

**The Lady's House...**

I patrolled, up and down, left then right, and back, all night. The halls of Castle Barlosk still managed to be cold, even in the height of summer. The sides of my overcoat went swish, swish, swish against the chain mail leggings, helping me keep count of how many steps I took on the patrol. Last time, it was five hundred sixty two; the time before that, five hundred and sixty two. I was aiming for five hundred and sixty two this time, as well.

I heard a hushed voice call out, "Edrik!" which was supposed to be my name, but people here had just been calling me "Footman" for so long I had nearly forgotten the sound of it. I turned to look, more excited than I remembered feeling in months, to see the face of none other than my old Captain Els coming out of the shadows. I knew at once that he wasn't back on the payroll; he was out of uniform, and what's worse, dressed in black, cloaked, and carrying a bloodied sword. I just swallowed hard and raised mine.

"Not one step closer, deserter," I said, completely devoid of enthusiasm. "Got sent on a quick mission and it took you years? What the taff, Els?"

"Edrick, please, keep your voice down. I'm here to liberate you, liberate all of you. The Lady dies tonight."

"What?" I said, not able to believe my ears. "The Lady dies? She can't die...she's immortal.—a goddess!"

"Edrick," he hissed, his wrinkled up face turning all gnarly. "You can help us. We need to gather up the others, the ones still human, the ones loyal to humanity. We can do this tonight, I swear to you. It will all be over tonight!" I looked behind him and saw a series of other faces in the darkness, eyes all locked onto him, nervous eyes, untrusting eyes, eyes that thought he was out of his mind for talking to me, but waiting patiently to see the results. Maybe some of them already had an arrow to string ready to shoot me dead if I didn't play along.

"Els," I said, feeling a tremble in my gut. "Why did you leave us before and not come back? Things would have been all-right if you had just stayed."

"I am sorry, old friend," he said. "I was a coward, and a fool, but now I have come back to set things right. Please, join with me, and I swear to you—"

"Yes, yes, I'll join you," I lied. "Stop saying the same things over and over, I get it."

He smiled, and let out a long breath. "I knew he could be trusted," he said over his shoulder. That was my cue.

I took off running, heading for the corridor with the nearest bend so that they couldn't get off a shot. Who did he think he was, vanishing like that, coming back here years later with blood on his mind? I began to shout, "Alarm, alarm! Armed intruders! To me, men, to me!" but before I could really get the first word out, I felt a pain in my back that pushed me forward and off my feet. My vision went black before I even hit the ground.

**The Lady's Own...**

I stood in the meeting chamber along with two others; Vivia, the human high priestess who had devoted herself to the fae, and a bulky, spider-like creature that nevertheless stood upright on two legs, and had a head that was separate from its body. Before us was a fountain built out of a natural spring which bubbled and streamed mineral-rich water into beds of densely growing multicolored mushrooms. Finally Delphine entered, and I felt myself blush with an animal passion at the supple sexuality of her barely adorned form. I noticed that she carried a thin golden circlet in her hand. Vivia and I bowed deeply, and then the spider-creature followed along, though its body did not seem made for such movements.

She spoke to the spider-creature first. "Thank you for coming, my friend. Know that though I call myself Queen of the Fae, I am no descendent of Scina, and have no desire to continue the legacy of hatred between our two peoples. I offer to you Jik'su'hup, a shaman who has also had to suffer the recent loss of his goddess, to the aid of your people as you recover from the loss of your mother. It is our hope that with her help, once your mother's eggs have been hatched, a new queen may be found among the young and raised into motherhood."

Hearing my name, I bowed silently before the spider-creature, and took its outstretched limb. It produced a long series of chattering noises, and then turned its many eyes to me. Delphine approached.

As she came before me, I prostrated myself before her, touching my head to the ground. "Arise, holy shaman," she said.

"My lady," I began. "Before our Goddess, Thalia, was found, we offered our services to you. Now that she is once again lost to us, we again offer you our services. We, the jacknalls, the mongbats, the trusslers, and all other beast of claw and tooth with a mind and a heart to devote, pledge ourselves to you. All shall be as you ask."

"Thank you, shaman. Before you depart to the underworld to begin this work, I must ask if any news has come from those in search of Thalia's remains, or those who have destroyed her."

"None yet, my lady, only that the jacknalls reluctantly agreed and have set out for The City," was my reply.

She nodded, and then replied, "The weaver mother cannot be avenged, and so they gladly offer to you their aid in this search."

### The Lady's Care...

"Get him onto this table. Connect these to his veins here, and then here." Once the doctor had revived Ranson, we rushed as fast as we could to the portal, and to our surprise found the guards dead. We realized that the Bloods had probably come this way, but couldn't change our plans; we had to get Ranson to The Lady's changing room or the second chance at life that the doctor had given him wouldn't last. By the time we got him in place, he was delirious, comatose even, but his heart was still beating.

He was safe now; he would live, though once attached to the life-given tendrils, the changes that had already begun within him would accelerate. He would revile his appearance when this was over, but at least he would be alive. The rest of us, on the other hand, felt far from safe. We were back in Barlosk now, and The Lady surely knew of our betrayal. Returning without the scroll would be bad enough; returning after having joined with her enemies in a quest to destroy her would mean our lives would be very short indeed if we did not escape soon.

"Hey, look at this!" one of the loyals called out. I ran to him, along with two others, to one of the bodies which lay in the care of the changing room. Her throat was cut with a wide gash, as if from a sword. "Who would do this?" he asked.

"They'll think we did it!" I mumbled in fear.

"No, the Bloods; the other Bloods came this way. If they got Els with them they'd know how to get here. One of them has to have done this! Prob'ly Els himself!"

"We can frame them!" I said, and then got a slap on the head.

"It's not a frame if it's true!"

"No, I mean, we can claim that we came here to chase them down, to protect The Lady?"

"And when she remembers that she's not *stupid*, how will your plan go then?"

"Quiet."

The voice came from Ranson; but already it didn't sound human, there was a growl behind it, which lasted for a moment after the word faded from his lips.

"Shh," ... "Shh," ... "Shh," was passed around; as if being quiet was an idea everyone had all on their own.

"How long do we leave him?" whispered after a moment of complete silence.

"Until he's all healed up, and then not a moment longer."

"Then what, do we go back, get the taff out of here; or, do we...?"

"Do we go after the others? The bloody blasted Bloods what be here with blood on their minds?"

"We'll ask Ranson when he's better. He always knows best."

# **Chapter 19**

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## **Hosts and Hospitality**

— Sheam: Undertow —

Day 7: 6:30 pm

I should never have asked to be put to work writing these lies. With each one I penned I felt the burning sorrow fade and the bleak gray of depression sweep in to take me. Corrine knew enough not to try to speak with me right now—any attempt to open my mouth would result in a cracked, tearful voice.

There was a knock on the door, and Corrine hurried to get it. We knew better than to expect it was James finally home from his long mission, but I still knew that it was the only thing on her mind as she undid the bolts. Instead, it was Sarievo, and from the look on his face, I knew the depression was only going to pull me further under.

"I am afraid you both can stop writing, now. I was too late. Thurm offered his superiors a full report. Oberon knows, Rafael knows, and," he stopped, seeing Corrine get up and move to a delivery slot that was lit up. She pulled out a large leaflet, the standard size for a Hammerite flier, and without glancing at it for two seconds nor uttering a word aloud, she dropped it on the table before me and sat down to massage her forehead with her fingertips.

My eyes fell over it, lips sealed tight and my cheeks clenched in my teeth,

HEROIC DEATHS IN A BOLD VICTORY AGAINST EVIL: THE  
EXPEDITION TO THE GHASTLY VILLA OF THE WOOD A  
SUCCESS. WE MOURN THE LOSS OF OUR BROTHERS AND  
PRAISE THE SURVIVORS. PRAYER SERVICE WILL BE  
OFFERED FOR THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES TO THE...

I stopped reading, hating the rhetoric, skipping down to the large list of names of the dead. There he was, listed simply among the other Hammerites, but without a Brother next to his name—Daelus Thresh. With one shove I pushed the paper off the desk, and let it float back and forth to the floor.

"They'll be widespread by now," Corrine said quietly after she removed her hands from her face.

"I'm sorry," Sarievo whispered, and then seeing nothing more that he could do, let himself out.

"Well now what?" I choked out, as soon as I was sure that I could manage the words without beginning to sob.

Corrine began to gather up the pages we had written, and stack them into a neat pile. As she put one into the stack, she stopped, looking at it, and then smiled, her breaths quick as if in a silent laugh. "Lord Daelus Thresh and Lady Unexumbra Sheam off on world tour by sailing ship?" She turned the paper so that I could see the writing, and though she was still smiling, I could see the tears in her eyes.

I smiled too, and felt more tears stream down my cheeks. I thought I was all out of them. I pulled it away from her, looking at it. "Yeah," I whispered. "Most of mine were stupid like this...more wishes than...than..." and as hard as I had been fighting it for hours, I choked on the words and found myself

sobbing, wadding up the page in my hand before throwing it across the room.

Another one of the inboxes lit up, and Corrine, reluctantly, got up and went over to pull out the leaflet. Though my vision was blurred by tears, I could see that it was a perfectly square unusually white sheet, which told me at once it was from someone with money.

"This is so strange," Corrine said, her eyes twitching back and forth as she read it. "It has been requested that you come to Castle Canard at once, but it says here that the summons comes from Lord Canard's son, Mallard."

The unexpectedness of this shook the tears from my eyes for the moment. "They must have heard before us that Daelus was dead...I mean they must have gotten the Hammerite announcement thing first."

"They must have...but I wonder why the request is coming from Mallard? As far as I know he hasn't been very active in his father's business, in spite of the fact that he's going to need to become heir to the ward very soon."

I just kept rubbing my face to get rid of the tears, and said, impertinently, "What is it with them and ducks?"

"Ducks?"

"Yes, Mallard, Canard; both names for ducks." I found a handkerchief and emptied my running nose into it, in a very unladylike gesture.

Corrine laughed, saying, "I don't know! I never really thought about it. I got so used to the names I forgot completely about the ducks!"

"I think they're all a bunch of quacks," I said, and then blew my nose again. "Quack, quack" I wanted to ease the tension, and was surprised that it was working. "Does it say when they want me?" I asked.

"No...probably best to go now."

"Should I take a bodyguard? I mean, it's Lord Canard, he's an ally, but you never know who might try to ambush me on the way."

"It's a shame Sarievo left in such a hurry."

"I know. Never mind, just a stupid thought. Nobody even knows I am here, right? That message was delivered by proxy, wasn't it?"

"That's right. There's no reason to suspect that anyone knows."

I didn't want to leave Corrine, but when your local warden's son summons you, it was best not to keep him waiting.

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— Nightfall: Forging a Union —

Day 7: 7:00 pm

Barely a moment had gone by, and she had returned. I found myself unable to think. I was overwhelmed by how nothing was as I had anticipated, and how deeply I felt in over my head. "Forgive me, Daelus," she said. "There was an urgent matter which needed my attention."

"Delphine, I—"

"Shh," she said, putting one raised finger to her lips, and the other to mine. "I did not return to rush you into your decision. To be honest, I simply could not stand to be apart from you. Oh, you blush...and you think; how could such a thing be so? I promise you that it is. I never dreamed in all my life that I

would meet another delegate, and yet here you are before me, preceded by a tale of legendary deeds that would make any mortal princess blush red with desire. Well, I am no princess, and that is a good thing, for none would deserve you."

I could not tell if it was rehearsed or not. It was true, I felt myself blushing at her words and her *closeness*, but the rest of what she said was a little over the top. She had to see that I was not impressed; and yet, as much as I felt jaded to her attempts, I knew deep inside that she was winning

"You look tired," she said. "And this I can well understand. You may have rested in between slaying the wicked beast and being brought to me, but I am sure it was an unpleasant, uncomfortable rest. I am having quarters prepared for you. Oh," she gave a pleasant laugh, and smiled quite unlike I had seen on her face before—it seemed almost human—and said, "I am sorry, I would let you simply rest now, but you cannot sleep here until you have accepted my offers. These are my chambers. Please, come."

I stood, feeling a throbbing ache all over as I forced my muscles into motion once again. Still, I was not so weary that I could not speak my mind, though I was possibly far too weary to exercise good judgment over weather I ought to. "Why do you need me to accept your offer, when you seem clearly capable of simply seducing me."

"I don't want..." she took my hand, placing her palm against my palm, "to seduce you, Daelus. As soon as I let my spell over you fade, you would betray me. I want your loyalty. I want a union."

"So, you are not merely after my seed. Yet, before, you said you do not desire me. Has that changed so quickly?"

"Would it be so unbelievable that it could not change so quickly? No, you misunderstood me before, or possibly, I was unclear. What I meant was that I do not desire you simply to fulfill a sexual craving. Trust me, I have many servants of able body to perform this task, and yet I would never commit such an act. I am not a whore, oh delegate."

Like I had previously noted, she was winning. She seemed to know just what to say...to anticipate my train of thought and form an argument against it before I had even voiced it. "Thank you for the clarification," I simply said.

She bowed her head, slightly. "And I thank you for speaking your mind."

"I do wish for rest in a soft bed, and a long span of time to enjoy it. May I also bathe, and see that my clothes are cleaned?"

"All of it. Come, please follow me."

She led me down a twisty corridor which seemed far too deliberate to have formed naturally, and yet the surface of the walls looked as if they had never been touched by a carving tool. As we walked I sometimes saw great gaps in the ceiling, and a larger chamber looming above us, with the fae flying about to and fro, presumably on their own business, maybe leading lives as normal as anyone in The City might lead. I tried to make a mental map of my surroundings, but my mind was far too fatigued to remember any more than the first few minutes of the journey. Finally, she passed her hand over what seemed to be solid stone, and the rock moved away as if it were ripples on the

surface of a pool. She stepped inside, and I followed close behind.

Within was a simple bed, with pillows and linens and everything one would expect from a guest room in any mansion in The City. It, plus the other furniture, table, chairs, dresser, mirror, bathing basin, all seemed completely out of place in the natural cavern, and strangely ethereal in the light produced from the crystals above and the fungus below. I turned to look at her, but before I could form words in my gaping mouth, she said, "I wanted to make sure you felt at home."

"Thank you," I just said. She stepped farther in, to the wardrobe, which she opened. "My father's old clothes," she said, taking one out to show it to me, ancient, but still good. Of course the style does not seem to match your taste, but I expect you will not wish to go naked while your own clothes are being cleaned."

"I do not wish that, no," I simply said. "Thank you, again."

"Shall I send a servant to help you with the bathing basin?"

"Perhaps, but right now, I just want to rest, thank you."

She smiled, which again, added a strange humanity to her face. "You do not need to keep thanking me. Just, please, send for me soon."

"I shall," I said with a nod. "Do you wish for me to remain here?"

She did not answer at once, but when she did, she sounded hesitant. "You are not confined, but know that should you choose to wander some areas may not be safe for you...and if you were to become lost it can be very difficult to find your way back. You may wear this medallion if do choose to venture out. It will let all know that you are here under my good graces." She indicated to a gold piece hanging from a chain which had been laid out on the table.

"I understand," I said. She didn't want me to leave, whether any of that was true or not.

She smiled once again, and turned to leave.

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— Sheam: Castle Canard —

Day 7: 7:30 pm

I went to Castle Canard on foot. The City seemed a remarkably lonely, desolate place, with its tired buildings leaning against one another and threatening to fall over into the streets, and equally tired citizens shuffling about, caring about empty, meaningless things in their empty, meaningless lives. Things were very quiet when I approached the gate, at the end of a cul-de-sac in the pleasant Hightowne neighborhood a mile or so north of The Circle. Seeing no guards outside to greet me, I knocked on the door-within-a-door and waited.

A door within the door-within-a-door opened, being a window only big enough for a head, and a head with a big fur cap poked through and said, "Whatever you're selling, the master doesn't want it, already has it, or can get better, cheaper, elsewhere."

My face became cross from being mistaken for a hawker, I held up the crisp sheet of paper that had prompted my visit. The man stared at it and



then lifted a spyglass to his eye to look at it, even though I was no more than three feet away from him. "Here!" I just insisted.

"No, no, I can't touch it...if I touch it that's like inviting you in. Hold it so I can see it."

I groaned and held it perfectly still and flat so that he could read it through the spyglass. Then he popped the spyglass away and said, "Mallard isn't at home."

"Are you sure?" I said, impatiently. "Because the request says to come *at once*, and it's *at-once*-o'clock now, and so here I am. He will probably be around any minute, wondering why you didn't let Lady Unexumbra Sheam in *at once*." I knew he wouldn't recognize the name, but he'd feel foolish disallowing someone with so fantastic a moniker entry. I was also surprised how quickly I had taken to the pseudonym.

He popped open the spyglass again, this time looking at me with it. He only did for a second—maybe he was pretending that he hadn't gotten a good look at me the first time and this time he'd recognize me, but if that was true he didn't make a show of it. "Come in, come in. I will inform The Lord that whoever you just said you were is here to see Junior."

Junior—so Lord Canard was also named Mallard, hilarious—"Lady Unex—"

"Yes, yes, I heard you the first time!" he grumbled as he closed the door within the door-within-a-door and opened medium sized door that was still within the biggest one. It reminded me of those dolls where consecutively smaller ones were inside one another, and he was the smallest doll in the center.

"And I am from The Circle, under Lord Daelus Thresh."

"I know, I know!" he said, though I found that hard to believe. I was quickly led down a series of halls and chambers, all made from big blocks with vaulted ceilings with tapestries hanging that did little to soften the echo of every footstep. We passed by an occasional guardsman in a uniform similar to The Gryphons', but geared more towards being indoors rather than duty in the mud and the rain.

"Wait here," he finally said, when he brought me to what seemed to be a modest throne room, if a throne room could ever truly be modest. By the time I turned to see where the doorman had gone, all I saw was a big door closing with an echoing bang, and then motes of dust settling in the evening light that seeped through several small windows near the ceiling on the west side of the chamber. I could only see the dust in the beams of light, but I knew it was everywhere, the place smelled of it, dusty, old—ancient.

Several moments later a door on the opposite side of the room opened, with a guardsman coming out, and an old man walking with a cane coming inside behind him; Lord Canard. The guardsman held the door open as the old man walked in, eyes preoccupied with where his feet were going to go next, until a second guards came in behind him. The first shut the door, and the two escorted him across the room, without a glance at me, where one held his arm out firmly so that Canard could hold onto it as he lowered his frail

body into the chair. Then, finally, he looked up at me, with a smile bespoken by a hint of senility.

"My Lord," I said, and realized I was not dressed to curtsy properly, and merely bowed. "I am here to answer an invitation from Mallard Canard to come at once, however I am confused by the absence of your son to greet me."

He reached out his hand, saying so quietly I could barely hear him, "Let me see it," likely indicating the initiation. I stepped forward, and to my surprised, one of the guards also stepped forward and took the note from my hand. He gave it to Canard.

The old man read it slowly, which was understandable, since his hand was shaking so rapidly I couldn't see how his eyes could focus on the words at all. "Yes, this is his writing," he said slowly. "And he always signs Mallard Canard...not caring for the titles Lord nor Junior...nor even The Second. One would think that he was...ashamed of his...place in this world...but if that was so...why use the name at all?"

I just nodded, not sure what to do or say next. The Lord just continued to smile at me, though I wasn't even sure if his old eyes could even see me. He seemed to be looking somewhere in the back of the room, but when I glanced, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Growing uncomfortable in the silence, I finally said, "My lord, you have heard the news of Lord Thresh's death?"

"I have. It made me very sad. You were his assistant, yes?"

"I was, my lord." I said with another slight bow.

"Do you know who will be succeeding him as Lord of The Circle?" he asked. The topic of business seemed to add strength to his voice.

I felt myself blush. It was foolish to answer in the way I knew I should, as I had just been identified as his assistant; not partner, not heir, not even trusted associate. It was merely an aid, a glorified secretary. Unable to bear the silence any longer, I choked out my reply. "I am, sir."

I expected him laugh, but he did not. I was certain I saw one of the guard's turn a brief smile, but then it was gone. He simply said, "Ah, then it will be you who will be attending the weekly meetings from now on."

"I believe so, my lord." I had no idea what these meetings were about, and even less desire to go to them myself. I was very quickly feeling completely unprepared for the task. How could Corrine believe that I was ready to take over for Daelus? Surely James was the correct choice, not me.

"He missed our regular meeting this week, though he did arrange for some unscheduled ones, which makes up for it. I do not expect you to share his schedule, but I do expect to see you at least once a week."

"I will try," I just said, and then unable to take it anymore, "Do you know when your son will be arriving?"

He shook his head. "I have not seen him all day, but this is not unusual. I can send my man out to go find him, if you would like."

"I would like to know why he summoned me here," I said, hoping that didn't sound rude.

"As would, I. Brenton, please find Freedle and ask him to discover where Mallard is and why he isn't here to greet his guest."

One of his two guards left, leaving the three of us once again in silence.

"Sir," I said finally, disliking the sound of *my lord*, "do you have any advice for me, on how to begin?"

"For starters," he said his voice raspy. "Don't ask for advice like that. It makes you appear weak. Ask advice from your aids, the ones you trust, not those above or equal to you, otherwise you will not last very long."

"I see," I just said, feeling incredibly foolish for doing something which I thought was a gesture of good faith.

At that, another guard came in. It looked from his uniform that he was a high rank, which I found a little confusing. I knew that Wendle was the captain of the guard, and his uniform was hardly decorated at all. Maybe the castle guards and the Gryphons were kept separate? The man came to Canard from the side, put his hand on the old man's shoulder, and though he was whispering, spoke loud enough for me to hear him. "A man is at the west gate, claiming to be Childress's brother."

"My brother?" the remaining bodyguard said in surprise, looking to his superior.

"He says he must speak to him about an urgent family matter. I told him to go away, but he was insistent. Do you grant Childress permission for a five minute leave?"

Lord Canard just nodded, and then moved his hand as if to shoo them both away. They both immediately left, closing the door behind them. I was now completely alone with the old lord.

I opened my mouth to say something, but he began to speak unexpectedly. "I know that you were not prepared for this," he said. "I will do what I can to make things easier, but I cannot show preferential treatment, or it would paint you as a ripe target to my enemies. I must behave indifferent, or it would put you in danger...do you understand?"

I just nodded, but took a hidden meaning from it. He was not indifferent. He was tempted to show preferential treatment.

"You shouldn't stay," he said. "I would show you better hospitality, but that would be unwise tonight. I do not know when Mallard will be here, but when he arrives, I will send him to you instead. I can give you a Gryphon escort home...in fact I will." His voice was growing weaker and raspier by the moment. I felt concerned, but there was nothing unusual about a man of his age speaking this way. "Nothing about this seems right. In fact, it all seems very wrong to me."

"I will go," I said.

"Let me...call for..." He lifted up a small stick with a ball at the end to tap it to a small gong hanging near his chair, but as soon as he did the tiny piece fell from his trembling hand. He reached to get it, but before he could take it back up again his hand went limp. His head fell, with the chin against his chest, and did not move. It looked as if he had fallen asleep.

"Lord Canard?" I said after a moment, but no answer came. I cleared my throat, and said it again, but still he did not move. Suddenly, a thought struck me, and I was up by the throne, touching his shoulder to nudge him, and

repeating his name into his ear. I placed my hand under his nose without touching him; I could feel no breath. I took his hand, and felt the wrist, no pulse.

I gasped out a short cry, my hand to my face. "Oh no," I whispered, and then tried his wrist again, squeezing his frail limb trying to find a heartbeat. I dropped his wrist and felt his neck, again nothing. He was gone.

I stepped away, completely at a loss for what to do. I was alone with him; what would I say? Should I call for help? There was no help to be given; what could anyone do for him now? More frightened than sad, I tried to will myself to call for aid, but I could not find my voice. I just stood there, trembling, my hands over my mouth, looking at him.

I knew five minutes couldn't have been up, but the door opened and the two guards came walking in, the bodyguard and the decorated one. The bodyguard was speaking. "He wouldn't tell me what was wrong, just that he was afraid something had happened to me and wanted to make sure I was okay. It was the strangest thing, I—" They saw Canard's limp body, and rushed to him. The decorated one immediately felt his neck, while the bodyguard looked on, his hands gripping the side of the throne, his knuckles white, his eyes the size of saucers.

"By the Builder," The decorated one said. "He's died."

"Trickster, be damned!" The bodyguard shouted, his eyes glistening. "I leave for two minutes and the old man just drops dead?" he growled.

"Where the devil is Brenton anyway?" The decorated one shouted, and then turned to me, rushing forward. "You! Woman, I demand to know what happened here!"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I stammered, swallowed hard, and then stammered some more, before he took me by the shoulders and shouted, "Were you the only one with him? What happened?"

"He just...passed out," was all I managed, and then added, "and when I checked—he—he..."

"Why didn't you call for help, damn you woman! His doctor is never more than a shout away!"

"Didn't know what to do," I said quietly, looking anywhere but into the angry man's face.

The bodyguard was shouting at me now. "Are you sure that no one else was in the room with you? No one else saw? No one else was here?"

"What's going on?" The second bodyguard walked in, and then cried out, "Builder's mercy, what's wrong with Canard?"

"He was alone with the girl for half a minute and now he's dead!" said the man who still refused to let go of my shoulders. I squirmed out of his grasp, stepping back from him. Thankfully he didn't pursue, but continued to frown at me with disgust.

"There was no one else here," I insisted. "We were talking and he just—" I found myself choking up again—dammit! Why couldn't I just stay calm and talk!

By then there was a dozen people in the room, guards, servants, all crying

out over their dead lord like they had been the first one to discover it, and they needed to tell everyone in the room what they had just seen. His doctor finally showed up, and was listening to his chest with some device with tubes that went into his ears, as if there was something to hear inside of him aside from a heartbeat and breathing, none of which were happening.

"You, and you," the decorated one said, whom everyone was calling sergeant, "take this woman below. She is being held as a witness in the death of Lord Canard, and possibly a suspect."

"A suspect!" I shouted, suddenly finding my voice, loud and clear "of what? Of, seeing him die, and not snapping my fingers and making his heart start again?"

"With the death of your own Master Nightfall, it is possible that Lord Canard would be targeted next," he said coolly. The next thing I knew, shackles were being locked around my wrists. "And we cannot ignore any leads in this investigation, even the least likely, even someone like you. Take her below!"

I couldn't believe what was happening. I knew at once it was a setup, that I had been lured here by Mallard so that I would be the only one in the room when Canard died and would take the fall for it. Then they would say that I had been the one to actually kill Daelus, and the Hammerite document was a cover for it. I had stepped right into someone's twisted little plot, and now it would be my head on the block for murdering not only Daelus, but one of The City Wardens. By the time I had realized all of that, I was already being led downstairs from behind by a guard with big hands around both my arms to a room surrounded by the bars of cell doors.

"Someone talk to Captain Wendle. He'll tell you I could never have done this!" I said to them as they took the shackles off.

"The Captain is on assignment. He will of course be informed in the morning," one of them said simply. I could tell in his eyes that he was skeptical about all of this, but he wasn't about to disobey orders. They exited the cell, and closed it. A mechanism locked it automatically. I should have made a run for it, I thought, but was glad that the thought came a moment too late. Running now would be pointless.

"Foster then, or Stephens; they know me too. They'll tell you I'm innocent."

"You said it yourself," the other guard said, who held no sympathy in his eyes. "You were alone with him. Even if you didn't kill him, you're a witness, which means this is the safest place for you. Now shut up."

"Can someone at least get a message out? Let my people know where I am and what happened?" I pleaded with the sympathetic one, who hesitated before leaving.

"If your people are worth their salt, they'll know something is wrong soon enough." Then he left, closing the dungeon door with a solid boom.

I sat down on the little cot in the corner, which felt more suited to the storage of pots and kettles than sleeping on, wondering what could possibly happen next. If there was any sanity anywhere upstairs, they'd soon see that

there was nothing I could have done. What worried me was that the people who set this up were still at large, and that meant setting more things up. So far it had all gone perfectly, and there was no reason to suspect anything different. I trusted Wendle though, and Corrine, and was certain that my people were far more clever than whoever the villains were here. Even if I had to wait for James to get back home, they'd see me out of this mess. I just hoped I'd still be in one piece by then.

— Ghost: Repentance —

Day 7: 8:00 pm

"Holy shit, Lytha, that guy really got to you; didn't he?" I said, saying everything on my mind except the one question I really wanted to ask—why weren't we having sex again?

Lytha had her arms around her knees, curled up almost into a ball with her back to the stone wall, totally ignoring the nice bedding that I had *found* for her. I figured that, as long as I was still cursed, and as long as the ruins seemed safe from the zombies, safer than any Hammerite church even, we may as well have something soft to sleep on at night. The truth was that even though they looked the same, mine was much more comfortable, since I was hoping she was never actually going to use hers and instead always use mine, with me. She wasn't doing either, and it didn't look like that was going to change.

"He did," she whispered, not even looking at me.

"So are you going to tell me what happened, or not? I know you've tried to tell me like six times, but I still don't get it."

"I don't get it either," she whispered even quieter. I liked her better when she was crazy, at least then she made *sense*.

"Listen, Lytha, if that guy or that guy's mind did something weird to you that you didn't like, we don't need to go back there tomorrow. Don't even worry about it; we can find some other way of curing me. I don't want you to go through that again."

I saw her smile, just a little.

"Okay, it's settled then. No more Hammerites. Guys are all rotten anyway, even the so-called good ones."

"No, Ghost," she said, finally putting a stop to those whispers. "We have to go back. He can help you...I know it. I've seen what's inside of him, and I know that it can help you. What happened when I dug too deeply into his mind isn't what worries me..."

"Well then what does? Because zombies don't seem to worry you, and those are pretty bad."

She was quiet. I wished I could do what she did...just reach into people's minds and get what she wanted. It must have been nice. "Alright, if you aren't going to tell me, then we aren't going."

"It's losing you," she said, which confused the hell out of me.

"What? You're not going to lose me, Lytha, not to him anyway!"

"It's not like that. It's that...I am just afraid...that doing what you need to do, in order to cure yourself...it will take away too much of what makes you...you."

I didn't know what to say. I hoped she realized I wasn't going to try. Then, as soon as I had given up, I thought of something. "I'd like to think that I am not such a bad guy that me going all...repentant...would change who I am."

"I know, I am sorry, I am just...unsure if there will be side effects or not."

"Listen, Lytha, you're in the same boat I was, only I had no say in the matter. When I met you, you had this crazy demon thing in your head, right? You were possessed or something, right? Isn't that what you said to me?"

She nodded.

"Well what if I went, hey, Lytha, why don't you just keep that demon thing in your head, because I like you just the way you are now, and I am afraid that if you get all sane and not demon possessed you just won't be the same anymore!"

She looked horribly hurt for a second, but then cracked a smile and gave a short laugh. "It's not the same, though..."

"Oh yeah? How is it not the same?"

"I was me, just me, for a long time. Then *It* came, got into me, polluted me, made me nearly someone else. With you it's different. You're just you, the good, the bad, all of it just one package. Now you're cursed and the only way to get rid of it seems to be to remove something that's always been there. It's not like what happened to me at all."

Again, I didn't know what to say. Again, I finally thought of something. "Well that hurts a little, you know? I guess you like my evil side, maybe that's my main point of attraction, but I'd like to think that there was more to me than that."

"You don't have an evil side, Ghost!" she said, letting go of her knees and leaning forward. "There's no such thing. You do things sometimes that hurt people, and sometimes you're not sorry about it. That's just who you are. That's who I am, too."

"Oh, I see now," I said, maybe cutting her off, maybe not. "You're not afraid of me changing, you're just afraid of me being a nicer person than you, because maybe, I don't know...what then? Maybe I'll want someone nicer than you?"

"Do you have to say such remarkably stupid things?" she said with a frown.

"Yes, yes I do! I have to, and you know what? Being repentant doesn't mean that I'm ever going to stop saying stupid things!"

"You don't even know what that word *means*, Ghost!" she shouted, slamming her open hand onto the ground in front of her.

"No of course not, because I am stupid! But not you; you're inside Mister Priest's head, getting all of the answers, and now you want to keep them from me!" Something told me we weren't really angry with one another, we were just frustrated and had no other way of getting it out. I didn't need to be a

mind reader to know that.

"I'm sorry, I'm just..." she pulled herself back, leaning against the wall again. She began to rub her face. "I'm scared you'll turn into one of *them*."

The way her voice changed suddenly told me that she had spoken from the heart; she had finally told me what was worrying her. Hah, I didn't need any stupid mind reading powers. "I'm not going to enlist, Lytha. They'd kill me."

"I know...but...something tells me Ymar won't be satisfied with you until he's made you into a perfect little Hammerite drone, even if you never wear the uniform or say the prayers."

"Maybe he doesn't want to. How do you know? Oh, I forgot, you can read minds...silly me."

"This is what he means, Ghost. He wants you to believe, truly believe, in your deepest bottom of your heart, that The Master Builder is The Lord your God, and that you are totally at his mercy, and for you to throw yourself upon his mercy, taking the full blame for all of your sins, expecting and even wanting to be punished for your sins, so that you may allow this God to punish you until he is satisfied that you've been punished enough, and then when he's done, you'll belong to him, completely to him, and everything you do afterwards must be in his service. Now, does that sound like something you want?"

"Wait, isn't that all stuff that's supposed to happen after you die?"

She let out a groan of frustration, put her hands to her forehead and smacked the back of her head into the wall three times. "I don't know. I am only trying to put into words what I got from him!"

"I still think that maybe you're wrong. I think there may be less to this repentance thing, than all of you seem to think. In fact, I've been thinking." I twisted around to find my pack. Rummaging around for a moment, I pulled out the star.

"Maybe repentance *is* the answer, but not through the Hammerites. The curse was put where it was to punish whoever stole the star, right? Well, what if the star was no longer stolen?"

She shook her head. "Even if you get rid of it or give it away, you're still the one who stole it; and the whole tomb caved in. You can't put it back, you already had that idea."

"I don't think that's true. I never thought of it like this before, but all of this religious stuff made, me realize that you can take a bad deed and turn it into a good one."

"How did you get to that infallible leap of logic?" she said with sarcasm.

"It's like you just said with The Builder. A person does wrong, the Builder punishes them, and then after the punishment they're a better person, better than they would have been had they never done something wrong in the first place."

"*Better* only according to the Hammerites' beliefs; that doesn't actually mean *better*."

"Yeah well forget the Hammerites for now. Think about it—you may need



to tell me, because I am stupid—”

“Will you cut that out? I am sorry I called you stupid. You’re not, okay?”

“Aha, you just proved my point. If you had never called me stupid, I’d never know that you think I am not stupid.”

She just rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, think about it...who is the one person, or persons, who I could give this star to, to make my theft of the star no longer a theft at all.”

She took a deep breath, which turned into a long sigh. “I don’t know. Donate it to the church?”

“I said forget about the Hammerites. No. I knew it when I robbed that tomb, so it was right in front of my nose all this time. Alarus isn’t a dead family. There’s still Alaruses knocking around right now. They’re separated by a few generations, but it’s still a direct lineage.”

“How do you know?” she said, eyes narrowing.

“Isn’t it good business for a thief to know something about the people he’s robbing? Anyway; if I was to find a living relative of the Alarus, the more direct the descendant the better, and gave them the star, suddenly it would no longer be theft. I would be just the guy who risked his life to get back into the family something that they should never have locked away in a tomb in the first place.”

The look in her eyes told me she was thinking it over very carefully. “Do you really think the zombies would care if—?”

“Zombies don’t care about anything! This is going to break the curse, I am as sure of it now as I am of anything. It’s better than just getting the star out of my hands or even giving the Alaruses back what’s theirs...it’s just oozing with repentance and religious-y goodness, don’t you think?”

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt to try.”

“Yep.” I stood up. “So are you coming?”

She blinked at me “Now? It’s dark out...the zombies—”

“Bah, taff the zombies. The more I think about this, the more I need to do it right now, right this second. The longer I wait, the longer I hold onto this star when I knew what I needed to do, the harder it will be for me. You can come or not. I could use your help.”

“My help; with what? You don’t need my help against zombies if you run across any.”

“Yeah, but I will need help finding the Alaruses. I bet you’ll be able to pull that needle out of that haystack like a big red horseshoe magnet.”

She smiled a little, whispering, “Bet I could,” and then saying aloud, “So, a mission, but to give, and not to steal.”

“Biggest mission of my life.”

“And when we find these Alaruses, do we just knock on their door?”

“We’ll decide that when we see their door. Come on!”

## — Sheam: It was a Passcode — Day 7: 8:00 pm

Time seemed to be at a standstill. I was thankful, at least, that there were no other prisoners tonight, so I would not have to put up with the crooning and hollering of disgusting wretches at the blonde girl in the corner cell. I kept going over and over it again in my mind, what had happened, what I should have done differently, what the warning signs had been, and when I couldn't take that anymore, I imagined what must be going on upstairs, with Wendle giving the gold-encrusted lily-pants of the house guard a piece of his mind before marching down here to free me. Either that, or Corrine showing up to reasonably and logically talk some sense into the buffoons, before smacking them in the forehead because obviously reason and logic was useless against these clowns. It was even possible that Othello would come dashing in, incapacitate the guards, pick the lock, and dash me off in a daring rescue, but I wasn't nearly delusional enough yet to believe that would actually happen.

What I was not expecting was to hear an unfamiliar voice whispering to me from the window. "Sheam!" it uttered.

I had to climb on top of the hard bed and stand up on the tips of my toes to see up into the deep opening of the window. I saw a set of unfamiliar eyes staring at me from under a hood, behind bars so close together one could get their hand through but little else. He was crouched down, like the window was level with the dirt outside. For an instant I dreamed that it was Ghost and that I didn't recognize his eyes or his voice because he was wearing the choker, but that dream quickly faded; he would want me to recognize him. "Who are you?" I just said.

"James sent me to get you out of here. Here," he said, and with his arm stretching out as long as it could reach, offered me a small metallic sphere with the only distinguishing feature a big red button that he was holding down with his thumb. "Take this," he said. "But don't let go of the red button. It's armed, and will detonate three seconds after this button is released. Throw it down the hall at the cell block door, and it'll take down the door and the two guards behind it in one boom!"

I stared at him, eyes wide, and then stared at the bomb in his hand, eyes even wider. I didn't believe him. This was not at all James's style. After all, Canard's people were still allies. But, what if it was true? What if Canard's people had been so deeply infiltrated by the enemy, the only way now to get me out was through brute force?

"Will you take the damn bomb already? My hand is beginning to cramp up!"

The expression on my face faded; my demeanor grew cold. "All real processes are irreversible," I said to him.

"What the taff is that supposed to mean? Do you want out of there or not?"

That was the wrong answer. Reaching my arm as far as I could, I grabbed the bomb away from him careful to keep the button pressed, and then, threw

it back at him as hard as I could. To my impossible luck, it flew in between the bars, and nailed him square in the forehead. Both he, and the bomb, fell to the dirt with soft thuds.

I ran from the window, but could not get far. "And all theoretical concepts are invertible," I whispered to myself as I huddling in the far corner of the cell, already counting two, three...

The bomb burst in a fireball that sent the bars of the window shooting into the cell like javelins. Thankfully I was not hit by any of the flying debris, most of which collided with my cell door, knocking it open. "Jailbreak!" I heard yelled from nearby, and saw the two guards come running as I lifted my head timidly.

Before I could explain, I saw a pair of arrows sail in from the gaping hole where the window used to be, and when the two guards stood, staggering, gurgling up blood from arrows in the lungs, another pair of arrows shot in, hitting them both in the heads, bringing their bodies to the floor with sharp crashes from their useless armor.

Eyes wide with fright, I picked myself up and spun around, to face a pair of cloaked men holding short bows dive through the hole in the wall. I tried to make a run for it, pushing through the destroyed cell door, but they had their arms around me, and soon coil after coil of rope around my torso, tying my arms firm to my sides, while at the same time a gag went around my face. I tried to kick, but the next thing I knew I was knocked off my feet, a strong arm grabbing hold of the binds to catch me just inches before my face hit the floor. Then they started to tie up my legs, too. I tried to yell or shout for help, but the gag was choking me, so tight that I could barely breathe.

By the time I was turned around so I could see the hole again, one of them men had climbed back into it, and was waving his hands for his partner to come. With incredible strength, I was lifted up quickly by the man below and grabbed onto by the man above, pulling me up so that the sharp edges of the jagged hole scraped against my back, but not so brutally as to cut my bonds. I winced in pain, but was unable to cry out again. I had been lofted over his shoulder, so that my face was to his back and my legs held firm by one of his arms. I couldn't see where we were going, but I could see the other thug climb quickly out of the hole, ignoring his comrade who had lost his entire head to the explosion, and then sprinting to catch up with and pass his partner. Without any warning I was flying through the air—the man had actually tossed me. I only saw it in a flash as the stone wall with the sharp iron spires jutting above it rushed just inches from my face, before I landed in the rough and brutish grasp of the other man. He slung me over his shoulder just as the first had, and resumed running. From the sounds of it, his partner scaled the wall just as easily as he had done.

I was pulled from his shoulder and tossed carelessly into a stagecoach, with both men piling in after me. I heard a shout from the driver and the crack of a whip, and then the whole thing jerked into motion. One of them wasn't prepared for the sudden burst of speed, and topped over on top of me. He was ridiculously heavy, and would have easily cracked my ribs if he had

been wearing heavy armor. He righted himself without so much as taking notice I was anything other than a lifeless sack, and took hold of a rail bolted to the roof of the cabin.

With two sharp thuds which shook the entire coach, arrowheads protruded through the wood, splitting and splintering it. Others followed but by the time there were five, the two men had hooked tethers onto their shoulder harnesses, opened both doors, locked their feet into place on metal bars, and hung themselves out of both doors so that the tethers snapped tight. They had arrows to string and were letting them fly into our pursuers, who, by the sound of the gallops and the speed at which the arrowheads perforated the wall, had to number at least five or six.

The pursuers no doubt were not expecting the enemy to hang out of the coach like this and fire back, so they were definitely taken by surprise. If I was only free, all I had to do was cut the tethers and watch them fall head-first into the streets, but my bonds were tight and my hands so numb that I could no longer feel them struggling.

The one on the right had sent four arrows flying before he had to pull himself inside to avoid an awesome sight, a Gryphon on horseback swinging a long sword so that it clipped the thug's shoulder. The thug spun around, not phased in the slightest by his wound, and let an arrow fly, nailing the Gryphon in the chest, sending him flying off his horse. I choked against my gag, wanting to cry out, but could accomplish nothing by it. The other man's tether snapped, shot straight through by a Gryphon's arrow, but he caught himself on the edge of the door before he fell out, and his partner grabbed him to pull him to safety. He punched open a trap door to the roof of the coach, and climbed up to it, nearly stepping on me, so that he was a full torso above the carriage and sending arrow after arrow into our pursuers.

Then, it all stopped. "That's the last of them," one of them said.

And then the other replied with, "But there's more behind that bunch."

"Doesn't matter, we're almost to the green point.—Time to transfer."

"Good thing we lost them before green point."

"Yeah, good thing we did our jobs."

The carriage stopped suddenly, and then I was grabbed and tossed out the door, caught by the other thug, and hoisted over his shoulder again. After a quick sprint, I was thrown into another carriage, but this time rather than just tossing me in, they at least made sure I was seated upright. Immediately I saw that I had more company than just the two thugs, and in fact this carriage was twice the size of the other one. All of my attention became focused on one man, a man they had deliberately placed me across from, before slamming their bulky selves to either side of me and jerking the carriage into motion. He was thin, had a face like a horse, a mustache that curled into circles at the tips, and a monocle over his left eye. Ghost's description of him over coffee an eternity ago couldn't have been better illustrated. It was Balastar Ramirez, or as Ghost preferred to call him, Tea-time.

"Ungag her," he said, and then one of the thugs took a big knife to my cheek, cutting off the gag and leaving what felt like a nasty cut in my face

along with it.

I coughed and choked as I felt freedom return to my face and neck, but had nothing to say.

"My Uncle wanted you to just rot in that prison until everything was nice and settled, but I couldn't think of anything more wasteful," he said with an air of boredom.

I just stared at him from under lowered eyebrows. I didn't think I would have been able to manage any other expression under the circumstance.

"Tell me, girl," he said, suddenly growing in volume and enthusiasm, "how does a man arrive in The City with nothing, and in under a year he is causing so much trouble for an extremely powerful warden that it disrupts all of his plans? Furthermore, how does one acquire the wealth to put one in such a position to become such a nuisance to those whom ought never to be...bugged?"

Still, I just stared, my eyebrows pushing even lower. I had nothing to say.

"I broke you out of there at great risk to myself, because I am certain that you were worth the risk. I am certain of this, or I would not have put everything at stake for it. Disobedience to my uncle, naturally, will probably prove uncomfortable for me, were I not certain that you would serve me well."

He still wasn't going to get anything out of me.

"A quiet woman: thank every God and Devil in existence. My request is simple. I want Thresh's secrets. I want to know how he became so powerful, so fast. I want to know how he became so wealthy, so fast. I want his power, and I want his wealth, and I want to be able to get more of it, very, very quickly, just like *he* has always been able to do."

He was asking for something that didn't exist, so I still had nothing to say. I felt pains shooting into my skull from how tightly I was clenching my jaw.

"Oh, incentive, of course.—Well we can't kill Thresh again, since,—oh, ah, I see how much even saying that burns you. But no, we can't kill him twice, so who should be next? We have no idea where Mister Sterrett is, so that won't make a very good threat, but we do know exactly where the Missus Sterrett is. I could cut off her head."

I blinked, I felt my heart turn upside down, and I felt my entire body tighten into a single knot. "You want to know his secret?" I growled to him through clenched teeth. "You don't need to threaten me with chopping off people's heads. I'll give you the Gods-damned secret. Take us to The Circle. I'll give you the whole taffing secret right taffing now."

"Ah, so cooperative. Good. Driver, to The Circle!" he shouted. "There now, you see boys? I told you this would be simple."

Tea-time smiled at me, took a deep breath, and then rearranged his shoulders. He shouldn't have done that, I saw exactly how tense he actually was. He wasn't afraid of me, that I knew; he was afraid that if the men saw that he had risked the wrath of Ramirez upon all of them for nothing, they would simply kill him. That wasn't part of my plan though. No, I planned to give him exactly what he wanted.

## — James: A Paper Trail —

Day 7: 8:30 pm

After I had moved what I considered a safe distance from The Patroller's corpse, I settled on an open building of considerable character (should I need to find it again) to deposit the rather heavy load of books I deemed worthy to recover from Phaeros's work tables. Sorting through them without the fear of sudden assault by an eldritch horror allowed for a much more thorough, collection process.

The most curious discovery was that Phaeros from time to time dated his notes (it would have been prudent for him to always do this!) and the date range gave me pause. I had been operating under the impression that his work here began some time after his disappearance fifty years ago, but upon seeing the type of work he had been doing in the hub, work clearly related to the crafting of the scroll, I began to doubt that. In fact, it seemed that he had been making use of the cottage to travel to Dereloth very, very shortly after his initial arrival in The City, and was contemporary to his work in politics. By Jossimer's own account, and by Phaeros's writings which he left behind, the scroll was completed sometime after Tempia came into the picture and yet before their disappearance. The date ranges discovered in the notes corroborated those accounts.

Further investigation revealed additional dates, the newest of which was marked fifteen years ago. It was a list of locations, all of which were crossed out save one: the Forbidden District. This was undoubtedly a list of candidate locations for hiding away the scroll. From the available information, I jotted out a timeline on a blank leaflet using my own writing stick.

- 72 years ago - Phaeros arrived in The City
- 70 y.a. - Phaeros begins visiting Dereloth (or at least the hub)
- 68 y.a. - Em arrived in The City
- 64 y.a. - Jossimer arrived in The City
- 62 y.a. - Phaeros meets Tempia
- ?? y.a. - Phaeros completes the scroll (based on Jossimer's account)
- 49 y.a. - Jossimer and Em both end their contact with Phaeros.
- 50 y.a. - Phaeros and Tempia vanish from The City.
- ?? y.a. - Phaeros and Tempia conceive three female(?) children
- 15 y.a. - Phaeros briefly returns to The City and hides the scroll in the forbidden district

This still left me with two questions. What event inspired Phaeros and Tempia to leave The City behind, and what event inspired Phaeros to return the scroll to The City thirty-five years later only to hide it away, rather than simply destroying it? The notes here did not answer either of these questions, no matter how thoroughly I perused them. It was time to move on, driven by a hunch.

Moving quickly, I made my way through the streets of Dereloth to the next likely place Phaeros would have spent time—the university library. I was not

surprised to discover that the door was locked, but I was surprised to discover that my lock picking skills were up to the task. I had it open within moments, all the while wondering how some of my agents managed to do it in seconds while under fear of discovery and death. Once inside the grand halls, a place that contained a sum of knowledge several orders of magnitude greater than what The City entire contained (the idea made me drunk, but I refused to be distracted by it), I began to hunt for any tell-tale signs of passage. It seemed that though Phaeros may have been a bit of a slob in his own laboratory or at least in places he considered his own; at any library no matter how vacant, deserted, abandoned, or derelict; he was meticulous and left nothing out of place. Still, I had a hunch what he was after, and though he was very good at putting the books back where they belonged on the shelves, he was again absentminded when it came to his own belongings. He tended to lose bits of notes inside books, leaving them behind for those who come after him to stumble upon.

I was looking for books on the heretical elements. The university, being far more open minded than any public institution, was not afraid to host books on what were considered by most respectable practitioners of the arts to be dangerous, and few were considered more dangerous than the study of what was unfairly dubbed the heretical elements. Tradition told us that there were four elements; earth, air, fire, and water, though some other schools of thought added metal and wood to that list. The heretical elementalists went in a totally different direction, dubbing the four elements substance, void, time, and eternity. This, sadly, would become after nearly a century, the founding basis for the Rivata's practices.

After hunting through the card catalog, I discovered where the books on heretical elemental accounts were stored; on the top floor, in the back, where in theory the students were the least likely to stumble across them, but in truth the place that they were most likely to get noticed. Every library administrator worth his salt knew that students tended to seek out the most remote regions of the library to study, and when in these remote regions if their minds began to wander, the books on adjacent shelves became tempting outlets for distraction and procrastination. I remembered very well my own days as a student, and how some of the most interesting topics I studied were stumbled across in this very manner.

Once I had ascended to the top floor and located the stacks in question, all I could do was collect all of the books on the topic in sets as heavy as my arms could carry, move them over to the nearest table, and flip through each of them carefully checking for loose pages or notes. The heretical elements, was a very broad topic, and most of the books in this section varied widely in their intention, scope, and tangents. I was only on my second batch when I finally discovered a loose scrap of parchment stuck into the spine of the book. It contained a single word, or perhaps merely six letters, I could not yet be sure: ELEOMO.

The word tugged on my memory, but did not bear fruit. Confident that this was Phaeros's handwriting, I went back to the card catalog, and searched

for this word among the topics. Low and behold, I found that their collections contained ten times as many books on the topic Eleomo as it had on the heretical elements. The books were also much more front-and-center, being on the ground floor near the front. Before I dedicated myself to the pursuit of scraps, I attempted to educate myself as to what this topic, in fact, was.

My first attempts were frustrating, given that most books on the topic were written for those who were already experts, so that their author could skip the basics and merely ramble on and on over their own tiny theories. Finally I located one that was a broad summary on the topic, and discovered how closely it was linked to not only the communications hub were Phaeros had set up his base, but also the heretical elements—as much as no one wanted to admit it. It was the study of pulling things, beings, entities, and so forth, from one reality into another. Its origin were humble enough, though also fairly profound, being founded as a means to understand how the conception of a child can result in the summoning—or creation as non Eleomoists argued—of a soul. That point of contention was actually what founded the Eleomo ideology that the soul already existed prior to conception and was merely summoned into the body. My memory suitably jogged, I recalled that this research went down many particularly dark roads, including a great deal of contribution to, again, the Rivata.

After many books searched with no further trace of Phaeros's study, I changed my approach. I checked the library's university directory, looking for a Department of Eleomo. Finding none, I broadened my search, looking for any Institute of Eleomo within Dereloth. I discovered quickly that there was such a place, and then, pieced together enough information about it that I would be able to find my way there from the university. Leaving the library a mess, (as was customary, as otherwise the fine intelligent people whom the library employed to reshel the books would find themselves horribly bored) I departed and began my hopefully uneventful journey to The Eleomo Center.

— Lytha: The Family's Name —

Day 7: 8:30 pm

"Well? Have you found anything yet?"

"Don't...rush me, Ghost."

We sat upon the wall of The City, both covered in large cloaks with the hoods drawn, so that we looked like a pair of cloistered monks doing an impression of vultures. It would have been easier for me to pick minds if we were walking the streets, but this location gave Ghost a good vantage point to watch for zombies. The moon was bright in the cloudless sky, so if they came from the northern wilderness or The City to the south, he'd be able to see them approach from quite a distance. I sat with my arms outstretched, as if The City was a fire I was warming myself on, as I poked one mind after another, testing it for the safety of entry, and then searching for a single name—Alarus. After about thirty minutes I had found definite evidence to support Ghost's claim that the family still existed and was living in The City,



but I was getting conflicting thoughts about them, and no clear direction to travel to find them.

"Nothing yet," Ghost muttered.

"Don't rush!—"

"I meant *no zombies* yet!" he whispered loudly into my ear. I squelched the urge to just throw him off the wall.

"Were you expecting zombies?" I said with a sigh.

"I'm guessing that at least a dozen people die in The City every day. Crime, disease, old age, honest brawls, not so honest brawls; it happens whether or not a zombie curse is going on.—Keeps the gravediggers busy. Outside The City in the villages and so forth I imagine it's pretty similar, but you can add starvation and wild animals to the mix then. Of course I don't know if a guy eaten by a wolf can turn into a zombie, as most of him's been eaten...but."

"Are you *trying* to distract me?" I said with a groan.

"No, sorry, I was just saying...."

"I imagine most of the deaths happen at night, and the night's just begun. Also, the villages are all far, far away from here, too far for a zombie to travel in one night."

"That's the thing about zombies though...they just keep coming. They'll walk nonstop as long as the sun is down, and when it's light, they fall over. Night again, they just keep coming, every night, over and over. And the ones in The City...same deal. I bet the ones who aren't buried yet are breaking out of the caskets and on the move. They could have died a week ago, but oh no, here comes a cursed bastard, let's go get him!"

"Your curse doesn't just raise every dead in The World though...that would be the apocalypse. I noticed a pattern to it...if you kill them or if they die very close to you, they become zombies and follow you no matter where you go. If there is a corpse near you for an extended period of time, they will rise, but will fall again once you put some distance between you and them."

"Yeah, that's true I guess," Ghost said "though I bet I could think of some exceptions to that. I don't know if—"

"I was being nice before about you not distracting me, you know," I said with only a hint of impatience.

"Sorry," he just said, and continued to glance over the wall to The City, and then back to the forest.

I started all over again, having lost my place. It was difficult to dig just deeply enough to know if they knew that name or not, without getting so far inside that I'd lose my sense of place and time, and be dwelling on a single person for almost an hour. I was almost ready to give up on it, tell Ghost we needed a new spot, when I found a glimmer of a possibility. "I think I found something," I muttered, and then dug deeper. A man passing through owned a pawn shop and sold a diamond ring to a young man who wished to propose to a girl. The young man thought that his last name went much better with her first name than Alarus. The only reason why the pawn shop owner remembered was because the young man was both lecherous and a braggart,

telling wild stories of all of the women he had taken advantage of, and felt bad for the girl. I had an urge to do a greater good deed than Ghost was planning, but remembered an old promise I had made myself years ago; no matter how tempting, never use what you get from someone's mind to become involved in their life.

"Do you know where to go?"

"Not yet," I said, standing. "But I have a link. The mind I read knows of a person who will know exactly where the Alaruses live. I think I can find that person, too." The pawn shop owner managed to find out where the young man lived. It was possible he was planning to murder him. I could save him the trouble but, no, I wasn't going to get involved. "We need to get off this wall. Come on." Without waiting for his approval, I jumped, tumbling into a landing with less grace than I remembered doing recently, but still not a bruise on me. Ghost on the other hand landed like a sack of flour. I was surprised he didn't hit his head.

"Where to?" he asked.

"This way." We didn't have far to go, or at least, it didn't seem far to the pawn shop owner. We couldn't run like I wanted to; The City was still very much awake, which meant too much light to slink through the shadows, and too many people in the streets to not find a pair of cloaked figures at full sprint unusual enough to call the guards. As we went I filled in the holes of the path from sampling briefly from pedestrians around us, so that soon I had a detailed map of the area burned into my mind. We got to the house of the Alarus fiancée, but did not go to the door. I ushered Ghost into a narrow gap behind the house and another building, so pitch black that a midnight cat would have seemed gray in the midst of it.

Ghost was wise enough to not utter a breath, leaving me the luxury of an undisturbed mental snoop. I found him quickly, and from the content of his mind, he was definitely entertaining his lecherous ways. He was angry that he was not able to spend the night with the Alarus girl, because her father said that today was 'family time' and that he wasn't family yet, and so he was getting revenge on her by sleeping with another woman...though he was not planning on ever telling her. I found that my urge to find him and cut his throat diminished after reading his own mind. The pawn shop owner saw him with anger as a wicked man who must be punished, but now I found him to be no more than a fool who could not control his animal impulses; contemptible, but not worth my effort. "I have what we need," I said to Ghost, though I wondered why I didn't just place the thought into his mind.

We were out of the gap and on our way again. "What did you find out?" Ghost said.

"The Alarus family has a manor-home in the third row of Westmarket. I know how to get there."

Ghost whistled. "Wealthy family," he said with disappointment in his voice. "A pity we're not going there to rob them."

"Yes, that is right, we are not. Besides, everyone is home right now, so it would be a foolish night to rob them."

"Not with you around. We could walk right in and take off every necklace and ring with you mucking about in their brains."

I turned to Ghost, grabbing his wrist; I found that I could feel his entire body through that simple touch. Immediately the impulses flowing through the lecher surged into my mind, and for an instant I forgot what I was going to say. Regaining my composure, I told him sternly, "Don't get distracted, and don't try to use me like that. Remember why we're doing this."

"It was a joke!" he squeaked like a little mouse.

"Bullshit it was. Come on. There's not going to be any mind tricks. You're going to march up to the door and present that star to the family and tell them where you got it. Let's go."

I let go of him, leading the way. Again, I wondered why I didn't just reach into his mind, slap him around, and rearrange his thoughts to be correct. Of course, I didn't really need to wonder. I refused to do it for the same reason why I didn't want him manipulated by Brother Ymar. I needed him to be himself, nothing less and nothing more.

— Sheam: Secrets of The Circle —

Day 7: 9:00 pm

The carriage stopped with a jerk. One of the thugs opened up his window, peeked out, and said, "We're here," before opening the door to get out.

"Unbind her legs," Tea-time said, and then the other thug, brandishing a long, jagged knife, began cutting at the ropes around my legs, not caring if he cut through my clothing or cut my legs themselves. With a minimum of blood loss but shredded breeches, my legs were free, and soon I was being led from the carriage to the ruins of The Circle, with one rope from the length that still bound my arms to my sides held onto tightly in case I should try to run away. There were six in total now, counting the driver. I was led through the ruined openings to what remained of the center hall, at which point Tea-time turned around, and with his hands on his hips, said, "We're here. Show me, and it had better not be a trick!"—As if he would know a trick when he saw one.

Ways of getting him apart from the thugs rushed through my head, ways to convince him that he alone should know the secrets, that he can't trust the others who might share this knowledge with Ramirez, but I felt like I needed to get him alone in the first place to even begin discussing these ideas with him, so I just said, "You'll need to let me lead, now, and I'll also need to use my hands."

He nodded swiftly, and the rest of my bonds were cut, though again the thug was clumsy, or simply careless, the blade coming too close to my skin for comfort, leaving a gash down the side of my sleeve that was soon red with the trickle of blood. "Show us," Tea-time said.

Without hesitation, I made a direct line for the basement. The gang followed me, with Tea-time closest behind, lighting torches to illuminate our path. Once I got to the basement, I opened the regular secret door with the pull of a lever, listening to them go "ahh," as if I had shown them something

remarkable.

"Wait," Tea-time suddenly said. "All of you stay here. I must accompany her alone."

I heard grunts and bahs coming from the men, but kept my face completely cold to hide my surprise and relief that he would make things so easy. I suspected that he already thought what I had wanted him to think; any of these men may betray you to your uncle. Tea-time took a torch from one of the men, and pointed to the opening, glaring at me.

I went. I had only been through here a few times, but I already knew the way by heart. I led him through the compartments of the outer secret area swiftly, until we came to that familiar but nondescript empty room.

"What's this?" he says. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the vault," I just said. "Put the torch down and help me." I got down on my knees.

He put the torch down, and knelt too. "No, over there, put your knees there and there," I said, pointing. He did so, surprisingly quick to obey, his eyes aglow with excitement as he said, "Now what?"

"Do as I do," I said as I placed my open palms against the stone floor. He did the same. "Now, on the count of three, lift your hands up while keeping your fingers spread."

He did it, just as I did, but when he saw the square of blocks in the floor rising up against our open palms he gave a small shout in surprise, lifting his hands away with a jerk, letting the blocks fall back down into place with a crash. "I wasn't expecting magic!" he hissed.

I just sighed, and rolled my eyes at him. "What *were* you expecting? Of course there would be magic. Did you think that Nightfall's secret to wealth and prosperity would be thrift, an entrepreneurial spirit, and an army of extremely well paid *accountants*? Again," I said, putting my palms against the floor.

"I was going to!" he barked back, and put his hands on the ground. This time, he did not panic, but successfully lifted the stone square out of its place. Following my lead, we brought it to the side, and lowered it to the ground so that it sat next to the square opening.

"You go in first," he said, picking up the torch and standing.

"Fine," I just said, swinging my legs into the hole, grabbing onto the ladder, and climbing down. I wasn't very far down when he began to climb too, only much faster than I was, his impatience showing. I had to double my pace to keep him from stepping on my fingers.

When we got to the ground, he held his torch before him, looking around at all of the crates and boxes before us. "Is this it? Is this the vault?"

"No," I just said, walking across the room whether he was following or not. "This is just junk. You'll know the vault when you see it. It's this way."

"And the secret to Thresh's success is within this vault?" he said, "Not just his wealth...I want to know his secrets too!"

"Yes, of course," I said. "You'll find it all. It's no good to me...I wouldn't know how to use it." It was unnecessary, but I felt it might lull him even

further into his fantasy world where I wasn't a threat to him in the slightest.

I led him down twisty corridors and through chamber after chamber, on the route I remembered surprisingly well. He kept quiet, but I could tell he was losing patience, often moving to overtake me before I came to an intersection, and then waiting a moment before I chose my path. "I had no idea all of this was under here," he said.

"Of *course* you didn't," I said with a sigh. "Otherwise it wouldn't be secret, would it?"

"Don't get smart with me, girl!"

Soon we came to that infamous large cavern, with the ancient catwalk leading out to the elevator with its shaft vanishing into the darkness below. I could tell from the way he paused that he was impressed, and had his excitement renewed. Surely, he must have thought, after two secret doors and now an elevator into the depths of the earth, I must be going somewhere important! Without a word or an ounce of hesitation I led him onto the catwalk, paying close attention to how it seemed to be handling his weight. It was doing badly, but he seemed completely oblivious, possibly misled by the way I moved with confidence up to the elevator. I got to the open door of the elevator car, which was just a cage hanging from a cable with notched tracks at each corner, and said, "After you."

He simply didn't get it. He waltzed right past me into the elevator cage, standing in the back with his arms folded before him, waiting for me to enter behind him. I looked up at the cable the cage hung from, seeing the way it was snapping, one strand at a time, under his weight. Sadly, it didn't seem to be enough. "Are you coming?" he finally said.

Eager to show no reluctance, I stepped inside the cage. Almost immediately I felt the cage lurch, and the sound of the ancient cable splitting in two under our combined weight. Acting entirely on faith; I pushed myself backwards violently just as Tea-time's face distorted into a grimace of panic. I fell backwards onto the catwalk just as the upper edge of the car flew past my toes. Then, I had to hold on for my life; sinking my fingers into the sharp, rusted metal of the catwalk, I felt the entire structure give way. Even so, I still watched the elevator cage car with Tea-time reaching out for anything to hold onto, his eyes wide in terror, as it plummeted downwards. I could hear the sound of metal scraping against metal and see a shower of sparks as the car chafed against the rails of the shaft far more rapidly than it was designed for. An instant went by and the two rails that made up the back of the shaft snapped, sending the car into a tumbling freefall as Tea-time bounced around inside like a rag-doll. This entire time, the catwalk was still twisting in a controlled fall with the side at the cliff still attached, but with my weight slowly snapping the brittle metal of the structure. Suddenly it jerked to a halt, so that it was nearly vertical, with me hanging on for dear life with bleeding fingertips. Still, I had to watch the cage tumble. All I could see now was the bit of light as Tea-time's torch bounced around inside the cage until it finally working its way free and the rushing air snuffed out the flame. I wasn't even sure if I heard it hit bottom.

It took me a moment to realize what I *was* hearing, the thunderous boom, boom, boom of my heartbeat, and the panting of my breath. All of it had taken no more than seconds, and yet I watched it unfold as if in slow motion. In the pitch blackness, with no idea how far up ahead the ledge was, and how long I had before the catwalk snapped free to allow me to join Tea-time below, I climbed, finding each hand-hold painful, my blood and sweat slippery, and my feet unable to find purchase in the tiny holes. I kicked my shoes off, able to use my toes to help me climb up; then finally, after what seemed like an hour, I felt the comfortable, smooth, cool touch of the stone, and pulled myself up onto it.

My heart was still pounding as hard as ever, and my lungs were still gasping for air. I was blind in the darkness, and could only imagine the bloodied state of my fingertips after having to rest my entire body weight against the rusty metal edges. I would probably die of infection if not treated.

Knowing that this was not over yet, I forced myself to stand, and with my hands out before me in case my memory was not as good as I thought it was, began the journey back to the ladder out of here. Remarkably, I made it back almost in no time, with the faint opening overhead an easy sight after my eyes had grown accustomed to the utter darkness. Wincing with pain, my hands took hold of the wooden ladder rungs, and I began to climb up. Hand over hand, up I went, with my heart still pounding just as furiously as ever.

I reached the top, and in the dim light saw that my hands were not nearly as shredded as I had feared. I quickly went to the outer secret door, and found the thugs waiting around, just like they had been told. Their eyes lit up when they saw me, getting up from where they had sat or leaned. "Balastar needs help carrying up all of the loot. He asked you all to come down to meet him and help him get it all. The man who can carry the most gets the biggest share!" Before they could reply, I went back the way I came, quickly going to the hole in the floor, and waiting. As expected, they filed in with greed in their eyes, glancing from me to the hole in the ground. "It won't be easy carrying the chests up the ladder, but if Nightfall's men can do it, so can you. Balastar is waiting for you down the third corridor to the right. Just follow it down until you find the third left turn, go down it, make two left turns from there, and you'll find him waiting. You'd better hurry before he hyperventilates from the sight of all that gold."

Grinning stupid grins, they went into the hole one by one, until the last of them had disappeared from sight. I hoped that my nonsense directions would get them so lost in the darkness that it would be hours before they found their way back, and by then I would have gotten help to close the secret door. As I had that thought, another one crept in on me; I only counted five go down. I rushed back to the outer secret door, to find one of the thugs still waiting there: one of the two who had abducted me. "One had to stay behind and stand guard," he said, grinning, and looking me up and down. "My, your clothes are a bit revealing, aren't they? Are you trying to seduce me?"

I looked down, seeing nothing revealing about my clothing other than the cut down my pant leg and the cut opening my sleeve. I ignored his comment,

and just said, "This is a bad place to stand guard. They could come at you from both sides and overwhelm you in a second. Here, I'll show you a better place." Before he could protest, I had walked out of the room. He followed behind quickly, reaching out to grab me, but was a moment too slow. When I got to the stairs up to the ground level I slowed down to make it clear that I was not trying to run away—just trying to gain some kind of tactical advantage against him, though for what, I had no idea yet.

He was behind me, saying, "I don't see how I'd do better standing watch up here," before I caught sight of a familiar face among the rubble. It stared at me with wide eyes set in a boyish face, below a horrible haircut: Schinler. My eyes grew as wide as his, and tried to mouth to him, "Get out of here!" without making a sound. The thug behind me hadn't seen him yet.

Then, as if he totally misunderstood me or simply chose to ignore me, Schinler leapt from his hiding place holding a chef's knife high over his head and roared as only a mouse could before charging the thug. "Schinler, no!" I shouted as the thug began his own roar: of laughter. The thug rammed his fist into Schinler's chest, sending the knife flying and him to the ground. Then he grabbed Schinler by the throat, his hand so big that his fingers could curl all the way around, lifted the scrawny lad from the ground, and slammed him against a wall. His free arm curled back, forming a massive fist, which hammered into Schinler's face, sending blood streaming from his broken nose from the very first punch. Then he punched again, and again; Schinler couldn't even cry out and could only make gargling noises as he choked on his own blood.

I didn't even think; I just did. The chef's knife was in my hand, and then it was plunging deep into the back of the thug's neck, clear down to the handle. He couldn't even scream he had too much knife in his throat. My head was spinning from what I had just done as I watched his body crumble to the ground, but I soon forgot it all as I saw Schinler's body go limp as he hit the ground along with him. I rushed to him, cradling his head, wiping the blood from his face, saying, "Schinler, Schinler, you poor, foolish, stupid, brave boy." He continued to cough and choke, his eyes glazed over, panting for air, but he was still alive. I lifted him up, cradling him in my arms, and stumbled over the rubble as I strained under his weight.

That's when I saw a sight so beautiful I almost broke down and cried. Captain Wendle, accompanied by a host of other Gryphons, was running towards me.

I didn't even try to explain to them. "He needs a doctor!" I screamed. "They broke his nose; I think they might have cracked his skull. He was just trying to save me," I said, as one of the Gryphons took Schinler from me and ran with him.

"What happened? Are you alright, Sheam?" Wendle asked, his sword drawn, his eyes quickly taking stock of my injuries.

"I'm fine. There's more down below, in the secret, secret chambers. I tricked them into getting lost down there, but one stayed behind, and I had to kill him. You need to help me close them in."

"We'll go down there and kill the bastards!" one of the other Gryphons said.

"No," Wendle said, putting his sword away. "We seal them in and only let them out when they're weak from hunger and dehydration, and then they'll be willing to tell us anything in exchange for a sip of water." Wendle followed me to the secret door, helping me close it. The Gryphons spread out through The Circle, searching for any other sign of Ramirez's men whom I might not have been aware of.

"I heard what happened at Castle Canard," Wendle said after the hole was sealed. "And it sounds like everyone there lost their taffing heads when the old man died, but I know better. Ramirez's claws run deep into our house. I wouldn't be surprised if he had several men in his pocket who worked together to poison the Lord and frame you for it."

"Tea-time, I mean, Balastar, was working for his own ends," I told him. "But I guess we still have bigger problems."

"Where is Balastar? Did he get away, as usual?"

"No," I said. "He's dead; I pushed him down an elevator shaft."

Wendle's eyes lit up, but he did not smile nor frown. "I am glad the shit-head finally got what was coming to him. On the other hand, without Balastar, now Ramirez has one less idiot to screw up his plans. You're right, we do have bigger problems; Mallard Canard is missing, we fear abducted."

"Damn," I hissed. "He had this all planned out, just waiting for the moment Daelus died, wasn't he."

"Yes," Wendle said. "This is truly a dark day, to lose two such great men at once. I am very thankful we did not lose you, too."

I felt the sorrow tugging at me with the mention of Daelus, but the time for weeping was over. "I'll be glad when we know Schinler's alright. Wendle, how did you know to find me here?"

"Well, we knew that Balastar probably wanted you to give him something, be it information or an object, and we figured that one way or another you would convince him to come to The Circle so you could get it for him. To those who know you, you are very predictable, Sheam. We're lucky you're unpredictable to those who do not know you."

"He said he knows where Corrine is, and threatened to hurt her. Is she safe?"

"Yes, she's safe, and you will be soon."

"No!" I said firmly. "I am the Mistress of The Circle now, and I am not going to hide in a bucket while my territory is threatened by a thug from the south side of the wall. We're going to find Mallard, and we're going to send Ramirez a message...that if he wants to take Hightowne, he's going to end up with his hand cut off."

Wendle grinned, his mustache bristling out like a hairbrush. "I knew I liked you for a reason."



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**— Ghost: Presumably Alarus — Day 7: 9:00 pm**

"These are some posh taffers," I said, tilting my head back to look the big mansion up and down. "So, what are we doing? Just going up to the front door?"

"You're going up to the front door," Lytha said. "The Hammerites know my face, and have spread around wanted posters. I don't want to risk anyone here recognizing me. What are you looking at?"

"I'm not looking at anything," I said, my eyes darting back to her. "I am listening. Can you hear them? The zombies, they're coming."

She looked at me, brow slowly lowering, eyes drifting away as she listened, and then shook her head "No, just the howling of the wind."

"Oh, there's that too," I said, scanning the distant streets as far as my eyes could manage in the darkness, "and the flapping of shutters, or the rush of water in the sewers, the hum of the electric street lights, the distant music of the tavern somewhere back the way we came, and that snuffle of undead feet, and the moan of undead hunger." I was giving myself chills. "You know Lytha, sometimes I think you're so busy reading minds, you don't use your ears anymore."

She gave me a skeptical look. "Ears can play tricks on you...but minds only tell the truth. Are they getting close?"

"Yeah," I said, and then looked back up at the mansion. "I'd better do this fast. Why can't I just break into their upstairs room and leave it for them to find? Wouldn't that be more humble, anyway? No thank-yous, no gratitude, and all of that."

"Because I don't trust you not to try to steal something...that's why."

I looked back at the place. Half the lights were on, most of the central rooms, with upstairs rooms and rooms on the edges locked, with one exception. It would be so easy to slip past the guards, climb up the side, and leave the star in the master bedroom like it had been put there by the taffin' tooth-fairy. Lytha was probably right, though. First I'd want just a peek inside the jewelry box, and then once I saw what was in it I wouldn't be able to leave it. I had to go up to the front door.

"Alright, here goes nothing," I left the dark safety of the alley and stepped out into the wide street, my shadow stretching across the wide avenue from the humming streetlamp nearby. There was a big iron gate separating the street from the mansion's small front garden, with brick walls covered in ivy flanking it. It looked nice, and was perfect for climbing, but I knew Lytha would be right behind me to smack me if I so much as tested the strength of the vines. I lowered my hood, wanted to look less threatening, and took the star out from my hip pouch. I had decided it would be a good idea to wrap it in brightly dyed paper and a ribbon, so that it looked like I was delivering a gift. There didn't seem to be any guards at the gate; which made me wonder how anyone was supposed to get inside. It was probably by invitation only!

As I approached the gate, I saw that there were indeed some guards on patrol near the front door. If I rattled the gate and waved, they would

probably come over to see what was going on. I'd give them the package and that would be that; no fuss, no mess, no problems.—Just a delivery. I even wrote a little note inside the packaging which told them a little story about what the star was and why it was theirs now.

I was about to catch the attention of one of the guards, when I felt Lytha's familiar grab at my shoulder, spinning me around. I was looking right into her face, which was giving me a very stern, 'Stop, come with me' look. I gave her a 'What the taff?' look in reply, but didn't stand there like an idiot when she briskly walked back to the alley. I was right behind her.

"What's wrong?" I said, "I thought I was doing fine."

"This isn't the right house," she said, giving it a stern look and then looking back to me.

"What do you mean? It says Alarus right there on the gate."

"I did some snooping while you were dawdling in the street and doing your best impression of a man too timid to knock on a girl's door on their first date. These aren't the Alaruses we want."

"What do you mean? Aren't any good as another?"

"I read the mind of Lord Alarus. He's a very guilty man who knows how to hide it, but not from himself. His mother married the widower Alarus when he was a child, and then when he died, he took the fortune leaving the true heirs to the Alarus name penniless. He's kept the secret his entire life, not wishing for his own family to inherit the shame of his ill-gotten fortune."

"Crap, Lytha, that's really...well I guess I don't see anything wrong with it to be perfectly honest. It's really unfair, but that's life, you know?" I shrugged. "So are you saying that I can't give it to them?"

"Maybe you don't care, but I do," she said, frowning. "Not only that, but his daughter is currently engaged to two different men, the little whore. Neither of them knows, of course, but her father does, and he's helping her keep the secret until he decides which one he dislikes the least."

I laughed. "What? Since when do you care about that?"

"And his wife has killed two of their servants with her bare hands, both for petty accidents." She was starting to curl her lip in disgust.

"Crap, a real tyrant, but that's your nobility for you, I guess."

She grabbed me by the hand, pulling me closer so that she could whisper to me, her eyes filled with sorrow. "And their son is a rapist, luring girls in with the promise that he will teach them to play the flute, having his way with them, and then threatening to dishonor and ruin their families if they breathe a word of it."

I did a double take, and when the words had sunk in, immediately felt my blood boil. "That settles it; these people are definitely getting the star. I am going in there and shoving it up that boy's arse!"

Lytha laughed, placing her palms firmly against my cheeks, holding me steady. I knew my face was beet red. "I'm sorry, Ghost, but I made that last part up," she said. "I just wanted to see if there was anything that would actually make you angry."

I felt sheepish, and gullible as hell. "Okay, yeah, funny," I said.

"You're in luck, though. Lord Alarus knows exactly where the family of his estranged step-siblings lives. They're in the slums, the whole lot of them, three generations, all in one tiny house."

I smiled, and then grinned. "Ah, I get you now. Well, to be bloody frank, I'd feel much better about giving the poor folks the star."

"Why Ghost," she said, "you're learning to read *my* mind."

I shushed her quickly, putting my hand to her mouth, and glaring out into the street. The zombies were here. As usual, they were drawn to my general vicinity, but once they were nearby they had to rely on some other sense to track me down. These were all recent dead, still fully clothed, most resembling elderly people who had probably just died today of old age, only to get back up and begin shuffling the streets while no one was thinking to watch. I thumbed over my shoulder, indicating it was time to find a different way out of the area, hopefully putting some obstacles in our path that the zombies, or at least these zombies, couldn't pass.

— James: Speaker for the Eleomo —

Day 7: 10:00 pm

I felt it stranger that my memory of Dereloth was so poor, but I had to remind myself that I had been no more than a boy when taken from this place. Unlike Daelus and Phaeros before him, who were both men when they came to The City, I was no more than a gifted child. It seemed perfect for my eventual lot in life; it could be accomplished by none who had not actually grown up with The City as his home. Now however was not the time to be reminiscing of a childhood on the streets, it was time to enjoy the sight of the Eleomo center before me, in spite of several previous earnest attempts to get myself lost.

It was nestled in among the other buildings like it didn't want to be noticed, but presented an architecture style distinct from the rest of Dereloth, the Rivata influence, or more likely what would later inform the styles of Rivata structures, was evident. Evidence suggested that Phaeros's presence here was likely, as the front door was left wide open.

The entry hall was round with multiple exits and an oddly shaped pillar marking the center of the room, surrounded by a semicircular dais. I peered about, hoping that some type of directory would present itself, but seeing nothing but bare marble walls.

Giving me quite a start, the oddly shaped pillar began to disassemble. It detached itself from both the ceiling and the floor, and then split itself into quadrants, the upper two folding up behind it and splitting into other smaller parts, to reveal a large sphere in the very center which in turn detached itself and seemed to roll down the split in the bottom half, until it was at nearly head height. Below the sphere a rectangular portion extruded, which appeared to be a tall stack of thin square blocks. When the transformation was complete, the dais itself spit in two and slid to open a space between the pillar and myself. It began to roll or hover—I could not see which—towards

me, with a faint glow within the solid marble (or what appeared to be marble) coalescing into a single bright spot at the very front.

I took a few steps back, instinctively, and the thing stopped completely. After a pause, it resumed its approach, but much slower. This time I did not retreat, and in holding my ground, found that it stopped of its own accord just a few feet in front of me. A series of tones emanated from it, deep, but highly distinct tones, so much that it seemed like the thing was attempting communication, though nothing about the tones suggested language.

"Breeevvoommf, vommf, vommf, Vreeeeemmooooo," it seemed to say.

"I am James Sterrett, a visitor," I simply said. "May I pass?"

The glow in the sphere increased, until it congealed into a single point of light that was taking on a bluish color. "Mommvovvf, Movvmf, Breeeeem," it seemed to say, and then a long piece of it, which unfolded out from the back, tipped with an elaborate and slightly dangerous looking instrument, came to bear on the tall stack of bricks in the front of it, attacking the top brick with ferocity, a loud ratcheting sound, and a plume of steam-like dust. Another appendage unfolded, took the top piece off the stack gently, lowered it to the floor, and slid it along the smooth marble to my feet. It left it there, retracting all appendages, and waited.

I crouched down, picked up the square, flat brick, to see that it had carved writing onto the top of it. The writing was in the common tongue of Dereloth, and said simply,

| You may ask questions. |

"Curious," I said, and then looked up to see an appendage with a claw-like attachment beckoning me. Uncertain, but thinking it was a worthy guess, I placed the thin block into the claw. It closed, and then took the block and slid it into the bottom of the stack. The entire stack compressed briefly, there was a sound like cracking stone, and then the stack relaxed. I imagined that the replaced block was now blank.

"Questions, questions, of those I have many," I mused aloud. "What, or who, are you?"

An identical process proceeded, but this time, rather than sliding the block across the floor to me, it simply held it where I could read it. It said,

| Eleomosynator. |

"I see. Is that your name, or your job?"

It put the block at the bottom of the stack, and simultaneously with the compression it carved out a new message.

| Name; and job. |

"What is it that an Eleomosynator does? *Ee-lee-oh-moh-sin-A-tor*. Am I pronouncing that correctly?" The reply took several blocks to convey, and it

didn't seem to run out of arms with which to present them to me, lining them up vertically until the last was in place.

| I greet those who visit |  
| the Eleomo center, |  
| escort them to their business, |  
| and answer their questions. |  
| Yes. |

The last yes, I took it, was in reply to my pronunciation question. "So, you're sort of like a butler, but there was no one around to turn you off when everyone left."

| No, not like a butler. |  
| Yes, I was turned off. |  
| Phaeros reactivated me. |  
| Phaeros has yet to turn me off. |

"Ah, so Phaeros was here."

| No. Phaeros is here. |

"Is he? Remarkable! Please, will you take me to him?"

| Yes. |

It spun about in place, and moved off. When I began to follow it, it quickly adjusted its hovering speed to match my walking speed. I slowed even farther, to a much more comfortable pace, and it too slowed. It led me down a hall and into a room. There, sitting before a large table with a top resembling a swirling whirlpool, was a man, sitting completely still, as if dead. I had never seen Phaeros personally, but being involved in politics as he was, it was not uncommon for him to be the subject of portraiture, and thus I recognized him. His eyes were small and deeply set in an oddly shaped face with a very pronounced chin and brow. His rather flat chin was turned up at the tip, and the lobes of his large ears sagged almost to his shoulders. White hair covered his head completely but was very short, as if it had been shaved several weeks ago. He was old, but not as old as he should have been; I could not remember the age he would be, but he was my senior by several decades, and I was no young man myself. It was possible that he had died many years ago, but this place, without any bacteria or other microbes, was incapable of decaying his body, thus he appeared exactly as he had when he had died.

However, my speculation was dashed to bits when I, upon approaching him, quickly noticed that he was breathing, but very faintly, and only at about six breaths a minute. The breathing pattern suggested deep meditation, but such meditation was difficult to achieve whilst being simultaneously

unconscious. "Phaeros? Phaeros!" I said, with no reaction from him in the slightest. Finally, I reached to touch his shoulder, but found his robes cold to the touch and his body as firm as stone. Whatever power had taken him, it was keeping him alive, but in a state that was quite literally frozen. I wondered briefly if this was Delphine's doing, but had nowhere to go with that thought. Thankfully, if wishes were questions, I had my own genie.

"Eleomosynator," I said. "What is wrong with Phaeros?"

| Unknown. |

Disappointing, but hardly unexpected, then I asked, "What was it that Phaeros was doing here?"

| He studied the means by |  
 | which very specific souls |  
 | may be summoned into |  
 | the bodies of children |  
 | upon conception. |  
 | It is essentially forced |  
 | reincarnation. |  
 | In his particular case |  
 | it dealt with the souls |  
 | of higher beings, |  
 | such as deities. |

Taff! So it was here that Phaeros discovered how to bear goddesses as children. His children of course had to have been born prior to his current state, so it was only natural to infer that his current presence here was of a very different nature. "Do you know if that was the nature of his current visit?"

| Purpose of his current |  
 | visit is unknown. |

I studied him. His face was expressionless, his eyes closed. His face was lined, wrinkled, but did not appear any more than a decade older than myself. Maybe that's why he came here...to cheat death until the correct time. However, why would he come to the Eleomo center to do this? Unless... "Did Phaeros instruct you on how to wake him?"

| No. |

So much for that idea.—Actually, I had phrased the question badly. I tried a different approach, "Did Phaeros instruct you to do a certain act when a certain amount of time had passed?"

| No. Additionally, I am currently |  
| unable to tell time. |

That settled it then. It was time for a new topic, one that had been nagging at me ever since I heard of Eleomo. "Did Phaeros, by any chance, dabble in the principals behind the way the Rivata were able to push us delegates back into The World in spite of the banishment?"

It was still for a moment, which was unusual. It had always answered before without a pause. Finally, it sprang into action.

| Unable to answer questions |  
| pertaining to topic: the Rivata. |

"Ah, of course...a forbidden subject; allow me to rephrase. Did Phaeros research how to bring a living body and soul which had been banished into the netherworld back into the real world?"

| Yes. |

I wanted to ask if he had found a way to do it, a way that we delegates could summon our own people back to The World, people who, I had to assume, were kept in suspended animation just like Phaeros and Jossimer and Daelus and I were before we were sent here. I wanted to ask if it was possible that I would ever see my parents and siblings again. They would remember me as a child of course, but it didn't matter. If I thought it was possible, of this Eleomo Center held the secret to that, I might find myself staying here until I found it myself. I couldn't do that, of course. Corrine would miss me. I had to ask something, though. "Did he discover that it was possible?"

| Yes. |

I felt my heart leap. "Did he successfully bring someone back?"

| Unknown. |

"Do you believe that the Eleomo Center contains the knowledge and tools to make such an event possible?"

| No. |

My heart sank, again. Phaeros had researched it, but lacked the resources to actually do it. Maybe that's why he came back here; even though his birthing of Goddesses had been successful, he had never forgotten the possibility of bringing the others back, and so he...did what, exactly? I was letting my own wishful thinking cloud my judgment. I had to stick to the

facts! Thinking that way, I realized an obvious question I had failed to ask, or rather I had asked it, but in a foolish way. "What is Phaeros's current condition?"

| His body lives in a seated |  
| position. His spirit resides elsewhere. |

"Is his soul in the possession of Delphine?"

| Unable to answer—insufficient |  
| knowledge regarding Delphine. |

"Yes, yes, of course. Oh, what is the purpose of this table he is sitting at?"

| It allows one to see over |  
| great distances, or even across |  
| dimensional barriers. |

"Aha, what was Phaeros looking at when his spirit left his body?"

| Unknown. I was not present |  
| to observe this, and it |  
| was not recorded. |  
| It was believed that the |  
| table he is currently using was |  
| modified in some way prior |  
| to his current session. |

"Blast. I suspect he conducted some type of spiritual projection, and that he needed to see his target to conduct the projection, so he used the seeing table. I hope that it didn't sever the connection by accident, forever severing his soul from his body."

| Please restate query. |

"I am sorry, that wasn't a question for you. Eleomosynator, can you show me how this table works?"

| I can, on the condition |  
| that we use one that is |  
| not already in use. |

"Of course, of course. Oh, but you mean...the one Phaeros is sitting at is currently in use?"

| Yes. |



“Because he is sitting at it or because he is actually using it?”

| Both. |

“And how is he currently using it? What is he currently attuning it to?”

| Unknown. |

“Damn. So much you know, and so much you don’t know. No, no, that was not a query. Will you assist me in the use of this table, here?” I sat down at one of the adjacent tables identical to the one Phaeros was before, though mine lacked the swirling pattern.

Eleomosynator did not respond at first, instead he moved to the opposite side of the table and began to manipulate things under the surface which I could not see. Finally it presented a stone reading,

| What is it that you wish |  
| to see? |

“Can you show me what it was that Phaeros was observing?”

| No. |  
| He learned to command the |  
| table without my assistance. |  
| He requested that I do not |  
| disturb him while he did so. |

“I see. But you did, at one time, assist him in its use, correct?”

| Yes. |

“Can you show me the last thing you assisted Phaeros in viewing?”

| Place your palms in the |  
| receptacles. |

I did so. Then, almost at once, the tabletop cleared and became very dark. A moment later the darkness faded, and I found that I was looking into a circular room. The view was strange, not like looking through a window into another place, but as if I was looking through another pair of eyes that moved and changed focus as I willed them to. I found that I had complete freedom of rotation, able to look up and down and all around me. The chamber was definitely of Rivata design, and was encircled by a series of body-shaped imprints which stood tilted back at a forty-five degree angle to the floor. They were all of different size and shape, ranging from big grown men to youths

and a few shaped for women, and one even for a child. I counted ten in all. "What is this place?" I asked.

| Unknown. |

"If it's unknown how did you find it to show Phaeros?"

| Phaeros asked me to show |  
| him anything in Dereloth |  
| presently which did not belong. |  
| After showing him many things, |  
| this was the last. |  
| After I showed him this, |  
| he no longer wished me |  
| to be present during his viewings. |

"I see. Can I reach this place by foot?"

| No. It currently exists several |  
| miles away from any surface |  
| which would allow friction for |  
| locomotion. |

I imagined a single room out floating in the infinite void which surrounded Dereloth in all directions, and the only way to get there was to run and jump in the proper direction, and hope that you were aimed directly at it, because if the arc of your error was more than an arm's reach, you would sail past it and be forever floating out into the nothingness. It was not an attempt I was willing to make, so I was content to just sit tight and observe. "What are these indentations for?" I asked.

| Unknown. |  
| At the time of previous viewing. |  
| Four indentations held humans. |

"Fascinating. How long has it been here?"

| I am currently unable to |  
| tell time. |

"Yes, yes, of course. I am sorry. Did it appear before or after you met Phaeros for the first time?"

| Before. |

"Did he say anything about it?"

| He said only, |  
| “so that’s how they got us here.” |  
| This was not directed at me. |

“Builder’s bollocks, that is how the Rivata got the delegates into The World, isn’t it. No, no, stop, that wasn’t a question—I know you can’t speak, er, write about the Rivata.” So, there were ten delegates in all, and all had been sent to The World already. I had no way of knowing if the circle represented any kind of order, and where the order began or ended, but I could only deduce that the hollow shaped like a child had to be me. Three of the hollows seemed suited to hold women. One of those three was rather small, so one of the remaining two had to be for Em. Beyond that I had no clue.

It would have been very nice if all delegates were known and accounted for, but I had also feared that there could be as many as a hundred of us. Ten was more than I wished to contemplate, but so few that it was clear the Rivata put a tremendous amount of faith into each one. I imagined that it took all of their strength to breach their banishment and send a living person back into The World, so ten was probably exactly as many as they knew was possible. What I really wished I could know, at this point, was if the order was how I guessed, and if Daelus was truly the final Delegate, or if there were at least four more that had come after him. Would Phaeros know? Would my companion know? “Eleomosynator, when Phaeros first viewed this room, were the four remaining individuals adjacent?”

| Yes. |

“And do you recall anything about the appearances of the four?”

| From left, to right.  
| Mature Adult Male. |  
| Mature Adult Male. |  
| Mature Adult Female. |  
| Young Adult Female. |

“Can you describe them in any more detail?”

| My design prohibits a large |  
| degree of familiarity with men |  
| and women to prevent me |  
| from developing favoritism |  
| with frequent guests. |

“Fascinating! Alas, not very helpful. Thank you, Eleomosynator, you have told me quite a bit in spite of that.”

| Please direct both expressions |  
| of gratitude and complaints |  
| to the administrators, who |  
| have made the Eleomo Center |  
| and the Eleomosynator possible. |

From that, I wasn't sure if I was dealing with a being of purely designed responses and devoid of personality, or if I was dealing with a creature of unique intelligence that possessed a truly complex personality. It would be wonderful to be able to spend a year with the Eleomosynator to test the plausibility of both theories, but I wasn't sure how well it, or he, as I preferred to think of him, would do if removed from Dereloth, or even the Eleomo center. Focusing back on the Delegate chamber, I studied the four hollows, trying to glean any more information from them. Alas, they were not body molds, merely places to set the bodies in an average enough shape to keep them stationary without having to be meticulously crafted.

I looked up from the table, uncertain if I could learn any more from staring at that room, and cast my eyes back to Phaeros. It was time to attempt to wake him.

— Ghost: Just a Delivery —

Day 7: 10:00 pm

In the slums, no one could tell one hovel from another. I was surprised Lytha seemed so certain that this was the one, but then again, I should have known better by that point; when Lytha knew something, she really actually did know it. We didn't need to hide in a dark alley here; in fact, we were some of the most reputable people in sight. "They're all home," she said, "though the generation betrayed by the heir by marriage has all died off, there are three from the next generation, two of whom have spouses, and from them eight children, only four of whom still live here, three of whom have spouses. All of the children from that generation are here; sixteen total."

"Crap, thirty people? That's a lot of mouths to feed. Do you think the star will be enough to get them out of the slums?" I said, feeling about twenty times more comfortable with this than I had at the mansion.

"How much do you think it's worth, if taken for the material values?"

"Six thousand is what old Raggie was paying me to get it," I said, feeling a cold spot deep in my gut at the thought of the poor bastard.

She thought for a moment, staring at the hovel, before turning back to me. "The little ones are all asleep now, as are the elderly, but others are still awake. You should go, now."

"Yeah," I said, taking a long sniff of the air. "They're getting close again. Even in the slums there isn't anything that smells quite like zombie. Are you sure that—"

"They're here," Lytha said. "And there's more than one," she added, pointing down two other streets "two there, and a third that way."

"Crap. Why do so many people have to die all the time?" I pulled out a vial of holy water and uncorking it.

Lytha pulled it away from me. "Give me the rest of those and the bombs in case I need them. You give them the star; I'll worry about the zombies."

"Ah, I knew I kept you around for a reason," I grinned, handing over whatever gear she may need.

She winked at me, pulled my hood down, gave me a quick and surprising kiss on the lips, and said, "Get moving."

"Moving," I said with a grin. I walked over to the door, but then turned around to look back at her. She had walked right up to one of the zombies, which didn't seem to pay her much mind, and sloshed a bit of holy water at it right from the bottle. It hissed and moaned, crumbled, and fell into a pile of rotting meat and bone. "Yeah, yeah, you make it look so easy. Try doing that when there are fifty of them, and they're all after you! Oh, and if you just do that, you'll run out of holy water really fast."

She rolled her eyes, and then rushed down the next street to the steadily approaching pair. Another funny thing about the slums at nearly midnight, zombies could easily be mistaken for ordinary folks. Not wanting her to use up all of my holy water, I faced the door once again, and knocked.

The door creaked open, but only for a few inches, with a chain holding the door from going any wider. The face of an elderly man looked up at me, with big shaky eyes and gnarled fingers combing through his beard. "Yes?" he said.

"Uh, hi," I replied, and then took a deep breath, putting a smile on my face which I hoped wouldn't look creepy. "I'm here because I want to give you something that belongs to you."

He frowned, glanced over his shoulder, and then back at me. "All we've got is already here," he just said.

"Yeah, well, this is a little different. It's sort of like a gift. If I can come inside, I promise to explain everything."

He wrinkled up his already horribly wrinkly nose even more, muttered something about how they were too poor to rob and the women too ugly to rape, and undid the chain across the door. He opened it wide, letting me see into a filthy room with dozens of eyes glaring at me from the shadows that soaked up the space between a few dim oil lamps. I could see that many of the cupboards had been converted into beds for the children, who were all curled up like mice in a nest against one another for warmth. Chairs creaked as the adults twisted around to look at me. A game being played on the floor with lines carved into the wood and buttons as game pieces came to a stop as a young woman with a face black from soot stopped mid-move, looking up at the stranger. One of the others who had been scraping the bottom of a tin for a few more tastes of whatever was once inside froze with his finger in his mouth. All around me I could hear nervous breathing and the creak and groan of old furniture as the Alarus family shifted so that everyone who was still awake could get a good look at me.

"Uh, hi," I said.

"You already said that, son," the old man who opened the door said.

"Er, yeah, I know. Listen, I need to make this short, so, here." I leaned over, folded my legs under myself, and sat on the floor, just like half of them were doing. They all followed me with their eyes; big bloodshot, weary eyes in the darkness, set above hollow cheeks and jaws that probably only knew how to chew hard bread. I pulled the star, still in its nice packaging from the previous attempt, out of my hip pouch and placed it on the floor. Slowly I pulled away the ribbon and the wrapping, and when the star itself was revealed, I heard a chorus of gasps come from all around me, along with a few hushed, "Oh my word," "What is that?" "It's so beautiful," "Well would you look at that."

"What is this, son?" the old man said, who by now I figured was probably the patriarch of the group.

"It's called The Alarus Star, and it belongs to you."

More gasps followed, along with them whispering back and forth to one another what I just said, followed by remarks of disbelief.

"Surely you have the wrong family," the old man said. "Lord Alarus and his clan live in Westport. Surely this belongs to them."

I shook my head. "No, I am very sure it belongs to this Alarus family. That's because you are related by blood to the old Alarus family buried in the Boneboard. That's where I got it, and now I am giving it to the people who deserve it."

The silence around me was quickly being drowned out by whispers that overlapped so much that I couldn't really make out most of it. I could feel their attitude though; they were starting to get excited, but it was a very fearful excitement. They still didn't trust me. That was when I heard a crash outside, a muffled moan, and then the hiss of holy water burning undead flesh. Whatever was going on outside, it had gotten close to the hovel, and the cruse clearly wasn't broken yet.

"Here," I said, "Mister Alarus, this is yours, take it." I lifted it up and held it before the old man. He stepped away from me, his eyes filled with worry, his trembling hand still stroking his beard.

"I can't accept that," he said. "The other Alaruses would find out. They'd take it from us; tell everyone we stole it from them!"

"No, they won't!" I insisted. "Because you're going to do this, as soon as day breaks; you're going to take it to Newmarket and find a shop named Guthrey's Mint. Sell it to him, he'll give you a fair price for it, no less than two-thousand gold pieces, I swear to you." I couldn't help but think, I could have gotten six thousand for it, but that would have been through Raggie, or maybe Nightfall, and those means were likely to get these people into far more trouble than they deserved. Two thousand was still a decent sum, and to these people, a fortune.

The group's murmur of excitement became a low roar, as my words were repeated over and over among the family. Some of the children were now awake too, asking who this man was, hearing what the adults were saying and repeating that amongst themselves. Soon I heard them saying, whispers at first, but then almost a chant, "Take it, papa, please, take it."

“Well, that...that’s an awful lot of gold. We could eat...why, that could get us out of the slums, no doubt. We’re hard working folk; we never wanted to take nothing from anybody.”

“Yeah well you’re not taking this from me, because it’s already yours. I’m just a delivery man.” I held it out to him, my eyes locked onto his, begging him to take it, but refusing to just shove it into his hands. I felt like he needed to accept it. I heard another hiss, and a dull thud against one of the walls, and the unmistakable sound of “currrrrsed!” but again the people didn’t seem to notice. The hiss was followed by a sharp cry, and then two loud strikes, and then silence. I was holding my breath, telling myself over and over that Lytha could handle a few pesky zombies.

He was hesitating, but finally, he reached out, and slowly, very slowly, reached out farther, and took it from me. I let out a sigh of relief. Almost at once his family gathered around him, not pushing or shoving, but packing together as they no doubt were used to doing, wanting to catch a better look at the star. Quickly it was passed around, each one who took it marveling at it as the gems caught the light of the oil lamp, whispering to each other about how beautiful it was. The children soon took part, not quarreling over it, but very impatiently trying to get their chance to hold it, turn it over in their hands, hold it up in the light, and then pass it on.

“Why did you do this for us?” the old man said, who had tears streaming down his cheeks.

I didn’t answer right away. I listened. I sniffed the air. All was silent except the constant murmur of excitement from the three generations who passed around their dream of a better life. There were no hisses, no moans of undead anger, no splashes of holy water, and no smell of the undead. I took a long, deep breath, closing my eyes and lowering my face into my hands. In spite of my relief, at that moment, I didn’t really even care about the curse anymore. Strangely, I felt like the looks in these people’s eyes and the hints of terrified joy in their voices was worth more than that six thousand gold I could have gotten. Finally, I turned to the old man, who was still waiting for my answer.

“I need to be honest with you,” I said, though I wasn’t really sure why. With my voice lowered, I went on. “I’m a grave robber. I stole the star from the tomb of your family, planning to just sell it off. It was going to be just another quick job. Well, it didn’t go so well. I ended up with a curse that followed me wherever I went, and eventually realized that the only thing to do was give the star back. So, that’s why I am here. I’m really not all that nice of a guy, and definitely wouldn’t have done this if it wasn’t to save my own neck. But, you know, now that it’s done, I’m really glad I did it.”

He just smiled, and reached out to pat me on the shoulder. “The man who did the right thing because it was easy and he wanted to do it is only half as good as a man who did the right thing even though it was hard and he didn’t want to do it.”

I laughed a little, and said, “What about the man who only did it because bloodthirsty zombies were hunting him down every night?”

He laughed too, patting my shoulder again. "He's pretty good too."

I grinned. "Now listen, I am serious about what I said about selling it off. It's pretty, I know, but one thief in the night and it's all gone. Get the money, divide it up among yourselves so that it can't be robbed from you in one snatch, and then don't ever let a soul know that you have any more coin on you than they've seen you just pay to the merchant."

"Don't worry son, we haven't made it this far by being stupid."

I scratched the back of my head. "Ah, yeah, sorry...I'd just hate to see my good deed wasted, you know?"

"I know. I do have one more question...what is your name?"

"Eh," I said, suddenly feeling very sheepish. Strangely enough, I really didn't want to tell these people that my name was Ghost. After hesitating for a moment or two, I finally said, "Steven."

"Thank you, Steven," he said, and then one after another, and then all at once, everyone, from the elderly to the middle aged to the youths to the tiniest children who could talk, said, "Thank you, Steven. Thank you, thank you so much."

I knew I had turned bright red. "Well, I should be going," I just said.

"Please, won't you stay for tea? We were saving some, and how about some bread?" said two of the woman at once, though not in the same order.

"No, no, please, I need to be off," I told them as I stood up and turned to the door.

"We'll never forget you!" one of the little ones cried out as I opened the door a crack. I just smiled again, and let myself out.

I saw Lytha in the moonlight, standing with crossed arms, leaning against a pole. Before her was a pile of mangled zombie parts, all perfectly still. Aside from a gash on her arm, she looked like she had done pretty well for a first-time zombie killer. "How did it go?" she asked with an amused smile on her face.

I came up to her. "A more important question is, did you just kill all the zombies, or did they all, suddenly and at one moment, just drop dead?"

"All of them, one moment, just stopped moving, and then fell over."

I balled my fists and silently shouted out, "Finally!"

She smiled even more. "You know, I'm kind of proud of you."

I shrugged. "Just did what I needed to do to get by another day. There's nothing special about that."

"You're also not telepathic. I haven't felt so much joy coming from one place in a long, long time. The little one's right. They'll never forget you."

"Blah," I just said, waving it off. "The coin only will last so long, and then they'll be cursing me."

She laughed, and slid her arms around me, drawing me closer. There was something strange and a little awesome about her doing this while almost standing on top of a pile of mangled zombies. "And I was wrong. This hasn't changed you one bit. In fact, right now, you are as much yourself as you ever have been. The same when you risked your life to save mine."

"Ah, well, this is really different from that."



"I don't care," she said.

I smiled, feeling myself blushing again. "So, could you hear all of it?"

"Oh no, things got a little intense out here, but I could hear most of it, Steven."

"Gah!" I shouted, shoving her away and taking several steps back. "Never call me that, okay? Besides, I completely made it up. It's not even my real name; it's really completely a fake."

"Ghost, soon you will learn that you can't lie to a telepath," she said with a wink.

I just glared at her. "Promise me I will never have to hear that name spoken aloud again?"

She laughed, saying, "I can't promise that, but I can promise that I'll never call you that again. And you know you're right; it isn't your real name one bit. Ghost really is your name."

"That's better," I said, hoping she wasn't going to try to use this against me some day. "Now, can we get out of here?"