

Legacy...

And thus I saw there before me rising up out of the molten glow, body shining of gold and bronze, an angel of The Builder as none other couldst be. Her wings spread wide glistening with the purest of metals, each feather perfect as couldst be made not by the workings of human touch. Before her she held aloft the Master Gear, work of mine own hand and glory to the Builder, presenting it to all as a holy work of the most divine providence. Then she placed the gear within herself, filling her, working within her as a heart works within mine own chest. Then all the metal children of The Builder didst rise up and offer her praise and glory and she offered them her blessings in return. She spoke to me, her voice pure and clean, telling me that The Builder hath called to me for a special purpose; and to this purpose none other may cometh, to reshape The World into The Builder's paradise, for no other Heaven couldst be so holy as this. Finally, she departed moving through solid metal and earth like it wert merely air lifting up into the sky to return to The Builder's side. Praise The Builder and his most holy angel messenger; and thus as is written, I, his Prophet, alone bear witness.

The New Scripture of the Master Builder

Wardens...

Rows of faces stared out over long broad tables and flickering torches that barely illuminated the ancient assembly hall. The tables formed a series of concentric rings, each six or seven feet above the previous, going up several stories so that the faces at the back top were too distant to recognize. At the center of it all was a fat man with thick black hair and a thinly cut beard, seated at a small table facing another small table, allowing Lord Ramirez to face his judge. Somewhere up in the many rows of wardens sat his accuser, Lord Raputo, who had been silent all evening after putting forth his tremendous evidence. I had transcribed every word of it, and though I myself was not voting or judging, it was certainly difficult to not agree with the inevitable consensus.

As the custom, it came to a vote, and as the custom, the vote was unanimous. It was always said as unanimous. It was considered taboo to speak of the number of sitting wardens out loud. Then his face turned to a scowl of rage, but he continued to say nothing.

Ramirez didn't flinch during any of it, until the final vote was offered. Then it really was only a flinch, a twitch of his facial muscles as a tiny speck of his inner thoughts bubbled to the surface; the crippling realization of a lifetime of conquest come down to failure at the tally of a vote.

The judge spoke. "Henceforth, Lord Ramirez, you are stripped of the title

of Warden, and your vast territory divided fairly among your neighboring wardens of Canard, Tell, Antonette, Fitzaviar, and Agus, with some converted to neutrality where unfairness would otherwise arise. The specifics of this division will be discussed amongst the aforementioned at a date to be determined at the conclusion of this meeting.”

It was more than just the stripping of a title; it was the destruction of an empire. With others now in the position of caregiver to these territories, the income Ramirez enjoyed from those grateful for his protection and fearful of his wrath would dry up. He would no longer be able to afford his business ventures, his fronts for criminal activity, his lavish luxuries and exotic pets, the tremendous taxes to be paid on his spacious estate and retreats, or even be able to meet payroll for his army of thugs, most of whom would abandon him for masters with deeper pockets and the finances for ambition. He had been ruined, and would most likely live out the rest of his days in a modest apartment in a forgotten corner of The City, or else take his own life in despair. Once one was removed from the society of wardens, one never returned to their ranks.

Two tremendous men came forward, and pulled the table away from the still sitting Lord Ramirez. They forced him to stand, and one by one, tore off every emblem or symbol of Ward Ramirez which he bore on his extravagant outfit. When they were finished, they took him, hands on both shoulders, down a long narrow path which cut through the bottom ring of the assembly hall, out to a riverboat where he would be taken to the opposite bank, and dropped off. None of the wardens seated in their many rows looked down at him. Silence accompanied the faint shuffle of feet as he was taken away, as was customary.

Hammerites...

I pushed open the great doors with my single hand and all of The Builder’s might. They swung open wide, striking the walls behind like thunder. The entire council rose, a look of surprise and shock on their faces, and whispers of “Brother Chispin!” upon their lips; but one bore much more than that, Brother Oberon’s eyes flashed with fear. I stared across the council table at him, blood still trailing across the marble floor from my open wounds, the red of my holy garments blackened with mud and torn from the blades and thorns of my enemies. I strode forward, each fall of my boots echoing through the hall, each of the tiny robed men jumping in their seats with each step.

I pressed my single closed fist upon the table, and pointed with the gory stump of my wrist at Oberon, already seated in the chair of my slain master, already wearing the robes and headdress of the high priest. The fear in his eyes stretched out into an expression of near panic.

When I spoke, my words were soft, but carried with them a weight greater than that of all Soulforge. “My road was long and difficult,” I said

slowly, "with the embrace of death at every step, and the jaws of Hell at my back. Yet I have returned bearing a message, and a purpose. For it was on this road that I was confronted by three spirits. The first spirit was Brother Ymar. He didst tell me, Brother Oberon, that *thou* hadst killed him. The second spirit was that of our beloved Father Rafael. He didst tell me that *thou*, Brother Oberon, hadst killed him." I could feel the tension in the room mounting to a suffocating level as the other priests glanced back and forth between the accuser and the accused, but none dared speak or move against me. I continued, "The third spirit was The Master Builder himself. He revealed himself to me in all his glory, descending from the heavens on a chariot of gold and steel. As he came before me, and I genuflected, he spoke but a simple command. Brother Oberon, he didst command me to *kill thee*."

As I said this, all present began to stir with outrage and distress. Brother Oberon stood frozen, overcome with the power of The Builder's judgment upon his soul. Then, the glow reflected upon all of their eyes as a spiritual hammer formed, clasped firm by the hand that was no longer there, the long shaft tilted towards Brother Oberon, the head white-hot with energy, ready to destroy him where he sat. "I said to The Master Builder, Oh Lord, I am thy humble servant, and *thy will be done*, however, would killing this man be enough to punish him for his misdeeds? Is his blood worthy penance for these crimes against his brethren and his sins against thee?" The other priests again began to stir, moving away so that whatever fury I unleashed against Oberon would not strike them as well.

"And The Builder replied, nay, thou art wise. He shalt remain alive, and his days numerous, and his punishment long, and just, and fair. He wilt come to know that mine name, 'Tis Lord, and that mine vengeance *terrible*."

Thugs...

My vision was so blurry, I could barely figure out what I was seeing. It had been two days without a drop of water to drink; now I knew how the prisoners felt. I heard someone talking, and it sounded like. "Okay, get up, all of you. Nap time is over. You're all headed for the dungeon, but at least there's food and fresh air there. Come on, I know you're too weak to fight back. Just put on these shackles and we'll be off."

I could barely remember how I had even gotten down here. The man put the shackles on me and guided me to a ladder, where a rope was tied around my torso and some people up above pulled me up to help me climb. Slowly it was starting to come back. That girl, Nightfall's bitch, told us to come down here to help Balastar. But then when we looked and looked, we could not find him, and then when we came back, the trap door at the top of the ladder was shut, and no matter how hard we pushed and pushed on it, no one was strong enough to open it. We hunted through all of the crates for food or water, and found nothing. Finally we all just decided to lie down and wait until someone came looking for us.

The next thing I knew, we were in the slam. They told us that Ramirez was no longer a warden, Balastar and one of the gang were both dead, and that we were better off in the Gryphon's cell block than roaming the streets looking for work. I didn't mind it, really. The gruel they gave us was better than the goulash that we got in the barracks, and at least we didn't have to watch out for that stupid pet burrick. Taffing hell, that thing smelled like...

Pagans...

I scraped the symbols of slain Gods into the earth, Searowrenc, and Lord of Char, Woodsie Lord, and Weaver Queen, Queen of Fangs, and Faery Queen. In each that wove together I placed seeds. With palm cut blood dripped onto seed and into symbol, filling with power and spirit. The seeds split, giving root, raising up sprout and bud. A spell of purpose voiced, and passion, to fill our lungs with air hot as fire and our vein with slick blood of venom and sap.

Now we were ready.

The time was *now* to once again taste hammer-fool flesh. The mongbats, hidden in their trees, were ready. The weavers, hidden in the underbrush, were ready. The jacknalls, both in the trees and the underbrush, were ready. The fae, hidden in low clouds which drifted overhead, were ready. They all only awaited my signal to begin.

We had them surrounded. The hammer-fools sought to build a tower upon the hole which marked the entrance to the land of the weavers, and now the fae as well. For that trespass they would pay with their blood. We waited for them to gather, that their numbers to be great, so that we could kill as many as possible and strike as much fear into their souls at one moment as we were able. They stacked block on block, good stone carved from the womb of the earth; now dead rock. They split board and beam from the good trees, dead wood to lift their dead roofs and to line their dead floors.

I lifted my mouth to the sky and gave the call, the cawing of a crow, over and over until I was certain that all would hear.

All of the woods stirred as we came from our hiding places. The mongbats launched into the air, screaming their hatred. The jacknalls roared long and strong as they lunged from the woods against their foes. The weavers raced, silent, but as fast as lightning, in to make their kills. The faes descended from the sky, like spears themselves, to throw their barbed shafts down below into the soft bodies of their prey.

The battle was swift, blood now over every block and beam. Quickly the hammer-fools died, taken off guard, their arrogance telling them that they were safe, and strong, and that none in the wood would do them harm. They died by tooth and spear and claw and speed and sting, overwhelmed in seconds, until they all lay dead. Their flesh would be taken below to the weavers, a gift from we surface dwellers to those underground people for their generosity to us.

Soon more openings would be made to bring the underworld and the

overworld closer together, so that even if the hammer-fools returned to this spot and sought to resume their tower, the fae and weavers would not have their way blocked. We would kill them, and they would return to kill us, back and forth, on and on, as was always the way of things. It was right, after all, for us to kill them in our lands. Were we to attack their City, we would die also.

Some say this as bad, as an evil war, as needless bloodshed, but I felt different. It was good, and right, to kill and die in this way. It was what I did not understand the most about the hammer-fools, and their strange God. They were promised an afterlife of glory, and yet they feared death and hated those who killed. We had done good to them, killing them in this way so that they would go to their God and their glory. This was a war that could not be won, with failure only certain were we to stop fighting.

Engineers...

"Remarkable, the key-engineer hath already recreated the Master Gear?" Brother Thurm's jaw nearly had to be picked up from the floor when I presented it to him.

"Indeed, Brother!" I said in excitement, "And in fact, he doth say that this version is greatly improved, and shalt work with all of the other changes he hadst designed."

"Ah!" Thurm said, nearly squealing with glee. "Brother Perrywynne, when I had heard that all of the schematics had been burned, I didst sink with despair, thinking of the loss."

"Nay, Brother, the key-engineer told me himself. With his old work swept away, his mind was able to be opened to new ideas, and he was able to craft new designs without restraint or limitation of the old. It was a blessing in disguise!"

"I see, I see, of course; why did not that occur to us at once? This key-engineer is truly a wise man." He turned the Master Gear over and over in his gloved hands. We had to wear gloves when handling it, lest the oil from our fingertips sow imperfections into it. It was the request of the key-engineer, and his requests were to be carried out to the letter now that he was properly and rightly in charge of the Mechanist project.

"Sadly," I said, my excitement fading as reality bore into the conversation, "I also bear grave news. Father Johanathan hath ordered the Mechanist labs, and even the machinist factory, dismantled, and the space given over to the seminary and the scribes and the training of soldiers."

Brother Thurm did not seem to understand at first, but before I could say another word his eyes drew sorrowful. "Can naught be done to prevent this mistake?" he simply said, though I was certain he wished to say more.

"I know not, brother. All seemed well, until the key-engineer presented before him a design to rebuild Soulforge Factory, which nearly doubled its size and efficiency. At first it did seem as if the holy Father wert to approve of

this proposal, but soon voices cried out against it, from all those displaced by the revision, but most verbally by the brotherhood of holy architects, whom also felt that the proposed design was an abomination for every principal they stood for.

Thurm shook his head, and seemed to grow optimistic. "I did know there would be quarreling over this, but surely if the key-engineer did propose a simple restoration of the existing factory areas it would be—"

"Nay, brother, Father Johanathan made it quite clear that he sees no need for either project, and in fact intends to consolidate the corps of engineers and thus mechanists as well as subordinates to the Master Forger. He doth not see the difference between simple smelting work and the fine craft of steam engine design and implementation! He doth not even understand what science goes into the fine craft of complex gear-works!"

"A pity, but why not educate him? Surely even a man of his great age can be taught new ideas. I am certain that the key-engineer and he shalt soon see eye to eye, and with our help, too!" Brother Thurm now was back to his usual exuberance, which I found strangely infectious.

I simply nodded, saying, "We shall not give up. Perhaps we may lose the Soulforge Factory, but a new factory could be built, possibly in The City's outskirts where we would only displace farmers and cattle herders, rather than our brethren."

Brother Thurm nodded. "Ah, yes, most certainly. Much land still exists for this. I am certain that we shalt not have to abandon these inspirational projects." He then paused and seemed to grow uncertain again. "However, I regret that I do not yet know his actual name. Must I continue to refer to him as key-engineer when he is one of my brothers?"

I gave a nervous laugh, and replied quickly, "Nay, brother, however I regret to admit that I have simply forgotten what his actual name is! I always intend to ask him, but whenever we meet, the meetings are so brief, he speaketh constantly and with such strain and difficulty, that I am afraid to interrupt him and give him more to say than he already is attempting!"

"Ah, a pity," Thurm said, seeming a bit disappointed. "I wilt have to remember to meet with him myself, and not about work. I am certain that he wouldst not mind simply a friendly conversation with one of his brothers."

"We shall see, however it wouldst surprise me if he did. He seems fanatically dedicated to working, and naught else. Even food, or drink, oft doth not interest him!"

"Ah!" Thurm said, "Is that not how we and our brethren the architects and the scribes oft appear to the soldiers and the clergymen!" he said with a laugh.

"'Tis true!" I replied. "He is so far greater than thou or I; he seemeth to us as we do to the soldiers!" I gave a good laugh at this thought, as did Brother Thurm.

A Shepherd...

I smiled as the smell of the salty air washed over me. It felt good to let my beard grow, and to wear comfortable clothes; nothing made from metal or leather. I looked out over the cliff across the thrashing sea to the tiny bits of black on the horizon. On a day as clear as this I could still see the towers of The City, soon to be just a memory as the simple ways of the small island town claimed me. My exile had been short thus far, but I already felt as if I had made the little grassy, windy rock my home.

"Hi!" I heard the charming voice of a girl behind me. I turned slowly, as not to disturb the grazing sheep at my feet, before smiling to a very young lady standing on the other side of the simple wooden fence, a tiny tied parcel held tightly in her arms.

"Hello," I said, and gave a nod and a small wave. The town was not used to newcomers, especially those who intended to stay, but I had found them surprisingly warm and hospitable to me.

"I saw you at the grocers yesterday," she said, her freckled cheeks turning red. "My friend told me you were new here, and that I should say hello. She told me you took over Old Man Gringsby's flock."

I nodded, leaning on my crook. "I'm not used to tending to animals that are so docile," I said, looking fondly down at the peaceful beasts. "I've never done it before, but Gingsby's wife says I have a natural talent for it; said I was like a shepherd and sheepdog in one."

She laughed a sweet girlish laugh before saying, "I watched you for a little before saying hello. I hope you don't mind. I didn't want to disturb you; you looked so peaceful, like you didn't have a care in the world. I just couldn't take it anymore though, I felt like I was spying!"

"Oh, it's fine. But it was nice of you to say hello. Give my regards to your father for me...Mister?"

She laughed again, putting one hand against her face to cover her mouth. "Mister Snow, and I'd be happy to tell him so, but I don't live with my father anymore. I haven't for years. I'm twenty-eight."

"Oh!" I said, startled, feeling myself blush. "I am sorry; you don't look a day over fifteen!"

She laughed some more, rocking back and forth. "Some tell me so," she said in a shy voice.

"Well, give my regards to your husband then?"

"I'm not married either," she said, and started to walk along the fence, though she didn't take her eyes off me. "My name's Lacy, Lacy Snow; what's yours?"

I smiled, and I wasn't sure why, but I glanced out in the direction of The City. The sky had grown hazy with a storm rolling in, so I wasn't sure if I could see it anymore. In fact, I was certain that I couldn't. I looked back at her, and said, "Duncan Wendle. I am pleased to meet you, Miss Snow."

"I'm pleased to meet you too, Duncan. And my name is Lacy, not Miss."

"Lacy," I said, smiling broadly. "Oh, and, I'm not married either," I added.

She didn't say anything else. With one last smile she departed, her braided hair swinging at her back as she left. I smiled to myself, and turned my eyes back to my flock, lest one decide that the grass growing on the loose rocks of the cliffs looked tastier.

The Incarcerated...

My face hit the cell floor, which was caked with dirt, dried vomit, and excrement. I tried to stand, but with every twitch of my muscles my back burnt from the deep cuts of the whip. Finally, after struggling against the shackles at my wrists and ankles, I managed to at least turn myself over, so I could meet the gaze of the man standing at my cell door. I knew him at once; Brother Sigmund.

"Oberon," he said coldly.

Still painting for breath from exertion, and spitting the taste of blood out of my mouth, I said, "I didst not know thou wast assigned to Cragcleft."

"A new assignment," he said, and then leaned close to the bars, lowering his voice. "Thou dost still have friends within The Order. More of us shalt be assigned to Cragcleft within the coming weeks." He leaned away, looking around slightly before leaning back, "I only ask that thou endure."

I snorted, and fought to keep my voice down. "Where were mine friends when the dog Chispin hadst me thrown in here like a common criminal? And when I was shackled, dragged, kicked, beaten, spit upon, stripped, bathed in filth, and locked away, where were my friends then? Where were they to stay the hand that clasped the whip that lashed me?"

"Biding our time, like thou always taught us," he said his face growing stern. "And now thou must continue to bide thy time. Have faith, old friend, and all shall be set right."

"Not with Chispin as high priest," I growled, "He wilt continue to drive the order into the ground just as Rafael."

"Nay, Brother Oberon, he didst not accept the position. It didst fall to Brother Johanathan."

"Him?" I said with bile, "the senile fool?" I then stopped, thinking it over. "Thou art right. With him as the high priest, things shall be...easy."

Brother Sigmund nodded, and whispered, "I must continue mine patrol. As I said, expect to see more of us in the coming days. Endure, Brother Oberon. Endure."

"Thou must listen to me," I hissed. "This rumor, that Tresh is alive. Is it true?"

Brother Sigmund nodded "'Tis no rumor, brother. I didst see him with mine own eyes. His return came to us not long after Brother Chispin's."

I spat, growling with rage, "The one they call Thresh, this vile pretender, is a poison to The Order. He is in collusion with the enemy, a corrupter to Markander, and a wicked man whom I have worked day and night to impede. Now that I am here, another must take up the task; he is a liar and a fiend, and

'tis he who should be here, but with his hands removed and his tongue cut out and his eyes gorged out! Thou must tell Father Johanathan and the council of this before his wicked acts may continue!"

He tilted his mouth in an expression of confliction. "I doubt very much these words will be heeded, Brother Oberon," he said coldly. My eyes widened at his impudence. "Oh, hast thou not been told?" he continued, "It was Thresh himself who didst free Chispin from the clutches of the heathens and their demon goddess. He was greeted as a hero, and given Father Johanathan's highest blessings. I suspect it may be difficult to do as thou dost say."

"No!" I called out, disbelieving my ears. How couldst I have been so unfortunate, to have that worm beneath my heel twist into a deadly serpent and strike at my tendon? Before I could say another word, Brother Sigmund walked away.

A moment later another man stepped into view outside my cell, the new prison warden. I met his hard gaze, and then he nodded slowly. He had heard the entire thing. Understanding, I turned once more to lie still, choosing to place my face against the slime of the cell floor rather than dirtying the open wounds on my back. Patience, endurance; these virtues I had in abundance.

The Bloods...

"Aha, Common Soore you old bastard, I thought you were done for!" I grasped the man's hand and shook it firmly, before saying, "Oh, and Memnon."

"Peppersmith, you old bastard," Soore said, letting go of my hand and finding a chair with a table in range of his boot. "You're looking as ugly as ever. I see you clowns haven't thrown Guildous out yet, and I'm told McWorth still dreams that he's useful, but where the hell is Lord Styles? That taffer was always good for a laugh." Memnon walked right past me without so much as a hello. He was such a rude man!

"Lord Styles is actually our liaison to the Hammerites now," I said proudly, fiddling with my beard. "Things have been moving quickly while you've been gone. Crowley has used his leverage as an ally of Thresh to gain favor with the church, and now they recognize the good that we do rather than just labeling us as rabble-rousers."

"Well imagine that," Soore said, and looked like he was counting the boards on the ceiling. "You had to wait until I was gone to do it, right? The only thing I hate more than a pagan is a Hammerite."

"Ha! Don't let Crowley catch you saying that!"

"Let me catch him saying what?" The obese bearded one came through the door, a vindicated Memnon at his side, before bursting into laughter, shouting, "Common Soore, just as ugly as I remember! Memnon tells me you two have quite a story to tell!"

Soore gave an impassioned wave, but did not move to get up. "Hello

Crowley. I have, but I am not breathing a word of it until I have a smooth smoke and a tall ale," he said as he crossed one leg over the other.

"Memnon, so good to see you made it back in one piece!" McWorth came bouncing into the room, his face glistening with sweat over the ten seconds of exertion. "And you didn't manage to get Soore killed off along the way! Try harder next time, will you Memnon?"

Memnon laughed, and replied in his stupid voice with his stupid head, "Actually he died three times, but he's part feline and so he still has at least two lives left."

Crowley and McWorth laughed, but I didn't see what was so funny. "Cats have nine lives, not five, you idiot Memnon!"

They were all quiet, staring at me, before Soore said, "Yes, but you see, I've already used up four of them so, two left. Do you get it now?"

"Well how was I supposed to know that was what he meant!" I demanded. They all laughed, even Memnon. How dare the imbecile laugh at me! I was ready to storm out of the room.

"So what else is new, Crowley?" Soore said after one of Crowley's comely serving lasses lit his cigar.

"Oh, many things—May I have one too, apple blossom? Thank you dear." The serving girl gave him a cigar as well, and lit it.

"You call your servant girl apple blossom?" McWorth said with a scoff. "That is the most pathetic thing I've ever heard in my life; more pathetic than pagans!"

"None for him," Crowley said to her, and then winked. She giggled and skipped out of the room. McWorth seemed visibly irate at this. I laughed!

Crowley blew some smoke into the air "Many things, eh? Does it mean I have more pagans to kill?"

"Indeed!" I said before Crowley could utter something preposterous. "We've managed to completely drive them out of Eastquarter and Dayport. Our next target is Shoalsgate!"

"Nice," Soore just said, but for some reason he said it to Crowley, and not me!

"Hmm," Crowley said with a nod. "Things will continue, but I expect them to be difficult. Much savagery will still commence, but we'll take The City back from those barbarians. We have the Hammerites on our side now, as I am sure Peppersmith has already told you. Mark my words; this is a good day to be a City-born man."

House Canard...

"Birchman, hey, come over here! Yes, come here, I need to ask you something." I stifled a grumble and decided that the urgent business I was on wasn't nearly as urgent as I had thought it was since Mallard now seemed like he wanted to chit-chat. As soon as he became head of the household he fired Lord Canard's chief of staff whom he never got along with and promoted me,

someone enjoying a high paying chair with almost no real responsibility, to the position. I sorely missed my idle aimlessness.

I quickly shuffled over to where he sat, peeking at him from over the top of the stack of boxes in my arms. "Yes?"

His jowls trembled with the enthusiasm of his whisper. "What did you say her name was?"

Oh, damn it to hell. I had hoped he had forgotten all about the very unfortunate visit we had to suffer through just an hour ago. "My lord, this woman, she is...well, I have been told that there is only one word to describe her. Ridiculous."

"I didn't ask you to describe her, my boy, I asked you for her name!"

I sighed, thinking that my entire career likely hinged on this very moment. "Lady Dimewell, milord."

"That's *Lord Canard* to you, and what an intriguing name!"

"Lord...my...sire, by calling you *milord* I am essentially calling you *Lord Canard*! They are practically the same thing!"

"Oh, sorry, I thought you called me Mallard. It's supposed to be Lord Canard now! No more first name basis! Anyway, as I was saying; I don't care who thinks she is ridiculous. A man of my age who hasn't sired an heir can't be too picky about whom he beds! See to it that she is invited officially as a guest at once, and that she knows that I am *serious*! Oh, and call the apothecary. I want to be at peak performance for her visit, so see if he has any herbs or vials or potions that he can use to help *perk me up*!"

I gave a long sigh which boarded on groan of despair, and caught the glance of Captain Stephens, who glared at me disapprovingly. I quickly straightened my back and said, "Yes mil—er, I mean, Lord Canard."

I escaped while I still could. As I passed by the guardsman at the door, he silently mouthed to me, "Gold digger!" before making a gesture like he was hanging himself. I had been thankful that Lord Canard Junior had not yet done something disastrous, but it seemed that I had thought that far too soon. I briefly contemplated hiring an assassin to end the life of the buxom and bothersome Lady Dimewell, but quickly realized that I could save my money. Half the staff would likely be plotting her death within an hour of her *official* visit.

A Ranger...

I folded up Heppet's letter after reading it. After Tillus had finally died of his wounds, even after the Hammerite healers did everything they could, I waited day and night for some sign that Heppet was alive. When I learned that James was back in The City I went to him, my throat choking with both hope and fear, only to hear the unthinkable; Heppet had been left behind, lost, location totally unknown. I had not spoken with James since.

But now with this letter and all of the relief it brought me, finally I could accept it; I was alone. I was happy that he had found his way to where he

believed he belonged. He was never quite happy anywhere. Even with us rangers, he knew that part of his life was missing.

I tucked the note away in a special place and looked once more about the lodge. The lofts of my fallen comrades had not been touched, left exactly the same as they had been that fateful day when we answered the call and went to Nightfall's aid. They gave their lives, and no amount of gratitude or reimbursement on his part would ever bring them back. I had intended to use the money he gave me to rebuild the Riverbottom Company, but I felt it would be no use. The troop would die with my comrades, and I felt I now had a new path to follow.

I locked the door to the lodge behind me, maybe for the last time, with the money in hand. I walked slowly to The City, passing through the outer wall, and walking a short distance from there to the nearest steeple and bell tower I spotted. I searched around the back of the church, and soon found the abbey. The front door was unlocked, so I let myself in.

Dust floated down gently through the shafts of light. The air smelled of old books and candle wax. A noise came from a nearby room, and then the shuffle of feet against stone. "Can I help thee, my son?" a Hammerite clergyman said as he revealed his spectacled eyes and bald head to me from around the corner.

I turned to him, and offered him a small smile. I lifted up the bag of gold and said, "I've brought a donation for the church."

His eyes lit up as he took the bag from me with a smile so broad I feared his face would fall in two. "Thou art most generous, most generous, I thank thee, and I thank thee!" He said, and then repeated that again several more times as he looked over my donation.

I took a long deep breath, sure of what I was about to do, in spite of my hesitation. "Also," I said to him, "perhaps you could help me with another small matter. You see, I would like to join your order and become a Hammerite myself."

His look of elation only seemed to grow. "Blessed be the small miracles in our lives, that which bringeth us grace in our darkest hour and that which bringeth us the light of The Builder whilst all else seems black. Welcome, welcome my brother, to our holy order. Please, come with me, and I shalt tell thee of how thou might become one of us. May I ask thy name, my brother?"

"Sarievo," I said, and offered him another smile.

Agents...

"I propose a toast," Agent West said, holding high his glass of wine. "To the life of an agent! May our nights be long, our days be short, and our pass codes, never compromised."

"Here, here!" Andrew said with enthusiasm, and raised his glass as well. Petra did the same, as did I. We drank.

"Agents of The Circle," West went on, looking to each one of us. "Has a

nicer ring to it than Agents of The Network, doesn't it?"

"We never called ourselves Agents of the network," Petra rightly pointed out, leaning back into her chair and giving her head a wobbly shake to get a strand of hair off her face.

"I always just thought of us as James's Agents," Andrew admitted, after taking another short sip.

"And we still are, of course," West said, raising a single finger as he often did. "But as James has now declared the partnership with The Circle permanent, I daresay I like the ring of *Agents of The Circle*."

"It sounds...circular, so round..." Petra said, after taking another long drunk. She began to refill her cup.

"I think Petra's drunk already," Andrew said with a laugh.

She finished pouring and with a grin, said, "To The Circle, and all of the round people rolling around inside of it, like *little marbles*." She took a drink before the rest of us had time to raise our glasses. She put her empty cup down and nudged Andrew, "Your turn."

"Ah, my turn," he said quietly, rolling his glass around so that the wine nearly spilled out, "to our leaders, James and Corinne Sterrett, the Master Nightfall, and most especially to Sheam who is as cunning as she is enchanting."

Petra started to giggle as she refilled her cup, and gave Andrew a solid shove on the shoulder. "Why don't you ask her to marry you," she said, and then made doe eyes at him before tipping her glass back.

"To Sheam," West said, his cup raised, taking the attention off of Andrew's blush. I raised my own glass silently, thinking nothing need be added.

"What about you, Othello?" Petra said, tilting her head at me to look at me through a gap in her hair. "We're celebrating your return to active duty, and you've barely said a word the entire time. Come on, give us a toast."

I thought for a moment, feeling the stem of my glass between my fingertips, before lifting my hand up to my face to carefully lift the mask away. Their expressions did not change as my ruined appearance was uncovered, except Andrew, who actually seemed to relax a little more. "To one another," I said, holding up my glass. "May, we always be true no matter the task, no matter the cost, to ourselves and our fellow agents."

"Hell *taffing* yes," Petra said, lifting her glass high.

"To my friends," Andrew said, his smile broadening.

"Until the very end," West concluded, and took a drink.

Chapter 24

Correspondence Persists

Four Weeks Later**— Jyre: The Journal —****Day 36: 5:00 pm**

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve before glancing around. My time in The City seemed like a distant memory now, though it had only been weeks since I joined with the small group of Barlosk refugees in their work to build a new settlement in the woods. I still thought of it every day, stabbing Daelus, James and that strange City, Els's death in the dungeon...Ranson. I kept going over all of it in my mind, wondering what I could have done differently, and thinking of how everything could be different now if I had just made one tiny change.

Heppet saw me staring off into space again, but I pretended not to notice and just got back to work on my own. He and the other men, many of whom I knew as guards or villagers at Barlosk, and their families were working every day to build huts and clear fields and till farmland and hunt for food. I was sitting up on what was going to be the roof of our house, tying together some long straight sticks that Heppet had chopped with rope that I had woven this morning. Soon we wouldn't have to huddle under the tent of animal skins when it rained.

We helped with everyone's house; it was just our turn now. I never really talked with anyone, but felt that everyone was probably good and never had to worry. I said something when I needed to, fetch me that pale, I need some more fiber for rope, I see an animal, and someone should go bring us dinner. Working alongside the other women and children, who were the only ones small enough to get on the unfinished roofs and tie the sticks together, felt good enough. There was just nothing to be said.

Heppet was always talking to me of course, and I said just as much as I needed to make him feel happy. He talked with everyone else too; they all loved him. I couldn't see why he bothered with me at all anymore, he was like part of everyone's family, was never bored or lonely, could never be found off alone with his thoughts. That was me.

Things were good, but I knew that they weren't right. This wasn't what I wanted, but I knew that was foolish. I had been very lucky, but I just couldn't be glad over it. I was unusually quiet with Heppet as we finished up with the roof, put the tools away, enjoyed our dinner, and then turned in for the night. The other families were always asking him to stay the night with them, so he could tell the children stories, and sometimes he even did. But tonight he said no, he thought that I was lonely, and I needed the company. Why did he always think that how I was acting when I wanted to be alone was me being lonely and that I needed company? He always did the exact opposite of what I wanted!

I was just sitting at the simple table, just like the one in every other hovel that the carpenter had made, my legs crossed on the floor and my eyes cast out the window, my mind somewhere far, far away.

Heppet sat down across from me, and stayed quiet for a long time. I knew

it wouldn't last. He couldn't stay quiet for long. He never came near me unless he meant to say something. So I wasn't surprised when he started talking finally. "Jyre, aren't you just a little curious? Why would he have just left it with you if he didn't intend for you to read it?"

I knew exactly what he was talking about. He mentioned it every few days, like it was the only thing he cared about; Tanya's journal. "I am," I admitted. "But I..."

"What?" Heppet said, leaning closer.

"I don't know," I replied. I did know, but I didn't want to say it.

"You're afraid of what you might learn?" he asked.

"No!" I shouted, which may as well have been saying yes.

"It's been almost a month. He's not coming back for it."

I didn't say anything. I knew he wasn't coming back for it, but that didn't mean I should read it. It was his journal! That was private. It reminded me too much of that day when I went through some letters inside Daelus's tower.

"If you don't want to read it, I will. I can keep secrets. He left it with me, after all. I just gave it to you so you could use it as a hard back to write on."

"Okay," I said, before I had even made up my mind.

Without a word he got up, walked across the room to my little stash in the corner, and pulled the journal out from under a pile of clothes. How did he know exactly where it was? He came back over to the table quickly, setting it down carefully. I stared at it. It looked like it had come from The City, so crisp and clean, like it had hardly been used. For all I knew it was blank. Finally he opened it, right in the middle. I wasn't surprised when I saw it was blank.

"See?" I said. "He just left it because he hadn't used it and didn't care," I reasoned.

"Hang on," Heppet said, and leafed through it to the front page. It was blank. Then he closed it, rotated it upside down and turned it over so that what was the back was now the front, and opened it again. I saw writing at once, but he tilted the book away so that I couldn't see it. I was pretending not to be trying to look.

He was quiet for a long time, but I could see his eyes going left and right as he read it. Finally, he said to me, "It's a letter to you, Jyre," looking up.

From his eyes I couldn't tell if he was upset or glad. I looked with my own wide eyes down to the book, which he had pushed before me. Slowly I took it, turned it around so that the words were right side up, and read.

Old Friend,

I wanted to tell you so much when I saw you, but I knew that I couldn't, and then I knew that it wasn't because of Ranson or Soore or even Heppet being there keeping me from getting a moment with you; I was too ashamed. Some things needed to be said, so I found a way to do it without my own shame catching up my tongue and making me hide my face in my armpit.

Please understand; I did what I had to! My family loved our little village, and we knew that we could never let The Lady come there or its innocence would be lost. Even if she left it alone, did not bend it to her will, did not force it to join her unified peoples, it would have been tainted by her savage influence. We always lived apart from the pagans, not allowing their animalistic ways to corrupt our simple, childlike nature. The people of The City lived apart from nature, dominating it and butchering it. The pagans lived as one with nature, with men acting as beasts without laws other than hunger and passion. Our village wasn't like either of those peoples; we were somewhere in the middle, cherishing nature, but living under the laws of Man and his civilized, rational ideas. It was simple, pure, and good.

And I was terrified that your return to it along with the captain Els would be the beginning of the end for it.

It was not just you, either. My family and I also left, sure that our own mystical ways would break the peaceful equilibrium that persisted there. We acted apart, separated but still attentive, shrouding the village so that none from the outside could ever find it and that any who attempted to leave would always simply find their way back.

But that doesn't explain why I was at Barlosk. Truly, it is simple. The pagan village, where I settled down on my own, where you met me not long ago and I lied to you about our village being lost, was claimed by The Lady. Rather than run, I gave in to curiosity. I discovered that though we were right to wish her to never discover our village, she was not the cruel butcher that we had been led to believe. I hid the true extent of my powers from her, but she still knew of my talents, and so sought to give me good work to do at Barlosk, as a healer, a teacher, a craftsman, and many other things.

In time as I worked there I began to realize how much like her my family and I had been when we decided we knew best for our village, and chose its future for it without ever stopping to think if we had the right to. And yet I was too afraid and ashamed to admit that we had done wrong, and work to amend it. When Barlosk fell, I realized it was time to act. So I wrote you this, along with instructions on how to find your way back to our village. I left at once to seek out my family and petition them to undo this shroud we placed on our village, so that you might be able to find it and resume your old life.

If I am successful, it could mean an end to the innocence of that place, but if that is so then that is how things must be. We had no right to choose. This is the providence of fate, not the will of a clan of magicians.

I do not ask for you to forgive me. I know I am beyond that. I

am, however, truly sorry.

Sincerely,
—Tanya

I just stared at it in silence for a long time. At first it was just words to me, little meaning, and little consequence. Lies, control, plots, betrayal; it was all so common a few words about it on a page seemed of little importance. But as time went by and I read it over and over, I began to feel. I didn't know what the feeling was, because it was strange. At first I thought I was angry with Tanya, but then I didn't think so. I wasn't glad either, or thankful that he had done this. I just felt like...I would be waking up from a bad dream soon.

"Jyre?" Heppet finally said, sitting just as he had been for what could have been an hour. "What do you think?" he asked.

"There are directions to find my village here," I said, turning the page to find a short list of steps to follow and a crude map sketched out, showing the way to go from the location where Barlosk had sat.

"Yes, I know, but how do you feel about it?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, afraid to even think about feelings, expecting myself to fly into a rage at any moment at the thought of another man doing what all men always did; lie to me.

"We can get things packed up. Make some food tonight, some things to last us the trip. We can leave in the morning?"

"What?" I asked, confused. "What are you talking about? Where are we going tomorrow?"

"To your village, of course!" he said much louder than he had been talking.

I blinked. "Why do you want to go there?" I asked, still confused.

"Jyre!" he said, smacking his forehead. "Why do you always have to be so difficult?"

"I'm not being difficult; you're not making any sense!" I shouted.

"I am saying I want to go with you to find your village! I don't know if you've heard, but I am a pretty good ranger! I could find a bear's den in the dead of winter; under ten feet of snow!"

"Oh," I just said, trying to think of a way to talk him out of it. "No," I said, "these directions look pretty good. You don't need to help me."

He groaned, and fell so that his chin hit the table, with his hands going over his eyes. "Jyre!" he finally shouted. "I don't want to *help* you. I want to *stay* with you!"

"I know," I just said, though I really hadn't known that. "But you don't need to. It's okay. You have friends here. I don't want to take you away from them." I always thought it was a good idea to pretend to be selfless whenever I wanted to be selfish.

He groaned again, and started to rub his face, before staring at me between his fingers. "I forgot; reasoning with you is like trying to fend off a swarm of bees with a stick." He started to laugh. "How's this, then. I'm going with you whether you want me or not!"

"If you really want to, okay," I said, closing the book. I looked up at him, my face blank. "I guess we could leave in the morning."

"Good grief!" Heppet said, getting up and pacing across the room before coming back. "There you go again. I hate it when you're so stubborn and then you just give in for no reason. I like to know *why* I won an argument!"

"You didn't win," I just said, "and we weren't arguing."

He looked at me for a moment, and then started to laugh. "Okay, have it your way. If we're going to be making food I'll need to go get some sticks for the fire." He turned around and went out the door.

I slowly lowered my head to the table, resting my cheek on the cool surface of the closed book. I didn't know what we would find out there. I didn't know if I'd even recognize my village when I got home; I had been so young when I left, and I knew my time at Barlosk and The City had changed me. Still, I started to understand what that feeling was the letter gave me. I felt hopeful. I raised my hand to my face, feeling my lips and cheeks. It was a smile.

— Sheam: A Christening —

Day 36: 9:00 pm

"Step into my time chamber, my dear! Any past you wish for, any history is yours to have, and mine to grant!"

I offered Sage Walden an earnest smile, before saying, "Can you make me an empress, of a far off land, or maybe of The Moon?"

He gave off a long laugh, before settling down into the chair across my desk. "Will Lady Unexumbra Sheam no longer do? I had to work very hard to make it seem like this person always existed, you know!"

"I know," I said, singing the bank note authorizing the transfer of funds from my account to his. It was a very new thing for me, and came with the territory that he had made possible. Only aristocrats could have bank accounts! I had also already gone over the copies of the falsified documents he had crafted and stealthily inserted into The City's records. "But all of this talk about time chambers and granting wishes, goodness," I feigned a blush, trailing off.

"One thing at a time my friend, one thing at a time," he managed as he continued to laugh while inspecting the bank note I had just signed with my new name. "For now though, you are officially recognized as a member of the aristocracy, which I am certain you will find extremely useful when doing business with stuffy brain-dead clouts who think that heritage and inheritance actually mean a damn thing! Ah, but you and I know better. A finely drafted document and an astute understanding of bureaucracy, means that water *is* thicker than blood!"

Daelus had told me that when dealing with Sage Walden, it was best to just let him have his soliloquies and smile and nod approvingly. Still, I couldn't help but get a word in now and again. "May I contact you at any time if I need something changed?" I asked.

"Yes, yes of course. For a nominal fee, of course, any time, any time at all. It is a real pleasure doing business with you and *Lord* Thresh. You have such fascinating assignments for me! You have no idea how good it is to be out of the courtroom and engaged in projects that involve real creativity!"

I smiled even wider. "We are glad you are happy. We are also glad that you decided to keep us as a client, even though you've severed all ties with House Canard."

He waved it off like it was nothing. "I know when to jump off a sinking ship when I see one. I can't imagine the agony his new lawyer will feel when the legal troubles start flowing in. Henceforth, I am the servant of you and your master...ah, but that will not do anymore, will it—you and your *partner!*"

I grinned even more, showing my teeth. "We'll see about that," I said, though admittedly I *didn't* like the sound of it.

"I will return tomorrow to continue discussions with Lord Thresh about the Raputo contract. I still haven't decided how his reinstatement as head of The Circle impacts the legality of your signature, but I am sure in time we will discover a loophole."

"Good," I said to him nodding. I hated that part about telling Daelus what had happened while he was gone. I expected him to be angry or even disappointed, but he still maintained that he was proud of me and supported everything that I had done while he was gone.

I stood and reached out to shake Sage Walden's hand, but to my surprise when he took it he leaned down to kiss it. "Lady Sheam," he said, before taking his overcoat from the hook and departing.

"Partner, hmm?" I heard Daelus's voice from the doorway leading to his office.

I looked up at him smiling from the shadows, and shook my head, laughing silently. "He's a little presumptuous, isn't he?" I said.

"Maybe not so presumptuous, Sheam, I know we've talked about this several times now; but I am afraid my hand has been forced. I am going to have to remove you from the position of secretary."

I rolled my eyes. There was no one within earshot to be suddenly shocked that he was going to fire me; so, his alarming choice of words fell flat. "Fine," I just said, knowing this was inevitable. "But I still get a desk, right?"

"Of course," he said, cracking a smile. "But not in front of mine. You'll have your own secretary, too."

"Please, not Schinler!" I insisted.

He laughed, "No, no, not Schinler. He stays in the mail room, which will no longer be in the executive wing I might add. I suspect you'll want to hire your own secretary."

"Chief of Staff, eh?" I said, wondering how I really felt about that title. "So...I take it that means more than just Schinler and Maxwell."

He nodded, taking the seat which was against the wall to the side of my desk. "If the Hammerite architect who drafted these...rather interesting additions and expansions to The Circle gets his way, we're going to need a higher headcount to keep things sane."

"Will I get to hire *your* new secretary too?" I said with a sly grin.

He laughed again. I hadn't heard him laugh so much in weeks. "Of course, yes, you will," he said. "Though, if you want to find an adequate replacement you may need to hire *three* people!"

"Oh hush!" I snapped playfully. "I already have someone in mind, but I won't tell you a thing until I've made up my mind. That's my prerogative."

"Naturally," he replied.

I glanced out the window. I could see the silhouette of cranes and scaffolding against the stars, surrounding the still only half-rebuilt Circle. I had a fine view of it from my temporary office in Eisenhower's hotel. Daelus had insisted on letting the Hammerites put it back together, since they were going to do it for free, but they were so disorganized now that they were weeks behind schedule. Daelus had just been to a meeting with them earlier today to discuss the direction of the project, which is when he met the new architect that had been assigned to it, and the surprising news that they were going to be redoubling their efforts to rebuild and expand The Circle. At first he thought that Brother Thurm had somehow gotten involved, but he had been so tied up with trying to resurrect the Mechanist project that Daelus couldn't even meet with him. No, the request had come from Brother Chispin, of all people! He had one condition, of course; he wanted to add a chapel to it, which Daelus surprisingly agreed to.

It hadn't been all good news, though. The construction crew who were building a tower monument at the site of the villa had been massacred and their work torn apart. Worse, though, was the news that *Mister* Oberon, no longer to be called *Brother* Oberon apparently, had escaped from Cragscleft with the help of some of the guards, all of whom had deserted and gone into hiding with him. There had been no news of it since then fortunately, or unfortunately, so it seemed for the time being Oberon was going to lie low. I was happy to see that those grim events had not returned him to his sullen state. As I pointed out when he first told me, at least there haven't been more attacks on temples inside The City. In fact, not a single Hammerite had died within The City walls since the day of Father Rafael's murder.

"Well," I said finally, getting up from my chair and sweeping my hand across the desk to make sure it was spotless. "I suppose this concludes business for today?"

"Indeed," he said, standing as well, and going for his hat and coat hanging on the wall. "I am actually a little anxious. I'm meeting with Rembrandt tonight. He finally made it back from Barlosk, or at least he finally decided to tell me about it."

"Do you expect he will have alarming news?" I asked, locking all of my drawers.

"I don't know what to expect," he replied, donning his hat. "I expected him to explain everything in a report rather than killing me with anticipation, but I am told that another of The Bloods, Memnon, met with James and filled him in completely. James will be meeting me for dinner, so I'll find out then."

"Oh, I know you hate anticipation," I said, opening the door for him. He

stepped out, but not before giving a little bow.

"Under certain circumstances it's quite good. However, I'd rather leave it to holiday parties or romantic rendezvous, and not business." I closed and locked the door behind us. He walked me the short distance to the hotel room I was using as a temporary apartment, the same one I had stayed in while hiding from the Hammerites. "My lady," he said, giving a slight bow but a generous smile.

"My lord," I said in return, giving a slightly less slight bow and a slightly more generous smile. I unlocked the door and let myself in, only turning around to catch a glimpse of him walking down the hall to the stairs. "Partner," I whispered to myself, seeing how I liked the sound of it. No, I didn't like the sound *at all*.

I shut the door and locked it, dropping off my purse before pulling a small cloth off a potted mushroom which then bathed the room in an odd yellow light. Before I vanished into my bedroom, I caught site of a folded note that had been slipped under my door. It even had my footprint on it. I stooped to scoop it up, and unfolded it.

Hey, I've got something that's yours, and I just want to explain why I can't give it back. Meet me behind the building when you get this. I'll be waiting. I'm sorry I was such an ass.—Ghost

I frowned, and sighed. I had almost forgotten about him and the choker. I wanted to forget. I opened up my purse and took out my keys, deciding I needed one but wanted to leave the other, and went back into the hall, locking the door behind me.

— Ghost: The Last Word —

Day 36: 10:00 pm

I knew she either wouldn't be long or wouldn't be along at all. I had listened in a bit on her chit-chat with Master Nightfool for a bit, and decided I'd rather not have to deal with him too, so I left her the note and just waited. When I saw her coming around the side of the building with a pissed off look on her face, I decided I had better grovel a little. "Hi Sheam!" I said in a cheery tone.

"Ghost," she said, staring me down and crossing her arms. "I thought you said that someone stole the choker from you. I expected that to be the end of it but...and now I see you're wearing it. Why can't you give it back?"

She got right to the point, didn't she? I had hoped it would be invisible under the shadow of my hood, but I guessed that women just had an eye for jewelry. "I can't give it back because it's the only thing keeping me alive."

"What?" she said, her pissed off look getting more irate by the second.

"Okay, that's not true. Sheam, I hate to break it to you, but I'm dead. I know, I know, it's sad. I'm sorry I didn't invite you to the funeral, but there

was crying, and it rained, and I knew you were busy, so..."

"You think you're funny but no one is laughing," she said sternly.

"Heh, yeah, that's part of my charm, isn't it?"

"You're obviously not dead and that choker can't keep anyone alive," she said firmly.

"Okay," I said, "I didn't want to do this, I didn't want to scare or gross you out, but okay. Check this out." I pulled off the choker.

She blinked quickly, took two steps back, and then her eyes just got really wide. I didn't need to look down at myself to see what she saw. It had been a month since I had died, and even though wearing the choker made me just like a normal healthy man with blood in my veins, in reality my body had begun to decay, and it wasn't a pretty sight. I put the choker back on quickly, in case she was going to throw up or something. I personally didn't mind the sight of myself as a zombie, I thought it was funny, but for some reason women really hated it!

"So do you get it now?" I asked.

"Yes," she said slowly. "You're using the...death feature of the choker...but backwards."

"Right, it wasn't my idea, actually, but it seems to work. So now you see why I can't give it back to you. If I am going to be undead, I'd really rather at least look alive."

She nodded, but still bore that grossed-out expression.

"Of course, it could be much worse. You see, there are two kinds of corpses. Okay maybe that's a simplification, but bear with me. One kind rots and is full of worms and...You get the idea. The other kind just decays on its own, and that takes a long, long time."

She was frozen; she hadn't reacted at all, not a laugh, no puking, no getting angry, she just stared at me like I was some kind of monster.

I stopped my explanation. She didn't need to hear it. I changed the subject. "I feel fine, to be honest. Just like myself, really. I still get hungry, thirsty, other...things. Uhm, I'm turning over a new leaf, actually. I figured death was a new chance to start over. Someone told me I liked being a hero, and that kind of sunk in. I've got a new fence now, too. He's a bit of an odd one, but he's given me work. So, I guess I haven't completely turned over a new leaf, but it's a start."

"That's...good," she said slowly, her shocked expression fading a bit.

"Heh, yeah," I said. "Well I guess that's all."

She nodded. "Okay," she just said.

There was a long awkward silence.

"I'm..." she began. "Glad you found a good use for the choker. It's really probably not meant for anything good. I'm surprised someone found a way. I'm glad you have it."

I grinned. "Thanks, Sheam," I said, and feeling bashful, "and I am sorry I was such an ass to you that day and got all in your face about how...you remember."

She nodded. "It's okay. You were right. All of it; I figured that out

quickly.”

“Oh, damn.” I grinned. “So who did you kill?”

She smiled. “Not telling.”

“Oh shit, Sheam! That was a joke!” I smacked my forehead. “You killed somebody?”

She cleared her throat, and said, “Two, actually. One indirectly, one...well, yes, I got my hands dirty. It had to be done, I am afraid. My new lawyer called it *justifiable homicide*. That means both of them had it coming.”

“Wow!” I said, astonished. “I really underestimated you. I’m sorry.”

“Just don’t do it again,” she said with a condescending smile. “Because I think I *could* do it again.”

“Well, I should be going. I have a job tonight, and I promised some kids in the slums that they were going to get real turkey to eat tomorrow, and I don’t want to disappoint them.”

“You’re feeding kids in the slums?” she said in astonishment, or maybe it was doubt.

“Yep,” I said. “Seems I have a new addiction, in addition to booze and sex, which I am getting plenty of these days! I’m telling you, Sheam, un-death is getting crazier every minute. Never know what I’m going to do next!”

“No. Well, good luck then. Goodbye, too, I think.”

I nodded “Yeah. Until next time though, right?”

“Next time,” she said, giving a very small smile.

I nodded, and gave a little wave. “Bye,” I said, and then turned around and vanished into the shadows.

It was true, too. My new fence, an oddball named Koyné, had been looking for a burglar who wasn’t afraid of haunted places. I was definitely the man for the job. I also knew a place that raised turkeys, and I had promised the owner to pay double for his biggest one even though he insisted that they weren’t ready for the chopping block yet, because I had met some kids in the slums, friends of the Alarus, who said they had never tasted turkey in their lives.—Or chicken or pork or beef for that matter, but I told them turkey was my favorite and I just saw how their little mouths watered. Right then I just knew what I had to do; it was turkey for dinner or my name wasn’t Ghost!

— Nightfall: News from Afar —

Day 36: 10:00 pm

“Evening, Eisenhower,” I said as I passed by the bustling man at the desk.

“Thatcher!” he shouted. “We need those linens cleaned by sun-up, so it’s either now or first thing in the morning! Do you want to come in an hour early?—Thatcher!”

“I said, evening, Eisenhower.”

He looked up at me with surprise, like he hadn’t noticed me until then. “Ah, evening Lord! I take it the accommodations will be ongoing? Thatcher! Dammit boy, do your ears work?”

“Yes, though we have a completion date set now, but I think a miracle will

be needed to meet it, so we'll keep it indefinite for now."

He nodded, and wrote that down. "Thatcher, have you taken the trash out to the back yet? Where, the devil are you, anyway?"

"Ahh, boy," I just said, and left the hotel behind. Richen was waiting for me in the hansom cab, or rather next to it, as he seemed totally engrossed in the activity of brushing Suzy's mane. "Ho there, Richen," I called out.

"Oy!" Richen shouted back and then shoved the brush under his arm before giving her a kiss on the nose and running to climb on to his driver's seat. "Home then, aye?" he said.

"Aye!" I shouted back, and got in. As Richen sorted out the reins, I happened to see a familiar guardsman pass by whose name I still could not remember. "How goes the watch?" I called out to him.

He sniffed the air, and gave a half frown. "Still stinks," he said.

"I'm sure it does," I said, and then had to hold my hat in place as the cab burst into motion, careening down the street in the direction of home.

The ride home took barely any time at all with Richen driving, so I had to remind myself to tap on the ceiling and let him know that I would be stopping briefly on the way there. Once we had climbed the first hill he let me out, and I continued on foot to a familiar meeting place. With the way the gravel crunched under my feet, Rembrandt would be able to hear me coming from a mile away.

I found him lying against a rock with his hat tipped low over his eyes, picking at his fingernails with that overlong switchblade. "I heard you had some excitement," I said to him.

"Heard that did-ya?" he said, peeking over at me from under his hat.

"I was expecting a full written report, but I suppose that Memnon would be a better person to speak with about that," I said. I was frankly surprised that Rembrandt had decided to meet with me at all.

He frowned, and continued to pick at his nails. "I'm good at finding out what I am not supposed to know about other people. When it comes to my own adventures, feh, no one wants to hear about me." Then he looked up again, and gave a toothy grin. "But I do have this for you," he said, pulling out a very worn folded note out of his pants pocket.

I stepped over and took it from him, and read it at once.

Daelus,

It is me. Jyre. I want to say what happen and where I am at. I will stay in the woods now where I belong. Maybe find a new home maybe not. Els is dead. Ranson is dead. The Lady I believe also dead. At the end it is not what I wanted. To seek revenge now I see is as evil as any other. It was Ranson who I kill and I saw that it caus only more pain, not any thing good. We destroyed Barlosk. Rid it from The World. But all its people I hope were spared.

I was told you sent the men and Els to come attack The Lady.

You do this cos I ask for help. You also spoke to the Hammers cos I ask for help. Both were not what I wanted but I know you did it for me. So thank you. I am sorry for stabbing you. I hate that I did this and hate that it was the last time I saw you. I hope some day we can meet once again and things will be better. I will return to The City some day I think. I do not know when. Maybe when I am grown. Maybe then I can know you. Really.

I also want to say that I dream of you. I saw you with The Lady and she was dead. You took her body away somewhere where it wood belong only it was not just her body it was her too. You gave her to five robed men who took her and promised to keep her safe. Do you know what this means? I hope you do. I often dream strange things and of you and I do not know why. Maybe some day you can tell me.

Your servant,
Jyre

I folded the paper back up, a haunting feeling creeping over me. I slowly turned my eyes up to my tower, its silhouette cutting up through the dark clouds like a dagger. Finally I turned back to Rembrandt, who had put his knife away and had folded his hands over his stomach. "Thank you," I just said.

He nodded "Any new work for me?"

I took a deep breath and glanced out over The City, giving it a quick thought. "Yes," I said, as I pulled out my coin pouch. "A thief came to me two days ago saying that he stole the Crown of Guises, but wouldn't tell me where he stole it from or who owned it or frankly anything about it, only that it was worth five thousand gold—which is quite a bold claim. I'd like to know more before I do business with him. He went by the alias Ruby-Wolf." I held out five gold coins for him.

He reached up and took them, pocketing them with a smooth motion. "You got it," he said, and then tipped his hat completely down over his eyes.

I found Richen exactly as I had found him back at the hotel, brushing Suzy's mane and kissing her nose. He saw me coming this time though, and had the cab ready to move as soon as I was seated. It was only a short distance more to the front gate of my property, where Richen dropped me off.

"How is the shack working out for you?" I asked him before saying goodbye.

"Ah, 'tis fine!" he shouted, leaning over and scratching the small of his back. "Bu'whut I love about-it is the stable! Nice!" He said, giving a thumbs-up motion.

I nodded, smiling. "Good. We'll have your shack feeling like a proper home very soon, but I am glad you find the stable to your liking. I hope Suzy likes it too."

"Aye!" he proclaimed. "Tha's why I like it! Suzy does!"

I couldn't help but laugh and waved as he urged the horse onto the freshly cut path to the shack and stable. I had recently put these up for him so that he could be ready to pick me up first thing in the morning and I could be already home when he dropped me off at night. I had never seen a man so happy to move out of a regular city apartment into a one room shack, but he said that the stable made it all worthwhile, and he'd be spending most of his time in there anyway.

"Evening Gispa, Medan," I said as I approached the front gate. Medan cheered out a hello, while Gispa unlocked the gate and opened it for me. "All quiet?" I asked them.

"Quiet as you'd expect with Jossimer making his usual fuss," Medan chuckled. "He thinks James is sympathetic so he goes on and on to him about everything he hates about you."

Gispa started to laugh, and slapped his knee.

"So James goes, nod, nod, nod, and says nothing, and Jossimer just goes on and on! He still can't get over the fact that he was *almost* rid of you!"

"Ahh, it never ends," I said, and then found myself laughing as well, "Goodnight, gentleman."

"Night boss!" they both said, and thus I found myself at the front door. As I had now come to expect, Jossimer had the door open before I could so much as think about finding my keys.

"Sir," he said forcefully, and then stepped back so I could come inside.

I did so, quietly giving him my hat and coat and gloves and boots, which he obediently took one at a time and placed them in the closet. "Sir," he said again, returning the nod, and then, "Master Sterrett will be joining you for dinner, which should be served in approximately ten minutes."

I said, "Thank you Jossimer. Keep up the good work," and gave him a nod. I knew what the secret was of course. Whenever he vented to James it meant that he had gotten it out of his system and would be perfectly amicable once we were finally face to face. On the other hand, I had noticed a pattern of better behavior on his part for the past few weeks; possibly, because I now knew that he was a delegate as well, he felt that I showed more respect for him and thus he could show more to me. It was an interesting arrangement, but if that was what it took, so be it.

"Yes, sir," he said, and returned to whatever the devil he actually did around the place while I was gone.

— James: Finding Order in the Chaos —

Day 36: 11:00 pm

"I'm sorry Corrine couldn't join us," Daelus said as he sat and a steaming plate was placed before him.

"Likewise," I responded, though I paused to give Marith a grand smile as she served me my dish. "However; when news came of the discovery of Bigeng ruins in the mountains, she knew she had to rush off at once to see it. I asked her to wait until I had time to go with her, but she said that she

deserved this as retribution for my visit to Dereloth, and with that I could not argue. She took Petra and two of the other women agents, claiming it was a girl's holiday."

Daelus laughed, and began tasting his food. While we ate I told him of my meeting with Memnon where we went over his report in exacting detail, along with a host of speculation about what went on between Jyre, Ranson, and Tanya, that resulted in Barlosk's re-banishment. The explanation lasted through the main course, a light desert, and continued even after we retired to Daelus's study with cups of tea.

"It must be good, knowing that Jyre and Heppet are safe," he said at last.

"Oh, intensely; I felt ten times the fool when I found my way back to Phaeros's cottage and discovered that no matter what I did, I could not propel myself back to Dereloth."

"And even if you had, would you have been able to come back? I did ask you not to try, as I recall," he said quietly.

"Yes, yes, of course. But Daelus, the archeological value of that discovery would be worth the risk alone! That library! *My gods*, that library!"

"So did you go back to find Jyre and Heppet, or to establish an archeological project?" he said in an accusing tone, but the look in his eyes said otherwise.

"Ah, both!" I said in my defense.

"How *did* they get back into the real world, anyway?" Daelus mused.

"We may never know considering that the only two who witnessed the event are not available for interview and probably would not understand it if they could. If I may offer a very blunt and possibly stupid explanation though, it would be that with the entry of the colony into the netherworld, something had to be pushed *out* of it. Logically it would be an equal portion of volume (the colony entered Dereloth quite small remember) but of a material that was the most *eager* to depart to actual reality."

"You could blow so many holes in that explanation," Daelus remarked with skepticism.

"Would you rather I had said that they were simply *meant* to return to Barlosk at that time? That it was divine providence or intervention, maybe? Placed, by the hands of gods, at the exact place The World needed them the most?" I replied with a grin.

"Given what I've seen, I'd say that explanation rings more true."

"Ah, but it just begs more questions. Who, or what, could have been looking over them to ensure such an event took place?"

"You're so literal about these things," Daelus remarked.

"Of course, of course. I just always expect things to follow certain rules, even if they aren't the rules *we* must follow," I replied with a grin.

"I heard that when Sariovo got the news about Heppet, he went off and joined the Hammerites."

"Oh?" James said, "I wonder why I hadn't heard anything about that."

"I don't think he's forgiven you for leaving them behind," Daelus said gently.

"Ah, no, I imagine he hasn't." I didn't blame him. It was like explaining to a father that his son was left behind, but that it somehow wasn't my fault. I was glad that Sarievo had merely refused to forgive me, rather than attempted to strangle me on the spot!

"It's good," Daelus resumed. "I believe that his time spent with the Hammerites had a very positive impact on him. I think he will be happy among them, and may even get them to open up a woodlands division, though that sounds like an uphill battle." Daelus took a sip, and then drew a long breath, gazing out the window into the darkness.

"Now," I said finally, "you may tell me why you have been so quiet and why you seem so troubled."

Reluctantly, he pulled a worn folded note from his top pocket and handed it to me. I opened it at once and read it quickly, my eyes growing wide with interest.

I also want to say that I dream of you. I saw you with The Lady and she was dead. You took her body away somewhere where it would belong only it was not just her body it was her too. You gave her to five robed men who took her and promised to keep her safe. Do you know what this means? I hope you do. I often dream strange things and of you and I do not know why. Maybe some day you can tell me.

"Remarkable," I said, looking up at him in astonishment. "Is there any reason why Jyre should know about the Rivata and how they choose to appear to us?"

He shook his head slowly. "But which is more remarkable? That she dreamed of five figures in gray robes, or that she dreamed of *me* handing Delphine over to them?"

I gave the note back to him, and he dropped it on the table between us. We spent the next moment in silence.

Daelus spoke again. "The ashes of the scroll, mixed with her blood, were left behind in that netherworld. The colony was at its final location, so it was a location that the Rivata knew of. If the Rivata could send the colony to that netherworld, they could send someone or something else there to retrieve that ash for them."

"I cannot argue with that reasoning," I said humbly.

"So they have all three of them: the Avatar, Delphine, that Being."

I shifted uncomfortably, not enjoying this apocalyptic prediction. "Let us put that to scrutiny. The scroll was designed to be a gateway to a pocket-plane where the creature designed to be the Rivata's avatar in this world was kept. We have no reason to believe that this pocket-plane would withstand the combining of the two entities. It is very possible that once the gate way shut, the pocket-plane tore itself apart, destroying both entities."

"Or freeing them," Daelus rightfully pointed out.

"Yes, or that," I was forced to agree, "However, if they were truly both

free, I doubt you and I would be having this conversation!" I said with a grin.

It did not illicit a similar reaction from him.

I continued. "More difficult to determine are the effects of the blood mixing with the ash. Blood is merely a substance, a part of her body not unlike a foot or a hair."

"But blood is, metaphysically, much more than that. Why else is it the main ingredient of so many rituals?" he asserted.

"True, yes. I am afraid I am at a loss here. It is one element I barely understand, the scroll; mixed with one I cannot comprehend, the summoned being; and a third that I am not educated in, the blood of a goddess. I wish I knew what to say on the matter."

"I think what...I believe..." he paused, taking a breath, sounding a bit frustrated. "You're right about one thing. We, and The World, are still here, so it's reasonable to assert that...wherever this combined being is, it's not here wrecking havoc. I just—there's no possible way Jyre could have dreamed that unless it was some type of *vision*. A person doesn't dream something like that unless there's something real out there making it happen."

"Dreaming of real events is not a gift or a special power...it is a real phenomenon that happens to every day normal people. How often have you heard stories of someone dreaming that a relative or a child has died, only to wake up the next day to find out that it was true, and totally unexpected? And that the dream actually and vividly depicted the event?"

"Yes," Daelus said. "It's rare, but considered normal I suppose. I believe we must take this seriously."

"But what she dreamed did not happen. You gave Delphine's body to...oh my."

"I gave her to Em," he said, his eyes turning hard.

"Could giving Delphine's corpse to Em somehow symbolize handing her over to the Rivata?"

He shook his head. "That was a corpse. Delphine died a goddess, not as a mortal woman. The body would be irrelevant from a metaphysical perspective. Jyre even said it in the letter, though maybe not even knowing what it meant—I gave *her* over, not just her body."

"Ah, too true, too true...so it is more likely to be the blood that symbolically represented her being given over to the Rivata. But the blood was my doing, not yours, and she was clear that she dreamed of you carrying her."

"Dreams," Daelus said. "Since when do they really pay much heed to the actuality of things? They are far more concerned with meaning, and when not meaning, the raw feelings of the dreamer."

"Precisely," I simply said.

Considering the subject at hand, a topic that I had forgotten some time ago suddenly came to the forefront. "There was something Jyre said to me while under hypnosis that I wanted to ask you about."

"Hm?" he asked wordlessly.

"She mentioned a look in your eyes during your first meeting which she treasured. It was that look which drove her to visit you repeatedly, though she admitted that upon subsequent visits the particular look was nowhere to be found. I had since then dismissed it, but I thought it pertinent to ask you about it in case there actually was something to it."

"A look in my eyes," he said, growing rather distant for a moment. I did not hurry his reply. "Recognition," was all he said when he spoke again.

"You recognized her from somewhere?" I asked.

"No. I thought I did. She reminded me for an instant of someone I used to know, from my previous life. The recollection was fleeting though, and quickly vanished. I hadn't thought of it again until just now."

"Ah," I said quietly, remembering our previous conversations about how Daelus supposedly remembered nothing from those days. "An interesting occurrence, considering that without it the events that followed would have been much different!"

He began to rub his eyes, and then when he was finished he looked up at me. "I think I need eye glasses," he said.

I laughed. What a delicious non sequitur! "I can recommend a good lens crafter," I said, still laughing.

He gave a brief laugh, and then drained his teacup. "I think we've been going about The Cause all wrong," he suddenly said, which caught me off guard.

"Oh?" I replied.

"What have we really done, anyway? I daresay we've done exactly what the Rivata wanted us to do; only we did it with the intention of not letting the Rivata take advantage of it, which I now think is malarkey. They will find a way to twist our work to their needs."

"So what do you propose?" I asked, truly hoping that he had a suggestion.

"Undo the damage done by our predecessors. Phaeros and Jossimer crippled The City's government and military, the two components that would have been the most difficult for them to control or oppose. I say steps should be taken to restore them to their former power and dignity."

I nodded, unable to disagree. "It is a difficult prospect, but I believe that you are right. I am thankful that Jossimer is still around to help us with that. However, there are still five delegates unaccounted for. Four of them are likely still at large, doing the Rivata's work in The City as we speak. One, Phaeros's predecessor, is most likely deceased, though I would not be surprised if he set up a legacy that would ensure lasting benefits to the Rivata long after his death."

Daelus seemed lost in thought for a moment, but then said, "Phaeros had Em and Jossimer. I, presumably, have contemporaries. Some of those unaccounted for may have been contemporaries to you."

I nodded. "Most likely still alive and most likely deeply entrenched in the Rivata's work."

He shook his head slowly, and then his eyes drifted to meet mine. "No, I think he's dead."

"Oh?" I said in astonishment.

He nodded just as slowly, letting his eyes drift away again "Markander."

I was taken aback. "*Father* Markander? The Hammerite High Priest who preceded Rafael?"

"Yes, I am sure of it now," he said, bringing his fingertips together. "Like you, he approached me after I had summoned my tower. He knew what it meant, and who I was. He also knew that he was dying before his time and that his work of bringing the Hammerites to a downfall was incomplete. He wanted to obey the Two Rules though, so he didn't tell me who he was, just put me into a position where I had to continue his plans to sow chaos into The Hammerites."

"Remarkable, yes, it fits. Markander often was charged with the decline of The Order over the past twenty years or so; even though he did ambitiously pursue the position of High Priest with a single-minded ferocity, as I recall. I don't know why it never occurred to me that he might be a delegate."

"Until a few weeks ago," Daelus explained, "you never thought to imagine that there were as many as ten of us."

"I believe then that we must add The Hammerites to our list of organizations to bolster." I then grinned, a sudden realization coming to me. "The rule of conquest is quite ironic, isn't it? Almost as odd as the rule of no contact." I said.

Daelus did not seem moved by this statement, in fact, he nodded. "Yes, though it is stated as the opposite, our goal never was to gain power in lofty positions."

"Yes, though to do what is needed that is certainly required. The Rivata wished to come to a city with a crippled power structure, with struggling masses that have no leadership to turn to and thus would turn to *them*. It is *now* our job to make sure that the rival factions are strengthened, the conflicts firm and strong and the competition fierce. It will be an environment most un-conductive to Rivata control."

Daelus nodded. "Why else would you and I have allied ourselves with criminals who seek to siphon wealth, and thus power, from the aristocracy. Our jobs were never to become powerful names in the world of crime; it was to cripple the livelihoods of the nobility."

At that his enthusiasm waned, growing quickly pensive. "Oh, Gods...James, you and I are both directly responsible for the slaying of two pagan goddesses. I'd say that qualifies as deeds beneficial to the Rivata's directive."

I smiled grimly. "The feeling of having one's eyes opened, of knowing how blind one has been, is both amazing and horrifying."

He gave a long sigh, and seemed to grow distant, toying idly with the empty teacup in his hand. "I wonder what made Phaeros decide to forsake the scroll."

"I wish I could have asked him more," I admitted solemnly.

Daelus nodded, and remained quiet.

I checked the time. It had grown very late, and even though I did not have Corinne at home expecting me, I did have work to do. It seemed trivial in

comparison to our discussion, but I had to remember that for every delegate out there dealing with the fate of the entire city, there was a Sheam or a Wendle dealing with the hard facts of everyday life, with difficult matters in their hands. I still had a Network to run, and clients who depended on me. Thus I said, in conclusion, "We will work to make contact with the three remaining unknown delegates, or four if the elder still exists, undo the damage they have done, and convert them to The Cause."

"Or kill them," Daelus grimly but rightfully pointed out.

"Yes, or that," I said, remembering all too well my decision that had already resulted in the death of five hundred of our former countrymen. At that, I drained my cup. No more words seemed appropriate, so Daelus and I quietly shook hands, and I departed.

— **Nightfall: A Shadow on the Balcony** —

Day 37: 12:00 am

I closed the big door to my bedchamber slowly, feeling the vibration as the bolt clicked. I walked across the room to the balcony and drew the drapes closed. With the moonlight shut out the room was cast in darkness, only illuminated by the blue flame of a single oil lamp. As if propelled by some premonition, I glanced over to the wardrobe where little Jyre had sat, now so many nights ago. There was a deep shadow there, pitch black. I walked over and stood in the place she had hidden herself, just to make sure. It was silly to do, but it was done nonetheless.

Still, as I walked back to my dresser, I had the distinct feeling that I was not alone. I redid the top button and glanced over to the drawn curtains of the balcony.

At a glance I knew I saw a human shape, felt a glimmer of hope, but I quickly realized that it was not Jyre at all. As I stepped forward, the glow of my lamp diminishing behind me, I could see that I was seeing the shape of a woman, but tall and with a fine figure. I drew open the curtains, and found myself face to face with someone I did not recognize, and yet somehow was certain that I knew. "Lytha," I said at once.

— **Lytha: A First and Final Meeting** —

Day 37: 12:02 am

His mind was like a cliff on the side of the ocean, the waters crashing against it in great waves, but the tall rocks had stood vigilant for all time against the perpetual onslaught. "Lytha," he said at once. He did recognize me, after all.

"I want to know why," I said immediately. I could have just taken it from him, but it would be easier to with the question poised. Even if he said nothing, or lied, his thoughts would betray him. "Why about many things, but we can start with the one that is most personal to you and me. Why did you have Ghost sent into Cragscleft to get me out? What do you want with me?"

He was alarmed at first, but this quickly subsided into acceptance. "There are two reasons," he said, both of which flowed into my mind before he had put them to words. "The first is that my head of intelligence wished very much for you to be out of the hands of the Hammerites, due to the things you might know concerning The Lady Delphine and her plans. It was information he feared the Hammerites would only destroy."

It was true, though I did not like the idea of others knowing that I had any connection to the witch. "And the other?" I asked, knowing already that his second reason was actually the first that came to mind, but one he found difficult to express.

Still, he spoke plainly. "It's because I felt responsible for what happened to you, and wished to correct it."

It was true, then. He had been the one to send the Hammerites to the villa, resulting in my capture, my torture, and as a result *It* taking hold of me. It had never been his intention, and his regret was earnest. "You did not correct it," I said. "But some good did come of it," I then added.

He nodded.

"You...have something to tell me, about Delphine," I said, feeling that much of his mind was devoted to her, filled with turmoil and conflicting feelings. As I asked, I sensed his mind organize around it, trying to express what he didn't even understand about himself into words.

"I was with her when she died," he simply said.

"And you regret this," I replied at once.

"Yes," he said slowly. "It needed to happen, but I am sorry that it did. It was not the outcome that I wanted."

His restrained sorrow sunk into me through my skin in waves, cracking the hardened shell I placed around my own feelings about Delphine. "She was my sister," I said quietly, as much to myself as to him.

He looked surprised for a moment, and then a strange thought occurred to him. I reminded him of her very much. I found the thought both sickening and strangely gratifying. "I am sorry," he simply said.

"Don't," I said quickly. "I do not know what side of her she showed you, but she was a cruel, wicked woman, who would stop at nothing, spare no one, to get what she wanted. I am glad that she's dead. It means I can stop running from her."

As I said this, I could feel the crashing waves working against me, eroding my own feelings. Was she really as cruel and wicked as I had believed? Were my own thoughts and feelings about her merely Thalia's hatred for her? Had this man possibly known Delphine better than either of her sisters could? I was not certain of any of it, only that he did not believe me, and I could not change his mind. He knew that she could be cruel, ruthless, and vile, but he did not believe that she was evil.

"I still don't understand your part in this," I said, and listened to the way his mind wrapped itself around my statement. "What connection did you have to Delphine? How was it that you were with her?"

As he searched for an answer I felt his thoughts flooding into me, like the

ocean waves had broken through a thin wall of rock and came crushing into a small inlet. I saw all of it, from the Hammerites to the weavers and the wicked beast, to the choice she laid before him and the final moments of Delphine's death, and beyond. As he opened his mouth, saying simply, "Your father and I are of the same background. She understood this, and thought it meant that I could help her. She was right, and wrong," I felt that I understood all of it.

"But you are nothing like my father," I simply said.

"I don't know," he replied. "We'll have to see."

I just nodded. I had taken what I needed from him, whether he wanted to give it or not. I turned, ready to descend back down into the rocks, but then hesitated. I felt like I owed him something in return, though I was not sure why at first. I came from a dark, twisted, troubled family, and he had, of no obligation, stepped in and at least partially set things right. "Thank you," I said, "for what you did for Delphine. I hope that she finds peace." I turned and looked away from him, my eyes searching out the now familiar ruins in the rocks not far from here where I would meet Ghost at dawn, after our work for the night was done. "I know I have."

I guided his mind with my hands, helping him see things as they were; how he was afraid to see them. Stroke by stroke, I smoothed out the turmoil. He would no longer doubt or regret his terrible choice. He would no longer blame himself for Delphine's death. I did not put these ideas into his head; they were already there. I just helped uncover them, helped bring them to the surface, so that if he were ever again faced with a similar choice, he would not doubt, or second guess, or dwell in the past and regret. It was my gift to him.

He smiled gently, and I felt the crushing waves against the cliffs subside and calm. He harbored a thought, distinct and clear in his mind, as if he had spoken it out loud, but was refusing to share it. I was a half-delegate too, he mused. He felt that this was important, but only because Delphine had believed it important.

Before he could say another word, I slipped over the rail of his balcony, and let myself fall so that my feet soon slid along the gentle slope of the tower wall. With my momentum landing on the mansion's roof brought me into a full run. I leapt from the rooftop to a nearby outcropping, not once slowing my sprint.

I had a simple job planned for tonight. Koyné told me of an ancient emerald ring that was going to be auctioned off tomorrow at The City courthouse. It was being kept in a special vault with a combination lock. The code was never written down, and was impossible to crack. He needed someone who could learn secrets without asking questions, who could move silently and invisibly, who could move in and out without even disturbing the dust on the ground. He knew there was no point in asking anyone else.

— Nightfall: Correspondence Closed —**Day 37: 12:10 am**

As mysteriously as she appeared, she was gone. I knew that there was no point in scolding the guards for allowing her to slip in and out. It was said that Lytha could walk through walls, could move in plain view without ever being seen, could know the unknowable by hearing it in other's thoughts. I felt that somehow, even though I had told her little, she understood all of it now. Somehow, I felt that I understood things a little better too.

I undressed and cleaned myself before putting out the lamp and sliding into bed. As I lay quietly, an urge crept into me. I wanted to get up, go downstairs, all the way down, to my lower sanctuary and sit in my chair. I wanted to see Em. With a deep breath I pushed the idea out of my mind, and soon felt myself drifting to sleep.

End Chapter 24

A Final Thought on Delegates...

As I observed it all happen, from the minds of those who partook in every choice and refusal to choose, I slowly began to understand. Somehow, in spite of my century in search for these secrets, of this hidden knowledge, I had already known it all. It had been hidden from me, in the deepest corner of my mind, only to be brought forward as I learned the truth. The tears had mended. The burns had cooled. The conflicting magical energies which toiled and twisted my mind had been made still. All that had been clouded had become clear. Though the identities of the final three delegates remained a mystery, I felt certain now that I understood the identity of the *first*.

For all these years I had been observing from a table just like the ones James and Phaeros had used in Dereloth to see through the eyes of anyone whom I chose, to feel what they felt, to hear what they thought. And yet how ironic was it that my own thoughts and feelings remained unclear to me?

Though Daelus was the origin of my self-awareness, it was James who revealed the truth to me. I first suspected it when I saw him observing the Delegate chamber, seeing the hollows, reasoning out where he had been and what he could remember. Then I realized that *I too* remembered. The memory *cracked* free of its shell and exploded outwards to fill my mind in a startling instant. I remembered awakening in that very room, of seeing the faces of nine of them, faces I now knew belonged to Phaeros, Em, Jossimer, Markander, James, Daelus, and the other three who remain a mystery. Their eyes were closed, all asleep, none yet ready to be brought forth. That is when I realized who I was. I was a delegate; the first; the original. Why else would I have been so obsessed with them, searching my entire life to know? Unlike them, I had not been given instructions, or a purpose. I had no rules to follow. I was merely a test, sent into The World to see if it could be done. My life held no meaning other than that.

Yet still, I would go on. Like Phaeros in his altered state, I was ageless. I desired no food nor drink nor any other bodily need. I simply existed, observing, waiting. I knew that I would soon remember the faces of the unknown three. In time I would observe them just as I had observed Daelus and James, young Jyre and Sheam, the half-delegate Lytha and the one who called himself Ghost. I felt that in time all of the remaining delegates would come together, either in peace or in war, and that I would not be excluded.