

The Dryad's Glade...

I felt the soft cool of the goodsie grass upon the softs of my feet and watched as the thistles and the thickets parted to allow my way. I passed into the glade, the will-o-wisps singing and the grandfather trees humming gently their greetings. The branches did bow, creaking groaning as they do in the words of the wood, as the Woodsie Mother approached, with her hair of lilacs and pure goodsie sap flowing through her veins. I too knelt before her, my palms caressing the sweet clovers as I waited for her approach. At last she was before me, and bid me to rise.

"It is done," I said, "The vessel has been destroyed."

"Thank you, Larkspur," she spoke, her breath smelling of nectar. "Thanks to you, a great hardship has been spared this world. I feel that we may all now rest, and wash our cares from us."

"I pray that this is so," I said simply, bowing my head once more.

I came among my brothers and sisters and sat among the roots of the grandfather oak, nestled among the mosses and the gentle vines, and we all drank plumsie juice and sang songs of praise to the Woodsie Mother and the Grandfather Oak, and songs of remembrance for the Woodsie Lord and all those who had gone before. The birches and the sycamores bent and swayed, keeping time for us, as the night birds called and the will-o-wisps made merry with their chimes and tones. I watched as the Woodsie Mother unraveled, her graceful vines splitting apart, wrapping to embrace the Grandfather Oak in his blissful slumber, and join him in his low hum of a lullaby.

The Agent's News...

"We came to a cottage in the woods. After doing a thorough analysis of it, we were preparing for the return trip home. Jyre and Heppet were inside the cottage, and called James in to see something. I followed a minute later, but found that the three of them were gone without a trace. I searched the house, and then waited, and then searched the surrounding woods for any trace of their passage for hours. Finding none, I saw nothing to do but to return home and report what had happened."

"He's not dead," Corrine said firmly. "He's not dead until we have proof of that."

"He may be a prisoner, or he may be an infiltrator. We can't know which, only that whatever happened, happened to the exclusion of myself. I do not believe that James would do this intentionally," I replied, though I knew it would do little to help.

Corrine nodded solemnly. She was being remarkably calm about this. I suspected her true reaction was being saved for after I left. "Missing, yes," she said. "And we have to proceed as if he is not coming back."

"I'm sure he'll turn up soon," I just said. "James would do that. It's like him."

"Thank you, Petra," Corrine said.

Farewells were exchanged, and then I departed. Just as expected, Ramirez struck as soon as there was but a single hole in the network, though I had no reason to believe it was anything but a coincidence. I made haste back to resume my duties, certain that I could be of better help there than anywhere else right now.

The Slasher's Blood...

I could follow her scent for miles. The stench of The City made no difference. My senses were sharp and pure, blessed by the goddess herself.

"This," one of my pack snarled, lifting up a dead vine in his claw. I could see it was soaked through with blood, blood not even a day old.

We each drank deeply of its scent. Yes, it was the blood of our goddess. But there was another scent here too on the cliffs by the beach. It was a man, the same man who was with her before.

She had not died here. Our search would continue, but now we had a stronger scent to guide us. The smell of her blood would draw us to her. She was deep inside The City now, but we would find her. We howled, not caring if the hammer-fools in the castle above heard us; there would merely cower in their beds at the sound. The howl was a call to the others.

"We follow her! Come, mongbats and trusslers! Come weavers and fae! Our search grows hot! The scent of her blood is strong! We follow!"

Chapter 20

Alliances and Betrayals

— Sheam: A Plan is Hatched —

Day 7: 10:00 pm

After I had seen Schinler to a doctor and been assured that with some surgery and stitches and a few weeks in bed he would be fine, though his nose would never be the same, I found myself waiting patiently at The Gryphon's Nest, expecting the arrival of Corrine and a few others I had requested meet with us. It was a wide room where everything but the floor was made out of wood, with beams and trusses going this way and that overhead, with banners of all shape and size hanging, representing all of the various emblems that The Gryphons had used over the decades of their service to the Canard family. Wendle came and went as I waited, finding himself extremely busy ordering patrols to areas where Ramirez's thugs had reportedly been seen. From the sounds of things, a quiet invasion was taking place, and Wendle was opting for an equally quiet way of diffusing it; making sure the enemy knew we had them surrounded before a sword was drawn.

There was a commotion in the corridor, and when I craned my neck to look, I saw a man who I had only just met yesterday, Andrew being lead in by a Gryphon.

"Andrew," I said, getting up. "I was expecting Corrine. Is everything alright?" It seemed like a silly thing to ask. A better question might have been, has something *else* gone horribly wrong?

"I am sorry to be the bearer of more bad news," he said, leaning against his cane, "but word has arrived that the expedition into the wood has run afoul. One of the two agents who accompanied James and Jyre returned to inform us that the other three have vanished without a trace."

I quickly saw him seated and pried from him the whole story, or as much of it as he knew. He repeated over and over that James and Jyre were just missing, not gone, and that he expected things to still turn out alright. For Corinne's sake, I hoped he was right. For me, it was already too late for such hopes.

"Again, I'm sorry it's me here for the meeting and not Corrine. I know you were counting on her wisdom, but she asked that I go in her place."

"No, I am glad you're here. I am happy to see you again, Andrew," I said, managing a smile.

He had no problem giving me one. "A pleasure to see you too, Sheam; though I wish it were under better circumstances."

"Yes," I whispered, and then added with more volume, "I've invited Lord Crowley. He should be here any minute. It didn't make sense to make an ally and then ignore him as soon as it's us who need help instead of him."

"Good thinking, Sheam," Andrew said, nodding. "I heard what happened to you, with Balastar Ramirez. Your bravery is remarkable, unfathomable even. I can't imagine anyone behaving with such cunning and valor as you did in a situation like that. I am truly impressed."

I felt myself blushing, and took my hands off the table to hide them in my lap where I could stare at them. "I was just mad," I said. "That's all."

There was another commotion at the front, and when I got up, I saw that

it was Lord Crowley arguing with the Gryphons about how many bodyguards he could bring inside. He had brought four, and the Gryphons at the gate insisted that they didn't want their fort being trampled through by men under a different banner. Wendle quickly offered a compromise, suggesting that three of the bodyguards help patrol the perimeter, while one joined Crowley inside. It was agreed upon, and soon I was introducing Crowley to Andrew. After Wendle finished issuing a new set of orders, he sat down to join us, though he remained silent.

"It saddens me that a respectable noble like Lord Ramirez would stoop this low, but it is not unexpected," Crowley said as we were all seated. "It also blackens my heart to know that your Master has been lost to the pagan enemy."

"Yes, the Hammerites wasted no time in boldly announcing that fact, damn them," I said.

Crowley just nodded. "Well a war on two fronts is never wise. I do not know what I can offer you other than the image of support. It goes a long way, you know. To appear as if you have the support of someone is often more useful than any real aid they could give you."

"I understand that," I said. "But I have a very real favor to ask of you. It is not a difficult favor, but it may not be one you like. Right now there is only one other warden with the power to stop Ramirez's advance should open warfare begin."

"Lord Raputo," Crowley said.

"Yes. None here being of noble blood, I do not expect he will grant any of us an audience."

"I thought you were of noble blood!" he said suddenly.

I felt myself grow uneasy. "I...may have made it appear that way."

He wasn't angry though; he was smiling. "Very well, I see why you would need my help with that, then. You are right; Raputo is a very busy man, and would very likely even not grant an audience with a nobleman like myself. You are also right in that Raputo is one of the last men I would want to speak with, on anyone's behalf. It would be like a steak walking into a wolf's den and asking him for assistance."

"That's true," Andrew offered, "but he also believes very firmly in the ways and the doctrines of the society of wardens. If he even has reason to suspect that Ramirez assassinated Canard and kidnapped his son, he would see that the wrath of the entire society be brought down upon Ramirez as a traitor to their ways."

"Very well, but we would need proof before we went before him."

"That will be my job," said Andrew, "finding that proof. I will need the help of The Gryphons, but I am not sure who can be trusted. We believe that high level members of Canard's staff have been corrupted by Ramirez."

"I regret to admit that most of my men cannot be trusted in this," Wendle said. "They are good men, but this is very serious business. I have ordered the entirety of Castle Canard go on lockdown, with everyone present that night under house arrest. Oh, the sergeant in charge of the house guard

raised hell over that, but it just made my orders more firm. The investigation could take weeks, though, and we don't have weeks."

Andrew resumed, "It would be easier if we could intercept communications within Ramirez's ranks, but any message sent by courier into other territories is always encoded, and our top cryptographer is also under house arrest."

"Who?" I asked.

"Othello, of course," Andrew replied. "He is even better at it than I am."

I sighed. "Okay, I guess we can bring him anything that needs decoding, but I still don't want him having another emotional breakdown while on assignment."

Everyone nodded, especially Crowley.

There was another commotion at the front, but this time Wendle got up to check on who was trying to force their way inside. I recognized the voice, though it seemed so out of place I could not immediately identify it. When I turned around my eyes grew wide in surprise. There, being escorted in by Wendle, dusting off his shiny pitch-black slacks, was Jossimer.

"Joss?" Andrew said, also sounding surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"Yes, yes," he said in his usual impatient tone. "You can all place your eyeballs back into your skulls. I know all of you are disgusted to witness my presence, but you can take that disgust and *eat it*. The Master is dead which means I am no longer his butler in that accursed tower, James is missing which means I am no longer beholden to his sage advice, and people very important to them both are on the brink of being murdered in their sleep. This means I am not about to sit around like a broken broomstick, minding my own business in some forgotten corner of some forgotten tower, while you imbeciles sit around twittering like lost chicks trying to figure out how to deal with a situation that is spiraling out of control, without any input from anyone who knows a damn thing about anything."

The smile on Andrew's face put Crowley at ease, but he still didn't look very happy about being called an imbecile who didn't know a damn thing about anything. Jossimer sat down, pushing his square spectacles higher up on his nose, and dusting off the sleeves of his pitch-black overcoat. "Now," he said. "What idiocy have I arrived just in time to talk all of you out of?" By then Crowley was also smiling, since he probably thought he just found an ally in his argument against going to Raputo.

"Well," Andrew said, "We have three main objectives; one, to locate the kidnapped Mallard Canard, who is heir to Lord Canard's wardenship, and who is probably being held by Ramirez in such a way that does not link his kidnapping to Ramirez."

"Nonsense," Jossimer said sharply. "Kidnapping? Absurd; if he assassinated Lord Canard than he also assassinated Lord Canard *Junior*."

"We don't know, one way or another," Wendle said. "For now all we know is that Mallard Canard did write the note which summoned Sheam to Castle Canard, so we know that he was being held alive at one point at least."

"Our second priority is then to link the assassination, or assassinations, to

Lord Ramirez, and with that proof, go to Lord Raputo.”

“I don’t like the idea of involving Lord Raputo in this,” Lord Crowley said. “It seems like we’re asking for trouble.” He seemed to say this directly to Jossimer, expecting an immediate agreement no doubt. Jossimer just remained silent.

I answered him instead. “Which Warden do we go to, then? None of the others in the area are strong enough to pose any threat to Ramirez. Raputo is the only one whom Ramirez would fear retribution from.”

He looked unhappy, but just said, “Very well.”

“Our third priority, though this seems just as important as the other two, is to root out any double agents within Canard’s ranks,” Andrew continued.

“So,” I said, not really certain what to suggest, and hoping I wouldn’t look too stupid if someone corrected me. “Finding Mallard is going to require keen observation, and maybe muscle. I suggest that Andrew organize James’s Network to search, sending any coded messages to Othello for decryption. If he is located, and force is needed for his safe return, then Gryphons step in. Sound okay?”

“We’ll find him,” Andrew said with a smile, though I wasn’t sure what there was to smile about. “Linking Ramirez to all of this is going to be the toughest, so Corrine will need to head that up. She will of course need Wendle’s help to find out who the double agents are and expose them.”

“I already have made a list of possibilities,” Wendle said, nodding to Andrew.

“Crowley will be standing by to deliver what we’ve found to Raputo,” I said, praying that the man wouldn’t back out. It would be difficult to find another nobleman willing to help us.

“Agreed,” he said, “and I can also offer some men to aid in the other objectives, if you will have them.”

“Gladly,” Wendle said. “At this point outsiders can be more easily trusted.”

“And Jossimer?” I asked, turning to look at the man whose eyes were invisible behind the reflected glow of his spectacles.

“I still have allies, within The City’s government,” Jossimer said reluctantly. “Some favors are owed to me. I cannot promise anything, but I may be of assistance in discovering a positive link between Ramirez and these deeds.”

“Thank you, Jossimer,” I said.

“And what will you do, Miss Mistress of The Circle?” Jossimer asked with an impolite tone.

Wendle answered him quickly. “Ramirez wanted her out of the way, and as far as he knows, she’s still off with Balastar somewhere. Hunting down Balastar and Sheam will distract him for the time being, allowing us some breathing room. We need to keep her location and his death a secret.”

“I’m afraid I must agree with Wendle,” I said, feeling like I was going against what I had previously promised myself. “If there is nothing else to decide now...shall we begin?”

— Lytha: The Scent of Blood —

Day 8: 2:00 am

“Careful with that!” I complained, gritting my teeth, as Ghost scrubbed my wound.

“Hey,” he said, “It’s not my fault you let the zombie scratch you. I’ve gotten cuts like these before, and trust me; you need to clean it thoroughly if you don’t want some really nasty infections. I’m almost done and we’ll wrap it up.”

Ghost had brought me to his apartment, which he hadn’t set foot in for nearly a week, so I could take advantage of his zombie wound treatment kit. I was sitting up on the small counter with my top off so that he could better access the wound across my back, though I still wore a bra.

Not really wanting to watch what Ghost was doing, I closed my eyes and tried to put myself somewhere else. I tried to think back to a pleasant memory to distract myself from the pain of the scrubbing. My mind shifted this way and that before settling into a familiar grove, a recollection of my sister’s I had been avoiding ever since it has surfaced on the beach, fearing what it might reveal about myself, or about Thalia. I gave in to it, knowing I could not avoid it forever.

The memory took me back many years to a time just after my birth, to a place I did not recognize, a small cottage in the woods not unlike the one Thalia had built for herself. Her memories and feelings about it were *much* different, however.

Though still very young, Thalia was keenly aware of what our parents had in store for her new baby sister: Lytha. She remembered as an infant, a remarkably bright and observant one, seeing her older sister Delphine endure the same torment, the same torturous rituals that she would later be subjected to herself as a young girl. She knew for certain that I would be next in line to receive this treatment, and could not bear the thought of the child whom she loved so much facing that kind of pain.

She tried to confide in her elder sister Delphine, whom to her seemed basically an adult, but was met with harsh rebuking. Delphine believed completely in our parent’s dream, and considered it blasphemy against them to suggest that what we endured was somehow unnecessary and something to escape from. She insisted that I was the most important part of our parents’ plan, and that Thalia would suffer gravely if she dared jeopardize anything.

And so Thalia backed off, and tried to accept that our parents and Delphine were wise, and that she was just an ignorant child, and needed to stay her place. And as time went on, and I began the treatment, a treatment that pained her to recall and made me tremble inside just trying to recollect, Thalia felt herself dying inside. She did not hate her parents or Delphine, but she did believe they were wicked, and she hated what they were doing to their helpless children. Still, she did nothing, powerless to change our fates.

And then the voices, or as she eventually realized the single voice of *It* using many conflicting voices to disguise itself, came to her. It urged her on,

telling her how evil her parents were, how pathetic and useless she was for obeying them, and demanding that she take action, kidnap me, and run away. For days, weeks, months, she fought against those voices, sometimes screaming back at them in rejection, and sometimes just trying to ignore them, begging them to pass.

Until the night she gave in, and allowed It to have her.

With its strength filling her and swelling and tightening her muscles, she tore herself free of the chains that were used to keep her in the bed. Thalia then forced her away through the locked door of her room, pulled the door open to my room, lifted me—an infant not even three years old—from my crib, and stole away into the night.

By the time she realized what she had done and It had returned her body to her control, it was too late. We were alone in the wilderness and she had no way of even knowing how to return home. She wandered, giving any wild berries she found to me, for she knew of no other foods in the woods. She starved herself for my sake. Eventually we were discovered by a tribal hunting party, Thalia nearly perished from hunger, and me still relevantly healthy. They were nomadic gatherers so they had no settlement to return me to, only a camp where the women of their tribe nursed Thalia back to health.

Thalia's memory grew hazy from there, but I did not need to strain to remember it. I now knew that It had been with her all along, and was in fact responsible for pulling our family apart. If things had gone differently, if It had not been so compelled to sew chaos everywhere, if Thalia had been stronger and able to resist Its drive to destroy, would Thalia and I have turned out just like Delphine? Would we have stood by her side, proud and powerful Goddesses, working with her to see that our parents' dreams became reality?

We'd never know.

With a shudder I shook myself from the almost vision-like vividness of the memory, preferring to return to the scrubbing at my open wound. With a long sigh, I idly cast my eyes out the window to admire the view from his lofty apartment. Just then I noticed something outside; something that didn't seem right. "Ghost," I said slowly, and then quickly, "turn out the light."

"What?" he said while trying to sort out the bandages.

"Turn out the light, quickly." I leapt from the counter, moving to a place in the room where I couldn't be seen from the window. Ghost hit the switch on the wall, and with a buzz and a sizzle, the overhead lamp shut off.

Moonlight flooded into the room. Ghost did as I was doing, on the other side of the window. Slowly we both moved to peek out, scanning the night sky and the sea of rooftops that spanned the horizon. "Those are big bats," he said, seeing them too.

"I don't think those are bats," I said, in a hushed tone. "And those certainly aren't bats. Look, over there, near the second tower past the..."

He replied in the same hush. "Yes, I see them. Shit, Lytha, are those..."

"Fae, yes."

"And Monkey-bats."

"And who knows what else," I said.

"Why the devil do you think they're here? They look like they're searching for something."

"Me," I just said.

"Well good luck finding you. Are they going to search through every apartment in every building from here to Wayside?"

"Ghost," I said, feeling the hair on my neck stand on end. "Is there a draft in here?"

"Yeah, always has been. I could never find where it was coming from to plug it up, but it never seemed to matter. Why?"

I looked down at the open wound on my arm, and the pile of bloody rags in the waste bin, and then back at Ghost. "Because I can feel what's in their minds. I can't read them, they're too animalistic for that...but I can feel...that they have a scent they are following—the scent of blood."

"Oh shit," Ghost said, as he watched one of the mongbats swoop dangerously close to the building."

"And they know they're getting close."

Ghost quickly went into the other room, and took a candle. He ran back in, and began to try to set the rags on fire.

"Don't!" I said. "They'll see the light, and then they'll be interested. The scent will lead them right here. I need to get out of here."

"Come on," he said. "The basement seals; they won't be able to find you down there."

He took the bandage so he could finish wrapping my arm, and we both went for the stair. I didn't even bother taking my top or cloak. We raced down the flights of wooden steps, creating a terrible racket of creaks and groans, until we got to the basement door. Ghost pulled it open, pulled me through, and then closed it shut. There was no lock on the door, but it looked tight enough so that no drafts could escape.

It was dark inside, with only a flickering and buzzing electric lamp on the far wall basking everything in a sickly green light. The room was filled with the typical barrels and crates, but what caught my eye was a row of iron gratings on the floor to one side of the room. "Where do those lead?" I asked.

"To the sewers," Ghost said, taking my arm again and beginning to wrap it with the bandage. "Sometimes they unpack crates of produce down here, and want to wash off the crates before the next batch, so they just hose them off and let the water drain out. Why?"

I felt minds closing in on me, minds too inhuman to read and yet human enough to feel their approach. "They know I'm here," I whispered. "They lost the scent, but it was too late. They realized where I was."

Ghost gave a worried breath, and then tied the bandage firm. He went to a shelf near the door, and began to push it so that it was blocking the door from opening. "Ghost," I said. "The door swings out."

"Oh yeah," he replied stopping, but then resumed pushing. "It will still slow them down."

"Or slow us down," I said quietly, eyeing those gratings again. I hated hiding. I hated running. I hated feeling like the hunted. I was the hunter, not the other way around. Then I saw it; movement. I strained my eyes in the dim light, until I realized what I was seeing—dozens, or hundreds, of spiders were crawling out of the gratings. "Ghost!" I yelled, glancing to him and then back to the swarming creatures, feeling my heart rate surge.

"Gah, sewer spiders!" he shouted, and in a split second he was stabbing holes in half a dozen big barrels, letting dark liquid smelling of heavy alcohol spill out onto the floor, rushing towards the gratings and the invading creatures. "Now let's see if this is really one hundred proof. He took a bomb from his belt, clicked it so it was armed, and tossed it at the gratings, yelling, "Get back!" to me.

I jumped behind cover just as the bomb exploded in a firestorm, igniting the liquor and sending trails of flame back to the barrels, which thankfully did not explode. It only took a few seconds for the scorching fire to die down, revealing hundreds of twitching and smoldering spider corpses.

"They're not all gone," I said. "In fact...none of them are gone."

"What?" Ghost said, yelling to me from across the room over the roaring fire. We had run in opposite directions, and were now separated by the blaze. My escape was cut off.

That's when one of the gratings, and then the next, were pushed upwards by a large creature that looked like a man crossed with a spider. They didn't seem to care about the flames, but were definitely enraged by the death of the little ones. I sensed more from them, a need to find someone or something so that someone or something would be pleased with them, a need to set things right in their lives, to fill a hole that was left missing, but beyond that was just the swirl of an animal mind with human thoughts. An instant later they saw me, and knew at once that this was the 'someone' that they needed to find. They could smell my blood. They threw down the gratings, and stepped out of the holes, standing tall on four legs with the other four as arms.

I did the last thing they expected. I still had a knife strapped to my leg. It was in my hand, and rushing at the nearest one. The fire scorched my flesh, but I didn't care. The dagger bounced off their armored skin, but the creature I had struck was startled, and panicked. The other rushed to its aid, but I had done what I needed. I dove into the opening on the floor, feeling the cold but slimy water sooth the scorches on my arms. Even before I burst to the surface, I knew that I was not alone. I kicked off from the bottom of the sewer tunnel, in the direction that I felt they had come from. When I broke the surface, it was too dark to see, but I knew that there were several more of the half-man beasts and hundreds more of the little spiders surging after me.

I swam. They were afraid of how I would escape, and so I knew how to escape. I found a place where the water poured down, and let my body fall with the tumbling water. I hit the reservoir hard, but not so hard that I was stunned. I was back to the surface again before they leapt down after me, and swimming hard against the current. Reading from my pursuers a vague sense of where they feared I would go; I swam down a narrow side passage into the

pitch blackness. A twist and a turn later I saw moonlight again, and was swept away by the current as the water dumped out into the open air, and into the river. I did not fall, though. I twisted around so that I could grab the rim of the pipe at the last moment and instead of dropping down, used my momentum to spin myself body over hands, and landed from the flip on top of the pipe, feeling like my wrists were just twisted like the lid of a jar. I ran along the top of the pipe the short distance to the stone wall of the riverbank, leaping up just high enough to grab onto the top. I then hoisted myself up and over the iron rail, and was back in the streets.

They were still coming though, I knew it. What was worse, I saw mongbats and fae circling overhead, ready to spiral down at any moment for the grab. I sprinted for an alley which opened up onto the river road, only to hear the beat of wings crystal clear as they swooped in after me. I sensed with alarm something lunging for me, feeling the wind from its wings on the skin of my back, knowing in my mind that a creature wanted its prey alive, and would be reaching with its claws and not its fangs. I spun around, lashing with my dagger, slicing deep against the open palms which sought to grasp my shoulders, sending the mongbat screaming away.

I reached the end of the alley, and turned into the next street, only to see four of the fae touch down before me, their wings folding up at their backs, their long faces that resembled barkless sticks glaring at me with two rows of eyes that opened down their cheeks. Then one jerked violently, and had an arrowhead poking out of his face. The other three turned sharply to see why their friend had fallen down, and another had an arrowhead through the neck. I rushed at the one closest to me, jumping up, slashing with my dagger to cut off its wings, which tore like brittle paper under my blade. It chattered in agony as I rushed past the last one, jagged sword swinging but missing. Ghost, my sharp-shooter, was aiming his bow for a third time.

When he let it fly, I didn't hear the chatter of a fae in pain, but the howl of a mongbat. I glanced over my shoulder to see at least a half dozen of the hairy creatures bearing down on me, with more fae circling in the air, and in the distance, howling from a rooftop, a sight that sent cold shivers straight through me; a jacknall.

As I ran past him Ghost took my arm, saying, "I know where we can go!" before charging at full sprint down the street.

"We can't shake them, and we can't fight them all off! Where the hell are we supposed to go?" I yelled.

"Here!" he shouted, before leaping over a tall wall in a single bound. I was right behind him, sailing over the wall, hitting the ground with a roll before nearly hitting my head on something stone and mossy. It was a gravestone.

I got up as fast I could and shouting "Ghost, if the curse is broken, you can't get zombies to fight them off! Besides, by the time they raise those beasts will be done with us!"

"No, no, no!" he said, getting up himself before resuming his sprint. "Come on!"

He ran at the door to the church, ramming it with his shoulder, causing

the brittle wood to splinter and crack around the useless lock. I was right behind him, squeezing through the crack, with the pursuing beasts just seconds behind me. "Then why are we here!" I shouted.

"This old church is haunted," he said, leaping over a row of ramshackle pews as we ran for the front, or back, whichever, of the church. "We're heading to the undercroft!"

"But if it's haunted; how the hell does this make sense!" I screamed, close behind, hearing the doors behind us burst open.

"Lytha, I know a little something about how to deal with undead. Come on, trust me!"

Ghost rammed the door to the undercroft just as he did the front door, and it splintered open the same as the first. We careened down the stairs, which emptied out into a cobweb infested chamber that smelled of death. "Undead, in this case Hammerite undead, which I don't need to remind you, are by far the worst kind of undead in the entire world, only wake up if you disturb them. Then they operate mostly by smell and, in our case, you and I smell like The City and the critters behind us small like The Trickster himself. Alive or dead, or undead, Hammerites hate the smell of The Trickster." He told me this as he zigzagged through the undercroft, going as fast as he dared while avoiding getting too close to any of the stone tombs which filled the room, until we got to the very back, with no escape.

Various beasts of all shape and size burst in, immediately knocking over one of the stone caskets, causing it to crack in two and dusty bones to spill out. All at once the room filled with an eerie blue glow, an icy chill, and the moan of a hundred voices calling out in anger. The mongbats, fae, spider beasts, trusslers, and jacknalls that flooded the room all suddenly froze in their tracks. Bright wisps of eldritch smoke poured out of every casket in the room, as the chorus of moans grew more distinct, and hushed into a chanted whisper, "flames, nothing but flames, flames consuming your flesh..." I felt my skin crawl, chilled to the very core, my eyes wide as the vapor grew into distinctly human forms, big bodies topped with skulls, with arms that held massive hammers.

Nearly petrified, I heard an even stranger sound coming from beside me; Ghost was nearly giggling with excitement. My own fear tempered, I turned to look at the approaching horde of monsters, all of them eyes wide with fear, the ones with fur puffing up, every hair on their bodies standing on end. The spirits began to swirl and fly about, diving for the creatures, howling their menacing chants, their icy touch, and their ironic promises of flames. The ones in the back broke away running, squeals of terror echoing as they fled. Some that remained, including the mighty jacknall, simply dropped to the floor, motionless.

Ghost was now laughing out loud, his eyes wide with excitement, as the last of the creatures that still stood bolted for the stair with the spirits following them up, until all was quiet and darkness had returned.

"Actually the thing I forgot to mention is that these types of spirits are also completely harmless. They're just *really scary!*"

I blinked, staring at him, jaw agape. "Why didn't you tell me they were harmless?" I demanded.

"Well then you wouldn't have believed that this would work!" he said with a grin. "Doesn't matter who you are; person, monster, big scary monster, they're all afraid of ghosts.—Except for me."

"Well," I said, taking a deep breath. "Once again I owe my skin to you."

"Nah, give this one to the Hammerites. They got me out of my fix, sort of, and now they've done you a favor. See? They're not all bad after all."

"I suppose they have their uses," I said quietly, looking up at the creatures that were still motionless on the floor. I sensed nothing from them, not even that vague animal feeling. They had actually died of fright. I turned to Ghost. "I need to get away from The City. I need to go far, far away, where Delphine's minions can't hunt me down. I need to leave immediately."

"Okay," he said, surprisingly. "Where are we going?"

"Ghost," I said, taken aback. "What do you mean, we? I'm going."

"Do you really think I'm going to let you out of my sight again? We were apart for thirty whole seconds when you vanished into the sewer. I thought I was going to have a heart attack!"

"I was only under there for thirty seconds?" I said, a bit baffled.

"Yeah, I counted. Okay, I'll tell you what. Before we leave, as stowaways on a boat or something, we go back to Brother Ymar in the morning. Maybe he can help us find a way to get these pagans off our back. Maybe then we don't need to leave The City."

I sat against the dusty stone wall, looking up at him. "Brother Ymar. He did set you on the right path for breaking your curse."

"Yeah, he sure did, though thankfully it didn't involve any church school."

"And he did say that there was something he needed our help with..." I said, trailing off into thought, trying to imagine what I could have discovered in his mind to give me a clue as to what he wanted from us.

"Oh, I had forgotten about that," Ghost said, sitting next to me.

"We should meet with him at dawn, like he requested," I said, still deep in thought, pondering what it was he could have wanted, "but not to ask him to help me. I can't accept help from a Hammerite, not after what they've done to me...not after what I've done to them."

"Alright, fine," he said, rubbing his hands together. It was dreadfully cold still. "We tell him the good news, and see what favor he wants from us. It'll probably be something simple. Those Hammer priests don't strike me as overly needy people."

"You would be surprised," I told him.

— James: Phaeros —

Day 8: 3:00 am

I gazed, and I pondered, and I pondered and I gazed. All attempts to wake Phaeros had proved unsuccessful. I tried removing his hands from their places at the table, but they were rigid, his grip strong, and even though I was

able to pry them off for a few seconds, his trance did not break, and I soon had to give way to his superior strength. A life behind desks and at podiums does not do well for one's arm strength. I tried the obvious things, shouting in his ear, shaking him, pinching him, covering up the table with my coat, or trying to break his line of sight to it, but it all proved fruitless. Eleomosynator was also no help, always insisting that it was unable to obey requests regarding a table in use except those issued by the table operator, or even answer questions about its use to respect the privacy of the table operator. I began to accept the idea that there was simply now way to break him out of this trance.

Eleomosynator could not tell time, but my pocket watch was still functioning, and it told me that it was three in the morning. My thought drifted to Corrine, hoping that she would take my disappearance with a stiff upper lip. I had tried asking Eleomosynator to set the table to view The World, but as he was designed to help people see things either in the same world as the viewing table or some less-real world somewhere beyond it, he did not know how to set the table to go in the opposite direction, to view a world more real than this one. I suspected it was possible, but without an instruction manual I had no way to begin. Naturally that was my cue to go in search of an instruction manual, and after hours of searching for one, and hours perusing it once I had found it; I still had no idea how to view a world more real than the one we were currently inhabiting. Naturally, why would the designers think of such a thing? To imagine a world more real than the one we were in was absurd! They never imagined that the entire city would be transported into a less-real plane!

Of course, I eventually got the idea to hunt for any chapters written about those entranced while using the table. The Book was written in the native tongue of Dereloth, and though it was easy to digest in the small samples that the Eleomosynator gave me, going through hundreds of pages of the stuff was slow and tiring work. I kept reminding myself that this was actually my first language, but that was when I was just a child, and I didn't want to think about how long ago that was!

Finally, I stumbled across a passage that caught my eye.

Practitioners of the bizarre arts may be tempted to mentally project themselves through the viewing table. This is not recommended, especially when attempting to view a plane of unreality significantly distant from our own, as the viewing table has a slight possibility of losing contact with such planes, or said plane may cease to exist altogether. If projecting your mind through the table, while the disconnect or dissolution of the plane occurs; one may find the connection between mind and body severed completely.

That was all; just a warning in a footnote, confirming what I already suspected. There was still no indication of what to do if it happened! I flipped

to the index, hunting for any references to mental projection or mind-body severance. I discovered a reference to it on a new page, and quickly went to it.

Eleomosynator will not obey the commands of anyone in regards to table operation except the current table operator. In doing so, while a user is engrossed in a viewing, may result, in rare cases and in viewers who have a high sensitivity to the entrancing effects of some un-real planes, of a mind-body severance.

This wasn't very helpful, either. So much for reading the taffing manual! I was given a possible new idea, however. "Eleomosynator," I said. It hovered up next to me. "Do *you* have a user's manual?"

| I have an operator's guide, |
| but it may only be viewed |
| by ranking officials of the |
| Eleomo Center. |

"Well, being the only person here, I am the highest ranking official of the Eleomo Center. I would like to see your operator's guide."

| Please wait here, Director. |

It hovered away, and returned in under a minute with a tome just as large as the one I had just spent hours making my eyes sore over. I set it down on the table, and went right for the index. Almost at once I found what I wanted, and after reading a few pages, turned to Eleomosynator and said, "Override Authorization Qua Fen Septa Septa Po."

| Safety and privacy protocols |
| disabled for the next ten requests. |

"Very good. Come with me." I led Eleomosynator back to Phaeros. If he was viewing a distant plane of un-reality, and the connection was severed, restoring that connection may end the mind-body severance, and allow him to be interrupted from his mind projection in the normal method—by blowing into his ear! "Eleomosynator, I would like for you to determine the last location the table was viewing before it lost its connection."

| Table has not lost its |
| connection with viewing focus. |

"Oh, now that is odd." I stared at the surface, seeing only swirling clouds, like a whirlpool. "What am I seeing, then? And don't you bloody say unknown, please!"

| You are seeing the |
| privacy shroud. |

“Ah, of course! But that makes no sense; why would he put up a privacy shroud when no one was here to spy on him?”

| I am not, no one. |

“So, he didn’t want even you knowing what he was up to. Very strange. Very, very strange indeed. Eleomosynator, please deactivate the privacy shroud.”

He hovered around to one side of the table, and began manipulating pieces under its surface. Finally, the shroud vanished, replaced by something just as baffling. It looked like the electrical arc of an angel’s ladder, but several of them, all traveling in different directions around a center point, and traveling back and forth, rather than repeating in one direction. The central point had a colored glow that was different from the electrical arcs, but try as I might I couldn’t quite pin down what color it was. Beyond the strange display was just misty nothingness. “Now what am I seeing, Eleomosynator?”

| Unknown. |

“For once that explanation satisfies me. I have never seen anything like this.” I still had a problem; if the connection had never been lost then Phaeros was not suffering from a mind-body severance. The answer that leapt into my mind astonished me, for I could think of no other solution—Phaeros had created a feedback loop. He was not viewing another plane of un-reality; he was viewing the inside of his own mind, while simultaneously mentally projecting into the image. “Eleomosynator, is it possible to use the table to view the mental un-reality of the subconscious mind?”

| The table can function |
| this way, however such |
| activity is forbidden. |

“That would explain why he didn’t want you to see what he was doing...you might be tempted to make him stop.” This still left me with the problem of waking him. If my guess was true, then what would be the purpose? To put himself into a trace that would allow him to wait until someone found him here, so that a century, an eon, would be no more than an instant to him? Was that why he was so young? Had he become immortal, and regretted it, and wished to find some state of oblivion to end his life in, unable to truly die? All I had were pointless conjecture. I had set forth on his expedition to learn about Phaeros, and he sat before me. I had to find a way to end the cycle.

Of course, that's when the obvious came to me. "Eleomosynator, alter the table's view to this room, focused directly on Phaeros." I stepped away, not wanting to be in the view. I couldn't watch the table from where I stood, but I could see the familiar alterations to the mechanism below, and then all activity cease.

I watched Phaeros's face. A moment past, but there was nothing; unperturbed I waited and in a moment more I saw his facial muscles relax. His eyes blinked. His brow furrowed. His eyes seemed to come into focus. He jerked, gripping the table harder, and then his face twisted into anger. He looked up at Eleomosynator, and screamed, "What have you done!"

"Don't blame him, blame me!" I said, quickly stepping forward.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, shouting less, but his face just as angry.

"I am James Sterrett, a fellow delegate."

"Oh no," he said, suddenly glancing about the room, and then back to me. "Do you realize what you've done? Do you realize what I was doing? The seal has been broken! The rift will open! They'll be able to come through!"

"What seal? What rift? Who is coming through?" I said quickly, my stomach turning upside down at the thought that I had done something horribly wrong.

He grabbed me by the shoulders, saying, "You say you are a delegate, than you must know. You must know! In fact, they sent you, didn't they? To break my concentration! Eleomosynator, kill him!"

| Invalid request. |

His eyes flared with unthinkable terror. "Dammit! Hide me, Eleomosynator, or no, wait, just keep him from following me. I don't want him to see where I go; he'll lead them to me!" He rushed off, robes trailing behind him. I moved to follow, but Eleomosynator quickly moved to block my path, shifting itself around to grow wider and block off the passageway that Phaeros ran down.

Almost at once I felt a tremor, which was hard to imagine possible since there was no ground beneath the stone floor which could shake! Nonetheless everything around me was definitely vibrating, and the vibration was growing quickly of higher pitch. Following this was a crack of a possibly electrical nature, causing me to immediately think of the electrical display I had just witnessed on Phaeros's viewing table. Thinking the discovery of the source of this disturbance more imperative than ascertaining Phaeros's direction of flight, I followed the sound to its source, which led me outside.

"Oh dear," I just said, as I felt a strange tug against my body in a direction that was difficult to discern. What was easy to discern was the source of the sound, for I could see an electrical display in a pattern identical to what I had just observed dancing in the "sky" above the rooftops. It was hard to tell where it was exactly, as I had no idea how big the disturbance was; for all I knew it was rather small and nearly on top of me, or it was miles away and

enormous.

The electrical field quickly dissipated, and in its place was a single point of darkness. There was a pulse, and I felt myself pushed backwards, as did every block and beam in the entire city of Dereloth. The point of blackness began to expand rapidly, with everything around it distorting. It was as if it was not merely pushing away the air around it, but pushing the whole of the matter/void framework, so that the entire landscape around it was being pushed back as it grew.

It was not an even, gentle pushing. Buildings twisted off their foundations. Towers tumbled backwards. The ground buckled, blocks pushing themselves and one another this way and that as if in a traffic jam. The entirety of Dereloth was shifting and pushing against itself violently as the black shape continued to expand and gain definition. It was massive, hundreds of feet tall, with its surface of glossy black ribs that formed a truss around it, perfectly ordered, perfectly logical. It reminded me of a massive black bee-hive, but perfectly symmetrical in every dimension. Finally the city stopped expanding around it, though the structure continued to grow. I realized that it had been brought here in its entirety, and now it was beginning to actually, physically expand. Pieces of it extended outwards, expanding like spyglasses or accordions, some out into the air, others cutting effortlessly through the city, toppling whatever structures in their paths that were still standing, some even pushing out at ground level, sending the blocks of the paved streets flying in all directions, the ones that were lofted into the air sailing indefinitely into the nothingness.

Then all was still. The pieces that had extended had done so far beyond me, so that I was well within the outer perimeter they formed. If Phaeros was still hiding within the Eleomo center, then he would find himself too close for comfort, for the perimeter of the extended pieces engulfed the building completely.

Then there was a jerk, and another long tremor, and when I looked back, I saw that the city outside the perimeter of the extended parts was being lifted up somehow. No, it was only my point of reference; I, along with the ground under my feet, and the Rivata structure and the part of the city that was contained within the perimeter, was being lowered downwards. I could not tell if it was the intention to take a chunk of the city along for the ride, or if it was all merely just lodged in place between the spokes, but I guessed it was the latter. When the top of the sphere-like structure cleared the underside of Dereloth, we began to have lateral movement. I had no reason to suspect that my sense of direction was in any way intact, but I had a sickening feeling that we were moving in the direction of where The City would be, if everything in this netherworld corresponded to an actual location in the real world.

I felt a sharp knock on the back of the head, hard enough to push me over, but not so hard to knock me out. I rolled over to my back, a task that was made very difficult due to the way the blocks of the street were so uneven now, to see Phaeros looming above me, like he wanted to reach down and grasp my throat. I kicked him in the knee instead, and scrambled away,

getting back to my feet before he could recover. "Now see here," I said, raising my fists up before me. "You're far too old for a scuffle, and if I may admit, so am I, so why don't we just talk it over like gentlemen, eh?" I said with a grin.

"Doesn't matter," he said, "none of it matters anymore. Don't you get it? They've won. It's inevitable now."

"Curious way of putting it—'they've won' indicates that the victory is in the past. 'It's inevitable now', indicates that the victory is forthcoming. Which is it?"

"Both!" he shouted. "Look!" and he pointed at the only thing which didn't need pointing at. "It's a colony. They've been gaining strength, all these years. First it was one man, sent just to see if they could. Then they sent me. Then four others, all one at a time, years apart, and four more, waiting in their chamber, probably all released already. We had jobs to do and rules to follow, the directive, but we were all just the first phase. Next they wanted to know if they could send bigger things into The World, more than just the clothes on our backs and the bones under our skin. I helped them with that, back when I thought I had to; I brought in Barlosk, showed them it could be done, showed them how to do it. Blast, I was such a fool. They didn't need me after that. They knew how to do it, and were strong enough. They have the colony now. Five hundred delegates in there, all ready to swarm out into The World, all just like you and me, with our heads full of their plans, of our orders, of missions to accomplish. By the time they're ready to reenter The World, it will already belong to them!

"I could have stopped them. I was blocking their entry into Dereloth. I knew that they couldn't bring the colony into The World without bringing it here first. I had them, like water in a crimped hose, I had them. It would have been stuck, unable to enter, for all of eternity, if you had just minded your own damn business and left me the hell alone!"

"Gods," I uttered, feeling completely hollow inside, like I had been scooped out. "I had no idea..."

"No, of course you didn't! You were just meddling in things you didn't understand! You shouldn't even be here! No one should ever come here! It's too close to them; it's too close to The World. The more reality we add to this place, the thinner the line between their banishment and The World gets!"

"What can we do?" I asked, my head simply spinning. "There has to be some way!"

"There is no way," he said. "It will get to where they have picked for the insertion point, and then it will be only a matter of time before they send it into The World. Then, with hundreds of delegates in The City and beyond, there will be no way to stop them all. They'll rise to power, half of them, a hundred of them, a handful of them, and hand everything over to the Rivata when they come."

"There has to be something we can do!" I insisted.

He shook his head, "We're their pawns. In the end, no matter how hard we try, we just end up working into their hands again."

"That's not true!" I said, "You resisted them. You fought against them and kept them at bay. It was just that fool like me who had to come and ruin things!"

He sneered at me, but said nothing more.

"We're here, now," I said. "They probably didn't expect us to be here, but they didn't think things through, they didn't realize that we could do any damage to the colony. They're like that, trust me; they get so set in their plans that they lag behind when it comes time to adapt. I bet if we could get inside that colony, we could do some real damage to their plans."

"What are you suggesting? That we go in there and murder every single sleeping delegate? If you are truly suggesting that, then perhaps you are not the fool I thought you were. But will there be enough time? Do you have a knife? How long would it take to strangle two hundred and fifty people in their sleep, assuming that we both have the same hand strength?"

"Oh, my," I said, understanding what he was saying. I wasn't sure if I was capable of such a thing. And what if, "What if, we meet someone in there who we know? Would we be able to kill them?"

"What are the odds?" he hissed, his scowl deepening. "The number of people wiped off the face of The World numbered in the hundreds of thousands. What are the chances, of that many, that in a set of five hundred, there would even be one that you had met before?"

"What are the chances, indeed," I said my voice lowering. "What are the chances that members of my family could be inside?" I turned from him, looking up at the colony's black trusses that towered above us. "I am too addled to calculate in my head, but what if..." All I knew was that the members of my family were all brilliant, talented, successful people. If I was chosen to be in the first batch, it was very likely that some of them were chosen for the full production set. I had to keep quiet about it, though. I didn't want Phaeros to realize how conflicted I was.

"Is it true?" He said, taking me firmly by the forearms and nearly shaking me. "Are you really against them? Are you really with me?"

"I am!" I shouted.

"Then empty yourself of these foolish notions. If we get inside of there, and find a way to destroy this colony, even if means murdering every living thing inside, we do it; do you understand me?"

I nodded, realizing I had no choice. "Do you have any idea how long we have?"

"Minutes? Days? Years? Have all ten of the delegates been sent to the world?"

"Yes, the Delegate chamber was empty when I looked."

"For how long; do you know for how long?"

"Nearly a year, not enough time for any of them to truly come to power."

He said gravely, "The Rivata are patient, but they lack good judgment. They may be unified, but they have never learned how to not operate as something other than five minds. They conflict at times, contradict, and act in ways that are illogical or nonsensical. Thus, we have no way to predict when

they will deploy the colony."

"All true," I simply said, equally grave. "Now, how, do we get inside; and once inside, how, do we avoid them finding us and doing away with us in a most disagreeable fashion?"

"I have no idea what could be inside though, guarding it."

"Very well, let's search for a way in." I cast my eyes back onto the menacing form. Somewhere inside could be people who would do great things for The Cause, if we could only find a way to awaken them and bring them home with us. My family might be inside. Daelus's family; even though I would have no way of knowing them. I wasn't ready to accept simply murdering them all. There had to be a middle ground, but for now, I had to show unity with Phaeros. I knew he wouldn't hesitate to try to get rid of me if he felt that I was putting our ultimate goal at risk.

— Jyre: A Familiar Place —

Day 8: 3:00 am

I sat in the cage, staring out at the corpse which hung upside down from a chain beside me. It was Ranson. It swung back and forth, dripping blood all over the ground; his dangling fingers left trails in their wake. My mind fled from the horrible sight, but the thing it had fled to was even worse: Daelus. He was in danger, and I had abandoned him. I should have gone after him, but I was too afraid, too cowardly, so I just did as I was told and told myself that it wouldn't be my fault. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The stink of blood filled my nostrils. For a second I imagined it was Daelus, not Ranson, who swung from the beam.

Unable to escape it anymore, I found myself staring into Ranson's bloodied, upside down face. Suddenly I heard The Lady's voice, telling them to begin. A dozen creatures with long curved knives were upon him. They had started at his feet. Carefully paring the flesh and stripping it back from the muscle underneath, exposing raw nerves and tissue to the air. Sick fascination kept me watching despite my revulsion. They peeled his skin off like pieces of clothing, taking great care not to let it rip or tear. Suddenly it seemed as if he was alive again, but his thrashing and screams only lasted only a few seconds. But, still, I could see the life in his eyes. I could see the agony.

Even as they cut and peeled his muscles from his bones, his eyes grew stronger. I could see the accusation in them. "Your fault," they seemed to say. "If you hadn't been so useless, so foolish..."

I shook my head in denial. "I never meant...didn't think."

Then, he really did speak, shouting, "Do you ever think?" Blood dribbled down his chin into his twisting mouth, but it was no longer Ranson's mouth; it was Els. The pain in his voice was unbearable, as knowing that I was helpless to stop the butchering was. "It's always Jyre; Jyre, Jyre with you, isn't it?" Els's back arched as the knife bit into it. "Do you ever think of anyone else but yourself?" His whole body convulsed in agony as they tore the skin from his back. He lifted an accusing finger and pointed at me, his lips forming the word

“traitor”. Finally, his arm went limp, and his eyes slowly glazed over. The last drop of life left him.

Guilt surged through me. I wanted to scream. This was my fault! Els was dead and it was all my fault!

I heard laughter. Swallowing hard, I looked up. “Now you see, young one,” The Lady said as she stepped between me and the corpse, “what it is that awaits you?” She moved back a step and gave Els’s body a push. He swung forward, his face slamming into the cage. I jerked away as his still warm blood splattered over me. I could feel it running down my face but my hands were shackled to the cage and I had no way to wipe it away.

The Lady bent down to look me in the eye. Her skin was smooth, and unblemished. Her hair cascaded around her face in black waves. Her eyes were like distant stars, bright, yet impossibly cold in the darkest of night. She smiled, and lifted a finger to wipe a drop of blood from my cheek.

Kill me, I thought. Just slit my throat—now, end it! I would welcome that. No more pain, no more misery, and no more hurting the people I loved. Daelus; he would be better off without me. They all would.

She did not. I was alone. That was all I had left now; waiting. I wanted it over: finished; me gone; The Lady gone.

I stared at the wall. The stone fascinated me. I could see the tiny little grains that went into making it. I could almost feel the texture of the stone beneath my fingertips; rough, flaking, tiny grains breaking off at my touch. I traced the pattern of the contours in my mind, imagining myself an explorer mapping it, noting the peaks that formed the mountains and the tiny crevices that became huge valleys.

That’s when I saw him, up ahead, far up ahead, at the end of the valley; Daelus. It was not my imagination, nor an illusion. I felt myself frozen, staring at him from across the great distance, a distance that seemed to grow larger with every passing instant.

I was pushed from behind. “What do you see, girl?” shrieked The Lady’s voice from behind. I fell to my knees, but my eyes were still fixed on his face. Sweat broke out all over my body. Dread filled my heart. If I could see him, then so could she!

My legs had been claimed by the earth beneath me, swallowing me up to the knees. She launched over me, sailing overhead like a great bird, and then snatched him up in her talons like he was a field mouse. I screamed his name over and over, but it was no use. She flew, with Daelus in her grasp, over the mountains and the valleys, and though they were now impossibly distant, I could still see them clearly. He wasn’t fighting back; he was powerless against her. She had him now. I continued to scream and pull, but I was sinking deeper and deeper. The valley I had been in was now a deep crevice, with the mountains on either side moving in closer to swallow me up. Daelus and The Lady were just a speck in the distance as the gap closed, imprisoning me in darkness. I tried to scream louder, but now earth filled my mouth, drowning me in the dirt...

"...Jyre!"

I opened my eyes, but not to darkness, nor light...just nothing. I turned my head quickly, and saw Heppet's face looking down on me. I frowned.

"Wake up, sleepy head," he said, giving my shoulder a nudge. "And look at this."

I rubbed my eyes, and before I could look noticed the loud grumble from my stomach. "Do we still have any food?" I asked, thinking I knew the answer, but hoping that Heppet hadn't eaten it all after I dozed off.

"Yeah, but, come on...look!"

I looked, and at first didn't know what I was seeing. When my eyes focused, getting once again used to seeing things in the empty haze, I realized it looked like a floating castle. There was a wide wall, big enough to wrap around a small village, and then a series of great halls with towers jutting up at the corners. It only took me a second more to recall walking those halls, and up and down the winding stairs of those towers. "Barlosk," I just said, surprised at the fear in my own voice.

"What?" Heppet asked, though I knew he could hear me.

"What is *that* doing *here*?" I suddenly shouted.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Heppet said, almost as loud.

"It's her home!" I shouted back, into his face "The Lady! That's *her* castle!"

"Well what it is doing here?" he asked.

"What's what I want to know!" I continued to shout, wondering why he just asked the same question I had.

"Well it's no good yelling about it!" he screamed, topping my volume by a long shot. I was amazed there was no echo.

"Shh!" I hissed, scowling at him. "She'll hear you!"

"There's nobody here but us, Jyre," he said, once again in his normal tone.

"I don't believe it," I said, looking at the castle in the distance that was growing larger every second. In just another moment, we would be there, with the cable the boat was on heading directly for one of the towers. "Somehow, I don't know how, she will be there. Even when she was gone, she was always there...I could always feel her there, somewhere."

"Well, if she's there, we're in luck. We outnumber her," he said with a grin.

I couldn't share in his joke. With eyes locked onto those dreadful towers, I felt a lump of ice forming in my throat. Suddenly, the dream, a dream I had so quickly forgotten, rushed back into my mind, only instead of Ranson or Els hanging there to be flayed, it was Heppet. "We have to go back," I said. "This boat will dock and then we just send it right back."

"Aren't you at all curious?" he said. "Don't you want to rummage through the place with not a soul there to stop you? Don't you want to know what we could find there?"

"No," I said, crossing my arms tightly.

"And if we could have discovered the secret to stopping all of her evil plans? What then? Do you want to have run away from that?"

I didn't say anything.

"Well, maybe I don't have as much reason to fear her as you do, but I think I have plenty of reason, and I am not afraid. It wasn't a coincidence that we came this way, Jyre. I think this is our destiny."

"A stupid word," I just said "doesn't mean anything."

"Which one: coincidence or destiny?"

"Both," I barked, crossing my arms tighter.

"Don't you ever get tired of running away, Jyre?"

He knew just what to say to set me off. I scowled at him, kicked him in the shin, and...went nowhere. I had nowhere to run.

"Ow, dammit, Jyre!" she said, nursing his leg. "What was that for?"

"Sorry," I just squeaked.

"Here's a plan; if we run into The Lady, just do that to her. Taff it, that hurts."

I looked back in the direction of Dereloth. Running away had gotten me into this boat, heading right towards the place I swore I'd never return to. What now, run again? Run back and forth until my feet were worn off? I wasn't tired of running away. I didn't think I would ever get tired, but it looked like, right now, I couldn't. "Okay," I just said. "We'll...see what we can find."

"I hate it when I win an argument and I have no idea how," he said, still nursing his leg. "What made you change your mind?"

"I didn't," I said, not looking at him anymore, but looking at Barlosk, the tower now just seconds away. "I don't want to talk about it. Let's just go...we'll look. But when we don't find anything we go back, right?"

The boat was slowing down, gliding into its dock at the top of the tower gracefully, like it really was in water and not hanging from a cable. A moment later it stopped its gentle swaying and became as firm as solid stone. Heppet quickly jumped onto the wooden platform that came up level to the edge of the boat. He turned back to look at me, offering his hand.

I didn't take it. Instead, I just jumped out, like he did. He pulled his hand back, looking foolish.

"Guess this is the only way down," he said, stating the obvious about a door I could see just as well as he could. I was sure it would be locked. Then, amazingly, when he yanked on the handle, it glided smoothly open, far easily than any of the doors opening that I remembered. "Okay, you know this place...you lead the way."

I pushed past him, entering the narrow hall that opened into a spiral stair to the floors below. The torches were out, but it didn't matter, light didn't mean much here.

In silence we climbed down the spiral stair. It was so steep that I had to hold onto the bricks to either side of me with both hands and tuck my chin against my chest to look down below me, reaching my foot with gingerly to feel for the next step. I always hated going down these stairs. I couldn't imagine how the big men with all of their armor just rushed up and down them without ever falling. I didn't know how Heppet was doing, but I didn't want to look over my shoulder to find out.

We were on the top floor now. The halls looked like I remembered, but none of the details did. It could have just been the light making things strange, but I felt like I didn't actually know this place. "Where to first?" Heppet asked. "Where would you most like to go without getting caught?"

"Her room," I said without thinking.

"Lead the way," he said.

I led him down the familiar hall, haunted by the memories of walking up and down it so long ago, thinking over and over how impossible it was that this place was *here*, and that I was in it. As we approached the door to The Lady's chambers, my hands felt like ice. What if she was inside? What if she came to this place in those long hours when she would vanish without a trace? I could imagine it now, opening the door, pushing it aside to reveal her standing there, her gown flowing across the floor, eyes staring out at me from beneath raven-black hair, and that smile, the haunting smile. I felt the wood of the door before me, and hesitated, but then Heppet just pushed it right open and stepped inside. I reached out to grab him, to tell him to stop, that she will see him, but he slipped away, and we both found ourselves staring into an empty room.

The bed was there, like I remembered it, and some of the furniture, but little else. The carpet was different. The banners were missing. Her paintings were, of course, not on the walls. Heppet let out of brief "Hmm," as he looked around, obviously not impressed. I walked in slow circles around the room, taking everything in. I went to the bed, and felt its softness, sweeping my hands up and down the linens. I went to the dresser, and pulled a drawer open. It was filled with clothes, but not her clothes. They were whatever whoever lived here before had worn. I dug around inside, looking for anything interesting, but it was just clothes.

I went to the row of windows which overlooked the courtyard, but the glass was fogged and offered no view. I glanced back and forth across the room, and then shrugged. "I just wanted to see it," I said. "I didn't think there'd be anything in here."

"You just wanted to jump on her bed, right?" he said with a grin. I shoved his arm and walked out.

Heppet chased after me, but by the time he caught up, I was standing on a narrow balcony overlooking the inner courtyard. It had no ground at all, which made sense, since I remembered the inner courtyard was just dirt. The outer courtyard was filled with the buildings of the small town which Barlosk reigned over, but I didn't want to go out there. I wanted to leave.

Still, I could remember sometimes coming to this very spot, when I knew that I wouldn't be missed, and staring out into the vast wilderness. I didn't know why I picked this spot, in this direction, but I felt that my village was out there, somewhere. Maybe when it vanished, The Lady sent it here. Maybe it was out somewhere in that vast nothing, in this strange no-place. I felt Heppet close beside me, silently looking out the same way I did. He missed his home too. Gently I leaned against him, letting my head touch his shoulder. I felt his arm go around my back, fingers lightly touching my

shoulder. I sighed.

Suddenly the building shook. I nearly fell off the ledge, but Heppet caught me. Then the building shook again, more violently, as if the entire place was coming apart. There was a violent jerk, which made me scream, and then blackness.

No, not blackness—things were just dark all of a sudden. Not just dark: real. There were stars in the sky. The courtyard was illuminated by torches which cast long shadows across the dirt of the ground. There were shouts—yelling. I blinked, and saw arrows flying through the air across the courtyard. There were men on one side, shooting arrows at some men on another, who were shooting back, and still more on the walls in the towers, shooting at both groups. I could feel Heppet's grip on me tighten, as he called out, "What the hell?"

I was frozen, glancing back and forth at the groups who were filling the air with arrows. I should have run for cover, but I found myself transfixed. Then I saw him. A face in the group to the left side, the smaller group, caught some of the moonlight. "Els!" I shouted out, and he quickly jerked his head up to look at me, eyes filled with surprise.

"Jyre!" I heard call back, but not from Els. My own eyes filled with surprise, I quickly looked to the group on the right, the larger group, and saw another familiar, and yet horribly unfamiliar, face in the moonlight: Ranson.

"They've seen us!" Heppet said. "Jyre, we need to hide, this way, hurry!" But I ignored him. I saw Els running, leaving his group behind, exposing himself to danger, as he charged from cover in the direction I knew would lead him upstairs to this hall. I glanced and saw Ranson doing the same, coming from the other direction. I pulled away from Heppet, running the way I knew would get me to Els.

I dashed down the hall, running through a doorway, taking a hard right before nearly leaping down a stair. I was face to face with Els as he turned a corner, eyes aglow with hope, shouting, "Jyre!"

I couldn't even call out, "Watch out!" before a big thing came out of the opposite door and swing its sword at him, sending an arc of blood flying across the stone wall as the blade cut deep right below the ribs. Els spun around, his sword in his hand, blocking the next two blows.

I raised my bow with arrow nocked and took aim, but the arrow that pierced the beast's head was not my own. As it fell, I saw clearly who had come to our aid: Ranson. "Long time no see, my little sweet," he said, running past Els, arm reaching forward as if to grab me.

I began to back away, my hands trembling as I raised my arrow once again to take aim. "Stay away from me!" I shouted my voice rife with fear.

He raised his hands slowly, a hurt look falling across his barely human face with oversized eyes with huge orange irises that only showed a hint of white at the corners, a long, thin, pointy nose and protruding jaw.

"Stop or I'll...!" I couldn't finish my sentence. Els had lunged at him, tackling him, both of them slamming against the wall with a crack. Then they were both on the floor, and I felt a stabbing pain in my back. I screamed at

the sudden shock and agony, and was then pushed forward, the floor filling my view, before I felt big hands with sharp, piercing claws take me and pull me up. Then I could see that Els and Ranson were also surrounded, with men and beasts carrying swords, kicking and grabbing them, pulling them to their feet with shouts and roars, pushing them to move. They took Els's sword and broke Ranson's bow, and from the crack I heard behind me, I knew that they had broken my bow as well; my precious bow that had been a gift from my dear friend, Tanya, the only link to my home I had left.

We were led down another set of stairs, and then it all came back to me: that fight with Els, being pulled off of him, led down these very same stairs, and thrown into a cell, just like what was happening now. They tossed Ranson in first, who stumbled and landed against the far wall with a crack. Next Els was put in, who simply collapsed onto the floor with blood gushing out of his side. Finally they threw me in, and I nearly slipped in Els's blood, before hitting the back wall like Ranson had done.

I spun around as the cell door was locked, and then pressed myself back against the wall as I saw the gaping maw and white fangs of a massive beast let out an ear-splitting roar. Several of the other creatures, one of which still resembled humans, chuckled to themselves as they left the dungeon behind, the furry beast waiting a moment longer, issuing a constant low growl, before leaving with them. It was only then that I was able to feel around on my back, my clothing already soaked with my blood from where the bug-like beast had stabbed me.

"I've missed you, you know," Ranson said. I ignored him, not even looking, as I rushed to Els, lifting his head up off the ground and getting him to sit upright, propping him against some boulders. The cell was almost like a cave, with a low ceiling and a tall iron fence with a gate keeping us in.

"Els, wake up, wake up," I said, holding his head up, shaking him gently.

He opened his eyes, "Jyre," he whispered. "What the hell are you doing here?"

I frowned, letting go of him and stepping away, though I kept my back to Ranson. "Is that how you say hello to me? Aren't you even happy to see me? I was so happy to see that you were alive, but now I am not so sure!"

I could hear Ranson laughing, and it made me cringe. I didn't want him to see us like this. He was the enemy, not Els.

"Jyre, I *am* happy to see you. I just wish it hadn't been here, in this *hellish* place." His voice was weak, shaky. I looked down at the wound on his side, and saw that it was much worse than I had imagined. It was far worse than my own. I knew that no major organs had been hit, but if he didn't get stitched up, he would bleed to death in a matter of minutes.

I pressed myself to the iron fence, shouting, "Guards! If he doesn't get a doctor he'll die!" There was nothing, not even a call for me to shut up.

"You know, Jyre," Ranson said as he lounged in the corner where the ceiling was lowest. "I was angry at first, when you chose him over me, but I got over that."

"I didn't choose him over you," I hissed, turning to face him finally. "There

was no choice to make. He was a man and you were just a...cockroach!" I spit on the floor, and stomped on where I spat, like I was grinding his little body into the dust.

He just laughed again. "To tell you the truth, when I first found you in The City I was shocked as hell. You see, I never expected to see your precious little face again, but there you were, same old Jyre. You ain't changed a bit."

"You've changed," I said, hoping to hit a nerve. "You've changed a lot. You were always ugly, but now you look like some kind of a rat person. I guess it suits you, doesn't it? Makes you more like you really are!"

Instead, he just laughed again. "So which is it? Am I a roach or a rat?"

I didn't answer. I just turned my back to him, and called out again. "He's bleeding to death! Someone send help!" Nothing...

"So, why'd you go with him, Jyre? Why'd you pick that filthy traitor over me?"

"It's not like I had a choice! One day I was in that cage and the next I was with him in his boat!"

"Ah, right, I remember now," he said, continuing to chuckle. "How romantic, a little boat ride for two down the river."

"Just shut up, you little worm," Els managed, though his voice was little more than a whisper.

"Oh, so a worm now, too; I am making quite a collection. But you're forgetting something, Els asked you a question. Why the devil, *are* you even here, little girl? Twice you escape from me, only fall right back into my hands. You must like it there more than you realize."

I watched the exit to the room, seeing the flicker of torchlight beyond, thinking at any moment that I would see Heppet come around the bend, here to rescue us. I had run from him too quickly though, I knew. By the second turn I had lost him; he would have no idea where I was now. He was on his own, and maybe dead.

"Answer me, dammit!" Ranson yelled, suddenly sounding like that roaring beast who threw me in here.

"I don't know," I just whispered, pressing my forehead against the bars.

"No, of course you don't. You never do anything because you thought about it. You just do. Just like when you went to The City with this old man. You didn't think it over then either, did you? Just went with him, like you just went with me before."

"He rescued me!" I hissed, twisting around so that he could see the fury in my eyes.

"Oh," Ranson said, looking taken back. "He rescued you. Els, is that what you told her? That you rescued her?"

"No," he said, "I never told her that."

I turned around completely, so that I could see them both. "He rescued me! You rescued me from her, Els! Don't you remember?"

"Oh, I am sure he remembers. The problem is; you don't. Did he ever tell you the story, hmm? Els, did you ever tell her the story of her so-called rescue?"

"No," I said finally. "I never asked. He never told me."

"Ah, well isn't that something. How did you wind up in The City with him, anyway? I am as curious as you are, Jyre. Go on Els, why don't you come clean?" he said with a wicked chuckle.

Els said nothing. Every second he remained silent twisted another knot in my stomach. "Els," I uttered, "tell him the truth. Tell him how you rescued me from The Lady."

"Jyre," Els finally said, his voice sounding so weak, so fragile. "I..."

"Come on, you lying, traitorous whelp. Tell her the truth. Tell her how she's no different from anyone else you've ever lied to."

I didn't care anymore what Ranson said. "Els," I just said again, "what have you lied to me about?"

He let out a long sigh, and with his eyes turned from me, said, "I never rescued you, Jyre."

"But," I said quickly, "I was out of that cage. I was free, and with you. You took me away from her. You had to have rescued me!"

"Jyre," he said, his voice gaining strength. "No, I didn't rescue you."

I couldn't speak; I felt like I was choking on my heart. I just stared at him, my vision blurring with tears as I listened.

"The Lady set you free, and charged me with taking you home to your village. Once I saw you safely there, I was supposed to return to her and resume my duties. But I disobeyed her, and betrayed you. Instead, I decided to make a run for it while I was out of her sight. I couldn't just abandon you in the woods, so I brought you with me. I took you to *my* home, Jyre, to The City, not your home like I was charged. Ranson is right. I'm a traitor."

I couldn't believe my ears. All this time, I could have been home back in my village, but it was Els's selfishness which doomed me to this miserable life. I searched my mind for some way out of this, some proof that Els hadn't really betrayed me, that he had some excuse. Finally I said, "But you did take me to find my village eventually, and it was gone...destroyed by The Lady!"

"We have no idea what happened to your village, Jyre. I put that idea in your head, that it was The Lady's doing, because...because I needed..." he paused for a long time, and then swallowed hard. "Because I needed you to feel the same anger I felt, the same hatred. I wanted to take my revenge on The Lady so badly, and you were my only companion. I knew I couldn't do it unless you also felt that same rage, and hatred, and desire to make her suffer for what she had done to you. So...you see; it was all lies. All of it."

Ranson was laughing; his head tilted back, mouth gaping open. "Feels good, doesn't it? To come clean? Too bad now Jyre now knows her only friend in the world is a filthy, selfish backstabber. So, once again, Els comes out on top, and Jyre gets the raw deal. Get used to it, kid. That's the way life works."

I coughed, choking back tears, which somehow streamed down my cheeks anyway. "I thought you cared about me."

His voice sounded so faint now, so weak, as he replied. "Jyre, I do. I always did."

I didn't listen. "You don't. Just like my dad. He'd never really cared about me either. Why else would he have left us that morning without a word, knowing my mum was sick? What other reason could there have been for him to walk off to work that day acting as though everything was fine and never come back?"

"I'm sorry," he said even more faintly. I watched as his blood pooled around my feet, the color slowly draining from his face, his eyes losing focus.

"Do I even know what it was, that she did to you? Was that a lie too? Did you ever even tell me? I am not sure I can remember!" I shouted, growing more and more bitter with every word.

"Oh, you want to know why he hates her so much." Ranson said, suddenly not laughing anymore, but seething. "The same reason I do! Take a good look at me, or what's left of me! She turned me into a monster! And he was next! The only difference is that he cut and ran, while I stayed and tried to fight back! He was a coward, while I put everything on the line to put an end to her wicked plans!"

"No," Els breathed faintly. "You were *always* a monster."

The words of Ranson's comeback were drowned out, a million miles away, by a sight which held me transfixed in horror. A tall figure glided out of the darkness, skin shining white in the dim light, lids lifting up to reveal eyes like sparkling crystals. White hair flowed freely over her bare shoulders, which came forth from her gown like petals from the green of the stem; The Lady, more beautiful and more terrible than I had remembered. The men saw her too, Ranson soon hushed to silence by her mere presence.

"You poor, petty, foolish men," she said musically. "See how you bicker like imbeciles over this simple girl, and rage like squealing hogs over a Goddess. Tell me, foolish ones, why so much of what you do revolves around the actions of two females whom you both treat with such contempt?"

Neither said a word, and I found myself unable to do the same, nor even look at her. I felt myself shrinking, wanting to fall into a crack between the stones beneath me. I had imagined hundreds of times what it would be like to be face to face with The Lady once again and none of them were even remotely like this.

"You, Ranson, tell me, who is this child?"

"She is no one, My Lady," he groveled, his voice shaking with fear.

"Do not lie to me," she hissed, lips curling up to reveal dozens of thin, pointed teeth.

His eyes darted to me, as if seeking out some answer, before they flicked back to The Lady with his reply. "It is Jyre, my lady. She is the girl I brought to serve you those many years ago, whom you sent away with Els so that she may return home," he replied, sounding so pathetic I almost felt sorry for him.

She suddenly turned those icy eyes to me, her lips parted slightly in an expression of curiosity. "You mean the one you took to serve yourself, whom I then set free. I am not accustomed to my gifts being rejected, so please, tell me, why have you returned, young one?"

What could I say to her? That it was an accident? That James had brought

me to the strange city and I had stumbled across Barlosk completely by chance? Before I could think any farther, I found myself giving the same answer I had given to Ranson when he had asked the same question. "I do not know."

Her lips closed, and her eyes narrowed. I could hear her give a faint sigh of frustration. "No, I imagine you do not. I will have to deal with you later." At that, she turned to leave.

"Wait!" I called out, letting the sobs be clearly heard in my voice. "Els is dying, he's bleeding to death! You have to save him!"

"No," she said, turning her head so that I could see it in profile. "He disobeyed me, he deserted his men, and he betrayed you. I think it's time for all of this treachery and deceit to end. Goodbye, Els, Ranson, and to you, Jyre."

She left. I couldn't take my eyes off of her until she was out of sight. I turned to Els, wanting to know how to feel, wanting to see rage in his eyes, or sorrow, or fear, or hatred, but I saw nothing. His eyes were blank. Fear gripping me, I crawled over to him, taking his head in my hands, his stubble pricking the torn skin of my palms, and felt that he was still breathing. "Els," I whispered. "What do we do? Els?"

He said nothing. He couldn't even see me.

"Els, I forgive you," I cried, "I don't care about any of it. I don't care. You never did anything to hurt me, not really. You were just scared, and selfish, just like I always am every day of my life. Els please don't die. Please..."

It was getting harder and harder to feel his breath. With a block of ice in my stomach, I wrapped my arms around his heavy body, clinging to him, pressing my face against his neck, whispering over and over my plea for him not to die.

"I know you're scared," Ranson said after a long silence. I said nothing. "But what are you scared of?"

Still, I said nothing.

"Are you scared of being alone?"

"No," I said.

"Then why are you so afraid of him dying?"

I didn't reply. I couldn't.

"Are you afraid of where his soul will go? If he'll burn in The Builder's hell, or in a hell made for those who defy the pagan gods?"

"Shut up," I whispered, but too quietly for him to hear.

"Aren't you afraid of finding out, Jyre? Of knowing which it is?—of dying yourself?"

I offered him silence.

"I am. I'm terrified of death. That ever chattering thing in your ear; that talks and talks; that never quiets and never stops? It talks so much, but in your youth you ignore it, the strength of your voice can shout over it, and abhor it. But when you age, *oh how you age*, the whispers become so loud, so shrill; that your sagging, ugly, *old* body cannot even utter a sob as death closes in for the kill. Pretty words, aren't they? The Lady told them to me, long ago."

I lifted my face from Els' neck, and stared at Ranson. His eyes glistened in

the dim light, almost like The Lady's had.

"It's too late for him, Jyre. If he were a young man still, he would be strong, those wounds no match for him. But he's not. He's old, and weak, and he can't hold out for much longer. Soon, you're going to need to let go."

His words just made me cling tighter. I looked away, wanting to shut him out.

"His revenge may have been his own, Jyre, but now you have something else. Now you can *avenge* him. She could have helped him, but she chose to do nothing. He'll die because of her. Now it's up to you to kill her in Els's name."

"I don't want to kill anyone," I whispered against Els's skin.

"You will. When you feel the last drops of his life drain away, and his body go limp, you will. You'll want nothing but to make her feel the same. You'll want her to fear death, just as you now fear for Els's."

As much as I wanted to yell for him to shut up, I knew what he was saying was truth.

"I can help you, Jyre. We can help each other. Els's death doesn't have to be in vain. We can still meet back up with the others, join forces, and together we can put a knife in her throat and wipe Barlosk from the face of The World."

I heard every word he said, and in a way, it all sank in, but I wasn't listening. I was listening to Els's heartbeat grow slower, and slower, and weaker, as his blood trickled slowly farther and farther across the floor. "Els," I whispered. "I forgive you. I forgive you." I chanted it over and over into his ear and listened, begging him to say something in reply; anything to let me know that he was going to die at peace.

Then I heard it, so soft it could only have been breath between his lips. "Thank you," he said, and then the heartbeats faded. I counted the seconds, begging another beat to come, but there was nothing. All was silent, all was still.

He was gone. Just like mum. I didn't cry any more tears. I didn't sob and beg for him to come back to life. That hadn't worked for her, and it wouldn't work now. I lifted my face from him; gently pushed his eyelids closed. I sat, my back to Ranson, running my fingers through his graying hair, feeling the cold knot in my stomach subside. It was over.

"Jyre," Ranson finally said, after a long silence. "Are you going to help me, or not? You don't have to wind up like Els too."

I felt a hot surge of anger deep inside, but kept it there. Ranson was my only hope now. Slowly I turned to look at him, as he lounged casually in the corner, eyeing me steadily with a blank expression. I nodded.

— Nightfall: The Choice —

Day 8: 3:00 am

I found myself unable to sleep. I had not bothered to change clothes or even undress before I got into the bed, expecting to pass out as soon as my body came into contact with it. Instead, I was restless. Hours passed as I lay

motionless, yet sleepless. Soon, I could not fathom why I had ever considered sleeping at all. I wanted the circlet back, but I could not understand why I desired it so much. It had to be some lingering residual effect of the Rivata magic. On the other hand, I didn't trust her to possess such a thing, unsure of what danger it could cause.

I got out of the bed. My boots were back on my feet, casting rod and sword back on my belt, and hat, tattered remains of it anyway, was back on my head. I looked at the medallion that Delphine had left for me and saw that it had two gems set into it, a red and a blue, with an empty socket for a third gem. Each gem had a wreath delicately carved around it. The red gem was encircled by bones; the blue one, with what seemed to be the limbs of insects. The third was surrounded by gears and nails. I put the medallion around my neck.

I stepped out of the chamber, which had no door, finding myself back in the main corridor which offered glimpses of the highly trafficked aerial avenue overhead. Flighted creatures were less frequent now, but still common, though none ever seemed to be paying the slightest attention to what was occurring below. I ventured onwards; opposite the direction she had led me, into the unknown. The corridor dipped and curved around as I went, separating itself from the large overhead area, and joining with smaller, more intimate spaces resembling something of an underground village, where various men, woman, and beasts seemed to come and go about their business, usually ignoring me, sometimes making a concerted effort to appear as if they were ignoring me, sometimes glancing, seeing the medallion, and then quickly looking away, and occasionally whispering to one another.

I crossed through a threshold and found myself out in a large open chamber with the smell of sulfur tickling my nose. The village spilled out into this massive cavern, with huts replacing the natural cave chambers. I noticed places where food was grown and harvested, some beings who spun thread from silk and moss, and many, many merchants selling their wares, most of which resembled no more than arts and crafts, but a few here and there offering tools and commodities. It was not unlike the market of The City, only underground, lit by fungus and crystal, and populated by a startling array of creatures, most of whom resembled hybrids of human and animal, though plenty still seemed fully human.

As I passed by a doorway leading into what resembled an ordinary tavern, or as ordinary as a tavern could be with long tails hanging over the backs of many of the stools, I was certain I caught the word "delegate" come from an unfamiliar voice. Thinking someone had seen me and was simply reporting an observation, I kept walking, but found that my ears were following the conversation and it was not at all what I had first assumed.

"Did you hear what she was saying to the one she called delegate?" It was a female voice, very human, but definitely not Delphine.

"You were spying on the goddess?" The one who replied had a deep, growling voice, with strange clicks every time it changed syllables.

"No, Cicada, not spying; standing ready to protect her should the intruder

wish her harm!"

They were not speaking loudly, but seemed to be sitting right against the wall of the structure, which was little more than a stretched hide. I walked over to one of the artist's tables, inspecting a series of wood carvings freely while the merchant, an ape-like creature, snored loudly. I could still hear them well enough, and hoped it didn't appear as if I had stopped to listen in.

"Vivia, you not able of harming any foe, which ever dream of harming her!"

"I will ignore this argument. I heard her speak a strange word, many times.—Rivata. Have you ever heard her speak this word before?"

"No."

"Nor have I. She made it sound as if this thing, Rivata, was at the core of her plans the entire time and yet if this is so, with you and I such trusted members of her inner circle, why never we heard of this word so far until now as she says it to him?"

"Don't like this. Has she kept it from us, or is she making stories for him?"

"I don't know. He seemed to know exactly what she means by this word, so it not made up, not made up at all."

"I no care about this. No care. Trust her with my all. I do care why you so now all weavers and like." The creature spit. "Find them a new mother? What?"

"Oh hush, you jealous old bug. Don't you know this is how it will be now? Used to be only fae here, now look at us all! We can't call the jacknalls and the mongbats brothers without also opening our arms to the weavers. This is the new way of things!"

I couldn't linger. I had already inspected everything on the table twice, and some were starting to get uncomfortable with me around. I continued on my way, digesting what I had heard. I made a big circle around the market, before going back the way I had come. I passed by my chamber, thinking it would be wise to act as if I had never ventured out at all, but felt compelled to explore further.

I chose my path, electing to only make left turns, and to make every left turn I came to, so that I had merely to follow the wall back the way I came. In this direction the path sloped upwards, and again separated from the overhead avenue. The scent of rotting meat hit me as I passed a wide corridor. Driven by curiosity, I went, with my hand over my nose. The corridor shrank in size quickly as I approached the end, until I came to an opening no larger than a typical doorway.

Inside I was assaulted by strange odors and noxious vapors. There were many tables covered in glass containers of every shape, size, and color, most of which were filled with liquid or some other matter. I saw every type of alchemical device I could identify and many that I could not. Among it all was the table where the assemblage lay breathing steadily, the reconstructed spider's heart beating in its chest. As I approached it I could see clearly now that it was intended to be female, but though its shape was humanoid and form indicated femininity, nothing about its details suggested that it was

attempting to be a literal representation of humanity. My eyes followed the various tubes which were connected to it, across the floor to a grove of trees with branches that pushed against the rocky ceiling. Most of the trees bore large purple fruit with the branches bending under their weight, but some had smaller, lighter, yellow covered ones. A few trees were adorned with fruit that seemed to be a hybrid between the two.

Then I turned around to look back at the assemblage on the table I instead noticed something else at the far side of the room. A man was tied with his arms and legs wide to a rack which stood upright, with vines wrapped tightly around him. As I walked quickly to him, I realized first that he was a Hammerite, and then, to my disbelief, that it was Brother Chispin, and finally, to my shock, that he was still alive. He was whispering faintly to himself, his lips barely moving, but I could see that it was the same words over and over. He was praying to The Builder for strength and courage. I stood before him, looking at the way the vines attached themselves to him, seeking out his wounds and feeding from his blood, with one big clump of them wrapped around his wrist; it was a missing hand. They had tortured him for information no doubt, and the vines most likely had something to do with that.

I was conflicted; I had a great desire to see him cut free and escorted to safety, even though this man would have me struck dead at the slightest provocation. Do to so would be to risk everything; I had been fortuitous with the way Delphine had decided to treat me, and I did not want to jeopardize the advantage that gave. Setting Chispin free would mean an end to that, and likely, have me put into the same place as he. Then there was the matter of the offer, which I, in spite of many attempts to convince myself I was rejecting, still clung to as a possibility. I felt that I should turn around and leave at once, allow Chispin to have whatever fate he chose for himself by breaking off from the group on his mad quest for blood. I also felt that I had already too much Hammerite blood on my hands, the dozens of men who died on the expedition, and worst of all, Brother Ivan, who I willingly sacrificed for my own gain.

My mind was set. I could not atone for these wrongful deeds, but I could proceed with a correct deed in the here and now. With my sword drawn I began to carefully cut the vines away from him, and as he began to slip free of their support, put my shoulders under him as I continued to cut, that I might lower him gently as his bonds were undone. Bit by bit, his blood flowing over my cloak, I lowered him to the floor, turning him over so that his back rested against the stone.

"Brother Chispin," I whispered to him, patting him on the cheek. "It's Thresh. I'm getting you out of here."

"Who?" he said faintly, his eyes flickering open for a moment. "How didst thou...find me?"

"Can you stand?" I asked, glancing around nervously to see if there was any sign that I had company. All was silent, all was still; as far as I could tell; we were alone.

"I believe that I can," he said. Then he began to strain to push himself up off the floor. With all my strength, I worked to guide his massive body to sit up, and then raised him higher into a stand, supporting him with one arm around his back.

"Who art thou?" he said, obviously still delirious.

"It is Brother Daelus. Do you remember the expedition to the villa? The battles we fought? You were captured. I set out with the others, Brothers Thurm and Ivan, but all either were forced to retreat or were slain. I am the only one to make it this far, but now I am going to get you home."

"Daelus," he whispered, his eyes coming to focus on me. "I thought thou wast a traitor," he mumbled.

"Can you walk, brother? Come, this way. It will be difficult to escape, and I am not certain of the way."

He seemed to gain strength, lifting up slightly so that I needed to support him less, and raising his head a little higher. He didn't look at me, but his jaw took on a more familiar shape; stiff and resolute. "I do remember the way they brought me. I was blindfolded, but I could feel every footfall, every turn. That is the direction we must go," he said, lifting his arm to point.

At once I knew what he meant, and felt it impossible. To go that way, we would have to travel through the village, and beyond. "I fear we cannot go that way, Brother. There must be another means to escape."

"Thou art lucky that I am too weak to scold thee for cowardice," he said. I looked at him in disbelief, but then could not help but smile. To my surprise, he smiled back.

"Please wait here. I must scout out ahead for a clear path," I told him.

I quickly went back the way I came, and found an outcropping from which I could observe the entire village. From my vantage point, I saw that a few hundred feet beyond the far edge of the village, a tunnel vanished into an unnatural darkness. That was very likely to be the way out. I scanned the walls, and discovered that to one side was a series of hollows inside which strange plants were grown. The back of these hollows was very dark, and there did not seem to be anyone tending to the crops. The hollows wrapped around the edge of the village, ending very near that final corridor. I went back to Chispin, finding him supporting himself with one hand against a wall, but altogether looking much stronger than before. "I have a way, but first," I took off my cloak and wrapped it around his shoulders, hiding the bright red of his uniform. "Now, stay close to me, and don't glance around, keep your eyes on me at all times and one hand against my back."

I went forward. By now Chispin was able to walk under his own power, though he was slow, and often stumbled, needing me to rush to his aid lest he tumble onto his face. He had lost a great deal of his blood, so it was remarkable to me that he was able to walk at all. I led him past my chamber, and onwards, to the side passage where I had observed the village, but then continued on in a corridor which I believed circled around the edge. I had to continuously slow down as I felt Chispin's fingers on my back slipping away. Once or twice a creature or a human pagan saw us, watching me with eyes

wide, looking at the medallion, and then my wounded companion with his hand against my back, and then continued about their business. Chispin, as I suspected, was doing as I asked. As long as he kept his eyes on me and did not look back at any of the pagans or beasts who approached us, they would not see the fear, or anger, or hatred in his eyes, and would focus on me and my medallion instead.

Finally we came to the hollows, which I now saw where carved out spaces where certain mineral deposits produced some strange plant-stone hybrid growths that were unmistakably similar to the swords I had seen the fae wielding. We hung to the back, staying in the darkness so that we would not be noticed by the busy villagers, thankfully discovering that the hollows were indeed connected along the back edge, as I had initially observed. Our pace quickened slightly, but it was just a shift from a very slow walk to a more casual walking speed. I could hear Chispin's breathing growing in strength behind me, and his hand occasionally pressed rather than dragged, indicating that I could move faster.

At last, after what seemed like an hour, we came to the end of the cultivated land, and at the far side the village, with the tunnel into darkness before us. The only problem now was that we would be exposed, stepping into the light for all to see, though all they would see would be our backs. I remained resolute that one could get away with the most heinous of crimes if they merely acted as if they were doing as they were supposed to, and stepped into the passageway, big enough so that Thurm's machines could have fit through easily, pushing forward.

After many minutes of this, my approximated state of calm became more and more real. We were not being pursued, and I suspected, not even observed. The trek continued as the passageway sloped upwards, and the light of torches up ahead marked our approach to something interesting. I noticed several creatures standing in the middle of the cavern, with only a few torches set on tall sticks to mark their guard station. Then I realized that beyond them was simple, pure blackness, and remembered the blackness in the doorway sealing off the slaughtered Bloods from the rest of the world. I concluded that we had come to the end of Delphine's territory, and behind that curtain was freedom.

The guards at the station seemed to be built for speed, and not for fending off an invasion. It was two fae, and an agile human man who looked like he could outrun any wild beast in a fair race. They were intended to warn the others at the first sign of trouble, not engage the trouble directly. Resolute, I continued forward and it was only when I was a hundred feet away, did the guards make any indication that they had seen me. They stood at attention, waiting at their post, until I was close enough for them to speak without shouting.

One of the fae spoke, holding his sword so that he was sure that I could see it, without actually raising it to me. It spoke in words that hissed and clicked, forming a sound that vaguely resembled, "What is this?"

"This loyal servant was brought to Delphine for medical attention. She

has healed him, and now he is going back to his home, and with him, untold devotion to the goddess of the fae.”

It spoke again, this time more distinct, as if it were getting used to the feel of speaking. “I know your medallion, but I do not know your face.”

“I was granted passage by Delphine, who assured me that I would be treated with hospitality by all of her people.”

“Medallion is safe passage within this realm, not passage beyond it.”

“I’ve seen this man before,” said the human, after a loud grunt, pointing to Chispin. “But I can’t remember where...”

I could feel Chispin’s grip on my shoulder strengthening. I knew what he wanted to do, to strike these pagans dead and make a run for it. I knew that before two had fallen, the third would have escaped, and then all of Delphine’s forces would be brought to bear on our backs.

The fae turned to him, and issued a loud “Sh’sh,” before turning back to me. Before he could speak, I made use of the pagan man’s comment. “Yes, when we passed through here some days ago. Will you now allow us to pass?”

“Not our purpose,” it said. “Keep things out, not in. Go.” It stepped back, allowing us a clear shot at the opening. I felt a sigh of relief welling inside of me, but I did not release it, wanting to appear as if I was never concerned. Still, this felt wrong somehow, too easy. Rather than continue as I had been, I turned and took Chispin gently by the arm, and led him forward. I could feel them studying us as we passed by, but were they waiting for a chance to strike, or were they merely curious?

The threshold was now before us. I stepped forward.

The stars were above our heads. To either side were dense woods, with the trunks of trees squeezed together like the walls of a cavern. The ground beneath us was soil, and was trodden by countless footprints. That was when I let my sigh of relief out.

“There were many times when I expected thou to betray me,” Chispin said, slowly. “But I realized that thy arrival to free me was an answer to my prayers, and thus I kept faith in The Builder’s providence, that thy word would be true, and that my salvation wert at hand. Thank thee, Brother Daelus. I was a fool to doubt thee.”

Could this be the same Chispin who had pigheadedly matched his men to their doom just days ago? The hell the pagans had put him through must have given him a change of heart. I didn’t say anything to him, just gave his shoulder a squeeze, and offered him a smile.

“We must make haste for The City, and tell them of this grotto, that we can turn our full might upon these devils.”

“Brother Chispin,” I said reluctantly. “I am afraid I must ask you to go on without me. You seem strong enough to go on your own now, and when the sun rises you will be able to know which direction will lead you back to The City.”

His brow lowered, his eyes searching mine. “Mine first thought was again of thy betrayal, but again I must focus on what I do know, and not what I

hadst imagined. Thou wilt to as thou must, and I shalt the same. Good luck in thy deeds, and may The Builder watch over thee. I shalt keep thee in mine prayers.”

“And you in mine, my friend.” He began to walk down the path, limping slightly, his butchered wrist clinging to his chest as he walked. Reluctantly, I turned back to the way we had come. Why was I even considering going back there? What possible good could I do? I had escaped. I should be making a run for it, so why did I now gaze back into the blackness, trying to convince myself to run, rather than it being the other way around? The circlet was gone, so I was no longer being driven by the Rivata’s will. Was I ever? Maybe the circlet had nothing to do with it. Maybe I had no real control over my own choices, only doing what they set in my mind was right to do? Maybe it was only evident now, when their will seemed so illogical in the face of what I knew I would actually do if it were up to me?

It was all nonsense; I knew why I really wanted to go back. It was Delphine’s offer. If I went back through that threshold, I knew that I would be saying yes to her offer. Would the offer still stand if she knew I had released her prisoner? Maybe what I wanted to know was; did she want me so badly that she would still take me in spite of having done this?

I wasn’t thinking anymore. I was stepping through.—

Delphine was before me, standing alone. The guards were gone, as was the guard post, and then I realized that I had not returned to the tunnel at all. She no doubt had been observing the entire time, and when I came back through, she altered the portal to deposit me here. She simply stood, regarding me, arms curved around behind her, chin lifted slightly, the thin fabric which wrapped her body moving gently with the air, as did her hair. She looked at me, eyes seeking out mine, silent, analyzing, cold. I mirrored her posture, gazing right back into her eyes, and remained just as silent.

Finally, she spoke. “You delegates are strange, strange people,” was all she said.

“I saw no need for him to suffer more than he already had.”

“And yet he was not yours to do with as you pleased.”

I didn’t wish to reply; for that was a debate I didn’t want to have with her, at least not now.

In time, she continued. “It is a very small matter, for I had all that I needed from him, but he will return here, as you undoubtedly know, with all of his brethren at hand. So you see, by sparing his life, you have only fated more of them to die, and, many of us as well. I thought a delegate of all people would understand the grave cost of mercy.”

I knew she was correct, and yet, I could not find in myself the acknowledgement of a mistake. Instead I just said, perhaps impertinently, “You can change where this portal leads. If you wish, when they come, you could have them all deposited into a distant cavern, where none will be harmed.”

She smiled wide, and then let out a brief and soft laugh. “And if I wish instead to lead them into a pit of molten rock and sulfur, so that they would

all burn in agony?"

"Then I would be very unhappy," I just said, mirroring her smile.

"You delegates are strange people, indeed."

"I cannot vouch for any but myself, and as far as I am aware, I am the least strange person I know."

Her smile became less wicked, more genuinely pleased. "Why did you not run away with him? Have you returned to accept my offer?"

I found myself wanting to say yes, but again, I stopped. That was when the simplicity of my situation became clear to me; I was trapped between I wanted and what I believed was right. Maybe with genuine concern, and maybe stalling for time, I found myself saying, "How can I be certain that all you have told me is the way things truly are?"

She stepped forward, bringing her hands where I could see them, holding a length of cut vine. When she was close enough to touch me, she raised the bit of vine up, and said, "Do you know what this is?"

"It is part of the plant that I cut in order to free the Hammerite."

"Yes. It seeks out the blood of animals to feed, and when it does, it releases a toxin into the bloodstream." She took my hand in hers, fingers sliding between mine, raising it up, while holding the vine in the other hand. "This toxin keeps the victim alive by slowing their metabolism, and also calming the mind. It has a side effect of removing one's sense of imagination or creativity, making it impossible for one to lie, or even remain silent when presented with a question." As she spoke, I saw the vine begin to grow in her hand, feelers coming out, caressing her skin, before growing rigid and breaking the surface, small streams of blood leaking out and trickling down her arm. The vine began to crawl up her arm, over her shoulder, behind her neck, and down her other arm, to mine. I watched, mesmerized, as the vine wrapped around my fingers, traveled across my hand, to my arm, with the same feelers splitting off, hardening, and piercing my skin. I felt the prick, but then numbness, even as streams of my own blood dripped out of my sleeve. The vine that draped across her back began to bud, small flowers popping open, oozing with a thick red liquid.

"Now," she said. "You and I may have a truly honest conversation. Have you made your choice?"

"No," I said.

"How can this be, if you came back to me?"

"I wish to be absolutely certain, before I choose." The words flowed from me without hesitation, so easily, so effortlessly. I could feel my heart slowing inside my chest, and little need to even breathe.

"And what would help you reach this certainty?"

"I heard some of your followers speaking about our conversation, saying that they had no idea that fighting the Rivata was ever part of your plans for the new goddess. Is this true?"

I saw anger flash in her eyes, though I didn't know if it was aimed at me or at her underlings. "I have no plans for the new goddess, only hopes and dreams. I am not summoning her so that I can control her, like a tool. I am

bringing her into The World because I feel that The World needs her. It was never my plan to fight the Rivata with her; that is correct; however I feel stronger that a World that is hers to nurture and guide can never fall to Rivata control. If they came here, she would destroy them."

"Why do you think The World needs her?"

"—because the old ways are flawed. Chaos is seen as the dominion of nature; and order, the dominion of man. It does not have to be this way. Chaos must reside in balanced abundance in the realm of man and in nature. Order must exist in equal measure in the realm of nature and in man. The division must end."

"So you wish to summon a goddess over both order and chaos. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"And this is what The World needs?"

"More than anything, this is what The World needs."

"Is that what you believe, or what your parents believed?"

Her eyes grew wider, her face growing emotional. "It is what all of us believed; all four of us, my parents, my sister, and I."

"I must tell you what I believe, then. The Rivata infect. The Rivata digest from within, and then spread outwards from the center. The Rivata see no difference between goddesses and mortals. The Rivata do not operate along the guides of the divine nature of order and chaos. They exist outside the confines of the four classical elements. The Rivata cannot be defeated by any goddess or being this world or reality can produce, because they gain their power from beings outside reality that *operate* outside of reality. Nothing brought here will be able to resist their pull. Our only hope is to prevent them from reentering The World, just as the only salvation of The World those centuries ago was to banish them—destroying them is not possible. Bringing this goddess into The World is the very thing that will make her powerless against them."

Her eyes were wider than ever now, but the rest of her face remained calm. I felt she was searching for a reply to this, but as she had already told me, the toxin removes one's ability to be creative. I spoke what I truly believed, and she was unable to invent a reply to it.

Finally, I spoke again, drawing even closer to the truth of the matter. "Tell me, Delphine. Were we to conceive a child together, would this child be born, and have a life to live, or would the child's soul be stolen away from inside your womb, torn from its prenatal body and put into the assemblage?"

Her eyes began to shrink back to their normal size, and a long breath escaped her before she replied, "The child's soul would be put into the vessel, or assemblage, as you call it. She would not live in a body of flesh."

"If that is the case, then I refuse."

A look of sincere heartbreak crossed her face for an instant, but then it hardened into a scowl of determination. "That cannot be what you truly wish!"

Until a moment ago, she would have been correct. I wanted badly to

accept her offer. In the end, it came down to a trivial, almost petty distinction in her mind, a question that she thought irrelevant, but to me made all the difference. If I were to have a child, I could not stand the thought of it existing as that thing on the table. "The toxin works, Delphine. It forced you to tell me the truth, and it has forced me now as well. You got what you wanted, now end this. You have my answer."

She frowned deeply, her eyes a sea of disappointment. Her hand grasped mine harder, squeezing. She stepped forward, her face nearly against mine. "If I agree to allow our child to live in her own body, would you say yes?"

"I would," I told her, without hesitation. "But will you give up on the vessel? Would you discard your life's work, and your mother's life's work?"

"No," she said in an instant, and then cried out in anger, pulling herself from me, tearing the vine from her skin and mine and tossing it violently to the floor in a splash of blood. She had been betrayed by her own desire for honesty. She collapsed to her knees, hands against her face, with blood trickling from the dozens of pierces along her arm, shaking.

I just watched her, unsure what to do. My arm was in the same state as hers, which now stabbed with pain as the toxin wore off. I felt my heart begin to race, my pulse like a drum in my ear, and my chest heave, out of breath. I felt a weakness in my knees, like I wanted to collapse. Suddenly, two people were at my sides, holding me from behind so that I couldn't see them. My hat was knocked off. Delphine slowly rose back to her full height, trembling all the way. "There is another way," she said, and then turned around. I felt a stabbing pain in the back of my eyes, blinding me for an instant. When the pain was gone and my vision returned, I found that I was back in her laboratory, and that the rack that once held Chispin had been moved right next to the table with the assemblage.

"Cicada, Vivia, put him in place," she said. Still weak from the toxin, I found myself unable to fight back as I was pressed into place, my arms and legs spread, with thick rope tying me down. My sword was pulled from its sheath and taken away. Within seconds the vines were all around me, wrapping and twisting, the feelers hardening into thorns and slicing right into my clothing, into my skin beneath. She did not watch as they did this, her eyes fixed on the assemblage, her hand against what could have been the thing's cheek if it actually had anything resembling a face. When the vines had stopped growing and I felt as if I was floating on a cloud my vision blurred so that I could barely see; and her voice, when she spoke, sounded both like a distant echo and my own thoughts within my mind. "This is what my father intended, but my mother refused as too dangerous. If he were still here, I would not need to do this to you; but I seriously doubt you would do this of your own free will. You used the mysteria to revive the beast in the realm of the weavers. I know that the mysteria can be used to bind a soul to our goddess."

"I would not, you are right," I just said, though I felt no will to say it. The words just came out.

"As you can see, the chaos fruit are not to their full potential and so we

must wait. With the death of my sister, the Queen of Fangs, the scales were tipped back towards balance, but since then things have slid steadily back towards chaos. The death of the weaver's queen has a part to play in that. Queens, even the queens of beasts, represent order after all. But more, my sister's wrath has been brought before The Hammerites, and though she is gone now, the chaos she poisoned them with spreads. The Order will fall. It only needs one last push...I suspect the death of their king-piece to push them over the edge. When that happens, we will be ready to begin. While you wait up there, feel free to reconsider your choice. I doubt you will, of course, but understand that I can be very forgiving and I am still very anxious to do things the *right way*."

"You have no idea what the mysteria will do to your vessel," I whispered.

"No, no one does, except possibly my father. I suspect that she will be tainted by the Rivata, but then, that may be just what she needs in order to bring death to them."

"Don't do this," I managed slowly.

"You have forced my hand, Daelus. I presented you with a better way, a better way for all of us, but you refused. Now this is the only way. Do not despair; I sense we do not have long to wait now. The chaos fruit vibrate with anticipation, feeling the way the forces of chaos and order shift. The Hammer King dies this day."