

A thing of impossibility...

"No two are quite alike, but what trait do all of the pagans' living deities share?"

"Tell me."

"All were once merely beings of flesh and blood that were born, grew into adulthood, and came into their divine state either as a gift, or as earned."

"I see."

"What if, it were not so? What if, a divine being were simply placed into The World, without first having ever been born, lived, grown, and matured, as a living member of The World, as a soul vested in The World's life and existence and prosperity?"

"I do not know."

"I have a theory. The pagans claim to embrace Chaos, but what they truly love is a level of Order just great enough to allow them to live in harmony with nature, and no more. Chaos and Order are not two sides of a scale to be balanced, you see. To attempt this would be vain, and childish. Chaos is merely an expression of the absence of Order. To suggest they be balanced would be like trying to find an amount of light that is balanced between perfect illumination and darkness. These pagan deities are dark beings, but they are far from pitch blackness. They desire to create as much as they desire to destroy, if not more so. While they hate the built form as a sin, they do have an undeniable love for life itself."

"Are you straying from the topic?"

"Not at all; from my illustration, you should see what I am suggesting. A deity brought into The World without first existing as a living thing would be a pitch blackness of such impossible darkness that the sun would have to be put out forever in order to understand it. It would be a being of pure insanity, lacking even the most fundamental understanding about its own nature. Destruction would be the only thing within its grasp. It would hate all creation, all life, all existence even."

"We are lucky, then, that such a thing is impossible."

"Is it?"

-- Excerpt from Strands to Unravel, a Debate of Two Sides, currently on loan from The City's University Library to Corrine Sterrett.

Chapter 22

No Name by the Tongue of Man

— Nightfall: Herald of World's End —

Day 8: 8:00 am

"Father Rafael is dead," I whispered to myself. Funny, over any other circumstances, I might have heralded this news with a sigh of relief and a glass of wine.

Delphine stooped on the opposite side of the table, the assemblage before her. "It's time," she was whispering in its makeshift ear, "Time for you to be born, my child." Then she lifted herself to stand and called out, "Vivia, by your wisdom, is the chaos fruit ready?"

"They sing to me, mistress, all in harmony. They are truly ripe."

She smiled slowly, bringing one hand to her chest, stroking her fingertips across her skin as her eyes went from one tree to the next. "And Cicada is there anything among the guidance of the stars which tells us this is a poor time to begin?"

"Nay, my lady. Halt, stars say not," he croaked. "Stars say, today, this mark is true. Stars say, when next this sky be seen, this day be remembered!"

"Yes," she said, her hand rising to caress her neck gently in anticipation. "Today we create our own celestial event. The vessel is complete, every piece, from the meticulously planned to the instinctively salvaged, is perfect. Go now, both of you. Tell the fae, and the weavers. Tell the jacknalls and the mongbats. Tell the bugbeasts and the ratfolk. Tell man and woman of pagan blood. Tell the humble and savage people of the godless villages. Have the word spread from Barlosk to the Great Maw to the Dryad's Glade, to the sunken citadel and the hissy's den, to towers of The City and the factories of the Hammer-fools."

Her two servants bowed, and ran out. She still refused to look at me, unable to see my eyes fixed on her, empty of hope, resigned to my part in this. Her back was to me, arms spread to either side, both seeming to grow longer with every instant, thinner, down to her very fingertip. She grew taller, stretching so that her simple wrapped garment no longer fit and fell to the floor, leaving her naked. Her hair, merely a wig, dropped to the ground as long thin pieces slid from her scalp in two neatly packed rows; dozens and dozens of antenna that soon flowed down her back like hair.

I was so preoccupied by her transformation that I barely noticed that the room was changing. The ground flowed like water, pushing the laboratory tables back away from the assemblage and my rack so that soon they were out of sight, leaving only the three of us in an empty cavern. I felt as if I was spinning in place, the light playing tricks on my vision as the crystal-filled cracks in the walls moved like the blowing branches of a tree. The cracks began to spread, the light intensifying, until they split open completely to reveal the great cavern of the underground village. We were now at the top of a precipice overlooking Delphine's people who had emptied from the buildings, standing in packs that filled the gaps between the hovels by the thousands, with thousands more peeking out of tunnel openings and crevices. The air was filled with fae and mongbats, with the cavern walls and ceiling stirring in motion with spiders of all shape and size.

When I looked back to Delphine, I saw that she had changed even more. Now four wings, translucent and celled just like the wings of any fae, adorned her shoulders and back, spread wide just as her arms were, though her arms now numbered four as well, a second pair protruding from under the first which were even less human than her originals now seemed to be.

Slowly she turned her head to look at me, the six eyes that opened along her elongated cheeks faceted like an insect's, as were the original two. Her lips parted slightly, to reveal the only thing that hadn't changed. Even in her fully human form, her teeth were still tightly packed, slender daggers. She seemed to sigh, and then a smile came to her lips.

She turned back to face the silent horde that had gathered to witness this event. When she spoke, her voice was like the high pitched buzz of an insect in my ear; it made my hair stand on end. "My people, devoted worshipers of the slain Slasher, orphaned sons of Gin'Geen'Ginin, the time has now come." She did not shout or cry out loudly, but rather allowed others to in her place. Some spoke in the same language she used, but others in different tongues, most of which resembled the calling and chattering of beasts. The crowd began to stir, but only as a murmur.

"Understand that this daughter whom I now summon is not a new Queen Goddess to rule over, provide for, and guide us, but one who can tear down the divide between Order and Chaos, who can bring our wisdom and way of life to the city dwellers. Chaos will no longer be the domain of the wood and the wild, but also of the pounded and sculpted metal gear. From the intricate working of the most finely crafted creation, the power of Chaos will dwell. It will be as my mother, The Sorceress Tempia, once wrote. Bolt of blue, I call to you. From tamed and true, I unleash you. Leap the gaps, and energies fry, too swift for mortal hand or eye. Stumble hands your errors make, and flawed your steel will flex and break."

"You don't need to do this," I barely managed to say, inaudible under the chanting and cries of her followers. "If you summon her with the mysteria, then this has nothing to do with chaos or order. This is *insanity* you are dealing with."

She ignored me. Why should she listen to a few petty mumbled words when she had the obsession of her entire heritage at her fingertips? Soon Cicada and Viva were back at her sides, joined by several other priests and priestesses of various species, all surrounding the assemblage's table and my rack. Delphine stepped through them, towering over them, walking steadily to me. Abruptly she shrunk, and was once again in the appearance of a woman, with only the shadow of eyelids down her cheeks. I felt myself blush slightly as my eyes traveled over her womanly features. She smiled, lifting her chin. "What pleases you more, Daelus?" she whispered "my body as a woman or my body as a goddess? There is still time to reconsider."

"As a goddess, you are very impressive." I replied, though through no will of my own. "But it is as a woman where your beauty lies." I knew then, more than ever, that the poison of the vines held me powerless to the will of her words. "But no," I added, perhaps ironically.

Her eyes were locked onto mine now, and though they were once again the eyes of a human, they reminded me of distant worlds in the heavens. She stepped forward again, the leaves and loose vines pushing gently against her skin, her hand coming to touch my cheek. Her fingertips felt like ice. Slowly she lifted an inch farther, so that her lips touched to mine. I could feel the sharp blades that lined her jaw against me, and then the chill of her tongue as she licked a prick of blood away.

The vines tightened, the tendrils pushing deeper where they had stabbed me, gorging themselves on my blood. I understood what she was doing; this was no attempt at further seduction. She knew how to make my heart rate rise.

"I have given you so many chances, Daelus," she whispered against my lips. "Consider this your last."

I replied honestly, the only way I was able. "No."

"Even as you say no, know you are also saying yes," she said, breathing against me. "I do not understand you, foolish man, but I shall honor your choice. Now I must ask you to share with me what you fear the most. It is time for you to tell me a poem, one far more useful than the crude musing of my mother. I want the one that my father hid from us both."

I felt the vines digging deeper, the blood seeping from my body. More and more flowers began to pop open all along the vine, each one dripping a stream of blood. My vision began to go dark. "Can the vines force me to say something I don't actually know?"

"Oh, but you do know. You used the words to bring the wicked beast in the weaver's lair to life. I imagine you will put up a valiant struggle, but I know the words are in your mind somewhere. I suspect this will help." She reached to the side, and one of her servants handed her something which I could not see. She drew it up before me, allowing me to catch a glimpse of the gold circlet before she set it down on my head. I immediately felt it take hold of me, conveying with alarm the intensity of her power, the threat the vines posed, and the tremendous potential of the assemblage on the table. She slid a fingertip around the edge of the band, pleased with the control over me it represented. Then she reached to my cheek, and plucked a single flower whose peddles had been brushing against me. She looked at it with an air of curiosity before turning her eyes back to mine. She placed the flower back among the others as it pleased her, arranging them until she was satisfied. "There, that's better. How handsome you look, how nicely the blossoms compliment your complexion. I want you to recite the words of awakening now."

I had nothing for her. I didn't even have the desire to remain silent. My mind was empty.

"Come now, don't keep us waiting," she cooed softly into my ear. "I am a very patient woman, but I have been looking forward to this for *so very long*."

"What lies in the deepest reaches...of one's memory?"

It was as if I had said nothing at all. The words hung in my ears, as if they had spilled out of some unseen cup held under a constant stream. They were

alien words, strange tones and syllables, only forming meaningful words at the very base of my mind.

Delphine's eyes lit up, a gasp escaping her lips. She recited what I had just said, the language of the Rivata, the mysteria, sounding even more alien from her lips, and then the gathered servants did the same, and then the announcers called it out to the villagers, and then they all spoke it in unison in a great chorus. The assemblage shook with a great violent surge of life. Delphine left my side, running to it, down upon her knees, uttering, "Yes, this is right. And the next phrase?"

"What lies in the furthest reaches...of the skies?"

She was wrong. It wasn't the truth serum of the vines that were summoning the words from my throat. It wasn't the circlet upon my brow. It was something else I carried with me. It was something I had no reason to possess, something that by no logical comprehension should have been with me at this moment. It was the pouch of ash that hung from my belt that had once been a scroll covered with the most powerful mysteria ever made known to human minds, the same mysteria used to summon the Intendant to the Rivata and bind them together all those centuries ago. I knew this because it willed me to know it, willing me to know who was truly responsible for this.

Delphine was euphoric. As the words of the second mysteria were chanted by the thousands of voices, the assemblage began to burn with the glow of life. Delphine ran back to me, her fingers sliding about my jaw, her eyes wide and wild. "Excellent, excellent Daelus. Now, tell us, what is the third phrase?"

It taunted me, not out of a sense of victory, nor a joy at some plan being realized, nor even a wicked desire to destroy; but merely out of a fundamental need to control. It didn't just have me, it had Delphine, and her priests and priestesses, and all of their people, and the entire World.

"And? Daelus, the third phrase?"

I was resisting. I didn't know how, but I was. My lips did not move. My mind was blank. In showing its hand, revealing itself to me, I knew how to suppress it. It had nothing to do with the truth serum; that only removed my will to lie, or invent.

"Now, Daelus!" she shouted, her euphoria flashing to rage in an instant. She sunk her hand into my chest, fingers sinking into the holes already cut by the vines. "Say the words, Daelus! Don't fight it!" I could see rivers of blood trickling down her white skin.

"I can't," I whispered.

"You can!" she hissed. "The Weaver Queen heard your voice!"

"What fuels the unquenchable thirst...of control?"

It was wrong. Those were not the words I had used to revive Cth-knhu. They were not the words that could release the beast still held captive in the ash. In my resistance to the life-giving mysteria, the power in the scroll had substituted something much more powerful, something much darker, in its place. I listened in horror as the gibberish was recited by one after another,

until the assemblage itself began to chant it over in over in sounds that could have melted the stone around it. Only then, uttered from its mechanical jaws, did the sounds make sense to the back of my mind. *"The unquenchable thirst...of control!"*

"What comprises the infinite reaches...of madness?"

None were able to repeat those words. As I uttered them, little more than a rasp at the back of my throat, the chaos fruit began to burst in rapid succession. All present turned to look in shock as they were showered with the back juice, and then twisted around an instant later to see the assemblage rising up from the table, its back arched so tight that its heels nearly touched the back of its head, its jaw oozing a kind of light that poured out of it like sludge and collected on the surface beneath it, as the sounds of *"Control! Madness! Control! Madness!"* emanated from it like the beat of a drum.

Delphine was calling out in exhilaration at the sight, still blind to the truth of what was occurring. "Oh Goddess, daughter, and mistress, tell us, what name shall we adore you with?"

The tubes which connected it to the chaos fruit slid quickly into the Being's body, like tongues of a serpent. It unfolded itself, shoulders high and with face to the sky, and then began to spin in place. All present began to cheer and call out in worship, with Delphine at the forefront of it all, on her knees, her hands outstretched before her, her cries inaudible to my ears. The Being spun faster and faster, until it was just a whirl of motion. Without warning, something lashed out from it, striking one of the priests, who was carried up in a blur of speed into the Being's spinning form. There was a tremendous roar of tearing and shredding, and a red mist gushing out like heavy smoke. Delphine and her servants halted their veneration in shock, eyes wide at where their fellow had just been. As quickly as the first, another was claimed, and then another; until all, save Delphine, were backing away in horror.

Delphine glanced at me, her face suddenly crossed with doubt and confusion, and then back to the Being as it slowed from its spin. Soon we saw, and understood. The body was now coated with writing flesh and muscle, blood still gushing from severed arteries and torn skin as it all shifted and moved about the frame, integrating itself with the metal and wood and ceramic and glass of the assemblage. Its form began to gloss and harden becoming more distinct, resembling more and more a small human woman with a delicate figure. Delphine gestured madly to the remaining servants to calm themselves, though her own face was still twisted in doubt and fear.

The Being continued to writhe and convulse, even as its body seemed to complete itself. The now much more human-looking head jerked, its jaw open wide in a mimicry of coughing and gagging. Finally, it stood upright on the table, and pressed one of its hands to its chest. The chest caved and split, the hand growing claw-like and sinking into the soft amalgamation of flesh and metal parts, until its entire torso seemed to burst open, all of the pieces laid out within it, and the sap of the chaos fruit gushing out like water from a burst hose. Its hand was grasped around the sewn up heart of the spider

mother, fingers sinking in, pulling. With a great jerk, the heart was ripped out, the tubes snapping one by one until it was free. The Being regarded the beating mass of tissue. Its jaw was still open wide, but the choking and gagging had subsided. The head tilted left, and then right, and then its entire face began to distort with a grinding and a snapping sound. I blinked, and saw that now its jaw was where its forehead was, and eyes, no more than empty sockets, were set above its chin.

It turned its head to look at Delphine, who was back on her knees, her head grasped between her hands, her face showing nothing but terror. The Being twisted its arm back, and threw the spider's heart at her. Delphine shrunk away to avoid it, letting it shatter as it made impact on the wall behind her. That was when the remaining priests and priestesses ran, and a great wail of horror issued out from the crowd.

The Being's chest folded back up, sealing with flesh and constructed parts moving across its surface like it was water. It looked to me. The upside down eye sockets, though empty, conveying some ineffable sense of awareness. It dropped nimbly down off the table, and began to walk slowly towards me with the grace of a ballerina.

"You'll not touch him," I heard Delphine whisper, and then she too became a blur of motion. An instant later she was between the Being and my bound body, striking it away. The impact sounded like the shattering of a clay jaw. The Being was knocked to its back, sliding several feet across the floor towards the precipice. As it came to a stop, it flipped over, and then dropped from the ledge.

I heard the screams. I heard the same sound it made before when it claimed a body into its own. I saw it in flashes as it spun about, claiming body after body, until it rose into air with fae-like wings, which sickeningly seemed to have been assembled together from many slain and mutilated fae. Delphine launched after it, her body seeming to burst in mid-air as she made her transformation. Surging forward with all of her might, she smashed it out of the air. She then dove down to grab the Being off the ground, two hands on its shoulders, two more about its head, twisting and pulling. The Being's wings seemed stronger than Delphine's, and soon the two were tumbling through the air, crashing into building and cavern wall, into stone columns and crystal growths, until Delphine was pushed away, crashing head first into a sea of jagged rocks.

The Being grabbed two more pagans that it had found hiding, and swung them into the air with its elongated arms. It positioned itself so that they collided with its body as they fell, and in a blur of motion and a shower of blood, it had added their flesh to its own compacting and growing form. Somehow I knew, maybe because of the influence of the cirlet, that not unlike Cth-knhu, it was gaining in strength with each body it claimed, using the release of energy from their deaths to strengthen its very existence.

I watched helplessly as it continued to do this, tearing the village from its foundations in its hunt for more flesh to consume, until Delphine came back to her senses. I heard her howl of rage over the cries of her people as she

once again latched onto the Being, pulling it away an instant before it claimed another body, tossing it so that it crashed into a long pointed rock that hung from the ceiling. The Being nearly came in two as the shaft of rock slid through its torso, but then seemed to reassemble as it slid back down. Delphine caught it again, working maniacally to remove its head once more, but unable to cope with the strength of her creation. It may have been coated in flesh now, but the assemblage was still at its core, and even the strength of a goddess seemed unable to pull apart the robust joints of metal and wood.

It was not going to allow her to continue to try, however. It once again began to spin, and possibly fearing it claiming her flesh, Delphine let go, flying backwards to a safe distance. When it stopped, quiet filled the cavern; all of the pagans and beasts were either dead or had escaped. It came to be still, even its wings slowing and folding up behind it, apparently no longer needing them to remain airborne. The Being regarded me once again. Its jaw opened across its forehead, calling out a horrible sound. It was the first time it had done so since it was summoned, but this noise was unrecognizable to me. It jerked into motion, bearing down on me, calling out in that shrill, impossible voice.

Delphine was closer, and tackled it to the ground an instant before it could reach me. It thrashed her with its wings, sending dark cuts up and down her body, her blood arcing away. Delphine clenched her razor-teeth in pain, all her eyes wide with determination, as she struck the back of the Being's head over and over, causing its skull to hit the ground with such force that cracks were sent to the far corners of the room. The flesh that it had coated its head with was flying off in chunks. Abruptly, possibly sensing a moment of weakness, it lashed back out at Delphine, gouging her with a cut from her throat down to her hip, before slipping out from under her and flying back into the cavern.

Delphine fell limp to the ground, her blood pooling all around her.

The Being flew out across the ruins of the pagan village, in the direction of the gateway to the outside world. An instant later I felt it was gone, disappeared through the gateway that would let it out near The City.

I was too weak to struggle. I felt like half of my blood was now in the vines. Half of Delphine's blood seemed to be on the ground. Slowly, and then quickly, she shrank back to her human form, and curled up into a ball.

I tried to struggle, searching to find feeling in my wrists, but my body was so numb I knew it was useless.

Delphine wasn't moving anymore. She wouldn't die, not now. I felt I knew her better than that. She had faced so many obstacles, so many setbacks, and so many changes in her plans; she would not choose to give up.

— Ghost: The Master Gear —

Day 8: 8:00 am

Continuing to waltz around as Brother Murth didn't seem like a good idea anymore since it was pretty clear that there were no uninvited guests in the

Mechanist lab. Plus, a guy walking around in ceremonial duds would stick out like a sore thumb. Once I got to the end of the ladder I found a tiny little maintenance area to stash the stolen clothes, thanking The Builder that I had the sense to put them on over my stealth garb and gear, rather than stripping down to my underpants like I had first thought. I only had to replace my gloves. It was a good thing that priest wore plus sizes!

To my luck, I managed to get off on some kind of service deck which was comprised mostly of tubes and pipes and conduits that ran along above the catwalks that hung over the busy and dangerous and noisy factory floor. I could clang around on the pipes all day and no one would hear it over the racket, and since the light bulbs were hung from this level down below the pipes, if anyone glanced up they wouldn't be able to see me over the glare of their precious electric lamps.

I quickly located the group of new recruits, who were being ushered into a big metal box that overlooked the factory. Nimble as a cat and with some help from my new climbing gloves, I crawled onto its roof and pressed my ear to the metal to have a listen.

"As thou canst see we are currently producing what amounts to smaller versions of the machines assembled upstairs, which have been dubbed mechanisms, and we who work on them called mechanists."

"Hence the name of this project," one of the others said. This got a laugh.

"Indeed, though our chief benefactor, Brother Oberon, insists on calling the mechanisms themselves mechanists, and does not speak of *us* at all!"

This got another, heartier laugh, but there was a bit of ire in it.

"The current designs are small enough and maneuverable enough to inhabit any cloister or sacristy, and we soon hope to have models that are narrow enough to fit through a single width door-frame. The current group of new recruits, that means thee, wilt be assigned to the implementation of the new ideas developed by the key-engineer in all designs. He hath been making breakthroughs in all areas at a staggering rate. For instance, we now have a system where the mechanisms can actually hear commands. I am speaking not of responding to verbal orders; that is far too imprecise. I mean a remote control box that does not require the electric cable to work. It will issue tones at frequencies beyond the range of human hearing that translate into orders by the mechanism's vibration sensitive membranes. Furthermore, we are working on a system where the mechanisms can be taught complex layouts such as floor plans. This means that a command can be issued such as; come to the rectory, and the mechanism will be expected to know how to get there. This is a great leap beyond the current system, where each turn and step must be manually conveyed to the mechanism. Of course, the key engineer is already hard at work on a system he says wilt surpass even this; the integration of his mechanical eye, something he claims he hath already perfected, into the mechanisms, so they wilt not need to be taught the layout of a building, but wilt be able to use visual clues and learn it for themselves."

Another laugh but this one was a bit skeptical more like scoffing.

"Ah, it does sound strange, doesn't it, a machine that can see and walk around unguided? But the key-engineer promises that we will see this come to pass within several years, at least!"

"Can we see this mechanical eye which this key-engineer claims to have perfected?"

"Nay, brother, it, like he himself, are not to have visitors. But I can tell thee of a secret device which thou shalt be expected to visit many times. We call it the Master Gear, but as you will soon see calling this device a gear would be like calling Soulforge a collection of stone blocks."

Again, laughter; I suspected this time it was from Thurm.

"What is this Master Gear?"

"It is the central apparatus which converts the electrical impulses issued by the control box into mechanical energy that is then translated to the joints and locomotive systems of the mechanism, producing motion and maneuvering. It is this component, not merely the size, which separates the mechanisms from the machines constructed upstairs."

I heard "Ahs," of understanding, but it sounded like "Blah, blah, blah," to me.

"It is an extremely delicate and complex piece of equipment, which acts as the guide for the production of all copies. Attempts have been made to make copies of other copies, but this always results in mechanisms that fail quite early in their service."

"Why must we copy from a Master Gear at all? In all other things, there are schematics and plans to work from, which have exact measurements!"

"Such plans exist, but are kept under lock and key,"

"Like thy key-engineer!"

"Yes, precisely!"

I was quickly putting together a shopping list for myself. If I wanted to really foul up the mechanist project, I needed to find those schematics, find that master gear, and find that key-engineer, and do unspeakable nasty things to all three of them. Then there was Brother Oberon; I was just going to stab him in the face. Guys like me had a hard enough time as it was dealing with regular Hammerites. I didn't like the idea of having to worry about metal ones too. I was skeptical about this whole thing at first, but now that I was in the belly of it all, there was nothing I wanted to do more than seriously taff things up.

I listened in for a few more minutes, but all they were talking about now were work schedules, who would be working with whom and on what project, and Brother Thurm talking about how excited and pleased he was just be there.

I crawled around to the back of the big metal box and found that the rooms nearest the back wall had no actual back wall themselves, just an open space for the pipes that I was using to get around on to bend in and go where they needed to go. I slid down one and nearly lost my footing, falling to my death, but caught myself just in time. I would have felt pretty stupid to get all this way only to die sliding down a pipe.

The room I was in was filled with all sorts of junk piled onto shelves between drafting tables stacked high with smeared and smudged sheets and lots of broken pencils. I found one angry note claiming that the design ideas from the key-engineer were an incomprehensible mess, and that he refused to put up with it anymore. The guy was probably right; on the other hand, usually the work of a genius was an incomprehensible mess to a normal guy like me. I quickly rummaged through some more notes pinned to the wall, looking for a clue as to the whereabouts of the top secret stuff, before realizing that top secret stuff usually wasn't advertised on the group bulletin board.

I went back to the wall so I could climb back up the pipes, never really stopping to wonder if I actually could. That's when I heard what sounded like crying. I glanced around for a bit before realizing that the sobbing was coming from the pipes, or rather, I could hear it coming from a room that one of the pipes was connected to. I had to make a guess, up or down, and given that down was easier than up, it seemed as good a guess as any. I slid down the pipes to the next level, which was less well hidden than the service area I had been using, but rather dark and empty. I followed the pipe along the wall, until it hit a really dusty and poorly lit brick hallway, which stood out as odd since everything else in here seemed to be made from metal. I followed the pipe along the passage as it twisted back and forth, until it finally vanished into a wall with a big metal door in it.

The sobbing seemed to be my best clue, even though it had stopped, so I set to work on picking the lock. My trusty lock-pick that I found glued to my arm back in Cragscleft was back in action, and soon I heard the final tumbler fall into place. I wondered how the Hammerites expected to keep people out of the room with such a lousy lock, but they probably never expected anyone like me to want to get in there.

It was a pretty empty and big room, with just a single spotlight at the far end over a man huddled at a desk. I closed the door behind me, and saw him move a little, like he was lifting his head up just slightly. He didn't do anything else. Slowly and carefully, I walked towards him, until I was standing next to the desk, giving the poor bastard a look over.

The first thing I noticed was that he actually had a big shackle around his neck, with a chain on it that was locked to a big iron bar on the front of the desk. The chain was so short he couldn't lift his head more than a foot from the desk's surface. The light was above his head so I couldn't see his face, but he looked relatively young. The sheet of paper that covered the desk in front of him was covered from top to bottom with extremely detailed insanely complicated diagrams of Gods-knew what, with his two hands resting palms down on top of the only blank spots at the bottom.

Finally, after I had been standing there for about a minute, he slowly turned his head to look at me with his left eye. It was all red and swollen, like he had been crying. "Y...yeths?" he mumbled in a voice that sounded like the metal band around his neck was a half-size too tight.

"Uh, hi," I said. "Are you the key-engineer?"

He gestured slowly to the work in front of him, but said nothing.

"Huh," I replied, and pulled open one of the desk drawers. It hit his knee, but he didn't move. I then noticed that his legs were shackled to the desk too. Ouch, Brother Oberon was a real slave driver. I reached inside the drawer and pulled out a big bound set of pages. "This the schematics for the master gear?" I asked.

He didn't reply, just turned his head even more, his eyes trembling. He started to take lots of short, shallow breaths.

"Ah," I said, as I saw the table of contents. "How convenient; the schematics for the master gear, plus a dozen other things. And look, you're not finished yet. Half of it is still blank. Well, I hate to cut your work short, but..." I looked to the side and saw a metal bucket full of balled up pieces of paper. I dropped the bound volume into the bucket, and pulled out my tinder box.

"No!" he cried in a whiney voice, but I didn't listen. A few sparks later and I had a nice little blaze going. I poked it around a bit with one of my longer daggers to make sure that the fire was spreading evenly between the bound pages; I didn't want anyone picking up where he left off. I looked up at him, seeing tears streaming down his cheeks at the sight of all his hard work going up in flames.

"Don't feel so bad," I said. "The bastards you did this for didn't deserve it. Look at you! Do you really want to live like this?"

He didn't say anything. He just watched it burn. A few times he started to heave up and down, giving little grunts and cries of sorrow. Then he started to laugh faintly, and then cry a bit more, and then more laughter. The guy was clearly not right in the head.

"Look," I said, coming up to him with my slightly scorched dagger to his throat. "I'm trying to turn over a new leaf, so I'll cut you a deal. Tell me where the master gear is kept, and I won't kill you."

He didn't even hesitate. "Down, downstairs," he muttered, "Master Gear room has a sign on it.—Third from your left—Door code...nine seven, nine seven.

I patted him on the back. "See? That wasn't so hard. Tell you the truth; I wasn't going to kill you. Fact is; you're too damn pathetic for that. Look, I'll even loan you my lock-pick. It's got a bit of a history of undoing shackles, though I don't think you'll need to use your teeth or your toes. Nah, to hell with the loan, it's a keeper. Good luck with the neck...thing. I hope that if I kill Oberon you can actually get some credit for your own work."

I walked away. As I got to the door, I heard him break into a wail. I glanced back, seeing him with his head in his hands. Then he grabbed the sheet of paper on the table, and began to tear it up, crying and sobbing to himself.—Poor bastard. I let myself out, clicking the door shut behind me.

Once I got back out to the main area of the factory I found the stairs that the key-engineer probably meant, and clamored down them in a passable attempt at discretion. I found that keeping this place top secret also meant not many soldiers were on duty; in fact, I hadn't seen a single one. I knew

that some of the priests could hurl holy hammers and kill people with them, but that probably didn't apply to the nerdy engineer type priests. As my luck would have it, as soon as I spotted the third door from the left, I heard Perrywynne's group coming, and the only place to hide was the second door on the left. I took my chances and ducked inside, since there was no light under the door.

I didn't even bother looking around, since I imagined that the only reason Hammerites would be in a dark room was to either sleep or to be doing questionable things to one another, and in the first case they wouldn't know I was here, and in the second they'd be hiding, terrified of being caught. I watched with the door open just a crack as the familiar group of new recruits was being led to—yup, the door that said Master Gear on it.

Once they had all passed, I made sure my ears were hearing the noise from the factory correctly, (it was pretty loud) and stepped out into the corridor behind them. I unhooked my blackjack from my belt and gave the one in the back a solid whack. I caught him with my hand over his mouth before he hit the ground, and deftly piled him into the dark room before the rest of the group noticed. I could hear the click-click-click-click of someone punching buttons, probably the door code the key-engineer told me about, so I waited a bit until I heard the door open and close. Then I heard it open again, and when I peeked out, I saw one of the Hammerites, Brother Thurm of all people, poking around, saying, "Brother Harold? Where art thou?" When he passed my door, I leapt out, gave him a solid thump, and then piled him on top of Brother Harold in the dark room. "Sorry, buddy," I mentioned before I left him.

There was just five, maybe six of them in the Master Gear room now, so I could probably take them with a little distraction. I had just what I needed in mind. I ran up quickly to the door, punched in the code, nine seven, nine seven, and tossed in a flasher-bomb. With a pop and several cries of surprise, I stormed the room. Thankfully, Hammerites always put their light activation levers in predicable places, so when their eyes recovered from the flash, they'd have nearly pitch blackness to contend with. As they were shouting out in dismay about a blown fuse and trying to get one of them to go do something called "flip the breaker," I landed good solid blows on each one, taking them down in turn, until I got to Brother Perrywynne. He just shouted in anger, and took a swing back at me. I forgot about the blackjack for a second and gave him a good solid punch to the jaw, which sent him to the floor faster than Laurela's clothes after two bottles of wine.

"Master Gear, I presume," I said when I switched the light back on and found a really incomprehensible looking thing inside a glass case. It looked like a cross between someone's overcomplicated novelty timepiece and one of those ship's navigation tools for sailing by the stars. With a crack of the blackjack, the glass was shattered. I then lifted up the oddly heavy contraption, and immediately got the sensation that my ears were ringing. No, that wasn't just my ears; I had set off an alarm. Crap! I quickly spotted a big key ring next to where Perrywynne was knocked out, tied by a string to

his belt, and fumbled around with it until I got it to fit in the really obvious keyhole on the base of the pedestal. Why hadn't I checked for that before I tried to take it? Oh well, the damage was done. I knew the drill; lie low until everyone assumes that the cunning brigand had somehow escaped impossibly, and once they've given up the search, *actually escape*.

I ran out the door as fast as my energetic legs could take me, making a dash for the pipes which had been my avenue for most of my adventure. I found that with a healthy dose of oh-shit I could climb back up them just fine, and in no time I was shimmying up like a monkey into places where the Hammerites would probably be too thick to actually look.

When I got up to the service deck at the top level I quickly noticed that the elevator, the only way out as far as I knew, was being barred off and locked, and that a posse of soldiers had been allowed down here after all. They would probably erase their memories afterwards. Much to my amusement, way down below, I saw that some of the mechanism mechanist things were being powered up, with packages of coal shoved into their behinds and lit. Faster than I expected they came to mechanical life, with an engineer tethered to them clutching boxes covered with levers greedily in their hands. Yeah, in a fair fight, I definitely was glad I wasn't going to have to be worrying about those things.

The pipes under me lurched violently, nearly shaking me off. I frantically looked around to see which Hammerite had spotted me so I would know which way to run, but they were all preoccupied with something *else*. I twisted around to face the other direction and saw that the commotion, and the violent lurch, was centered about the previously barred elevator.

Something, it looked like a really disturbing zombie girl with bug wings and its head on upside down, had just caused the elevator chamber to pretty much turn inside out, and was now being surrounded by Hammerites. The soldiers were shouting at it, but it seemed to ignore them, and they all looked too scared to take a step closer. I didn't blame them; I had seen plenty of zombies in my day, but that one took the cake for *hellish*. "If my curse dreamt that up," I muttered to myself, "I am so thoroughly screwed."

I saw a big bright glowing something fly through the air and explode in the zombie's face, maybe one of those spiritual hammers I had been wanting to see in action; but the zombie only recoiled slightly and then lashed out at all the soldiers at once, cutting them into pieces with arms that seemed to stretch out and turn into blades before reforming into perfectly arm-like appendages, aside from resembling a horror story from a meat-packer's nightmare. I was then pretty sure that this was not actually a zombie.

The Hammerites were scrambling, but it seemed to be ignoring them now. I could see the ones below on the factory floor working like maniacs at their controls, but none could seem to maneuver just right to get the big tubes attached to the front of the mechanisms aimed at the zombie girl monster thing. One of them shot a bit of fire out of the tube, but the fire only lasted for a split second, though for some reason it made part of the ceiling above it dent really badly. My best guess was that it threw something out of the tube

and I had just blinked and missed it. It was a shame he also missed the zombie by a mile.

She dove down to the factory floor. She landed next to the machine that had just fired at her, tearing into it with her bare hands, though I wasn't sure if the term hands even applied to her. Everyone around her abandoned their control boxes and ran, leaving her pretty much to do as she pleased. The thing pretty much went to pieces as the metal cracked and tore, with her tossing parts and gears left and right. Finally, and I knew it when I saw it, she was holding that machine's copy of the master gear proudly. She regarded it carefully, and then tossed it away. I started to feel very self-conscious.

She looked to the next machine, and tore into that one as well. It was even faster this time, since she knew right where to look. Again, she tossed the master gear away, only this time I thought I heard a shriek of disgust.

I had a feeling something bad was coming next. She looked right at me, if you could call whatever she seemed to do with those empty eye sockets looking. She flapped her big bug wings and rose up into the air. I had a good idea I knew what she was after. I quickly scrambled over the tops of the pipes, thinking I might be able to get to the elevator before she did, but then I remembered how fast I had seen her move. If she got to me, and she wanted the master gear, she was going to get it, and I was probably going to die just for the sport of it. So, I did the only sensible thing I could think given the circumstances.

I didn't run for the elevator, I ran deeper into the factory. There were lots of vats on cranes that were pouring molten metal into forms on conveyors, and the biggest one was nearly dead center. The length of pipes that I was on could bring me halfway there, but for the rest of the trip I needed to run down a single narrow conduit that would probably make a tight-rope walker proud. I just ran, not thinking very hard about how stupid this was, until I got above the metal vat.

As soon as my legs stopped moving and my brain started working, I felt my balance slipping away, and over I went. I managed to grab onto the conduit somehow with one hand, dangling above the burning heat of the vat. It really wasn't meant to be supporting my weight, so I wasn't surprised when I saw the brackets starting to split. I was close enough, anyway. I took the Master Gear and threw it into the vat below, an instant before the brackets snapped and the conduit dropped down several feet.

I saw her turn her head to watch it fly through the air and land in the vat with a plop. She frowned, unless it was an upside down grin, and took off. She perched herself right on the rim of the molten vat, making the whole thing sway under her probably tremendous weight. Not seeing the gear anymore, she did the most amazingly stupid thing I had ever seen a monster do; she jumped in. Within seconds, she was gone, and a few seconds more, the billows of steam and smoke that she kicked up when entering was gone too.

I pulled out a knife and cut the conduit, which was probably really stupid since there was usually electricity in those, but somehow I managed to avoid

shocking myself to death. Down I went, but it was a swing in one direction rather than a straight fall, so I managed to grab onto a catwalk railing. With a grunt and a tug, I was over the railing, crouching on the catwalk, panting for breath.

All around the Hammerites started to come out of hiding. Even the key-engineer, who had by now managed to pick the lock on his shackles, was stumbling into view, though he looked like his back was permanently bent from being chained like that.

Much to my chagrin, I heard them begin to shout again. When I looked back at the vat I saw a tiny womanly figure rising up out of the molten metal, glowing just as brightly as the metal itself. One arm was stretched out before her, holding up a big gob of dripping metal. Her body began to ripple, and when one of the ripples traveled down her arm, the molten metal burst off, revealing the Master Gear; perfect, undamaged.

She didn't resemble a zombie anymore; I didn't know what she looked like now. The metal wasn't cooling or hardening, with the ripples continuing to flow over her body to give her entire form a sort of ribbed texture. With a loud crack, her chest just burst open, revealing a really mangled interior of burnt flesh and the most random bits of wood and metal I had ever seen inside someone. She put the Master Gear into a hollow spot inside, and her ribcage shut like a double-door.

The molten metal changed color from orange to bright gold, and seemed to double the light it gave off. Her eye sockets were now bright yellow orbs, and the bug wings, which had been burned off by the molten vat, were growing back, only now they looked like metal feathers. Her head was twisted around, with the mouth and eyes back in their proper positions. The mouth was gaping open, sending out a high pitched tone that made me wish I was deaf.

What was almost as crazy was what was going on below. I knew that the Hammerites had all ducked for cover, so it was really confusing to see the mechanisms starting to move around, bumping into each other. One by one they started to get a handle on themselves, until they stopped and looked up at the metal woman who was hovering above them. What was even more crazy was that the half-assembled models were also getting up off the conveyor line and going to join the group, all clanking and whirring and making the strangest noises I had ever hear come from a machine.

She didn't seem to be finished yet, though. Everything about the factory seemed to be taking on a life of its own, with the conveyors twisting and convulsing and the cranes twitching and warping, the pipes above me started to writhe like snakes and the catwalks bucked like wild beasts sending the cowering Hammerites flying off into a deadly tumble. She didn't seem to be in a particular hurry about anything anymore, just hovering there, arms and wings stretched out wide, the machines beneath her swarming around like flightless moths trying to get closer to a flame somewhere above them, but only managing to trip over one another.

I heard an explosion, and realized that one of the machines had just shot

fire out of its long metal pipe, and that a Hammerite on the other side of the factory was now missing a head. Like thunder, more and more of the explosions went off, followed by screams as more and more of the Hammerites were killed by their own mechanisms. Over and over, on and on it went, with things exploding and dents being pushed into the walls and ceilings. It was only a matter of time before one of the pipes was aimed at me.

"Right, play time is over," I said, and took out one of my specially tipped arrows, the kind with the explosive crystals tied to the end, "My turn to make something go boom." I aimed for the chain that was now the only thing holding up the big vat she had just taken a bath in, and let it fly. The crystal exploded on impact, sending chain links everywhere, and causing the vat to go into a nice tumble, throwing molten metal everywhere. She avoided it easily of course, but I was dealing with one thing at a time. As the hot liquid metal flowed across the floor, the oddly living machines first got stuck in it, and then quickly melted just enough to make all of their gears jam and fail.

She looked up at me, eyes glowing like flash-bulbs, her metal face locked in an expressionless mask of contempt. "Oh, maybe I should have killed you first, or just ran for my life," I realized out loud, and thought it time to make a mad dash for that elevator. I tried to run along the catwalk, but it was squirming like a snake, so it wasn't long before I was knocked off my feet.

She landed on the catwalk in front of me, and the whole thing seemed to tip up to slide me closer to her. In the insanity the railings had broken free, so it was just as easy to slide off, landing with a tumble on the stone platform below. I then made a mad dash for the ladder in front of me, but it seemed just as alive as the catwalk had, so I decided to avoid it, taking a hard left and leaping onto the top of a crane's control cabin, before running down the length of the crane arm. It was moving too, but slow enough so, that I didn't lose my footing.

She was behind me again, so I had to jump before I felt I was close enough to the ledge in front of the elevator. I caught it at chest level, knocking the wind out of me, but not dazing me so much that I couldn't scramble up. I got a really nasty push though, one that tore the quiver off my back and probably a layer of skin with it, and found my face grinding against the floor like sandpaper against a skinned peach.

I spun around on my back, watching her slowly hover closer; beating her wings lazily like it was just for show. I had my bow ready again, grabbed a crystal-tipped arrow that had fallen nearby, and this time I aimed for her head. The crystal exploded on impact, sending her back a few feet, but otherwise she wasn't bothered by it. "Nuts," I just said, and tried to push myself to my feet.

Then she moved fast. In a flash she was on top of me, that cold metal face of hers right in mine. I heard my armor tear and then a sound like cracking bone mixed with a block of stone being split in two. I felt something cold, and then very hot, and the next thing I saw was her bloodied hand as she pulled away from me. I glanced down at myself, seeing nothing but blood all over my tunic, and said, "Oh," before everything went dark.

— Lytha: Forces of Evil —

Day 8: 8:00 am

The stone column shook as the blast hit it, but I stayed my ground. I slowly came to my senses, still numb and torn apart by the death of a mind I was so closely in contact with. I was trying to take hold of Oberon's, but I found myself lacking. I could hear his thoughts, but felt no power over them, not even for the gentle push and pull of ideas as I had managed with Rafael. All I was able to gain was a belief that the stone column should shield me from the blasts, and so here I stayed. One of the machines had already exhausted its shot, another had yet to fire. He would have to reenter to replace the barrels, and then I would have him.

He was maneuvering the machines to either side now, attempting to flank me, thinking that I did not know which one was still a danger and which was an empty threat. He knew it, and so I knew it; the one coming around from the right had already split its rifle pipe, and would not fire again. I waited until I could feel his anticipation mount. He knew where I was, but as long as I was behind the column he would have to take the shot blind. Feeling the time was right, I spun around to the right side of the great pillar, coming face to face with the machine with the split barrel.

Seeing what I had done, he forgot himself, confusing one machine for the other even though he could see things before him perfectly well. He pressed a button, issuing the command to fire. I ducked, rolling away from the column so that even the debris couldn't strike me. The shot flew out, but without the rifle tube to guide it, it came out at a random direction, striking the ceiling, bouncing off, and landing on the other side of the room in a plume of dust.

He now had a clear shot at me with the other machine. He was quickly fiddling with the controls to estimate the aim; I could feel the difficulty of the task through his concentration. I would not ease his burden. I pushed myself up, running for the closed gate, all the while feeding off his perceived difficulty, hoping I could make it somehow overwhelm him. As he saw me running for the metal bars, he panicked slightly, and I latched onto the panic, again forcing his feelings to overcome his sense. He fired prematurely, his aim imperfect. I threw myself down as the metal ball rushed over my back, by chance alone striking one of the metal bars rather than sailing through to kill him.

He gave in completely to his panic, dropping the control box and running. I was off the ground quickly, slipping easily through the gap where the metal bar had broken free, chasing after him. As soon as I had, I felt that I was being drawn into another trap. I could sense him up ahead, meeting with a large group of dozens of soldiers, lying to them, telling them that I had killed the High Priest and that he had me cornered. More and more were pouring into the room. He had planned this, ordering these men here hours ago, ready to do his bidding when things unfolded badly for him.

I ran back to the side chapel, taking both control boxes in my hands, dashing behind another column for cover. I sat, with both boxes in front of me on the ground. I would not need to see to aim. I would not need the

precision of the rifle tubes either; all I needed was their fear. I understood well enough from Oberon's concentration how to work the controls, and quickly maneuvered them both to aim for the corridor. A moment later they charged the iron gate, quickly unlocking it and sliding it back into the ceiling. I pushed the red buttons.

Both machines fired, and though neither hit a target, the effect was the same; surprise and fear went through the Hammerites in waves. Then, I half-heard half-sensed Oberon tell them something. The machines firing mechanists needed time to cool down before another shot could be made, and that they could flood the room without fear of a second salvo. He did not tell them the whole truth; however, there was more to the thought that went unspoken. There was danger.

As the Hammerites overcame their fear and began to surge into the room, I pressed the firing buttons repeatedly trying to cause the accident Oberon knew was possible. Then, it happened; one of the machines attempted to fire, and jammed. It attempted to fire again, causing a rupture inside, and an explosion. Now there wasn't just fear, but also agony and death. I felt the impact of the metal pieces against the column, and an instant later the second machine also exploded, the steam boiler on its back ruptured by the shrapnel from the first, sending even more Hammerites to the ground, maimed, or dead.

Oberon was running again. I jumped from my cover, dodging quickly around the dead and dying Hammerites, only to face three more that had held back and now wanted my blood. The first was blind with rage, swinging too wide and too slowly with his hammer. I was inside the swing before it had made a half arc, cutting his throat, and then dodging away as his hammer struck his companion next to him. The third held his hammer closer to the end and with both hands, coming at me with a faster swing. I knew it was coming, evaded it, dragging my dagger through his side before running out of the chapel, the coast now clear, Oberon now with a good head start.

I raced down passage after passage, hot on his trail, before finding myself back in the front hall of the cathedral. I caught just a glimpse of him as the great doors at the front shut and barred. The one, who had dropped the bar in place, cut and ran blind with fear and nearly knocked himself out as he hit a nearby door before actually opening it. I ignored him. I ran for the front door, leaping up to kick the lock bar up and away, recovering, and then pushing the doors open.

No, not again; not this time. I pushed myself to the ground as the crossbow quarrels flew overhead, sailing harmlessly above me. I picked my face up from the floor to see Oberon standing triumphantly at the back of one of their street steam locomotives, with a host of archers both behind him and beside him at the back of the machine as it rushed away.

He had even planned his getaway! As he thought if it, I understood it; I knew where he planned to go. Even if I lost him, I could get past him and cut him off, or be waiting there for him.

Another salvo of quarrels narrowly missed me. I returned the favor,

pulling my own bow off my back, and taking aim. My accuracy was better. The first one dropped, and the second, seeing he was in danger, gave up most of his aim for nervousness, and when he pulled the trigger again, I had little fear of being struck. One arrow later he was on the ground too, and I was on the move.

The locomotive was now halfway across Town Square, a grand forum that would be packed with people at this hour of the morning, making focusing in their individual thoughts extremely difficult. The machine plummeted through the square, causing the shopkeepers to rush to safety as the big mass of metal and steam crashed through and demolished their stands. Every mind in the square roared out in surprise at the crash and the appearance of the locomotive, making it easy to find, but impossible to hear the thoughts of the driver. I zigzagged through the market, squeezing between terrified townspeople and vendor's stands until I found one that looked like it would support me. Arrow at the ready, I ran up it and when I reached the summit, I took aim and released my arrow in just a split second, feeling it fly true to its target, the driver.

He was dead, but one of the archers also knew how to operate the machine. The body was shoved into the street, and the machine was quickly under control again. Waves of emotion and thought and intention and confusion pushed against me from all directions as more and more people flooded into the plaza to see what the commotion was. I had to rely on my ears to keep track of the machine, unable to find Oberon's mind in the chaos. I crossed over the wake of its destruction, letting another arrow fly, this time taking down another one of the crossbowmen. Quarrels were fired into the crowd. Innocent bystanders were dying. I should have just gone straight to where I knew Oberon was headed and spared these people's lives.

It was too late now. I ran up the side of another merchant's stand, sending another arrow off as I reached the top of my climb, seeing another one of the crossbowmen tumble into the street.

The machine was nearly to the edge of the square, but I was no longer sure who was on it, my brain lost on the storm of minds all around me. As I pushed through the crowd, who still seemed to have no idea that I was the one they were exchanging arrows with, I came to a clearing just in time to see the locomotive ram into the side of a building, causing the entire wood and brick structure to lurch, and then continue to press against it until the entire building was collapsing all around it. I could not preoccupy myself with the destruction; however, Oberon had jumped from the machine, maybe some time ago, and I now had no idea where he was. It was possible that he was still heading to his fallback position, but it was also possible that he would change his mind. I wouldn't know unless I could find him again.

Suddenly, something *else* flooded my mind like the ground beneath me had simply given away. A force of thought, pure insanity, rushed over me and before I knew it I was on my back gasping for air. I knew that it wasn't *It*; but rather a completely different sensation. I felt something move, some Being, towards the cathedral at great speed. This being was full of intention, of

hunger, of wanting desperately to have something which it felt was here and here alone, almost childlike in its single-mindedness, but carrying with it a weight that made the ground beneath me seem to shudder.

"Ghost," I whispered in fear, a horrible premonition coming over me. I could deal with Oberon later. I pushed myself up, again shoving the clueless crowd away and sprinted back to Soulforge.

The plaza seemed impossibly wide as I ran back while the people herded around to catch a glimpse of the Hammerite beast demolish everything in its wild path. I found myself leaping to the roofs of the stands, hopping from one to the other, jumping away an instant before each collapsed, until I was back on the ground again, sprinting to the gaping front doors of Soulforge. My eyes were immediately drawn upwards to the grand rose window which adorned the façade. It had been shattered, and the stonework around it torn asunder as if an explosion had gone off inside of it.

When I got there I saw that it wasn't just the rose window, everywhere I looked I saw the stonework pushed outwards, like it had been hit by a massive force. There were no scorch marks, or signs of an impact; it was as if the air itself had risen in pressure and pushed out the walls like steam pushes on the shell of a boiler. It was not the same everywhere I looked. In fact, there was a distinct path to follow. When I got into the main sanctuary hall, I saw that the back of the room, behind the altar, had been pushed through leaving a gaping hole and piles of debris everywhere. More Hammerites lay dead or dying under the rubble, some with strange slash wounds that ripped their bodies open. Only a few seemed unharmed, and were too occupied with tending to their wounded brothers to pay me any attention.

I felt another oppressive surge of feeling that nearly knocked me off my feet. It was a sensation of possession, of having something cherished, of being completed by it. Whatever this Being was, it had found something within Soulforge that it desired more than anything else in The World.

I ran even faster. There was a single mind before me which outshone all of the others, even that of the tremendous force of the unknown Being; Ghost. He was not afraid, but he knew that he was in grave danger. His lack of fear was what disturbed me the most. I knew he was going to attempt to be heroic again, to do something brave and bold rather than simply saving his own skin.

Soon I was through the hole in the back wall and once again following the path of destruction which channeled me downwards into the factory. There was a deafening noise, but it was not the steady rhythm of the factory machines. It sounded like pure madness. When I dropped down through a hole that had been blown into the floor I came face to face with the chaos; screaming Hammerites everywhere, running in fear from massive machines that were going haywire. Some resembled the street locomotive that Oberon had used to escape, but others seemed to be equipped for destruction. Arms with wrecking balls swung madly, big drills pummeled the walls and floors, big rotating saw blades swept left and right, cutting everything in their path. Up ahead, beyond it all was a continuation of the hole that had been torn straight through the factory.

I ran forward, right in between the trashing machines, narrowly avoiding a number of blows that would have torn me in half. I landed on a catwalk which seemed to turn into a cloth blowing in the wind as I grabbed onto it. It shook me free, sending me tumbling to the factory floor. I rolled, avoiding major injury, and continued my run just in time to avoid a wrecking ball landing on me. Both the tremendous Being and Ghost were very close now.

I slid down the hole which looked like it had once been an elevator shaft, catching myself on a hanging bar before I broke my ankles. With another drop I was on a stone floor, jerking my eyes forward to see. Ghost was right in front of me, on his back, his bow in his hands. An angelic form of molten metal was before him, her head crowned in a halo of flames. In that split second, I felt the Being's consciousness flood into my mind, smothering me like the ocean smothers a candle. Her eyes flashed like the sun, and then she moved with impossible speed, one of her arms striking Ghost like a javelin, with only the sound of cracking stone above the roar of the self destructing factory.

I felt the pain of the strike in Ghost's place, of the claw ripping straight through me and out my back. My head slammed onto the stone behind it, my mouth gaping open in a silent scream. All I could feel was the Being now, a mindless desire with no thought as to what it desired. Ghost had been silenced.

I jerked my head back up, my hands instinctively testing my torso, finding it whole. My mind may have taken the blow for Ghost, but it was his body that had been pierced. My mind searched and searched for his, calling out, screaming out, grasping at his body like the search for a drowner in the water, to no avail. Every time I felt I had found him, he slipped between my fingers, until all I was chasing were echoes and ripples.

The Being filled my vision now, one arm steaming with blood that was quickly burning off of its red-hot surface. With her eyes locked onto mine, I felt another rush of consciousness flow into me like a savage invader. She did not know what she was doing. She did not know what she was, or why she was here, or what any of this meant. She was little more than a child, a newborn, thrust with agonizing torment into a World where she did not belong, into a body unfit for any living soul. She was a creature of impulse, of desire, of needs and uncontrollable hunger. She did not know why she wanted what she did, or why she did what she did, only that she would follow her impulses and needs where they took her. She did not understand life, or death, or the difference between our bodies and the metal of the machines. Her confusion, her intense self loathing, had been channeled into hatred. Yet, she did not understand what she hated, or why.

I could have been at the eye of a hurricane and I would not have known it; everything beyond our two minds was melted into a torrent of insanity. I was just the tiniest of voices in the storm of her thought, but I screamed with all my might to be heard. *"Go back to where you came from. Leave us in peace. You do not belong here. My god, my gods, you killed my Ghost. I hate you; I hate you with every fiber of my being."* At that moment, I begged, and prayed, and

wished that *It* would somehow return to me, and grant me the strength to slay this Being of insanity which held me captive, to bring my vengeance upon her; but my prayers were fruitless.

She heard me. Somehow, she understood me, but she did not care what I had said. Only one question was driven into my mind, "*What am I? What am I called?*" with such force that I nearly forgot who *I* was.

I knew that there was neither name nor word in the tongue of man which could describe what this Being was, yet my heart answered with pure certainty; "*You are evil.*"

She did not understand. She only understood two things; that she was, and that she desired. All I could think to do was to offer her a simple concept, "*Desire not to be.*"

I felt as if my mind was being sucked out of my skull as she pulled away from me, my senses returning to my body to see her rise up quickly into the air, the ceiling burning and melting as she made contact. She flew straight up, vanishing into the stone above us, until daylight pierced the hole left by her passage.

I rushed to Ghost's body, nearly slipping in his blood, feeling him limp in my grasp, unable to tear my eyes from the ruin of torn flesh and cracked bone that remained of his chest. When I finally willed my eyes away, vision blurred by tears, I forced his lids open, searching for something, anything that remained inside. There was no life within his orbs, not even a glimmer, but with the direct contact, my mind delving deeper and deeper after the faintest of smoldering embers, I stumbled upon the tiniest thread of hope. Because I had mentally allowed myself to take the blow for him, his mind had not yet accepted that his body was dead. Gasping through suppressed sobs of fear, I lifted his body up into my arms, and began to run. Builder, help any Hammerite who got in my way.

— **Nightfall: A Common Foe** —

Day 8: 9:00 am

In all that was spread before me, not a thing stirred until Delphine slowly raised her head. She looked out and saw what I saw, her domain in ruin, her and her people gone, and all the fruits of her life's work gone. I could not imagine what was taking place in the outside world with such a Being free in it. "Delphine," I called out, piercing the silence that had hung over us.

Slowly she turned her head to look at me. She had the face of one who felt that all was lost. Her eyes would not lift to meet mine, hanging to the floor with shame.

"Delphine!" I called out again, as firmly as I could manage. She finally looked up, her eyes trembling. "Get up!"

"I should be dead," she whispered.

"You're not dead. So, you need to get up."

Reluctantly, and then with growing determination, she pushed herself from the ground. I did not know if it was a result of being a goddess or if it

were her closeness to the fae; but her wounds were now closed, though she would undoubtedly carry the ghastly scars for the rest of her days, assuming those days weren't numbered.

"Now, come get me down."

She obeyed, probably seeing no other choice. She worked slowly, squeezing the vines between her fingers, massaging them to force them to constrict and pump the blood back into me, before snapping them off delicately a piece at a time. The feeling was returning to my limbs, and my mind began to return to normal. When the vines could no longer support me, she did, lowering me carefully to the ground, letting me rest in my weakened state. "What have I done?" she said finally, sitting beside my head, once again looking out into the empty, dead village.

I wanted to hate her, to feel nothing but rage and contempt for her and what she had done, but I felt unable to. Part of it was that she twice protected me from the Being, and part of it was that I too felt responsible for what had happened. "It wasn't just you," I said back, just as softly as her words had been. "I could have said yes."

"I don't know what to do now," she said even more quietly.

"I do," I simply said. She turned to look at me quickly, her eyes shocked and surprised, but she said nothing. "But first you need to do two things. Your people may still be in hiding. You need to have them all leave—not a soul beside you and me may be within your domain. The next is more difficult. You must lure your creation back here."

"She isn't my creation," she said, barely a breath.

"Delphine!" Her eyes snapped back to me, growing wider. "Do you know how to lure her back here? There must be some way!"

"No," she said. "This thing that we summoned...that I summoned...is impossible. I feel that no force in The World could hold sway over it. She is nothing like what I wanted, what I had hoped."

I ignored her throes of self pity and regret. I had no need to lecture her and no desire to listen to her admitting to her follies. "You'll think of something," I simply said.

"How?" she uttered, her voice cracking. "Maybe you did not understand as I saw it. This is not a Goddess that was brought into the world, as I had hoped, nor is it a demon, or anything else of that nature. I cannot extend an invitation to her and expect her to honor it! I do not even know if it is possible to communicate with her at all!"

"I know what she is," I said, feeling some strength returning. "She is an un-living being, a force of consciousness to which life is alien. That is how the Rivata came to be. The cult sought to merge them with an un-living being which they summoned; though rather than channel it into an assemblage they channeled it directly into themselves."

"How do we stop such a thing?"

"We can only divert it elsewhere. Just as today, she was not created, but summoned. We need to summon her to somewhere *else*, and get her back out of The World."

She leaned forward, her face over mine, "How?"

"I will worry about that. You worry about saving the lives of the rest of your people, and then bringing that thing we summoned back here."

— Jyre: Vendetta's Fruition —

Day 8: 9:00 am

Ranson, Soore; it didn't matter. Both were cruel men, incapable of compassion, so being in the clutches of one over the other seemed trivial. All I cared about now was Tanya, and why he was suddenly before me. "Why were you with The Lady?" I asked him over and over, but Ranson just told me to shut up, and Tanya kept quiet. We had retreated into the woods again, and when we finally stopped to catch our breath, I asked again, "Tanya, why are you at Barlosk?"

He just looked at me with big, distant eyes. Truly, it had not been that long since I had seen him last; it wasn't even a year ago when Els took me to find my village and all we were able to discover was Tanya, and his words about our old home being lost. He had seemed slightly distant then, but now he was nearly a stranger to me. "I had to, Jyre. The village I had taken refuge in declared allegiance to Barlosk, and I could not continue to hide. When The Lady discovered a man of my talents, she refused to let me go to waste. She brought me here, gave me work and treated me as an honored guest."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Gave you work? Honored guest? Tanya, she's evil!"

"Not evil, Jyre, she wants what is best for her people and does not care who else it hurts. That's not the same."

"When you don't care who you hurt, that's called being evil!" I yelled in his face.

"Enough with the philosophy lesson," Ranson said, pulling me away from him. "Today's been a long time in coming, and you two will have time to catch up later. Alright, boy wizard; Soore's lapdog Memnon says that the bands around the ground level of Barlosk are the key to sending the unholy place back to where it came from, wiping it from the face of The World. I'm betting you know more about it than he does."

"I do," he said, looking up at Ranson, before glancing back at me. "The magic that holds Barlosk here is strong, but it has a weak point. Why should I tell you?"

"Because if you don't," Ranson said. He looked at me, and a small smile came to his face. His arm shot out like a striking snake, grabbing me by the shoulder and pulling me tight against him. "I'll kill Jyre." I didn't kick or even try to struggle. At this point, I welcomed death.

Tanya stood up, almost looking like his old self for an instant, before once again growing distant. "I do not believe you will kill Jyre," he said quietly.

"Oh, no? Well how's about this, then. Unless we stop The Lady, she's going to do something crazy. It will be something that makes turning me into the half-monster-beast you see before you look like a parlor trick." Ranson gave a low growl; as if he needed to prove any more than he already had that

he was a monster inside.

"I know, yes," he said. "To tell you the truth, I had become resigned to this as inevitable."

Ranson nearly barked with anger. "Inevitable? You sloth! You've given up, and yet you know! You knew this entire time! You could have destroyed Barlosk at any moment and you sat in your little house and did her little work!"

Tanya seemed to come to life, a spark of emotion in his eyes. "What I know will probably kill everyone inside of Barlosk along with The Lady! I couldn't do something like that!"

"Thank you," I heard myself mutter. I didn't know why I was thanking him. I was just glad that he still had a heart somewhere in front of that cowardly spine of his.

Ranson pushed me away, nearly causing me to fall on my face. Before I could even think about taking off running, big hands were on my shoulders, helping me up, and then holding me in place. It was the fat one, the one I had mistaken for Ramirez. "Hi," he said with a grin.

"Just tell me, Tanya boy. The blood won't be on your hands; it will be on mine." Tanya was quiet. Ranson put his hand on his shoulder, leaning in close, and saying, "Just tell me. I promise you won't have to see any of it. You won't have to know. We'll cut you loose and you can just run. Just tell me. You'll be a hero, you know."

He gave a faint sigh, and then said, "There's a room at the center of Castle Barlosk,"

"Tanya, don't tell him!" I screamed.

He looked up at me for just a moment before meeting Ranson's gaze again. "It's where the band's tail is swallowed by its mouth. You must paint these symbols across the band in blood." He began to draw the symbols into the dirt before him with his finger. "Once you do that, run. It will take time, minutes, for the glyphs to imprint onto the magic of the bands, and cause them to fail. Get out or you'll die with the rest of Barlosk."

I was nearly in tears. I didn't want it to happen this way. No one else should have to die because of this, especially not an entire town, even if it's Barlosk. Not even The Lady deserved this. This made us worse than she was.

"Okay," Ranson said, after he had copied the symbols down onto a scrap of parchment. "This task is for me and Jyre. The rest of you would just get in the way."

"No!" I shouted. "This is wrong!"

He gave an impatient sigh. "Isn't it true, Jyre, that you and Els made a pact together? You agreed that you would see The Lady fall, no matter the cost. Well, now you know the cost. Els is dead, so he can't do this, but trust me, he would. To back out now would be to spit in his face, to spit on his grave!—Revenge against The Lady. That's what you lived for, isn't it? Ever since you realized you could never go home? You went to Nightfall for help, but he failed you. Els needed your help, and you failed him. That's where I come in. I'm not going to fail you, and I am not going to fail him, but most of all, I am

not going to let *you* fail *him*.”

Ranson finished, but I didn't know what to say. He claimed Daelus failed me, and I believed that was true. Had he really, though? He did things in his own way, never quite what I expected from him. He went to the Hammerites, something I would never do, so that they could be brought against The Lady. He hadn't failed me then, just helped in a way I hated. Then, even after I had tried to kill him, he still found Els, helped him and gave him men to aid him. Again, he had done what he could, even though I hated it. So really, he hadn't failed me at all. He just always helped in the opposite way I wanted him to. Was this the same, now with Ranson? Was he offering me help that I hated, but still something that needed to be?

“Don't keep me waiting, darling,” he said softly, his eyes glinting faintly.

“Okay,” I said quietly.

“Atta girl,” he said, winking at me. “Suf, keep a good tight hold on Tanya until I get back, then we'll set him free. Keep a sharp eye out for Soore and his dogs. Aim to kill. This may take some time, so don't get bent out of shape if you don't see us. We'll find a way back. Come on, Jyre. It's time we both had our revenge, together.”

I kept hoping that Soore and Heppet and the other men would show up, sending arrows through every one of us, even Tanya and me. I felt like it was better to die now than to let myself do what I had just agreed to do. Why was I so against this, after so long of planning for it every day? I guess I never really imagined that revenge would actually include killing anyone. I just wanted her to feel sorry, to regret what she had done. I don't know why, but I always imagined that was what Els wanted too. Ranson was probably right, though. Els wanted her blood, wanted her dead. Everything he had said all along led to that, I was just too much of a child to understand.

“After you,” Ranson said, prodding me to move.

I went without a fight, walking silently before him. He didn't speak either; but the way his toes nearly clipped my heels encouraged me to go faster. When we were almost to Barlosk, I felt that something wasn't right. There was noise coming from the town, and the ground felt like there were hundreds of feet on the move. “The hell?” Ranson said, noticing it too. We went around a different way to get a better look of where we thought the commotion was, and soon saw what was happening. Barlosk was being evacuated. It wasn't just the village, either, because I knew that there were far more people pouring out of the front gate than had ever lived as The Lady's subjects when I lived there. After a moment they weren't even people anymore—monsters and beasts of all shapes and sizes were rushing out of the gate, with flying ones just floating up into the air in droves.

“Something's gone wrong,” Ranson said. “They're not just leaving, they're terrified of something. Look at how they push and shove, trampling each other.—Animals.”

“We should wait until they're all out,” I said, feeling a glimmer of hope.

“No,” Ranson said sharply. “And risk what they're all running from escaping too? We have to hurry. In the panic no one will even notice us.”

Now Ranson took the lead, going for the same tree we had used to get over the wall a few hours ago. As I climbed up the tree I had to pause for a moment in astonishment of the masses of creatures fleeing Barlosk, things I had never seen before in my life. What amazed me the most were the people who looked like tall insects, and how each one took to flight carrying a smaller beast with them, sometimes people, sometimes furry creatures, sometimes big spiders. Ranson had called them all animals, but what I was seeing looked more civilized than anything I would have expected from The City.

After a climb and a drop we were both inside the courtyard, I found that Ranson was right. With everyone rushing out, we didn't even need to worry about staying hidden. By now the village was completely empty, with only a steady stream of creatures pouring out of Castle Barlosk, but soon even that trickled to an end. Within moments, before we had even reached the side of the castle, Barlosk seemed deserted.

"Hurry!" Ranson hissed to me, waving me to enter the servant's door near the back of the castle. The ground floor was dark, even during the day, and with the rush to escape many of the torches had been knocked free of their holders. Ranson grabbed one, waving impatiently again for me to follow. Abruptly he stopped, putting his back to the wall. We were right next to the barracks. I did the same, listening.

"Everyone needs to get out—Lady's orders. That means you too."

"Nope; I'm hiding here until this blows over. And by that I mean sleeping through it."

"This isn't just going to blow over. It's the end of everything. You didn't see what that thing did to the Fae's village. It was a massacre, a butchering! You're out or you're dead!"

"Fine!"

Ranson jutted his chin out at me with a jerk. I guessed he meant that to mean he wanted me to move. I walked as quietly as I could back down the passage, and took a corner before I stopped. He was right behind me, then turning the corner to press against the wall on the other side of me. I could hear the two men that were just talking leave the room and go the opposite way. Ranson was moving again, back in the direction we had just come from. I groaned quietly, I could have been there already if I didn't have to put up with him!

He crossed through the barracks to the opposite side, and then produced a key from his belt, opening a door at the far end. I followed quickly, but when I got inside I stopped in surprise. "What are you doing?" I demanded.

Ranson was filling his pockets with gold. It was the guard's treasury, where the pay was counted out in between it being taxed away from the villagers and distributed. "Be a shame to let it all go to waste!" he cooed with a sly smile.

I was disgusted. I ran out of the money room and out of the barracks too. I knew the way to the room Tanya described. It was one I was never allowed in, so I was very familiar with the door. I heard Ranson call out after me, but I

ignored him. I could easily hear him give chase with his pockets of gold coin jingling like sleigh bells. On my way I even pushed by two other guards, who dodged to let me past, with only a "What the hell? Does he know that we're evacuating?" before I turned the corner and was out of sight.

The door was in front of me. I grabbed the handle. It was locked. I kicked the door, but it was no use. Then there was a sharp pain at the back of my head as Ranson grabbed me by the hair. "Don't you *ever* run away from me again!" he hissed into my ear, before throwing me to the ground and fumbling around with his keys. He unlocked the door, and reached down to grab me up, pulling me with him.

The room didn't look like anything, just an empty place with a single pillar in the center. To my alarm, and soon panic, Ranson wasn't letting go of my wrist. Instead, his grip was getting tighter. "I haven't decided yet when exactly I made up my mind to kill you," he said with almost a laugh. I struggled against his grasp, but he yanked me forward, and shoved his hand into the stab wound behind my ribs. I cried out in pain, shrinking to the floor. "It could have been when you first left me, but we both know that was Els's fault, not yours." He grabbed me by the throat, and pulled me up. I struggled more fiercely this time, clawing at his hand, kicking his legs, but he didn't seem to care. He punched his knuckles into my eye, and everything almost went dark.

"It could have been when you ran away from me instead of giving me that scroll. You know we could have used that scroll to destroy her, right? What did you ever do with it, anyway?" He pushed me against the column, and with a thin twine that he had in a tight wrap in his pocket, began to tie me in place. I was so dazed from the punch I barely knew what was happening.

He tied off the twine, and again reached around my back to jab his hand into the wound. His fingers were covered in my blood. "But honestly, I don't think I was really sure that I wanted to kill you until today. You've just been treating me so unfairly, all this time. It's like I never even meant anything to you." I couldn't see him now. He was on the other side of the column, probably painting in the symbols Tanya told him with his fingers. I could hear them begin to sizzle as the magic awakened from the glyphs.

"And you were so stupid about it, too. Why the hell would I have you of all people come and help me do this when I clearly didn't need any help? You should have realized then that I just meant to leave you here to die."

I wasn't thinking anymore, just straining against the twine that was so thin it cut into my skin.

He walked around in front of me now, his hand still red with my blood. "All that garbage I told you really got to you, didn't it?" He grabbed my chin with the bloodied hand, squeezing. "I only wish it could have been me that had killed Els, and not some random beast. I really wanted to. I can promise you one thing, though. After I get out of here, if he isn't already dead, I'll find Nightfall and kill *him*, just because *you* loved him."

I couldn't resist any longer. I let myself go limp, panting for breath, feeling faint. His hand was still grabbing my face, which he jerked up, and

then pressed his lips against mine. I bit him, hard. He pulled away, giving a short snarl, his own blood dripping down his chin. He punched me again in the forehead, knocking my head back against the column. My vision nearly went dark for a second time.

He shook himself off, and wiped some of the blood off his chin with his clean hand. "Well my love, I've got to run." He turned around slowly, walking casually back to the door.

With my body limp, I felt the twine loosening. Something clicked in my head, and I exhaled completely, flattening my body as much as I could go. Then, putting my arms straight down my sides, relaxing my muscles, I carefully lowered myself down. The twine slid out of the grooves it had worn into me. I turned my head, letting the strands scrape against my cheek. One by one they slipped off me, until I had enough free above my head that the rest of the twine become completely loose. I wiggled the rest of the way, until I was on the ground, free.

He was still slowly walking away, too full of himself to notice anything. I could hear him whispering back what he had already said, replaying the scene over and over to himself, as if he hadn't enjoyed it enough the first time. I rushed to his back, pulling his own dagger from his belt, and as he turned around in surprise, plunged it straight into his throat.

It was only when I saw the blood spurting out of his neck and the life draining out of his eyes did I realize what I had done. Just like with Daelus, I had acted out of blind, thoughtless rage. He didn't say another word. He couldn't. He just fell to the floor, his blood flowing over me like a shower from a fountain.

He was dead, dead because of me; because I had wanted to kill him. I had wanted to shed his blood more than I had ever wanted anything else before. Well, I had done it now, and I wasn't happy; I was disappointed. It had been too easy in the end. It had been just like how he did it, holding power in his hands, taking lives as he saw fit, never caring that a life was not his to take. I was just like him. A voice in my head spoke but one word. "Murderer" I was a murderer. It was not just because I had killed him, but because I had wanted to. By pulling out his dagger and thrusting it into his throat, I had gone against everything I held true. Life was not mine to take. Life was sacred; a thing to be cherished. Once life was gone, it was over.—Finished.

I wanted to die, there, now, to pay for my horrible sin. All I would have to do was to wait, and I would perish along with all of Barlosk. But no, if I did that, who else would have to die with me? There may have been still time. I rushed from Ranson's body, to the glyphs drawn in my blood that were now corroding the bands around the column. My own hands were drenched in Ranson's blood. I reached up, trying to smear the symbols with the new blood, but all it did was burn my hands. It was too late; I had not only murdered Ranson, but had allowed him to murder every living thing still left inside Barlosk.

But what if they had all gotten out? What if I was the last one left? Before I knew what I was doing, I was running. I jumped over Ranson's body,

sprinted down the corridor, and leapt for the nearest window I could find. I tumbled through the air and landed hard on the grass, but then felt a great push against my body. There was an empty sound, and then a strange pop, and then a great wind that threatened to blow me back into the castle. I dug my hands into the grass, but my fingers were slick with blood. The wind seemed to blow forever, harder and harder, with my fingers slipping every second. As abruptly as it began, it stopped, and I found myself lying alone in perfect silence, the sun beating down on my cheek.

I slowly stood up, and reluctantly turned around. There was nothing there. No Barlosk, no pit, no field of rubble or even torn soil, just a grassy clearing, big enough for a castle and village to sit inside. I stared in disbelief, blinking at the sunlight in my eyes. Barlosk was gone, and Ranson along with it. I sunk down to the grass, still not believing what was before me. I had no idea where The Lady was, if she had died with Barlosk, or if she had been sent to that strange un-real place that brought me here. I had no idea what to do next. Was there anything left to do? Was this finished, all of it?

I thought I would be glad, that I would want to celebrate, but all I felt was empty.

— **Nightfall: Desire Not to Be** —

Day 8: 9:30 am

"Here, drink this," she said, kneeling before me and bringing a small, clay jar to my lips. I had managed to sit up, but felt an immediate change as the thick slightly sweet liquid touched my lips. I slowly drank it all, panting for breath after draining the jar in a single draft. "You were right Daelus, many were still hiding. We are alone now, I am certain of it. Even Barlosk up above us has been emptied."

"Good," I said, lifting myself up to my feet. She helped me, her shoulder under my arm. It seemed backwards; the damage the vines had done to me was trivial compared to the wounds inflicted on her. "And as for bringing her back here?"

"No, I still do not..."

Immediately I felt something, as if the circlet had tightened by an inch. "Delphine!" I pointed to the dark tunnel which led to the portal, which was now illuminated by a point of light. Delphine let out a gasp as a remarkable creature came quickly into view. It was a woman, whose ridged skin shined like gold, and who glided on big wings of metallic feathers. Her eyes were bright yellow lights, and her metal face frozen in an expression of apathy.

"It's her," Delphine said, quickly transforming into her goddess state as she left my side. "I do not know how," she said, her voice like the buzzing of an insect, "but she chose to return on her own accord."

I was certain that this was the same entity, but the awareness the circlet granted me showed me a Being much different than the one that had left us. Her first desire, to be complete, had been satisfied, but now she had another. "Something's about to happen," I said as I felt a strange sensation in my gut. It

was a sensation that ignited a memory deep in my subconscious, as if a part of a dream. "I think...I believe she knew it was happening. That she came here to experience it."

Delphine began to glance around with the speed of an insect, her many faceted eyes taking in far more than I could bear witness to. "It's Barlosk," she said, her voice increasing in pitch. "Someone has broken the spell! It's slipping away!"

The Being simply stood in midair, waiting. Somehow her instincts had led her back here. "What do you mean, slipping away?" I demanded.

"It's being pulled out of The World and back to the netherworld! I can stop it!" she insisted. "No, I cannot, but I can sever the link between this domain and Barlosk, so we will not be dragged along with it!"

"No!" I shouted. "This is what we need! This is perfect!" I could not believe our good fortune, but as soon as that thought occurred to me, I questioned it. If this Being had come here knowing this was about to happen, then this was exactly what she wanted to happen. It was too late to change my mind, and I was still not convinced that I should. With the unexplainable feeling that I had done this before, I felt The World slipping away from around us, like the air was being sucked out of my lungs, and replaced with a vast expanse of nothingness.

The light was now different; even, average, like there was no light at all and yet everything perfectly illuminated. For a moment everything appeared the same, but then everything I laid eyes upon began to fall apart. The ruined fae village before us tumbled into a million pieces, the cavern walls split and shattered, the light giving crystals which filled the cracks spun out of control, and the ground beneath my feet was suddenly no more than smoke.

Delphine grabbed onto me, her wings beating to steady us against the disintegrating material all around, but it was unclear if this was even needed, as nothing was so much falling as merely breaking apart. I could see miles and miles of cavern stretching out around us in all directions, all of it crumbling just as ours had, and I soon realized why; the only thing that had been banished to the netherworld was Delphine's domain, not the stone that surrounded it. Without that, the thin layer of rock and crystal that formed the shell of the interior spaces had nothing to hold it together.

The Being was flying in wide circles around the debris, causing it to form wakes as she passed, and some of it to gather up behind her in a trail. The circles grew larger and larger, until she passed us, flying away at tremendous speed, the debris following along behind her like the tail of a comet.

"I fear that this plane will not hold her for long. She is not simply freely exploring her new realm; she has a very specific destination in mind. We need to follow her. Can you?"

"Yes," she hummed to me, and soon the clouds of debris were behind us. I could still see the silhouette of wings in the distance against the gray haze of nothing, and expected that Delphine's vision was far better than mine. A chill ran through me as I spotted a distant speck beyond her, the distance difficult to gauge without any frame of reference. Whatever the speck was, I felt that

it was of great importance; the cirlet was giving me the urge to protect it at all costs.

— James: Process of Elimination —

Day 8: 9:30 am

It began with simple observation. I first noticed that the sentries had relatively simple patrol patterns which they never deviated from. These patrols always consisted of a loop, with no about-face. I established that there were exactly twelve sentries, and then I took my time, memorizing the patrol pattern of each, and by virtue of that, soon understood the complete layout of the colony. That part had only taken an hour; if Phaeros had been just a little more patient he would have been still alive and able to better enjoy his immortality.

I then focused on understanding their capabilities, a process that was aided by the fact that the sentries deemed any foreign matter an intruder, even if it was just some pebbles I had collected from outside. I noticed quickly that the sentries possessed both hearing and vision, but how these senses were utilized depended on other variables. When a sentry saw a pebble, it essentially shut down its hearing faculties until the visual threat had been assessed. Likewise, when it heard a pebble it shut down its visual faculties until it had, through audible means, determined that the threat had been assessed. As I quickly realized, this was a very flawed system, as a pebble coming to rest produced no other sounds, and as a result, a blind sentry would continue to listen for an extremely long period of time before aborting the search.

Thus, I had a plan, but to enact the plan I needed to move quickly, cover a great deal of ground, and risk certain death. As a precautionary measure, I tore away part of my sleeve and wrapped the soft cloth around my feet, so that my footfalls were below the audible threshold of the sentries' even while in focused audio investigation mode, which my plan depended on them being in.

One part of my plan made me nervous; like Phaeros's plan, it involved the sentries being unable to reach me before I found the deactivation controls. Of course, that was the only similarity. I had to tie up at least seven of them before I could cross the bridge, and felt that I had no more to learn before I began. Right on cue, I tossed a pebble so that it came to rest before a sentry turned a corner and would be able to see it. As expected, it shut down its visual center with several silvery discs just below the surface of the curved tube of its body turning over, and went into audio search, with long slots resembling gills opening up wider along the sides of the tube. On my toes, in case my footpads weren't quiet enough, I crept by the sentry in plain sight. Once I was in a position where I knew the next sentry would be able to hear, but neither the previous nor the next could see, I tossed a second pebble. This set the second one into the same mode. I repeated this process for the remaining five sentries, until I was back at Phaeros's last stand, knowing I had

only seconds before the first sentry switched back to its standard patrol. I went.

Just as I had hoped, the seven which I had befuddled continued to ignore me, and the five which I had no time to deal with but who patrolled on levels both too high and too low to theoretically get to me in time, approached steadily. With my breath held and a few prayers in mind, I quickly crossed the bridge, and quite contrary to my expectations, found myself standing in the relatively simplistic control core. I only had seconds to spare, so I made an educated guess as to which panel represented the sentries, and using my best understanding of a language which I was only vaguely exposed to in my early childhood, located the off switch. To my chagrin, no change seemed to occur. Two of the five un-befuddled sentries were now in the core, with their hair-like portions beginning to resemble combs. Not wishing to panic before death, I realized that I had simply misunderstood the way the control worked, and tried again, this time pressing in before sliding down. Much to my relief, I was still alive, and the sentries were apparently catatonic.

That was when my dilemma truly began, however. I was still not committed to the idea of simply killing every living person within the colony, and now that Phaeros could no longer argue in favor of his point, I placed my chin firmly on my fist and began to think it over. I could, in theory, devise a way to wake up each colonist individually, and win them over one at a time to The Cause, until all five hundred were in agreement with me. This plan had obvious flaws, namely that my food supply (mongbat, delicious!) would not last much longer than another day, and I, unlike Phaeros, still needed to eat and drink. Other flaws included the possibility of dangerous or violent colonists subjecting me to physical harm, the possibility of them feigning acceptance of The Cause only to gang up on me later, and any number of issues not linked to the arrogance of expecting that I could sway the hearts and minds of five hundred people to abandon the programming that the Rivata had probably made as integral to these people as the need to urinate.

With a sigh, and a heavy heart, I examined the life support systems panel. Like the sentries, it would be easy to deactivate. A puzzling thought then occurred to me; why include these panels at all in the design of the colony? Surely the Rivata themselves did not plan on tinkering with the environmental control systems inside the colonist's sleeping pods. Why include the ability to deactivate the sentries? It was assumable that the sentries were designed to ignore the colonists themselves, so that they would be allowed to pass. Then I remembered the protrusions all around the surface of the colony, and deduced that when one was to awaken, they would be transported down one of these protrusions and released into the wild without ever having to go near a sentry.

If I were to hazard a guess, it would be that either a colonist was meant to assume the role of custodian to the colony and man these controls, or a delegate was. It seemed, then, only logical, that what had taken place was exactly what was supposed to happen. A delegate was meant to observe and understand the sentries to a degree where they could be surpassed, and then

take mastery of the colony as its caretaker, responsible for seeding the colonists into The City when he saw fit, possibly as some sort of figurehead.

It was preposterous to assume that I was to be the one, for the Rivata had no idea I would be here, and certainly hadn't manipulated me into being here. There were too many thousands of variables for that to be of consideration. It was only natural then to expect that one of the other currently unknown delegates was meant to be the colony's caretaker. Why would it even need to be an unknown? Perhaps it was Daelus?

As amusing as all of this conjecture was, it still did not explain why the Rivata would place a kill switch on the control panel of their colony unless they expected there to be a reason to use it.

Ah, I was stalling. The thing I had come here to do was lying before me and I was devising clever ways to delay the inevitable. I was certain that I did not want to kill the colonists and I was uncertain that I would be able to do so and even more uncertain if it would even be the correct thing, logically, to do. However, if I were to rely on logic, I had to accept that when faced with a choice what one wanted was actually irrelevant. I was certain that the colonists seeding The City was the will of the Rivata; so in the best interests of The Cause, I had to do the opposite of what the Rivata wished. I pressed in on the control which would deactivate the life support systems, and setting my feelings aside, pushed downwards.

Just as with the sentries, I felt the results were instantaneous. A hum which had been inaudible was noticeable in its sudden absence. I carefully stepped around one of the dormant sentries, traversing the bridge which would take me back to the glossy surfaces of the pods. I quickly approached one, and with my face close to the surface, felt certain that the young man I was seeing within was not among the living. I went from pod to pod, peering inside, forcing the extent of what I had just done to sit firmly in my mind, not wishing to smooth it over or escape it, or to present that somehow it was any less severe than it was.

On the other hand, it was true that their lives were not truly their own, and they had, for all intents and purposes, died the moment the banishment took effect, and every living inhabitant of Dereloth was stripped from The World out of fear that some hidden taint would escape and the Rivata would persist. Who was the greater monster, then? Was it the few who decided that for the sake of The World a city must vanish without a trace, or was it the one man who decided that it was okay for ten of these people to return, but that five hundred were better off dead than to be given a second chance at life, even if it was to live in slavery?

It was no use contemplating, for I had another challenge before me now. With my work here done, and having gotten more than I bargained for, how now was I supposed to return home, and least I forget, ensure that poor Jyre and Heppet had also returned home safely? Was it hypocritical of me to worry about the lives of two, when I had just killed so many? Did it matter that I knew them?

I had to shake these thoughts from my mind. After all, during the course

of my careers in The City, how many had died due to the direct action or willful inaction of me as head of my network? Surely not five hundred; but what if, that had been the case? Would I continue to do my work, day after day, blind to the sum of the slain, because most had been hidden from my view, and it had only been a few at a time over the course of years?

I could tell that I would be preoccupied by this for quite some time.

I felt that my return home trip was not too farfetched, considering that the entire colony was designed to reenter The World, so it must have some capacity to either send its entire mass through, or colonists through one at a time. I began looking over some of the other control panels of less obvious function, certain that I was on a roll and would soon have the entire workings of the place well within my grasp.

I examined the panel until my head hurt, but soon felt that I understood what I was seeing. There were several displays, one of which appeared to be some form of countdown. I could not remember how the value of the increments translated into seconds or minutes, so I was uncertain how much time was left on the countdown. Sixty of the first value could have gone into the second, or six hundred, or eight thousand, so the countdown could have been for an event hours away, days away, or years away. The second display showed three values that had also been counting down, but all three now showed complete and I had not noticed any change. It took only a moment to remember that the colony was moving, that position could be expressed as three numbers—typically the x, y, and z axis in modern mathematics, so I could only assume that the colony had reached its final position.

The countdown, I guessed, was how long until the colony entered The World. I assumed the delay was not arbitrary; maybe there was not enough energy present to make the transition? Still, my best bet was to find a way to prematurely trigger the transition, and that probably meant finding some way to speed up the countdown.

The last thing I then expected was for the floor beneath me to shake suddenly, very nearly throwing me from the really rather small floor-space of the control room. At first I suspected that the colony had struck some larger stationary mass; but soon saw it was the opposite, that the colony was the larger stationary mass that a small mobile object had struck. To my alarm and fascination, I found that I had a visitor. A person, which seemed to be a winged woman in a skin-tight golden suit, had burst through the colony's wall and entered the center chamber. She was now relatively immobile, though glancing about frantically. Whenever her head aimed in my direction, I saw that her eyes were glowing in a brilliant shade of yellow.

The more I looked at her, the more I was filled with the idea that this was not merely a winged woman in a suit, but some entity native to this un-reality (if such a thing were possible!) that had stumbled across the colony and was now burning with curiosity for it. I expected that I would soon have a better idea, as she was now hovering slowly towards the core.

— Nightfall: Hand of Ash —

Day 8: 10:00 am

“What is it?” Delphine hummed as the Being vanished into the giant black trussed orb that was surrounded by what seemed to be a ring of ruined stone buildings.

“I don’t know,” I said, “But it’s Rivata.”

A moment later and we were inside, using the same hole that the Being had pushed open. Somehow the interior of the orb reminded me of the chamber where I had met Cth-knhu. We saw her at once, hovering steadily, taking in her surroundings. I was alerted to the prescience of another through the circlet, and to my great disbelief, spotted a man standing on a small platform that marked a gap in the tall shaft at the center of the space. It was James. Even at this great distance, I could tell that he was just as surprised to see me.

“I am not sure exactly what is going to happen next,” I said to Delphine as she clung to a long slanted beam that connected the shell to the central shaft with her four free limbs, letting me rest prone against it, protecting me with most of her body. She was, thankfully, using her human arms to hold onto me. “Just don’t let go of me, okay?”

“I won’t,” she said, as the Being began to circle the core, flying in circles so fast that she was becoming difficult to see. “What is she trying to do?” Delphine asked.

“I doubt she even knows. Okay, brace yourself.” I knew that the words were just a playful jest at the true incantations.

*When time had ended, and mortals quake,
Your voice from death, Will me awake.
Come out, come out, come play with **her**.”*

Like the mysteria I had used to summon the Being, the meanings of the words were built around the power of the sounds. I pulled the pouch of ash from my belt, and with one hand, dipped inside so that my fingers touched the soft powder. Go, you devil, the doors have been opened, flee your prison. I could feel the ash stir against my hands, trembling as if alive. I quickly pulled the circlet off my head, throwing it away, not wishing to be driven mad. The same sensation I had felt in the woods tore through me like a spear, one hundred times more intense. I felt as if my heart had been crushed.

The blur of gold continued to spin around the core, but soon it was not alone. There was a rupture in the fabric of void and a thick black mass spilling out of it like crude oil. It spread, space itself cracking like glass and long snake-like tendrils spilling out from the cracks, feeling, wrapping around anything they touched, pouring out and splashing like liquid at one moment, crushing and twisting like leathery muscles the next.

Still, the Being spun, her speed seemingly uncontrollable, tearing through the black material wherever she touched it. There was a sound like cables that had been pulled impossibly tight had snapped, sending out echoes which

seemed to repeat forever. "Gods," Delphine hissed in terror. "What is it?"

I tried to answer, but found that I could not. Even as it was ripped and torn by the spinning streak, the Avatar was forming, so large that it could not stretch out to its full height within the confines of the Rivata structure. Somewhere in the mass of slithering tendrils and writhing worms, I felt eyes fix on me like I had been encased in solid stone. Words flooded into my mind, like the speech of a thousand voices over thousands of years compacted into a few short seconds, conveying one simple message. It was pleased.

She spun about faster and faster, each time she came in contact with the Avatar she burst through, with a mass of worms reaching out to grasp her, only to have them shredded as she tore away. It was a fight she was losing, however. With each circle she made, the tendrils which chased her grew more numerous and closer, latching onto her, slowing her nearly to a stop, before she could rip away and continue her insane, pointless spin. A great reverberating force was emanating from the Avatar every time the Being cut through him—laughter. Finally, it took hold of her and she did not break free. I could see her struggling, screaming with insane rage, cutting one tentacle after another with four to take each one's place. She was being drawn in.

I knew exactly what it would do. Like any other being of its nature, the Avatar would seek to consume. The Avatar's maw opened wide, with new tendrils shooting out of it to claim her. She was struggling less now, and I could see that the worms were not only around her, but all through her body, trying to tear her apart from the inside, but somehow she held together. If it wanted to rip her apart, it could; it was drinking in her essence. It was the moment I had waited for. They had become indistinct, merging. As powerful as the Avatar was, it could become far more powerful with the Being added to it. It was time to let the door swing shut, returning them both to the ash together.

I heard a crack and felt Delphine's grasp on me tighten forcibly then her voice give out a sharp cry of pain. I jerked my head up to look at her above me, and saw an arrow shaft protruding from her chest, right where her heart would be. Immediately I felt her grasp fail, and her body slipping off the beam, dragging me with it.

— James: The Archer —

Day 8: 10:05 am

She spun around the core, like a hyperactive planet orbiting too close to its star, so fast that I could barely see her anymore. Then I noticed a second intruder, one far more familiar. She had grasped and then clung onto one of the beams that held the core in place as she stretched out long fae-like transparent wings on either side. She had six limbs and two rows of eyes down her cheeks, and antennae in a mass like hair. I had seen illustrations of The Queen of the Fae in old books, and decided that the old artists knew what they had seen.

I had little time to admire her however, as a disturbance was forming

nearby. I felt a punch all over, a suffocating sensation like I had just died and come back to life, and then saw a crack forming in midair. Something else was pushing through into the un-reality. At first I thought it was the Rivata themselves, or the appearance of a new structure, but though the fissure in space resembled the previous phenomenon, this one was quite more ghastly. I quickly assembled my thoughts and jumped to a conclusion; The Faery had Phaeros's scroll, or what was left of it, and she had just used it.

With the Avatar forming right beside me and the golden angel spinning laps around the core, soon I felt like I was at the eye of a storm. The Avatar was ignoring me, totally preoccupied with the creature which was plunging in and out of it like it was merely made of smoke.

My eyes fell back upon the countdown timer, knowing that I was seeing something that wasn't right. The speed of the countdown had doubled, and was still gaining speed. The angelic being's orbit around the core was not a careless fidget, but designed to somehow accelerate the mechanism that would send the colony back into The World. Unlike the other two panels, this one had absolutely no discernable way to shut it off.

If the colony was to return to The World right now, that was good. If the colony was going haywire and was going to be sent to some other world, or some other non-world, that was quite bad for me. What was also quite bad was it doing so with the Avatar inside of it, no matter which world it ended up in. The scroll could be used both ways, but I did not expect The Faery to know that or even care, she had obviously intended this to happen. I was going to have to kill her, and take the scroll from her. I had to move quickly.

I could not get a clear shot at her from the core, especially not with the Avatar and The Angel thrashing about, so I ran for my favorite bridge. As I got onto it I felt it give way beneath my feet, my chin slamming onto its gray surface. I looked up, and saw that it had not broken, but was now bent in the middle where it had been struck. The Angel was flying past every second, with a trail of tentacles chasing her every time. I didn't have a second more to waste though, I had to move! I took three more steps, and the bridge was struck again, putting another bend in it, this time in the other direction so that it now resembled a twisted S.

I inched along the gray path before me, on my hands and knees, holding fast every time it was struck, keeping my head low to avoid being struck myself, knowing that I would not see death when it came. As if by a miracle, I reached the other side, and standing tall, saw a clear shot to The Faery above me.

I pulled the special arrow and bow from my backpack. I pulled it back tight, aiming carefully for her heart. The arrow flew, nearly straight up. I heard in satisfaction her cry out as it sunk into her chest. As she fell, I knew at once that something was wrong. There was not one body falling, but two. One was dressed in black.

— Nightfall: The Fall —

Day 8: 10:07 am

As we fell she shrunk to her human form. Her blood changed to bright red. I could even see the teeth inside her mouth become those of a normal human. A split second before I hit the surface below me, I saw James, bow drawn, watching with wide eyes as I fell.

She crashed into the floor first, and I on top of her. Her blood streaked out in all directions from the impact. Her soft body broke my fall somewhat, but I still felt shooting pain sting my every bone. The pouch of ash was torn from my hand, the dust spreading out over the floor, mixing with her blood.

"Daelus!" James shouted, running to me. "Gods, Daelus, what's going on? Where is the scroll? The Avatar must be put back into the scroll!"

I couldn't answer him; I didn't know how to put my thoughts into words. I craned my neck to look up, past the sea of black ooze that writhed before us, to see the Being nearly in pieces, writing in agony; and what's more, parts of the Avatar beginning to resemble her. I saw something else, too. The shaft at the center of the structure was beginning to glow, parts of it rotating, parts sliding, until more and more light emanated from it. The light traveled down every beam and began to pour out of every piece of the structure all around us

"The colony is beginning to move back into The World, or some other World!" James insisted. "The Avatar will be pulled along with it!"

I didn't understand him; I just knew what I had to do. The ash was mixed with Delphine's blood. I had no idea what that would mean. I had no idea if she was even still alive. Unable to contemplate, knowing what I had to say, I recited the mysteria.

*When called I rise, When the time grows nigh,
And the fated one comes, This world shall die.*

There was a great wailing of anger that deafened my mind as the Avatar and the Being both began to unravel and flow in streams into the ash mixed with the blood. Every passing instant the colony grew brighter; but soon I realized it was not light I was seeing, it was white, the white of nothingness, of nonexistence, of being somewhere else. The material of the two combined beings whipped around the three of us as it was thrust into the ash, until it seemed like there was nothing left, until it seemed like there was nothing but white.

Nothing but white....

Nothing but black, and silence, and a slight chill in the air....

"Daelus, are you alive?"

I felt that I was, in spite of feeling like every bone in my body was broken. I only knew it was not true because I could still move. "I am," I just said. "And you?"

"Yes, it seems so."

I turned myself over, my hands going to Delphine in the pitch blackness.

Her soft skin was still warm, but as my hand gently touched her throat, I could feel no pulse. Slowly I moved my hand to her face, parting her lips with my fingertips. I had not seen wrong; her teeth were normal. Something about James's arrow had also robbed her of her godhood. If it had been anything else, she would have been still alive.

It was strange how preoccupied I was. We could have been anywhere, in any World. James and I could have been dead. I wasn't sure yet what had become of the Avatar or the Being. Yet, all I seemed to care about at the moment was that Delphine was dead, and how unhappy that made me.