There will be no luck of the draw; we will know exactly what we are getting, a powerful spirit, part sorceress, part delegate, and born a Goddess. She would not have to find her way and ascend, as I had to do, as my sister Thalia had to do; she would

be *born* a Goddess!"

As much as I felt I had already agreed to her, had desired for what she described to come true, to be the mate and father to Goddesses, my lips disobeyed my body. "I cannot do this for you," I said, though the words sounded alien to my ears.

She smiled a sly, seductive grin. "That, my dear husband, is because you still wear the leash of your slave driver. Carefully she reached her hand to my forehead, fingertips touching the circlet. I felt my hand involuntarily lashing out to push her away, but she caught it with the iron grip of her free hand. "I forgive you," she said. "You do not understand how strong their control is over you."

She lifted it from my head with her free hand. Immediately I felt a change come over me; the room, the closeness of her body, my own body, all felt different in a way I could not understand. "Their leash?" I said, baffled over her choice of words, and yet quickly understanding what she was saying.

She placed it somewhere behind her, without moving an inch from me. "You don't know, do you," she said, almost a whisper. "My father had a crown similar to this one. He relied on it for most of his life, the intuition it gave him, being able to know things, sense things, beyond what could be known or sensed. Finally he realized that none of it was true; it was not heightening the senses at all; it was allowing your slave drivers complete access to your mind. They feed knowledge to you, but you perceive it as a divine intuition. Did you not once wonder how it was possible that you used the *Mysteria* to awaken the wicked beast? It was the crown, not you."

I gazed at her, eyes wide, now totally defenseless. I could not doubt her words; they made more sense than my own mind was able to make for days now.

Her arm was now sliding around me, her face close to mine as she spoke. "I know you hate them, just as my father did. It is in your nature to hate them. That was their mistake...in choosing the best delegates, they chose hearts and minds who were the most likely to hate them. That is why I know you will help me. You will not do it because you desire me; that is irrelevant to you. You will do it because our daughter will make real all you have fought for. Our daughter will have the power to crush them."

"How do you know?" I whispered. Even though the circlet had been stripped from me, I felt that my "no" still stood, and it was my "no" that I still clung to, though I could not understand why. It would be so easy now to simply say yes.

"Because she will not be a Goddess who is tied to one element or another, or one race of beings or another, or to beasts or the wood, or even to Order and Chaos; she would transcend it all. She could go to where they have been imperfectly banished and pull out their very hearts. The war would be over."

"And why would she do that for us?"

"Because we would *ask* her to! Just like I am asking you now; she would do it of her own free will, because she was *asked*."

"Just because you believe she could do this does not mean she would. She

could be a tyrant worse than even the Rivata. What then? What would we have created then? We can't know, because you are speaking about a being that does not exist anywhere but in the theoretical musings of your parents!"

"Yes," she said, her arm around me growing tight and violent, her nails sinking into the skin of my back through my cloak. "Yes, that is all. A delegate who wished to do what the banishers of the Rivata could not and a sorceress who wished to unite all pagans under one divine being." Her eyes were fierce, and her voice held a hint of anger, and an impatience I had not yet sensed from her. "It sounds silly, doesn't it..." she said hissing out the word silly, "when I put it like that? Do you know what I am, oh delegate? I am their failure. I am their first failure; my sister, Thalia, their second failure. My third sister, whose name I will not even utter, was their worst failure of all."

She loosened her grip on my back, her fingertips stroking gently at where they had just cut into me. "But now the world has another chance. We can learn from their mistakes. We can begin where they left off, and there will be no more failures. Even if you cannot see this, if you cannot fathom the good of this, you must trust in your predecessor's judgment. *He* believed in this with all of his heart."

I was silent. I wanted to say, he believed in Tempia with all of his heart, and Tempia was a madwoman, but I said nothing. I remembered the pouch of ash at my belt, where the ash had come from, what it contained, what Phaeros had done to The World, and wondered how someone who had already done something so horrible could be trusted to make amends. But I also could feel her breath on my cheek, her hand gracefully caressing my back, her leg stepping to press against mine. I thought of the Rivata, and above them their Intendant, who would stop at nothing until they could return to this world and make it their plaything. Anything which could possibly end this was worth the risk. How could we be so arrogant, James and I, to think that the two of us through our plotting and dealings, could somehow stop their plans? Delphine offered a real solution with a real possibility of success. I thought of Jyre and her pleas of hatred for Delphine, and the misplaced adoration she felt for me. She had been wrong about me—she could also have been wrong about Delphine.

"I need time to think," I whispered. "You have given me so much to think about it. I cannot decide so quickly. Please, give me time."

She looked at me, the seductive smile vanishing from her lips, and her eyes softening. "We have time. I have waited, and will wait. But I am anxious, and desire deeply to see my dreams come to pass." She stepped away from me slowly, drawing her hand back as she swept her fingers around my body. "Our discussion became so heated, I lost track. Whose turn was it to ask a question?"

"I do not remember, either," I said, immediately wishing she had not stepped away; feeling dreadfully cold now that her body was no longer against mine.

"Then you will not mind if I ask. What is your name, oh delegate?"

I blinked, surprised that through all of this, she still did not know my

name. "I am Daelus Thresh," I said.

"Hmm," she hummed. "Daelus, Delphine. Delphine Thresh," she hissed, drawing out the first and last sounds, testing the way the word felt on her lips. "It may be petty of me, but I never liked the sound of the name *Kendrick*. You have given me a new reason to pray for your cooperation, my delegate."