

**Delphine...**

At first I was afraid that he had been struck too, but as I fell away from him I saw that he was still whole, unharmed. Whoever had sought to slay me would soon have to face him for this deed. I knew, somehow I knew, that the fire in my chest that spread to every limb was the cruel sting of death; or worse than death, the robbing of my essence. It was burning away my very soul.

I looked up at him, my last instant of vision a blur as consciousness faded from me. Why didn't you say yes, Daelus? Why?

As my vision went dark I felt myself being torn as if in the jaws of a tremendous beast, ripping me into millions and millions of fragments, spreading me to the four winds. Distant, more distant, farther and farther I was spread, until I was no longer certain who I was or who I had been. I was, on and on, smaller and smaller, no longer even knowing what it meant to be...

# **Chapter 23**

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## **The Pages of History**

## — Nightfall: Her Captive —

Day 8: 10:10 am

I let my breath go deep and slow, trying to calm myself, trying to convince myself that all was as it needed to be. There was a quick scraping sound and a flash of light as James lit a spark onto a small torch.

Her white skin glowed in the dim light. I reached up to close Delphine's eyes carefully. I refused to touch the arrow shaft that pierced her breast, not wanting to even look at it. I wanted to say something to her, anything, to let her know that it was done, that the horrible mistake she had made was now set right. I could only hope that her lingering spirit had been witness to the final events, that she had not been trapped in that strange place, and would go on to whatever heaven was designed to house the soul of a goddess.

"It seems that the two entities are gone...both within the scroll I take it?" James's voice sounded alien, like the voice of a stranger.

I did not wish to speak with him now, but I knew that it was important to. "There is no more scroll," I just said. "It was just the ashes of the scroll, and now the ashes are her blood."

"I see. Or, rather, I do not see. Where is the ash? Where is the blood it mixed with?"

I looked, and saw that James was correct. The pouch was on the floor, but the ash and the blood it had mixed with was missing. "It must have resisted the pull back into The World," was all I could reason out. "It's still back there, somewhere."

"Indeed. Thankfully, however, it seems that you and I did not resist it, and are no longer *back there*. The question remains, however; where is the colony? I am afraid we cannot assume that it *and we* are in a World at all and even if we were, possibly not our own World."

I knew he did not expect me to say anything about it, so I did not try. "I do not want to leave her body here," I said. I really didn't even care where here was; I would worry about that soon enough. Right now, all that occupied me was Delphine.

"I suppose it wouldn't be right to. How was it that you were with her? Where you her captive?"

"Yes," I just said, "I was held captive by her."

I felt his hand on my shoulder. The warmth of his palm provided a stark contrast to the coldness of her body that I now felt. Slowly, I lifted my eyes to him, to see his grave face peering down. I knew I would not have to explain to him; he understood that I was not merely her captive. "It is good to see you," he said, and then offered the slightest of smiles.

I nodded. "It is good to be seen by you."

He then grinned, and offered me his hand to help me get up. I did not take it; I needed both of my arms to lift Delphine's body from the ground. As a human, she seemed so small now, even though she was the same size as she had always been. Her body was easy to lift and to hold draped across my arms. "Let's figure out where we are, then," I said to him.

**Earlier****— Sheam: The First Phase —****Day 8: 8:00 am**

Corrine looked up as I slammed the door behind me. I went quickly to the table where she sat in the uncharacteristically tidy apartment and tossed the envelope and rolled contract onto the table in front of her before sitting down in a chair across the table from her. I anxiously ran my hands through my hair a few times before looking up, biting my lip to keep from frowning dramatically. I then got up, paced across the room twice, before sitting back down so heavily that it made the chair groan. I ran my fingers through my hair again, looking up at Corinne again expectantly as she read over the contract, her eyes darting around as she analyzed it quickly. "Well?" I just asked.

"Doing business with Raputo is never an easy affair. However if he plans to bring Ramirez down; he could do so in a day or even less. I think that the very fact that he had you sign such a contract should be taken as a sign of respect, if nothing else. He wouldn't have even bothered drafting it if he did not believe that The Circle was to be taken seriously, and that sentiment coming from such a powerful man is not one to be taken lightly." I just stared at her. I didn't know what to think about any of that, so I didn't even twitch in acknowledgement. She continued. "There's really no point in beating yourself up over it, Sheam. At least now you know where you stand with him. You would have had to find out sooner or later, anyway."

This wasn't the topic I wanted to discuss with her. "Look at the envelope," I said. It may have been rude to ignore everything she said, but I wasn't in the mood.

She did so. "What is this?" she just asked. Then I remembered that Raputo hadn't actually written down the little secret.

I unloaded. "Raputo says that *Wendle* is the traitor who had Canard killed. Wendle! How can we do business with a man like that, who lies like that, and tries to turn us against our very own?" I felt my hands shaking violently, and dragged them through my hair a few more times to try to calm them. It wasn't working. I wanted something to grab onto and tear to pieces.

"Who is this on the note, then?" she asked. I hated that she didn't immediately agree with me.

"It's the person that...who Raputo says has proof that...proof...of *Wendle's treachery*," I stammered between my teeth. I couldn't look at her anymore; I couldn't stand that she wasn't as outraged as I was.

Her eyes flashed back down to the note, adjusting her glasses. "I will see to it that she is contacted at once, using only the most secure means."

"She?" I barked, slightly shocked. I didn't know why.

"Yes, this is a woman's name. We aren't the only ones who employ female agents, you know."

I didn't know why it mattered. It just seemed more insulting that it would be a woman who was accusing *Wendle* of this. If it were a man, then it would

be between him and Wendle. Now it seemed much more personal. On the other hand, now I was imagining myself pulling her hair out. "Okay, we contact her. I want to do it."

"Sheam, we need you here for the time being. I'll have one of the agents take care of it at once." She began writing a note. "And it's clear to me that you are far too emotionally involved in this right now. Know when to let go, to let someone else handle a problem. You can't be everywhere at once; you can't know everything at once. Let the network work for you. The truth will come out. If this is a frame, we will know it. But, if it's true, then we absolutely must know it as soon as possible. I'm afraid that we're going to have to cut off every facet of Canard's organization at once."

I just continued to rake my hand through my hair, letting my fingernails dig into my scalp until it hurt. "It's that injection Andrew gave me, I think. It's got me on edge like I am going to explode."

She pointed her quill at me. "No, Sheam. If it's Andrew's usual solution, it shouldn't make you at all anxious. This is real stress you're dealing with, and you're going to need to learn how to deal with it much better if you don't want to die of heart failure."

I forced my hands back onto the table, but now I just wanted to claw the wood until splinters shot under my nails. "What now? Any news on Mallard?"

"I am expecting an update from Othello soon. He's been given an encoded message to decrypt. The entire facility in Downtowne has been evacuated, so his house arrest has been temporarily suspended. He's downstairs right now, with Andrew."

"Okay," I said. "Raputo didn't say anything about Mallard. I hope that he doesn't do anything premature to tip our hand and inspire Ramirez to just have Mallard killed."

Corinne had gotten up, and was in the kitchenette fussing over the wood-burning stove. "Let me get you some tea that will calm you down. It helped you just the other day, I recall."

"Put me right to sleep, I recall," I said. "And when I woke up, Daelus was dead. No, please, I don't want to relive that."

She sighed, but didn't stop her work, dropping some mushrooms into a strainer and lowering it into the kettle that was over a lit fire. "You need to do what you need to do in order to do the best that you can do. Once you've had a sip you'll feel better, trust me."

I was raking my hands through my hair again, feeling unable to stop. "Alright," I said, "But that taffer Othello had better get those messages decoded soon."

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— Lytha: A Thread of Hope —

Day 8: 9:00 am

I had so far to travel, so far to run. The sky was darkening now with an impending storm, the light from the rising sun choked out by dark clouds on

the horizon, being swept in from the sea.

Without warning I felt my legs fail and I stumbled, dropping Ghost, tumbling on top and scraping my cheek against the rough stones of the street. I felt so weak, so helpless. As I struggled to get back up, to lift him back up, I felt myself searching his mind again for that tiniest glint of being which I had found lingering before in spite of his death. I knew it was still there, but growing fainter every moment. I also knew that if it was up to my two legs, I would not be able to get to where I needed to go in time.

I looked to the side, seeing the tall sails of boats traveling up and down the river. I followed one with my eyes, seeing how it was catching the wind from the southeast, the same wind that the storm rode upon, pushing it against the current of the water.

I lifted him up, ignoring the crowd who had gathered to see the blood-soaked woman carrying a dead and still bleeding man through the streets, and ran to a building on the side of the river which stood next to several masts. I rushed to a man seated at the dock, and nearly stumbled again before I was able to let Ghost go, falling only to one knee, looking up at him with death in my eyes. "I need a boat that can go far upstream," I demanded.

The man looked at me with wild eyes under bushy eyebrows and an ever bushier mustache. "You savin' a life?" he said in a rough voice around the pipe clenched between his teeth.

"Yes!" I replied, though I could feel in his mind that he could clearly see Ghost was dead.

He pointed to what looked like a large rowboat with mast. "That'n'll get y'the farthest up; bu'it depends on which stream y'take. Y'c'n pay me when y'return. Gods bless."

I dropped Ghost's body into the boat, jumping in myself, and untied it. I had never used a boat before, but I was quickly pulling from the old sailor's mind exactly what I needed to know. Without even thanking him I had pushed off from the dock and rowed quickly to the center of the river. I was losing ground fast to the current. I fought against the unfamiliarity of my fingers to the knowledge I had gained from my telepathy, trying quickly to set the sail correctly. I kept reaching out to the minds of other sailors in nearby boats, increasing my knowledge bit by bit. When the sail caught the steady wind I could feel the little boat suddenly change directions, and in no time I was passing the dock again. I waved to the old sailor, whispering a quiet thank you.

— Jyre: Ready to Just Be —

Day 8: 9:45 am

The wind was even calmer now with the grass no longer swaying in the breeze. This grass must have been in the field before Delphine had put Barlosk here with her magic and now that Barlosk was gone, the grass was able to taste the earth again and feel the warmth of the sun. It didn't have to know why any of this happened, whose blood had been spilt, what horrible

deeds had been committed. It just was back in The World now, ready to just be grass again. I wanted to be like that. I wanted to be ready to just be again.

Things were darker all of a sudden. I looked up at the sky to see that a cloud had passed over the sun. Then I felt the ground tremble beneath me as many booted feet swarmed to surround me, and a hooded head moved to block my view of the light. "Where the devil is Ranson?" a voice demanded. "What have you done with him?" another came. "Where is he?" "What the taff happened?" "Oh you're going to pay for this!" shouted another.

I just looked up at them from where I sat, seeing the faces of Ranson's thugs, hearing the voices that reminded me of that day when I stood in their midst, being told how to go find a scroll in a terrible place I wanted to forget. I said nothing; I didn't even want or try to. They could do what they wanted with me and it wouldn't matter. I didn't care anymore.

One of them grabbed me, but I instinctively kicked him and squirmed away, even though the wound in my back again felt like it was on fire. A second one tried to grab me, but he didn't even get close; I dove between his big legs and tumbled out the other side. I took off running, but was tackled to the ground by a man three times my size. I kicked my foot up, catching him in the crotch, and then shoved my elbow in his face. It knocked into his teeth, which hurt, but at least he was off me now. Again I was being grabbed, this time by two from either side. I tried to twist free, but something heavy hit me in the head, and it all went dark.

— Sheam: The Second Phase —

Day 8: 10:00 am

"Sheam."

I looked up over the rim of my mug at Corinne. Her eyes looked big and blurry through the lenses of her glasses. "Did you hear what I just said?"

"No," I admitted, rubbing my eyes like I knew I shouldn't. I did it anyway; the pain felt good.

"Othello's report is ready. Another meeting has been called. Crowley and Jossimer should be here any minute now. Once they are, the four of them will come upstairs. It should be very quick. I don't think there is much to discuss."

I took a long breath, and had another sip of the soothing tea, "Any news about Wendle's accuser?"

"No Sheam, the orders just only went out to look into that. I am afraid it might be a while."

"Oh. Corrine...can you...I don't feel like dealing with those men right now. I know I'm not doing very well right now. This is just so much at once. I don't understand how you can just keep going and going like this."

She smiled. "Graduate studies were a good preparation. As for the meeting, I was going to suggest that I just handle things for now. That is how James and Daelus often operated, you know."

I tried to smile back. It was really strange to think of myself and Corinne

walking in the footsteps of James and Daelus, but here we were.

She nodded, not needing a verbal reply. "Just sit tight, Sheam, and I will handle it. Ah, here they are."

I looked up as the various locks on the door popped open. Andrew came in first, his walking stick knocking heavily on the wood floor with every step. Othello was right behind him, hanging his hat on a hook neatly. Though Andrew's movement was slow and uneven, Othello refused to simply walk around him, instead patiently waiting for the man to approach the table, and pulling out a chair for him. Crowley and Jossimer came in like a pair of quarreling old hens, deep in a conversation which made no sense to me since it was oddly lacking in nouns. They sat at the table across from one another and on either side of me, so that their knees bumped uncomfortably into mine.

Crowley raised his voice, gesturing to both Corinne and I. "Well we're all here now; why don't you gripe to them about it?"

Jossimer rolled his eyes, pulling his pipe out of his jacket and beginning to clean it. "There is a dispute over whether we should be wasting our time with Mallard Canard. Lord Raputo is involved now. This is a warden affair."

"Exactly," Crowley said. I was confused; if they were in agreement, what was the argument about? Some men simply enjoyed arguing.

"A valid point," Corinne said. "Do not mistake this for charity. Lord Thresh and Lord Canard shared a mutual respect, but it had basis in nothing other than their individual characters. However, if Sheam is to continue on in the Master's place and Mallard in the place of his father; I would like something more concrete in place to ensure that the relationship is in our favor. Her being responsible for his safe return home would be an excellent start."

"You assume much," Jossimer said, finished with the cleaning and beginning to fill the pipe, "about how this Mallard Canard, whom we all know has never had any interest in his father's work and will make a horrendous warden, views gratitude. I need not remind you that some view a favor owed in more, shall we say, animalistic terms. For all we know, this man could resent Sheam deeply for being responsible for his rescue, and it could cause him to behave extremely badly towards her in the future."

"Such a cynic," Crowley said with a scoff. "He's dancing around what he's really thinking, ladies. He doesn't think that Mallard would ever respect this young lady under any circumstances, and he's using this theory in order to not hurt her feelings."

"There are female wardens," I said, not wanting to get drawn into this argument, but with my pride stepping over my discretion.

"Yes, all of whom are twice your age," Crowley replied.

I felt myself growing angry, my knuckles cracking as I closed hands slowly. "You did not seem to believe my sex or my age was an issue before." I looked over to Corinne, begging her to say something to rescue me. She was silent; looking slightly concerned, but only nodded.

Jossimer laughed, lighting his pipe and clasping it between his teeth with

a sharp click.

Crowley looked doubtful, but replied nonetheless. "Before you were a liaison from Lord Daelus Thresh; now you are suddenly and without warning his replacement. I am not calling this a bait-and-switch, my dear; I understand that none of us may choose the moment that we lose those of great importance to us. I also do not mean to suggest that this changes anything we agreed upon. I am merely warning you that you cannot expect to have the same relationship with this Mallard that your predecessor enjoyed with his father. That is simply fact."

I took a long drink of my tea, letting the mug block my view of him, sipping slowly until he finished. I put it down with a bump, frowning at him, but not at all apologetically. "We'll deal with that when the time comes. For now, though, I see the logic of having it be The Circle who rescues Canard, and not Raputo, and not some other Hightowne nobleman."

"Speaking of which," Jossimer cut in after loosening the death-grip he held on his pipe. "I trust there is a reason why Captain Wendle was not invited, and that it does not involve him being too busy to depart Hightowne." He spoke coldly like he knew exactly why and wanted to rub it in our faces.

Thankfully, Corinne stepped in at that note. "We will discuss the situation with the Captain when we have more information. For now, we have a very small agenda, and I would like to stick to it.—Othello, your report please?"

I allowed myself to look over to Othello for the first time since the door opened. He seemed completely himself again, which was to say that he had not spoken a word, and offered no clues as to how he was actually feeling, especially with the mask in place. He didn't even turn his head to look at the speaker, keeping his neck rigid, the dark holes in his mask aimed somewhere between Jossimer and myself. "The message intercepted was of a request to transfer a high profile prisoner out of Downtowne. It contained the address for the new holding location in Dayport. This is Warden Clifton's territory." He set a parchment before us with the address on it.

"Do we have any other information on that building?" Corinne asked.

He still didn't turn his head, even though Corinne was sitting directly to his left. "It is a home, actually, of a minor nobleman named Brenner who apparently owed Ramirez a favor."

Crowley rocked back and forth in his chair. He seemed abruptly and oddly jovial after the previous heated discussion. Perhaps it was not as vital to him as he had made it seem, merely wishing to ruffle someone's feathers. Probably he was happy to get out of his castle and be dealing with things a little more important than spreading pagan prejudices. "I don't know much about Warden Clifton," Crowley admitted, "—possible ally for Ramirez?"

"Doubtful," Corinne said. "He's nestled up against Warden Webster's territory, which is just as vast as Raputo's. Clifton would be no more likely to ally himself with Ramirez than Canard would be."

There were so many names flying over my head, I wasn't sure how I was expected to remember it all. Then, I remembered how. I took the quill from the center of the table and began to write everything down.

"Sheam," Corinne said quietly. I looked up, my eyes wide as saucers. "We tend not to take notes at meetings like these. These meetings technically never actually take place."

I glanced down at the paper. Feeling quite abashed I quickly scratched everything out.

"The Brenner estate," Othello continued like the interruption never happened, "is serviced by the Cob Steele security company. I believe Jossimer should find that of interest."

Jossimer frowned, not speaking immediately, just continuing to trace the wood grain with a yellowed fingernail. "I served alongside Cob Steel a lifetime ago," he admitted.

"Served how?" I asked, freely admitting my ignorance, hoping everyone had already forgotten my faux pas.

Jossimer snorted. "We were both Brigadier Generals in The Baron's Army. When he retired he founded the security company. I believe I can..." Jossimer slowly lifted his pipe back to his lips, and puffed on it a few times knowing full well that we were hanging on his last word. "I can suggest to him that he provide inferior services to this client for one night."

"He would do that?" Crowley said, sounding skeptical.

"The man has a sense of honor, which conflicts with his sense of industry. If he is made aware that he is protecting a criminal act, he will act accordingly, finding what he considered a *happy medium* between his duty to what is just and his duty to what is fair." It was both surprising and oddly appropriate that Jossimer not consider fairness and justice complimentary, but rather opposed.

"Why don't we just have his guardsmen get Mallard out of there for us?" Crowley insisted, growing impatient.

Jossimer blew out another puff of smoke. With him right next to me, I couldn't help but feel like coughing at the stench. "Would you like to ask him to become involved in the affairs of wardens? I would sooner have my nose hairs plucked one by one."

"Wonderful," Crowley just said. "When will we know his reaction?"

"When will this dreadful meeting be finished?"

"It could be finished in a moment if no one has anything else to add," Corrine explained.

"I do," Crowley said at once. "I need to check on it, but I believe that the next door neighbor to the Brenner estate is a friend of my brother's sister-in-law. I may be able to ask for the use of a guest room, which we could use as a base to observe the estate and plan the rescue."

"You believe?" Jossimer said with another snort. "When will you know for certain?"

"When will this dreadful meeting be finished?" Crowley replied mockingly.

Corinne sighed, and took off her glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose where the glasses sat. "I'm going to ask Petra to be the one to go in and get Mallard out."

Jossimer put down his pipe, “—the small woman with the black hair? What if Mallard is unconscious and he needs to be carried out? Surely a man would be better suited to this.”

Corrine stopped rubbing and glared at Jossimer. “If Mallard is unconscious and needs to be carried out, I challenge you to find a man who would be able to do it. He weighs three hundred pounds. No, Petra will have smelling salts. Mallard will have to get out under his own power.”

“And what if he is injured, his legs broken?” Jossimer insisted. “What if they fed him nothing but pastries and bacon for the entire span of the abduction and he now weighs five hundred pounds, and is incapable of operating his flabby little legs? What is the contingency then?” As much as I didn’t like his tone, I knew that it was good that he was thinking this way.

Corrine’s lack of impatience showed that she too understood. “If Mallard is unable to escape on foot, Petra is quite ready and able to incapacitate every man, woman, child, and pet in the building. Once they’re all unconscious, we can send in two strong men, or three if needed, to carry the fat duck out.”

Jossimer didn’t say anything further. Crowley seemed to be expecting him to, and looked amused when he did not.

Andrew spoke up, his voice several orders of magnitude softer than the two who had been speaking. “If Crowley can secure the guest room, I volunteer to do the survey.”

“Are you feeling up to it, Andrew?” Corinne asked. She sounded like she was glad he offered, but seemed a little worried about the man’s health.

“I am. I would ask that Petra also join me, in case one more accustomed to field work can spot things I would not realize.”

Corinne nodded. “I’ll let her know. You two can go together.”

“I’ll tell my sister-in-law’s brother’s friend that you two are a couple! It will make things less suspicious!” Crowley said with a laugh.

The comment made me slightly irate, but that could have just been the sound of his laughter. “You mean your brother’s sister-in-law’s friend?” I clarified.

“Er, yes. Didn’t I say that?”

I rolled my eyes. “What if I went too? You could tell your brother’s sister-in-law’s friend that we’re siblings, and avoid embarrassing poor Petra and Andrew.”

Andrew was quiet, looking thoughtfully at me before answering, “I would be in your debt if you could assist us in any way.”

Crowley laughed again. “Yes, and I am certain her handwriting is better than yours! I’ll request a room with three windows and three beds!”

Corinne looked worried, but didn’t say anything. “Very well, it’s settled then. I suggest the three of you do this during the day, when the glare on the windows will prevent anyone in the Brenner estate from realizing there are three pairs of eyes spying on them. Petra should be inside as soon as it gets dark, though. We have no time to lose.”

Jossimer and Crowley both got up immediately, grunting at one another before reaching for their coats. I offered Othello a glance, but he could have

been fast asleep with the mask in place and I wouldn't know it. I wanted some kind of closure on what happened the other day, but I felt like now wasn't the time to seek it, and if it was not now, it probably would never be a good time. I decided I was better off just letting the whole thing go.

— **Nightfall: Lay Down Your Burdens** —

**Day 8: 10:15 am**

"So, they're all dead?" I asked, looking at the glossy surface of one of the pods. In the darkness it was completely impossible to see inside, so I had to take James's word for it.

"Yes, I am afraid so."

"With these people released one by one into society, if the colonists were anything as talented and ambitious as we delegates, it would have been a sure victory for the Rivata. The City would have sat in the palm of their hand. Still, to do this could not have been an easy choice," I conveyed with empathy.

"For Phaeros, it was an easy choice. His determination made the decision easier for me."

"Oh," I replied. "Yes, it is easier when someone else is doing the choosing."

"Not always," was his gentle reply.

We parted from the row of pods which filled the massive wall and wrapped all throughout the interior of the Rivata structure. James slowly led me through passages and across thresholds, until we were looking out into the expanse of blackness pierced only by the long protrusions radiating from the colony at regular intervals. The meager light that James's torch provided did nothing to illuminate this darkness that surrounded the colony. It was as if we were still in the netherworld, but rather than an infinite expanse of gray, it was darkness. "Oh, I don't know why I didn't notice at once," James said. "The portion of Dereloth that had clung to the surface of the colony is gone."

"It probably fell," I said. "It didn't look like there was much holding it in place. I don't think there was gravity in the netherworld. I think that we only fell because we expected to fall."

"A reasonable assertion," he replied. He took a pebble from his pocket, and tossed it into the darkness. It definitely behaved as expected. We listened for the sound of it striking bottom, but if bottom was any distance away something as small as the pebble wouldn't make a sound loud enough for us to hear.

"James," I said, looking down a corridor that ramped and curved to the colony's base. "Do you know, what is this way?"

"Yes," James said. "I did not investigate completely due to the danger of the sentries, but it seemed to be a fairly nondescript chamber with a few chairs in the center."

"I few chairs," I just said, and renewed my hold on Delphine's body. "Interesting." I began to walk in that direction.

We followed the corridor, and soon came to the room James described.

There were indeed several chairs, six of them, arranged in a circle facing one another, but without a table in the center as one might expect from the configuration. What interested me the most; was the way the ceiling dipped down above each chair remarkably like the room at the base of my tower. From my knowledge of the way the device in my home worked, I was surprised to see it was arranged for a group. Perhaps the Rivata had advanced the technique? "I know what this is," I said to James.

"Oh?" he replied, stepping in farther than me to better light it with his torch.

"It's how the colonists would communicate with the Rivata. It also heals them. I have one. Remember putting me in it?"

"Ah," James said simply. "That seems like so long ago."

"I think it was," I said, walking to the center of the room, careful to not knock Delphine's head or legs against one of the chairs.

"What are you doing?" James said, joining me by my side.

"Sitting," I replied, lowering myself carefully, holding Delphine across my lap.

"I thought you said that the chairs were for communication with the Rivata. I do not think I really want to face them right now. I think that they would be most unhappy with me."

"The device can be twisted to other uses if you will it to be so," I said. "It is not a direct channel to them, but an open conduit to many things. They did not expect me to be bold enough to misuse it, I trust. Please, James, sit."

James sat in the chair beside me. I reached out and grasped his hand. "Focus on me, and my words. Soon you will become aware of a separation, a disconnect between your body and mind. Do not be disoriented, try to maintain control over your cognitive functions." As I said it, I felt it taking place. I also felt James following along, understanding. "Now, avoid the pull of where the device wants you to go. Focus elsewhere, anywhere will do at first, until you are comfortable with slipping away. It is not forcing you to go down that path, merely making it the most comfortable. Just follow my lead."

Just as I had done those few days ago, I felt my mind traveling up through the colony, engulfed in the darkness of it, the stain of madness left by the Being, the taint of evil left by the Avatar, and the crushing loneliness of five hundred souls expiring in unison. I would have given up right then to despair, my essence raw to the tremendous sorrow of this place, was it not for the comfort of James at my side. We continued upwards, engulfed in the darkness now, unclear if we were traveling through complete emptiness or infinite solid.

Gently, I felt myself being drawn. It was not a startling sensation, because I felt the pull coming from the very place I had wished to go. It was drawing me in faster now, far faster than I had traveled before, so that when the brightness stung my awareness everything became just a streak before I found the familiar mountain vista forming around me. There was a small cottage on the cliff-side, at the end of a long, winding road. Inside there was a table and chairs, aged wood painted white, with a lace tablecloth draped over

it. Sunlight from the nearby window caused the cloth to glow, along with the small vase and its host of flowers. There were cabinets on the walls, an old worn bed which looked deliciously comfortable. Paintings of every shape and size hung from the walls.

"Daelus," I heard her voice say. I turned, to find Em standing with me, her face host to a gentle expression of contentment, without an ounce of surprise.

Em had immediately brought my body with me; as she said before, that was always the easy part. It was the mind that was difficult to transport. To my additional surprise, Delphine's body was still in my arms, but to my dismay James seemed to be absent. No, that was not true; I felt the ghost of his presence here, but he was stuck somehow, unable to fully come through. "My friend did not make it," I said to her faint apparition.

"He did, but I chose to only reveal myself to you for now. It would complicate things too much for me otherwise."

"You were expecting me," I said, watching as she gained opacity and color came to her face. "You were ready for my approach."

"I was," she said, walking past me. "Please, put Delphine on the bed."

I did as she asked, lying her body down carefully. The arrow had not gone all the way through, so she was able to lie flat. I adjusted the pillow under her head, even though I knew it was pointless, and brought her hands together to fold them at her abdomen.

"You have been watching over me this entire time," I ventured, looking up at Em as she sat on the opposite side of the bed, looking down at Delphine with a look of reverence.

She looked up with her eyes only. "Not the entire time. I lost you once or twice, when the power of things near you became too much to bear."

"But still, you know...all of it."

"I do. You didn't have to refuse her for my sake, you know."

"I?" I was taken aback, "What do you mean?"

"When you refused Delphine's offer; it was because of me, wasn't it?"

Was it? I knew that thoughts of her had entered my mind several times during the ordeal, but I felt that I was certain I knew why I had declined. There still might have been a thread of truth to what she claimed. Often one knows what one wants to do without understanding why, and comes up with justifications after the fact to add reason to the choice.

"Em," I said, not wishing to be drawn down the path she was taking me. "What would Phaeros have wanted for his daughter's body?"

"Phaeros's ideas of what was proper for the bodies of the dead were, shall we say, distorted. I am afraid you have asked the wrong question. What do you want for this woman's remains? I know you would not have asked if you already knew the answer, so I will simply promise you to tend to her respectfully; like family. What concerns me more is the fate of her soul, however."

"Is that in question?" I said urgently.

"It is, and I am afraid I am at a loss. Had I been attuned to her and not you, I might have understood, but I expected to be able to know something,

anything, about the passing of one so powerful as she, and yet, it is a mystery.”

“Could it be due to the mixing of the blood and the ashes?” I asked, feeling great anxiety over the question.

“Perhaps,” she said slowly.

I did not expect her to be able to answer. The thing that I feared the most, but was growing more and more possible as I thought about it, was that her essence somehow had merged with the two other beings in the scroll. It was a fear born from the stuff of nightmares, having no hold on rational thought, and would not stand up to any logical scrutiny. Yet I was unable to escape this fear, unable to avoid this conclusion. I knew this much for certain; something as powerful as that ash acting as a doorway to a realm that contained those two entities would be powerful enough to persist no matter how one attempted to destroy the physical form. It still existed, back in that netherworld and what existed could be found.

She was studying my face silently, not making any motion to say or do anything. I looked from her down to Delphine, and hated that I had brought her here with me. It was wretched of me to bring the corpse before her, even if it seemed right. I did not want to be here anymore, to be studied by Em’s eyes, and to have Delphine’s empty form before my own eyes to study. “I should be going,” was the only thing I said to her.

She looked disappointed, but not sad. “You will return, soon?” she said.

“I do not know. I am wary of the method. I expect that soon the Rivata will learn how I am misusing their device, and either stop it from happening, or twist it to their purposes.”

“I see,” she said quietly. “You could always walk.” She smiled gently, and then with a hint of playful joy. Before another word was said, before I could utter a goodbye, I felt myself slipping from her, and from this place. Just like before, when she sent me to the site of the villa, it was nearly instantaneous. I found myself sitting in the chair deep beneath my tower, my head tilted back in the rest, gazing up at the dipping ceiling. Something was in my hand.

I looked down, and saw that it was a rolled canvas. I knew before I unrolled it slightly that it was the painting I had brought to show Em, the one Jyre had stolen from Delphine.

Coming fully to my senses, I realized that I was alone. I got up quickly, looking around, and as soon as my eyes fell back upon the chair I saw that James was now seated there, a dumbfounded expression on his face.

Privately, silently, I bid Em and Delphine goodbye.

— James: More Questions than Answers —

Day 8: 10:20 am

The sensation of having my mind detached from my mortal coil was astonishing. Nothing could have prepared me for it. At first I had no idea how to follow Daelus’s lead, but soon found that it was so easy I didn’t need to even think about it. I merely willed it and it was so. There was a flurry of

activity, none of which I understood, and then to my great amazement I found myself standing, physically standing, my mind back in my body, inside a simple one-roomed cottage, with pleasant decorations and a tidy arrangement, and most notably, a very alluring woman seated by the bed. Or was she? As I looked at her, I wasn't certain if I was seeing her at all, and yet I felt as if she was as real as I was. "Hello," she just said, remaining in the seat.

Her greeting helped draw me out of my dumbfounded state. "Ma'am," I replied with a quick nod, but then quickly wondered if "Miss," would have been more appropriate. She looked simultaneously matronly and maidenly. In fact, the more I looked at her, the more I felt that I knew her from somewhere, but I could not place it. "Where am I?" I asked.

"In a cottage in the mountains," she replied. "You followed your friend Daelus here."

"Ah, yes of course. Where is he?"

"He has gone on before you, and now awaits you."

"Ah, I see, I see. And you and he are of acquaintance? My name is James."

She smiled even more. "Yes, James, I know. Yes, he and I are of acquaintance. He was not aware of it, but I knew him in our previous lives."

"Previous lives. Are you a delegate as well, then?"

"I was once, yes. I knew Daelus when we were both citizens of Dereloth, but he was a man of importance, while I was a commoner. That is why our relationship went in only one direction. You also don't seem to remember that you and I are also of acquaintance, and though it was not in a previous life, you were very young then."

Her familiarity was starting to congeal into a memory, of a time long ago when I was first thrust back into The World as merely a child. "I do believe I remember. Would you be Em?"

She seemed to blush slightly, which seemed an odd thing for me to witness since I was certain she was no more than a translucent bluish shade. "I would be," she just said.

"My goodness," I said, grinning. "My lady, how foolish of me not to remember! I have so many questions!"

She blushed more, but her smile faded. "I am afraid I am rather poor at answering questions."

Her words made me hesitant. She had brought me here undoubtedly at Daelus's request, and it would probably not be proper of me to conduct a spontaneous interview. I realized, instead, that there was something important I needed to tell her. "My lady, I had the misfortune of being with Phaeros today when he died."

She tilted her head just slightly to one side, a few strands of hair falling out of place to slide against her cheek. "He died only today?" She said, after a long pause.

I gave a deep nod. "I am afraid so. He died doing something very dangerous. He was aware of this danger, and proceeded, believing that it was only right."

"He wanted to live forever," she said, eyes lowering to the floor. "I always

told him that he was a fool for wanting that, and yet here I am, practically in the same position as he.”

“So you are alive, then?” I asked, surprised she had said anything about it.

She gave a sad smile, and then lifted her finger to her lips. “Shh,” she said, “It’s a secret I can’t tell even you.”

“My lady,” I admitted cautiously, “there are many of your secrets which I seek.”

“And I am afraid your curiosity will have to wait. I am sorry, James, but I do not wish you to keep you here. I must tell you though that this crusade you have devoted your life to, The Cause, is about to become much more difficult. You recall before that I implored you to abandon it as I did, and banish yourself from civilization?”

“I do. And by now you must know that I did not heed your advice.”

“Yes. I also know that it was a mistake for me to advise it. I see now that even if the ten delegates were to abandon the directive, the Rivata would still win. You have destroyed their colony, true, but they have many plans and techniques. They will merely see this as a setback. They have the patience of the cosmos, and a very single minded determination. This seems a great victory, but it was for you a victory pulled from the jaws of defeat. They too are capable of doing this. Be cautious, be careful. You will need to continue to fight, and to seek out the other delegates and convert them against their masters. Not all will be as willing as Daelus was.”

I grinned. “I did not believe for a moment that I had dealt them a killing blow. I will heed your words, my lady, and be vigilant. I must ask you one last thing before I depart. There are ten delegates in all. I know of only five. Do you know the identities of the other five?”

She shook her head. “I am sorry, but I do not. I hope that you find them quickly. It is almost expected for a delegate to rebel against the Rivata, but there is one outcome you may not foresee. You seek to unite the delegates. Some may seek a more destructive path.”

“I had considered that, yes,” I replied gravely.

“It is time for you to go,” she said. “Daelus asked a favor of me, and I need to tend to it at once. Goodbye, James. I am glad to see that the child-like curiosity still persists within your heart to this day.”

Before I could say anything else, I felt a tumble of disorientation, and then found that I was seated again. I was in a dark low room, with the texture of the stone reminding me at once of Dereloth. Before me stood Daelus, holding a large rolled canvas, looking quite perturbed.

— Jyre: The Trial —

Day 8: 10:20 am

*I saw her through the storm of smoke and ash. The Lady had her arms raised high, calling up to the heavens. All around her monsters danced and sung, only to burst one by one into splashes of blood and fire. James was beside me, his voice shouting into my ear, “Jyre, kill The Lady with this, now!”*

*I obeyed, lifting my bow, the arrow in place. I took aim at her, pulling the string tight. The shaft of the arrow brushed against my cheek, its cold caress a welcome companion. My eyes fixed on The Lady one last time. I let out a growl, deep and primal, as I chose my spot. "Your throat, my lady," I mused, "Or your heart, perhaps?" I think I laughed. "Oh. I almost forgot. You have no heart." I aimed for her throat, wanting her to feel the arrow's bite. "They lied to me, my lady. Would you like to know why? Because they said you were a goddess. But you can't be a goddess, can you? Do you know why? —Because goddesses can't die!"*

*The arrow sailed through the air, like a bird in flight, arcing through the sky, appearing as a golden angel with wings of brass and eyes like the sun.*

*Then she was on the ground before me, her hand raised up, pleading for help. Blood gushed from her throat, just like Ranson's had. Her eyes searched for me, begging me for an answer, why would you kill me? Who are you to take my life from me?*

*I fell to my knees. I had done it again; murdered. Just like with Ranson, and Daelus before him, I had given into my bloodlust and done that which was the greatest evil. I cried out in despair and regret, reaching out to her, wanting to undo this horrible act, but she was too far away now. It was done; The Lady was dead.*

*When I looked again, I saw James traveling as if through a great storm. He fought the current around him, threatening to push him off his path. He walked along a slender gray bridge that shot through an inky blackness, which twisted and turned in the forces around him, creatures of unspeakable horror and rage, and yet he pressed on. He called to me to follow, urging me to stay on the path, to not look at the wicked things that raged on either side. I ran, keeping my eyes on him, knowing that if I failed now, all would be lost.*

*Daelus stood over The Lady's body, reaching down to clasp her outstretched hand. Slowly he leaned down, and lifted her from where she lay. He carried her away, his back to me, through a great swirling gateway which led to a strange black land of shapes and forms I could not understand. On the other side of the gate were five robed figures, the sight of which made my blood turn cold. They had no faces under their hoods, just blank forms of gray. He lifted his arms, offering The Lady to them. They took her, whispering thanks to him, promising to keep her forever, to keep her safe, secure.*

*Daelus looked back over his shoulder at me. As my eyes connected with his, I saw that familiar glint. His eyes were always different; tranquil calm, gentle compassion. His lips moved, forming the words, "It is done, Jyre. All you have asked for is done. Goodbye."...*

I awoke with a start. I couldn't have been out cold for very long, because Ranson's men were still standing over me, their legs like a cage around me. They weren't looking at me though; they had their backs to me. I turned around and saw immediately that one was on the ground, twitching as blood poured from him. I looked up and saw a long blade in the face of one of the men, who held his arms up in the air. I followed the blade to an arm, and a

face with an eye patch and greasy black hair; Soore. Rembrandt was there too, with a knife to another's throat, and Memnon holding what could have been a bomb, and Heppet with an arrow ready, and even Tanya holding one of them with his fingers at his face, paralyzing him. "Let her go!" Heppet yelled.

Slowly they parted, moving away from me, being led step by step by blades to their necks and arrows in their faces. As soon as I saw a gap big enough, I bolted, running. "Jyre, wait!" Heppet called out, but I ignored him. I wanted nothing to do with this anymore. I plunged into the woods, and kept running. "Jyre, it's me!" Heppet yelled, as if I was blind and deaf and couldn't recognize him. All I could think about was the dead man that had been lying next to me, and how it could have been any one of them, even Heppet, who had dealt the killing blow. No, it was worse; it could have been me who had killed him. For a moment I was confused, did Ranson's body vanish with the rest of Barlosk? Was that Ranson who had been there, next to me? Was it truly me who had killed him?

No, I was losing my mind. It was one of Ranson's thugs, and he had been killed by Soore. I saw the blood on his sword. "Jyre, stop running! I just want to help!" Heppet called again. I just ran faster.

I had no idea how, but suddenly he was flying through the air, like he had run up a tree and down a branch, landing in front of me with his arms spread wide. "Jyre, please don't run away from me!" he said, his eyes filled with fear.

I stopped, skidding on damp dead leaves and falling on my back. The wound stung like I had been freshly stabbed all over again, making me cry out in pain. Don't run away from me, he said, isn't that what Ranson said? Don't you ever run away from me? Heppet was just as bad as he was, or worse. At least Ranson was open about how nasty he was. I didn't know what Heppet wanted from me, why he treated me like he did. I didn't understand him at all.

I couldn't run any more though, and he wasn't moving any closer. He lowered his arms, his eyes red and glassy, his voice trembling, "Jyre, what's wrong? Please tell me what's wrong. I just want you to be okay," he said.

"I killed him!" I screamed, backing away from him as much as I could by kicking at the muddy soil beneath me. "And I killed her too, and everyone else inside!"

"Jyre, are you okay? I don't care about the rest, are you okay?" he insisted, coming closer again.

I ran at him, punching him in the chest over and over with the bottom of my fist, just like I had done with Daelus, only then I had been holding a dagger. Then I felt his arms around me, not trapping me, but holding me gently, and the next thing I knew I was sobbing against his shirt, hands still in fists, still thumping against him weakly, as I said over and over, "I killed him! I killed Ranson!"

He was shushing me, stroking my back, saying, "It's okay Jyre, I know, and it's okay," like I was some kind of child he was supposed to be comforting, lying to by saying things were okay when they were not. I hated him so much

for lying to me; why didn't he just say the truth? Why didn't he call me a wretched beast and a murderer, and spit on me, saying I was worthless? Why did he insist on lying to me? Els lied to me, and Father lied to me and now Heppet too!

I couldn't fight back anymore. The longer he held me, the tighter his arms became, the closer I pressed against him, until his shirt was soaked with my tears and runny nose and drool from my gaping, sobbing mouth. He didn't seem to care. He just held on, rocking me gently in place, telling me everything was going to be okay.

I didn't know how long I cried against him, but when I felt like I could no longer breathe and that my throat hurt from the wailing, I pushed myself away from him, turning, only to see eyes staring at me. My own went wide, and then Heppet noticed too, giving a start. We were surrounded by beasts and strange men with painted faces, many who had spears and some with swords. One came forward, a man with a head that looked like a rat's, jabbering and squeaking at us. Heppet rushed to get between him and me, and to my amazement, started jabbering right back. The two went on and on, back and forth. Sometimes the strange man pointed at me, but Heppet always got in the way of his arm. Finally the strange rat-man seemed to get even angrier, but turned away in a huff and started to walk. The entire rest of the crowd started to move too.

Heppet whispered to me, "We need to go with them, back to the clearing," and then tried to take my hand. I let him, too scared now to fight back. In fact, I found myself clinging to his side, not wanting to look at any of the monsters that walked with us, but finding it impossible not to look. "I told them that Ranson was the one who had done this and that he coerced you, and that our friends were just trying to stop him. I think they might be going to let us all go."

"You lied?" I whispered back, frowning at him.

"I didn't lie!" he insisted.

When we got back to where Barlosk had been, it was completely filled with the same kind of strange men and beasts, but there were women and children too. I then realized that these were the people who had fled from Barlosk, the ones whose home I had taken from them. As they parted to let us through, I saw that Soore and the others, even Ranson's men and Tanya, were all tied up, and looking very surprised to see us, except for Rembrandt, who looked like he didn't care.

When we got to them, the rat-man began to chatter to some of the others, who seemed to get angry, pointing and gesturing to Soore and the men. I saw that their weapons were in a pile, but with many creatures standing in the way so that even if they somehow managed to escape their bonds they wouldn't be able to rearm themselves. Suddenly some of them grabbed Heppet, pulling him away from me, ignoring his shouts in their language. He was being tied up too, and the next thing I knew I had heavy claws on me and thick robe burning against my wrists. Heppet and I were pushed down among the prisoners, Heppet struggling to remain close to me. I sunk to the

ground, my head curled down to my lap, just waiting for them to kill us and get it over with.

A big bug-winged creature that looked like a stick landed before us, the crowd parting to give him space. He began to gesture violently, making chattering noises, clearly very angry. One of the human pagan men began to translate, saying, "It is worse than just Barlosk! Our hive is destroyed, gone! Our Queen is dead! We have no where now to go! Someone must pay for this horrible crime!"

The entire crowd had erupted into shouts and arguing. The speech I could understand was drowned out by the speech I couldn't. I wanted to dig a hole, crawl into it, and just die.

An even louder shout was heard, and everyone went silent all at once. I saw a woman standing before us who looked like a priestess, only she was covered in blood and grisly wounds. Her walk was difficult, and she needed the help of a strange hunchbacked creature to even stand. She shouted, "Do not quarrel and rage! The Faery Delphine is dead, but this death was a sacrifice so that we all may live! It was her will that the Fae Realm and Barlosk be pulled from this World, in order to trap the cruel being of death whom she mistakenly summoned forever, lest it destroy the entire world! She paid for her mistake with her life! The loss of our homes is a small price to pay!"

I didn't understand what she was talking about, but I knew well enough who she meant by The Faery Delphine. It was true, my dream. The Lady was dead, but I wasn't the one who had killed her. I wondered if Daelus had been with her when she died. Had James? Was it either of them who had stuck the killing blow? I felt that it could not have been Daelus. He had shown her compassion, coming to her side after death had taken her, carrying her away. Where had he taken her, though, and who were those robed men? It made no sense. It was just a dream, after all.

The stick-man was chattering again, with his friend translating. "Even so, these men are our enemies, and traitors! If Delphine were still alive, they would all be put to death!"

"Please, may I speak?" I was shocked to see Tanya stand slowly, finding it difficult with his arms bound behind his back.

The stick-man spat at the ground before him. There were many shouts and chatters and grunts, and a few shouts of "traitor!" but they all quickly died down, and no one came to force him to sit.

He raised his voice so that everyone could hear. I was amazed at how loud he could be. Was it magic? Why didn't he just use his magic to escape? "It is true that these men were traitors to Delphine, and I as well for assisting them, and some mercenaries brought along to seek her blood, but look at *why* they were doing so! Vivian herself says that it was a horrible mistake what Delphine did, and she paid for it with her life. These men, though they are our enemies, were willing to stop at nothing to keep this horrible thing from happening! If they had been successful, then maybe Delphine would have been slain, but how many others would have been spared? The Fae Realm

would still be here, as would Barlosk. I beg of you to show mercy; let them and let us go free with our lives. This matter is done. No more blood need be spilt today.”

Tanya looked over at me, connecting his eyes with mine. Everything he had said seemed to make sense, but I didn't believe for a moment that anyone would listen to him. That's not how the world worked. It was always blood for blood. Even I, who hated killing and violence, knew the hunger revenge put in a person's heart. I knew that it would always come down to blood for blood.

The crowd began to murmur slightly, and then it was back to its roar of activity. At the front of it all was the stick-man, making all sorts of noises and waving his arms.

The priestess once again called for silence, and I recoiled as a truly ghastly creature pushed its way forward. It looked like a huge spider, but it walked upright on big, human-like legs, and had a head separate from its body that it could turn and look around with. It started to chirp and chatter faintly, with the priestess called Vivia speaking up beside him. “He says we too suffered the loss of our queen mother, we weavers. The Faery offered promise of a better future, no more hatred between our peoples, weavers and fae. I could not believe this was so, thinking no, impossible! Yet, it was. Now we both have no Queen, but all is not lost. I offer this to you fae. Our home can be yours as well. Build your village in our lands. Both our Queens can be born again, but can now live as sisters.”

The stick-man, who I guessed was the fae, replied, with his translator saying, “This thing that you say, it can be talked over. I thank you for your generous heart. However, it does not escape these man-fools from their deaths.”

“You ignored what the good woman Vivia spoke of? These man-fools sought good acts, though they went opposite to us. Also remember, the man-fool who killed *our* Queen was forgiven for this deed by *your* Queen. We accepted this. Why can you not now accept this?”

The stick-man spat again, but said nothing further.

“The weaver say they go free. What say the fae?”

It just chirped once, and the one beside him translated.—“Death.”

An old man who wore just a loin cloth and had drawings all over every inch of his skin stepped forward, and said in a weary voice, “I am not knowing if I can be speaking for all of Barlosk, but normally this is what I do. Vivia's words ring true for me. What matters more, the stones and blocks and beams, or the people? The Hammer-fools say the stones. I say the people! Barlosk says they go free.”

The fae shook violently, waving his arms at him. Many other fae behind him jumped up and down, waving their arms, chattering.

A ferocious monster like a giant wolf howled, barking and snarling. I felt my gut twist at the sight of his hairy face and white fangs. The fae immediately settled down. Amazingly, one of the other pagan men translated. “You quarrel like man-fools, all! The jacknalls say when their goddess bes

slain, it was all of the way of The World! Yet no, Faery say, we should be angry! Hunt, find murderer, kill her too! What happened of this? More dead jacknall! More dead weaver! More dead mongbat! More dead fae! No live Slasher Queen! It was fool of Faery to wish this for us, and fool she was! Death comes to those of power, just as creatures big and small, it is how it bes! Punish for this is the realm of the man-fools and their foolsie laws! Hammer-heads seek revenge in this way! It is not our way! He says, if his brother bes eaten by another, that is the end for him! Life go on, life take life, life kill, life live on! This should be the end for Faery, no start for revenge! Do we see the Woodsie Queen acting in this way? Seeking death and revenge for the death of Woodsie Lord? NO! Past is past always says Woodsie Queen! She was wise, and knew, that this is not the way!"

All eyes turned back to the spokesman for the fae, who seemed to be studying the jacknall carefully before answering. Finally, he did, with his translator saying, "As you say, it should be true. Woodsie Queen is only goddess left now. Past is past. Yes."

The jacknall barked, and then howled. The translator said, "It is agreed then. All say they go free. No death."

"Agreed. Past is past. No death." The fae quickly walked away, going into the crowd until I was no longer sure which fae it had been. They all looked the same.

Heppet gave a huge sigh of relief. "Wow," he said quietly to me. "I never thought that one of those wolf-monsters would save my life some day."

— Lytha: Letting Go —

Day 8: 11:00 am

The City grew into two tall walls which enclosed the river. There was nothing more I could do to gain speed, no more tricks with the mast or the rudder, and no more use struggling with the oars. I was going as fast as the wind could carry me.

I could barely see or sense them now, those little red dots which scurried about like ants through The City streets. Word was spreading quickly that their High Priest had been killed, but none would know the truth of his death. It would be held that I had done it, and why not? I had already slain so many of them, what was one more? In a way, it was almost better. With me as a scapegoat, it would never become known that one Hammerite had raised his hand against another and spilled his blood. The Order would not fall into chaos as one side waged war upon the other. I could live with their blame, and they would have to live with their dark secret.

I didn't even care about Oberon anymore. He could run, escape, live a long life; prosper even. He could become High Priest. What did it matter? Was he more evil than the vilest man who had ever held onto power within The Hammerites? Would he be more evil than Father Markander, who had been High Priest as long as I could remember before Rafael took his place?

I had tried, and I had failed. Who was I to think that I could do my part to

right the tremendous wrongs done by a being far more powerful than myself, to an Order far more powerful than *It*? It was not only about their hatred for me, but my hatred for them. Could I let it all go? I was not meant to be on a holy war against the church. I was just a burglar who could read minds; nothing more. That was who I had been, and that was who I longed to resume being. In time the Hammerites would forget me. Their memory was short, especially when dealing with things they wished to remain a secret. They would find someone else to punish, claim victory to show the people they were in control, and then sweep the truth under the rug.

I would keep my face hidden, venture out only to do a job, become once again the secret and the shadow that was only spoken of by those who knew not what they were saying.

What of Delphine though, and her vendetta against me? Would she continue to send monsters after me night after night until I had either been killed, or her people grew weary of being sent off on a fool's errand and possibly their deaths? I would have to wait and see. I could make my tracks difficult to find even to them. The shadows of The City were deep, its stench hid many a scent, and its throngs of humanity easy to melt into and become invisible. She, like the Hammerites, would eventually need to give in, and like I had decided, let it go.

But before all of that, I would follow this river up to a lake I had visited little more than a day ago, and I would save Ghost's life.

— Jyre: Leaving and Staying —

Day 8: 11:00 am

As soon as we were cut loose Soore and his men, including Heppet, rushed off into the woods. I didn't even consider doing anything else. When I turned back, before stepping through the tree trunks, I saw that Tanya was still among the pagans, and that Ranson's men had run off in a pack in a different direction. I quickly turned and resumed following, not wanting to lose them.

When we had gone a short way I saw that they had stopped, with Heppet talking to Soore. I caught the very start of it. "I'd like to stay behind," he said.

"Any reason why?" Soore replied, looming over him.

Heppet looked over his shoulder, right at me. "I'd like to talk with Jyre about it," he said.

Soore craned his neck to look over at me with his good eye, and then just said, "Make it fast."

Heppet hurried over, coming to a stop in front of me. "Jyre," he said, looking very nervous. "I know you've thought about it too. We both have. Staying out here, I mean. Not going back to The City."

I looked down at the ground. I had thought of it, but I wasn't used to just deciding what to do with myself. I always depended on other people to do things like that. "Where?" I just asked.

"I don't know," he said, and looked like he was trying to get me out of the earshot of the others, who were standing around watching us expectantly.

"Anywhere—does it matter? I can hunt and can grow, so we wouldn't go hunger. I can build us a shelter."

"I can take care of myself," I just said, still looking at the ground.

"Then who will take care of me?" he said, putting his palm to his chest.

"Why? I'm a murderer. You shouldn't want to stay with me."

"What? Jyre, what are you talking about?" He came close slowly, putting his hands on my shoulders.

"I killed him," I whispered, still refusing to look up at him.—"Ranson."

"I know, Jyre. It was probably the right thing to do. He had it coming."

"It doesn't matter," I snapped. "It's not about that. It's what I felt inside." I lifted up my hands, staring at my fingers. They still had the stain of blood on them.

"What did you feel?" he asked, coming just slightly closer, his voice down low.

I shrugged. "Just..." Finally I looked up at him and met his eyes. "I don't know! Like," I paused again, uncertain if I could say what I wanted to say, "When I rushed at him, took his knife, I felt like I was gonna enjoy killing him!"

"But you didn't," he said, his eyes steady.

"But I *wanted* to."

"I know the feeling," he said. He sounded genuine.

"I just...couldn't think. I just acted. No thought. I don't...deserve what you said. I don't deserve anything."

"Yes you do! You deserve a better life!" he insisted. "I want you to stay out here with me. Don't go back to The City, Jyre. Neither of us belongs there."

"Why do you want me to stay with you?" I squeaked. "I just mess things up."

"I mess things up too, Jyre! I want you to stay with me because...I just think we understand each other. We understand like other people can't. I think I need that."

I looked down again. Before I knew what I was doing, I uttered a soft, "Okay." As much as I wanted to continue arguing with him, finding new reasons to refused, I had said it, and now I just wanted even more to stop talking.

"Well, okay then. We're still going to need someone who knows the way back," Soore's voice came from behind Heppet. I looked over to see him rubbing the hilt of one of his swords idly with the other two men at his sides.

"I don't know it," I admitted. "Els did. He followed a stream."

He rolled his eye. "What, so are we just supposed to wander in the woods for days or weeks until we hit the shore, and then make a mad guess over which direction to travel?"

A voice came from the thicket. "We know the way back!" Everyone spun around, weapons ready to face the approaching group of men. It was Ranson's thugs. The one called Suf had spoken, and was continuing as the group of four men approached us. "It's not hard. It would be easier if we all

stuck together. We're all Bloods still, you know. We didn't join up just for Ranson."

Soore seemed to scoff at this, stepping close to Suf so that he had to look down to glare into his eyes. "Is that right, lard-oh? And how long before one of you tries to stab me in the back for killing your man?"

Rembrandt came to the side, putting a hand on both of their shoulders. The sling around his arm was definitely just for show. "Didn't you gents learn a damn thing from those beasts that just set us free?" He then gave Soore a wink and walked away, popping out his switchblade to clean his fingernails.

Soore smiled a twisted smile and watched him go, and then turned to Suf, offering his hand. Suf took it and shook firmly.

"City Purebloods," Suf said.

"Aye," Soore replied.

"Excuse me, Mister Soore," Heppet said, stepping forward. The big man turned to look at him. "If it's possible, I'd like to send a message to my ranger troop."

"Alright," he said. "What is it?"

"Oh," he replied, looking a little taken off guard. "Well I wanted to..." he made a gesture like he was writing on the air. "You know, write a letter."

"Do I look like an office closet to you, son? I've got no paper," he just said.

"Permit me," Tanya's voice came rushing in from the direction of the clearing. He pulled a small bound book out of nowhere, along with what looked like a quill without the feather. He opened the book, bracing it on his knee, and tore out a single page. He then handed the page, book, and quill to Heppet.

"Oh, thanks," Heppet said with a grin, and sat down directly where he stood with the book in his lap and the parchment on top of it to write.

"This guy," Soore said, pointing to Tanya and then looking around to make sure everyone was listening. "This guy *is* an office closet." His comment grew an assortment of unenthused laughs, probably not as much as he expected. He didn't seem to care, though. He just pulled Memnon aside and started to talk with him about gathering supplies for the return trip.

Tanya was staring at me, but made no motion to approach or say anything. I walked forward, but instead of going to him, I turned to Heppet with an, "Uhm." He looked up at me, grinning. "Can I do that when you're done?" I just said. He gave a firm nod, and resumed his jotting.

When I looked back up Tanya was no longer looking at me. He was focused on another group of people approaching; some were wearing the guard uniform of Barlosk; others were probably villagers, some women and children. They formed a trail back to the clearing, and the woods were so dense I couldn't see how many there were in total. The one in front, a guard who I recognized, spoke up. "It's said you're going back to The City."

"That's right," Soore replied, looking a bit irritated.

"Well, we would like to come too. We all talked, some want to try to find refuge at other villages, some want to build a new one, but we're frankly sick of living beside beasts and wild-men and would like to return to civilization if

you'll beg our pardon."

"If you come," Soore said, stepping towards him. "You will need to throw away the remains of your pagan life. If you come to The City it's to be City Folk. I won't stand for anything else."

An assortment of nods and agreements came from the group, though a few seemed to shrink a little, whisper quietly with those nearby, and exchange goodbyes. I watched for a long time as the group changed with more people coming to see what was going on, and either decided to go with them or stay behind. Tanya was no longer anywhere to be seen. Finally Heppet finished, giving me the book and the quill before handing the folded note to Soore, who instead handed it to Rembrandt. "This is the guy who deals in information," he just said, and resumed his conversation with some of the refugees.

I sat down with my back to a tree, and tore out a page just like Tanya had done for Heppet. I was tempted to open the book and start reading, curious about Tanya's secrets, but I respected his privacy. Before I began, I looked up to see Heppet talking with some of the other pagans, probably telling them what to expect about life in The City. For a moment I wanted to just give the page back to Tayna, say to hell with the woods and villages and go back with the group to The City, but then I heard Heppet talking of belching smoke stacks, flickering electric lights, dirty streets filled with vagrants and horse droppings, marching Hammerites and watchmen, with bricks and walls and glowing lights and rooftops and domes and towers and spires as far as the eye could see in every direction. I knew I could not go back there. I didn't belong there. I could, maybe someday, return to visit, but for now it was time to try and find where I really belonged.

I was startled when I realized the quill had no ink to dip into, but then remembered that Heppet hadn't needed one. I placed the tip to the page, and saw that it worked just like a stick of charcoal, only with droplets of ink soaking into the soft paper. Overcoming my astonishment, I began to write, starting with two words. "Dear Daelus."

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— Sheam: The Third Phase —

Day 8: 2:00 am

"Good grief. I thought they would never leave us alone."

I pressed my back to the door after our hosts finally decided to leave us in our guest room. Crowley had been wrong, it wasn't his brother's sister-in-law's friend, it was his brother's friend, which meant that he asked much more pertinent questions about us that were much more difficult to bluff our way past. Thankfully Andrew seemed to be gifted at that sort of thing, and I soon realized I just needed to keep my mouth shut and let him do all of the talking. The two of them didn't seem nearly as flustered as I was. In fact Petra had wasted no time pulling the spyglass from her luggage and having a peek next door.

"It's a good view," she observed. "We can see the entire building from

here, and every room on that entire wall has a window, most of which are wide. We could probably draw a fairly decent map from just this view alone.”

Andrew was already seated at the desk with his quill ready, sketching things out as he glanced up and occasionally making corrections when Petra disagreed with him about what they couldn't see. Suddenly I started to wonder why I had even come along.

“That one was just on the second floor a moment ago. See how he cuts his beard? It's the same one,” Petra said.

“Are you sure? That's a fairly typical beard-cut,” replied Andrew.

“Yes but he slipped and cut one side too short.”

“You can see that?”

“Yes. So those four doors one on top of the next must lead to a stair tower.”

“Okay, but I think we should observe more until we decide for sure.”

“We have, what, six hours before it's time to move? I feel ready to go in now.”

“Jossimer's friend hasn't recalled his guard force yet. If you wait you'll have an easier time of it.”

“I think they're keeping Mallard in that room. Notice how the guards change the way they walk when they pass it? Like they usually patrol differently in that area, and they need to be extra conscious to follow the new routes?”

“A keen observation, I see why you're considered one of the best.”

They had been going back and forth like that for the past hour when I let out a sigh and went to go lie on the bed. They both looked up at me, like they had forgotten I was even there. “Has the solution worn off already, Sheam?” Andrew asked.

“I don't know,” I said, and then got back up. I went over to the window, looking at what they saw, but sure I wouldn't be able to make the same deductions. I did have something rattling around in my head though, and decided to voice it. “We're probably going to be watching your progress from here as you work tonight, Petra. It's going to be excruciating to see what you can't see and watch you going into danger without being able to tell you.”

“That's why normally we don't 'spectate,’” she just said.

I frowned, crossing my arms tighter. “It would be so useful if there was a way to communicate with an agent on a mission, tell them things they can't see, watch out for them, you know?”

They were both quiet, but they did seem like they were thinking about what I said and not just humoring me. “I would probably just find it distracting,” Petra finally said.

“But it could be very useful,” I continued. “Like, imagine that you're about to go up the stair, which you say is behind that row of doors. Maybe a guard is standing watch at the top, and you'd have no way of knowing it until you got there and peeked. We would be able to see from here, though. How would we be able to tell you?”

Andrew leaned back, stroking his beard gently as he thought it over.

"How do ships at sea miles apart communicate?" he said.

"Don't they use flags?" I answered.

"Not at night," Andrew said.

Petra seemed to take interest in the question, though I was sure that Andrew already knew the answer. "They have a lantern in a box with slats on it. They work a lever to open and close the slats to form flashes of different length. Long flashes and short ones mean different letters. It's called seamen's code I believe."

"Yes, that's right," Andrew replied, still stroking his beard.

"Do you know seamen's code?" I asked them both. They shook both their heads no.

I was on a roll, though. "That's better though, isn't it? We could come up with our own code, a much simpler set. We wouldn't need to say entire sentences, just a signal for danger, or turn left, or turn right, or don't go in there, or things like that. We could use the next few hours to work out a code rather than just spending it analyzing patrol patterns which are probably just going to change anyway."

"That's...a good idea," Petra said after a pause. "I don't like it, don't get me wrong, but it's a good idea."

"I think it's worth a shot," Andrew said, giving his chin a good rub. "Petra, let's give it a try. Sheam, do you mind finding us one of those flash-boxes while we work out what the codes could be?"

"If I can't find one I'll make one," I said with a nod.

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— Lytha: Against the Current —

Day 8: 2:00 pm

The mind of every sailor I passed had propelled me step by step to the place I needed to go. I knew now that the lake was up ahead, but the stream was growing shallow, the current faster with every turn, with more and more rocks threatening to flip the boat with every one I struck. Finally I felt that I could go no farther; the boat was jammed against the rocks.

I lifted Ghost's body up and abandoned the boat. I knew I didn't have far to run now. The woods here were familiar, like from something out a dream. With every step I felt like the lake was growing impossibly distant.

I could not find Ghost's mind anymore, the light had gone out. I didn't care though, I still had to try. I pushed myself harder and harder, every muscle in my arms and legs burning, my chest heaving for breath, my mind growing dizzy from the strain.

Finally I saw it, the familiar spot. I could even see the marks my knees had left as I kneeled before the water's edge. Carefully I set Ghost down, and then gazed out across the calm surface of the lake. I searched my memory for where the gentle splash had swallowed the choker up into the water. I could almost see it, floating through the air, dropping down impossibly far from the bank, and sinking to the lake's bottom.

I jumped in. I soon found that the lake was deeper than it seemed. I

swam, forcing my aching muscles to work, stroke by stroke going to the point where I saw the choker vanish. When I reached the spot, I dove down, eyes shut against the filthy murk of the water, reaching with my fingertips down, down, down to the floor of the lake.

I could not find it. I burst back up to the surface, wiping the water from my face, panting for air. I hadn't given up. Again I dived, faster this time, kicking harder against the water to propel me to the muddy bottom. At last I came to it. With my lungs burning I searched frantically, but the mud was too deep, and the underwater movement of the water too erratic. It could take hours to find; days.

I burst to the surface again. I felt failure looming over me like the gray storm clouds that had swallowed up the sun. I panted for breath until I could force myself to slow, and think.

The lake was filled with life. My powers only worked on people, but I always felt something, even from animals. I needed anything, the faintest awareness of something out of place. I closed my eyes, letting the water bring the thoughts of the lake-life to me, spreading my fingers out, and begging for any sign.

It was a strange sensation, like a tickle at the base of my spine. I went down again, driven by intuition gained from the obscure mind of something below. I swam deeper into the lake as I went down, farther down, twice as far down as I had before. When I could not take it anymore I returned to the surface, but only to take a quick breath of air and go down again. I reached, feeling my fingers guided by the strange sense of something out of place. I felt it, the cold touch of something metallic against my fingertips. I grabbed, pulling the familiar shape from the muck, and rushed to the surface.

I came up with a splash, gagging for air, coughing up the water that had seeped into my nose. I didn't waste another second though. I stroked hard, reaching the shore, pulling myself onto land, and falling on top of Ghost's body, my arm nearly pushing into the gaping hole in his torso.

With my hands shaking I put the choker around his neck. My trembling fingers fiddled with it, trying desperately to remember how it worked, until I located the bead which made one appear as a corpse. To my surprise and relief, I found that it was able to be turned the opposite direction of normal. It was exactly what I needed. I turned, and with my breath swept away, saw Ghost's body become whole, not so much of a trace of the gap torn into him.

"Ghost," I whispered, my hands still trembling as I stroked his cheeks and tugged at his eyelids. "Ghost, wake up," I said quietly, my voice shaking so badly I could barely speak.

I began to push on his chest, thinking it could possibly restart his heart. I tried to inflate his lungs by breathing into his mouth. I went back and forth, over and over, but it was useless. I was a fool to think that this could have worked.

I had collapsed against him, my face buried against his neck, the choker pressing against my forehead, my fingers in his hair. Lifting my head, I pulled open his eyelids, looking. I searched and searched in his mind for any trace of

a thought still lingering, anything I could latch onto, but it was all long since gone.

*"You're looking in the wrong place."*

It was true; I was, wasn't I? I gripped Ghost's head firmly in my hands, still holding his eyelids open. I shut my eyes, and left the lake and Ghost's body far behind. I called out Ghost's name, but not with my lips.

*I was still in the woods, but it was a very different wood, the wood where my sister's cottage stood. I burst the door open, eyes darting around inside. There he was, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, smiling at me. "Bit of mess, isn't it?" he said.*

*Ghost was there, full, complete...almost tangible. He wasn't merely the image of Ghost which had killed It. It was everything I had drawn from him since the moment he first slung me over his shoulder in Cragscleft. He was as much Ghost as Ghost himself.*

*I rushed to him. I didn't say a word. I grabbed his head between my palms, and pressed my forehead to his, my eyes wide. I could feel him shake violently all over and a rush of energy burst through my eyes with an intensity that made my brain feel on fire.*

I opened my eyes, feeling the same energy burst out of them. I felt his body shake violently for just a moment, and then it was all over. I immediately felt him move within my grasp, letting out a sigh. I could feel his heart beating under me. I could feel him fill his lungs with air. He blinked, over and over, looking up at me with confusion. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said back, unable to hold back my tears any longer. I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, squeezing him, letting short burst of breath escape me as I suppressed the urge to just break down and cry.

I felt his arms wrapping up around me, weakly at first, but slowly gaining strength. "What happened?" he said.

"You died," was all I could think to say.

"Oh," he replied. "So that's what it feels like—wasn't too bad."

I laughed, choking on sobs that refused to go away. "Was pretty bad for me," I said to him, lifting myself back up to look into his eyes. "And..."

"What?" he said, smiling up at me. His eyes were just glowing.

"You're...still dead, I think."

— Ghost: Undead —

Day 8: 2:30 pm

"I'm...still dead?" I looked up at Lytha in astonishment. "I really feel very *alive*, to be honest. I am not sure how I am still dead."

It took her a minute to manage to talk again. She kept starting and stopping, getting something out but her voice cracking, before finally saying, "The choker, it just makes you look like a living, healthy body. I put your mind back inside you. It had left."

I reached to my neck, feeling the choker in place. "Wow, the thing had a real use after all," I said. "It's a good thing you decided to give it back!"

She snorted, and then started to laugh, even though the tears kept coming. "I didn't need it anymore," she said.

"So for a while, I really was a ghost," I reasoned. "I don't really remember it, but I couldn't have been pulled back into my body unless my soul had decided to stick around. Maybe it knew that you weren't going to just let me die like that."

"I did let you die, though," she said softly, touching my cheek. "I couldn't stop that thing. It killed you."

"Yeah, but it didn't chop me up or eat me or something, so you definitely deserve some credit," I said with a grin.

She wiped her face off. "I...told it to go away. I think I told it to destroy itself. It left. I don't know what happened to it, but I think it's gone."

"Hey," I said. "What happens if I take this off?" I fiddled with the choker, looking for the clasp.

"Ghost, don't!" she yelled, grabbing my hand and pulling it away. "If you take it off you could die!"

"But you said I am already dead. How can I get more dead?"

She looked really scared, and was holding my hands really tightly. "Don't risk it, please don't risk it. I don't want to lose you again."

"Some day Lytha, it's going to get knocked off by accident, and then if that's what happens, that'll be it, poof, gone."

"So let it be *some day*," she said, pleading.

"I can't live like that," I said. "Going every day worried about what will happen if I take this bit of jewelry off? Worried that if it slips out of place, poof, I drop dead, again? No, no, no."

"At least," she said, seeming to waver. "Wait a little while. Don't try it right now. If you try it now, I could lose you just as soon as I got you back. It only worked before because you didn't know you had died. If you die now, you'll know it, and I won't be able to bring you back. I know I won't."

I took my hands out of hers and put them in mine, squeezing. "Try it when? In ten minutes?"

"No, that's too soon."

"When, then? An hour? How about in the morning?"

"Ghost..."

"Maybe a week from now? Seriously, Lytha, do you expect me to live like that?"

"...Yes."

I laughed. "No you don't!" I said, and then moved to get up. She got off me, sliding to the side, allowing me to stand. "We do it now, and then we never have to worry about it again. If I just drop dead, then that's how I was supposed to go."

She sat down, looking up at me, her face red; her eyes redder.

"Do you know how I like to live? I live without worries, and without regrets. I live knowing that every day I'm going to do exactly what I want to

do, and damn what happens next. Maybe that means robbing a tomb, maybe it means killing some asshole, maybe it means saving the life of a really crazy woman. I live never worried about will I die that day, because I know if I did, it will either be funny, awesome, or lame, and if it's lame, people will at least make jokes about it."

"Don't talk like that," she whispered.

"This is who I am, Lytha. You should know that. You had me in your head, right? You know all about it."

She nodded slowly.

"So if I didn't take this choker off, right now, it really wouldn't be me you got back, would it? It would be some less-good copy of me, a phony. A toy you just dreamed up because you couldn't stand the idea of living with the real deal."

She looked away, anger in her eyes, but she knew I was right.

"Well, I can promise you this. I don't feel like some less-good copy, or a phony, or some toy you dreamed up. I feel like me, so I'm going to take this thing off right now, and if I drop dead, well...just so you know, I'm madly in love with you." I reached up and yanked it off.

— Lytha: Ghost —

Day 8: 2:32 pm

"...just so you know, I'm madly in love with you." I felt like my heart stopped. I jerked my head around to look at him, just in time to see him pull the choker free from his neck. Instantly the bloody hole through his torso reappeared. The choker slipped from his fingers as his knees gave way. His jaw went loose and his eyes rolled up. He fell.

I didn't scream, or cry out in anger or denial. I caught his body as it fell knowing that what he had said was true. He had to live the way he wanted to, and couldn't change that just for me. I nearly collapsed under his weight as he came down into my arms, myself falling as well, until he was still on the ground, his face to the sky, body in my lap, with my tears falling down to mix with his blood. "Love you too," I whispered faintly as I shut my eyes tight.

"Gosh you're cute," Ghost's voice came. My eyes went wide, glaring at him as he grinned at me.

I pulled my left arm back and punched him, hard, right in the nose. "Asshole!" I shouted.

He laughed, pulling his hands up to nurse his hurt nose, only laughing harder when he lifted his hands up to see that I had bloodied it. I pushed him out of my lap, stomping away, before stomping back, grabbing him by the throat, pulling him up to kiss him hard on the lips. I could feel a very *intense* pulse through his throat.

"Sorry," he said, as soon as I pulled away. "It was just...funny." His eyes were still glowing like before.

"If that's your idea of funny you're going to get a lot of bloody noses," I just said.

"Yeah well, whoa, would you look at that. I can see my ribs!"

"You're disgusting," I said, letting go of his neck and grabbing him to pull him to his feet.

"You feel better now though, right? No more worrying about that silly choker! I'm a certified undead! I wonder if this will heal." He started poking and picking at his wound, like he didn't even care. "Doesn't hurt; that's weird."

I grabbed the choker off the ground and wrapped it back around his neck. "Fine, you won your little gamble. Now for Gods sake keep this blasted thing on when you're around me. I don't want to be able to see your liver." Much to my disappointment his bloodied nose also cleared up.

"Better hope you don't knock it off during sex!" he said with a chuckle.

"What the taff makes you think we're ever going to have sex?" I scowled.

"Oh, I," he blushed, and scratched the back of his head.

I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulled him back in and bit his lower lip. "Did *that* hurt?" I hissed.

"Ouch, yes!" he said with a grin.

"Thank Goodness," I replied, and then shoved him backwards so that he slipped in the mud and fell over into the lake.

"Did that hurt?" I called out, needing to shout a bit over the sound of him thrashing. "You're not taking on water, are you? With that big hole in you you'd probably get waterlogged. Don't take the gods-damned choker off!"

He was laughing again, and trying to get out of the water, so I rushed at him and pulled him back in. "I wonder if you can still drown. Wouldn't that be a fun experiment? Maybe we should try it, because, you know, we can't just live every day wondering if you'd drown or not! That's no taffing way to live!"

"You're making fun of me now!" he said, though from the laughter in his voice he didn't seem too upset by it.

"Oh, am I?" betrayed a smile for just a moment, before splashing him in the face. He coughed and snorted, probably with some fish up his nose. "You're awfully fussy for a dead man," I observed.

"What is it with you and water?" he said after he had coughed all the water out. "I seem to remember another episode with you involving water. Oh right, I was saving your life!"

"I guess we're even now, huh?" I grabbed him again, but this time I just brushed some of the wet hair out of his face.

"Nah, there's no keeping score," he said with a wink.

"Oh," I said, drawing him close for a small kiss. "So you won't mind how unfairly I treat you."

"Oh, well," he said, and then leaned in to kiss me back. "I won't hold a grudge."

## — Jyre: A New Beginning —

Day 8: 6:00 pm

After the group had left to begin the long journey to The City, I returned with Heppet to the clearing where Barlosk had been. I wanted to find Tanya, ask him again why he was with The Lady, but I couldn't find him, not even to give him back his journal. I hung onto it, still feeling it wasn't right to read it, sure that he would show up eventually to take it back from me.

We had heard from some of them that something was happening. We set and watched from a tree branch as the pagan beasts and people danced around a huge bonfire, chanting and singing. I couldn't understand most of it, but got the idea quickly that this was a celebration in The Lady's honor. At first it seemed stupid to me. Why celebrate death and destruction? But as I watched and the hours went by, I began to understand that this was simply their way, and if I couldn't understand it then I had no place judging it.

Heppet and I sat in silence. Sometimes I turned to look at the way the firelight illuminated him, reflected off his eyes, and the way he gently smiled as he watched. He probably understood better than I what was going on below.

Without giving him any warning, I slipped down from the tree branch. I walked into the woods, away from the roaring fire. Soon I heard him following, but he did not chase or move to catch up.

When I got to a spot that seemed right, I began to collect bits of wood and other dead plants I could find on the ground. After a moment I realized Heppet was no longer with me. Of course, why should he stay? This had nothing to do with him. I had to roam around a little to find enough things for the two piles, but finally I was satisfied. I took a stick, and drew into the dirt a name in front of each pile, Els then Ranson.

I saw a red glow come over the forest, and when I looked up I saw Heppet standing nearby, holding a burning stick. He had understood what I was doing, and fetched a small part of The Lady's bonfire to help me. I went to him and took the stick, slowly bringing it first to Els's fire, and then to Ranson's. I sat down, still holding the burning stick, only tossing it to the ground between the two small fires when it got too hot to hold onto anymore.

We watched quietly for what felt like all night as the two piles slowly burned, yellow flames licking up at the sticks for a time, and then replaced by a faint red glow as the fire cooled and smoldered.

"Jyre," Heppet said, after even the red from the fire had died away.

"What?" I replied.

"Have you thought about where you want to go?"

"No," was all I said.

"There's another village a day's travel from here. I know a lot of them from Barlosk are going there."

"No."

"Some are going to stay and try to rebuild Barlosk, only this time as just a village. No castle, no lady."

"Oh."

"We could stay and help them."

I took a deep breath before saying, "No." What I didn't say was; why in hell would I want to help rebuild Barlosk?

"We could do like we talked about before. Just build a cottage in the woods. Who needs a village, anyway?"

I didn't answer. It was all just words to me, an empty idea that could never become real. "Why do you want to stay with me?" I said finally.

"Jyre, if it isn't obvious, you're just going to have to figure it out on your own."

"Figure you out," I said, lowering my chin to my knees. "You're really strange."

He gave what sounded like a laugh. "I'll tell you what. You can decide in the morning. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, and rolled onto my side right there before closing my eyes.

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— Sheam: The Going Forth Phase —

Day 8: 7:00 pm

I held my breath. I had no idea how Andrew was staying so calm. Petra had vanished, and it had been nearly ten minutes. We saw her go through a door to avoid a guard, but she wasn't coming back out. The agreement had been to stick to the southern wall so that she could see Andrew's signals, so she either found an opportunity too good to pass up, or she was in trouble.

I lowered the spyglass, looking to Andrew. We had killed all of the lights in the guest room so that there would be no chance of confusion, or us being spotted by the house guards, so I could just barely see the outline of his profile against the dim glow on the back wall. His hand was on the lever on the side of the signal box I had found, though it required I run all the way down to the docks district and back to do so. I was glad that the mission was in Dayport and not in Shalebridge.

"There she is," he said suddenly.

I lifted the spyglass back up, looking at the door she had vanished into, saying "I don't see her."

"Next floor up, three windows over."

I corrected my aim. "Wow," I just said.

Andrew began to flash the box. I watched as Petra glanced right at us, and then glanced to the left. She had no way of knowing it, but a guard was about to turn the corner into the hall she was in. She let herself back into the darkened room, and shut the door.

The difference between the day and night shifts had been considerable. Normally the night watch was double the intensity of the day watch, but thanks to Jossimer only a handful of guards were on duty, and most of them were the same blokes from the day shift. That meant that they were tired, irritated, and impatient.

I watched in astonishment as Petra crept back into the hall, glanced over to us, before nearly running down to finally reach the doorway we thought

the stair tower was behind. She glanced over at us again. Andrew gave the signal for all-clear. She vanished inside, and a moment later, the door directly above on the next floor opened, Petra stepping out. She did a quick hand signal. "The upstairs door is locked," I said. We had agreed that if she needed to send information back, she would use hand signals, and I would be watching with the spyglass to convey them to Andrew, who needed to keep his hand on the light box lever in case he needed to send a message in a split second. "Tell her the guards upstairs have keys on their belts. I don't see any others that do."

"Hmm," Andrew said. "We don't have a signal for that. I'll try..." He paused for a moment before flicking the slats open and closed several times. "Obstacle—solution—behind—obstacle," he said out loud. "I hope she gets the message."

"I don't know if it will help." To my surprise, she nodded, and then went back into the stair tower, vanishing from our sight. "Hold on," I said, as I noticed one of the guards on the top floor break off from his patrol, looking like he heard something. He cautiously approached the stair tower door, sword drawn and at the ready. "Damn it, Andrew, he's spotted her!"

"Wait," Andrew just said, infuriatingly calm.

I couldn't stand it. I watched closely through the spyglass as he moved to the top door of the stair tower, pulled the key from his belt, unlocked it, and pulled the handle. The door came open, and he peeked inside. I found myself holding my breath again, a sick feeling of anxiety creeping through my stomach. The guard opened the door completely, and stepped through, closing it behind him. A moment passed. The door opened again. It was...Petra?

"What happened?" I said in astonishment.

"How do you get through a locked door when the person with the key is on the other side? You get them to unlock it, to go through, and to give you the key."

"Give you the..."

"Make a suspicious noise to lure them into an investigation. Lie in wait for them to come searching. Once they have their back to you, knock them on the head and take the key from him," he clarified. He began to signal to her again, describing to her the situation on the top floor no doubt. I wished I had tried harder to remember all of the light signals. I only memorized the hand signals.

"She's going for the door where we think Mallard is," I said. "She's unlocking it." I bit my lip as she peeked inside, and then gave me a hand signal. "Mallard has been located."

I could hear Andrew give a long breath. Maybe he was nervous, after all.

Petra went in, the door closing behind her.

"Gods, I think I'm going to throw up," I said quietly.

"An allergic reaction to the...?"

"No, Andrew, I'm scared half to death that I am going to see Petra being killed right before my eyes."

"I'm afraid that can't be helped. Just know, even though that is something that happens to people in her profession, it is *not* going to happen to her."

I wasn't sure if it helped, but I didn't feel the urge to throw up anymore. I counted off the seconds one by one, until I saw Petra emerge from that door. A huge man was behind her, who looked far older than I had expected. I wasn't sure why. Lord Canard had been ancient, and his son could have been as little as fourteen years younger than he. From what I could see through the spyglass, it looked like Mallard was at least in his sixties. "He's got no sons," I observed aloud.

"What?" Andrew said, a little confused.

I didn't want to distract him, so I quickly clarified, "Mallard never bore any children, so if we lose him there's no heir to the Canard estate or wardenship." What I was really thinking was; he's far too old now to ever have any children.

"There's always an heir. It's in their rules. If it's not the son, there are laws to determine who the assets and positions go to."

"Oh," I simply replied.

Petra was leading him down the hallway, though it looked like he was having trouble moving. He had probably been tied up, and his arms and legs might have still been asleep. Petra glanced over her shoulder, saw Andrew's signal, and then opened the stair tower door. Mallard saw it too, peering through the window, holding his hand to shield his vision from the glare of the street lamps below. Petra grabbed onto some loose fabric at his sleeve, giving him a solid tug. He followed, vanishing into the stair tower.

"Thank the Gods he doesn't have to go *up* those!" I remarked.

I only heard Andrew give a single breath, but it sounded like a laugh.

"Taff it," Andrew said. I jerked my spyglass down to the ground floor to see that a guard had appeared suddenly, walking so that he would definitely see the stair tower door open when Petra came out. She was in the tower, so had no way of seeing a signal. Andrew began flashing the box open and closed frantically, following no signal and not stopping.

"What are you doing?" I said, feeling a panic overtake me. "She can't see it!" I insisted.

"No, but he can," Andrew clarified. I soon saw what he was doing. The guard turned his head and then did a double take. He walked to the window, shielding his eyes just like Mallard had done, trying to figure out what the flashing light he was seeing was all about. I watched in amazement as Petra emerged from the stair tower, pulled a small black club up over her head, and swung it down onto the guard's helmet so hard I could have sworn I was able to hear it. Andrew stopped flashing, and Petra gave a hand signal that we had not rehearsed. It was a thumbs-up.

I gasped for air, putting my hand on my chest to steady myself. "That was close," I said, more to myself than anyone else.

She was in the clear now, and Andrew told her so. With Mallard close behind her, she cautiously crept to the west side of the building, where a back door awaited their escape. A moment later they were both through, into the

street, and out of sight. A stagecoach was waiting on the other side of the ally, where Mallard would be deposited and taken away to a safe location.

"Wow," I said, looking over at Andrew, who was leaning back in his chair.

"That was remarkably easy," he said in a smiling voice.

"Easy?" I said, scoffing. "That was easy?"

"She was in and out within fourteen minutes, thanks to Jossimer's assistance, Crowley's assistance, and most of all, your rather remarkable stroke of genius."

I didn't argue with him. I wanted to say something like, oh, it wasn't that smart, or that the flashing box was his idea, but instead I just soaked it in and remembered what it felt like to smile and mean it.

"Now," he said, getting up. "We have something far more difficult to attend to."

Immediately I thought about Wendle. There must have been some news by now about the evidence against him. A grotesque premonition told me that I would return to Corinne to discover that Wendle had been already executed for his treachery. I didn't say any of that though, just asked, "What?"

"How to convince Crowley's brother's friend to allow us, to not spend the night!"

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— Ghost: Success Through Persuasion —

Day 8: 7:00 pm

"Well I'd call this a pretty thorough victory," I said after an awkward silence. We had managed to fill in each other pretty well on what happened, though it took Lytha three times as long to tell her side of it.

Lytha looked over at me with a skeptical expression. She looked funny but also really good in the normal-people's clothes that we had stolen from a line at the edge of The City. We wanted to stay on the move and remain inconspicuous during the daylight, so we stashed our business attire and found something a little more casual. Besides, my armor had a huge hole where the front should have been.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?" I said, jumping up to a low wall to walk along the top, putting one foot in front of the other. We were lazily strolling through some farmland at the outskirts of The City, and hit a place where the fields had gotten smaller and the buildings closer together. In a few more miles we would be in Lampfire Hills.

"The High Priest is dead. We failed to protect him. Oberon got away. We failed to bring him to justice. You got killed!"

I jumped down when I got to the end of the wall. I thought I looked pretty good in the green jacket and wool trousers I had nabbed. Lytha said they didn't match, but I didn't care. "I don't think we hurt anybody by letting Father Rafael die. He was pretty much a tyrant and was pretty young, so he was going to have a long time to transform The City into a Hammerite paradise."

"That's true," she just said, kicking a rock to make it skid down the path.

The clothes she took were too big for her, so she had to constantly adjust them to keep them from slipping out of place. I didn't mind watching.

"And as far as Oberon framing you for his murder, well, that's a funny thing. I've been thinking it over, not that I do that much. I saw what kind of work those mechanist things did to people when they got in the way of those fire spraying tubes, and it doesn't look anything like what you could do with a knife, even on a good day. I bet he wasn't counting on the insanity happening in the factory, but they now have a good dozen wounds to compare the one on the High Priest to, which means they're going to know that he died from a mechanist blast, not you."

She gave me that skeptical look, but then smiled just a bit. "That's a good point," she said.

"So, Oberon gets away. Even if he convinces them that it was an accident, there's still going to be a ton of Hammerites who don't trust him, and will be sure that he murdered their H.P. out of greed for his position. So when he goes after the H.P. position himself, they'll go, ah-ha!"

She didn't say anything, just glanced in the direction of a church steeple a few blocks down. Even on the outskirts, there were Hammerites.

"And let's say that he does someday become H.P. He's going to know you're still out here, and you've got his dirty little secret. He'll be terrified that if he goes too far in any one direction, and attracts your attention, you'll be sneaking in through his window at night to either cut his throat, or somehow present proof that he murdered his way to the top. You won't even need to actually do anything. His guilt will keep him petrified."

"I felt no guilt from him," she said.

"His greed will then. His fear of losing what he has. You did feel greed, right?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"So you see; there's no problem. It wasn't a failure at all. It just didn't go as planned."

"I never judged you for an optimist," she said, looking back over at me.

"Heh," I chuckled. "Now me, I'm the one who screwed up."

"Ghost," she said in a pleading voice, "I already beat you up over getting yourself killed. Don't do it again now."

"No, no," I said, not even really thinking about that. "I mean the key engineer. If I really wanted to end their whole Mechanist project, I should have killed him. But when I got right to it, I just couldn't bring myself to."

"I'm not surprised," she said. "It's not your way to simply kill, even if it's with reason. You're more likely to kill with no reason, out of impulse, but even then it's usually an accident."

"Yeah, well, I thought that with Oberon out of the picture, he wouldn't want anything to do with designing those machines anymore. But he's not out of the picture, and so nothing's going to change. They'll design a new Master Gear, and it will probably be better."

"Even if you had killed him, another would have picked up where he left off." Lytha said. "There were many copies of the Master Gear; one would yield

the secret of how to rebuild it. It would go on in spite of him. You can't halt that sort of thing, once an idea becomes manifest. You would have more luck halting the turning of the pages of history."

"We can try. I like to try." I just said.

"So what do we do now?" she asked. We had come to a part of the road which crested a hill, so it was easier to see The City sprawling out into the distance. We could even see the towers of Soulforge from here.

"I don't know. I don't make plans. I just do things," I said with a laugh. "Do we need to decide now?"

"No," she replied after a pause. "I do like knowing what's coming next, though."

"Something will. You can be sure of that. But you never really know what it was until it's gone, and even then it can be really strange and make you go, hey, none of that made sense!"

That got a bit of a laugh out of her.

"I just know that old habits die hard. I imagine we're going to just go on being us, without really much of a change. I don't feel any different, do you?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Oh," I replied. "Well I guess I've only known you for a few days."

"I feel lighter," she replied, "And simpler, and more...myself."

I scrunched up my nose. "How can you feel more...yourself?"

She flashed a smile, but it was only for an instant. "I just feel like now, finally, I am able to actually have my own life, and not just live for the sake of someone else."

I nodded, not really sure what that meant, and found the pockets on the sides of my pants.

"And you feel different, too."

"Oh right, you can read minds," I said with a laugh. "I don't think I'll ever get used to that. What am I thinking of right now?"

She put a little swagger in her step. "How good my butt looks in these pants."

"Correct!" I then whistled a cat-call, and waggled my eyebrows.

"You lived for things bigger than yourself for just a little while. You did things for people other than yourself. You feel really, really good about it."

"That sounds like the opposite of what you said about yourself," I noted, thinking I sounded like one of those fancy-pants doctors who made you sit in chairs and tell him about your father.

"It is, I think," she replied. "You died doing something you didn't have to do, for people you didn't know, without any thought of personal gain. Risking your life for me I can understand...but for Hammerites? You don't even like them."

"Ack!" I said, waving my hands. "If that gets out, my career will be ruined!"

She just smiled, and didn't say another word.

"Huh, isn't that funny," I said after a long pause, with my hand against my belly. "How can a stomach that isn't actually still there tell me I skipped

breakfast, and lunch, and I really shouldn't skip dinner?"

She took a step closer, and I felt her grab onto my belt, but it was on the opposite side, so that her arm was across my back. "I see both of your appetites are in good shape in spite of your un-death."

"Ha," I said. "I've got a bunch more than two appetites!" I corrected her. "Problem is to eat we need money, unless you plan on sneaking out into these crops and robbing a farmer of his turnips. I am not much of a grower, but I really don't think any of these vegetables are in season."

"Stealing food is so far beneath us," she said, sliding her hand past another belt-loop and wrapping her fingers into place.

"And stealing clothes isn't?"

"That was a matter of life and death. We couldn't be seen roaming around out here dressed like a pair of villains. Guards would be called out, The City Watch even, or Hammerites."

"Eating is a matter of life and death too!"

"I wonder if you can still starve. You shouldn't be able to. Your body is still dead. The rest is an illusion. Could you die from the illusion starving?"

"These are questions I don't plan to find the answer to!" I said with a laugh.

"No? But how can you live without knowing? That wouldn't be true to yourself!" she said with feigned drama.

"You're not going to leave me alone about that, are you? You're going to keep making fun of me, aren't you?"

"Until the day you die...again."

"Well *you* can still starve, so I say it's time to either steal food, steal money for food, or something that doesn't involve stealing, in which case you're going to have to come up with it."

She laughed, and not just a chuckle or a breath this time, a real tilt-the-head-back-laugh. It was a strange sound; I wasn't sure where I had heard it before. Oh, that's right; I hadn't ever heard it before.

"What's so funny?" I finally said, feeling left out from the joke.

"It feels good to only have to worry about where our next meal is coming from, and not about the fate of The World."

"I never cared about the fate of The World; just that you'd be around to live in it."

"Hush, Ghost. I can read minds. Don't tell me lies."

"Oh, crap," I gave in a little shout. "A million red-heads in The City, and I had to fall for the one who can read my mind."

"Come on," she said, sliding her hand out from under my belt and letting her fingers glide along my back. "One of the patrons in this tavern is a merchant who is stopping here on his way home from selling twenty farmers miracle-fertilizer that's really just soot scraped from the inside of his chimney. He's feeling very pleased with himself, and has left his coin purse sitting on his table for all to see. It will be child's play for us to slip out enough coin to pay for a three-course meal."

"Ah," I said, falling in love all over again. "You distract him, I'll make the

grab.”

“No Ghost,” she said, kissing my ear. “You’ll distract him. I can tell; he’d find you much more interesting.” She winked at me, a sly grin creeping onto her face.

“Oh crap,” I moaned, suddenly not liking this plan. She was already dragging me to the front door, though.

“Do you want to eat, or not?” she insisted, that sneaky smile growing more sneaky by the moment.

“Fine, but if he’s going to be making eyes at you all night, we get the money, and find a different tavern.”

Her sneaky smile was replaced by one that simply looked glad. “Don’t worry Ghost. When he sees you with me, he won’t dare take a second glance.” She opened the door, and stepped inside. I hadn’t realized how dark it had gotten until the lantern glow from the interior spilled out into the dusty road. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was until the smell of steak and beer filled my lungs. I hadn’t realized how quiet it had been in this sleepy farming hamlet until I heard the chatter and laughter of the tavern-goers. I hadn’t realized just how good Lytha’s butt looked in those pants until I saw her walking off in front of me.

I let out another laugh, just to myself, thinking that tonight was going to be a good night. No, it was going to be the *best* night.

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— Sheam: A Lure for the Captain —

Day 8: 9:00 pm

I closed the door to the auxiliary network headquarters behind me, actually letting myself feel relieved. Corinne was starting to get this place looking like home; the meeting table was covered with stacks of paper. I could barely see her head over the stacks. “We got Mallard out. Andrew and Petra are helping him get safely back to Hightowne so he can try to take some control over the situation there. I am sure he’s just going to taff it up, but it’s better than nothing.” I was sure Corinne knew all of this already, but I wanted to say it anyway. I let my back fall against the door, thinking the way my head bumped into the hard wood was oddly enjoyable.

“Good. Excellent,” Corinne said, sitting up so that I could see her. “Two things: one quick, one not so quick. First one, Raputo has begun to move against Ramirez. He’s issued a statement to all the wardens with his accusations, and his evidence, and is calling for a trail. He’ll get it, too.”

“Good,” I said, and could already guess what the second thing was.

“As for the other, we fact-checked everything that Raputo’s agent told us about Wendle. Either, this is an extremely convincing frame and Raputo’s influence is far greater than we knew, or it’s all true. I’m afraid that Wendle was linked to the purchase of the poison that was given to the chef who put it in Canard’s food, thinking it was one of his usual medicines.”

I let myself slide down the door, until I hit the floor. “Taff,” I whispered, and then, “Gods-taffing-damn it, Wendle,” digging my fingernails into my

forehead hard. "Why the taff would he assassinate his own taffing lord?"

"We don't know yet, and we must act quickly if we ever want to. I fear that things would go...badly, if it were either Mallard or Raputo or even Ramirez who decided Wendle's fate."

"Why?" I said coldly. "Who cares if it goes badly? He's a traitor. He deserves what he gets."

"He betrayed Lord Canard, and we do not know why yet. Wendle is a reasonable man. He would not have done it without just cause. We need to discover what that just cause was; doing so may save us from an even greater threat. If he falls into the hands of any of the factions I already mentioned we will never know the truth. We have to act quickly, before any of them do."

"Raputo will be expecting us to act," I reasoned slowly.

"Raputo does not hedge his bets on expectations. I am certain that he has examined a dozen possible outcomes and has designed a plan for each that will result in his upper hand. Don't worry about him for now; we need to get our hands on Wendle before this information gets to Mallard. Do not assume that you were the only one who was given this information."

I hadn't thought of that. Any number of businessmen could be petitioning for Mallard's favor with the tasty gossip about Wendle as an appetizer. "Wendle doesn't yet know that we're on to him, correct?"

"We can't know that, Corrine rightly determined.

"Then to lure him into a trap it needs to be something substantial, something that would cause him to put aside his doubts and fears and make a leap of faith." I found myself raking my fingers against my scalp again, but I didn't even try to force myself to stop. "We tell him...tell him that Master Nightfall faked his death, and wishes to speak with Wendle at once."

"Interesting," Corinne said, idly stroking her index finger up and down one arm of her glasses. "Speak with him about what?"

"We don't even need to say what it's about. Would Daelus if it were real? He'd say come, and Wendle would come."

Corinne nodded. "Okay, we do it. I am assuming your use of Master Nightfall rather than Lord Thresh was intentional."

"Yes, make him feel like this is not official business, this is strictly incognito."

"And where do they meet?"

I wasn't sure. It had to be somewhere outside of the concerned territories. Daelus's tower also wouldn't do. "Why not here—in the auxiliary apartment?"

"No. Wendle doesn't know about this place. He would be suspicious if it was a location that he didn't both know about and know was a secret."

"What about The Shed?"

"The place the zombies attacked? Hmm...Yes, I think that qualifies."

"Okay. I'll write the letter. Daelus didn't know it, but I got very good at faking his handwriting."

## — James: Sentimentality —

Day 8: 9:00 pm

“I see we both made it,” Daelus just said. I noticed a change had come over him; he was not happy by any measure of the term, but he no longer seemed as if he was carrying the weight of The World on his shoulders.

I got up as fast as my tired back would permit me. To my surprise, I was not nearly as tired as I had felt an instant before. “Yes, quite...Remarkable woman, that Em!”

“Oh?” he said, looking surprised.

“I visited with her, yes, however briefly. I am of the understanding that you did as well, but separately? I am glad I was given the chance to speak to her about Phaeros’s fate, though she was not as forthcoming with information.”

He seemed to grow uncomfortable, but offered no explanation for this. I gave him a brief recounting of what had occurred, especially her warning about the other delegates. He in turn explained to me his visit, which shed some light on the favor to him that she had spoken of. Only one thing drew a comment out of me. “Walk, she said?”

He nodded. “It makes sense. I have no idea how to get there...though.” The way he trailed off made me suspect that he actually did have some clue, but was intent on keeping it to himself. Have it your way then, old boy! I was the one who was happily married, after all!

I patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. You have a way of going after what you want.” I grinned, and saw a bit more life come into his eyes. “Now, may I ask what the canvas is about? I don’t recall you holding that when we left the colony, and I do not want to suppose that Delphine was transformed into it.”

He did not seem to appreciate my humor, just looking down at it with a melancholy expression. “A painting; it was Delphine’s,” Daelus observed. “The one Jyre gave me.”

It still didn’t explain why he was suddenly holding it, but I had to take it on faith that if it were a story worth telling, he would have done so. I put my hand on his shoulder, saying, “something to remember her by, then?”

His face was empty of expression. His eyes seemed very far away. I thought it was very possible that I had said the wrong thing, but I was far too tired to second guess myself.

He turned away quickly, walking out of the small chamber through the group of statues which I found just as chilling as the first time I laid eyes on them. I was then led quickly down another corridor which reminded me even more of Dereloth into what seemed to be a vault, but stopped abruptly just beyond the threshold, turning to look at an empty frame and stretcher bars propped up against the wall. He unrolled it, but seemed to lack the proper tools to restore it, so he merely set it down probably with plans to work on it later.

With that done, he looked back into the collection before us, but then lowered his head to regard his own person. “Delphine’s vines didn’t do much

damage to my armor and cloak that had not already been done by spiders and beasts and other adventures. I suppose if I kept this set it would only be for the sake of remembrance."

I frowned. Judging from the state of his clothing, giving it some thought, I was amazed that he was still alive. "Remembrance is always worthwhile," I observed.

"Also," he went on, looking over at me. "I seem to have been healed."

"Oh, remarkable." I observed there to be plenty of blood stains on his clothing, but upon longer observation I saw only healthy flesh through the holes in it! I myself had not sustained any serious injuries, but I was not without my bumps and bruises. A quick inspection revealed that there was not a scratch on me. "Well, your remarkable chair is quite a medic."

"Yes, but it is not instantaneous. We could have been in there for days and we wouldn't know it. Do you have a watch?"

"I do," I said with enthusiasm, fetching it from my pocket. I immediately saw that something was wrong. "But I am afraid I neglected to wind it, thanks to my over enthusiasm for discovering a lost city."

"It still wouldn't be able to tell us what day it was," he said. "I am surprised that as prepared as I felt I had made myself for this adventure, I neglected to bring my own watch." I grinned, appreciating the irony. He then looked down at the empty scabbard at his belt, and then glanced up at me. "I had hoped that my sword might have been an artifact of remembrance, but Delphine took it from me after I had refused her offer. Yet I still have this casting rod, which is rather useless without the orbs to fuel it." As he said this he detached the strange device from his belt, and dropped it unceremoniously on a shelf.

I had never really thought of Daelus as the sentimental type, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Now I could no longer afford the illusion. I could only offer him a smile.

Daelus then reached to his forehead, but stopped before closing his hand and drawing it away. "And I threw the circlet away before summoning the Avatar. I didn't want to know what it would feed into my mind, and I didn't have a way to store it on me. I imagine it's still up on that beam, in the colony."

"Circlet?" I asked, uncertain.

"Yes," he replied. "I thought it was a tool to increase one's awareness, especially of the un-seeable. Delphine suggested however that it was a means by which the Rivata could directly control me. She said Phaeros had one too."

"I imagine it is better that it was lost, then," was all I could think to say. I was not sure how much energy Daelus still had, but I was far too exhausted for conversation at the moment, even on a topic so fascinating. I did venture to add one thing, though. "You also seem to have lost your hat."

He looked up, as if the absence of the brim at the top of his field of view was something he had missed previously. "I didn't even want to think about that. I do look absurd without one, don't I?"

I knew he had to be joking, but the delivery was so deadpan I couldn't be

certain! "Yes, totally absurd." I said with a nod, attempting to match is emotionless tone.

"The sad thing is, no matter how urgent or pressing matters will be, Mrs. Simon will refuse to let me out of the mansion without giving me a bath and a new set of clothes." His deadpan continued, but I couldn't help but give a brief laugh.

To my surprise and relief, he smiled, and even gave a short, and faint, laugh himself.

"I trust you had best be getting to that, then. As for myself, I imagine Corinne would be very unhappy if I did not rush to greet her immediately upon my return to The World." I grinned even more broadly, feeling compelled to at the thought of a reunion with my wife.

His laughter faded, but his smile did not. "Don't keep her waiting," he said, and gave me a pat on the shoulder.

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— Nightfall: Remembrance —

Day 8: 9:20 pm

I glanced at the painting one more time. I still didn't like it. I thought it was devoid of artistic value, amateurishly executed, and showed no sense of composition of color theory. Phaeros had painted it, and he had no talent with a brush, nor had an eye for the aesthetic. However, it was also all The World had left of Delphine, and it was mine, for better or for worse. I would keep it in my vault.

I still was uncertain why my heart was so troubled over her death. I knew that I had not loved her; to imagine so would have been childish. Was it because I blamed myself? If I had accepted her offer, she would still be alive, and in time I might have grown to love her. My refusal was ultimately a selfish one, and as a result; horrible things.

James on the other hand seemed totally unfettered by the events we had just taken part in. I envied his tenacity. As I escorted him out of my lower sanctum, I happened upon something out of place as soon as the doors lazily parted to reveal the bottom of the central stair. "What's this?" I said puzzled by the contraption of tubes and valves that sat on the floor.

"Ah," James remarked. "A device for hearing faint sounds through any medium. We were using it to see if you were still in there somewhere, after Jyre had stabbed you and we shut you inside."

"Wasn't that days ago? Why is it still down here? Doesn't Jossimer know how to pick up after himself?" I said dryly.

I couldn't fool James. He laughed. I gave a wide smile, an expression I usually left for James's face. His seemed to carry them so easily.

When we reached the ground level and marched out into the main hall of the mansion, I suddenly heard a scream and the sound of a serving tray, and everything on it, crashing to the floor. We both jerked to the left to see Marith Henrett with her hands clasped to her mouth, eyes wide. I heard another feminine cry from the balcony up above, and saw Mrs. Simon performing a

similar gesture. I briefly considered putting the women on guard duty rather than the men.

After their outburst and recoveries, it didn't take long for every guard in the household to abandon his post and come swarming into the main hall, shouting in joyful astonishment at my sudden return to life. "I'll bet he was hiding in that downstairs room the entire time!" Medan remarked, and then Jarah added, "He's got a stash of liquor down there I'll bet, and a whole chest of jerky!" "And some naughty paintings to stare at!" called out Gispa, which resulted in an awkward silence and then one of his brothers quietly rebuking him that such a comment was inappropriate. Mrs. Simon took advantage of the lull to declare that she couldn't stand one more second of seeing me in such rags, and demanded that I come with her at once for a bath and a fresh set of clothes.

Before she pulled me away completely, I took James by the shoulder, saying quickly, "Send a message to Sheam at once. Tell her I'll be at The Circle within an hour." I was given a glare by Mrs. Simon. "Better make that two hours."

James nodded with a grin. "Consider it done; however, I must warn you that The Circle doesn't look like how you remember it. I am not certain if you will have an office to meet her in."

"Then we'll improvise. Now don't keep your wife waiting!"

As soon as James was off, I turned and came face to face with a bushel of nose-hairs. Jossimer's icy glare even froze Mrs. Simon in her tracks. "I see that my torment has not yet ended," he said in a bored tone. "I suppose it will be too much to ask that I be granted leniency on leaving the thin layer of dust you may or may not observe over everything. I regret to admit that I was somewhat lax in my usual schedule of chores due to the obviously exaggerated news of your demise."

I could smell unusual abundance of tobacco and alcohol on his breath, a clue to his level of agitation over the exaggerated news of my demise. I gave a gentle smile to my fellow delegate, and said, "Joss, lighten up." Mrs. Simon let out a giggle as I turned from him and allowed myself to be escorted to whatever demeaning activity she had in store for me.

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### — Sheam: Seeing the Big Picture —

**Day 8: 10:00 pm**

The Shed reeked of death. This was where Othello had lost his face; it was easy to see why he wasn't going to be joining us. I felt totally alone now; all those present were handpicked by Corinne, but I did not know a single one of them. I was surrounded by unfamiliar men who pressed together in the silence and the dark, waiting for our prey to arrive and our trap to spring.

The door opened. The sound of heavy boots and chain mail echoed over the hushed breaths. A bit of light shot through the room from wide doorway and illuminated a rigged object at the far side of the chamber, the rough shape of a cloaked man with a wide brimmed hat.

The armored soldier walked in cautiously, long sword visible at his hip, his eyes squinting at the darkness, uttering a single word. "Thresh?"

It was Wendle's voice. I didn't have to give the order; they knew what absolute certainty meant. The door slammed behind him a split second before two spheres rolled across the floor, belching pale green gas into the air. He gave a cry of surprise, but the gas spread quickly, and before he could draw his sword to cut the door open behind him, he had fallen backwards, his helmet sending out a loud tone as it struck the hard floor.

We all pulled the filters off of our faces and removed the blinders from our lanterns. Strong men clad in black lifted Wendle up into a sturdy chair, maybe the same one used to interrogate Ghost, and bound him tightly with a thick rope. We waited until the circulation would be cut off in his arms and legs, making it more difficult for him to struggle, before uncorking a vial of smelling salts and placing it under his nose.

I stood in the light. I wanted him to know immediately who it was who had captured him.

He opened his eyes with a flutter of his lids, and began to gasp for air and blink against the bright light in his face. After a moment of gasping and sputtering he said, "Sheam?" His lack of astonishment at all of this just cemented his guilt to all of us.

"We know you had Lord Canard killed," I said plainly. I dropped a bound volume on the ground in front of him, pages of writing spilling out onto the floor. "We can waste all of our time going over the evidence, or we can move on." I wasn't interested in playing any mind games with him. I just expected answers.

He looked down and away, trying to get the light out of his eyes. "Yes, it was me. So why am I still alive? There were no conspirators. I did it all on my own. You won't get any names from me."

"I want to know why," I said firmly.

He looked up at me, still blinking from the light. His irises had constricted, the pupils just pinpoints in fields of blue. "To save lives," he simply said, firmly.

I felt my brow and cheeks constrict around my eyes, my face growing bitter. "Explain that."

"When word came out that Lord Thresh had died and Lord Canard did not act immediately to seize The Circle, Ramirez took it as a sign of weakness. He had Mallard kidnapped, and was going to demand ransom for his release. The ransom would, of course, be the peaceful and lawful surrender of Hightowne to Ramirez. It would be the most tidy way for him to take possession of the territory he covets above all else."

"How could he get away with that? The other wardens would find out and then he'd be stripped of his title."

"He had so much dirt on Canard that he knew it would be kept a secret, Canard fearing that he too would lose his wardenship. So it was not only a ransom, but blackmail. I knew that Canard would never pay the ransom, and would instead send men, my men, into Ramirez's territory to die in a bloody

open war. Ramirez's forces outnumber us three to one. He would soon turn the tide, and invade Hightowne, and they would not save their swords for just Gryphons—anyone who stood in their way would be cut down. The bloody conflict would go on for weeks, in stalemate only because of our superior fortifications and their superior numbers. In time, however, Hightowne would fall to Ramirez."

"I see," I said cautiously.

"So, *you see*, the only way to avoid this was to kill Canard. With him dead, no-one would be left to ransom or blackmail. If Mallard was missing, the society of wardens would appoint a new heir to Canard's territory based on legality and precedence and what-have-you. Ramirez would have to change all of his plans based on his new opponent, whom he would not be able to anticipate or manipulate. Life would, essentially, continue on as it had."

"You still had no right to kill your own Lord," I said quietly, feeling my steely composure slipping as I grasped the tremendous difficulty that Wendle had been facing, understanding all of this. I couldn't imagine having to choose between those two options.

His voice remained firm, without a shred of fear. "No one has any right to do anything really; do they? I had to choose, and I chose the lives of my men. I will die here, now, for them if I need to."

"What about my frame? The timing was too perfect for it to be an accident. Lord Canard succumbed to the poison *exactly* when both of his bodyguards had been drawn away. It had been planned very precisely."

He seemed to grow upset, saying, "I know *nothing* about that, but I have long suspected that the house staff had been tainted by Ramirez filth. One part precision and one part luck, I say."

I took a breath, and then crossed my arms. I was told not to do that; it would make me look insecure, but I couldn't help it. "Mallard has been recovered from Ramirez's clutches in a single night. He's safe." I then lowered my voice, feeling a great sorrow creep over me. "Wendle, you should have trusted us. You should have trusted me."

"I was not willing to risk it," he said simply. "There was a gamble. I chose the one with the lowest risk and the highest rewards."

No matter what I could say, he would stand by his choice. He was a soldier, and a commander. Sometimes that type of person realizes that the best tactical choice would be to murder your own superior. I knew that I would never, ever be able to do something like that.

He continued. "If Mallard has been recovered, then I am afraid the situation is grave. He is completely ill-prepared to take on the reigns of the wardenship, but as the son it will fall to him. No warden may dispute this until he has done something warranting a dispute. I, for one, am not eager to witness what sort of buffoonery will undoubtedly result in a call for his immediate removal."

"We will deal with that when the time comes," I just said.

"And with me? What are your plans? I pray that my execution will take place before my throat becomes parched from all of this discussion."

"No," I just said, uncrossing my arms. I glanced up to some of the men present, and saw that they had their eyes fixed on Wendle, not on me. I took it as a vote of confidence. They were worried about him doing something dangerous, not me slipping up. "There may come a time when The Circle has need of a man who is willing to put everything on the line for the greater good. But for now, I am afraid you must vanish, Wendle. Your reputation and honor will be spared; your secret shall not reach the ears of your men, not if I can help it."

"Am I to waste away in a dungeon, then, until you deem a task suitable for a person of my capacity for treachery?"

His sarcasm bit, but I tried to ignore it. "In a nutshell, yes; your men will be told that it was a suicide; such was your grief over the failure to protect your lord. There will be no bloodlust for vengeance then, will there?"

"There may be some, but they would not become militant, no. They would probably not believe it, however. I am not exactly the suicidal type."

"The same has been said of any man or woman to ever take their own life," I replied coldly. "The men are prepared to take you to a secret location for holding." I then slid the filter back over my face.

The men took that as their cue, and did the same. A similar gas bomb was presented to Wendle, and in a moment he was out cold again. Once the gas dissipated, we removed our filters.

"I don't know of any secret location, if such a thing was ever agreed upon," one of them said.

"No," I replied, looking at him, and then glancing to some of the others. "I had suspected that we were probably going to just kill him." The words shocked me, even though I had been the one to say them. Had I ever really believed that we were going to simply execute Wendle? I knew the answer; yes, I had. "I'll request a suggestion from Corinne. She'll know a secure and secret place we can keep him. This must, I cannot emphasize, must remain totally a secret."

"Sheam, sir," one of them said, "we're agents of The Network. Secret is the air we breathe."

When I walked out of the room I felt like my knees were going to give way under me. I pressed myself up against a wall, hugging myself tightly, finally letting all of the tension out in a tremble so fierce I felt myself about to break down and throw up. When I slowly regained myself, I looked up, to see one of the agents before me; no, this was someone different. "Sheam," he said, "a letter from James. Master Nightfall wishes to see you at The Circle at eleven o'clock tonight."

I felt goose bumps come up all over my body, and every hair on my head stand up on end. "What did you just say?" I asked, expecting him to be a hallucination that would vanish at any moment.

He cracked a smile, ever so slightly. "I have a brief letter from James. I am sorry, but I took the liberty of reading it, as it was only one short sentence. Master Nightfall wishes to see you at The Circle at eleven o'clock tonight."

"There, must be some confusion," I said, not believing my ears. "We...told

Wendle that Nightfall wanted to meet him here to lure him into a trap. It was a trick. Master Nightfall...Daelus is dead."

"Just go, Sheam," he turned around and vanished into the darkness.

— James: Home —

Day 8: 10:00 pm

On my brisk walk back to my apartment I of course checked the drop-boxes, so I was soon appraised of not only the shift of headquarters, but a great deal about the situation with the late Lord Canard and troublesome Lord Ramirez. Corinne had been doing a masterful job in my absence! I changed my heading before I had made too great a detour, and before a half-hour had passed I was unlocking the bolts on the auxiliary apartment. The lack of vagrants on the stairs up made me feel like I wasn't quite coming home, but the thought of Cor behind this door dissolved any illusion that the location of the homecoming was truly pertinent.

I opened the door casually, and immediately I was hit by the smell of my favorite meal, potato soup, mixed with the unmistakable aroma of coffee and bacon. I kept my wits about me of course, and turned to close the door and re-lock it before my salivation became too much of a problem. I looked from the overflowing work-table to see Cor in the doorway to the kitchen, cleaning off her hands on her apron, wearing a modest smile on her face. Of course, why should I have doubted? She knew well in advance that I would be arriving soon.

"I see that the network moves much faster than my short legs!" I remarked with a grin.

She came over to me, her smile growing less modest, and gave me a very light peck on the mouth. "Much," she just said, and returned to the kitchen without another word. I propelled the aforementioned short legs to follow her.

I found myself seated before an oversized bowl of the delightful creamy soup, covered with bits of crushed bacon, and a mug of steaming black coffee to one side. My stomach roared with anticipation as I took up the spoon and indulged my appetite. A moment later she was seated next to me, a much smaller bowl before her, but not by much and a much larger mug of coffee, nearly twice the size of my own!

Once I had shoved enough of the delicious substance into my mouth to allow for a breath, I asked, "How was your day, Cor?"

"Pleasant. Canard was murdered, we signed a contract with Raputo, rescued Canard's son from Ramirez, and held Wendle for questioning under the charge of treason. Oh, and the High Priest of the Hammerites was also murdered, but thankfully we didn't need to deal with that. How was your day, James?"

I dabbed at my chin with a napkin before replying, "I researched a very strange family, discovered a lost city, fled from and destroyed a horrible monster, met a pillar that communicated by carving on stone tablets, plus a

one-hundred year old man whom I awakened from a trance, was then swept away on an alien structure, watched helplessly as the man was killed, avoided the same fate by executing patience and observation, destroyed a massive threat to The City, witnessed two otherworldly beings locked in combat, and finally killed a goddess before being rescued by an enchantress and returning home safe and sound."

Her eyes got a little bigger as she hunted down the last remains of soup from her bowl. She usually did that when she was impressed and didn't want to admit it. "Sounds like a pleasant day as well."

"It was interesting," I said, disappointed to see that my bowl was almost empty too. I neglected, of course, to mention the part about killing five hundred people. That thought quickly led to another, and then I dropped my spoon, raised my hands to my cheeks, dropped my elbows to the table, and proclaimed in disappointment and astonishment that such an important point had totally slipped my mind. "Builder's hairy bollocks!" I bellowed. "I forgot all about Jyre and Heppet!"

### — Nightfall: A Broken Circle — Day 8: 11:00 pm

On the way Richen had already filled me in on the major events of the day; the calamity, as he put it, at Soulforge, including the death of Father Rafael. I pretended to know nothing about it, for by all means I shouldn't have, and found that Richen honestly knew as little as I did. It was so; no facts or explanations, no theories even. He had more to say about the death of Lord Canard though, along with a host of tall tales concerning Sheam's activities during the entire thing. I listened quietly in astonishment, disturbed over what had taken place, but very proud of Sheam if all of it was true.

Finally the cab came to a halt at the familiar spot, and I disembarked. "Thank you, Richen, for a very spirited ride!" I tossed him a gold coin, which he plucked out of the air gracefully.

"A right ple'sha!" he chirped, "An' I'll say it agin, 'tis fine seein' y' back, ser!"

I smiled and tipped my hat to him as he cracked the reins and Suzy charged away, the cab bouncing violently over the slightest pebble as they rushed off into the night. It was a new hat, but was thankfully similar enough to the old favorite one that most people wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. Mrs. Simon had suggested that I used the advent of my return from the grave to present to the world a smashing new look. (Her words, not mine.) I politely declined, saying that if I were to adopt a *new look*, it would be so similar to the old look that she would be embarrassed to mention anything about it.

I felt myself sigh as I walked easily through the field of rubble where the outer wall should have been, and looked with restrained resignation at what was left of The Circle. The Hammerites had clearly been enthusiastic over their efforts to discover my secrets, and felt it necessary to inspect several

patches of the roof in order to possibly locate a hidden library that could only be accessed by flapping one's arms. At that moment, I no longer felt sad at the news of Rafael's death.

After I overcame the initial shock, I realized that most of the damage was merely superficial. The Hammerites hadn't the time to do any serious demolition, so all of it could probably be restored within several months work—less if Hammerites were involved. I made a mental note to speak with Brother Thurm about that tomorrow. Then I wondered if he had been in Soulforge when the mysterious disaster happened, and made a mental note to first make sure that the poor man was still alive.

I lit my lantern, and walked slowly through the halls of The Circle, assessing the damage, consoling myself, and being thankful that things had not been much worse. Oddly enough, I found the different way my footfalls echoed to be the most disconcerting thing about being within the old halls now. I hoped that once the place was rebuilt that old eerie sound would be the same as I remembered it.

The stair leading up to the upper office level was intact, and so I found myself climbing up to see what state my desk would be in. The door to Sheam's office had been hammered open, in spite of my certainty that we had left it unlocked for the Hammerites, and her office in complete disarray. I almost didn't recognize the room. Her drawers were on the floor along with everything that should have been on the shelf. My own door was similarly bashed in, as was my desk, which they seemed to have broken to splinters merely for the sport of it. I supposed that they were inspecting it for hidden compartments, or some other lame excuse to smash something. It was okay; I wanted a new desk anyway.

I found the chair on its side in the far corner, and righted it. One wheel was broken, but otherwise it was fine. I let it fall back to the ground. I wanted a new chair now too.

I turned to look out over The City, like I had done many nights before. As much as I felt like things could never be the same again, I couldn't wait for life to get back to normal. I had even managed to stop thinking about Delphine. Well, until that moment, anyway.

I turned around, feeling someone stirring in the doorway. When I did so, I found myself staring into the wide bloodshot eyes of an extremely bedraggled Sheam.

— Sheam: Silhouette —

Day 8: 11:10 pm

At first I made myself walk, and then I found myself walking briskly, and finally gave in and simply ran. The entire way I told myself over and over, don't believe it. It's not true. There was a mistake, an error in the communications. Worse, someone was trying to play a joke on me. Even worse than that, this was a trap just like had been set for Wendle and I would soon find myself abducted again, or simply killed.

The Circle was a poisonous sight against the night sky. I hated its broken dark shape, a cruel reminder of how my life would now be forever different. As I ran into the courtyard, I was devastated to not see him standing there before me. I walked the long way around to the other side, thinking it possible that he arrived from a different direction than usual. The courtyard was empty, not a soul in sight.

Of course, why would he be in the courtyard at all? He would be in the central hub. I went, leaping over discarded blocks and piles of books, skidding to a halt in the central area, where I forced myself to slow down and walk so I wouldn't trip and hurt myself. I did three laps around it, peering into each of the library and museum wings as I went, seeing nothing unusual, noting out of place, aside of course from the ruins.

I had one last hope. I headed for the executive wing. I raced up the stairs, and came to a halt before my office door, my heart nearly stopping. The door was wide open. I remembered fighting with it before, trying to get it to stay shut even with all of the damage done to it, and had at least managed to get it merely ajar. I slowly stepped into the opening, looking through the open doorway to Daelus's office, to immediately see a dark shape against the windows. It was a silhouette of a coated man with a wide brimmed hat, staying totally still. I tried to say something, but I couldn't find my voice. Finally, after what felt like a minute, he turned and his eyes met mine.

I walked forward slowly, and then I ran, throwing my arms around him and pressing my face against the thick fabric of his coat.

"Hello Sheam," I heard him say to me in a mellow voice. I felt one of his hands come up to my back and press there gently, holding me in place. Then he added, "I've been told that you have been doing an *extremely* good job while I've been gone. I'm very proud of you."

I didn't reply. I just soaked the front of his coat with my tears.