

Distortion...

"Knots tied in blood soaked ropes. Marble painted red; gentle stone pulled from the earth mocked into the form of ye that violate it."

The rope snapped tight. Bits of blood sprang off at the shock of sudden tension. There was a creak, and a shudder, and then all was still.

"Faceless then and faceless now," I whispered on, "eyes ground to dust, just as ye grind the wood and the stone."

My fingers swept over the marble form, a suggestion of noble robes, a tall statue, arrogant and selfish. Where my fingers touched, it was painted red.

"Ye robs the wood of its harvest, berries sweet and good, life and nurture to the wild, and uses it to paint dead halls of stone, to dye dead cloths ripped from the flesh of lambs. Red ye wishes, and red ye have, now ripped from thy own veins, thy own life, bitter and evil."

And the blood painted the floor as well; great pools, still pouring down from the bodies which hung.

"Ye, who I have slain, never to rest, never to sleep; hangs here the flesh of thy face in my hands. It was ye who created Hell, ye who dreamed it from thy nightmares; now it is ye who must exist in it, for it is thine and belongs to none other."

The great pounding on the door behind me continued. Beyond it I could hear shouts, promises of damnation, curses; words so dark it was their own tongues which should be removed, rather than the tongues of those who would dare defy their false god. They pounded with their hammers, but the wood did not give way; the wood they thought they had enslaved, thought dead and beaten, now defied them.

I wiped the blood from my hands, thick sheets splattering to the floor, and donned my gloves. Up I climbed. Now the stones they carved and packed into their walls betrayed them; for they ushered me to my escape up and out through the shattered glass and out to the night sky beyond. Eventually they would break through that door, now that the wood no longer needed to protect me, and they would see what I had done. Their brothers, rope tied about their necks, hanged from the towering statue of their builder, its head bowed in prayer. They would not recognize their brothers, for I had taken their faces.

Hammerites did not need faces; they had sold themselves willingly to a faceless cause, an empty existence. I was only showing them who they truly were.

Chapter 2

Honest Jobs

The Previous Day**— Ghost: A Day in the Life of the Dead —****Day 1: 8:00 pm**

Missive to Ghost—

Alright taffer, here's the map to the Boneboard. This place has been hit plenty of times before, but no one has ever made it into the Alarus Extension. I'm sure it will be no trouble for you; just a bunch of deadly traps, ferocious monsters, and hordes of the insatiable undead. Nothing you can't handle or your name wouldn't be Ghost. I've got a hot 6 grand in store for you if you pull this one off. Good luck me ol' duck.

—Ragbert

P.S. Almost forgot to mention. You've heard about the Alarus curse, right? Just nonsense, I say. I am sure you don't believe in those kinds of superstitions.

I was standing in a wide grassy pit with a wall around the upper edge which was intended to keep folks like me out. It had failed. Right in front of me was an ugly stone hut: the entrance to the place they all called *The Boneboard*. I was looking for what Ragbert, my fence, called The Star of Alarus. Anything else not nailed down would be good too.

I wondered why I was getting myself into this crap again. Was it because I *enjoyed* running for my life from angry burricks and zombies? No, it was because Ragbert said I should in one of his tidy little missives. He paid me money to do stupid things. Supposedly this time it would be worth it, but how many times had I said that before?

I glanced over my shoulder just in case a zombie had decided to appear behind me. They tended to do that in places like these, and it wasn't to tap you on the shoulder and ask for the time. No, the only thing there was some scattered debris, though I could have sworn I heard some scratching under one of the big tomb things outside the pit.

I checked my gear one more time before going in. I had a set of fire-arrows, which I had already carefully inspected to make sure that the explosive crystal tied to the end of each arrow-shaft wasn't chipped or cracked, or had any other flaw that would cause it to blow up while in my quiver. I didn't have many, not because they were rare or expensive; in fact, I grew them myself in a few fire pits I tended in my basement, but because if I packed them in too tightly the sharp edges would rub against one another and sooner or later the whole set would become just one big fireball. On the other hand the bombs and mines were more predictable and more expensive, and tended to be used as more of a defensive last-resort. They were the most fun when combined with big flasks of oil, which I had, to really make sure that

whatever was chasing me would regret it.

"Well," I muttered to myself, and any zombie within earshot, "time to zip down this hole and into the damned place." I took another glance around the pit just to make sure no one was going to protest. Everything was peachy, aside from that scratching sound, like undead nails being dragged across a closed coffin lid. Nah, it was probably just mold. Yeah, that's it; loud mold.

I passed through what looked like it might have been an iron gate at one point as I stepped into the stone hut. Inside was a single room with two interesting features, both of which a guy like me never wants to see in a tomb: a big gaping hole in the floor, and a rope tied to the ceiling going right down into it. I was about to get mighty pissed when I remembered that this tomb had already been hit many times before. It should have been obvious; this place was really easy to find.

Well, just because someone had entered The Bonehoard already didn't mean that they had made it out. I could probably expect to find a corpse somewhere with a bundle of loot. Or maybe it was a setup? Maybe one of my competitors was lying in wait for me down there, ready to spring a trap the instant I trod upon the wrong stone! Well, I'd show them. Even if they did manage to kill me, I'd haunt them for all eternity! Then I'd finally live up to my name!

I tested the rope, and quickly noticed that it seemed older than I was; not that I was all old or anything. It seemed securely attached to a metal loop that had been driven into the stone ceiling, like it was meant to be there or something. From the looks of the hole, it had either been made by explosives, which I loved, or a psychopath with a shovel and far too much energy. A psychopath was hard to rule out on either account.

I should have turned back, forgotten about the star, gone on to greener pastures, or at least tombs that hadn't already been looted. Obviously, I didn't. "Well, let's make this quick," I muttered with a shrug as I secured the pack on my back, grabbed onto the rope, and lowered myself down.

Surprisingly, I got down safely. It wasn't too deep, but still dark enough that I had to light my torch. I was in some type of hollowed out tunnel, which reinforced my psychopath with a shovel idea. I only had to follow it along a few steps before I came into a large chamber with a wooden floor and brick walls. The shattered and cracked boards I stood on also seemed to be the ceiling of a much larger chamber below. I could clearly see into it through the gaping holes in the floor. Then I noticed that, low and behold, yet another rope hung conveniently from the wood. This one looked a fair bit fresher.

"This place *is* well traveled," I muttered with a frown as I lowered myself off the edge of the wood and took hold of the rope. I just hoped that whoever had left *this* rope wasn't still inside. There was nothing worse than finding living people in a crypt. Living people in a crypt were never up to any good; like me. On the other hand, what about the *living dead*?

When I got to the floor I found myself in a place that looked exactly how I expected a crypt to look: tall dusty walls covered in alcoves full of bones. Some of the bones were scattered around the room as if a careless peer of

mine had felt no respect for the dead when pulling the place apart looking for loot. That was stupid. Any real grave robber knows they never put valuables in the first chamber! The good news was none of the bodies were moving, which really didn't mean much considering that the dead could lie pretty still before they woke up!

Confident that I was on the right track, I checked my map, the awful old sketch Raggie had given me, and tried to sort out the shortest path to the Alarus area. It didn't look far.

"North, and then east." I checked my compass, faced north, and then looked straight ahead. Ah, I was facing a solid wall. It was just a minor setback, so I began to explore a little. I chose a corridor at random, which was irritatingly devoid of cobwebs, and went down it. When I came to a junction, which was also far cleaner than I wanted to see, I noticed that there was nothing to notice. All of the alcoves had been picked dry. Damn, I hated being in crypts everyone else knew about! I liked my loot readily available, in large quantities, easy to tote, and a breeze to sell! I just hoped that the Alarus Extension was as untouched as Ragbert claimed.

When I decided it was time to move along I chose another passage at random, all the while inspecting my map to see if any of this looked familiar. It definitely did *not*. At this point I also decided that my map was useless. It may as well have been a big square with the word Bonehoard written in it, given how accurate it was. I wadded it up and put it away while quickly retracing my steps back to the first chamber so I wouldn't be hopelessly lost.

I did better without a map anyway, since it forced me to pay more attention to my surroundings. I chose the passage directly to the south. It grew very narrow and, according to my compass, curved around to the north while sloping upwards. Once I got to the top, I was looking out over another big chamber. Maybe I had doubled back to the first chamber? No, it had statues in it, and funny scary-looking faces carved into the wall.

I followed the corridor back to the first chamber, and then tried going west up another narrow sloped passage, which opened up into a smaller chamber that looked very self important and stank really badly. Immediately my eyes went to the floor, and I remarked, "Huh, dead guy." There was a fresh corpse on the floor, clearly a man of my profession considering his attire, along with a campfire and a book. I immediately checked the body for any valuables, and of course found none. All he had was a cheap dagger and a compass that wasn't nearly as nice as mine. I guess he wasn't a very good grave robber. Well, of course he wasn't, he died just five minutes from the tomb exit!

That's when I saw it: a place on his side where he seemed to have been nursing a wound. There were punctures and a clear discoloration of the skin beyond the usual for a cadaver of his freshness. Idiot! He had been hit by a trap, poison darts of course, and rather than getting the hell out of here and finding a doctor he'd decided to just sleep it off. Oh well: better him than me.

Just out of curiosity I opened up the book and had myself a read. It was just some rambling notes about the crypt. Jokingly, I remarked aloud, "Dear

Diary. This tomb really stinks! Today I decided to sit in a room all alone until I turned into a corpse!" and then chuckled at my humor. No one was listening. My chuckles faded as I read on, getting to some of the later notes. It talked of zombies, and traps, and belching burricks, and more zombies and traps, and people dying. Well, at least I now knew the fate of the previous expedition into this place. I briefly considered tempting fate by going in search of his lost comrade who no doubt had a big bag of treasure next to his bloated corpse, but the part about the belching burricks made me reconsider. I hated those ugly, stupid lizards. I needed to focus on the star.

This room was a dead end so I had to backtrack. I came back to where the corridor wrapped around the top of the chamber with those ugly carved faces. I figured it was my best bet, so I made the short drop down to its floor. Well, it wasn't as short a drop as I had hoped. I would never make it as a cat burglar since I tended to land on anything but my feet. After wincing in pain and brushing myself off I noticed that there were two ways to go. There was a big hall and a small hall, and they both went north.

I decided to give Raggie's map one last chance, so I pulled it back out to have a peek. Sure enough, there was nothing on it that was at all useful. "Crap," I uttered, and then did an enie-meanie-miney-mo. Ah, I'd take the big one. I walked only a short distance, turned a bend, and came face to face with an awful cave in. "Crap!" I said again, though this time it was more of a shout than an utter. Oh well, this just meant that I'd have to take the small corridor. I was about to turn around when something caught my eye, and it was a good thing too. There was a big stone plaque on the floor amongst the debris which read "ALARUS" plain as day.

"Maybe there's another way in, somewhere around...somewhere else?" I said to myself. I backtracked to the room with the ugly stone faces and went down the smaller corridor. It branched into two. I took the north one. It turned, it twisted, it split and divided, it led into rooms big and small. I was disgusted. I backtracked before I got myself totally lost, and thankfully was once again face to face with those ugly carvings. Desperate, I took the path that curled around to the south. I didn't know why I did. I needed to go north!

I was almost to the top of the slope when I heard something just around the bend. It was a moaning sound; the bad kind of moaning, the 'I'm dead and I want to eat your brains' kind of moaning, the 'I'll settle for ripping out your insides and painting the room red with your blood if I can't have your brains' kind of moaning. I liked the other kind of moaning better. I quietly turned around and went back the way I came with the hairs on my neck standing on end.

Once again I was before the blocked passage. I looked it over and grumbled. Why did this have to be challenging? Oh well, this is what separated us experienced adventurer types from the *wannabe* tomb raiders. I dropped my torch and slid my pack off my back to rummage about inside it. I produced my trusty rope and hook, all tied up neat and proper.

After looking over the wall of rubble for a moment, I noticed a crevice to

one side near the top that I might be able to squeeze through. I took careful aim and tossed my hook at the hole. It clanged, banged, and clattered its way back to my feet. "Experienced adventurer type," I muttered as I tried again. After three or four times I actually got it to go through the hole and hook onto something.

Now I just had to hold on tight and climb. I found footing on the vertical pile of rubble and pulled myself up hand over hand, until finally I was close enough to the hole to grab onto it. It looked a great deal smaller up close than it did from the floor. This would have been a good time for me to have made some vaguely spiritual gesture in the hopes that it'd somehow grant me enough luck to be able to get through the hole, but it would probably just have made any god listening laugh and decide to give me an even harder time, so I said to hell with it.

I reached through, grabbed on, and pulled. I reached farther, and pulled. The crevice was long and seemed to grow even narrower as it went. Of course, it was pitch black inside, and I could barely breathe.

I realized then that this crevice might lead nowhere. I'd probably become hopelessly stuck. Something could kill me at any moment, or worse, I'd be stuck here only to die slowly of thirst or suffocation. If that happened, I hoped that my feet would stink for all of eternity, so that the next bastard who tried to get through here would get a nose full.

On the other hand it didn't look like I was actually stuck yet; so, I had nothing to do but continue to reach farther and farther, pulling myself through slowly, until my hand finally caught open air. I gave a brief laugh of triumph, and quickly, too quickly, proceeded to pull myself through.

Of course, in the excitement of the moment I forgot that I had climbed up to the top of the rubble, so naturally there was a bit of vertical space my body needed to negotiate on the other side. I did so head over heels, nearly breaking my neck.

I could now add several scrapes and a brand new head wound to my list of credentials. If only all those people who thought I was so great could see me now! "Hah! Dusty and bleeding, professional adventurer am I!" No one heard me. Well, at least no one told me to shut up.

Now it was pitch black, and I had managed to not only leave my torch and rope on the other side of the cave in, but my pack full of expensive gear as well. I really wasn't much of a professional. I did the only thing a person like me could do in a situation like this. I put my arms out in front of me, and took a step.

I landed with a crash. "Ow! Damn it! Who put those stairs there?" Falling down a flight of stairs amidst the throws of magnificent heroism tended to bruise one's pride.

But I couldn't take a time out to think about how much I hurt. It was time to think about how squishy the thing under me felt. "Nice! A dead body!" Then it was time to think about the smell, bursting out from the carrion as if I had deflated a balloon. It was worse than my feet. It was the type of stink that would make a skunk curl up and die, and it was filling the corridor, my

nostrils, and my mouth.

I got off the body, trying hard not to think about what particular part of decomposing anatomy I was putting my hands into. "Eww, still fresh," I uttered, and was actually very thankful that I couldn't see a damn thing. As usual I wasn't the first one to get this far, but I certainly planned on being the first one to get the loot and get out.

Wait, if this guy was another grave robber, maybe he wasn't dumb enough to leave his torch on the other side of the cave in? I felt around in the dark bravely, not too concerned anymore about touching moldy dead things, frantically searching for something that felt like it could produce light. I almost wet myself with glee when I put my hand on the very distinct shape of a lantern.

Of course, I had no way to light it. "Crap." Well, the guy had to have a tinder box or a sparker of some kind. Reluctantly, my hands once again began to fumble about the corpse. Unfortunately, this meant finding his pants. That was the last place I wanted to be feeling. I'd leave this part out when telling the story later.

Ignoring the details, I did eventually find a tinder box and its sparking flint. Blindly, I clumsily shot a spark onto the oil laden wick of the lamp. This was obviously dangerous, since I first had to find the wick with my fingers, and then use my oily fingers to make the spark. I should have caught myself on fire. Of course, once the lamp was producing light, I wished it wasn't, because the first thing I saw was a million little critters scurrying away from the corpse, which was thoroughly mashed with black ooze seeping out all over the place. I almost added some green ooze, courtesy of my churning belly, to the scene. I made a mental note to not have a full meal before my next grave job.

I looked up and down the corridor. Well, it was dark, and looked like a corridor. One foot in front of the other, I pressed on. Without my rope, I didn't know how I'd get back the way I came anyway.

As my luck would have it, at the end of the hallway I found a wall. "Damn." I spat at the bricks. I guess this meant that I'd be the second corpse to grace this dead end. No, that was dumb. The other guy probably just broke his neck while falling out of the crevice, like I had almost done. Why make a grand hallway to the Alarus section only to make it lead to a dead end? There had to be a secret door. The Alarus family liked secret doors, I decided, though no amount of research had gone into that conclusion. As I searched for the secret door, I also decided that the Alarus family liked to bury lots of really valuable stuff with their dead, because, you know, you could take it with you, and why would their grandkids need tons of beautiful gold coins anyway?

I didn't know what I was looking for; maybe a panel, or a loose brick, or a hidden button, or a big red lever with a sign next to it that said, 'Pull me, I open a secret door!' Yeah, that would have been nice. My fingers slid into an unusually deep crevice between two of the stones, and instead of them getting bitten off by some evil little insect, I felt something move inside.

"Aha!" I said aloud, and pushed it a bit more. Nothing happened. I pushed my fingers in deeper, and felt the little thing inside break free. I pulled my fingers out, and with them came a pebble which clattered to the floor. "Huh," was all I could think to say.

I took a few steps back and stared at the wall some more. I was pretty sure I could see an outline of a door, though it was amazing how well rich dead people could blend two pieces of stone to look like one. There had to be a way in; after all, there were more Alarus's out there who still had to get around to dying! Where would they bury them? What would happen to the body of second cousin Bobby Alarus when he died choking on his silver spoon?

I turned my eyes to the floor, and began to scan the brickwork. I saw something shiny. Normally, this would be cause for a humorous remark about attention spans, but in this case something shiny was just what I really needed to see. I dashed over to it, put my lamp down, and looked close.

"Damn!" It wasn't anything I could take and sell; it was just a bit of metal between two stones...a bit of metal that could be part of the secret door opening mechanism! That or it could be a deadly trap, designed to spray out poison gas, or spikes, or release millions of venomous spiders that had sat waiting for decades just so that they could swarm out and eat someone someday. Yes, this had to be a trap.

After making that decision, I decided to stomp on it. A second passed, and to my surprise, I was still alive. I checked below my feet for a bottomless pit (with spikes at the bottom!) just in case. Sometimes I was amazed at how often I didn't die after doing something really stupid. Since I was still breathing, the fact that the secret door was open now seemed trivial.

I had to have been the first person to make it this far. There were cobwebs; lots of cobwebs. It was a good thing that I hadn't lost my family of daggers, because now they would come in handy. Speaking of family, it looked like I was in a chamber reserved for various uncles and cousins. I went from tomb to tomb, checking the name plate and then pushing the lid open to see what goodies were inside. I pulled rings off fingers, ripped necklaces off of necks, and even found the occasional gaudy bauble that really shouldn't have been worn by a man. Well, in this case, I was glad they had.

As I moved from room to room, I noticed that all of the name plates indicated men. It must have been some sort of chauvinist thing. Now where-oh-where was grand-daddy Alarus buried?

Maybe there were no women buried here because the women killed all the men? Maybe they got sick of the chauvinistic pigs and launched a grand conspiracy to kill them all, bury them in an elaborate tomb and then decorate them with fancy jewelry as if they were all nancy-boys? No, that couldn't be it. I knew better than to think that a woman could ever, under any circumstances part with a bit of jewelry.

After a tiring search of the area, I came to the conclusion that I was in need of a break. A small snack and some water would pick me up. Maybe it would even clear my mind. No, not likely. I also needed to stop the bleeding

caused by my earlier acrobatics. Of course, then I remembered that I had left my pack behind, and along with it my water, food, and bandages. Frustrated, I sat down on the floor with a thud and pressed my back against the resting place of 'Deeper Alarus'.

A moment later I realized that 'Deeper' wasn't a first name, but by then it was too late. The stone slab gave way under the force of my slump and I was once again falling. "The hell!" was the most sensible reaction I could muster. I could have tried to grab hold of something to keep from falling down but no, I decided to just shout something angry instead!

I lifted myself up from the debris and made a quick check to make sure nothing was broken. I hadn't fallen far, not like my first couple of falls, so I wasn't really hurt. I decided that I should invest in some body cushioning if I was going to make a habit of this. Of course I had done something stupid again; my beautiful lantern had been left behind. I tried for several infuriating moments to climb back up the shaft to get to it, with its warm yellow glow berating me.

I took a deep breath, and immediately regretted it. I smelled something like a cross between leather and bile. I knew that smell.

Then I heard a moan; another one of those bad moans. I froze, and for a fleeting moment hoped that it had just been some subconscious moan of anguish from me and not a bloodthirsty zombie. Then I heard movement, the shuffling of squishy feet, and the swish, swish, of rotting muscle dragging bone. I turned around and pressed my back against the wall. The light from the lantern in the shaft above was allowing some semblance of vision down here, enough to see basic shapes but not much else. I couldn't see anything moving, but the definite swish, swish was getting closer.

If I'd had my pack I wouldn't have worried. It had all of those wonderful things that I never ever allowed myself to go into a tomb without, only now I was in a tomb without them. That stuff was expensive too! I'd have to spend my entire income from this haul just to replace my gear! The zombie slowly lumbered into view from the pitch black recesses of the chamber, its arms reaching outwards ready to grab onto anything warm.

I still had my daggers, all six of them, but they weren't great against zombies. To a zombie muscles were optional, so slashing, hacking, or stabbing was pretty much useless. On the other hand, this zombie looked particular old and withered. I suspected that I could hack off a limb, but really I just hoped that it wouldn't notice me and go back to sleep.

But then I saw it; a big rock on one of the zombie's fingers. Distracted momentarily from my mortal peril (by something shiny, naturally) I pulled one of my daggers from my belt, dashed over to the zombie, and promptly hacked off its outstretched hand at the wrist. Un-handed, the zombie recoiled, letting out a shriek of anger and lowering its grubby brow over empty eye sockets. I barely noticed. Its hand, now in my hands, was trying to gouge my eyes out of their sockets as well. I wouldn't have any of that, and with a little bit of a skill and a very sharp knife, the hand was no more than a wriggling palm. I kept the ring finger and discarded the hand, throwing it as

hard as I could at the zombie, who had recovered from the shock and was ambling towards me.

It swung at me with its handleless arm, and the jagged bone came within a hair of my throat. I leapt over a nearby sarcophagus just as it made another lunge. It crashed into the sarcophagus, almost toppling over it, putting its head within biting distance. This gave me a grand opportunity to deliver a right hook. The zombie's head spun clear off its neck, and tumbled to the floor in some dark corner.

Zombies also tended not to need heads. It flailed its arms about menacingly and tried to climb over the sarcophagus to really mess me up. I kicked mightily at the sarcophagus causing the stone lid to slide off. It was big, and very heavy, and did bad things to the zombie's lower torso when it made contact and pinned it to the ground. Then the lid fell over upside down with a rumbling thud, crushing the zombie's upper body with a crispy splat.

Well, I guess that made me a hero. My enemy dispatched, I casually pulled the big beautiful ring off of the squirming zombie finger. I imagined the head was somewhere in the dark, trying its best to chew its way over to me so it could taste my brains.

"So much for the guard," I said with a chuckle. I scanned the room, and noted that there were only three sarcophagi here, and none of them had plaques, nor dates, nor names; nothing. They were arranged with two in the front, one of which was now open, and one in the back of the room. My eyes had adjusted to the dim light nicely by this point, so the room was spooky, but not impossible to explore.

First I checked inside the opened one. There were no rings, no necklaces; nothing. I went to the second one, and tried to kick the lid off just like I had heroically managed to do before. This time, all I managed to do was hurt my foot. Maybe I had just been lucky before, or maybe it was a shot of adrenaline that gave me super strength. Yeah, that had to be it. Slowly, I pushed and I prodded at the lid before it gave way, falling to the ground with a tremendous thud. It was the same deal, nothing; just old bones. I frowned and growled to myself. If I was going to get stuck in a secret chamber with a zombie, at least there should be some loot in it!

I turned my angry eyes to the third sarcophagus. "Of course," I said, "these two were just servants, and you're the master. You're going to have a ton of goodies inside, and better yet, the star!"

"Nooo!"

I almost swallowed my tongue, digested it and crapped it back out, all in one moment. My bulging eyeballs scanned the room as I slowly turned around, ready to face my company. To my shock, I saw no one.

"You will be cursed!" the voice hissed again.

I blinked a few times, and then realized who was addressing me. "Oh, is that a fact?" I replied.

Sure enough, I spotted the zombie's head, mouth gaping menacingly, and sort of hissing at me from where it sat, or...slid. Yes, the head was actually sliding across the floor back to its body. This was one hell of a zombie.

"Cursed!" it said, drawing out the "ur" part and hissing for a moment or two before he got to the d at the end.

"Yeah, cursed," I said, and then grinned heartily at the final sarcophagus. "Grand-daddy Alarus, I have found thee!"

With gusto I went and grabbed onto the lid, determined to pull it free with my bare hands just to make the zombie head mad. Amazingly, I pulled it off, and for an instant, felt as if my luck was about to change. I looked down into the open sarcophagus triumphantly and saw...a female mummy. There were no jewels, no gems, no rings, no necklaces, hell, I'd have settled for a crappy nose ring at this point, but worst of all, there was no star. The zombie head started to laugh...Bastard.

Wait, there had to be something in there, otherwise mister zombie wouldn't be making such a fuss. I looked over my shoulder to it just so it could see my smirk, and then I drew one of my daggers. I hated living dead things, I hated stumbling around in the dark, I hated falling on my head and my ass and other body parts, and most of all I hated wasting my time in tombs with no loot in them. With conviction, I sunk my dagger into the mummy of Grandma Alarus and cut her open; throat to groin.

"Nooooo!" shouted the zombie head, with much more fervor this time. That guy could sure move a lot of air for something with no lungs attached.

"Nooooo!" I mimicked, trying to sound like a whining baby. Its protest only strengthened my resolve. I dug my hands in and pried open her rib cage. There, barely visible in the faint light amidst the dust of decomposed flesh, was The Alarus Star. I grinned with triumph as I pulled it out and turned around so that I could gaze upon it in better light. It was just as it was described, a spectacular gold amulet shaped like a five-pointed star, trimmed with hundreds of gems that seemed to dance widely in just the faintest of light. "Thanks Lady Alarus," I muttered to myself.

"You are cursed!" the zombie moaned. "It will haunt you to the end of your days! Cursed!"

I chuckled at it. "You don't have much of a range for conversation, do you?"

"Cursed!"

"Yeah, I heard you the first time. Say, how do I get out of here?"

"Death!" it proclaimed, and I could have sworn I felt the ground shake as it did so.

"Uhm," was my reply.

"Death!" it shouted even louder, and the ground most definitely shook that time.

"How about not death? How about something significant other than death, okay?"

Now the ground was shaking all on its own, without the zombie to give it a rallying speech. I could hear rocks begin to tumble in the distance, crashing, smashing things. Wow, I guess there was a curse after all. I lost my footing as the ground heaved beneath me, split down the center by a massive crack. The light in the other room ceased suddenly, the lamp probably smashed under

falling rocks. As if things couldn't get any worse, the next thing I heard was the spray and slosh of water. I felt it too, rising quickly.

"Bollocks!" I shouted. Well, if I was really cursed, I may as well curse. I guess I would have only bad luck from here on out. On the other hand, I already had pretty bad luck before the curse, so maybe it would negate the effect, and now I would have good luck? Not thinking beyond that point, I grabbed grandma Alarus and heaved her out of her sarcophagus. I jumped in and, as best I could, tried to close the lid. "There, dead; now enough with the earthquakes and the rising waters!"

No such luck. I could still feel the shaking, and hear the water pouring. Well, this was it, I decided. At least I wouldn't have to worry about a fancy burial. I was wrapped up tight in a royal sarcophagus, after all.

My coffin lurched, and then I felt it begin to tumble. Water started to trickle in from around the lid. I felt myself being shoved this way and that, spinning, like I was rolling downhill. Then the tumbling stopped, and there was just the sound of rushing water, so loud I wouldn't have been able to hear myself scream. It went on seemingly forever, with my coffin slowly, and then not so slowly, filling up with water. Well, I figured drowning was better than dying of asphyxiation. Wait...

This was the second time tonight that prayer had occurred to me. I never thought too hard about Gods or Builders or Tricksters or things like that. I always figured it was just a way to control people and make money. As much as I tried, moments from death, I still figured it was all just a way to control people and make money. Well, so much for a prayer before death.

After I was done thinking pseudo spiritual thoughts, up became down and I found myself falling against the lid of the coffin. Then right became down, up became sideways, left went somewhere else, and I became sore, knocked this way and that until I had more bumps on my head than I had fingers. There was a tremendous crash, a cracking sound, I saw a flash of light, and then...

Then...Then?—

Then there was a blurry glow all around me. I tried to open my eyes. "Hell?" I asked aloud, trying to regain my senses. No, Hell was supposed to be hot, and while it wasn't cold in here, it was a little too comfortable. I blinked a few times, and squinted, and then realized that I was the luckiest fool in the world. Somehow, when the Alarus chamber had collapsed and all of that water flooded in the designers didn't take into account that there was a cavern under it all, and filling a room with water that was being shaken to pieces would result in a cave-in.

It wasn't any old nasty cave either; it was filled with glowing mushrooms as far as the eye could see. The water that poured in, and was still pouring in, only made them glow brighter. Laughing, I pulled myself free of the rubble and fell to my back into the bed of mushrooms, stretching out my aching body. I was tempted to try a couple, but no, I needed my senses intact if I was going to get out of this cave. I may have lost all my gear, but I had the star, had a bit of loot, and I had foiled the curse. I put a few nice-looking small

mushrooms into free pouches on my belt, and began hunting for a way out.

I wandered for a time and enjoyed it. It was nice to be out of mortal peril, and the mushrooms were pretty. I just hoped that this cave eventually led to daylight, or moonlight; either would be good. This would have been a funny time to take up diary writing. That way, if I never got out, someone would eventually stumble upon my journal, and read my last entry, which would say something about buried treasure, and a lost mermaid, and a golden mushroom that would make you king of the world. Then the poor sod would spend ages searching these caves for just those things, until he wrote a journal, died, and someone found it.

The cave sloped upwards, and the further I went, the fewer mushrooms there were. Eventually the darkness up ahead gave way to stars, and the open air. I came out in a walled yard, wild with plant life, with a modest looking house sitting at one end.

It turned out that the cave I was in was actually the private property of one Lord Clethen, though I supposed the title was merely a personal embellishment. As I drew near the house I saw lights go on inside, and then a crazed gentleman charged out towards me. He gave me a very hard time about trespassing in his mushroom cave, a place where he cultivated the fungus for the concoction of illegal recreational substances, and tried to end me with a knife. After getting myself beat up and nearly eaten by a zombie, I was in no mood for dealing with a grumpy mushroom farmer. I let him live—after all, I very much wanted him to continue his trade—though he'd need to put some ice on his eye. I would also have to add another place on my belt for my new seventh knife.

The cave was not far from the entrance to The Bonehoard, so finding my way back to The City was no problem. While walking down the winding path to The City gate, I knew I'd be a ripe target for bandits, what with my pouches bulging, but I just dared them to try to mug me in the mood I was in. I wouldn't be as nice to bandits as I was to that farmer.

My good luck held up though; no bandits. On the other hand, when I got to the gate, I ran into something almost as bad; a city guard. "There's a toll," he said smugly as he saw me coming. It was a big guy, strong, young, probably good looking; a real jackass. It had to be around midnight by then, and it was not uncommon for the nighttime guards to ask for tolls, even though it was not in their job description. Normally I'd have just scaled the wall and avoided the gate altogether, but I had somehow managed to lose my pack, as I recalled.

"No there isn't," I called back to him. He was in one of the towers, one of those big towers with lots of gears in them. He'd pull a lever and then the portcullis would open, letting me through; only he wasn't pulling the lever and I wasn't going through.

"There sure is. How about you pay it?" he replied even more smugly.

"How about I ram my fist so far down your throat you'll taste my armpit?"

He chuckled. "How are you supposed to do that when you're down there and I'm all the way up here?"

I didn't have time for this. I demonstrated. I ran over to the portcullis and began to climb up.

"What the...Hey! Hey, you in the other tower, crossbow him! I can't see him! Where is he?"

From the sounds of it, his comrade in the other tower was too busy laughing to get his crossbow. In no time I had climbed up the metal bars, and easily leapt into his tower, where I more or less made good on my promise. He had managed to get his crossbow by that time, but he was no good with it, so I took it away from him and broke it over his helmet. Then I grabbed his head, stuck his face in my armpit, because I thought it would be really funny, and then punched him in the gut a few times before I threw him out of his tower window so that he fell outside The City. The guy in the other tower just laughed harder. I bet when the jerk came to his senses, he'd have a hell of a time getting his 'friend' to open the gate for him.

Too bad, only his tower had the lever. So the same way I came in, I went out, but of course climbing down the other side so that I was in The City. I could still hear the other guardsman laughing. It was just one more chapter in Ghost's never-ending adventure. From there I went straight to my fence's flat. I'd be right on time.

— Lytha: A Sample of Consciousness —

Day 2: 12:00 am

Pale window panes reflected the soft moonlight, shining like sets of watchful eyes casting about the narrow courtyard. In spite of this, they were unaware, empty, beholding nothing. They certainly would not behold me.

I lofted myself easily onto the ledge, sliding with a nimble grace that often made me forget my own humanity. With a gentle press of my thin implement the window locks popped free. Silently I slid one pane open, a gap just small enough to allow my limber form passage. I slid one leg within, and then the next, feeling the edges of the narrow space graze lightly against the sides of my hips before I slipped easily through, touching nothing until my toes made contact with the stone floor within. An insect touching down on the windowsill would have made more of a sound.

I peered about my new environment from under the hood I kept drawn low over my face, and through the sheer veil I wore beneath that. The air was dusty, and smelled slightly of mildew, in the broad but vacant chamber which would only be occupied on the rarest of occasions during seasons when the master of this estate cared to entertain guests.

I traveled lightly across the room, closing my eyes once more. I didn't need them to navigate, for I had already memorized the layout of furniture. I needed to dull one sense so that I might focus on my others. I listened intently, but more importantly, I felt. I felt for any presences around me, any conscious minds which I could reach out and touch, and sample from their consciousness, so that I might be aware of what they were aware of.

Soon, I had them. I could almost taste the flavors and textures of their

awareness as they, guardsmen, carried out their duties with a bored diligence motivated more by a need for pay than for a desire to protect. This would be almost too easy.

— Ghost: An Unfriendly Houseguest —

Day 2: 12:00 am

“What do you mean you can’t buy it?” I shouted loud enough that birds would never nest on the roof again.

“I don’t have any money, Ghost!” Ragbert replied, showing me the bottom of his coin purse as if I needed a visual aid. “I explained all of this already.”

“How can you not have any money?” I gave the short, bearded, shifty eyed little bastard a murderous glare that would make most men twice his size go cold.

The stare didn’t faze him. “Simple. I was expecting another thief to bring me a big haul earlier tonight, and I’d be able to sell it off and have cash for you by the time you got back, but no!” He shook his head furiously, causing his braided beard to swing back and forth. “The little *weevil* went to Nightfall instead!”

“Who the *taff* is Nightfall? What the *hell* is a weevil?”

“I told you...this collector bloke...has a base in Hightowne...lives up in the hills to the north...foreigner, big shot, thinks he’s high society. You know; a taffin’ *arse-hole*.”

“Yeah, and now he’s got cash and you don’t, huh?”

He ran up to me, practically grabbing me by the shoulders. He would have too if I hadn’t stepped up my nasty-glare intensity. “Just give me another day, I’m telling you Ghost; my buyer is just sweating to get his hands on that star.”

“Nightfall’s base open late at night?” I said to him, figuring he wasn’t smart enough to take the first hint.

“No...” he said, starting to look worried.

“Mansion’s in the hills to the north, eh?” I replied, grinning.

“Yeah,” he said, nervously. “Tall black tower, real spooky, swear it wasn’t there a year ago.”

I patted him on the back. “Thanks Raggie,” I said, and then shut the door behind me.

I could hear him shouting after me, but for the moment, I was a little distracted. I wasn’t alone in the hallway outside Ragbert’s apartment. The guard from the gate was standing right before me, his face oozing with blood that dripped down over his uniform. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was gaping open, his breathing heavy; a wet, hiss-like breathing that made my blood go cold.

“Uh, hi...how did you find me?” I said, backing away just a little.

He opened his eyes, only instead of eyes, all I saw was thick red blood oozing from the sockets. “You are CURSED!” he proclaimed, jaw gaping open unnaturally, spraying me and the wall behind me with blood.

“Not you too!” was all I said before spinning around back through the

door, shutting and locking it behind me.

Raggie was standing there with his hands on his hips, like a taffin' woman, and said, "What the hell?"

"Long story," I replied, holding the door shut, as if the deadbolts weren't enough. Hah, deadbolt. I wanted to bolt from the dead. It was a good thing I didn't say that one out loud. "I don't suppose you have any holy water, eh?"

A worried look came across his face, making it get all wrinkly. "No..."

"Any fire-arrows?"

"No, I..."

"Any form of high powered explosives?"

"Well, heh, my wife says that my coffee is particularly..."

"Do you have a mace or an axe or a big taffin' board or something?" I yelled, just as the zombie outside the door pounded mightily, as if the blood on my face wasn't indication enough that something nasty was outside.

"Oh Builder, they followed you here? The zombies followed you here?" he cried, and I do mean cried; the man was almost in tears.

"Yes! Well, no! Well, look, there's a..." another blow came to the door causing me to pause for a second. "There's a zombie at the door, and he's not here for your damn coffee!" The zombie guard hit the door a third time, and I could feel the wood almost splitting. Damn, why couldn't I have picked a little street waif to brutally murder by accident? "So get me something big and nasty for me to kill it with, okay?"

He scrambled around the room, panicking, looking behind chairs and the sofa. After a moment I realized he was just looking for a place to hide. "Taff it," I grumbled, and moved away from the door, just as the fourth blow nearly split the door in two. The zombie guard's arm reached menacingly through as it moaned and groaned and generally sounded rather evil. The zombie I'd fought before had mostly wasted away and had been very easy to dismember, but this guy was fresh, and zombification has a way of stiffening and hardening the muscles, making them awfully hard to damage.

Raggie was trying to hide behind the sofa, squealing. I picked up one of his nice antique rocking chairs, and did a little invasive cranial surgery courtesy of those long slender pointy rocking...things. The chair pretty much shattered on contact, leaving the long shaft of curved wood sticking into the front of the zombie's head, and out the back.

"Ha, nice!" I shouted triumphantly as the zombie staggered back until it fell against the wall. It was only temporary though; the zombie would keep coming until it was either burned or doused with holy water. I knew one good thing about a fresh zombie, though; they were still used to using their brain to control their body. "Raggie," I said, "Quick, get some kindling and your tinder box, now!"

He nodded furiously and vanished into the next room. I counted off the seconds. I had a pretty good idea how long it would take a zombie this fresh to recuperate. In just a moment it would be shouting 'you are cursed!' again and trying to get me. "Raggie..." I said anxiously, wondering what was taking the man so long.

He came in with his arms full of what he considered kindling, a pile of thin dry sticks. He dumped the pile at my feet. "Oaf!" I shouted, quickly trying to shovel the kindling around the zombie. Then I rushed back over to the cowering Raggie and ripped the tinder box from his shaking hands. "This had better work...I can't believe you don't have any fire-arrows," I said, trying to spark a flame.

"I can't believe you don't!"

"I lost mine, okay?"

"And your bow too?"

"Yes, taff it, and my bow too!"

Finally a spark flew, and the kindling caught alight. Thank goodness Raggie kept dry kindling. I took a few steps back, and watched as the fire quickly spread to the stirring zombie. It wouldn't burn like a normal dead body would; zombies were much more flammable and prone to explosions.

I took a few steps back and sighed, crossing my arms. Raggie did the same, as if he was to be credited with vanquishing the beast as well. "Well, if my wife could see me now," he said with a chortle.

I just chuckled, and dug into my pocket for some treasure. No, it wasn't gold, though it was yellowish in color. I pulled out two of the mushrooms I stole from the cave, and offered one to Raggie. "Consider it a thank you for a job well done," I said with a grin.

His face lit up, and he took the 'shroom like it was a piece of pure joy. "I'll make us some tea!" he squealed.

I nodded and watched as the zombie burned, and gave another sigh of satisfaction.

"Only," he said, poking his head out of the kitchen to look back in on me and the inferno. "Won't that...you know, burn the building down?"

I turned my head to look at him, expressionless while the thought sunk in. My eyes widened as the concept began to permeate my thick skull, and then I turned back to look at the burning zombie. The flames were licking the ceiling now, and the walls, and—I muttered a shallow laugh.

I pushed my way out of the building, Ragbert in tow. I had to grab his arm and drag him along behind me to keep him from trying to salvage his collection of antique plates. "But the wife will never forgive me," he whimpered as we burst out into the streets.

The flames pouring out of the windows of Ragbert's apartment were a blaze of glory in the night. The two of us sat down on the curb, pressing our chins into our palms. "Well," I finally heard him say, "at least we still have those 'shrooms."

"Yeah," I said, trying to cheer myself up. Anyone who dies in that fire gets burned up, so they can't become a zombie—you can't get zombified by burning; that destroys zombies. Crap. I had to get rid of this Alarus star. I had to get rid of this curse.

Raggie and I sat on the curb for maybe an hour, nibbling our 'shrooms, watching the building burn. We made bets on how long it would take for the fire to spread to other buildings, and if a fire wagon would ever come.

“Look,” he said finally, “I need to go tell the wife. I’m just glad she was spending the night at her mother’s. Heh, I guess it’s not always bad to have a spat. Though probably now she’ll never want to speak with me again. I’ll show up, all pepped up on ‘shrooms, telling her our building burned down, and oh, by the way, all your nice things along with it, ‘oh, hello mother-in-law’, I’ll say, and then she’ll say I am a no-good low life like she always says, only now she’ll have a reason...”

Most of what he was saying hadn’t registered. I had already gotten up to walk away by his second sentence. Sadly, the ‘shroom didn’t seem to be having any effect on me; probably the curse again, so I was totally unable to escape the reality of my situation. I had to get rid of this star, and I knew just who to sell it to. What did Raggie say his name was...Nightowl?—Nightfall? Yeah, that was it. He lived in that creepy tower in the northern hills, the one that didn’t seem to be there a year ago. I’d love to scrape the curse off on him.

As I walked off I heard a crash behind me. Part of the building had probably caved in. I could hear Raggie moaning in sorrow, probably thinking that his wife was going to kill him.

— Lytha: Silent Passage —

Day 2: 1:00 am

I watched him from where I knelt, cloaked in shadow, as he looked directly at me, but he saw nothing save the bare brickwork he’d convinced himself lay beyond the veil of darkness. How could there be an intruder? He had not heard so much as a lonely raindrop peck gently on the rooftop high above.

Still, if I moved, I would enter his realm of awareness. He was tired, his mind dull, but his senses were good. He would be distracted though, and soon. I felt the approach of his comrade. Soon the other guardsman would pass by the closed door, just as he had done dozens of times this night, and every night, and so this man, out of force of habit alone, would turn to look at the source of the sound, as if he somehow expected that this time it would be different.

And then it was so, and I made my move. I was behind him in an instant. If he happened to turn around now, the shape of my figure would delay his reaction long enough for me to dispatch him quietly, but I knew that this would not happen. It had been ages since I was forced to do something so crude.

Soon I was away, and turned my attention to my next goal. I had studied the maps of the mansion well. My prize was only two more rooms away, and the guards between here and there were no different from those I had already eluded.

— Ghost: Home Security Experts —

Day 2: 1:00 am

I jogged all the way to Nightfall's tower. If there were going to be more zombies, at least they'd have a harder time keeping up with me at that rate. His tower was a good distance away though, and a bit hard to find, so it was no easy jog. I was already exhausted from nearly getting killed several times, not to mention all the nasty falls.

Finally the place loomed into view, and when I saw what was between it and me, I let out a cuss so dirty I was surprised the grass beneath my feet didn't wither and die. There were stairs, and lots of them, leading up to the gate. It seemed that Nightfall was so cocky that having a tower amongst the hills wasn't good enough, oh no. He had to go and put his tower on top of one of the hills, and make this big huge long stairway leading up to it. I sat myself down on the first step, and had myself a breather. I was exhausted, and there was no way I was going to make that climb after jogging several miles.

I wondered what time it was. I hadn't planned on doing an all-nighter. This was supposed to have been a quick and easy job, just an hour or two, and then I'd get paid and get to bed. Life wasn't fair. Hell, even my mushroom turned out to be a dud!

After resting for maybe five minutes, I got back up and started to climb the stairs. What I saw next made me want to fall down dead right where I stood. There were two guards, and they were coming with their swords drawn. I wasn't about to die, so I just sighed, and raised my hands to show I wasn't holding a weapon.

"Who goes there!" one of them shouted.

"Just a..." I sighed, "Just a merchant trying to sell the master some wares!"

As they got close, I could tell that they were eyeing the row of daggers on my belt. "Awful odd for a merchant to be calling this time of night, and so well armed," he said gruffly.

I groaned. "I'm serious; I have something I need to sell right now, so could you please just...let me..." It suddenly dawned on me how stupid and suspicious this was. Here was this dirty bloody scoundrel covered with daggers, coming in the dead of night, insisting that he had to sell something immediately. I was damn lucky they hadn't attacked me on the spot. But I was desperate, very desperate. "Look," I said, still holding my hands up, "escort me to the door, escort me everywhere, hell, hold your swords to my throat and cut me dead if I so much as move funny! Please believe me when I say that *right now* I could not harm a fly!"

"I'm going to have to ask you to turn around, and leave," the other one said firmly.

I sighed. I was going about this wrong. "He's a collector, right? Well I have something really super rare and I really know that he wants to buy it, alright?" Then it occurred to me that what I had said in no way helped me.

They weren't impressed. "Alright knave, off with you, I'll give you to the count of five..."

Just then, a third person appeared, right behind them. It was sudden; he

just popped out of nowhere. At first, I thought it might have been a zombie, but he definitely seemed to be among the living. Then I thought it could have been Nightfall, but for some reason I was expecting someone less old, skinny, and with better eyesight. What were those, trifocals? "What is the meaning of this?" he hissed. Maybe he was a zombie after all.

"Nothing at all Jossimer, he was just leaving, weren't you?" one of the guards said with authority.

I ignored the guard, and spoke to the old man. "Ummm, yeah, listen. I gotta speak to Nightfall, right now..."

"Leaving!" the other guard shouted, and the two of them began to walk towards me. The other guy, Jossimer, whatever his name was, maintained his position between and behind them. It was creepy.

Jossimer said, "Whatever business you have with the master, it can be conducted at The Circle of Stone and Shadow during proper business hours, and not here at his private residence at this ungodly time of night."

"This is a matter of life and death!" I said, almost hysterical.

"I warn you," Jossimer went on, "I am well versed in the martial arts, and if you somehow feel that you may be capable of dispatching these two excellent swordsmen, you shall have..."

"Alright!" I shouted, grabbing my face with my hands on each side. "I'm going! I'm going!"

I turned around just in time to misjudge the position of the first step, and missed it by a good foot or two. I fell, for the fourth, fifth time tonight? I fell flat on my face several feet down the stairs, and if the crack of my nose hitting the stone wasn't bad enough, it was accompanied by the jingle of loot escaping my pockets and scattering. That was just another drop in the bucket, I told myself; just another insult added to injury. I picked myself up, collected a few of the coins that I could find, and then looked up to see the three of them staring down at me like gargoyles.

I invented names for the guards, and a new one for Jossimer, and a not-so-new one for Nightfall, similar to the one Raggie had used, but slightly tweaked to be more potent. Beaten, I went back to The City. I wasn't going to be able to sleep tonight.

Once I had passed through the gate to Shalebridge, I thought about going to my apartment, but decided instead to just go to a bar. I wanted to be where there were people in case a zombie came, that way I could try to get away from it in the confusion. "I just have to make it to daytime," I told myself, "zombies never come out in the daytime."

Which bar was closest to here? There was Tippy Tillos, but I hated that place. Spice Mead's Inn was a little farther and had good ale, but all of the barmaids were homely. Oh, The Cracked Tankard was just this side of Shalebridge. I hadn't been there for a while, and if I remembered correctly, I had friends there. As a bonus, it stayed open all night long.

— Lytha: A Perfect Job —

Day 2: 2:00 am

I was very close now. The tight wire they used to hang the banner bounced only slightly as I put one foot in front of the other, crossing the room far above the heads of the idle and listless patrols. Even if they saw the banner's gentle movements, they would dismiss it as a trick of the wind, in spite of the fact that a draft never passed through this chamber.

Once I was to the other side of the stately hall, I nimbly descended the craggy brick wall back to the solid floor. A large chandelier hung in the center of the room, with dozens of small globes casting a diffused light to the far corners of the chamber. As a result, the shadows would not protect me here. Thankfully the guard's patterns were predictable. A hole in their patrols allowed for forty-five seconds of safety. I would need every instant of it.

I moved quickly now, the need for brevity outweighing the need for silence, though the sound of my passage was still no more than a whisper in the eerie silence. I was in the treasure room now, a low, lonely chamber with tired walls that felt the weight of the entire building pushing down against them. The guards rarely came inside this room, and tended to only give it a cursory glance as they passed by it from time to time. It was too great a sting to their pride to even consider that a thief could get this far. Their pride would be intact. None would ever know I was here.

The treasure room of Lord Indigos was legendary, said to contain the priceless tiara of the Indigos matriarch. It was traditionally kept within this vault after the passing of the lady until her successor came forth. The patriarch's wife had died in childbirth and the son that slew her was still far too young to take a wife.

Of course, the legend was true.

As I approached the big metal box I flipped open a small compartment on my belt, and drew out a pair of slender lock picks. I was slightly less skilled with unlocking mechanisms than I was at silent passage, but could still master the most devious of tumblers in a few scant seconds under the pressure of certain death. Now was certainly one of those times. I glanced around with an air of caution before I devoted all of my attention to cracking the safe. The treasure room was even better lit than the outer hall, with a row of large electric lanterns circling the ceiling. The unnatural glow from these lamps was harsh and unyielding, eerie in its steadiness and low hum. Soon the patrol would pass by, and that cursory glance would betray a fully lit woman clad in the pitchest of black leather, hunched over a vault that had been kept shut, and will be kept shut, for many, many years.

I set to it. One pick would hold the bypassed tumblers in place while the other attacked the next in line, until each gave way to my intrusion. As I worked I found it difficult to focus on the locations of the minds around me, so instead I resorted to merely counting the seconds until I knew the patrol would return. With the tension coming to a head, and only half the tumblers bypassed, I knew I could not stay any longer. Slipping my picks from their place I departed from the treasure room and rejoined the shadows, just an

instant before the patrol returned.

I drew a breath. The patrol continued upon its lazy way. I returned to the treasure room. I had not lost my progress, for I remembered the exact positions needed to bypass the first few tumblers. Still, I counted the seconds until the patrol would return, certain that I still needed all forty-five.

Finally, it was open, with the uncoiled hinges of the safe creaking steadily as they went, sending a shiver through me. Inside a small tiara rested in a purple satin cushion. I took it with both hands, pinching each side between gloved fingertips. It was beautiful, a braid of gold and silver adorned with perfectly cut rubies and sapphires. I was almost glad to be in the direct light, so I could marvel at the tiara properly before it vanished into my sack.

I had no time to tarry. I rotated the safe door shut, cringing as that same squeak issued from the hinges, but dared not relock it. To do so would be too loud, and the patrol was far too close. Once again I retreated to the shadows, hoping that they would not notice the position of the safe's handle. It was a gamble I had to take.

I watched, shrouded in shadow, as the patrol passed by. The guardsman made his hasty glance, but failed to notice the handle was in the wrong position. Following his hasty dismissal he continued on his way, but would continue to be within earshot for a time. As I waited patiently I felt compelled to take stock once more of my prize. I fetched it from the sack, turning so that the gems could not catch any light, and marveled at its intricacies. A smile slowly graced my lips, moved not by the treasure's beauty, or its value, but by the power I held over it; power to take, to keep, or to do with as I pleased.

Sensing my time had come, I returned the tiara to the sack, and made one last visit to the safe. I turned the handle, the solid metal issuing a dull clack as it locked. I did a hasty scan around myself, eyes shut, touching the minds around me just to be certain none had heard it. No, I was safe. By the time the patrol passed once more I was already making my way back across the banner cable. He made his hasty glance, and saw nothing unusual. Thus it would be so, for another eleven years.

The legend would persist. None would know that the vault had been cracked open tonight. None would know until that fateful day, when the son of Indego took a wife on his eighteenth birthday. In that lavish ceremony where the crown was due to be presented, a shooting pain of shock would stab all present as they looked with wide eyes into an empty box.

I exited, of course, the way I came. I would not tarry and search the lord's bedroom for valuables. Even if I did, a single copper coin out of place would alert the guards to a thief, and then the buyer of the tiara would evaporate into thin air.

I would be paid handsomely for this treasure, but even that had an air of irrelevance do it. There was nothing money could buy that I couldn't acquire through my own special means. Money only allowed me to feign the appearance of a normal life from time to time.

— Ghost: Three's a Crowd —

Day 2: 2:00 am

Before I knew it I had a roaring fire warming me, bad piano music in my ears, the smell of ruffians in my nostrils, and the taste of sweet ale on my tongue.

"And that's my story," I said just before I finished off the last of my third round. The barkeep had stayed pretty quiet during the whole tale, though he seemed pretty interested in the bit about the mushrooms. The ale had calmed my nerves a great deal, and so far there were no signs of more zombies. The clock was still showing two in the morning. Well, if time flew when you were having fun, the inverse had to be true as well.

"If I may be so crude as to offer my two penn'orth," the barkeep said, as he worked diligently against an immeasurable pile of tankards to clean, "a consistently undervalued two penn'orth, if you ask me, but two penn'orth nonetheless." He was a tall skinny kid with a funny haircut; looked like it had more grease in it than the place's food. He was using his own white shirt to dry the glasses.

I had no idea what he was talking about. All I knew was that I wasn't drunk yet, and that was making me grumpy. "What?"

"Now your intuition on going to Nightfall was spot on, I think, though for all the wrong reasons," he explained, and then spat into one of the tankards while trying to scrub it.

"What do you know about Nightfall?" I said, skeptically, and hoped he hadn't spat into my tankard.

"Oh, bits and parts," he ventured. "Last I hear, though, he's got in with the Hammerites, maybe they owe him a favor or two...and if you could get him to be 'owing you a favor' maybe you can find yourself a way out of this curse."

"Oh no, there ain't no way I am going to those Hammerites," I said firmly. "And besides, all I have to do is sell the star, right? Give it to someone else, right? No more curse?"

"Well, you did cut open the mummy and stick your hands in her. I'd say that you are pretty thoroughly cursed, my friend. I don't know if getting rid of the star will save you."

"Yes it will. Taffer...shut your yap!—Like you know anything." I tried to take another drink, but saw that my tankard was empty. I shoved it back at the barkeep, but then remembered the spitting.

"Ghostie!" I heard a shrill voice call out from behind me, so sudden and intense that I nearly jumped out of my skin. Before I knew what was happening, a pair of rather pleasant arms were wrapping around me from behind and curly strawberry-blond locks were brushing against my head.

"Laurela!" I replied with a grin, swearing that if I got her name wrong, I'd just kill myself right then and there. Her squeal of excitement that followed set me at ease. There's nothing worse than getting a girl's name wrong.

I felt a kiss behind one ear, and then she spun me around in my stool and hopped into my lap with the grace of an expert. I could tell she had been 'practicing' that particular maneuver extensively. "Now where's my big

handsome rogue been all this time?" she said right before pressing her gorgeous face against my cheek, no doubt getting black lipstick all over me. Thank hell I had washed the blood off my face as soon as I came into the bar.

"Heh, nearly getting myself killed," I said with a laugh. Her golden-red hair brushed past my nose, and I caught a whiff of something. Damn, she smelled good. If I wasn't careful though, her wandering hands would find their way to my pockets, and I'd be unable to pay my bar tab before I knew what was what.

"That doesn't cover half of it," the barkeep said with a snicker, like he had read my mind about not being able to pay my tab. Then I realized he meant the story about me nearly getting killed.

"Ooh," she said, giggling, "tell me all about it!" and then rocked back and forth in my lap in such a way that I stopped caring so much if she happened to swipe a coin or two.

I laughed, forgetting so much about zombies and curses, and turned so I could look into those big brown eyes...except they were blue. Oh well, at least I got her name right. "Well," I began, clearing my throat.

As if on queue, a blood curdling scream came blasting my way. Laurela shrieked and clung to me, and the barkeep almost dropped the tankard he was cleaning. I turned around quickly, careful not to let Laurela loosen her grip, ready to stare down a bloodthirsty zombie. Instead, a brunette in an exotic outfit pushed open the door, and slammed it behind her. "Hammerites!" she cried, panic in her eyes. Damn, I was hoping for zombies!

"Betty!" Laurela cried in reply, jumping up from my lap, and running to her friend. Things happened quickly at that point. Half the people in the bar got up and filed themselves quickly out the side door and out to the alley. The ones who stayed were either passed out drunk, or too big of a hard-ass to let Hammerites scare them. I could be counted among them. The bartender called to the two ladies to go through a door behind the bar and into the cellar to hide, so they wouldn't have to push through the crowd of ruffians once in the alley. I suspected that a Hammerite had actually tried to take advantage of Betty's services, and when she refused he got violent.

I just groaned and swiveled back to face the front door. Damn Hammerites. Once the cowards had managed to escape, I glanced around the room as the dust settled and an eerie quiet filled the air. There was Ill Eye Charlie still sitting there, a hard boiled gentleman with his feet up on the table, one eye staring at the wall, the other staring at the door. In the corner was Drew the Shoe, a witless thug who tended to attract flies; the source of the only noise in the room right now. I glanced back at the barkeep, who had resumed cleaning the tankards like nothing was going on, before casting my eyes over to the piano player, who was casually putting the fake plant and soil back in the pot he used to collect tips. Sitting beside the door was a fellow I didn't recognize, little guy, face hidden under his cloak, casually sipping from his mug.

So, we were the brave few who didn't like Hammerite bullies scaring us out of our drinks. I was sure that Charlie and Drew were used to picking

fighters with Hammers; probably usually won too. I didn't know the piano player's story, but I knew that the barkeep would stand his ground. Hell, if the Hammerites wanted to give me a hard time, I'd plant a few daggers in their guts. Well, I'd try, but now that I thought about it, every bone and muscle in my body ached, especially my skull and brain, I was exhausted, and my luck all night had been horrible. No, I wasn't going to tempt fate.

"Cheers," I said to the remaining die-hards as I got up, walked around the bar, and went through the backroom door Laurela and Betty had used to escape.

Just as the door closed behind me, I heard the front door being pushed open, and someone shout, "Thou shalt hand over the witch this instant!"

And it was at that instant that I had allowed myself to inhale the first breath since before saying 'cheers'. Then I uttered under my breath, "Holy Crap," and grabbed my face with my shaking hands to rub my eyes. It was funny how trying to escape from them made me far more tense than trying to face them. I knew none of the guys in there would rat on the ladies. After all, everyone loved Laurela and Betty. Some even liked them. They were good kids.

I heard the barkeep direct the Hammerite, or Hammerites, out the side door into the alley where most of the patrons had fled, so I quickly glanced around the store room and saw the usual; some extra tables and chairs, a box full of poker sets and a few broken dart boards. The spirits would all be kept underground in the cellar where it was cooler. Then I saw the cellar door; I quietly went and opened it and negotiated the steps, taking care to hold firmly onto the hand rail. I had already fallen down too many steps tonight. Looking around for the girls, I felt some relief; this cellar connected to the sewer.

The girls were huddled together under a blanket. It was chilly down here, and both of them were dressed for far warmer occasions. They both gasped when they saw someone coming, but Laurela quickly uttered, "Ghostie!" when she saw it was me.

I put my finger to my lips and went "H'sh!" I crept over and sat across from them, pretty sure that it was safe, but still trying to be quiet. "Barkeep will take care of the Hammerites, don't worry. I just wanted to make sure you two were alright," I said with a sly grin.

Betty looked flattered, and said, "Oh, that's so sweet!" as she pushed her straight, raven-black hair away from her face, but Laurela just looked happy to be able to try to pick my pockets again. It was a good thing their hair was so different; otherwise, in the dark, I might not have been able to tell them apart.

"Thou shouldst investigate the alley, I shalt investigate the storage."

"Oh, crap," I hissed under my breath. All three of us heard it clear as day; one of the Hammerites was coming. I sprung to my feet and turned around to head toward the sewer grate, but the girls grabbed onto me from behind and pulled me back to them, like they wanted to use me as a shield. I really didn't object to having a pair of women wrap their arms tightly around my torso,

but this wasn't the greatest of circumstances.

I didn't object though, I held my tongue, and hoped that the girls would do the same. I thought I could hear the barkeep objecting, but the heavy footsteps were getting closer and closer to the cellar door. Every time one of those heavy boots hit the floor, the girls held me tighter. At this rate, he could keep coming all night long and I'd be perfectly happy. But he wouldn't; eventually he'd get to the door, and then there'd be a fight. I could tell that he was almost there, and if that wasn't enough, I could feel the girls' breath on the back of my neck as they panted away, and their racing pulses...well, I was having a hard time staying focused.

Then I heard something else; a commotion. Next, the Hammerite that was coming for us seemed to charge off. There was some shouting, and some crashes, and some screaming, and then more running. Then there was silence. After about ten seconds, I could feel both of the girls take deep breaths, and then exhale slowly as they relaxed their arms around me.

Not a moment passed before we heard footsteps again, and the girls renewed the tightness of their grasp upon me with vehemence. I gave a slight grunt, startled, but then issued a murmur of satisfaction. I wasn't worried; Hammerites walked with a thud-thud-thud, and this was more of a thump-thump. Sure enough, the door slid open, and for one delightful moment I felt as if the girls were about to wrap their legs around me. It was the barkeep, whose name I was going to have to get eventually. "Coast's clear," he said with a nod.

Unfortunately this gave the girls reason to release me, but Laurela quickly spun me around, and cooed, "You were so brave to come down and look after us," before locking her lips over mine and giving the kind of kiss that usually meant one was about to become a great deal poorer.

As soon as she released me, Betty took hold of me, and with gigantic eyes and pouting lips said in a sing-song voice, "I was so scared, I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come, I'd have just died!" before she tried to remove my tongue from my mouth with her teeth. Yup, I was going to be broke by the end of the night, I just knew it.

It turned out that Drew the Shoe objected to the way one of the Hammers was staring at him, so he'd decided to try to re-arrange his face. This resulted in a brawl which thankfully moved outside after Drew got thrown out the window. Once faced with more than two Hammers, I was told, Drew decided that discretion was the better part of valor, or maybe that running was the better part of survival, or something along those lines. The Hammers followed him, and we were out of the woods.

Later I found myself in Laurela's apartment, convinced that I would never see any of my loot again. After a night like tonight, I didn't care anymore. A happy ending was a happy ending, gold or no. Sadly, my content comatose was shattered when Laurela gasped, "Oh my," simultaneously killing my mood and giving her away to be the dirty pick-pocket she was. She was holding The Star of Alarus in her hands.

Betty took a break from what she was doing to my neck to look up and

say, "Ooooh, that's gorgeous!"

I gave a little chuckle, and said, "Yeah, and just a few hours ago, it was locked in the chest of a billion year old mummy."

She shrieked and dropped it to the bed. Betty went "Gross!" and then smacked me on the head with a pillow.

At that point I recounted for them a slightly different version of the tale I told the barkeep. In my new version, there were far more zombies, and I vanquished them all with ease, I used all my own ropes, pulled the secret door open with my bare hands, I didn't keep losing my light, and I fell fifteen stories in the stone coffin before rushing down a river and heroically jumping to shore. Oh, and I said nothing about losing my gear, or the curse. In my new version, the mummy of Grandma Alarus woke up and tried to strangle me with her bony hands, before I smashed her skull to dust. As for tonight, well, I had thought that I was far too beat for any more vigorous activity. The girls made me change my mind.

— Lytha: Free of Hypocrisy —

Day 2: 4:00 am

I had escaped easily, and shortly thereafter the precious sack had been delivered to the trusted middleman who would ensure that the buyer never met the seller, and the seller never saw the buyer. Soon word would come to my fence that the job was done, and done perfectly, and he would sleep easy when day came.

I on the other hand did not care to merely spend my life in darkness and sleep through the bright hours. I required very little sleep, so I would likely rise at the time when most "normal" people would, and go about my business as if I dreamed my entire adventure.

I let myself into my quiet, cozy home. It was small and simple, but it contained all that I cared to possess. It seemed highly hypocritical for one of my profession to care much for personal belongings, and I tried to avoid being a hypocrite.

I relaxed for a brief moment in the soft cushions I kept in the corner, content to sip from the ambient noise and minds of the sleeping district beyond the thin four walls that surrounded me. As soon as I felt my muscles relax and my mind lose the desire to focus, I slid into my bed, and met with my sweet oblivion.

— Ghost: Now it's Personal —

Day 2: 4:00 am

After a very *interesting* hour and a half that did wonders to clear my head and relax my strained nerves, I bid the girls farewell and set out for home. Even though they picked me fairly dry of gold, I was in good spirits. Who wouldn't be? It was money *well spent*, after all. Of course, I wasn't going to leave the star with them. Even if they didn't mind the gross mummy stuff, I'd

be a heartless bastard to leave the curse with them.

I journeyed to my top floor apartment, forgetting about my previous reservations, sure that I'd see nothing but smooth sailing now. It had been a few hours and no more zombies had appeared, so I figured everything was going to be fine. I'd even forgive Ragbert for being such a loser.

I found everything as I had left it, so with a sigh and a groan I dropped myself into the crappy cot I called a bed, without even stopping to light a lantern or undress. I let out a long sigh, thinking how nice it was to be able to pass out before dawn, when everything was still dark and silent.

Except, it wasn't silent. There was a noise that didn't register at first, partially because it was so familiar, and partially because I was used to never hearing that kind of noise in my home. The full realization didn't hit me until that smell of rotting leaves and crushed insects stung all the way up my sinuses. My eyes shot open and I sat bolt upright, adrenaline surging through every limb. "Shit."

My daggers were in hand before I had even gotten to my feet. I didn't know why I bothered; I knew daggers were basically useless against a fresh zombie, but it always made me feel better to have something sharp and pointy grasped in my clammy, trembling hands. In the eerie darkness, the room lit only by the street lamps outside the window, I inched towards the door as that lazy shuffling and raspy, wet panting grew nearer and nearer.

With a wood-splintering crack the door was pushed open, and the bloodied form of my stalker lumbered into view. It was none other than Ragbert, with an oozing hole on the top of his head roughly the size of a masonry block. I took a step back with my face stretched out, cussing through bare teeth. "Oh no, not you too...Raggie, you're a zom—"

"You are CURSED!"

This, now, was a complete mess. I could take ancient zombies of luckless lackeys who got locked into a tomb in order to protect a bunch of crap evermore as vigilant undead. I could take a beefy zombified guardsman with a bone to pick with me for breaking his neck. I could even take on Hammerites; they weren't exactly zombies, they could act like them sometimes. What really made me sick to my stomach, and really, really angry, were zombies of my friends, even though they could be worthless idiots. What made me even angrier was the thought that it had been my fault. There was no time for a temper tantrum though; the zombie of Ragbert lunged at me. His hands went around my throat and mine went around his. His grip was strong.

"Raggie," I gasped, choking against the strength of his undead fingers, "It's me, your old buddy Ghost; you know, your friend?"

"Cursed!" it shouted, shooting blood and spittle into my face out of his gaping jaw.

I wasn't going to win a choking contest with a zombie—zombies don't breathe—but his mouth sure was open wide. I struggled, hoping to overpower Ragbert and knock myself free, but all I managed to do was stumble around with him, knocking over my cot. Then I spotted a good luck

charm out of the corner of my eye, and quickly reached for the tiny smooth grenade I always kept on top of my nightstand. I looped my finger into the pin and shoved the grenade into Raggie's mouth. He bit my hand, hard. He just wasn't going to let me win.

Cutting off his arm wouldn't make it grip any looser, just the opposite probably, but I had to do it. I pushed the zombie back against the wall behind the door, then cut and sawed at one of his fat arms with my dagger as fast as I could. With a startling crack I pried his elbow apart. I pulled my hand free of Raggie's jaws—his teeth raked against my skin, leaving behind three long, ragged scratches—with the pin looped around my finger. Then I grabbed the door and slammed it in Ragbert's face so that the wood was between the bomb and me. My vision was going dark as the two lifeless hands, one of which wasn't even connected to its body anymore, squeezed. I clenched my eyes shut. The top half of the door cracked and tore as the explosion hit it, showering me with a thousand sharp splinters. I think that was when I passed out.

The sensation of my neck burning woke me up just a few seconds later. I had zombie hands around it that were on fire. I frantically pried the knuckles from my neck then patted the flames off my shirt. The burns weren't too bad, but for now they stung. The explosion had pushed the door away from the zombie, which was now headless and quickly combusting. Not wanting a repeat of Ragbert's burning building, I rushed to the wash room, thanked whatever gods were listening that I had running water, and was soon dumping bucket after bucket onto the smoldering remains until I realized that my entire building was made out of solid stone and I was probably wasting my time.

I went back to the sink to put some cold water on my burns and the bite on my hand. I was out of a fence, but more than that; Raggie may have been a copper-pincher who stood neatly under his wife's thumb, but he was still a trusted friend.

With my face buried in a filthy towel, I heard a totally new raspy, wet groan come from behind me. I jerked my head to look and uttered, "Taffing hell! You too?" as the zombie of Raggie's wife shuffled into the doorway, bright red blood oozing from her neck where her undead husband must have bitten her.

"You are cur—" she started to shout, but was unable to finish. I kicked the washroom door shut, holding it closed with my boot. "I know I have more grenades somewhere," I muttered to myself, looking around like mad. "But what kind of idiot keeps grenades in his taffing washroom?" Sadly, it didn't seem like I was that kind of idiot. What I did have though, was a sparker for lighting the candle I used to shave by, a rag, and a nearly full bottle of rubbing alcohol I used to disinfect my usual grievous wounds. Working fast, with my boot still against the door (at which the mad zombie housewife was clawing madly) I soaked the rag in the alcohol, stuffed it into the top of the bottle, and lit it with the sparker. I braced myself, let the door open, gave the screaming zombie woman a solid kick to push her back, tossed the homemade bomb,

and shut the door with all my might just as the fireball went poof.

"Damn it all!" I proclaimed as I pulled the singed but intact door back open, and quickly confirmed that the Wife Zombie had been torched.

"Oh, this is good, this is really good," I began to mutter as I gave her burning corpse a solid kick. "Taffing wench," I hissed. "Couldn't get enough of nagging poor Raggie when he was alive, you had to become a bloody zombie and follow him around nagging him in undeath too?" That's when I noticed that my cot had started to catch fire, and I realized I had better fetch some more water and douse the flames before my cache of stashed grenades that I was sure I had but could never find suddenly presented itself.

I couldn't sleep here tonight, not with the burnt remains of two bodies stinking up the room. I quickly thought of returning to Laurela and Betty, but ruled that out on principle; if any more zombies were going to come for me, I wanted to stay as far away from those lovely ladies as possible. If any harm came to them because of this stupid curse, I'd just have to *kill* myself.

No, I wasn't going to get any sleep tonight. I'd get out of here, stay on the move until daybreak, and then find a flophouse where I could catch a few winks before putting my plan into motion. I had to get rid of the star, and Nightfall would be the lucky new owner. I changed into some clothes that didn't involve leather and studs, got myself nice and buzzed again to dull the pain, and hit the road.

— Sheam: Mistress of The Circle —

Day 2: 7:00 am

The only good thing about waking up was the bath—

It was a trick, of course. The bed felt so comfortable...the sheets so soft and warm. I pulled them tighter around me, feeling the warmth of the fabric all over my skin. Oh, but that bath...now that was truly tempting.

With nary a groan nor a sigh I shifted gently to sit, my feet on the floor. The cold stone would have kept me in my bed forever, so I was smart. There was a trail of rugs leading from my bedside to the fireplace where I would heat the water.

I did stretch though. How could I not? The sheets, which I had clung to even as I sat, slid from my back as I reached for the ceiling. I then relaxed, slouching a bit as I rubbed my arms absently. I pushed myself from the bed and once again stretched, feeling it all the way down to my toes. I reveled in the solitude of my sleeping and waking; it was not something I was used to, so it was not something I took for granted. I looked at my tub across the room and smiled gently. I mused about hiring someone to prepare my baths for me, but that would have ruined the solitude; that was sacred.

Now I had the fire going; wood and kindling had already been prepared the night before. I was so industrious. The warmth from the sparks and first glow of flame were reward enough for rising while the air was still chilly. I reveled in the thought of what was to come.

Once I was prompted to rise from my bed, it was much easier to trek over

cold stones and through damp passages on my way to the well. Though I was blessed enough to have the fireplace and tub in my bedroom, I had to walk what felt like the length of a city block through dark corridors in order to fetch the water. I considered it my exercise routine. By the time I was back with my first pail the fire was hot enough to heat it properly. By the time I was back with the second, the water was hot enough to go into the tub. It took ten trips to fill the tub to my satisfaction. If I was feeling a bit more industrious, and seeking a bit more satisfaction, I could fit as many as thirteen pails into the tub, and then the water would come up to my nose. That always came at a price though; by the time I got to pail twelve, I was usually so tired I splashed water everywhere on the trip, and it was dreadfully cold right out of the well.

As I walked, I often imagined that the halls were filled with spirits, wisps, or fairies, which would peek out from their hiding places to watch cautiously as the girl once again marked the end of their reign and the start of hers. With each trip more would retire to the faintest cracks in the darkness, content to sleep the day away while I fulfilled my tenure as mistress of these halls, and it was only with the dimming of the lights and the locking of the doors would they return once more to dance and play. They would giggle at how silly I looked carrying the pail of water, splashing it carelessly against myself as I went, but were secretly jealous of the pleasure I would soon enjoy.

With the last bucket on the fire and the tub steaming faintly before me, a dozen temptations assailed me from every corner of my mind. I could just roll back into bed and enjoy the feel of the pillows against my face. I could forget about the last bucket and just slide into that steaming hot water. I could run around through the empty halls, free to laugh and play just like the midnight creatures who now hid themselves away, knowing that not a soul could see or hear me, and remind them that I was truly the mistress of this little world of mine.

But this daydream alone was usually enough to allow the final pail to properly heat. I let the fire continue to burn until it extinguished itself. The water joined the rest in the tub, teasing me with hot splashes as it went. The pail was set to the ground with a satisfying clink, before I tested the heat with my toes. I carefully took the delicately etched bottle that rested on the table beside the tub and tipped a couple drops of the sweet mint oil into the water. I watched it for a moment, swirling and dancing through the water until the invigorating scent tickled my nose, inviting me in. Now it was time to sigh.

Slowly I eased myself into the water, feeling it pass over my legs until finally my hips were submerged. I picked my hair up to keep it from getting pinched between my neck and the edge of the tub, and then slowly leaned back, feeling the water creep up every inch of my spine and flow to wrap itself around my ribs until I felt the cool ceramic at the base of my head. The rim was not as comfortable as my pillow, but the hot water rendered that point irrelevant. I then lowered my arms down into the water to rest them lightly on my stomach. Finally submerged, the water left only my shoulders above the surface.

The tub was cleverly positioned to catch the bits of light which peeked through the narrow windows at the top of the wall; glassed crevices mostly obscured by grass, and so the dancing reflections would scatter across the ceiling. Maybe it was this which first caused me to daydream about what went on in these corridors at night. I smiled, and shifted around slightly in the water so my hand could trace circles in the surface, causing the light on the ceiling to scatter even more. I cupped some water in my hands and poured it on my shoulders and neck, which were still dry.

As time crept by the light cast on the wall slowly moved to claim the floor, and the faint reflection of light on the ceiling became invisible. Work. I may as well have splashed water into my face. I always knew when it was time to get out and get to work. I picked myself up from the tub, and then, before getting out, reached down to pull the plug from the bottom. I could hear the water begin to trickle out into a groove in the floor. It would flow into a shallow trough which had been carved for me and then into a slot where the trough met the wall; and finally a reservoir where it would sink into the ground, and someday rejoin the well water somewhere below. At least that's how I imagined it.

I dripped my way over to the towel hanging by the fire, gave myself a good rub and then it was time to dress. The thought briefly flicked into my mind of privileged ladies with their servants on call to dress them in the morning. If I had any lady friends I was sure that they would consider the way I twisted and contorted myself to get the accursed things on ridiculous and demeaning. Crinkling my nose at the thought of fastening a hundred buttons running up my back, I grabbed my favorite dress from my wardrobe, a simple yellow one, which had just been washed.

Coffee: if the thought of work was the splash in the face, the coffee was the rowdy consolation that it wouldn't be so bad; maybe. Coffee was to work as Bath was to waking up. At that thought, I retrieved my keys from their place of honor in the top drawer (the one with my unmentionables) and departed from my overnight domain beneath the floor of The Circle, a small figure ascending the grand and ancient stair into the noble hall above. I made a beeline for the kitchen.

As I walked past the stair leading up to the offices, I immediately thought to check the mail slot in case something had happened during the night. Sometimes a letter marked urgent could be put in a different slot outside, and the chute would take it to my office instead of to the mail room for sorting. An intricate system of suspended tracks was required for this, especially considering that the letter had to somehow fall upwards at some point in the chutes. I was sure that if it ever broke, I would have to be the one to fix it. It was very common for a letter to be delivered to this box overnight, but if it was very urgent, an electrical system was in place to alert and wake me so I could check the box at once. This was very rare; probably because if it did happen, the messenger was required to stay and wait for me to signal if I was going to immediately send a reaction message. They did not like waiting around.

Once at the top of the stair I crossed the waiting room, unlocked my door and let myself in. My office was quite tiny compared to my vast underground suite. Daelus let me keep it how I liked it; which is to say, Daelus liked how I liked to keep it. The mail chute also had a lock on it, which I plunged the key into and opened up. It was empty. I let out a brief sigh of relief, and then went to my desk; more out of habit than routine. I found all was as I had left it; I kept nothing on the surface of the desk when I was not working except my coffee mug, which was sitting almost dead center on the dark wooden top.

Without thinking, I sat down and took a sip. My reaction was less one of surprise and more one of mild disappointment. I was indeed more a creature of habit and instinct than routine; this coffee was from last night. I laughed at myself for automatically taking a drink of it and not once thinking, 'I had not yet made coffee this morning,' and then being disappointed that the mysterious coffee in my office that should not have been there was, in fact, old. I pushed it to the side of the desk and then got up.

I quickly went downstairs and continued my quest for coffee. At the foot of the stairs I found a little mouse. No, it was not really a mouse, but that is how I thought of Schinler; the boy who worked the mail room. It was odd to think of someone older than me as 'the boy'. He was slightly overweight, and a bit taller than me, with very pale skin and a slight graying of the cheeks where his beard should be. Maybe it was his haircut that made him look like such a child; straight even black bangs covered his forehead. He seemed to squeak at me as I went by; fueling my impression that he was a little mouse.

"Morning Schinler," I said without breaking my stride. I knew he'd have to follow me down the hall, as it led to both the mail room and the kitchen. He seemed to be getting here earlier and earlier every day—his shift didn't start for another half hour.

I was almost to the kitchen door when I heard knocking at the staff entrance. I did not like that: no-one should ever *knock* at the staff entrance. I took a detour from the kitchen to see what was going on. I slid open the window of the door, and saw the familiar, gentle face of Maxwell, the man in charge of collecting entrance fees to certain areas of the building. I sighed and said before he could get a word out, "Forgot your key again?"

"Beggin' your pardon miss, but yes seems I did," he said, patting his skinny body as if that would prove it. I undid the bolt and let him inside, briefly taking note of the gentleman who, in spite of being barely older than Schinler, looked twice his age.

"Where did you lose it?" I asked, trying not to sound impatient.

"Swear it must be here Miss," he said, urgently trying to get down the hall. "I searched the homestead clean, and there's not a trace of it. It must be behind the bench in museum wing two!" I looked longingly at the kitchen door, and with a fret turned around and followed him.

The wings of The Circle were divided into library, museum, and gallery areas, all radiating from the central hub along with the executive wing and foyer like petals on a flower. The library areas took up one side of the building; being the northeast, east, and southeastern wings. The executive

wing, where the officers and kitchen were, was to the north, with the grand foyer opposite it to the south. The gallery and museum wings were on the west side, and were a bit of a mix, broken down into smaller areas, some of which required payment to enter. That's where Maxwell came in. The library areas were free, but had many donation boxes scattered throughout.

We only had to search for a minute or two by his post before it was clear that the keys were nowhere to be found. There wasn't much for the things to hide behind; I was sure to keep this area as clear of stuff and debris as I could. I was ready to throw the bench at him when he suddenly realized that the key was in the one pocket he swore he had checked five times already, but apparently it had managed to find its way into the fabric in such a way that kept the iron surface away from his fingers. The patting down he did for me at the door now seemed more absurd.

At last, I did my rounds through the building. The east and west entrances were unlocked, as well as the main one in the entry hall. I did a quick check in each of the wings to make sure that everything was in order; or that everything was as it was left last night, order or no, before returning to my office.

I found that Schinler had delivered the mail and news to me, and that a mug of coffee was sitting at one end of my desk. Absently, I sat down and brought the mug to my lips as I thumbed through the papers. "Oh yeah," I said to myself, once again disappointed with the coffee. That was twice now that I had been disappointed over something which I really shouldn't have been. Maybe if I had left it in the center of the desk I would have remembered, but no, I so cleverly moved it and threw myself off guard. I put the mug down and focused instead on the news.

I folded the creases out of the first one neatly before I read it, so that it would lay flat once I was done. One could always skim through the first few paragraphs; they tended to be mostly suggestions about who should care about this and why. My eyes focused once I got to the meat of the subject.

"City Gate Guardsman murdered," I muttered. It happened all the time, there had to be something more specific here to warrant such a lengthy list of 'why you should care' points. "Body vanished," it went on, "comrade suspected of the heinous deed, refused to talk, spoke nonsense of the walking dead."

I placed it on the pile at a forty five degree angle, to present to Daelus once he arrived, which would be later today, as he had business elsewhere this morning. I unfolded the next note and absently took another sip of the coffee before reading it. Instead of scolding myself for being a scatterbrain and taking a fourth sip of the old coffee I simply told myself that it really wasn't that bad.

The letter was one directed specifically to us, hand-written and anonymous.

I heard that one Ranson, esquire, is in the market for a few particular paintings. Since I know you deal in all sorts of

artwork, not just the valuable sort, I thought I'd pass this on to you in case you could do business with the gentleman.

The letter went on to name several paintings and included their descriptions, which was necessary since the painting titles didn't ring any bells with me. However, the description of one did: an abstract painting, which conjured an impression of a forest in the late evening. It was unforgettable. I knew it had passed through here, but I also knew it was not currently on display, but rather locked away in storage. I searched my memory for who had sold it to us before I dove into my files. That's right; it was that younger girl...what was her name?

It couldn't have been that long ago. I got up from my desk and pulled the book from the shelf with all of the transactions from last month. I mused briefly about the day when these shelves would be filled; right now we hadn't even completed one. Within moments I had the entry at my fingertips.

Jyre | Painting | Framed in natural wood | Unknown artist | Untitled.

As I rightly remembered, the notes explained that the painting was in the lockup storage. It was where we put works which had ownership research still in progress. Sometimes it took months for our contacts to thoroughly determine who could possibly become angry with us if the painting suddenly showed up in our gallery. The thieves themselves often lied about the origins of their haul, so the rule simply was to never ask them. I wrinkled my nose and licked my finger as I skimmed through the other entries, looking at the other paintings Jyre had brought in, but none of them matched the other descriptions given in the anonymous letter.

If we had a buyer for the abstract one than maybe we could suspend research and simply get it off our hands. It was Daelus's call in the end. He usually liked to hoard the things; he felt his gallery was best filled with the simple artwork of armatures and bright, talented youths than the old and venerated master works. No one else seemed to understand it but me. Daelus loved art. It was as simple as that. Of course even if it was determined safe to sell I still wondered if he would part with it and sell it to this Ranson. I suppose it depended on why Ranson wanted it. Of course there was also the danger that he was the previous owner, or an agent of that owner. We'd have to research Ranson too.

"Sheam?"

I almost jumped out of my skin. My eyes jolted up to see a figure looming over my desk. It was Schinler once again, the boy from the mail room.

He, on the other hand, did seem to jump out of his skin, and took two steps back, arms splayed apologetically. "Sorry, sorry!" he squealed.

I took a breath, hands going down on my desk. "Schinler," I muttered, probably sounding less pleased than I had intended. "I wasn't expecting anyone to come in without knocking."

"I, uhm," he stammered, and then blinked nervously many times before

finding his next words, "th—thought you were expecting me."

"Schinler," I replied, pausing a moment to reason out why on earth I'd be expecting him. "I wasn't...what, is there more mail?"

"N-no, I, just...well, I said, b—before I left, b-before, y-you said that your coffee was old...s-so I said I'd...uhm," then I noticed he was grasping a cup of coffee in his hands, which he extended out to me as soon as my eyes fell upon it.

My irritation melted. "Oh Schinler, that's very kind of you, but I didn't hear you say that; you should speak up."

Schinler beamed and replied, his free hand gesturing madly as he did so while the hand that grasped the coffee shook, "No milk, one tea-spoon of sugar; just like you like it Sheam!"

His hand was gesturing too madly. Just as he finished his sentence his hands collided in a fit of ineptitude, sloshing coffee all over him and my desk. I watched in amazement as the morning's news was painted brown, and Schinler let out a terrified shriek. In reaction he dropped the mug, hands diving down to my desk to try to somehow pat the coffee off with his fingers. Sadly, the mug was not empty, so it just sent coffee pouring over the surface of the desk, soaking the mail even more.

I don't know what kept me from screaming. Instead, I swiftly picked up many of the papers before the flow of coffee made contact, and watched in horror as Schinler's patting only escalated the problem

"Schinler," I said firmly, "stop it, you'll just make it worse." He recoiled at my words, eyes the size of saucers. I placed the unharmed pages safely in the drawer, and then quickly fished out the soaked ones. I let the coffee drip off of them one by one and handed them to Schinler, saying, "Copy these over onto clean sheets, please?"

He nodded frantically, and then tried to grab some of the pages that were only slightly splattered. He managed to add two to his pile of ruined sheets, therefore ruining them as well, before I was able to stop him. "No! Those are fine, you'll just...oh dear."

He seemed like he was about to crawl through a crack in the floor stones. I busied myself with finding a rag to clean off my desk so I wouldn't have to watch him sulk out the doorway. As he was about to depart, I offered reassuringly, "Don't worry about it, Schinler, these things happen. Bring me back those fresh copies soon, please? And next time don't spill the coffee."

He turned around to see me smiling, and seemed to brighten up a bit. "Y-yes Sheam, I'm sorry...so sorry again, it won't happen again, I promise!"

"Right, not again, now, copies, coffee!" I said with a smile. He pushed his way through my office door with a bit more of a spring in his step. I didn't want to encourage him, but I also didn't want to crush him.

With the desk clean, I retrieved the news posts, and continued reading, hands curled around the top of my eyes like I was holding binoculars. The next one looked like it was from James' network. I flattened out the creases neatly before looking it over. "Residential building in North Quarter burned and collapsed," I read, frowning a little. "It was reportedly home to many. No

fire wagon was able to heed the call, many deaths suspected. Independent fence that goes by the moniker 'Ragbert' reportedly made residence there and is currently missing. Assumed dead, he is survived by a wife who will most likely not continue his business. Supporters of independent criminal activity mourn the loss."

Either the person who wrote this had a very dark sense of humor, or he was regarding this whole 'independent crime' thing a little too boldly. I suspected that it was just a crude sarcastic remark, and went on to the next letter. It was from Daelus. I had explained to Schinler many times that letters from Daelus must always be placed at the top of the stack, so I was a bit disappointed. Maybe it had just lost its place during the shuffle. No, he just hadn't done it right.

Sheam,

I ran into some trouble on my way home last night. A band of assassins was waiting for me. I ended up getting myself a bit frayed, and unfortunately was forced to kill two of them. I'll be going over some new security arrangements with the Gryphon's later. They already know about this, so don't worry about it. I'll see you later today. I am all in one piece; don't worry.

~ Daelus

Daelus was alright. I repeated that in my mind a few times before I was able to pull my hand from my face and rid my imagination of any images depicting Daelus being murdered. I let myself have a deep sigh, hoping my anxiety wouldn't get the best of me. This would have been an awful time for Schinler to show back up with more coffee.

I couldn't just stare at the letter and wait for Daelus to get back, dreading what sort of euphemism 'frayed' was intended to be. I had to continue my work. I read a few more notes, seeing little of any importance, before I finally came to one that stood out boldly from the others. I immediately recognized it to be a statement from the Hammerites. It was happening again; one of their temples was being briefly closed for maintenance.

— Lytha: The Unexpected Guest —

Day 2: 8:00 am

I awoke suddenly, as if startled from a dream that evaporated before the light hit my eyes. Morning light shone through the window panes, casting a glow upon the blood drenched wash basin. It took a moment for where I was and what I was seeing to sink in. As the full scope of the scene hit me I recoiled, back pushed up against the wall, hands gripping my face.

The walls and floor were painted with blood; strange foreign symbols I did not recognize, but tugged at the corners of my mind like the dream I could

not remember. The door to my bedroom had once again been forced open, furniture broken, and at the center of it all was the washbasin; the first thing I had noticed. I lifted myself from my bed, hand pinching my nose, and carefully walked across the room, careful to not allow my bare feet to touch the blood painted onto the floorboards. The contents of the basin were the same as last time; blood encrusted knives and razors, and lumps of unidentifiable flesh floating in the blood red water.

Why me, why again? I asked myself. What did they want from me? I knew the truth, of course, that this damnable cult was trying to intimidate me, to punish me for not returning my sister Thalia to them. The cult was the reason why she was imprisoned and tortured by the Hammerites in the first place. She was my sister, and by the blood of our mother, she did not belong to an accursed *cult*.

I would not be intimidated. I did as I had the past few times; scooped the flesh out with my bare hands into a pail, unplugged the basin's drain, and turned the knob to fill it with fresh water and wash away the blood. I set to work on myself and the room, trying to restore it to order, clean up the blood marks, and cover up what I could not clean.

I knew what I needed to do. I was going to go to Thalia, and convince her to tell me where the cult was based. I would go to them, knock their door in, and decorate their own dwelling with their own blood.

It was past midmorning by the time I finished, bathed myself, changed into clean clothing, and wrapped myself in a coarse gray robe with a hood and a veil that completely hid my face. I left my apartment and bought some fruit from a stand; soft, over-sweet, plump things grown in the dung of fat cows. The vendor treated me as if I was a friend, greeting me with a "Good morning Lytha! How are you my dear?" He was a sweet man, not very intelligent, but also pure of spirit and close to the earth. He never had to worry about being taken advantage of, for he never hoarded what was his and carried no expectations for the next day. I would not call him friend; such a thing is only for those who truly knew me, but I did not mind the affection he showed me; a stranger whose face he's never seen. I paid him all the money I had brought with me, a little more than what the fruit was worth; for money was not something I cared to hoard either. I kept the fruit in a sack under my arm as I walked to The City gate. Anyone who tried to snatch this woman's purse would only find some apples and pears, and then a knife in their back.

I walked at a gentle pace through the streets, allowing myself to take in the murmur around me. I could always hear the hum, the low roar of hundreds of loose minds thinking petty thoughts. I had become used to it, so much so that when it was gone I grew uncomfortable. Some would find peace in the quiet of the wilderness, but there I found madness in the silence. That was why I rarely left The City.

Thalia, on the other hand, was not like me. The murmur of The City did drive her mad, and only in the silence of the wilderness could she be herself. In her crippled, weakened state, she could never go very far beyond the door of her cottage, so that is why I always went to visit her. The discomfort of the

silence was worth bearing for a day or so for the sake of her company, and I knew she needed mine.

I came to The City gate. I felt a tremble in my gut as I saw the men standing before me; not of fear, but rage. There was a Hammerite speaking to one of the gatekeepers. This particular gate keeper seemed to almost be purring for the Hammerite's favor, as the two talked about the city folk around them as if they were farmers discussing a rodent infestation.

The Gate keeper tore himself away from his adoration of the Hammerite when he saw me—of course he couldn't really see *me*—and said, "The usual business, ma'am? Just one moment please."

But then the Hammerite turned, and said, "Hold! State your business, woman!" He glared at me. I could feel his eyes etching out whatever shape must have been hidden under the folds of my robes. In a way this softened the burning animosity I held towards him. He may have been a Hammerite, but he was still a man of flesh and blood.

He did not speak, but I could sense the words "*Filthy sinner*," seeping from his eyes and spilling down his body like melted wax as he judged me; a judgment that surely reflected his own guilt over the way he had just looked me over. You always hate in others what you hate most about yourself.

I turned my concealed face and said to the gatekeeper, "Are you going to let this Hammerite do your job?"

He stuttered, "No—no ma'am!" as he turned to glare at the Hammerite. "Who do you think you are anyway?" he demanded.

I smiled. This gatekeeper was a good man, and though he, like the man at the fruit stand, had never seen my face, he always treated me as a friend as I passed through the portal of his jurisdiction. And I, in return, always treated him with respect and kindness.

"I am thy judge and redeemer!" shouted the Hammerite at the gatekeeper, truly out of his gourd.

"You're also totally alone, Son," the gatekeeper said. "Go run back to your temple and shine your boots and let me do my job."

The Hammerite glanced around as he realized that there were several district guardsmen on duty nearby, and there were no other Hammerites within earshot. "Thou shalt regret this show of disrespect!" the Hammerite barked, as he backed off like the coward he was.

"I really apologize for that," the gatekeeper said to me. I could not forget the look on the man's face and the tone of his voice a moment ago, as he kissed the ass of the Hammerite, and then the complete change that came over him as he scrambled to appear brave and manly before a woman. I dismissed all of that, declining the opportunity to judge him. At least, I knew, he was a real person.

"No need, and thank you," I said as I passed through The City gate, and into the wilderness beyond.

As The City walls vanished into the distance behind me, so the silence grew, making me anxious. I kept to my path, wanting to reach Thalia's cottage as quickly as possible. The woodlands grew dark, and dense, but I

knew my path well, for I had traveled it many times during the day, at night, and through all forms of weather. I may have embraced life in The City, but the woodlands were still in my blood.

As I drew near, I could feel something was wrong. Normally the silence would be broken by her thoughts...which I could hear clearly in spite of my lack of focus. Such was the strength of her mind, and our close personal bond. So when I could not feel her as I drew near, I began to feel panicked. I started to run, needing to know what had happened. I opened my mind to the world around me, listening intently, trying to hear even the slightest whisper in her voice. There was nothing. I was alone in the woods.

Then her cottage came into view beyond the trees, in a small clearing. I rushed forth and swung open her door. Thalia sat at the table in the center of the room, her upper body lying limp against it, eyes closed and still. I didn't need to touch her to know; she was dead. I rushed to her, gently lifting her body to sit up, and cupped her face in my hands as I looked at her. Though she was only a half dozen years older than me, she appeared ancient and frail, and now in death, little more than a shadow of a human being. The panic was gone. Now there was only grief and acceptance. Tears welled behind my eyes as I clutched her head to my chest, but I did not weep. There had been times when I felt it would have been better for her to die so that she would no longer have to live with the pain and torment of her broken body, a constant reminder of her torture by the Hammerites. Now at least she was at rest.

"Thalia..." I whispered softly as I stroked her hair. I pulled my hood and veil away, letting my red hair spill over hers.

Whenever I visited Thalia, she always kept her eyes closed. She never hesitated to reiterate that it would be dangerous for me to look into her eyes; that we'd become lost in one another's minds and unable to find our way back. That was the nature of her power, a power which I held a faint semblance to. But now, as she lay dead in my arms, the only thing I could think to do was to pull open her unseeing eyes. I lifted her chin with one hand, and gently pulled her eyelids up with my fingertips, and saw...

...Her body erupted into green; a tangle of vines tore open her skin like paper, flooded the room, and then swarmed to entangle me. As my body was gripped tightly in the mass, I felt as if I was falling, air rushing at my back as the vines squeezed tighter, cracking my bones. I clenched my eyes tight, trying to make it go away, but instead felt thorns cutting at my lids, as if they were clawing to get inside. Pain engulfed my mind, like nothing I had ever felt. The thorns had cut my eyelids away, and plunged deep, first wrapping themselves around my brain, then down my throat, clutching my heart, and to the farthest reaches of each limb...

When I came to my senses, I found myself on the floor, sobbing tears of blood. It was only a vision, I tried to convince myself, but I wasn't sure if I believed it as I wiped the blood from my face with shaking hands. My skin crawled, my entire body awash with the horrible sensation. As my sight

cleared I took off my robe and looked at my hands and arms to see that my skin actually was twitching with motion, as if the veins under my skin were mimicking the vines from the vision. A vision, yes: only a vision, certainly not. I rubbed at my skin, squeezing, trying to make it go away. Then, as if I had been imagining it all along, it was gone. Perhaps it had only been in my mind after all.

I looked up at Thalia, and saw that when I pulled away from her I'd nearly pulled her out of her chair. Her eyes remained open, gazing at me. I couldn't avoid looking; my eyes instantly went to hers before I knew what I was doing, but nothing happened. I clenched my eyes tight and curled up as I lay on the floor, still panting and trembling from my experience. She was intact, though, not torn apart like I had seen in my mind. Or, had it been her mind?

"What did they do to you?" I whispered, trying to get back to my feet. I couldn't imagine what sorts of awful magic the pagans had used on her during her stay with them. I should have tried harder to get her away from that life. I should have acted, instead of running away and trying to pretend everything was okay. I gently lifted her from the chair into my arms and lay her down in her bed, folding her hands over her chest. I wasn't going to leave her here like this, but I wanted her somewhere more dignified as I prepared the cottage.

First I needed to find some water. There was a well out back. I cleaned the blood off my face, for the second time today. I had, a few times in the past, experienced a similar reaction to visions that were simply too powerful for me. All accounts had occurred in the presence of Thalia.

Once I was satisfied that my eyes were okay and that the blood was gone, I emptied the sack of fruit outside, hung my robe on a hook by the door, and then went through her dresser, putting only what I could use into the sack and leaving the rest. I did the same for her cupboards, trying to take note of anything small I could keep that may have been of personal value to me. I had all the cups and plates I needed, but I felt I should check just to be sure. The bookshelves had already been ravaged by me long ago. Thalia's hands had been crippled beyond the ability to turn pages, so she had insisted that I take whatever tome from her shelves that I wanted. I had, every now and then, but at the moment the thought of curling up with an old book from Thalia's collection turned my stomach. Finally, my eyes went to the chest at the foot of her bed.

It was locked. I knew what it held; artifacts of her previous life. I had often pleaded with her to throw it all out, but she insisted that she would need it someday. It seemed she had been wrong. I thought I should just forget about it; leave it and never think about it again. On the other hand, I had already looked into her eyes, something I knew I shouldn't have done. I was already pulling the old iron key from its hiding place behind the dresser.

With a start I dropped the key. There was a voice in the silence; a mind, a mind sharp as a razor. I lay still for a moment, focusing, listening, and trying to find it. There was someone nearby, and she was aware of me. Somehow, I felt that this woman was responsible for Thalia's death. I jumped to my feet,

took a knife from Thalia's counter and bolted out the door.

In my state of shock, sorrow, and rage, I didn't stop to question the validity of this sense, or wonder why I put so much faith in it. I dove into the dense woods, thick with vines like a jungle, and darted from tree to tree. The mind was on the move, trying to escape me. I chased, and though I could see nothing, I could feel her move.

I felt it behind a tree—gone; then behind a rock—gone; then above on a branch—gone. With each attempt I knew I was getting closer; though my opponent was swift, she would not evade me. I knew I was upon her, the knife in my hand, I spun around the trunk of a tree, but my blade only hit bark, digging deep. My eyes shot upwards, and for a split second caught a black shape on the branch above me, but then it rushed away, leaping to another branch. I chased. Now with each new encounter, I would catch her for an instant, seeing the black cloak briefly before it whisked away behind another tree or rock in the dense, increasingly dark woods.

Though I could hear nothing, I knew where she was, and so I quickly leapt to the top of a tall rock and dove down the other side. She was exactly where I knew she'd be as my blade swung; but it bit only air. I was close, very close; so close that I could feel her breath against me as she let out a gasp, my blade passing inches from her throat. She was unable to dart away as I swung again, though I still missed my mark. I jabbed again, and again. I jabbed again, and again. Each time she slid or jolted out of the way. Each time my blows came closer, missing by the slightest fraction.

"*Claw,*" the thought came into my head, and I reacted without question. She might have disemboweled me, for the swiftness of her attack, but my premonition allowed me to catch her hand. My dinner knife sunk into her shoulder. The force of my attack pushed us both over into the ground, me on top of her. Her hood was knocked free, revealing her face.

I recoiled at the horror which I beheld. It was a mask of death; eyes great and black and deep, and masses of teeth lining unfolding jaws. I fell into those great and horrible eyes like a pit had opened up below me. I fell into blindness, deaf to all but my own scream...

...I felt grass against my face, and wind upon my back. My ears no longer echoed with my own scream. Reluctantly, I opened my eyes. I saw the grass. I turned, rolling over, seeing trees all around me. Finally, my back to the ground, I saw the blue sky above me. Against my will, my mind searched for the image which had horrified me so, but I found nothing. Quickly I stirred, the chase flooding back into my mind. I was on my feet, searching for my enemy, but found nothing. My foe was gone; there wasn't even any blood on the leaves that coated the earth. I searched my mind. What happened? What had I seen? What became of the one whom I chased? Was it just another vision? I gripped my temple, trying to clear my thoughts. The silence....The silence of the wood was maddening. I needed to return to The City, to the warm comfort of the unending hum of innumerable minds, soft and plump with their idyllic innocence.

Stumbling, exhausted, I went back to Thalia's cottage. How long had I been away? There was no way to tell time within the cottage, but the sun was high in the sky. I pushed my way in and saw Thalia's lifeless body on the bed. There, I fell to my knees, and wept. I couldn't take this. I couldn't be here. I wanted to give her a proper burial, but how many more visions would I have to endure? I could come back, when my mind was cleared and the fact of her death had been accepted. Before I knew that I had decided, I was running, my robe back in hand, away from all of this, to The City.

— Ghost: Back on Track —

Day 2: 12:00 pm

Halfway through my wandering vigil it dawned on me that my pack was still sitting in that tomb, just five minutes from the entrance. I was feeling far too beat to even think about going to get it, so I decided to see how I felt after a few hours at the flophouse. In the end, it just seemed to make things worse. In the end the only thing that pried me out of that bed and forced me to go back was the idea of some other grave robber stumbling upon my pack, and playing finders-keepers.

Even though it was far less creepy by day, the silence in the Bonehoard drove me nuts. I could almost feel the walls watching me like they remembered me and knew I was cursed. Once I had my gear I considered for a moment trying to just return the star to the tomb, but I'd have to navigate the cave-in again, and it had been destroyed by the quake anyway, so I gave up on that idea pretty quickly. Plus, I was fairly certain that the body of the poor chump whose journal I had found was already walking around, *looking* for me.

After I stashed my gear back at my apartment, and avoided any thoughts of actually cleaning up the two rotting bodies on the floor (not to mention getting more sleep) I went to The Circle, star in hand. Soon Nightfall would be cursed, and I'd be free.

I had never been there before, but it wasn't hard to find. This *Nightfall* guy was new to The City, but the building was not. This was the first time I had ever known anyone to use it for anything, but what did I know? The gate was opened invitingly. Inside, in the middle of a grassy yard, was a building which was smaller than I had always imagined it would be. Why such an elaborate wall and yard were put around such a crappy little building was beyond me, but again, what did I know? The building was round; more gear-like really with the wings radiating from the center. The little park benches in the yard were cute, too.

I let myself in through a doorway I found at the end of the nearest wing, and entered what looked like a library; the books gave it away. I found a little old man who was hunched over a table with his nose in a book, and after stifling a rather large yawn, I shouted at him, "Hey you, which way to Nightfall's office?"

The man stuck his finger down onto the page, like he needed to mark the

word he'd just finished reading, before he looked up at me, wiggled his eyebrows, and said, "Who?"

"Uh, you know, the boss, the *owner*."

He frowned at me, and pointed over his shoulder. "Central hub's that way, just follow the signs," and then went back to his book.

— Sheam: Customer Service —

Day 2: 12:00 pm

I looked up quickly from my work as a man stepped into my office. I knew at once that he wasn't someone who had scheduled a meeting. I didn't need to check. From his shabby but not peasantly attire, rough but healthy physique, and demeanor that suggested he was about as comfortable in an office as a blueblood might be in a slum, I wagered that he was a crook who had come to try his luck doing business with Master Nightfall. He also had a smell about him that I couldn't quite place, but for some reason reminded me of burning hair.

"Hi, uh," he said as a grin cracked on his rough, stubble covered jaw, deepening the cleft in his chin. "The sign outside the door here said *ex-zek-ya-tive* on it," he remarked. I hid the smile that tugged at my lips. I wasn't sure if he was *trying* to be funny, or if he really didn't know what he was talking about.

My eyes briefly glanced over his many, thankfully, empty dagger holders. I didn't like his types coming in. Most had the sense to never try meeting Daelus face to face, so I rarely had to meet them either. With some notable exceptions, Daelus preferred to do business with reputable fences, not directly with the thieves themselves. The further removed we were from the actual crime, the safer it was. I had been trained in how to deal with them however, long before I had taken this job. "It's a fancy word for '*boss*,'" I told him, in a tone that suggested I was neither submissive nor to be trifled with, but not angry nor mocking.

He started to laugh, the fatigue in his watering eyes now becoming clear. "Yeah, yeah I know," he said after his chuckle was broken by a rather long yawn. "Well, I'm not too good at the formal stuff, so why don't you just skip the paperwork and whatever bullshit you're supposed to be here to do, and let me see him, okay?"

I just shook my head quickly, saying, "I'm afraid I can't do that, because currently—"

"Eh?" he blurted, cutting me off. "What do you mean, you can't do that! Listen, lady, I need to see your boss for important"—he broke into a long yawn—"business...stuff."

He might have caused me to worry with the intensity of his outburst, but the long yawn put me at partial ease. My smile turned coy, though it was only to mask my irritation at not only being interrupted, but having my work called *bullshit*. "I *gathered* that, but that doesn't change anything," I said, and began to shuffle through some papers nervously, pretending like I was busy.

"The fact is that he is not seeing *anyone* right now." I didn't like telling guests that Daelus wasn't here. I felt like it robbed me of some security if they knew that the secretary was here all alone.

"What the taffin' *hell!*" he shouted, grabbing the sides of his head like he was going to lift it up off his shoulders and throw it.

My mind quickly went to the poison-tipped dagger in my bottom drawer, or at least, the one I had always been *meaning* to place there in case men like him came in and started to cause trouble. Don't freeze, I reminded myself, and don't become apologetic or frightened by his antics. Be disarmingly frank and *polite*.

He wouldn't give me a chance, though. "What, he doesn't see sorts like me? Is that it? Am I not part of his exclusive little group of happy pants *fairies?*"

I couldn't help it; I laughed. I scrunched my face up to stop myself, and put my hand over my mouth, but I couldn't stop.

As he watched me his angry face wiggled away and soon he was chuckling too. "That was pretty good, wasn't it?" he said in a much calmer tone.

I nodded quickly, trying to restore the frank and polite demeanor I had just worked so hard to put myself into. "Yes, that was good. Better than most. However, I'm afraid you *won't* be able to see Lord Thresh right now. If you'd like, I can—"

He looked like a kid who just had his little toy pull-pony taken away from him. "What? *Who?*"

"That was funny, but you still can't see him."

"No, I got that, but...what? Lord *Thresh?* Am I in the wrong place? I thought this Circle was run by some guy called Nightfall."

I had to laugh again, but this time I kept it in my throat. I knew my eyes would give it away though, but I really didn't want to risk provoking another explosion of anger from him. "Yes, of course. They're the same. Sorry, I suppose we should hang a...sign or something."

"Hah, yeah," he said, starting to chuckle again. "That would probably—wait...so *why* can't I—"

I shook my head. "He is occupied for the moment in a very important meeting. However, I can—"

It seemed like he was ignoring me as he grabbed the chair in front of my desk, pulled it aside, and dropped his body into it like he was expecting his knees to give out at any second. With a mighty yawn that gave me a first-hand view of the deterioration of his molars, he said, "Okay, let's, just, start over."

I knew that if he wanted to go back in time and *really* start over, he'd need a lawyer. I suppressed a chuckle at the private joke. "Alright," I said, getting my appointments book out, opening it, and dabbing the quill into the ink. "Starting over."

"Eh, what are you doing?" he said, glaring at the book. He probably didn't see many books. I was tempted to tell him it wouldn't bite, and contained *words*, but I felt such teasing might be going too far.

Instead I just I looked up at him, with a crooked smile. "I'm helping you start over. I can set you up with an appointment. Please state your business. I will take a message, and we can go from there." I was trying to forget what he had said before about skipping bureaucracy. If he was going to insist on that again, then there'd be no appointments for *him*.

He took a sharp breath, like he had just dozed off and needed to jerk himself back awake.

I couldn't help it: I grinned. "You do want to make an appointment, right?" I said, sketching a little flower into the top corner of the page.

He nodded his head, and said, "Yeah, my name is Ghost...at least that's the name everyone knows me by. He should have heard of me by now if he's anybody around here." He grinned sleepily, but then tried to shoo away a fly he was certain was buzzing in his face. When he finished waving his hand around, he added, "You've heard of me, right? Miss...?"

I managed a regretful look. "I'm afraid not," I said, jotting all of that down in the neat little form I designed myself. I was tempted to lie, more to tease than to flatter, but I was trying to retain *some* professionalism. I wasn't sure why I kept wanting to provoke him. I usually wanted his sort to get in and out as quickly as possible, and never, ever bantered with him. But something about Ghost made me laugh, and I kept wanting to find new ways for him to do just that.

"No, I am sure you have," he said, growing a bit cross. "You just don't remember. Ghost, the professional grave robber. Pilferer of ancient tombs, plunderer of sacred relics!"

"Shall I write all of that down?" I said, the coy smile returning.

"No, never mind all that," he replied, looking offended. "Just say that I'm a big time grave robber who just pulled off the *ultimate* heist. I pulled a job in the *Alarus chamber* of the Bonehoard."

I nodded as I wrote, and then waited for him to continue. Finally I realized he was waiting for some kind of reaction from me, so I simply said, "Oh, impressive," glancing up at his smug expression.

He cleared his throat, clearly unsatisfied with my tone. "Well, I have the Alarus star now, and it's worth quite a bundle. In fact, it's worth so much that my last buyer couldn't buy it because he couldn't afford it!"

"What makes you think we can?" I asked, quite frankly.

"Because...you know, you're rich," he replied, as if he was telling me that I could smell because I had a nose.

No, *you're* rich, was what I had wanted to say. It took all my effort to keep from rolling my eyes. "Okay, I have all of that. Is that all?"

He seemed to be waking up a bit, but was growing surly as a result. "No, that's not all. Er, don't write this down. I tried going to his mansion last night, but his taffin', crow-nosed, chrome-domed, tunic-wetter of a butler and his knee-jerk cross-eyed guards wouldn't let near the place; some hospitality."

He slew me with that one. I nearly spilled my ink laughing at the *perfect* description of Jossimer. "He is, he is! He's that and more!" I decided right then and there that I liked this Ghost fellow after all. "Are you *sure* you don't

want me to write that down?" I continued, still laughing.

He seemed to lighten up at that point. "Gods, no! But yeah, that butler he was a real ass. Listen, it's been fun, but I should go. Just please tell your boss that I want to meet with him..." He paused, like he was thinking it over. "At the Drunken Mermaid Bar at the South Quarter Docks at...nine in the morning *tomorrow*. To discuss sale of the star. Oh, and to come *alone*."

I frowned to myself as I wrote all of that down. "I should warn you, Mister Ghost, that the master rarely accepts meetings outside of this building. I'm afraid you'd have better luck letting me check our schedule," I said, indicating the second book on my desk, "and deciding on a meeting according to *his* convenience."

Now he looked like a guy who thought he was about to take a bite of juicy steak, but instead only bit air, as the bit of meat fell off his fork and into his lap. At least he didn't bite the fork. "Just... *please* tell him all that. I'm sure he'll accept the meeting once he hears the *who* and the *what*."

I flashed a smile at him as I sketched another flower in the lower left corner of the page. "That's the first time you've said *please*,"

"Heh, yeah, *please*. Handy that," he replied, scratching his ear. "And this is *really urgent*, so *make sure* he gets the message and comes alone, er, please."

I didn't want to break it to him, but he had it all wrong. He was going to find out the hard way, of course, and it would be me he came yelling to once Daelus didn't show up at the bar. Still, I wouldn't really mind if he did. He seemed safe enough, and definitely made me laugh, so I just nodded, marked the page with a ribbon, and closed the book. "Done," I told him.

He nodded, and pushed himself up from the chair, giving a little grunt of dissatisfaction. "Well, back to the flophouse for me," he mumbled as he walked to leave. "Hey," he said, turning to look at me before he passed through the door.

"Yes?" I asked, peering back up at him, wondering what *else* he had on his mind.

He had an interesting, or rather, *interested*, look in his eyes, as he glanced over me for just a moment. He seemed less tired now and more simply confused, or possibly conflicted. "Eh, no, nothing, forget it," he said, and then shut the door behind him.

— Lytha: Independence and Inheritance —

Day 2: 8:00 pm

The Devil's Tongue was deservedly regarded by most folk as being beyond reproach; simply irredeemable. It was a part of The City that seemed to curl in upon itself, creating a cavernous maw that sucked the conscience out of even the largest heart. Its location was a secret, kept that way because most preferred to believe that it didn't exist, and those who did wanted it all for themselves. The sun may as well have still been shining; not a ray of it would have hit me as I walked the street between the lumbering hulks of buildings, spilling out over one another to grind against each other, as if to

mimic what went on within.

The architecture was lavish and obscene. The facade of the building I approached was painted in red and gold; half crumbled woodwork designed to put a royal face on the evil clown of a structure. I pushed my way through the busy streets filled with cloaked, huddled figures, bouncing back and forth between deep alcoves and the night walkers out presenting their wares, to the doorway which greeted me like a toothy gaping grin. Navigating the familiar halls of the brick and iron monolith took only a moment, for I knew them well.

"Two-timing on me, Koyne?" I asked after shoving the door open and glancing from my fence, Kyone, to the brigand who was sitting in my chair.

"We're not sleeping together, if that's what you mean," Koyne responded, giving me a bit of a glare with his good eye.

"What the hell is this?" The brigand responded, who didn't seem to be amused at all. In fact, he was getting a bit flustered. He turned from me back to Koyne, and demanded, "You said this meeting would be private!"

"It was, now it's over," I said to him, ready to hoist him out of the chair with my bare hands; but there was a problem with that plan. "How could you give this guy a job, Koyne? He's so fat!"

"It's muscle!" he barked, trying to shove me away.

"Look, no trouble, okay?" Koyne demanded. "I'm sorry, our meeting just went a little late, and you're a little early. He was just leaving, Lytha."

"Oh, it's Lytha, I'm so scared!" he cawed, "Lytha of the golden heart! I've heard them talk about you! The little angel! I know why you don't never hurt nobody, it's because you're afraid you'll cut yourself on the sharp pointy bit of the knife!" and then he laughed.

I didn't say anything. That's what Koyne was for. He spoke right up, "I'll tell you why she doesn't do any killin', it's because I do it for her! Did you hear about me too? Do they talk about how I can put a knife in a man's back at a hundred feet? Tried to take my eye, those that hate me, thought it'd blind me up, dull my aim; well now they've got knives in their back too, and daisies poking out their eye sockets! Did they tell you about that?"

"He's gone, Kyone," I said, sitting in my chair.

"Eh?" he questioned, squinting at me.

"You're blind as a bat, old man, but you've got some guile. Really, you don't need to try to defend me like that, or whatever it was you were trying to do. I like people to think those things about me; means I still have some cards hidden up my sleeves."

"I know, I know," he said, giving a little cough into his fist. "That's why I didn't correct him, just didn't like him talking down at you like that."

"How nice...but why was he here at all? Who was that?"

"Same as you."

"I beg to differ."

"Fine...yes, I was giving him a job. I didn't think it'd hurt your feelings."

"I just don't see why you'd bother when you've already got the best," I said, glaring at him from behind my veil. I knew he wouldn't have been able

to see it, even if he wasn't a blind old man, but I glared anyway.

"Best you may be," he said, reaching under his desk to pull out a pair of goblets, "but not the most dependable. I know you consider yourself an independent thief, but I'm more inclined to call you a un-dependant thief.

How many times have you stood me up?" He then pulled out a bottle of scotch, and poured each goblet to the brim. He may be blind, but all those years as a bartender maintained his sense for pouring. "Taken missions and then vanished? Completed a mission and then vanished without delivering me the goods until weeks later? And my personal favorite; outright declining without saying why!"

"Why is my business," I said, snatching up the goblet and taking a good drink. It was good to have a fence that had good scotch.

"This IS my business, Lytha! I don't know what yours is, and I don't care, you could be moonlighting at the grocer's shop for all I care, but I want you to understand..."

"Day-lighting," I said, already half done with my drink.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked. He was about to slam the bottle down on the desk as he made his point, but he hadn't gotten there, and with my interruption, he probably lost it.

"This would be moonlighting. The job at the grocer's shop would be my day job."

"You can't be serious."

"Do I look like I'm serious?" I asked, face hidden behind the veil as always.

He took the wise route and assumed my question to be rhetorical. "This is your last chance, Lytha. I know I never have to worry about you botching a job; only that it gets done at all. If you don't go through with this one for any reason, any reason at all, then you can find yourself a new fence."

I shrugged. I could have argued with him, pointed out that he'd also have to try to find a new thief; unless he figured that tubby from before was his future. The truth was really simple, but I didn't want to share with him. I did jobs that fascinated me. Last night, the theft of the tiara was thrilling. It just happened to be for another fence. The job Koyne had lined up for me was just a hack job. Any burglar could have pulled it if they were half awake. I fully intended to do tonight's job, if what I had learned about it so far was true, so I just finished off my scotch, and said, "Fine, what's the job?"

"Wine," he said with a triumphant nod. "The Stewart Family's inheritance from their dead uncle has finally arrived and it includes three bottles of the fabled wine from their centuries old vineyard on their family's secret island; the makers of the finest wines The City has ever known for the past five hundred years!"

Koyne was almost foaming at the mouth over this one. I offered an "Uh-huh?"

"Their business faded long ago, and their uncle was the last guardian of the legacy. But now it's gone to the idiot children, and they're going to drink it!"

"More scotch please," I said, tapping my goblet.

"Actually, I shouldn't. I'm sorry Lytha, but the job is tonight. I can't have you—"

"Tonight?" I balked.

"Yes. They're having a celebration tonight to commemorate the reception of their inheritance."

"This is awfully short notice," I said, and tapped my goblet again.

"This all happened very quickly. I told you it was urgent; it's urgent. I told you you're the only one for the job, and that's true as well. I have reservations about you, but I also know how you work. This mission is a one shot deal. You're my one shot thief."

"Two shots, and when I say shots, I mean fill this goblet to the brim with scotch before I grab that bottle away from you and start tipping it back myself."

"Fine," he said, pouring. "You know what I want. No one dies. No one gets hurt. No one even sees you. Re-lock doors behind you. Re-scatter the dust you've unsettled. Don't steal anything but the goal."

"I don't re-scatter the dust I've unsettled, I just don't unsettle it in the first place." I drank my drink. Damn, I didn't want to do a mission tonight, but it was too late now.

"Your attention to detail is flawless Lytha. I've known places to not realize they've been robbed until weeks after you've been through. I get goose bumps just thinking about it."

"If they're planning to drink the wine I'm going to steal, then I think they'd notice pretty quickly, Koyné," I said, already pretty sure what he was going to say next.

"Yes, that's why I'm going to have you do the old switcheroo. The idiot kids won't be able to tell the difference. When midnight comes, and they do their toast, they'll think they're drinking their two-hundred year old family wine. Really, they'll be drinking three bottles of the crap I picked up in Newmarket this evening."

"Clever," I said, not enjoying the idea of having to sneak around with three big bottles of wine strapped to my belt. It was one thing to just find the family wine and get out, it was another to have to carry three bottles of crappy wine while trying to get in too. "Do you want me to switch the labels too? Should I bring glue?"

"How did you guess?" he said, tossing a tube of paste onto the table.

"Fancy. Well, I suppose there's no time to waste?"

"I've written out all the details for you, here," he said, passing me a sheet of parchment. His writing was chicken scratch, but I had gotten the hang of deciphering it. "I know where the Stewart Family Manor is," I told him. "Anything else?"

"Use your judgment," he said, shrugging.

Indeed, I was good at that.