

Order of the Gear...

Vats of molten metal tipped and poured their glowing contents into forms moved along by conveyors. The forms were carried by cranes to where they were split open and their white-hot contents dipped into water that hissed and billowed with steam. Gears, hundreds and thousands of them, were produced one by one, minute by minute, their number ever increasing. They were carried out and placed in great rows in the next area of the factory, where the machines would be assembled. The great machines that had been sent out into the forest to demolish The Villa were merely precursors, one link in a long chain of progress. And such progress had been made, the machines were lighter, smaller, more mobile and maneuverable, and more precisely equipped to do their tasks.

"Brother Perrywynne?"

The voice of my fellow engineer snapped me out of my trace of admiration. "Yes, brother?" I asked him, breaking my gaze from the workings of the mechanist lab.

He handed me a rolled document, and I knew at once it to be the latest plan, completed by the key-engineer himself. I unrolled it, quick with anticipation, and felt my eyes grow wide immediately at the complexity and astounding genius of what I saw detailed before me. Was there no limit to what the key-engineer was capable of?

This was only the beginning, I knew, as I watched the endless flow of these gears down their tireless conveyors. Soon the machines we built today would be precursors to the next generation, over and over again, until what? When would it end? I did not know, but I was certain that I did not want it to end. As I gazed up at the glowing gears being freed from their molds and then carried through the sky by chains, I felt like I was seeing a small piece of destiny, of the divine, of heaven.

An Order to Flee...

All did tremble and quake and shiver from fear at the apparitions summoned by the one she called Ghost. "The Lady said she were dead!" one of the fae called out to me in its own tongue of clicks and chirps.

I could not understand it at first, but then felt I knew. The Queen of Fang was dead yes, but the body it held, the body of the Faery's sister, still lived, breathing. Was it the work of this Ghost, or the accursed doings of the hammer-fools?

Many were calling out, especially the trusslers, who dug beneath the earth and felt certain they could still trace her even though the scent was lost. The fae chattered with rage, but rage tempered by fear. The mongbats howled and hooted out their anger, but I could see how they trembled. Even the weavers, strange beasts to even we of the wood, silently huddled in their cracks, their nerves raw to the terrifying display we had witnessed in the

house of the hammer-dead.

"No!" I shouted with a snarl, and I felt my jacknall kin breathe a sigh of relief. "We go back to the wood," I barked with a snap, shushing the cries of even the howling mongbats. "We faced her. She is no longer our queen. We lost. It is over. The Lady cannot command us to do this. Leave the city stench behind. To the wood, all!"

To Place in Order ...

It was still deep in the night when I heard a knock at my cell door. I had not slept at all, but rather clung to my beads praying, knowing in my heart what the morning would bring. As I heard a voice at my door, the voice of Master Forger Carmichael, calling out, "Brother Ymar?" urgently, I felt that the events I anticipated would no longer wait for the dawn.

I arose slowly. I placed the beads down across my open Book of Stone, and lifted myself from the kneeler before my shrine. "Yes, brother?" I asked, opening the door a crack so that little of the candle light from within my cell would spill out into the hall. "What brings you to my abbey?"

"We art needed at Soulforge Cathedral," he said plainly. I felt I knew what this was about. Brother Carmichael was no simple messenger; he was the top ranking forger within our order. He would not have come to me himself if he did not wish to speak with me privately before our arrival.

"It is not too late," he said to me as we walked quietly through the sleeping halls of the abbey. "Thou canst still embrace the future. Cast thy lot with me, and all those who see thee as a threat to progress shall be silenced."

"Thou dost know me more truly than that, brother," I said quietly as the light from my brother's candle danced about the hall with every step. "Such things are of no importance to me. I cannot change my beliefs, for my beliefs are not mine to change."

"I thought as you once did," he said urgently, as if the danger were growing nearer by the instant. "But then Oberon showed me what my craft was truly capable of. He showed me the future. He showed me what *progress*, a word that our order hath feared for generations, truly meant. I implore you, Brother Ymar; the things he has shown me do not change nor pose a threat to the beliefs you hold so dear. In fact, they *glorify* them."

"Glorify," I whispered to myself. "*Things* may not glorify beliefs, Brother Carmichael. Only The Builder."

He let out a long sigh, as if he had decided I was no use. He was correct, I was certain. I was of no use. And that was why he was leading me to Soulforge at such an hour that would ensure our arrival before the first's sun's rays graced the stained glass. All of this would be done before the coming of the sanguine dawn.

Chapter 21

With Breaths Held

— Jyre: Brutal Men —

Day 8: 4:00 am

Els's body was still warm when they came. A half-animal thing sprinted into the dungeon, only to ram violently into the cell door and slide down the bars with an arrow in his back. A man who I recognized from my rooftop chase with an eye-patch and long black greasy hair thundered in, his bow ready and an arrow nocked, scanning the room for more enemies. Right behind him was a gaunt man in a strange floppy hat with his arm in a sling, and a long pointed knife in the other hand. Neither of them had bothered to look at me as they searched the room, when a third person entered—I knew who it was by the sound of his panting breath—Heppet!

"Jyre!" he yelled, running to the cell door. He shook it and found it locked. I didn't get up—I was still running my fingers through El's hair.

"Stand back, everyone," another man said, who had a short beard and no mustache, and strange spectacles on his nose that looked like crystals. He went to the cell door and started squeezing some tube that let out a dark brown gunk onto the lock. "Sir, Miss, please get as far away as you can from the door."

I was about to scream at the man that Els was dead, but then I realized he was talking about Ranson. I got up, and tried my best to pull Els away with me, but soon realized that I was already as far away from the door as I could get and sat with El's head in my lap. The man didn't seem to be wasting time worrying about if I was actually obeying or not, though. He was putting a torch to the goop and igniting it. Then he rushed away and joined the other men, including an extremely anxious looking Heppet, on the far side of the room.

It didn't blow up or anything, just sizzled and sparked, and made the lock area of the door glow bright red. Then pieces of the metal began to fall off, and soon the door was swinging free of the lock. As soon as it opened Heppet rushed in, putting his hands on my shoulders and saying, "Are you okay?" with a crack in his voice like he had been crying.

"I'm okay," I squeaked, ignoring the injury to my back, instead looking down to Els. "But he's dead."

"Is that," Heppet began, but then was cut off.

Ranson cooed, "Her former lover? Yep. Careful or you'll wind up next."

I screamed at him. I didn't say anything in particular, just let out a sharp call of rage at Ranson, which also made Heppet back off of me. Panting for breath after the outburst, I pulled myself out from under Els's head, letting it hit the cell floor with a thud. It didn't matter anyway, did it? He was dead; his body was just a body.

"Jyre, I'm sorry," Heppet whispered, trying to touch me again, but I just pulled away.

"Okay," the man with the eye patch said. "This is why we agreed to a chain of command." Without another word, he launched upon Ranson, who just stood there and took it. I was shocked; I thought he was on Ranson's side. The next thing I knew, Ranson's face was pressed against the stone wall,

the man's forearm to the back of his neck, with his other hand holding one of Ranson's arms twisted behind his back. "Help me," he said in a calm tone, and then the bearded one grabbed Ranson's free arm, twisted it around his back too, and tied both hands together at the wrist.

"I can help you," Ranson said, as best as he could with his cheek against the wall.

"Yeah, you're helping me already," said the man with the eye patch. "Did you kill Els, or was it one of the other scum?"

"Other scum," he said, and then laughed. "If it had been me, Jyre would have already killed me."

His words stung, but I didn't know why. I felt my stomach turning at the very thought.

"So you're Jyre," he said, looking over at me with his good eye. "I'm Common Soore. You gave us a hell of a run over the rooftops that night."

"Jyre," Heppet said, again daring to get within arm's reach of me. "These were Els's comrades: Soore, Memnon, Rembrandt," he pointed to each in turn. "They were sent by Nightfall's group to kill The Lady!"

"Nightfall?" I muttered, disbelieving my ears. "Daelus? He sent them?" I glanced back and forth over the three men, the bearded one who looked intelligent, the one with the sling who looked evil, and one with the eye patch who looked like he had stepped out of a storybook. "He sent them?" I just said, completely at a loss.

"Not quite, but close enough," Soore just said, pulling Ranson off the wall and throwing him down onto the floor with a boot against his cheek. "Now tell me how you're going to help us and why I shouldn't kill you, old pal."

"Come on, Soore, all those drinks together, all that joshing around? Doesn't that count for anything?" he said in his usual seductive tone after Soore removed his boot. So, he used it against other men too.

Soore snorted. "Tie him so he can't move an inch; then cut both his wrists so he bleeds to death. Let's go; there's only wasted time here."

"Alright!" Ranson squealed, "I can have my men join up with you. It should be easy now, they always liked you, Soore; it was just Els they hated. We're six strong; with you four added to the mix we can't fail!"

"Better hurry up," the one named Rembrandt said. "We've been in here ten minutes longer than what's stupid."

Soore reached down and pulled him up from the ground by just yanking on his tied wrists. It was a frightening display of strength. Before I could even cry out that we couldn't leave Els behind, I was being ushered out of the dungeon and we were running quietly down the corridor. The dead bodies of beasts and men lined the hall, some cut to pieces, others with arrows in them.

Up ahead I saw that Soore had come to a window, and forced it open quickly. He climbed out, but said to Heppet, "Don't come through until I am to the thicket and have my hands on Ranson. If he makes a break for it, shoot him." Then, Soore dropped out of sight.

As Heppet nodded his eyes met mine; I could see in them that he would have no problem shooting Ranson dead. He then forced his eyes away, maybe

seeing the disgust in mine, as he watched a smirking Ranson get shoved out of the window by Rembrandt. I ran to watch. After a dangerous fall he squirmed back to his feet, and then quickly followed Soore across the small patch of lawn to the thicket. Once there, Soore grabbed him by the arm and signaled. Rembrandt climbed out of the window, dropped down, and made the dash, but Heppet just put his bow away and looked at me. "Go first," he said. "I don't want to risk losing you again."

I wanted to ask him if he'd shoot me too if I made a run for it, but I kept my tongue to myself. I climbed out of the window but then hesitated. The drop was at least ten feet; maybe more. I had done it before though, so I let myself go, hitting the ground with a roll. Once on my feet I dashed to the woods where the others waited, and found that Heppet was right behind me.

Everyone was quiet for a long, long time, watching the castle, glancing back and forth, afraid to move or even breathe in case we were spotted. I tried my best to ignore both Heppet and Ranson, instead keeping my eyes on Soore. I hated him already for how he made me leave Els behind, and I hated how he so coldly threatened to kill Ranson twice like his life meant nothing. I hated men like him, who thought that the lives of others were theirs to do with as they pleased. He was in charge now, which meant that many would die before the sun peeked up above the trees.

Finally, Soore signaled to the others with a gesture, and we were on the move. They had clearly little experience moving through the woods, bumping into things, nearly tripping, and pushing aside branches as they went. In comparison, Heppet moved like the woods weren't even there, like he was a snake sliding through the grass. When the lights of Barlosk could no longer be seen behind us, and we came to a place that was a bit more open, Soore signaled that we stop.

For the first time in what felt like an hour, someone spoke up. It was Ranson. "I'll need some way to signal my men to meet us here if you're intent on staying put."

"We're not going to worry about meeting with your men if it risks our lives doing it." Soore replied.

"Suit yourself. We could have had this whole thing finished by now if I was in charge."

"Gag him."

Memnon quickly went to Ranson, who snarled at his approach like some kind of wild beast. In reaction, Soore grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, pulled him around, and pushed his chest against a tree with a crack. I winced. Memnon then slid the gag around Ranson's face, pulling it tightly into place and then tying it. I took a deep breath, trying to contain myself.

"Right," Rembrandt said after giving a wide yawn, "now what?"

Again I felt Heppet's eyes searching me, but again I just ignored it. I couldn't face him right now. I was too angry, too hurt, too broken apart by everything that had just happened. I knew that I would only spread the hurt to him, so I ignored him.

Soore gave him a knock on the shoulder. "Now that we're not trying to

pick pagans out of our arses, would you mind telling me who you are, son, and how you and Jyre managed to find your way to Barlosk?"

"Heppet, sir," he said in a tone of voice I hadn't heard since he was talking with James "Ranger of the Riverbed Company, friend to the Sterrett Network and thus to The Circle. A reformed pagan too, in case you were wondering."

"Okay," Soore just said.

"Jyre and I were on an expedition with James and an agent named Petra when we were somehow sent into this netherworld place James called Dereloth. After poking around where we shouldn't, we were chased by this goop monster into a flying boat, which took us to Barlosk. The next thing we knew, we were back in the real world, and you know the rest."

There was a silence which lasted so long that Heppet seemed to grow slightly anxious. Then, out of nowhere, Rembrandt began to laugh. It wasn't a nice laugh, either.

"I wasn't trying to be funny," Heppet just said, keeping his eyes on Soore.

"I should know better than to ask too many questions," Soore just said. "So you're here, and that's good. From what I've seen so far we could use you." Of course, they were men so they could use Heppet. What use did they have for me, though? I was just stupid and clumsy and would get in the way. Even before, when Ranson was talking about joining forces, he said their four and his six...neither of those numbers included me. I was just a problem, a mistake, something for them to have to worry about. I was dead weight.

"I'll do my best, sir," he said, and then added, "and Jyre too. She's good with a bow, and can move like a banshee." He cracked a small smile, and glanced at me. I didn't smile back. I didn't need his praise, or his favor.

"I'm well aware of the second part." He then looked at me. "We'll see about the rest." I was ready to just crawl into a hole.

Memnon spoke up. "Soore, I believe I have deciphered what we saw in the lower reaches and may have a plan to propose."

Soore gave one last glance to Ranson, who in spite of his gag still seemed pleased with himself, before replying. "Talk fast."

Memnon's eyes followed Soore's to Ranson as well, but then flicked his attention back to the leader before continuing. "Essentially the dark bands that we saw are the only things holding Barlosk in this world at all. It is native to another, and only enters ours like it had been lassoed and tied here. What Heppet said agrees with this."

He snorted. "Okay. So?"

Memnon looked nervous, like he probably wished Els were still in charge. "So if we break the bands then we can send Barlosk back to where it belongs, and everyone with it."

"Okay. How do we do that, exactly?"

What Memnon was saying had barely made sense to me at all when I found myself shouting, "We can't do that!"

Soore turned his eye to me, which was empty of anything resembling compassion or even interest. "Oh, why not?"

"I was there, me and Heppet, and that place is somewhere no one could

live. To do that would be like killing everyone. We can't do that!"

"Right." He then turned back to Memnon. "Well? I asked you a question." I knew it; I was just a stupid girl only worth ignoring.

"W-well, she does make a good point. I have no intention of being an accessory to mass murder. I think the key lies in the way the bands are broken. It comes down to basic elementism. Barlosk is not just comprised of stone, but of air as well. It should be possible to remove the stone's connection to this world without removing the air's connection."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning; that all of the caverns below the castle would still persist as openings, and not be replaced by solid earth. It means that the substance we inhabit, the air, will remain, and the people will not blink away along with the air."

Rembrandt cut in, after giving another long, cat-like yawn. "That makes no sense. Air is around us, and in our lungs, but we don't inhabit it any more than we inhabit the stone by touching it."

There was a silence, where Memnon was glancing back and forth between Rembrandt and Soore, two men he obviously found very intimidating, before stuttering out an answer. "Well, alright, maybe I am not exactly right about that, but I am certain about the underground chambers. If the air is banished along with the stone, all of those chambers and anyone inside of them will be, well, it won't be a habitable condition. I don't know if they would be buried alive, or if the soil would suddenly occupy the same space as their bodies."

Soore spoke up, nearly on top of Memnon's words. "You still haven't answered my question; how?"

He nodded furiously. "Right, how it's done. The top of the band represents earth, and the bottom air. It seems backwards, doesn't it?"

"He's wrong," Ranson said suddenly, the gag loose around his neck.

Soore shot Memnon a look that could have turned water to ice, before looking back at Ranson. "Okay. How would you know?"

He gave Memnon a sly smile, before replying to Soore, nearly purring. "The Lady knew, and she mentioned things from time to time. I didn't understand any of it, but I remember what I heard. All I can offer is that it's not earth and air you're dealing with; it's material and void. Seems like an arbitrary difference, but I think that air is considered material too."

Memnon grew visibly excited, and seemed to forget his intimidation as he blurted out, "Ah, yes, that does make more sense considering my observations. Still, I think, what I said before about the fate of those inside Barlosk when this happens, rings true."

There was silence. Soore looked at Memnon, and then back at Ranson. Finally he said, in a tone that sounded very impatient, "If that's so, what does it matter if it's air or void or whatever the hell? I just want to know where the taff you're going with this."

Ranson clicked his tongue. "Well I think I might have just put Memnon on the right track with my tip. I expect he didn't really know what to do before now, but I think he suddenly does."

Memnon clearly looked worried, and tried to say something, but stopped, and then tried again, managing, "The bands are demarking the plane where Barlosk meets the land, but the bands themselves are not important, it's what's around them, that is. They have stone on one side and air on the other."

"And?" said a very impatient Soore.

"I...I don't know." He threw his hands down against his legs. "I don't know. I thought I had a plan, but I guess I don't."

Ranson let out a sigh of disgust, but Soore didn't show any outward signs of disappointment. He just took Ranson's gag and put it more properly in his mouth so that he couldn't get it off this time just by wiggling his lips. Then Soore said, "When I heard that Peppersmith recommended you highly for this mission I was sure it was because he simply wanted you dead. Now I'm starting to see why."

"Humph," was Memnon's only reply to that.

"Hey," Heppet said out of the blue. They all turned to him, and when I could bear it no longer, I did too. "I don't know much about pagan magic, or any other kind of magic, but I know how to mess things up. This stuff is fragile, it doesn't like to really exist at all, so when you start taffing with it; it tends to just break. It's like anything the Hammerites build with their gears and fancy parts. If it's anything more than just blocks and beams, it doesn't take much fooling to completely break it once you get past the hard metal shell on the outside. Hell, I destroyed a massive illusion just by taffing up a few symbols burnt into a tree stump. If you really want to taff up Barlosk and you think that these bands are the only thing keeping it here, then just taff up the bands. Scratch them out; chip them off; burn them off; whatever it takes to break them."

"Yes," Memnon said, quickly, "But without knowing how it all works, we could suffer the same fate ourselves as we are condemning Barlosk to!"

Heppet looked at me, and this time I didn't avoid it. I knew what he wanted; he wanted me to stand up for him, but I had no idea what to say. "Jyre and I were there," he began. "And wherever there is; there's no people. I don't think that breaking this spell will do a thing to us, as long as we're above ground, and the bands are all above ground, right Memnon?"

"Technically they are precisely at ground level," he said with a nod.

Heppet continued. "Probably the only thing anyone underground has to fear is a cave-in, so there's probably nothing to worry about."

"That's a lot of probably," Rembrandt remarked.

"The logic is sound," Memnon said with a nod.

"So, what, do we just find one of these bands and mess it up? Are you telling me that all we have to do is go over to the castle wall and mess up the band, and poof, Barlosk goes away?"

Ranson started to make noises like he wanted to talk, shaking his head back and forth madly. Soore went over to him and yanked the gag out, saying, "What?"

"Those bands are around every wall, every building, and every place

where anything touches ground. They've been scratched up, broken up, shoveled up, rubbed out, and so on for years and the place is still standing."

"Sorry kid, but your idea's no good," Soore said to Heppet.

"I think I know who might help," Ranson said. "There's a shaman-priest-wizard in the Barlosk village, who isn't too fond of The Lady or Barlosk being in these woods. I bet if we got our hands on him we could make him tell us how to do exactly what you want to do. He and The Lady used to be real close, until she started recruiting, quote, unquote, from the nearby villages and pressing them into service, at which point she allowed, quote unquote, him to retire."

"Do you know where in the village he lives?"

"Think I do, yeah." Ranson glanced at me for just a split second, flashing a smile just as briefly. There was something he wasn't saying that had something to do with me, and I had a sick feeling like he had discovered a new way to hurt me. Heppet must have seen it too, because he was suddenly standing behind me. I could feel his warmth even though he was a foot away.

"Okay, we go after him then."

"First we get in touch with my boys and we all group up, then we go after this guy,"

"First I don't cut your throat, how about that?" Soore said in a chillingly non-threatening way.

"Oh, too brutal...if you kill me I can't help you."

Without any other warning Soore grabbed Ranson's forearm arm, pushed it against the tree, and put his sword against it so hard that the fabric of his sleeve split immediately, and blood began to flow down the blade. "How about I take one of your arms?"

"You're just afraid of my people outnumbering yours, aren't you?" he said wickedly.

"Nope, because I know I could cut them all down myself if I needed to."

"Please, stop," I found myself saying with a trembling voice.

"Can't be of much help to us if he's nursing a missing arm, pal," Rembrandt said, patting Soore on the shoulder. "Ease off on that temper, would you? You'll get plenty of chances to cleave off body parts." I could only imagine how horrible a man Rembrandt must have been that Soore didn't scare him.

Soore did ease off, and then turned his back to Ranson as he cleaned off his sword. Of course, Rembrandt kept his eyes on Ranson the entire time. I couldn't see the look on Rembrandt's face, but I could see Ranson's. There was rage, mixed with terror. It was a look he reserved only for those who had seriously hurt him. I had seen him give The Lady that look. I had seen him give it to Els.

"Sun will be up soon," Soore said, putting his sword back into its scabbard. I blinked, and realized that he had two scabbards, both on the same hip. I had never seen anyone do that before. "We'd best find this magician of yours before then."

— James: The Colony —

Day 8: 4:30 am

Before we could even think about getting inside, we had to navigate the now treacherous terrain between our location and the walled edge of the colony. Like light, gravity here seemed to behave in counterintuitive ways, with some pieces of the city hovering strangely in the air with nothing apparently holding them up, and others merely holes where a big chunk was shaken free and dropped endlessly into the void below. I suspected that Phaeros and I would behave much like the falling pieces.

Phaeros refused to allow me to get behind him. Whether this was just a habit of his or if he truly expected my betrayal was unknown, but I quickly realized that I had to match his level of apparent distrust. He knew nothing of The Cause, of the union of delegates who vowed to work together against the Rivata. In his time, if a delegate went rogue than all other delegates were potential assassins. It made me wonder; why was it so different now? How was it that I so readily trusted Jossimer and Daelus with my life, steadfast in the belief that both were dedicated heart and soul to The Cause? I could not answer that question. A more appropriate question was, did Phaeros move like a man who had a hidden knife on his person? Did he move like a man who trusted his bare hands to the task of destroying a foe? Only one thing was certain, he did not move like a man of *one hundred and one*.

I had many questions for him, and though it seemed he was not in the mood for conversation, I could not let this moment go to waste. "If I may ask," I said suddenly. "Knowing the danger the scroll presented, why did you place it in the forbidden district of The City, over thirty-five years after its creation?"

"I think that would be obvious by now, unless you are as much a simpleton as you are reckless."

"Ah, I merely do not wish to jump to *too many* conclusions," I replied with a grin.

He frowned, but answered anyway. "I was made aware of the Rivata's plans for the colony and Dereloth. I became certain that this place was no longer a suitable domain to keep the scroll, so I risked bringing it into The World in order to keep it farther from *them*. I searched for many possible locations to stash it away, but in the end that forbidden place under the watchful eye of my summoned guardians seemed the best choice. Why do you ask? It fills me with dread that you have, to be frank."

"Ah, with good reason," I told him. "It seems that your best choice was thwarted by a simple child." I feared that a grin at this point would antagonize him unnecessarily, so I kept a solemn tone.

"Has all my work against them come to *naught*?" he barked rhetorically.

"*Not* at all!" I said, "for you see another of our number did what you apparently felt was too dangerous to do, and has thus alleviated this venue for the complete destruction of our universe: the scroll has been destroyed."

"Bah," he muttered. "It can never be destroyed. Even reduced to ash, the grains would still possess the power of the original scroll. However, in such a

state it would prevent most from being able to read it.”

“Good enough, I say,” I replied, allowing myself a grin. Satisfied with the answer, I posed my section question. “How is it that you are so young? Did the trance you were in halt aging?”

He replied without looking at me, his eyes preoccupied with a set of uneven stones. “Young, old, does it mean anything to us anymore? Aren’t we both somewhere over a thousand years old?”

“Allow me to rephrase; how is it that you physically resemble a man in his sixties, whereas by circumstances I do not need to explain you should by all logical reasoning appear to be over one hundred years old?”

There was a long pause in which he hesitated to answer. Finally he stopped, and spoke up, but with a different tone of voice. “In Dereloth I researched the old Rivata methods of age slowing and reversal. At first the age reversal was more accelerated than I had wanted, but I managed to slow it and now my body should be in near-perfect equilibrium. By my estimates, it would have taken another ten thousand years for me to reach a state where my mind would have been unable to sustain the block, due to the fact that my brain would be the size of a grain of sand. Of course all of that is ruined now, thanks to you.”

I stopped too, but ignored the last comment. “Fascinating! So it’s true that the reverse aging process actually will bring a person back to the embryonic state, until they are merely a single cell. What happens then?”

“I don’t know. As far as I know, no one ever let that happen.” He began to walk again, stopping right in front of me with an expectant look in his eyes.

“Surely someone must have. One with this level of power over the human body craves events and discoveries such as this, regardless of the moral implications; in fact, they would likely consider the moral implications irrelevant. I am certain that such an experiment was conducted, and the results simply not recorded anywhere you are aware of.”

This time he ignored my comments, continuing with his face inches from mine. “Not only that, but I no longer need food, nor water or sleep. I am freed from all human needs, even the social instincts such as lust or loneliness. I have become, essentially, Rivata myself; immortal, complete, without needs or desires. I exist in a completely objective state. Imagine, Sterrett, if all of our race could become like this. There would be no greed because no one would have the need to want anything. There would be no evil because there would be no benefit behind it; no pleasure to be gained, that does not already exist within one’s self.”

He did not seem pleased, or proud, nor remorseful or even melancholy. He seemed totally indifferent. “And no good either, and I disagree with what you say about pleasure. Pleasure, but its very nature, demands a catalyst. One cannot experience it without some outside stimulus, no matter how subtle or obscure.”

At last he showed a hint of emotion: frustration. “Yes, but all of that becomes irrelevant! The very desire for pleasure can be suppressed!”

“I don’t see the point of existing at all in this condition. You are speaking

of eliminating not only the things needed for survival, but also the things which make survival worthwhile."

He frowned and shook his head. "Enough chatter. Are you trying to distract me from something?" he barked, eyes narrowed.

"No!" I insisted. "I am a very curious man!" I added with a grin.

"You certainly are," he muttered almost under his breath, and then pointed over my shoulder. "I believe that is the direction we must go.

I looked where he was pointing, and saw where one of the protrusions came in below a tall opening in the surface of the colony. It looked like a bridge leading to a very inviting door. "Ah," I just said, and began to resume the trek. "Do you know if there will be sentries?"

"I do not."

"And if there were, what their capabilities would be; vision, hearing? Super-human I suspect."

"I do not know!"

"And what would they do with us if we are discovered? Would we be held for questioning, or merely killed? Maybe we would be totally ignored!"

"Why do you insist on asking questions I do not know the answer to?" Phaeros hissed.

I grinned. "To show you that there are still some pleasures that you cannot find within yourself, like me shutting up."

He snorted, frowning, and for a moment, reminded me of Jossimer. I turned from him, and proceeded to the opening.

Once inside, the strange un-reality of Dereloth was replaced by the very real and very alien Rivata architecture. The door was framed by tall pillars that twisted up into the ceiling of a chamber in a way that didn't seem quite right from any angle. We found ourselves in a hallway that probably formed a ring around the perimeter of the colony at its widest point. All the way down the corridor were similar columns that twisted up into the ceiling at angles that never looked like they should be physically possible, to create a scene that made me dizzy if I tried to focus on any one thing for too long. I soon found that by shutting one eye and eliminating depth perception I was able to assimilate what I was seeing better, though it still was baffling to behold, with parts of the architecture that should have been farther away suddenly being in front, and vice versa. Phaeros was having no such difficulties, and in fact had finally taken the lead as we began to move down the passage.

"Do you recall—" I began, but Phaeros cut me off.

"My memory of life prior to the banishment is perfect, yes. This colony is completely unfamiliar to me, it was built by them after the banishment, but I recall enough about Rivata ways that I should be able to find the central control area."

I was immediately jealous. All I had were flashes of memories, images, and feelings associated with them, but little was concrete. Jossimer outright refused to speak of his life before the banishment, so I didn't know if he was like Phaeros or like me. Daelus insisted that he remembered nothing, not even images, but the way he always said it made me feel like this was a lie. It

wasn't a malicious lie; otherwise I was sure he was capable of making it invisible to me, but maybe a statement indicating that he simply did not want to remember. It was the only thing he and Jossimer seemed to have in common!

Phaeros turned to one of the walls, and passed his hand over the surface. The wall came in two and seemed to split open with everything around me twisting around to make room for this crevice. "Circulation," Phaeros just said, stepping through the narrow gap. I followed, squeezing into the small cell with him.

I had not even felt that we were moving, but soon I could see the signs of it through the apparently transparent walls. We were traveling up some type of elevator shaft, or perhaps the shaft was moving down around us. Soon the shaft vanished, replaced with a staggering vista of the interior of the colony. I could see rows and rows of vessels with glossy surfaces and shadowy human shapes behind them, lining the walls of the colony interior like a honeycomb. The protrusions on the outside seemed to carry in directly to the core, a tower which spanned the entire height of the interior. As my eyes adjusted to the strange geometry and facets I began to spot movement, strange shapes which I found hard to discern or even focus my eyes on. With dread, I realized that these must be sentries.

"The control area will be at the center of the core tower," Phaeros guessed aloud. "It will be easy to walk to, but difficult to approach, as it seems that the Rivata's artificial life forms are keeping this place free of intruders."

The slow motion of the elevator halted and the transparent wall turned opaque before splitting open to allow us onto the wide platform. Phaeros peered out and then waved for me to follow. "Don't look behind you," he said, as he darted out onto the platform. I followed quickly, taking his advice, keeping my eyes locked on the back of his head. Why he wanted to halt his reverse aging at this elderly state was beyond me, but then I remembered that he had planned to remain entranced for the next few thousand years. We were passing rows and rows of the glossy surfaces, and my eyes strayed to them, wondering if I could see through the material just enough to actually recognize anyone. Finally, Phaeros darted into another crevice, and when I followed, he grabbed me and pulled me up against the wall with him.

He was holding his breath.

With eyes wide, and my own breath held, I turned my attention to the way we had just come. I could just barely see out past Phaeros's robes. A moment past, and then another, and suddenly an obscene blur came into view. I felt my head hurting by trying to look at it, a flexing, shimmering mass that seemed both directly in front of me and miles away, with shifting parts that didn't seem attached before just vanishing altogether. Remembering my previous tactic, I shut one eye, and for a fleeting instant felt I could make out a long, curved, tube like thing that was behind held off the floor by what could only be identified as thick hair, before it slid out of view and I felt my mind returning to normal.

Phaeros turned to look at me. He did not seem frightened, but he did

seem very concerned. He gestured that we go deeper into the crevice, which surprised me, since I had thought we were already as deep as we could go. Why would he allow us to remain so close to that thing? Naturally, the answer came as soon as I had proposed it to myself; he wanted to get a good look at what we were up against.

Once we had traveled a few dozen yards into the narrow passage, he spoke. "Completely unknown to me; like this colony, those things were no doubt crafted during the banishment."

"What do you suppose their capabilities are?"

"Didn't you already ask that? Do you expect me to suddenly know the answer now?" he said, growing cross again. For someone who was supposed to be at perfect equilibrium and held all of the pleasures he needed within himself, he sure got angry easily!

"Well now you've gotten a close look at one, so I suspected that you might have some new clues!"

He frowned at me, and then said, "I do have new clues. We must go up again, here." He took hold of what seemed to be a ladder rung, and began to climb. Once he was at a suitable height, I began to follow.

Once up at the next level, I saw that we were in a place where the central chamber opened into a smaller courtyard. Like the central chamber, the walls were lined with the human-containing vessels, but this area was only a few dozen feet tall, rather than spanning the entire height of the colony, which seemed frankly much larger on the inside. We peered out into the courtyard for a minute or two before Phaeros left the perceived safety of our little nook, and marched over to a column with a few reflectance panels and multifaceted surfaces protruding from it.

I on the other hand was distracted by the row of vessels that allowed me personal contact with whoever was inside, although with the glossy surface separating us. I pressed my face against the surface, cupping my hands around my eyes in the hopes that it would allow me to see within better, but found that it did not. I had to keep reminding myself that here, it wasn't light that was allowing my eyes to see. In spite of the blurriness of the surface, I felt I could make out the features of the person. It was a woman in her mid twenties of unremarkable features and curly hair. The next contained a teenage boy with a large nose and very dark hair. The next was a muscular man in his late twenties or early thirties that had some scarring on his face and body. After that was an even younger girl, and then a man in his early twenties, followed by two more, and then three women, and on and on it went, a perfectly random assortment of features, but with a noticeable pattern. All were at least in their late teens and under forty. All seemed physically fit with none too skinny and none even slightly obese. Few were genuinely attractive looking but none stood out as remarkably so, however not a single one could be described as ugly.

"Sterrett," Phaeros suddenly said, and when I looked over, he was standing beside the column with one of the Rivata sentries slowly hovering directly towards him. I could feel my hairs stand on end as a sound I wasn't

sure was real pierced my ears. As it approached the curved tube of its body seemed to rotate so that the portion that the thick hair-like substance emanated from was aimed at him. One by one the hairs stood on end, growing totally rigid like extremely thin lances. I watched with wide yet as Phaeros stood his ground; when the thing was only a few yards away, he began to gesture before himself. Using both hands, he drew out several symbols in the air, faint trails of light being left by his fingertips. He stopped with a jerk, both hands before him in a grasping posture; the sentry stopped in place and the tube of its body seeming to contract slightly. Then Phaeros spun around on his heels, arms before him in the same grasping posture, as the sentry was dragged along through the air in an arc and had revolved a full one hundred and eighty degrees around him. Then with a shove of his palms, it was pushed firmly against the glossy surface of a vessel. His fingers twitched and faint lines of energy could be seen shooting out from them clinging onto the sentry and riding over its surface until the air was filled with the most indescribable pungent odor. From the way the tube and the hairs shriveled and cracked, I could only surmise that it had been cooked.

Phaeros gave out a sigh, and then turned to me with a frown. "I have conducted three experiments. The first was to determine if I could deactivate the life support systems from this terminal. The answer is no. The second was if the sentry truly meant to engage me as an intruder with lethal force. From its actions, I am satisfied that this is so. Finally, I have proved that I am capable of destroying one using arcane might."

I very nearly ignored him. I was approaching the burnt up sentry slowly, and asked, "Is it truly dead?"

"Was it even truly alive?" He grabbed a hold of it again telekinetically and dragged it towards himself so that it was halfway between him and the wall. He approached it cautiously, and once he was satisfied that it was not going to resume motion, began to inspect it. I had another plan.

I went to the vessel that Phaeros had struck it against, and found that the surface was cracked open to a degree that allowed me to pull it open. I removed a large shard with a firm tug, holding the ends of my sleeves in my palms so I would not cut myself, and found myself face to face with a woman in her late twenties with fine black hair pouring over her shoulders. She had a thin face and a long nose, with ears that looked like they had once been host to many pieces of jewelry. "Hello?" I found myself saying, my voice sounding like little more than a hopeful child.

To my shock, she opened her eyes wide with a jerk, her body stiffened, her neck strained, her mouth went agape, a choking sound could be heard in her throat, and then she was still. I gazed in at her, my forehead crossed with concern, and a sinking feeling that I knew what I had just seen. A moment later Phaeros was behind me, saying, "With the vessel compromised it would have taken too much energy to maintain her life support, so the colony cut her off. Her death was instantaneous. The same thing will happen to everyone within the colony once we have succeeded."

"I know," I just said, looking at her face. I wanted desperately to recognize

her, to know who this woman was but I knew that any recollection would be pure fantasy. I remembered that I had some sort of teacher when I was a very small child who was not part of the family but visited regularly. The odd thing was, before I looked at this woman's face, I had never been able to access that memory. Yet, there was nothing about that memory that could convince me that this was her. I turned from her, looking at Phaeros. "What else have you learned?"

"Little. Only that; these sentries would find killing us as easy as moving through the air. Come, we must somehow reach the core. If I can get each sentry between here and there isolated and engage them alone, I should be able to dispatch them without trouble."

"You have limited energies yourself. Do you think it shall last?"

"I am certain it shall. We must proceed."

— Ghost: Sanguine Dawn —

Day 8: 5:00 am

"Something's very wrong," Lytha said to me. I looked over at her, seeing that look on her face that I was growing to really dislike. It was the I-am-thinking-way-too-hard-right-now look, and it always meant she was about to say something really scary.

"Well yeah, we're about to break into a Hammerite-type place for the, what, third time tonight? I'd say that's very, very wrong."

"No," she said, lowering her body against the slope of the rooftop, lying like a big jungle cat ready to pounce on its prey. She really drove me nuts with some of the poses she struck. "I mean with the Hammerites. Something is very wrong down there. There's fear, anger, hatred. It's almost like..."

"What? Almost like business as usual for the taffers?"

"It's almost like I've already been here," she whispered, her face contorting into a look that was half disgusted and half really unhappy.

"Hmm," I muttered, looking out at the increasing glow to the east. "Well I think this qualifies as dawn, so we should probably be getting down there." After we laid low in the undercroft for a bit, we ventured out to find Lytha a new top and cloak and to arm ourselves just in case things got hairy again. Thankfully no more beasties showed up, which means we had either scared them off good enough or they had lost the scent.

"He's not down there," she said. "I can't feel him at all."

"What?" I said, but not because I hadn't heard her. "Has he just not arrived yet or something?"

"No," she said, "I don't know. I feel like people are thinking *about* him, but he's not there. We need to get closer. Come on." She lifted up, and nimbly walked along the ridge of the roof. I stood, and followed, but only half as nimbly. She jumped to the next rooftop, and then took two running steps and jumped up to the top of the cathedral's perimeter wall. I was right behind her, though keeping a far enough distance to make sure I could admire every inch of her as she moved. I liked the way her cloak fanned out as she ran,

giving me little glimpses of those leather pants. I followed her as she ran along the top of the wall. At the right spot she leapt over to catch the gaping maw of a gargoyle and used her momentum to swing and then let go to land lightly on the tin roof. I smirked. She turned around to look at me. "Are you coming?" she asked.

I took out an arrow, the kind with the fancy rope expelling device, and shot it into the wood siding of the small tower above the gargoyle. The rope unwound and I jumped catching it almost near the bottom. I climbed up the rope some then kicked the gargoyle to give me a good swing, then when over the roof I released the rope and landed right next to her. "Yeah, I made it," I said, and gave a little laugh. "I don't think I have the thighs for that move," I said with a little wink.

She didn't look amused. In fact, she looked downright dour. "Something horrible has happened here," she said, turning to look across the steep rooftop to some windows overlooking the main hall. "And for once I'm not responsible. Come on."

The tin roof was smooth, but I made it up it just the same. By the time I got to the window, Lytha was already looking down inside, and from the way she breathed, I could tell that she was right on the edge of being very upset. When I got to the window, I saw why. "Oh, that's...we didn't do that," he said.

"No," she whispered. Inside, down below us, were six Hammerite bodies hanging from ropes that were tied to a rafter. There were other Hammerites all around, and from the looks of things they had just discovered the bad news. Some were gesturing wildly, while others were getting ladders. Looking at the corpses, I noticed two things at once—their faces were just blood and raw meat, with dark holes where their eyes should have been, and they had very obviously placed red handprints across the white hammers on their chests."

"Brother Ymar," Lytha said quietly, a tremble of pain in her voice.

"Oh, no...no, no, that is taffed up. What the hell? Some asshole killed our buddy priest?"

She nodded. "And did it in a way that suggested I had done it. When I was under the power of the demon that is what my handiwork looked like.

"Not only that, but they're framing me, too. Those red hand prints probably mean to them that this was done by the cult which I was supposed to be a member of when they threw me in Crag's."

She began to shake her head, back and forth. "This *is* my fault," she whispered.

"You were with me the entire time, Lytha. There's no way you snuck off to massacre more Hammerites."

"No," she said, looking at me, her face more sorrowful than I ever wanted to see. "You don't know what I did to them. I got into all of their minds, and twisted them, and twisted, until they were completely bent to their wicked impulses. The Hammerites did this to themselves, but it was me who pushed them into it."

"That...I don't know what that is," I said. "But if Ymar is dead then that's it."

We may as well just get out of here.—Lytha?”

She wasn't moving. Her eyes were locked on someone down below. I could see her hands gripping the edge of the window tighter, and tighter. Suddenly she glanced up at me, her eyes filled with an animal rage. "It wasn't just madness and bloodlust that caused this. This was planned, slowly, carefully. The men who died here were chosen carefully, and Brother Ymar knew it. He knew that someone was plotting against him, that he was on a death list, but he didn't know how he knew, or who was behind it, it was just a feeling in his gut. I may have pushed their hand, may have accelerated things, but this was the direction things were already going. I didn't put ideas into their heads that weren't already there."

"That's...great," I said "all the more reason not to blame yourself. Now, let's get out of here before someone sees us and decides that the framing worked. Oh, wait, we're both already Hammerite mass-murderers, so why even bother with a framing? Lytha, why aren't you moving?"

I looked back where she was looking. Another Hammerite had entered the hall, a big guy, and was charging forward, nearly running, his voice booming so loud that it made the window frames shake, though I couldn't make out the words from all of the echoes. He went straight to one of the priests who was standing around shouting orders, and began shouting at him. The priest was shouting back, and for a moment, it looked like they were about to grab each other by the throat, when a bunch of other Hammerites got between them to stop the fight. I could tell from the way they postured that all of the guys who came to separate them were on the side of the little guy, and didn't like the big guy very much.

"The High Priest," Lytha said. "He doesn't know what is going on, but the others do. That's why they discovered it so quickly. They were the ones who did it."

"Are you serious? They're in there making a fuss, being outraged, and they're the ones who killed them, skinned them, and hung them?"

"Yes. He's next. They mean to kill him too, but they need the right moment."

"Fine, good riddance....I'll bet he has it coming."

"Ghost," she said, turning her haunted eyes upon me. "Who would you rather be in charge of the entire Hammerite Order, a righteous fool who punishes those whom he sees as wicked, or these men, who would gladly murder their own kin for power?"

"Oh," I just said, trailing off a bit. "Well when you put it that way..."

"We have to stop this," she said. "We've got enough Hammerite blood on our hands already. Killing a few more to prevent the order from falling completely into the hands of lunatic butchers seems like something you and I can do, doesn't it?"

"The devil we know, I guess," I just said. "So is there one guy in charge of this madness, or is it pretty well spread?"

"It's quite well spread," She said, "But it does have a head we can cut off. From what I managed to fish out of their brains, his name is Brother Oberon."

He's here, in Soulforge, now, but also far away. I think this cathedral is a lot bigger than it actually looks."

"Underground compound," I reasoned. "To their minds it would still all be Soulforge, even if he was really deep in there. Sound about right?"

She nodded. "I need to get to the bodies."

"What? Why for?" The bodies had been cut down by now, and were being put into caskets immediately. Funny, they just happened to have six caskets already on-hand.

"I may still be able to get something from their minds. Some things linger after death, especially if the death is traumatic and sudden. I know where the bodies are being taken. It won't be hard to get there."

"You look really, really tired, Lytha. Are you sure you want to do this now? We didn't get a wink of sleep all day yesterday. The sun is coming up, which means it's time people like us to get some rest."

"It's not just that," she said. "It's getting harder and harder for me to read. I think my powers are really fading. Having that thing in my head made me so strong, I felt like I could do anything. Now, I'm reverting back to my usual self, and I am pushing myself too hard. I just tried to read a dozen minds at a distance all at once; extremely emotional Hammerite minds. I have a headache."

"That's it then. We're taking a break before we do anything else. Hell, I am pretty exhausted too—been going nonstop for a solid week now."

"We can't," she said, touching my arm. "We don't know when they plan to strike down the High Priest. It could be a matter of hours."

I just nodded. "Okay. I never thought I'd be conspiring to save the life of that guy, of anyone."

"I think I'm more shocked than you."

— Sheam: A Question of Trust —

Day 8: 6:00 am

The reports were in stacks. Observations updated by the minute, some months old, tracking any activities that could be linked to Ramirez or any of his underlings who might be involved. I had a headache. The coffee at the Gryphon's nest was garbage, but I was on my third cup anyway. My eyes ached from lack of sleep and concentration. They resented the sight of daylight seeping in through cracks in the wooden walls. When I realized that I had just read over the sheet in front of me three times and still had no idea what it was, I tossed it away, leaning back in my chair with such force that it let out a loud groan.

Andrew looked up at me. He had a stack similar to mine, but was going through it much slower. He was probably doing a much better job, catching things I would miss. I avoided eye contact with him instead looking in the direction of a hall that had been black an hour before, but now glowed with daylight. A long sigh escaped me. I couldn't think anymore.

I heard musical notes, like from a stringed instrument. I turned my head

quickly to see Andrew leaning back in his chair, a lute in his hands, strumming it gently. His eyes were closed. I didn't recognize the tune. Maybe it was just something he was making up on the spot, letting his fingers decide where to go next. It was sad, and made me feel like I was lost, with no hope of being found. I watched him for a moment, seeing how calm his face was, how easily his hands moved over the instrument. I lowered my head to the table, resting it on my arm, looking back at that day lit corridor. I didn't know what to think. A few hours ago I held such conviction; now I was just tired. Then, after some time, Andrew's playing stopped. I had been focusing on it so keenly that I didn't hear the men enter the room, who were now waiting expectantly at the far side of the table.

The man in front held my attention. He was dressed in a robe that looked like it was made from scraps of carpet, with only a bushy beard coming out of from under the hood. He had Gryphons on either side, one of whom said, "He asked to see you at once, Sheam."

Before Andrew or I could say anything, he spoke up. "I will ask a series of questions, which you must not answer aloud. How many drawers are on your desk?"

I looked over at Andrew, confused. He seemed just as bewildered, but his eyes were calm. Turning back to the bearded man, I thought of the answer; there were three, one on each side and a long wide one in the middle.

As if he could read my mind, he then said, "On what day of the month were you born?"

I was born on the third day of the month.

"How many wings of The Circle are dedicated to books and artifacts?"

There were six in total.

"How many scoops of coffee do you always put into the pot?"

I always put two in, which was one scoop too strong for most people. I nodded, understanding. "It's okay, Andrew, he's one of ours." He had conveyed the code of three, three, six, two without actually saying those numbers himself, just like James had previously with the poem. Having personal knowledge about me was added proof of authenticity.

Andrew rested back in his chair confidently, bringing his fingers back to the lute, but not playing. No doubt he had his own numerical code which had to be conveyed in similar ways. "Yes, I see that he is. Very nicely done Agent, I hope this means that James has returned?"

"Sadly not.—I have been asked to escort Sheam to a very important meeting with a new ally who wishes to remain anonymous for the time being. Sheam, will you come?"

I felt my headache intensify, remembering all too well how my previous invitation went. "Can you tell me who it is?"

"I cannot, only that the messenger who gave me this invitation carried the signet of Adontus, the warden's symbol for truce. It is only presented in matters of extreme importance, confidentiality, and trust."

"And only presented to other wardens," Andrew pointed out. I am glad he did, I didn't know that.

"In times when wardens secretly make war upon other wardens, some may choose to trust non-wardens as their only recourse," the agent clarified.

I drew a deep breath, crossing my arms tightly in front of me, "When?"

"At once."

I rubbed my forehead firmly, trying to massage the tense muscles. "Andrew, do you have anything stronger than coffee that can wake me up?"

The agent looked worried, and flicked his eyes over to Andrew. "I do," he said after a pause. "If you don't mind injections, it will make you feel like you've had a solid night's sleep."

"Are there side effects? What are the side effects?" I asked, still rubbing my forehead.

"If you have a headache now it will get worse at first. After about twelve hours you will become jittery, restless, but it won't affect your concentration. The main side effect is that once it wears off, after about twenty four hours, you will be extremely exhausted yet suffer severe insomnia for about a week. It's not that bad, really. It was developed by university students who wanted to study nonstop for a week before exams, and then needed to be perfectly collected on the day of the exam."

"Fine, give it to me. I doubt I'll want much sleep this week anyway."

Andrew rummaged around in his bag where he kept all of his usual medicines and produced a syringe and a small vial. He dropped the needle in a tube of clear chemical, shook it a bit, then pulled the needle out and attached it to the syringe. The vial popped into place. "Your arm will be fine," he said. I pulled up my sleeve as best as I could. He took me gently by the wrist—his hands were quite warm—and rubbed some of the same clear chemical he had used on the needle on the inside of my arm halfway between my wrist and elbow. Then there was a prick, a squeeze of the syringe, and it was over. He wiped again where he had injected me, and then produced a small bandage from his bag, which he wrapped into place. I had never seen someone take so much care or ceremony over an injection before.

I shook a little. "Maybe it's my imagination but the headache is already worse."

"The power of suggestion, it takes about forty-five minutes to kick in."

"Alright," I said to the agent. "Will you be accompanying me to the meeting? May I request a few Gryphons too as bodyguards?"

"Uh, no, it was made very clear that you were to come alone. Arm yourself as you wish, but come alone."

"What?" I proclaimed. "After what happened last night?"

"The meeting will be in neutral territory, not held by any warden, and I was allowed to choose the actual establishment for the meeting. The inviter will be there alone too."

"Sheam," Andrew said. "In the business you are now in, such meetings will be common. You cannot live in fear. To use the Adontus signet to lure you into a trap would mean the instant revoking of this man's position as warden. None in that society would dare risk it, for to lose one's position as a warden means essentially to forfeit one's life."

I took another long breath. "Can't I at least have some way of knowing that someone has my back and can help me if I need help?"

"I'll know where you are; Flute's Parlor-house. We'll have all sides of the place watched. I intentionally chose a location that had no hidden exits or any basement."

I didn't like it, but could I afford to lose a warden as a possible ally? Why had he come to me, specifically? Why not to Wendle or someone within Canard's house? "Okay," I just said, getting up. "Goodbye, Andrew. Tell Corinne goodbye too."

"Don't try to sound like you're marching to your death, Sheam," Andrew said with a small smile.

I couldn't return his smile. I just followed the agent out. The two Gryphons watched me go. I didn't know either of them, but the looks in their eyes reminded me of watching a fellow soldier go off on a suicide mission.

We were loaded into a small carriage, and were quickly underway. It didn't take me long to realize something was wrong, though. "Why aren't we taking Krell Street? That's the..."

"I'm sorry, Sheam. We're not going where I said we were going."

I felt an immediate twisting of my gut as I realized I had fallen into another trap.

"I couldn't say where we were actually going. It was made clear to me that I was to either maintain secrecy before, or to directly mislead, anyone who is part of Lord Canard's organization. That includes the Gryphons. Lord Canard's house has been infiltrated and compromised, and that means we can't trust anyone. I gave the signal to Andrew. Don't worry that you didn't see it, it was very subtle. He'll be picking up the message shortly containing where I am taking you and giving instructions to avoid all contact with The Gryphons for now. We're actually heading to Newmarket, though again it is still neutral territory. The location really is an inn, and the man who is meeting you is still coming alone. All of that was true."

"Who is it?" I just said, still certain that I couldn't trust this man, James's passcode or no.

"I don't know; a warden and one who is not afraid to use the signet of Adontus to invite a simple businesswoman to a private meeting."

"Why is he keeping his identity a secret?"

"For his own protection, should you refuse—Nowhere was it stated that there would be any requirement that you accept."

I frowned. I hated that Andrew had let me step into this carriage with this strange agent, but I needed to remember that I didn't really know Andrew either. Corrine trusted him though, but how well did I really even know Corrine? No, that was wrong, I did know Corrine, and I did trust her. I also knew Wendle and trusted him, so I didn't like this talk about avoiding and mistrusting the Gryphons. He was just one man, of course. Anyone in the ranks could have turned traitor, and it wouldn't be Wendle's fault.

"We don't have far to go. Actually, here is where I get off. You go the rest of the way alone. When the driver stops, you will be on Fledgling Street. Take

the sixth left, Potter's Avenue, and at the end of the road you'll find a two-story Inn, called Guilty Pleasure. The tavern will be closed, but if you knock seven times evenly spaced, they will answer. Like I promised, there have been agents dispatched to keep an eye on the place, and it has no basement or secret exits."

"That only keeps them from kidnapping me. What happens if they just cut my throat?" I said coldly.

"Then word will get out that a woman was murdered under the promise of protection under the signet of truce, and this warden will lose everything. I know that's not comforting, but for what it's worth, I am certain that no warden would find killing you worth that price."

"Not comforting," I just said, though I also wanted to add that it was a little disparaging too. The carriage stopped, and the robed, bearded agent got out. I had never even gotten his name.

With a jolt, we resumed motion.

— Ghost: An Unanticipated Séance —

Day 8: 6:00 am

"Give me a hand," Lytha said as she tugged at the big turn-able thing that was attached to the door roughly the size of a dead person. I went over and grabbed onto it with her, and soon we felt it budge and rotate.

"How do you know he's in this one?" I asked, feeling the door come loose and open.

"I just do," was exactly the reply I expected. The body was on a platform that rolled out like a drawer in a desk, but since Ymar, or what was left of him, was put feet-first in the hole, we didn't need to pull him out very far. "Shit," she hissed. "The eyes are gone. That's how I get the strongest link."

"So you can't get anything from him?" I asked, looking around nervously. If I was still cursed, a place full of shelved and stored dead bodies was the last place I needed to be. Of course, it was daytime too, but that was little consolation. I backed up and leaned against the edge of an autopsy table, or whatever it was, so I could keep an eye on the door and an eye on Lytha at the same time.

"Maybe I still can," she said. I couldn't believe my eyes. She was actually pulling open where they had cracked his skull with her fingers and reaching in to touch his brain. I wanted to throw up. I was also feeling equal parts in love with her and a complete freak for doing so.

"Uh, does *that* work?" I asked.

"Never tried it before," she whispered, eyes closed.

I held my breath. The place didn't exactly smell good, but I was pretty used to bad smells given my profession. Something else just made me feel tense, like a shiver up my spine, like a cold draft on my back, like the distant cries of angry souls. Lytha may have been a mind reading professional—I wasn't sure if she was the only one in The World who could do it or not—but I knew a thing or two about what to do when I got a feeling like that. I needed

to either scare the spirits off, or tell them to show themselves and say their peace.

Lytha wasn't moving. She seemed to be concentrating like crazy, and didn't look very happy about sticking her fingers into a dead old man's brain. I continued to glance around, that feeling getting so strong I could have sworn my breath was turning frosty. Usually nervous spirits needed a little coaxing to show themselves, so I used the method which I found, in my experience, usually worked the best. "Hey, ghost. Come on out, I'm all ears!"

"Are you talking to yourself?" Lytha said, sending her annoyed glance in my direction. Then her eyes got really big, and the annoyed look vanished. She slowly turned her head away from me to look across the table to the other side of the corpse, to see a translucent and faintly glowing Brother Ymar standing with his hand over hers, looking down on his own body. She pulled her hand out of his head with a jerk.

I gave a little laugh. "We've got company," was all I could think to say.

Lytha stared at the spirit, silent, holding her hand in the other like she wanted to hide the blood all over it, and muttered, "Can he see or hear us?"

"Yes, otherwise he wouldn't have showed himself when I asked." I cleared my throat. "Brother Ymar, we're here to help you like you asked."

I watched his faint eyes which glowed a bit more than the rest of him move bit by bit as he looked over his dead body. Ghosts were always entranced by the sight of their own corpse. I didn't say I blamed them; I'd be pretty wiggled out by it too. Finally he looked up at Lytha, and then turned his head to look over at me. "Oberon," he whispered, though it could have also been the wind.

"Oberon, Brother Oberon," Lytha said. "Is the one who killed you?"

"No," he whispered. "He paid them."

"How do you know?" I asked, moving closer.

"They told me, as they cut out my eyes," he said.

Suddenly Lytha looked like she was going to be sick or start crying, those were two looks I never wanted to see on her face. I didn't have to read her mind to know what she was thinking, 'what about all those poor bastards whose eyes I ripped out?'

"What do we need to do?" I just asked. Suddenly I really couldn't remember ever feeling like this was a bad idea. If someone had told me this morning that I was going to be avenging the death of a Hammerite priest, I would have said, okay, bring it on. Ymar may have been a robe-wearing prayer-chanting sermon-giving water-blessing sex-abstaining priest, but that didn't mean I couldn't like the guy.

"Below," he said, "Factory...Oberon's work must be stopped." Then, just like that, he faded away. As far as ghosts went, for him finding peace was pretty cut and dry. No need to wait for your problems to be solved; just ask someone to solve them and poof, off to the afterlife like it's already good and done. I didn't know if Lytha understood or not, but this was a pretty high caliber display of trust.

Lytha shook her head, blinking, like she was just waking up. "We have to,"

she just said.

"Have to do what?" I replied. "Stop Oberon? Yeah, it's pretty much assured that we're going to do it."

"I didn't get much from him," she went on, "lots of flashes of a factory underground, where very complicated things were being built; things Ymar was very afraid of. He believed that he and the others were killed because of it."

"Yeah, makes sense. Maybe he could have officially opposed it, and gotten the other priests on the council to nix the project. Maybe he was killed to intimidate the others. Who knows? But I'd expect this kind of stuff from petty crime lords and politicians, never Hammerites. What the hell has gotten into them?"

"I did. It did. This is my doing," she just said without explanation. Then she locked her eyes onto mine. "I think we should split up."

I scoffed. "Oh, right, sure, but when has splitting up ever actually been a good idea?"

"This time we can be in two places at once; which is important since we have two targets, the High Priest and Oberon. I'll go find the High Priest. I still think I can get into his head to make him not attack me on sight, and to help him see what's going on and how to protect himself. You can go after Oberon, and probably just kill him as soon as you see him."

"Well why don't we both go after Oberon and we both just kill him? Ymar seemed to think that stopping him was the most important thing to tell us."

"—because he could have already given the order to kill the High Priest. I really believe that protecting that tyrant is the only thing that will keep the Hammerites from falling into total chaos. Someone needs to get to him, and of the two of us it has to be me."

"And that's bad? Don't we want the Hammerites to go all chaotic?"

"Very bad. Truthfully, many of them are merely bullies, but they still always follow their codes and rules. They're controlled, predictable, and as vile as they are, they really do keep things in The City from getting much worse. Imagine them ruled by a tyrant with no boundaries or sense of moral restraint; a madman. They could become very, very much worse."

"Alright, fine. So if protecting the High Priest is so important, why don't we both go find and protect him? Once he knows the truth he can just send his own people after Oberon."

"Because it might be too late; because what if his own people are actually Oberon's people? Ymar asked us to stop Oberon, not protect the High Priest. Also, we can cover more ground if we split up. You might find them both, or I might find them both, but the High Priest is probably here in the cathedral and Oberon is probably below in the factory. We just stand a better chance of any of this coming out okay if we search both places at the same time."

She was answering mechanically, like it was rehearsed, like she had been anticipating me not wanting to split up, and already figured out what to say. I squinted, looking at her with one eye. "I think you just want to get rid of me. I think that whatever you think you're getting into, you want to face it alone."

Is that it?"

It was just in her eyes for a second, but it was there; I was right. "Ghost, we're wasting time," she just said, adopting that I'm going to win this argument because I am a woman attitude.

I smirked. "Yup, I knew that was it. Okay, we'll do it your way. Meet back here when mission accomplished, right?"

"Right."

I took both her hands. She was tense; shaking almost. "Hey," I said, looking her in the eyes. "What are you so afraid of?"

She blinked, her eyes flicked up and to the right, and then said, "I'm not afraid, Ghost. I'm just trying to convince myself to do what I know I need to do, and I don't like it."

I gently squeezed her hands. "I'm too stupid to be afraid usually, did you know that?" I smiled. "Yeah, of course you did. You can read my mind."

"I try not to," she whispered.

"Good, because you don't need to; I'm a pretty simple guy. Reading my mind is like reading a sign painted on an apple that says 'apple.'"

She smiled a little, and stopped darting her eyes around and let them meet mine. That's when I grabbed her, pulled her in, and gave her a firm kiss on the lips. She stiffened up, but then gradually returned it, ending with a little bite. When I looked at her again, she seemed about ten times calmer. Or maybe not; maybe it was just me that felt better.

"Time to go, Ghost," she whispered.

"If this place is all crazy and we can't meet back here, I know you can find me. I'll hole up and wait for you."

She smiled, then slipped from my grasp and ran out of the room. I took a long breath, and stretched my shoulders and cracked my neck. "Okay," I then said, looking around. "Any more ghosts want to come out of hiding? I could use a wingman for this one! No? Just thought, I'd ask."

When I got back out into the hall, Lytha was nowhere to be found. There also weren't any Hammerites around; in fact the whole place was so quiet it gave me shivers. I nearly tiptoed down the corridor until I found some carpet, and then I found myself almost jogging. When I got to the next junction I found that this area wasn't as deserted, with voices behind closed doors and the occasional distant footstep. Fear was in the air, so thick I could smell it. It was the perfect environment for a madman to take control, like Lytha had predicted. Get the people scared enough, and they'll be willing to follow anyone who steps up promising to keep them safe. Maybe that's why Ymar and the other priests were killed; not because they were in Oberon's way, but because he could afford to lose them, and he knew it would scare the shit out of the entire Order to know that the killers who had been slaughtering them for the past month were still out there, and that even the mighty Soulforge Cathedral was not safe.

My heart nearly stopped when one of the side doors suddenly opened. I flattened myself against the wall in a shadow that would never have hidden me anyway, and watched with grinding teeth as the Hammerite priest totally

failed to look in my direction. He muttered to himself and walked away with the door clicking shut behind him. A minute later I peeled my back from the wall, before the pattern of the bricks could imprint on my skin, and tip-toed over to the door he had just come out of. Things were quiet behind it, but it was locked. Thanks to my handy little lock-pick, I had it open in a jiffy.

They were quarters. There was a bed, a kneeler, a little shrine with a cute little hammer, and a wardrobe.

I always hated trying to sneak around during the day. Generally, it was never done by anyone who was on my side of crazy. However, one could generally still get where they weren't allowed with the sun up if one had the proper resources. I cracked my knuckles, and opened the wardrobe.

— James: An Altercation —

Day 8: 6:00 am

We now moved with greater speed and determination. In order to avoid facing more than one sentry at a time, we still tried to avoid them altogether. After following Phaeros through his convoluted route of approach, his methods still obscure, we found ourselves with only a long narrow bridge between us and what Phaeros explained had to be the central control room. "This will be the most difficult part," Phaeros explained. "To cross over this, we will be completely exposed."

"Would it not be wise, before we cross the bridge, to seek out and ambush every sentry one by one, so that there is no risk of them all ambushing us together?"

He shook his head. "From what I have seen they cannot cross over thin air, or whatever this substance is we are breathing, and the core is devoid of sentries. After a sprint across this bridge, I will quickly locate the sentry control panel, and deactivate them. I imagine it will be simple. We must go, now. The time is wasting."

"Just because we have not seen them do so does not mean they..." I had not yet finished

When Phaeros moved, he made a dash down the bridge, which wasn't very fast considering that he was still a man in his physical seventies. I was about to follow, when I noticed out of the corner of my eye something which he had just told me he had not expected, a sentry moving through the so-called thin air. I wanted to call out to him, but as far as I knew my location had not yet been compromised. I backed into the corridor we had just exited, hoping that he knew what he was doing.

Phaeros wasn't even halfway down the bridge when the first sentry came before him. He quickly conducted his previous gestures, and pushed the thing away, sending it flying into the edge of a nearby catwalk, which caused the sentry to crack and leak fluid. Two more were now upon him at once, one of which he dispatched with his energy discharge, but the other spun around behind him. It rotated so that the hair-like protrusions were aimed at him, all of them stiffening to resemble a long-pronged comb. He confronted it, using a

combination of his energy discharge and telekinesis to dispatch it, but the one whom he had first set upon had not been entirely defeated, and was now taking a similar attack-posture. As Phaeros attempted to cook the sentry before him, the needle-like bristles of the first sentry came to bear on his back, and he was immediately paralyzed. The one he had been attacking resumed its work, and punctured his chest in a similar fashion, causing him to convulse briefly before resuming his paralysis.

I knew it was over for him, but I was not prepared for what happened next. Pouches on the backs of the tubes began to expand, filling with various colored liquids. I watched in revulsion as Phaeros's body began to shrivel, with even his bones apparently being reduced to fluid and extracted from his body. I pressed myself deeper into the crevice, and yet was unable to look away. Within seconds, all that was left of Phaeros was the hair-like tentacles of the sentries which had formed into the shape of his body, which were now even dismantling his clothing into its constituent parts. And a moment later there was not a trace of him. The sentries departed, and then I noticed that there were dozens of them hovering in wait, spectators just like myself, breaking off their engagement and resuming their patrols.

I allowed myself to exhale. Phaeros was gone. The control room was still before me. To approach it meant certain death. In a way, I cared little more for the loss of Phaeros's life than I had for the woman in the vessel—if I was to be a mass murderer, what did it matter that I had just allowed my partner in crime to suffer a grisly fate? Of course, the loss of knowledge he possessed was unfortunate, but I didn't have time to lament the execution of a fool who had thought himself immortal.

I didn't yet know it, but I was already devising a plan. I was watching the way the sentries were resuming their patrols, and began to realize things I had observed about the way they moved. It was patterned, organized, and predictable. They were not actually intelligent; they merely had a fairly complex set of contingency options when faced with certain stimulus. They seemed to operate under different modes, depending on the activity of their sensory functions. I felt it was possible to manipulate them in such a way that they would be so preoccupied by sensory anomalies that they would fail to notice the man crossing over to the core with intent to put an end to them all. To do this, I needed time to observe, ways to experiment with their behavior and, most of all a self preservation instinct far more robust than what Phaeros apparently possessed.

— Jyre: The Past Returns —

Day 8: 6:00 am

When we returned to Barlosk, the place was crawling with guards. The morning twilight made getting close very dangerous. We had come around from the other side, so that the walled village was before us, and the castle, where most of the guards peered out of towers, was farther away. I didn't see how we were supposed to get in. Even the window we had escaped through

was too high off the ground to climb back up into, but there were no windows in the walls around the village.

"I know the way in," Ranson said. He still had his hands tied behind his back, but they never did put the gag back into his mouth. "I think it would be best if just Jyre and I went in. I know how to find him, and he'll know Jyre."

"What?" I just said. "Who is it?"

"Don't remember his name," Ranson said with a wink. "Never was good with names."

"Be easier to get in and out if there are fewer of us," Soore said, giving Ranson a look over. "Make that the three of us. I'm not leaving you alone with the girl, not on my life."

"Heh," Ranson just said. "Have it your way." I wasn't sure who I disliked the idea of being alone with more, Ranson or Soore.

"Wait here. If I am forced to find a way out other than the way we go in, I'll find my way back to the clearing. If you see no trace of me for an hour, go to the clearing."

"Yes sir," "Okay," said Memnon and Rembrandt at the same time.

Heppet was quiet. I could tell that he hated me going off with those two men, but he kept his mouth shut about it. Unlike me, he was used to working with a group and having a chain of command, so he knew when to just accept things he didn't like.

"So, how about giving me the use of my hands back?" Ranson said.

"When I think it's necessary," Soore replied.

We went. The way in Ranson knew about was something I knew about too, a place where an easy to climb tree was too close to the wall, and a building was so close on the other side that someone could easily just drop down from a branch onto it. Of course, it meant that Soore had to cut Ranson's bonds so he could climb, but as soon as we were quietly to the ground Soore grabbed Ranson and tied his wrists back up.

"You don't trust me yet?" he whined.

"I trust a person once, and then never again," Soore just remarked.

We waited, listened, and then came out from behind the building to duck into a small covered area at the back of another. It was all homes in this area, simple hovels compared to what was in The City, but back in my home village only the well off could have houses like these. "It's just three more buildings that way," Ranson said. We crept along, barely making a sound, ducking whenever we got too close to a window, lying in wait before crossing a street to make sure no one was looking. Because the place was on high alert, the villagers were told to stay in their homes. There were far fewer guards than villagers, so it actually made the village less secure that way. I had complained about it once, saying it was stupid, and was told to shut up. Now I was glad they had ignored me.

Finally, as we pressed to the wall of a taller house, Ranson said, "This is it; back door?"

Soore reached over and tried the door handle. It was locked, of course. Soore drew one of his swords, and using it like a pry bar, stuck it in between

the door and the frame, and pulled. The wood of the door splintered and broke around the handle, leaving the lock useless. He pulled it open just enough so he could get inside, and then darted within. Ranson was quick to follow with me last.

It was darker inside, but we could still see. I heard someone running upstairs, and then stopping, probably listening at the top of the stairs, wondering if he had heard an intruder.

"Hello?" I heard in a strangely familiar voice.

"Go ahead, Jyre," Ranson whispered to me. "Tell him who his guests are."

Soore gave him a skeptical look, and then nodded to me, as if I needed his permission to take Ranson's orders. I was reluctant, feeling dry in my throat, only letting out a croaking sound when I tried to talk. Again, I heard the voice call down, "Is anyone there?"

"Yes, it's Jyre!" I replied, my voice cracking.

There was a long pause, and then the sound of running down the stairs. He quickly turned the corner, and I found myself staring down the dark hallway at a young man in brightly colored baggy clothes, his face obscured by the darkness.

"Jyre?" he said, his voice shaking. "Is it really you?"

I was confused, but felt Ranson give me a small shove. Reluctantly, I stepped out of my hiding place, into the dim light where he could see me. "Yes, it's me," I said in a small voice. "Who are you?"

"Jyre," he said in a voice just as small. He stepped forward, and suddenly his face set my memories tumbling out. "It's me, Tanya."

"Tanya," I stammered. "What-what are you doing here? The Lady, she, what, why? How are you here?"

"No time for this now," Soore said, stepping out of hiding. Tanya stepped back at the sight of the big, dangerous man, raising a short wand up before him that twinkled with energy. "Stay back!" he said.

"Relax," Ranson said, standing behind me. "Today's your lucky day—Family reunion."

"We're not a family," I hissed under my breath.

Soore stepped forward again. "Ranson says you're our man for wiping Barlosk off the face of The World. Yes or no. Now."

"I, uh, yes?" Tanya said, backing away again.

"Then let's go. Back the way we came."

"No!" Tanya said, "I'm sorry, I've already alerted the guards about the break-in!"

"Then, un-alert them!"

"I can't!"

"Taff!" Soore growled, pushing past Ranson and peeking out the back door through one of the cracks he made. "They're coming." He cut Ranson's bonds with a knife he had on his belt, and then handed him the knife. "Might need this," he just said. "Hide!"

I found a dark place behind a cabinet, Soore ducked into the closet he hid in just a second ago, and Ranson positioned himself so that when the door

opened, he'd be behind it. An instant later the door slammed open, probably smashing Ranson's nose, and guards poured in. I held my breath.

"Where are they?" One of them growled, sounding like a dog.

"False alarm!" Tanya said in a commanding voice that sounded quite unlike the boy I remembered.

Ranson kicked the door in, which knocked the nearest guard forwards, and then sank his knife into the back of his neck. The other guards, I wasn't sure how many there were yet, spun around, but then Soore moved like lightning as he leapt from the closet, swords in both hands, cutting down two with a stroke from each, and as he spun about a third went down as well. I crawled out of my hiding place, looking in horror at four dead bodies on the bloodied floor.

"Come on," Soore said, grabbing Tanya by the shoulder. Ranson was already out the back door. I scampered along, nearly slipping on the blood, until I was outside too. We were still trying to be discreet, but were moving much faster. In no time we were back at the house we climbed in from, and Soore was about to grab onto a ledge of the small stable to hoist himself up. Then arrows thudded into the wood around him, causing him to drop off, roll away, and find cover. The four of us piled into the stable and heard more arrows thud into place outside.

Ranson peeked, and then said, "Ah," before grabbing both me and Tanya by the arms, pulling us with him. I struggled, but only managed to tumble onto the ground, an easy target for the archers. Ranson whistled, waved, and the arrows stopped. "My boys are tapped into the same fancy magic alert system as the other guards, so they knew just how to find us," he said, grabbing my arm again and pulling me back up.

"So these are your friends?" Tanya said, looking abashed.

Suddenly the arrows began to fly again, and I tried to duck out of the way, but Ranson held me firm, saying, "They're not shooting at you." He was right, I could see now that they were still shooting at the stable, with Soore still ducked for cover.

"Call them off you worm!" Soore shouted.

"Nope, I got what I came for," Ranson said, dragging me with him in spite of the way I repeatedly kicked his shin. He didn't seem to care. "And if you make a run for it, Tanya my boy, they pin you to the wall."

We turned a corner, and found that ladders had been propped up against the wall. Ranson threw me against one ordering "Climb!" and then began climbing up the one next to me. I began to climb up, but Ranson climbed faster, and as soon as he was too far above to reach down and grab me, I started to climb back down. The ladder shook with an impact as an arrow hit the rung right below my feet. Ranson laughed, and by then had climbed back down far enough to snatch my wrist. "Up, not down, my sweet," he said, and kissed the air. Tanya was already up and over the wall. Ranson's men were now below us, so I couldn't climb down anymore if I wanted to.

Soon we were on top of the wall, with Ranson's five thugs pulling the ladders up and dropping them over the other side. "If you jump and don't

break your neck, running away will get an arrow in your back," Ranson said, and then pushed me to climb down first. I went, with him taking the ladder next to me. Soon we were all back on the ground, and I decided to make a break for it.

I sprinted, taking a sharp turn to the right, hoping to get on the other side of the nearest tree before they could get a shot off. I felt a stinging pain in my shoulder, and an impact which pushed me to the ground. I reached over with my other hand, and found that the arrow had only scraped across the top of my shoulder, not pierced it. It was too late, though. Big hands were all around me, and I was being dragged into the woods.

Why aren't you helping me, I wanted to scream to Tanya. Did I even know him anymore? I expected at any moment for Heppet or even Soore to start riddling the thugs with arrows, but it never happened. I was now over someone's shoulder, being led quickly into the woods.

— Lytha: The Side Chapel —

Day 8: 7:00 am

He was here, somewhere. I could feel his mind crashing through the halls like the great waves of a storm channeled through a seaside settlement. I walked the halls of Soulforge slowly, my hand never leaving the stone wall, feeling the cool bricks beneath my fingertips, and what's more, the eddy and sway of every mind around me as they toiled and marched through passage and chamber alike. I felt so weak now, so much smaller than I had been while under *It's* control, but I had learned so much. *It* had taught me ways to use my telepathic powers which I had never dreamed of, and even in my now weakened, normal state, I found that these techniques still worked.

No, that was wrong. It had been Thalia who was teaching me through *It*.

I could not tell where he was exactly, or what he was thinking, but I could feel the pull of his intentions, pulling me farther down the hall, telling me to turn left or right, and then propelling me to my destination. When I got there, I found I was nearly running.

It was a side chapel, but more vast and grand than the main sanctuaries of lesser cathedrals. Behind the alter was a Hammer Icon not unlike the one I had murdered Brother Adam against, not unlike the one I had lain atop as I poisoned the minds of the Hammerite elite. Beyond it, flanking it, were stained glass windows, designed to convey the full richness of the rising sun, they were colored gold, yellow, white, and orange. To the left, it showed a boy in orange robes carefully stacking one brick upon the next. To the right, it showed an old man in the same orange robes standing at the top of a tall tower, with his arms lifted to the sky.

The High Priest was coming here, and here I would confront him. He was coming to pray, to ask for answers, and to ask for help. I would be the answer to his prayers. If I went in search of him, confronting him in some corridor or chamber somewhere, it wouldn't be right. Everything would be wrong. It had to be here, in this room, before their holy symbols, upon their holy altar.

I went to the back of the room, and found where a great tapestry hung nearly to the floor. The fabric was coarse, the stitches thick, easy to wedge my fingers into. I quickly climbed up it, and from there found a narrow ledge to sit on. Now, when he came inside, he wouldn't see me, and I could observe until I knew the time was right.

Idly, I tried to reach out and find Ghost. I pressed my back to the wall, feeling for him. He was so easy to find, like an apple in a cart full of rocks. Funny, after what he said before, I would probably always now think of him as an apple. He was determined, and strangely excited. His mind was so clear and focused; never asking why he was doing something, only asking, what's next? I couldn't understand how he could be like that, just plunging forward step by step, never doubting if he was on the right track, never second guessing himself.

I let him go. He had his mission, and I had mine. I would find him when I was done, and if he was not done, help him.

But what if I need your help now?

My breath stopped, and I bit my tongue before I called out, "Ghost?" realizing quickly that he wasn't actually here. I forced myself to calm down, shaking the feeling away, whatever the feeling was. I was now so used to hearing voices in my head, I somehow imagined that I could hear Ghost's. I let it go, and rested, waiting.

— Ghost: The Transfers —

Day 8: 7:00 am

It was a good thing I had shaved up during my brief visit back to my apartment, because I was making a pretty convincing Hammerite. I had no mirror to check myself in, and the outfit was strange, not like what I usually saw the priests wearing, but I had never been to Soulforge either. Maybe these priests had special duds? It didn't matter. I'd blend right in as long as I had a look on my face that looked like I have a stiff rod up my arse. I opened my door back up and took a walk that made me look like I owned the place.

I only had a vague understanding that the factory was towards the back, and down, so that's where I went. I only had to take a few corridors before I ran into exactly what I wanted; a trio of Hammerites, a priest and two soldiers, talking in hushed voices. "Hail Brothers!" I said in a proud voice as I approached. "I amt new here, doth thou knowest the way to thy factory?"

One of the soldiers made a halfhearted attempt to point down the passage, but then the priest spoke up. "Brother, thou seem so jovial. Hast thou not heard of the slayings this dawn?"

"I..." The shock was genuine; I hadn't expected to be expected to be moping around. "Slayings!—Crap!" I said, which made the three of them look at me as they probably would a crazy person. "I doth mean, I hadst not heard, and this makes me *very angry* to hear!"

One of them looked skeptical, but the other soldier said, "Save thine anger for the pagans, who hath done this."

"Yes, those damn pagans!" I growled, and then quickly added, "Well I musteth quickly be to my appointment at the factory so, if thy couldst explain, er, how to get there?"

"Down this corridor, to the back junction; thou shalt see the sign before the elevator," the priest said, and then indicated to the two soldiers that he was leaving and he intended them to follow him.

"Thank thee!" I said loudly, and marched off. I was sure that had gone horribly, but at least they had not attacked me. They'd just be warning the factory to watch out for an idiot.

I did as he suggested, and found the elevator just as he told me. I saw a few more Hammerites on my way, but they all ignored me, or at least glanced at me when I wasn't looking. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath, or at least holding it around me, because I didn't smell so good. This area was a little busier, but still no one seemed to pay me any mind. I found the big red button that made the elevator doors open, and stepped inside. The platform was big enough to hold a dozen people.

"Hold the door!" someone shouted, so I reached out to grab it just as it began to close. It wasn't working! To avoid having my hand cut off, I let go of the thing, and quickly found a button on the panel before me labeled "hold door." It stopped with just a crack to go, and opened back up. A short Hammerite priest with a trim white beard ran inside, panting for breath. "Thank thee, brother," he said, giving me a nervous smile. "Oh, Builder, wert we supposed to don *formal attire*?"

"Uh," I just said, glancing down at myself, and then looking at him in his normal red robes. "Nay, I simply felt it appropriate for today! I doth not know why!"

"Ah, thou art surely the wiser of us both; for such a special occasion as this formal attire *would* have been correct."

Before the door closed again, three more Hammerites came into the elevator, all of whom nodded to the first one solemnly.

"Er, special occasion?" I muttered to him, wondering if he meant the dead priests in the front hall.

"Oh, forgive me; wert thou not also freshly assigned to the new project? I took thy apparent anxiety to be excitement over a new task, for my anxiety surely matches thy own! Wouldst thou believe that I have for years designed and operated mobile steam powered machinery, yet I have not once set foot inside the Soulforge Factory, where the majority of these creations are assembled?"

"Nay, I wouldst not believe that!" I replied, glad he had supplied me with such an easy way to answer.

"But apparently I am not being reassigned to oversee the construction of mine own designs, but to take part in the crafting of new designs which have hitherto remained secret beyond its creator and immediate supervisor."

One of the other Hammerites in the elevator sighed. Probably because the platform was taking such a long time to get where it was going, with grinding gears and so forth, and probably because they didn't like talking in the

elevator car. I ignored the last part. "Doth thou know who these people are?"

"I know not who the genius designer is, though I imagine that I shalt be working directly with him. This excites me, to be able to work side by side with such a colleague!"

"Thou shalt not," one of the other Hammerites said. We both looked at him. "Brother Oberon doth not allow any to speak with him, nor even see him, nor even know his identity. There is much speculation as to why, but I would thank thee to ignore it."

"I see," the excited priest said. "Then whom shalt I be working with?" I was too busy trying not to grin at the mention of the name Oberon. I was on the right track. Soon there would be a dagger in his throat and everything nice and tidy.

"We," the other priest said, and then the others nodded, "have also been reassigned to the new project, though we have previously worked in the machinist lab, so we do know some things about what to expect."

"Expect long hours," one said, "and intense heat," said another, "and to acquire regular injuries," continued another.

"Ah, well," the excited one said, looking more nervous than me. "It will be good to work with mine hands," he said with a grin. "Oh, forgive me. I am Brother Thurm. And thou?"

"Ah," I said, giving a slight bow. "Brother...Murth." I wanted to punch myself in the mouth. Why had I just taken his name and said it backwards?

"Brother Murth, it shalt be excellent to work with thee," he said, just as the doors opened and the other Hammerites piled out.

"Hey," I said, tapping his shoulder and hanging back just as we exited the platform. "Doth thou mind if I stay with thee? I get lost far too easily," I said with a grin.

"It would be my pleasure!" he said with a grin. It looked like this Brother Thurm may have been my ticket to success. He was oblivious, looked as nervous as I did, and yet was the genuine article, so no one would question me. As a bonus, he was going where I needed to go. "But we should catch up with the others if we are to find the next elevator!"

I followed him quickly as we caught up with the other group. We walked down a metal platform that was suspended above a huge space, filled with conveyors and cranes and big metal parts that were being ratcheted and riveted and pounded and having all sorts of work done to them. Molten metal was being poured; sparks were flying and more than anything else, the sound of dozens and dozens of hammers banging away with no sense of rhythm whatsoever could be heard. "Ah, my design," Thurm said, "and that there, and this one as well, but that piece is strange to me. Ah, that chassis is definitely mine own work, but another wiser than myself hath redesigned the exhaust outlets. Ah, notice this set of pieces, hanging from the far wall, more of mine design work. It is so exciting to see it all actually being made and assembled!"

"It is!" I replied, trying to match his enthusiasm. There was one little problem with our plan that Lytha seemed to totally forget. I had no idea what Oberon looked like, but I could fix that. "Brother Thurm, wilt thou point out

Brother Oberon if thou doth see him? I do not wish to appear ignorant.”

“Of course, Brother Murth! However, fear not ignorance, for it is merely as sign that The Builder hath not finished with thee!”

“No, he hath not!” I said with a grin.

Suddenly I found us coming to a halt, with a rather stiff looking Hammerite priest eyeing the entire group with distain. “Brother Oberon?” I whispered to Thurm, but he shook his head vigorously with a look of worry on his face.

“Brothers, I am Brother Perrywynne, and I shalt be your supervisor during your new assignment in the mechanist lab. First, ensure that folly doth not endure and that all of ye can recognize the difference between the two words, machinist and mechanist. ‘Tis subtle, but machinist is a word thou mayest speak of openly, and mechanist is a word that will see thy tongue removed before thou speakest of it freely with thy brethren at any location other than within the mechanist lab itself. In fact, ‘tis the last I shalt ever utter the word mechanist outside of the mechanist lab.”

I felt an overwhelming urge to utter a snide comment to Brother Thurm, but thankfully couldn’t think of one. If I had, I would have said it, and probably gotten myself killed.

“Now, present thy papers of assignment.” Perrywynne crooned.

I felt a bit lightheaded as I realized I had forgotten my papers of assignment! I quickly turned to Thurm, and muttered, “I have forgotten mine papers of assignment!”

Some of the others had already shown their papers to the boss, when Thurm replied, “Worry not, I shalt vouch for thee. I am certain it is merely a formality.”

No sooner had he said this was Perrywynne in my face, looking like he really wanted me to punch him. “I, uh,” I stammered.

“Brother Perrywynne, my friend Brother Murth hath forgotten his papers, but here are mine and I can vouch for him.”

Perrywynne looked at Thurm’s papers, but said, “Thou canst not vouch for him; only a signed order from Brother Oberon can warrant him access to the machinist labs. Return tomorrow with thy papers in order, Brother Murth, and thy punishment shalt be a minimum of ten lashings. Also,” he looked me up and down, looking even more like he wanted a sock to the jaw, “next time thou mayest leave thy ceremonial robes behind, unless thou dost wish to ruin them whilst simultaneously appearing a great pompous fool.”

Thurm looked apologetic, and patted me on the shoulder, saying, “I shalt see thee tomorrow. Worry not; they oft forget to do the lashings. It is difficult to work punishments into a busy factory schedule.”

“Bye,” I just said, as I watched the doors close them in and the platform begin to move down. So, they wanted me to return tomorrow. That probably meant that this was the last group of people heading into the mechanist labs right now. I looked around, to make sure no one was watching, and then peeked down the elevator shaft. They had already vanished into the darkness below, though I could tell from the mechanism’s rumble that they were still

moving. Taking a huge risk, which wasn't a big deal for me anymore really, I squeezed through the guard rails that kept people out of the shaft when no platform was present, and leapt with all the grace of a pail of water onto the service ladder that went up the back of the shaft. Down I went.

— Sheam: The Contract —

Day 8: 7:30 am

I knocked seven times, at regular intervals, just as I was told, and waited. If there were agents on the lookout, watching out for me, I couldn't find them. I supposed that to be a good thing. After a moment, the door opened, and a small shaggy-headed man looked up at me from behind big, thick glasses. "You the one he's expecting?" he asked in a squeaky voice.

"I was invited here to meet an important...to meet someone for an important...meeting." I hadn't even laid eyes on my inviter and already I was stumbling all over my words.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Lady Unexumbra Sheam," I said. It was feeling more and more natural to say that.

"Sheam? Okay, right this way."

I chanted inside my head to be calm, to relax, to slow down and take things one at a time. The Guilty Pleasure Inn hardly looked like a place an ambush could happen. The empty tavern had all sorts of curious things hanging on the walls, foods and drinks piled high on shelves, all of the chairs and stools up on the tables and bars, and the floor still wet from a mopping. There was a slight hint of vomit in the air, no doubt the reason for the mopping. I was quickly led into one of the back rooms, where the daylight couldn't penetrate and where thankfully the smell hadn't permeated. He opened a door, but did not go in, instead standing beside it with his hand gesturing for me to go inside.

I stepped through, and heard the door close behind me, though it bounced back open ajar. On the far side of the room near an empty fireplace, with his back to me, was a skinny old man of about my height, with just a bit of gray hair above his neck. His tunic was crimson red, and though it was simple, the way it was cut and trimmed spoke of wealth. He quickly turned around; his long cold face and hard gray eyes I did not recognize, but the pattern on the front of his tunic was familiar; a golden lion on the left, a golden dragon on the right. I gripped the back of the chair in front of me, my knuckles quickly turning white. He had a gold medallion hanging from his neck, again the roaring head of a lion, and his belt buckle, also gold, a snarling dragon's head. It was Lord Raputo, one of the most powerful men in The City, and one of the few wardens Ramirez would have reason to fear. I, frankly, was terrified.

After summing up this trembling, pathetic little girl he saw before him, he said, "I suspected that my invitation would draw Lord Thresh out of hiding, were he still alive, but I can see that this is not the case. He is truly dead, then?"

His words were like a slap, or a spit, in the face. All I could do was answer, trying my best to keep my voice from shaking. "Yes. I am afraid you'll have to settle for me."

He walked around the chair before him and sat in it, placing one hand on the table. "And who *are* you, precisely?"

Nervously, I tried to pull the chair out in front of me, which made an embarrassing squeak as it was dragged across the floor. Then I sat down in it, putting my hands in my lap, and then putting them on the table, before then putting them back into my lap. "I am Lady Unexumbra Sheam, and I—"

"Do not patronize me, young lady. Names have origins, entomologies, and meanings at the very least, do not appear out of thin air. What you have told me is merely random syllables; rubbish to my ears. Unexumbra? Did you dream that up while indulging in a cup of hallucinogenic tea?"

I was floored. I just stared at him for a moment, jaw agape. I swallowed hard, tried to collect myself, and managed, "Just Sheam, then."

"Similarly, a pleasant name, it is one of little stature and bears no quality. If you wish to be taken seriously I suggest you change it at once to something with more dignity, Samantha perhaps, or Pricilla."

Again my mouth was hanging open, but this time when I replied there was less tremble in my voice, and more simple anger. "My Lord, I will not be changing my name to one that suits you."

He smiled ever so slight a smile for the briefest of instants. Could he have merely said that to snap me out of my trembling stupor and get me to come alive a little? I didn't have time to think about it. "Yet you still have not answered me, a name tells nothing but the whim of your parents. Who are you that you believe yourself capable of taking over your deceased employer's business?"

"I am," I felt myself beginning to shake again. My throat was dry, like sand. "I am the one whom he left it to. If he desired it to fall to another, he would have declared so. I am afraid that is all I can offer you."

"And what do you plan to do with this business now that you are its sole proprietor?"

I was quicker this time, though my throat so dry it was painful to speak. "I will continue to run it just as he did."

"Will you. And were you aware of all of his business? As I understand it, you were merely a secretary."

"I will continue to conduct the business of The Circle in the fashion which I was aware of." I could feel my heart up in my throat, but to my surprise, I did not feel like I was any longer making a great fool of myself.

"And what if Ramirez sweeps over Hightowne and swallows you up? Will you continue to maintain business as usual?"

I didn't know how to answer that. It felt like a threat, but it didn't make sense as one. "We'll see," I simply said.

"Won't we." He turned in his seat, so that he was facing me directly, both hands before him, fingertips together. "Mistress Sheam, or Lady Sheam if you prefer to continue to dilute yourself with that meaningless title, I am here

with an offer, and a request. As you will soon discover, all deals among wardens are conducted in this fashion. It is unseemly to propose a request without accompanying it with an offer, and it is vulgar to put forth an offer without also issuing a request. The balance between the value of the offer and request, however, is often subjective, and the points of contention usually revolve around reaching a balance both parties can agree on. However, you are not a warden, and I dare say will never be one, so I suggest that you merely accept this offer and request at face value, and do not make any attempt to negotiate. This is a *yes or no* situation.

Believing I understood, I nodded, saying, "Very well." In a way, I was glad. I knew I had no chance in negotiating with him about anything.

"First, the offer: I am in the possession of irrefutable evidence that links Lord Ramirez to several assassination attempts on Lord Thresh, the assassination of Lord Canard Senior, the kidnapping of Lord Canard Junior, as well as the identity of the traitor in your midst who made all of this possible. Ramirez's lawyers will be forced to not only concede, but to resign. Ramirez will be, as a warden, finished. I am sure you understand that this also means that his life is essentially forfeit, for without the protection of the society of wardens, every thug whom he has ever wronged will be returning for their just rewards."

It all sounded too good to be true, and yet I knew that if anyone in The City could have that kind of information, it would be Raputo. James's Network was robust and trustworthy, but Raputo had thousands and thousands of men at his disposal, and his territory was vast. "That is...a very compelling offer; and the request?"

"I have here, a contract." He presented me with a scroll case that I had somehow failed to notice before. He opened it, and pulled out two sheets of paper which unrolled easily. They seemed to be identical copies of the same document, a contract as he said, with his signatures already in place on both copies. "You may read it in full; I will wait. In short, it is a no compete agreement where you declare that you will limit the type of business you conduct to areas which do not directly impact the incomes of several businesses in my territories. Furthermore, it is an agreement that if the sitting warden of Hightowne ever falls under ill favor with House Raputo, The Circle will be excluded from any ill-intent on the part of House Raputo against Hightowne, and The Circle is forbidden from joining in with the current sitting warden of Hightowne in any action which could be seen as negatively impacting House Raputo."

My head was spinning. It was a great deal to take in, but I was certain that I understood what he was suggesting. "I see."

"Do you?"

Now he was patronizing me. I took a breath, and met his eyes for the first time since I walked into the room. "May I have time to think it over?"

He raised one eyebrow just slightly. "Will you accept the blood of Mallard Canard on your hands and any others who die in a prolonged conflict because you needed time to...think it over?"

I felt a little bit of life drain out of me as he said this. I then realized, before I even read it, that I was not leaving this room without signing the contract. No matter what I did, I would be to blame for the horrible things that would happen, because I failed to do what I needed to do when I had the chance to make things right. I kept my mouth shut, and just read the contract. It seemed to say little beyond what he already told me, though it did contain a short list of businesses we were not to compete with, and a slightly longer list of businesses which we were not to interact with in any way. They weren't any places I had heard of. With an empty feeling in my stomach, I had one last question for him. "Is The Circle currently competing with any of the businesses in your territories you wish to protect?"

His eyes were narrow, not a glare, but almost a bored expression. "Not to my knowledge."

Without another thought or word, I reached for the quill, and signed my name on both copies, right below his. No Lady, no Unexumbra; just Sheam. It was done, and it had been easy. Corinne could rest, Andrew could rest, Wendle could rest, and I could rest. Lord Raputo would handle it from here.

He took his copy, and folded it up neatly. "Action will begin against Lord Ramirez at once."

I blinked up at him, "And the traitor?"

His bored expression faded into one of serious concern. "With that, I am not to become involved beyond this meeting. This is information I am entrusting to you and you alone. You may share it with whom you wish, at your own peril. The traitor is Captain Wendle of the Silver Gryphons."

I felt something inside of me twist into a knot. "Is that a joke?" I shouted, neatly standing up.

The look of concern on his face intensified. "Is that a rhetorical question?"

Now I was standing. "How the hell do you expect me to believe that Wendle is the traitor?"

His bored expression was back in full force, and he simply said, "I can provide firm evidence to corroborate this allegation. You must merely request it...politely."

I let out a long breath, and sat back down. "I request it *politely* then. Please."

He produced an envelope from under the table, and tossed it to me unceremoniously. "This sealed envelope contains the contact information for an agent of mine who holds the proof you seek. If harm befalls him you shall share a similar fate. Greet him with the pass code, 'strangers walk in the evening', and he shall reply with, 'strangers stroll at dusk', and he will know that it is I who has sent you." I snatched it from the table, wanting to wad it up in my hands, but instead folding it back up neatly. I was certain that once Corinne got a hold of this so-called evidence she'd pick it to pieces, and probably see right through it and find the real traitor, probably the sergeant of the house guards who threw me in jail.

"Knowing this, I implore you avoid Hightowne at all costs until this matter is done. The Gryphons hold a blind obedience to their captain, and if he turns

them against you, do not expect them to hesitate.”

I was going to tell him that he was wrong, that Wendle couldn't be the traitor, and even if he was, the Gryphons would never go along with some evil plot. Instead I just said, feeling snarky “Is there anywhere else I should avoid?”

The bored expression had reached a new level of apathy, “Ramirez's territory, naturally.”

“Naturally,” I said, trying to match his apparent level of boredom.

At that, he just said, “Farewell, Mistress Sheam of The Circle. I look forward to doing business with you at some time in the future.”

I got up, holding the envelope and my copy of the contract rolled tightly into a tube, bowed my head and said, “I am sure it will happen in a very non-competing way,” before turning around, leaving, and shutting the door behind me.

I let myself out of the Inn and Tavern without so much as a thank-you to the innkeeper, shutting the door behind me and walking out into the empty street. I couldn't go to Hightowne because of the Gryphons; I couldn't go to Corrine since the Sterrett apartment was in Ramirez's territory, so that only left me with Daelus's tower and, hopefully, Jossimer to help me get the word out. No sooner had I gotten on my way did I have a walking companion, the same bearded agent who had set me on this twisted path. “How did it go?” he asked.

“So you did follow me here after all,” I just said.

“Yes. There was no time to actually recruit other agents to the task of watching the Inn, so I did it all myself. I am glad to see that no harm befell you.”

“Only to my pride,—and to The Circle—look.” I showed him the contract.

“I suspect that you had good reason for signing this?” he asked.

I nodded. “Raputo has what we need to take Ramirez down. He's beginning at once. By noon Ramirez will be finding himself in some deep taffing shit, I expect.”

“That is certainly excellent news. Why, then, do you appear as if you suddenly had the weight of The City upon your shoulders?”

I didn't answer. I wasn't going to tell this man about Wendle, because I didn't want to hear anyone actually believe it. I would tell Jossimer, and then Corinne and that would be it. “Just this contract, it has me worried,” I just said.

“We will have Canard's lawyer look at it as soon as possible. Do not trouble yourself with it now. I believe you did the right thing.”

I didn't answer. “He also told me to avoid Hightowne and Ramirez's territory until it's all over. That's why I am headed this way.”

“Corinne has also avoided Ramirez's territory for the time being. I can take you to her if you would wish. It is a shorter talk than to the Thresh estate.”

“Please.”

— Lytha: A Moment of Charity —

Day 8: 8:00 am

I saw him standing before the Hammer Icon. Then, he dropped to one knee, and then both knees, and bowed his head low. The eastern sun bathed him in gold and red from the tall stained glass windows which flanked the icon. I could feel his thoughts from across the hall. He was afraid. He was full of doubt. He bowed lower and lower, thinking it would help, but finding that it did not. His lips moved to the words of silent prayers, recited over and over, but the words were empty to him. Finally, he cast his eyes up to the icon, and gazed. A minute passed. His hands were clasped together before him, held tight to his chest. Finally, he dared speak aloud, but barely a whisper, "Builder, why have you forsaken me?"

His mind was cool, muddy, much like the mind of any other man, a far cry from the mind that had nearly killed me just a few nights ago. I could barely understand what happened; *It* had so much control over me back then, but I knew the end result. I had extinguished his flame. He, like I, had been possessed by something, and he, like he was trying to do to me, was freed from that possession. To him it was not a horrific invader however, but a cherished spirit gifted to him by his almighty god.

Slowly I approached, masking the sound of my footsteps in his mind, until I was just a few steps away from him. I carefully lowered my hood, so that when he turned, he would certainly recognize me.

I waited, working on him only to sooth his mind so that when he did see me he would not immediately turn to rage. Finally, after many minutes had passed, he stood, and slowly turned.

I could feel his mind jerk with surprise as he saw me, but my efforts were true, and there was no aggression in him. His eyes grew wide, and his face long, with his open hands beginning to shake at his sides. "And now thou art here to kill me as well?" he only said.

"No," I replied.

"Why? That I must be forced to live with what thou hast left me? That thou mayest strip me of mine dearest brethren one at a time, desecrating them such that their eyes be torn from their heads, unable to follow The Builder's light into paradise, but fated to wander blindly in limbo for all eternity?"

His voice was even, calm; but I could see the pain in his eyes. His words sunk in quickly, sending a rasp of regret through my heart. The demon's work had been more sinister than I had even known; removing their eyes wasn't merely a show of their lack of identity, but was to bar their entry into their afterlife. Whether it was true or not didn't matter to the Hammerites left alive; it meant that their kin had suffered a fate worse than death. I looked away from him, unable to stand his steady gaze any longer, and offered, perhaps uselessly, "Can they not follow the sound of his voice as he calls them home?"

"What dost thou knowest of *His* voice?" he demanded, in a stern, booming voice.

"I know it once spoke through you, but now you are silent."

"Yes," he said, shrinking a little. "This was thy doing as well. Thou stole this from me."

"It was not me," I said softly.

"It was thee!" he called out, his voice booming again. He held up his open hand to the sky, and shouted, "By the builder's hand!" followed by...nothing. He lowered his hand slowly, eyes fixed on mine, saying, "He no longer hears my cries for aid."

Why was I here, doing this? Why did I feel like I needed to face him? I wanted to back away, to run. I wanted to lunge at him, cutting his throat, ending his misery and mine as well. I did neither, but spoke. "If I could give back what I took from you, I would, but I do not know how."

He lowered his eyes, and then slowly turned his back to me. He dropped to one knee, and then to the other, bowing his head, and praying. I could feel his mind reaching out to me, calling to me, begging me to come forward, to approach him, and to end it all. He wanted me to kill him. He wanted to die, to escape the ruin of a life and of a church I had left him. He felt that he had failed in everything, and was now praying to The Builder for forgiveness. Why not give him what he wanted? He was a cruel, dangerous man.

I knew the answer, of course. It was because another cruel, dangerous man would take his place; or one even more cruel and dangerous. I had forgotten about Oberon. What if Ghost failed? What if Oberon escaped, and became High Priest as I knew he desired? I then realized why I had asked Ghost not to come with me to face the High Priest. I had never meant to save him at all. I *had* come here to kill him. I had not even realized it, but I already had my dagger in my hand, my arm tight with anticipation. Even with *It* gone, even with the voices gone, my head clear, my mind my own, I still craved nothing more than to end this man's life. Oberon would be next, after him. I would enjoy it, too, to slay such a wicked man as him. Then who would be next? I would go on and on, just like *It* had done, murdering one High Priest after the next, until the Hammerites had grown so fearful, so cruel in their hatred for me and those like me, that they turned more and more into the very thing I hated and feared the most. Even though *It* was dead, *It* would have won.

I rejected that notion. I would end this, here and now. I reached deep into his mind; Rafael was his name, the son of a good man, who loved his God and never harmed a soul, who wanted nothing more than for his son to grow up strong and honest. He had gotten his wish; Rafael was strong, and he was honest. I did not know how to bring the spirit of The Builder back into him, but I did know how to find parts of a person and bring them to the surface, emboldening them and brightening them. I pushed my fingers into the muddy pool that was his mind, and felt around, finding this thing that he called honesty, and pulling it to the surface. With it I found other things, attached as if by tethers, rising to the surface along with it, a sense of justice, a firm faith in right and wrong, loyalty, trust in those whom he loved and called brother, and valor in the face of what he considered evil. One by one these

things, like shiny bits of glass, rose to the surface, covering up the mud, fitting together like puzzle pieces and holding together like a bridge. I felt the murk subside, the entire structure strengthening. More things became uncovered as the waters cleared and subsided, a sense of compassion, charity, and deepest of all, but now shining as brightly as the rest, humility. These things had been obscured, hidden from him, even at his prime. Now they would share equal places with the things he clung to.

Without knowing how I knew what to do, I had finished, and then I understood. I had done exactly what Brother Ymar had asked of me, and what he had enabled me to do by allowing me so deep into his own mind.

I drew away. Somehow, Rafael was aware of what I had done. He stood slowly, but kept his eyes locked on the Hammer Icon. He lifted his head to the ceiling, and spread his arms wide, standing in silence. Already I felt as if he had grown twice in size. I had nothing more to say to him; I would vanish now, and simply hope that it had worked. Somehow, I felt that I had undone all of the damage I had done.

There was a tremendous crack that sounded like lightning had gone off in my ear. There was a splash of red as Rafael's body jerked violently, and the Hammer Icon trembled and twisted as if struck by an invisible force. Rafael spun around, his mind shining radiantly with conviction, but his eyes wide in shock and pain, and blood gushing from a horrible hole in his chest. His mind called out in fury a single name, Oberon, before blinking out entirely as his eyes rolled up in his head and his body crumbled to the floor.

I spun around, my ears ringing so badly I was deaf and all I could see was a long metal pipe with a split, charred end that had black smoke wafting out from it. Before my eyes could obey, my mind latched onto another mind, his approach hidden from me from my concentration. Oberon. Finally I saw him, his face expressionless, gripping a strange device in both his hands which was connected by cables to an incomprehensible contraption of gears and pulleys; all I understood were the two metal legs and that the long tube in front which had somehow destroyed Father Rafael.

I was stunned, breathless; my mind was screaming as loud as the ringing in my ears giving me nothing but panic and confusion. I watched as he disconnected the cable from the device in his hands, took another cable which he held under his arm, and attached it. As he began to fiddle with it, I heard the sound of whirring and clicking, of metal feet pounding against stone floor, as another one of the infernal machines approached, with a similar pipe aimed at me. I latched onto Oberon's mind, and through the black tar of his loathing and insatiable jealousy and greed, gained immediately understanding. He had many reasons for what he did to those priests in the main hall, but the main one was to lure me here, so he could frame me for the murder of the High Priest, and then portray his mechanical monsters as the only thing that stopped me.

I watched, eyes agape, as the mechanical thing marched out in front of Oberon. I knew he was controlling it somehow with the device in his hands. I did not understand how it had killed Rafael. I had seen no arrow fly, nor any

explosive, or even a blade hurled through the air. Knowing I had only seconds to live, I grasped Oberon's mind, searching and quickly understood; the pipe somehow launched a tiny metal ball so fast that the human eye couldn't follow it.

I dropped myself to the floor a split second before another thunderclap shattered my ears, but this time seeing the blast of fire that split the end of the pipe open, almost immediately followed by the crack of splitting stone as the metal ball sunk into the brickwork behind me. I could feel Oberon's tangible frustration as I rolled away to hide behind a pillar for cover; and then my own as I realized that the door Oberon blocked was my only way out.

I couldn't see him, but I could understand from his mind what he was doing. He unscrewed the metal pipes, mitts on his hands to protect him from the heat, and replaced them both with new pipes from the stockpiles on the machine's backs. He then produced a second controlling device, and hooked the cable in so that he could control both machines at once. Steadying the devices by hooking them into holsters on his hips, he worked the controls to both machines at once. He even had a name for these killing machines: *mechanists*. He was now behind some type of barrier, which locked. Metal bars had been put across the passageway, with him on the opposite side. He could control the machines from safety, and I could not escape. He had me.

— **Nightfall: Delphine's Vigil** —

Day 8: 8:00 am

The hours had ticked by one by one. Delphine had not left my side that entire time. Sometimes she was standing still, eyes closed, her hands folded before her. Sometimes she was by the side of the assemblage, touching, caressing it, marveling at every part of it. Sometimes she tended to the fruit, squeezing parts of the tree and the fruit itself gently. She avoided me, however, refusing to make eye contact, refusing to draw near.

I fought to keep my eyes open, to keep my wits about me, to keep my thoughts on the here and now. I had hoped I would see a chance to escape, but it was impossible with Delphine always before me. Her two servants, Cicada and Viva came and went, but never stayed away for long. They were tense, impatient, pacing, and looked from time to time like they wished to speak to Delphine, but always shying away.

At last, something happened. Delphine stopped suddenly, stiffened, then her back arcing. Her eyes grew large, her mouth agape. Her face elongated, the slits in her cheeks opening slightly to reveal glancing, twitching eyes, before her look of euphoria faded, her appearance returning to normal. "It is done," she said. I looked quickly to the chaos fruit, and saw that they all now bore the same heavy purple fruit. "The Hammer King is dead. The World has embraced Chaos. The time is now perfect; we must begin."