

Safe and Sound...

They didn't get nuthin' out of me. The cell door was bolted shut, and then there was nothin' but the sound of a steady drip, drip, drip from the hole in the floor they 'spected me to piss and shit in. I was pretty sure I wouldn't have to wait very long.

"Hey," I called out, 'membering somethin'. "Can you at least take these shackles off?"

—Nothin'. They'd forgotten 'bout me. They didn't even care to begin with, anyway. I could tell the way they asked me questions; all typical ones, all the wrong ones. They didn't get nuthin' for it. Nope; my business with killin' Nightfall was none of Lord Raputo's business.

"Comfortable?"

"Who said that?" I shouted, looking around. That's when I saw a tall skinny guy standing outside my cell, so narrow he could have hidden behind one of the bars.

"The one who's actually going to get some answers out of you," was all he replied.

"Guards!" I shouted for help, quickly getting the idea that this bloke didn't work here!

"They're asleep," he said, and then suddenly he seemed to be inside the cell.

"How did you do that?" I demanded, getting up, but not really wanting to get near him in case he was some kind of ghost.

"Iron isn't cheap, you know. Why put a big guy in a cell with bars that are only one foot apart when he'd be just as trapped if they were two feet apart. I just walked in." He was grinning wickedly; his tattered floppy hat pulled down over his face so I could just see the grin.

"I'll show you!" I bellowed and charged at him, my fists out in front of me. He grabbed the chain between my shackles, put his heel behind my knee, and the next thing I knew my kneecap was split on the stone floor and my nose was smashed against the stone wall. "Arugh, damn it!" was all I could say after that.

"Okay, turkey," he said after he pulled me back around and showed me his knife. It was long, and so sharp I wasn't even sure if I could *see* the point, "time for someone to ask you all the right questions."

Chapter 3

Religion and Crime

— Nightfall: A Matter of Economy —

Day 2: 12:00 pm

I turned the artifact over in my hand as I studied it under the loupe. There were several imperfections which, while invisible to the average ignorant observer, were glaring to anyone who had knowledge about such things. I did not have this knowledge; I just knew where to look, because the person who made the fake was sitting before me, and I had the original in my other hand. The fake was simply designed to impress those who wished to be impressed. "Well done," I said, looking up from it to the craftsman who had made it.

I held the Chalice of Turama in one hand, and in the other a well made but obvious fake, which had been put together personally for me by a skilled craftsman named Knowles. It broke his heart to be forced into crafting such blatant imperfections into the replicas, but I wanted to be sure that anyone who had in mind a caper would understand that these were fakes they would be dealing with, and know not to bother. Yes, every artifact in The Circle was a replica, with the exception of the original artwork which would be considered worthless to any save the most open minded art lover. No one would want to steal a painting that cost two gold coins on the street.

I had purchased the Chalice of Turama for a modest price about a week and a half ago from Lord Ursula, who had recently been hit by one or more burglars. They managed to steal just about everything he owned except for the chalice. Ursula was in great need of liquid assets, so it did not take much bargaining for me to convince him to part with the artifact, in spite of its spectacular nature. The burglars also were given payment for being so generous as to not steal the chalice. If I wanted to display the item in the museum, it had to have been bought legitimately, rather than stolen.

I smiled at Knowles, who was looking at me expectantly, and nodded, saying, "Very good work, and good speed too." I placed both the copy and the original chalice in my travel bag, and dropped a pouch of coins—twenty gold—onto his table. It was the standard fee.

Knowles gave me a half smile as he scooped the payment up. "One of these days, Milord," he said, looking at me from under his bushy white eyebrows, "you're going to have to ask me to make something real. I am sick of working with lead, glass, and paint. Give me some gold and gems, and I will make anything you wish, something beautiful, something real for your museum!"

I smiled more and shook my head, "Only to have it stolen? But you are right, one of these days, I will have you create something beautiful for me, but if that were to happen, it would be as a gift to an enchanting lady, one so devious as to have stolen my heart, and not for my museum."

Now his half smile turned into a smirk, and he pointed at me, "And one of these days, Master Nightfall, one of these aristocrats who your thieves are robbing are going to catch on to your little game, and you'll wake up to find your throat slit."

"Is that a threat, Mister Knowles?"

His eyes went wide and he threw his hands up. "What the taff? No it's not a threat! It's just good advice! You're a good man, Milord, you've kept me in business far longer than I would have had you not come along, and I don't want to see you get your blood spilt because you're playing foolish games with villains. Your museum is not worth your life!"

"The chalice was purchased legitimately, Knowles. You have nothing to fear. As for the necklace last week, its owner was Duke Egress, who can't even keep his own staff under control, let alone inspire any form of police action against me. If I felt otherwise, I would have had it disassembled, the gems re-cut, the gold melted down, and each part sold separately for their basic commodity value."

He frowned and shook his head. "I just don't see why you have to be caught up in that villainy in the first place. I try to make an honest living. Sure, it's hard, but at least I sleep at night. At least, I did, up until I started working for you."

"I can appreciate that, and I am sorry. Maybe I should find a new artisan?"

He held up his hands, "I...now that's not fair. Blast, caught me being a hypocrite. Alright, I see your point. No, I need the business, I really do." He let out a long sigh and placed his hands back on the table. "We're all touched by sin here in The City; Builder help us," he uttered.

"That we all are, my friend." I reached my hand out to him, my face graced with a slight smile as I looked to him to close the matter. With a slight air of reluctance, he took my hand firmly and we shook. The instant he let go, my hand slid along the rim of my hat before drawing it quickly upwards from the table and fitting it neatly on my head. "Enjoy your afternoon," I told him. Finally he echoed my smile as he got the door for me, simultaneously fetching my walking stick from its place of honor in the crock.

"And you as well, Master Nightfall."

The door closed behind me. The leather of my glove groaned faintly as I gripped my walking stick tighter; tapping it firmly on the stone walk before me. I lifted my eyes to the scene; the rim of my hat a dark inverted plateau shielding my vision from the blue sky above. The Master was afoot in The City.

I launched myself into the streets at a speed appropriate only for one who truly has business at hand. The throngs of humanity parted ever so slightly in my path. These people, these wayward souls who called this place home, wished only to be left alone to their business; that they may travel unabated by beggar or hawker as they surged this way and that, pushing with great friction against one another, yet not once actually touching, with feet trampling ancient cobblestones, just as millions have before. I was not so unlike them.

The City: a place such as this needed no other name. To most who lived here, the word was synonymous with country, with continent. There was naught else to consider, nothing else on their mind. Many had never even set foot outside the sheltering walls, nor aboard a ship moored at the docks;

great-great-grandfathers and great-great-grandsons alike. That is what they were content with. That was the stuff of life.

As I walked I lifted my eyes to the handsome structures which towered above the beaten and trodden streets. At the base these buildings were of stone and wood; rough, sturdy, ugly materials fit for the dust and the mud of the traffic below. As the structure climbed to the second and third floors, the stone was replaced with marble, the wood with delicately sculpted ceramic. The separation was as literal as it was metaphoric. Ornately formed window casing framed expertly crafted fields of lead and glass. From these portals gazed privileged eyes, their vision tinted to whichever hue pleased them, arcing above the streets, never glancing below, seeing only one another.

But that was a world pressed between two others. Down below, the streets and paths of the commoners sprawled, but above lay another highway, the realm of the thief. How would life be then for ones such as these, who hoard and covet, to be visited from one who traveled on the highway above, and then cast into the streets below? How cruel was this? And how evil was I for supporting this...for encouraging this activity to thrive? What hatred did I hide deep within my heart which fueled the flame of joy I felt at the sight of these plump gentle beasts reduced to swine in the streets? What allied me to the wretched scum, the vile bundles of filth that preyed on the comfortable and the happy so that their victim's misery may be their prosperity? What madness was this? Ah yes, but it could be said either way. Who here is the victim? Who holds the greatest misery? Who, the greatest prosperity?

Yes, The City. My feet stepped firmly on stone and brick as I worked my way ever closer to my place of business; The Circle of Stone and Shadow. I was a part of this game now; no longer above it, no longer below it. I was in The City and The City was within me. I would go there and sit in my office, and they would come one by one. Look here, one would say, I stole this. Dangerous it was, this thing I did, but I did it knowing of you. Some coin I could have taken, or some naughty gems, but no, this heirloom is what I took. So valuable it is, and so dangerous for me to have done this, but in you I trust. I know you will buy this from me, give me gold and riches, and keep me hidden from wrath.

And it would be so. A wealthy child would lose their bauble, a thing of priceless value, only because they would have never sold it. A thief so paid for his work now has meat on his table, and a butcher now has coin for grain to feed his livestock. And I?—I had more work for Mister Knowles, (thus he too is paid) and another item of interest for my museum. My coffers filled as curious observers passed through: a gold to see the painted gallery, a silver to see the long lost crown of some dead lord, a copper to nose through the pages of some old manuscript. (Perhaps poetry will be of interest today.) All of this, because a crook, a wretched example of the worst humanity has to offer, slid into the porcelain domain of a wealthy man—one possibly as reviled as he—and stole a bit of metal and stone, valued only for its beauty.

And did I care so little for the bits of glinting treasure which I gathered

and displayed? Was there not some shred of appreciation for the beauty, the craftsmanship, which went into each piece? It would be a lie to deny this. However, the goal was not in the gathered, but in the act of gathering. The City held treasures far beyond the value of stone and metal, and I was of a mind to gain these treasures. Every day, as new spoils came, brought the chance that one of these true treasures would find its way into my hands. For that, all of this was worthwhile.

And then the sanctity of the ebb and flow of the streets was shattered. In an instant, a torrent of violence erupted dead ahead of me. A man, screaming obscenities, was thrust to the ground by one of Warden Canard's armed and uniformed soldiers; a Gryphon. Beside him, moaning in his pain was another Gryphon, clutching his bleeding side with one hand, sword still firmly grasped in the other. Lord Canard's men were at work. Two more were then upon the screaming man, beating him with the hilts of their swords and kicking him with their sharp boots. As quickly as it began it had ended. Only for an instant did I see him being dragged away, now silent, before the crowd in the streets closed back in, obscuring their path of withdrawal. It was only when it was all over that I realized I had not slowed my pace a step. A scene such as this was only barely less common than the usual friction. Soon even I will have forgotten it.

Now the walls of The Circle's court loomed above me, and my journey drew to a close. I passed through the iron gate, held wide for all to pass through, into the brief yard which separated the building itself from its perimeter fortification. Crossing the threshold was like traveling a thousand miles. It was as if the air itself had a different makeup.

It was quiet. I could hear the sound of my footfalls and see the shadow cast at my feet by the midday sun. I passed by a bench, occupied by a young couple who cared nothing for what was outside the perimeter wall nor what was within the structure the courtyard surrounded. Yes, children; their primary interest was indeed one another.

The doors creaked open as I firmly pushed against the latch with the top of my walking stick. Light poured inside, stealing the silence of its closest ally. I let myself in.

Briefly, before going to my office and to business, I passed through one of the library wings. Old books, mostly volumes I rescued from junk heaps and bon fires, were being devoured slowly by an ever growing army of old men, most of whom looked too poor to ever purchase one for themselves, and others too frail to write one. Still, they kept the donation jar in the room filled and the benches warm. Soon, I trusted, every page would be graced by their fingerprints. I hid a smile as I chanced to see one peering up from his page, eyes possibly lost in thought, gnarled old hand stroking his beard slowly. I excused myself without a sound, and crossed the inner chamber on my way to meet with Sheam.

And then a sound came which caused my heart to leap in dismay far more than any brawl in the streets could. "Oh, Lord Thresh! Can I call you Daelus? Oh, you look simply debonair today, Daelus! How good it is to see

you! I just thought I'd pop by early and maybe could get you to give me a tour of your museum? You know, I just love the sound of your voice, Daelus! So charming! And so handsome! Oh, why don't you tell me, how did you come across such a grand collection of books? Oh, you must have so many stories to tell!"

I stared in disbelief at Lady Dimewell, who had slithered out from a side chamber like a viper who had just caught sight of a rodent. Hadn't Sheam canceled my lunch with her? I refrained with only great willpower from allowing my icy composure to collapse into a string of expletives as she sauntered well within my personal space. She was quite a woman, to be justifiably frank. Her appearance would have been very exciting, had she not ruined it by painting her face in such an unsophisticated fashion and adorned her head with the most preposterous of ornaments. Her personality, which resembled a leech combined with a hyena, did not help things either. Though one of my general social standing would ordinarily find the attention and proximity of such a creature to be a mark of achievement, I could not help but find it quite embarrassing.

I went to open my mouth, but she was still talking, saying something about how she loved the sound of my voice. Did she? I would never have guessed that, considering how she would never let me get a word in. "Hello, Lady Dimewell, I..."

"Oh please Daelus, no need to be so formal. My name is—"

I had no problem cutting her off. "This is a very bad time, I am sorry. In fact, didn't you get my message?"

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Sheam up the stair at the entrance to her office, peeking at me through her fingers, as her hands were clutching her face in dismay.

"Oh? Message...what message? Oh dear, is there a problem, Daelus? I simply don't understand." She gave off a nervous laugh.

I turned to Sheam and gave her a 'rescue me' look. She heeded it, and walked down the staircase quickly. "Lady Dimewell, if you please madam, I had sent a notice early this morning to your servants to say that Milord Thresh would be unfortunately indisposed this afternoon. The Hammerites suddenly informed us last night that they would be doing inspections of The Circle today and that they demanded the master be here for interview."

I smiled confidently and turned back to Dimewell, saying, "That message, Lady Dimewell."

"Oh, well, my goodness, I never got such a message! Gracious me! How awful, an interview! They probably mean interrogation...but oh...My dear Daelus, what sort of sinful things have *you* been up to?" She gave another nervous laugh and attempted to walk up to me, hand outstretched, like she wanted to touch me or something. I just backed away a few steps.

"Lady Dimewell, please do not be so ridiculous!"

At that she retracted her hand and blinked a few times, "Me...? Ridiculous—Why, why, don't be absurd! Why, I never...! Ridiculous!—Hrumph!"

Thankfully, that seemed to upset her, and she turned on her heel and walked off sternly. One of the nearby peasants who were loitering in the hall, a young man, scurried after her, and she began to scold him as they went.

I let out a sigh. "Sheam," I said while rubbing my temples. "Write that word down. Ridiculous—I don't want to forget it so I can use it on her again."

Sheam gave out a chuckle, and it wasn't a discreet feminine one either. I looked at her with a curious expression, and she quickly explained, "That was the first time you have ever turned down giving someone a tour."

We both had a laugh, and after that it was back to my office and back to work. Sheam accompanied me after scooping up some papers from her desk. Before she sat down, I got right to the point. "Did *you* get my message this morning?"

She nodded and suddenly turned serious. "Yes, and I am very glad you're alright."

"I'm having Rembrandt look into what became of the assassin. With any luck he paid a visit to Lord Raputo's dungeon last night. Rembrandt should be able to get to the bottom of it. I informed my tower guard last night, and sent a dispatch to the Gryphons as well as to you this morning. Hopefully that will do some good."

"I was worried about you all this morning," she admitted. "I know you've been in tough spots before, but, a group of assassins? That's too much, Daelus."

I tried to give her a reassuring smile. "Dealt with far worse," I said calmly, though I doubted it would set her mind at ease. To be honest, I was rather proud of the way I had handled it. It had been a long time since I'd been in a fight, and did remarkably well considering the odds.

"But you were unhurt? No close calls?"

"Ah, well, they did land a few blows...but I was able to get some good medical attention."

Sheam nodded. "Mrs. Simon."

I smiled, "Yes, she is very experienced with that sort of thing. Big family of guards and all..."

She nodded, and was silent for a time. How is it that a woman can always tell when you're lying? Finally, she spoke up, changing the subject, "Have you heard anything about the one who was captured? Do you know who they were working for?"

I shook my head, certain that I had explained this already. She was anxious, so I did not press the matter. "I won't know anything until I talk with Rembrandt tonight."

She fell against the back of her chair, not trying in the slightest to hide her disappointment. "That guy gives me the creeps," she said without a moment's hesitation.

"I know, Sheam, and that is why I am meeting with him and you're not. He may look like an old scarecrow, but he gets it done. We're going to have to rely on him until James is off holiday. You were so supportive of him when he announced that he was taking one!"

She seemed to perk up a little, and simply said “scarecrow” with a little snort. Then she looked back down at the stack of pages she was sorting through. “I’m afraid I have two notices from the Hammerites this morning. One was the usual noise, but the other, well; see for yourself.”

She handed me the handsomely crafted Hammerite document, and I took a glance over it. It was very brief, and simply noted that another one of their temples was being briefly closed for renovations. This would be trivial, if not for the recent pattern she and I had noticed.

This was the third time it had happened this month. Hammerite building projects were common, as were renovations, and it was in their style to present lengthy documentaries detailing with fervor every nuance of their plans and designs for the structure. It was something they were vividly proud of, and wished to ram down everyone’s throats. But, as in today’s notice, there had been several instances where no real information was disclosed. It simply stated that a temple or a post would be closed for renovations for a period of one or two days.

At first Sheam and I suspected that it was simply for cleaning. This was cemented by the fact that, upon visiting one of the temples in question, I noticed that it was indeed spotless. On the other hand, I had never known Hammerites to actually close a temple for any period of time, cleaning, performing maintenance, or not. That was my only indication that something was amiss until Sheam, bless her, connected it to something which could be seen as coincidental; funerals. After every one of these closings, there had been several closed casket funerals for Hammerite soldiers and priests.

In a city as dangerous as this one, funerals for those as commonly hated as the Hammerites were not unusual. Whenever the damage to the body could not be masked, they would not allow the body to be seen. These instances were very rare. Full armor was always worn by the buried, which kept its shape nicely regardless of what body parts were missing; an arm or a leg for example. For a priest, who did not wear armor, wooden props were sometimes used in the case of dismemberment. The only time the casket was not opened during the ceremony was if the head had been desecrated.

I did some checking, and found resistance. No one wanted to speak with me about it; raising the subject invoked some rather negative reactions. I did not want to press my luck, but I did find out something that gave me just enough information to put it all together. The funerals in question were all for Hammerites who worked at the temples in question. That was the solution. A temple would be mysteriously closed, with no details given as to why, after which it would be spotless, and then several closed casket funerals were conducted for men who worked at those temples.

“Why do you suppose no one is talking about this?” she ventured. “I mean, we can’t be the only two people in The City with enough brains between us to figure out what’s going on.

“Oh, I don’t know about that....Plenty around with my brains certainly, but there’s only one in this city with your wisdom.” Idle flattery maybe, but it made her smile.

"Obsessive and compulsive, maybe; I don't know about wise. I had another thought, though. If there was a battle, and they won, they would have talked about it, shouted even, and paraded their slain enemies about, even if some of theirs died. No, especially if some of theirs died. The dead would be honored as heroes, not buried quietly and kept a secret." Sheam surmised correctly.

"Which means they lost," I said, following her line of thought, "badly."

"Well, the last funeral included three soldiers. Could you win in a fight against three Hammerite soldiers?" she asked bluntly.

"I don't know if I could take on one. I know I wouldn't want to."

"There's more, hang on; let me find it." Sheam then fished around in her stack of papers, and produced another note.

"Same topic, or new?" I asked, wishing to get Hammerites off the table.

"New. While you were out another thief dropped by who wanted to sell you something. He was rather impatient and annoyed that you were not here, or rather, *could not see him*, since that's all I told him. I convinced him to make an appointment with you, but he insisted that it be done on his terms." I took the appointments book and opened it to the page marked with a ribbon, finding his entry.

"I smell coffee," I said suddenly, finally placing the odor which had been nagging at the back of my mind.

Sheam seemed to blush a little. "Sorry, I had a spill this morning. I guess I just got used to the smell."

I nodded and looked over the entry, which was written neatly and clearly, which was one of Sheam's many talents.

Ghost:

Considers himself to be a very talented grave robber.

Broke into the Alarus chamber of the "Bonehoard" and stole an artifact known as the Alarus Star.

Needs a new buyer for the artifact after the last one backed out.

Claims it's worth a large amount of gold.

Tried coming to your mansion last night, but your guards and butler turned him away.

Wants you to meet with him at the Drunken Mermaid, a bar in the South Quarter Docks at nine in the morning tomorrow, and to come alone.

Said that it was extremely urgent.

I clicked my teeth together. "I don't like meeting with shady crooks at strange bars in the slums."

Sheam nodded quietly. "I knew you were going to say that. In fact, I insisted that you would, but he insisted that you'd make an exception for *him*, and his treasure."

I frowned and shook my head. "That's a rather arrogant presumption. On the other hand, with a name like 'Ghost,' information on him shouldn't be too

hard to find. Maybe someone can persuade me that he's a safe bet. I'll have Rembrandt check Ghost out once he's done with the assassin."

Sheam frowned a little. "He seemed like just a typical rogue, not someone's hired goon, but of course I couldn't be certain. I wasn't sure about him at first, but by the time he left I had decided that he seemed a good enough sort."

I smiled at her. "You're not so generous with most people," I said.

She shrugged, but it was a smiling shrug. "He was funny. Not strange funny, but actually funny. He was rough...but I just couldn't picture a man like that being an assassin."

"I don't think there was anything particular about the assassins from last night," I said as I folded the note neatly and placed it in the to-do box. "They were thugs, either acting on their own or at the whim of their boss. They were not, and I am sure of it, professionals. As a matter of tradition professional assassins work alone, and are artists at their trade." I mulled the topic of meeting Ghost over briefly, before deciding to change my mind. "I'll have one of the team leave a message with the bartender of the Drunken Mermaid to deliver to Ghost. It will be for an appointment with me at...Sheam, when can we fit him in?"

"Just a moment," she said, vanishing back into her office for a split second before she returned with her notebook. "Not tomorrow," she mumbled, "but the day after looks good; mid afternoon, say around three?"

I nodded. "Make sure the message is delivered, and tell *him* to come alone, and *unarmed*, otherwise there will be no dealing. Then, have the messenger stick around to observe Ghost's reaction and report back here at once."

"Very wise," she remarked, as she wrote all of that down. "Consider it done," she concluded.

Then something occurred to me. "This morning, why didn't Jossimer or the guards tell me that someone came last night asking for me?"

She frowned sharply at this, but said nothing.

"Damn that man, sometimes he's a wizard, but other times, an incompetent sloth. I expected better from the guards though. On the other hand, Jyre slipped by them too..."

"Oh! Jyre!" Sheam said unexpectedly. "She was here to see you a little earlier...just before...just before you ran into Lady Dimewell. Oh no, I forgot all about her! Maybe she's still waiting outside?"

I had forgotten about her too until the talk of Ghost jogged my memory. Well, it was good that she had come to The Circle to speak with me. It was the proper way to go about it, after all. Sheam had gone out the door to go look for Jyre, and as I waited, I considered what I was going to have to say to my guards. They used to be eagle eyes, but lately they had gotten lazy. I fretted, grumbled, and thought about replacing them, but I didn't like the idea of replacing Mrs. Simon as well. How could I fire her husband and his brothers without letting her go too? No, with a little more coaching, I think I could get them back on their game.

"That's funny," Sheam said, sitting back down. "She's gone. Maybe she'll come back later," she said as she began shuffling the papers she had left on my desk.

"Oh? That's too bad. I had actually hoped she would come here and talk with me," I said, earnestly. "Jyre needs help, and I have the capacity to give it, though maybe not in the way she wants."

"Yes," Sheam said with a melancholy look on her face. "She does need help. Someone was actually asking about one of her stolen paintings this morning."

"A guest?" I asked, a bit taken aback by the coincidence.

"No," she said, again quickly sorting through a stack of paper. "A letter, an anonymous one; it asked about the first painting Jyre sold us, among others."

"Ah, right, the abstract one. I wouldn't have remembered it if the meeting with Jyre had not been so unique. I remember vividly mistaking her for a boy, and her rather curtly correcting me. I then explained that we don't hear of very many young girls as thieves, and she said it was because they never get caught!"

Sheam smiled broadly at this, but said nothing as she pulled a page from her stack. "Here it is," she muttered as she read it quickly to herself. "Have you ever heard of an art collector named Ranson?"

"No, never. It's still in lockup, isn't it? The painting I mean."

Sheam nodded. "No results yet on the ownership trace."

"Well, it looks like Jyre gave us a good lead there. Have this delivered to the research bureau." I began to quickly jot down some of the information Jyre had given me. "It's not much but it could help."

"Okay," Sheam replied, skimming my note once I handed it to her. She, in turn, handed me the note asking about The Lady's painting.

I took a deep breath and considered for a moment what this could mean. The Lady was taking a shot in the dark, I told myself. She was contacting any potential art buyers to see to whom the painting was sold. "I am afraid that there is only one person who would be interested in that painting; its previous owner."

"But who is this Ranson, esquire?" Sheam asked.

Something tugged at the corner of my mind. "Where have I heard that name before...oh, yes, of course. Ranson absolutely is an agent of the painting's original owner. It seems that Jyre was right to warn me that a very angry mistress may be trying to track it down. She very well may have saved us a good deal of trouble." I paused, and then began thinking out loud. "That note is written almost like a warning; it was not from Ranson, but about him. It could be a ruse; the pretense of a concerned third party with whom we are supposed to confide honestly in, in the case that we should have some hesitation with being directly honest with Ranson. Take permanent note of that address and send a reply saying that we have never seen any of the paintings in question."

Sheam nodded briskly and began doing as I asked.

"Keep the painting in lockup for now, until we can decide how to best

unload it. Of course, it could simply be burned. We've already established that it's worthless."

"What's going on?" she asked, becoming increasingly alarmed at my tone.

I filled her in on the correspondence I had been having with Jyre.

Several Minutes Prior

— Jyre: Barred by Doubt —

Day 2: 12:30 pm

I clutched my knees to my chest and sank to the floor, my back pressed against the wall. I had made it as far as the platform at the top of the staircase. In the next room sat Lord Thresh's secretary, smug and prudish in her dominion of this place during Thresh's absence. I had faced her many times before; each time I had come to sell a painting she always seemed to act nicely, but I could tell that she still looked down on me.

I lifted my head with a start when I heard the door to the office open. A blonde haired head popped out of the door and looked at me with gray eyes. It was her. Her slender pink lips frowned slightly, wrinkling the chin of her young face, and her brow rose a bit in the center, eyes opening wider at the sight of me huddled in a ball on the floor. I froze under her piercing gaze.

"Are you alright?" she offered in a soft, tempting voice. I did not reply. She opened the door further and let herself out. She was slender and seemed a bit rugged, but still very womanly. She reached a hand out to me, as if offering to help me up.

I didn't take it, I just started at it. Finally she took it back, though her gaze continued to pierce. I remained frozen.

She just looked at me, and frowned a little more. Her brows peaked into her forehead, sending creases up it. "You're Jyre, aren't you?"

I trembled slightly at the sound of my name. How did she know it? I had never spoken with her. Lord Thresh must have told her. I felt warmth creep back into my heart at the thought, and so I nodded slightly to her. Her frown quickly changed into a smile, a gentle one, giving her slight dimples. It was as if she knew something, a secret, and wasn't going to let on about it to anyone.

My attention was torn away from her at the sound of Lord Thresh's name. "Oh Lord Thresh! Can I call you Daelus? Oh you look simply debonair today Daelus!"

Sheam heard it too, and quickly turned her head. She gasped, and quickly moved to the top of the staircase. "Daelus," I said quietly to myself before it hit me. My heart clenched into a ball of ice as I leapt up from my place on the floor and followed Sheam to where she stood, watching something going on out in the hall at the foot of the staircase.

"How good it is to see you! I just thought I'd pop by early and maybe could get you to give me a tour of your museum? You know I just love the sound of your voice Daelus!—so charming!"

I watched, aghast, as a woman of remarkable beauty stood close, very

close, to Lord Thresh...to Daelus. She was wearing a bright red dress that expanded enormously at her hips, with a low cut collar that also revealed much of her shoulders. She was wagging her chest at him like it was a bit of meat she was presenting to a hungry dog. My stomach twisted, chills passed through me, sweat beaded on my forehead; I wanted to throw up.

I listened a bit more as Daelus began to speak to her in return, "Hello, Lady Dimewell, I—" Sheam launched forward at that point, rushing down the staircase, probably to save her beloved Daelus from that monster.

"Oh please Daelus, no need to be so formal. My name is—"

I couldn't watch at that point. I couldn't stand the sight of those two women fighting over Daelus. I clutched the letter tightly in my hands as I too ran down the staircase, slipped past them all, and was away. I wanted to tear it to shreds. Tears ran down my face as I pushed aside some wandering fool, and then tore out into the yard, and out one of the gates.

I ran away. I ran all the way back to my hideaway in the slums. I didn't care if someone saw me, mistook me for some fugitive running from guards, and started shouting. I could outrun them. Running away was something I could do very well. At least I had that.

I flung open the door to the hideaway and almost rammed my head right into the chest of Els. I narrowly avoided smashing my nose against his chain mail shirt, and jumped back. He looked down at me with bloodshot eyes, and a face red with anger. "What are you doing? Where have you been, Jyre?" he said, scolding.

I scowled and bared my teeth. "Didn't know I was a prisoner here too!" I pushed past him into the room beyond, and flung myself onto my cot, face buried in the burlap I was using as sheets.

"Jyre, don't be so damn stupid! What in the blazes have you been doing charging through the streets like that? The Lady's spies are everywhere! Do you want someone to notice you?" he shouted. "Do you know them all? Can you recognize them? Can you tell who works for her and who doesn't? If you can, maybe you can help me out, because I sure can't!"

I lifted my head and turned to face him, scowling. "I went to see him again, okay? I went even though you said not to! You can't tell me what to do!"

"Oh, so you know what's best, is that it? If you're so smart, why do you keep coming back here? Why don't you just stay out on your own in the streets! If you know how to take care of yourself so well, why do you keep bumming off me for food and shelter? Well? Why the hell did I even rescue you? Well? Answer me, damn it!"

I just pressed my head deeper into the fabric. I wasn't going to answer.

"Fine, be a worthless wretch, come and go as you please, wander the streets, make a show of yourself, get caught. And when they catch you and put you into a cage, and you start to change, start to feel your bones stretching and your skin twisting, don't call my name to come rescue you, because I'll still be out here, free, and human!" as he shouted he began to cough, his rage overflowing.

Tears silently fell from my eyes into the coarse fabric. I said nothing. That bastard, Els; he saved me from her only to imprison me here. I would show him though. I would leave again tonight, and to go Daelus's tower, and deliver the letter to him personally. I didn't care about those other women. What could they mean to him anyway? I would use the front door. Daelus was a gentleman. I knew he would keep me safe, and help me, not like this stupid guard captain Els, who only wanted to lock me up and control me. Ranson treated me better.

I stayed there in my cot until Els went into his room. I could hear him coughing. The fool had probably gone and smoked something, and now he was paying for it. Night fell, and I waited, I waited to be sure that he would be at the tower when I got there. When I felt like I could wait no more, I took my letter, and quietly let myself out of the hideaway. I heard nothing from Els's room. As silently as I could, I vanished into the night.

— **Nightfall: Reprimands** —

Day 2: 10:00 pm

I frowned as I listened to Rembrandt give his report. We were once again at our private meeting place amongst the rocks of the northern wilderness, between The City and my mansion.

"The assassin was dropped in Lord Raputo's dungeon by the Shalebridge soldiers. They didn't get anything out of him, but at least they weren't stupid enough to buy the story about you dragging them up there to kill them. He didn't name you personally, of course; if he had the soldiers may have started actually asking the right questions, and I doubt anyone wants someone like Lord Raputo knowing their business. He insisted that they were off duty guards and were just caught by surprise. That explained why they were armed to the teeth, but not why they were dressed for shadow work."

I shook my head. "So what happened to him?"

"The soldiers locked him up, but as soon as things were quiet, I paid him a little visit, and did some interrogation of my own."

I smiled at this. "Sounds good, what did you find out?"

"Well he knew he couldn't try the same bullshit with me, since I had a pretty good understanding of exactly what went on, too good, but he still lily-footed around the facts, doing a merry dance. It's pretty simple, really. Ramirez wanted to whack you but was too much of a miser to go for a professional assassin, so he pawned the job out to some of his usual goons. He saw no reason for better, really. You go about with no bodyguards, walking the streets at all hours of the night, and no one assumes that a businessman can actually fight back, no matter how intimidating they dress. Getting killed and captured, winding up in Lord Raputo's dungeon, wasn't the plan I'm sure, so from this moment on he'll be cut off."

"You didn't guide them to that conclusion, did you?"

He was taken aback, and looked a bit insulted. "Do you take me for an amateur?"

"It was everyone's first guess that they were working for Ramirez, even Mine, but I am now wondering if that isn't exactly what they want us to think. There are others aside from him whom I'd imagine want me dead."

"Yeah, you and I both; but this is Ramirez's style: overconfident and corner-cutting. Trust me. I've known him longer than you have."

I didn't like his attitude. He was arrogant, as if he couldn't possibly be wrong. He continued, "You represent the greatest obstacle to him retaking Hightowne, outside of Canard himself. You are also the weakest. He figured a swift hit would do the job. Simple."

"Yes, simple," I responded, thinking that things could not be that simple. I went on. "I'll talk with Lord Canard about this tomorrow. I have another thing I'd like you to look into, Rembrandt."

He shrugged. "As long as it's not Hammerites, and assuming there's plenty of coin for me involved, I am at your service."

"What do you know about a grave robber named Ghost? He visited The Circle today, wanted to sell me something, but also wanted me to meet with him in the South Quarter Docks district, at the Drunken Mermaid Pub, tomorrow at nine exactly, and to come alone."

"Ghost, yeah, that rings a bell. Grave robber now is it? If memory serves he's just your average scoundrel; burglar, murderer, cutthroat, but no assassin. Is that why you're asking me about him?"

"I thought I made that clear; he wanted a private meeting with me. In light of the recent assassination attempt, I thought I'd play it safe."

"Ah, Master Nightfall plays it safe," he said, and then gave a little chuckle.

"What?" I asked, a bit annoyed.

"Well the only problem I could see is a conflict of reputations. Word has it on the streets that you're a Hammerite collaborator, and that he's a Hammerite...ah, well; let's just say they've come to blows."

"Not on good terms, are they? They don't usually like people breaking into their mausoleums."

"Not just that; he's a Hammerite murderer, and in cold blood no less, maybe even for sport."

"Very interesting," I said, after a pause. "In that case maybe I should stay away from him."

"Why, because your poo smells of Hammerite? I wouldn't worry about it. Look, either you can go around being afraid that every thief who tries to do business with you is out to stab you in the back for being a red-coat bedmate, or you can give up on the whole 'patron saint of thieves' thing."

I was growing more annoyed at Rembrandt by the moment. "Thanks for the advice," I said facetiously.

"Don't mention it. So do you want me to get some dirt on this Ghost character, or not?"

I did not reply at once, because I was musing over a shortlist of possible replacements for him. He was just an independent agent; a fact-finder by trade, and by no means a permanent element in the organization. I had to keep reminding myself that when I dealt with him. "Yes, do it. I'd like to

know for certain, one way or another.”

He snorted. “Bet my girlfriend’s forgotten what I look like. Right then, Nightfall, goodnight.”

We went our separate ways, just like last night, and I continued on to my mansion. At the gate I met my guards, but this time I greeted them first. “Evening Gispa, Medan,” I said in a slightly solemn tone. They greeted me in return, and then I cut to the chase. “I heard that I had a visitor during the early morning hours last night. Why wasn’t I told of this when I departed this morning?”

They blinked and looked sheepish. “Begging your pardon, Master,” Medan began, “Jossimer told us to not mention a word of it to the master.” Gispa gave a sheepish nod of confirmation. “But we showed him our swords, wasn’t a way we were going to let him through. He looked like a sour villain, and crazy too, insisted that he had to see you like it was desperate. Life and death he said!”

I shook my head, not accepting this. “Since when does Jossimer tell you two what to do? Is he the lord of this tower now?”

“Uh,” they said in unison, but I did not give them a chance to formulate a reply.

“Because if he was, I can assure you that he would not treat you as kindly as I have always done. But from the looks of things, you seem to prefer him as a lord over myself, so maybe I should begin acting more like him?”

One of them started to laugh, but then stopped when he saw the look on my face.

“You two will be assigned to interior patrols. Tell Jarah and Filburt that they’ll be stationed at the front gate until further notice.”

They nodded quickly in reply. “Yes Master,” and then moved to go to the front door without a breath of protest.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I asked, staring them down with displeasure.

They just looked at one another.

“Who is going to guard the gate if you both go inside?”

I scolded them a bit more than I would have liked, but they had it coming. I had gotten too soft on them all; too comfortable, but that had to change. I could no longer afford the laxness which anonymity afforded me. Medan accompanied me to the front door and the other stayed behind, to be relieved by his brother shortly. He unlocked the door for me sheepishly and let me inside. Jossimer was there waiting for me.

“I see my duty of opening the door for you is now also unneeded,” he said dryly.

I caught in the corner of my eye a glimpse of Medan silently warning Jossimer that I was in a very bad mood, which for an instant halted me from tearing into Jossimer. Jossimer took note, and then archived whatever it was he was about to say next for possible later use, and instead offered to take my hat, cloak, and stick. Medan slid by silently as he did this. I waited while Jossimer put my things away without uttering another word.

Finally I said, "Jossimer, the guards at the gate tell me you instructed them to keep quiet about a guest late last night. Why is this?"

His face twisted slightly into the makings of a disrespectful expression. "Instructed to keep quiet? The simpletons! I informed them that they need not waste your time in the morning with such trivialities, for I planned on informing you myself. I know how you are always in a rush at dawn. However this morning you were in such a rush not even I had time to inform you of our late night guest. You were quite spry, as I recall, especially for a man who sustained such injuries as you apparently possessed last night. Are you feeling better, sir?"

"I am not certain what you believe constitutes adequate opportunity to inform me of vital information, but the full three seconds during which I took my hat, coat, and walking stick from you constitutes an eternity of silence."

He seemed to stiffen and his chin seemed to grow larger as I said this. The expression on his face faded into his usual dour expression. "You are correct, sir. That would have been the appropriate time. I shall make note to adequately fill this span with any useful information which strikes me. I trust you shall also do the same?"

At first I thought it was just his usual impudence, but then it occurred to me what he was getting at. "Yes, quite an appropriate time for the exchange of information," I remarked evenly. "You are aware of the attempt upon my life, are you not?"

"Only second hand, sir. I would consider that to be very important information to convey to your major domo," he replied coldly. "I trust in the future we will both be more attentive at conveying to the other pertinent information, so that I may best do my job. Master." he gave a little bow.

"Go on," I said, expecting him to know what I meant.

He stiffened a little, and flared his nostrils. "He wore leather armor, with at least a half dozen daggers on his belt. It looked as if there was blood on his face and clothing. Splatters. Most disturbing. The guardsmen were doing their job well, I commended them. It was clear to us all that he was up to no good. He was crazed, had a panic about him, a certain hostile desperation I'd say."

He sounded like a typical grave robber, and Jossimer had a habit of driving perfectly mild mannered individuals into a state of hostile desperation. On the other hand, the guards didn't like the look of him either. Sheam, Rembrandt, and my staff were painting different pictures of this Ghost. I was worried that Sheam saw what he wanted her to see, Rembrandt knew only what others thought of him, and my guards and Jossimer saw what they were afraid of seeing. The tricky thing was that I trusted Sheam's judgment over all of the others.

I nodded to Jossimer, and said, "Thank you. I look forward to our future talks."

He bowed once more and then promptly vanished; off to do whatever it was he did when I wasn't looking. That had actually gone far better than I had wanted it to. I was of a mind to sack the lot of them, but temperance and

reason had gotten the better of me in each case. Maybe now Jossimer would stop complaining that he didn't have enough to do, too. Reassignment of the gate guard position was hardly a punishment; none of them liked that post; but I needed fresh, alert eyes up front, and those two, even though they seemed to have the best vision of the bunch, had gotten lazy.

As the night wore on I found myself tired, and out of sorts. I finished my dinner slowly and then decided to spend some time in the den with a book.

— Jyre: Barred by Doubt, Continued —

Day 2: 11:00 pm

With every step I took, I felt more and more like I should turn back. I had to press on, though. I had to show Els that I was worth something. I would get Lord Thresh's help, and then Els would have to apologize to me. He would see that I did have a plan, that I wasn't worthless, and that I could get things done. Soon I would have my revenge. Yes, it would be my revenge, not Els's. He wouldn't get the satisfaction, because he'd have just sat around in our little hideaway brooding, while I was out here doing the real work.

With that thought, my conviction grew, and I pressed on, step, after step, after step, up to the tower gate, until finally the two guards saw me, and I knew there was no turning back. Alarmingly, they did not shout out, nor did they draw their swords, they just stood and waited for me there. I knew then that I was going to be turned away, so I might as well get on with it. I approached slowly, until I finally stood before them.

"What's your business, lass?" one of them asked. He was large, and had a stupid look on his face.

"I'm here to see Lord Thresh," I muttered back to him, my eyes downcast.

"Speak up lass; I don't have ears in my toes. What's your business?"

The other guard laughed. He was large too, and had an even stupider look on his face. I wanted to shrink away. "I am here to see Lord Thresh," I said, a little louder.

"Well no kidding," he said. "People don't come here to see Jossimer, now do they?" And now he started to laugh.

"On now, Filburt, stop joshing her, treat her fair."

I kept my chin down so he could not see the intense frown upon my face and the trembling of my eyes. "I want to give him a letter."

"Ah, messenger then. Or is the letter from you?"

"It's from...no, I am a messenger, just a messenger." Maybe now they'd think it was something important, rather than just a stupid letter from a stupid little girl. Stupid guards.

"Alright then lass, go on up to the front door, and don't tarry."

I didn't reply, just waited for him to open the gate, and scuttled in. I almost ran to the front door at that point, but that would have looked foolish. I just walked very quickly. It felt like the hard part was over, until I actually got to the front door, and then I felt like the hard part was right in front of me; I had to knock. "He wanted me to use the front door," I

whispered to myself, and then stood there.

A moment passed as I just stared at the door. It was brown, and had a good grain to it, perpendicular to the ground. I thought I could hear the two guards behind me talking, maybe wondering what I was doing. I looked like a stupid scared little brat. I had to knock, or leave. I had to do what I had planned to do, and not just run away. I was going to put the letter into Daelus's hand.

I knocked. A moment passed and nothing happened. Reluctantly, and with my hand shaking, I gave another knock. I knew what was wrong; my knocks were so weak, no one would ever hear them.

I leapt in fright when I noticed one of the guards behind me. I was sure that he was angry, and was going to chase me off. Instead he just went to the door as I shrunk away, and hit a small ivory button on the side of the door, which caused a long elaborate chime to echo inside. He winked at me, and went back the way he came. I felt pathetic. Why hadn't I noticed that there was a doorbell?

A moment passed, and then I heard the door being unbolted. My eyes went to my feet again, and I clutched the note in my hands. The door slid open.

"What business calls at this hour? Yes, who is—" a voice came from the door, one totally unlike Daelus's, which stopped abruptly. My eyes darted up in shock, and I found myself looking at an ugly gaunt old man dressed in a tight white and black outfit, and square spectacles. He was balding, but with wispy white hair spilling over onto the shoulders of his black coat. He had a very large nose, with grotesque yellow hair jutting out of it. His chin was almost as large as his nose, but maybe that was just because he was frowning so deeply, I couldn't tell where his nose ended and his upper lip began. "What are you about?" he continued with a disgusted tone.

I just stood there in astonishment for a moment, thinking, how could such a horrible man have anything to do with Daelus? "I-I-I—" was all that came out of my mouth.

"Yes, yes, yes, you, you, you." He remarked impatiently. "Again, I ask, what business have you? Don't just stand there stammering. You're letting the insects in." His voice was harsh, and squeaky, like fingernails on a chalkboard.

I wanted to clutch my hands over my ears, but instead I stretched out a shaky hand which held the letter. "I...have this for him..." I muttered quietly, trembling.

Without warning, his hand swooped out and grabbed the letter away from me, like a hawk snatching up a field mouse. I jumped back with a start, aghast at what he had done.

"Yes, message delivered, now off with you, and don't bother me about a tip for your services. I didn't ask for this letter to be delivered, now did I?"

"But I..." was all that could come out, my eyes still stretched wide with shock. The door slammed in my face.

I don't know what came over me, but I let out a cry like the trickster

himself had leapt from my breast. "Bastard!"

I sank to the ground and wept. First the tower, then the awful reply, then the awful women at the circle, then his guards laughed at me, and now his awful, awful doorman had been a complete and utter pompous ass.

I nearly shrieked when I suddenly felt a hand pat down on my shoulder. I tumbled away, ramming my forehead on the brickwork at the foot of the door. When I realized what had happened, my heart leapt, and I turned myself back over to look and see who had patted my shoulder, hoping against hope to see Daelus's gentle smile.

No, it was just the guard from before, who was making fun of me. "Whoa there, hang on now lass, no need to jump, I just wanted to check and make sure you were okay.

"Leave it to Jossimer to make a little girl cry," the other guard remarked with a chuckle. "You're right, he is a right bastard, and he's got a stick up his ass so far, he's got the taste of oak in his throat."

I scrambled up to my feet and ran back down the steps as fast as I could, nearly slipping into a tumble several times, away from the guards, away from that doorman, and away from Daelus. I didn't know where I was going, but I sure wasn't going back to Els either.

— **Nightfall: The Second Letter** —

Day 2: 11:15 am

My reading was interrupted by Jossimer. He approached slowly, knocking on the doorframe as he entered. "Sir," he said, "a rather disgusting waif rudely dropped off this letter at the front gate. Shall it be disposed of, sir?"

I looked up at him from the work of fiction I was reading; a fantastic tale of a knight who sought to make peace between the feuding goblins and trolls of the mountains, and gave him an expectant look, thinking that this had better be good. Strange how the room was emptier when he was in it. He held up the letter between his thumb and forefinger, as if he did not wish to touch it for fear of catching some disease. I reached out to take it from him, and set my book aside. It was another letter from Jyre. Well, at least she delivered it properly this time. I would have preferred to deal with it during my hours at The Circle, but I supposed this was a good step.

"It should be noted, Sir, that Jarah and Filburt seem to have dealt with their first event as front gate guards as would be expected." I looked up at him out of the corner of my eye, wondering if he was actually trying to be nice about his coworkers, or if some mean-spirited punch line was coming. "Will that be all, sir?" Jossimer asked quietly.

I looked away, and said, "Yes, thank you Jossimer." He bowed and walked off.

I read the letter slowly this time, interested to see if she was going to make more sense upon her second correspondence.

Lord Thresh,

You do not understand! The Lady she is rich and powerful in The City! She is feared! Hated! Listen to the shadows. Here there moans. Listen in the streets. Here her praise. But there is a weakness we can find it. Revenge was my word, but she deserves it!

My people do suffer. My village was taken by her! They were made slave! They need our help!

Weeks ago we did sneak and stole from The Lady. She fears she has links to dark ones. We saw proof. We did search every hall and garden. My heart did pound. My fingers did sweat. I always feared we were seen, but we were never seen.

We want revenge in this way to bring her downfall. Then she will be beggar. She will starve! The picture is sweet to me. But do not judge me bad. I do not seek her death. Never.

She has this villa in the woods. We will go there tomorrow to see what is there to find. This is our final chance. After this, dead end.

Your faithful servant, Jyre

I rubbed my eyes. The letter made me even wearier. So, her people had been enslaved by this lady? It was strange that she hadn't mentioned this in the first place. I would have thought that it should have been the first thing on her mind. I would have to ask her more about that.

Skepticism prevented me from taking the comments about The Lady being in league with 'dark ones' too seriously. If her captain had actually said that, it could have just been to scare her. After all, they had found no proof; or had they? What was the captain looking for, and why did he drag this girl along with him?

Her plans for revenge were indeed ambitious, and I could see why she would want to get my help for such a thing, as it would be impossible for her to do anything like this alone with the captain. On the other hand, though she did seem to want me to help her with this revenge, she never did ask me to do anything specific. She spoke of plans, but never how she wished for me to be a part of them. I felt as if she was more interested in commiseration and encouragement than actual help.

Someone was trying to track her down. That much I suspected. If it was Ranson alone, then I wouldn't mind leaving him a trail of breadcrumbs leading to an even worse fate than he had planned for Jyre. If it was The Lady, and she was just using Ranson's name because of the weight it held, or as a decoy, then I would try my best to protect Jyre and her captain, but not at the risk of the organization, or The Circle, or The Cause. On the other hand, I had not completely ruled out that engaging this Lady and overturning her would not in fact be in the best interests of the organization...or The Circle...or The Cause. At that thought I mused; how long would I continue to think of those three as separate entities?

I found myself writing out a letter before I had even realized what it meant. It meant that I was taking Jyre's warnings seriously, as a matter of habit. When I had finished the letter to Sheam I called Jossimer to have it delivered immediately.

At that, I returned to my book.

— Sheam: Tracking Changes —

Day 3: 1:00 am

I was not yet asleep when the electrical buzzer sounded, along with the flashing light. There was an urgent message. I had been tossing and turning, restless, but with no real reason why. I welcomed the excuse to get out of bed and tiptoe over the cold stone floor, traipsing nakedly through the halls and up the staircases, guided by dim lights, secure behind locked doors, intruding only on the playtime of the spirits and mythical sprites who bounced and scurried into their hiding places as I past. A letter from Daelus was waiting.

Sheam, please have The Lady's painting taken out of lockup, packaged, and discreetly have it delivered to my mansion as soon as possible. I've decided it will be safer kept in my personal vault. I have this funny premonition that it's not as worthless as we first suspected. Even if I'm wrong, it's not like this is going to waste us any money.

~ D

I shrugged, and decided on a whim to take care of this now rather than wait until morning. Maybe afterwards I'd be able to sleep. I quickly went back down to my chambers, dressed, and got to work.

The lockup was on the far side of the basement from my quarters. In it were boxes of stolen goods which were waiting for recognition, inspection, and clarification before either being sold, put on display, or dealt with as if one had picked up a burning bit of iron with one's bare hands.

It only took a moment for me to locate the painting. It was already packaged, since we hadn't done anything with it since we had it carted to the assessor and he carted it right back. I hauled it upstairs, attached a delivery order to it, and placed it on the platform for delivery before the sun came up. The whole thing had taken far less time than I had hoped it would, so when I returned to the lockup to double-check and make sure I had relocked it, which I had, I found myself unlocking it again and going back inside. I still didn't feel like sleeping, and somehow I got a thrill from breaking into these crates to see what was inside. They were in my home, after all, so why shouldn't I?

I looked about idly for a minute or two, trying to decide where to sate my curiosity this night. Having made up my mind, I pushed away some cobwebs, which seemed to be able to manifest themselves in a matter of hours on anything, and opened a fresh box. Inside, settled in with some hay, was a

bronze choker. Under it was a note written in my hand. It was a surreal moment, seeing a document written by me, which I had no memory of, about something I had never seen. It read,

Item: Bronze Circlet

Brought in by: Anonymous.

Purchased for: 100 Gold

Notes: Reported to be magical, wearing changes appearance of wearer—untested.

Then it all came back to me. How could I forget writing a note like that? So-called 'anonymous' was, as Daelus told me, one of the so-called Citizen Tevka's men. Tevka was a rather nasty thieves guild boss up in the North Quarter. I gave a little laugh, finding it funny that the guy who sold it thought it was a circlet, when it was obviously a choker. Daelus probably didn't catch it either.

It was true though, it hadn't been tested. That was only because until now, I hadn't gotten my hands on it. I guess no one bought the story, since no one had tried to check it out yet, and it had been a while; long enough for me to forget all about it. I remembered burning with curiosity, and now I burned anew. I pulled it from the hay and ran to my bed chambers, and my mirror.

"Magical," I said as I unlocked it and allowed it to swing open. It was made from long, smooth beads, about a dozen in total, which gave it the look of a segmented circle of bronze. Then I wondered if putting it on was such a good idea. What if it was cursed, trapped, or poisoned? I had never dealt with magic in my life. Well, not really. Not like this.

I set it down on my dresser and stared at it. Open, it was a broken circle, hinged between every segment so it could easily open wide enough to fit around the neck. The delicate clasp at the front was easy enough to open while I wasn't wearing it. I was sure I could still undo it while I had it on. I was no stranger to jewelry, after all, not that I wore it that often. I touched it, running my finger along the bronze sections lightly. It felt so benign, so mundane. I imagined the worst thing that could happen if I put it on was that I'd look a little silly. Okay, I'd probably look ridiculous.

No one was here to see me though. "Taff it," I uttered, lifting it from the dresser and bringing it to my neck. It closed easily. It was not uncomfortable; it was loose, a bit too big for my slender neck, and so it rested on my collar bones, more like a necklace than a choker. It was made for a guy, I reasoned, which was also why it was bronze rather than something more attractive. I looked into the mirror above my dresser, and saw that I looked the same, though I was wearing a bronze segmented necklace. It would have looked better in silver. At least I didn't look silly.

"Magical," I said with a disappointed puff. It constricted, drawing itself tight around my neck. I bit back the startled scream and quickly pushed open the clasp and pulled it off, sending it crashing down to the floor.

I rubbed my neck, feeling my heart race. I was glad to be free of it, but my

fear quickly gave way to curiosity. "You are magical," I whispered, stooping down to pick it up. I did what I knew I had to do; I put it back on. There was no shock or sudden tightening. It fit snug, like a choker should, and yet I still looked the same. Well, not totally the same; I was now wearing a bronze segmented choker. It looked better as a choker than a necklace, I thought. It was more regal. It didn't look so bad in bronze to me anymore, though I'd have to wear something other than the yellow dress I had on now with it.

I looked at myself in the mirror, turning my head this way and that, inspecting how it looked from each angle. Maybe it was for a man, but it still looked rather good on me. I could get away with wearing something of a darker color with it, something sturdier than a yellow dress. It would also have helped if it was a darker shade of bronze, or more greenish.

I hadn't had to move it into place, it seemed to know exactly where it wanted to fit, and did do without shifting around even as I ran my fingers along the side of it, going from segment to segment, until I came to the one to the right of the clasp. I pinched and turned it, rotating it around the cord within.

With great expectations fulfilled, and an odd lack of surprise, I watched my skin tone shift from pink to cream, and finally to pure white. I supposed that my hand had been guided by the magic of the device, a sort of built in instructions manual. Then I supposed that it had been my mind, rather than my hand, that was guided by the magic. Though the thought of a magical device affecting my mind worried me, it didn't make me want to take the thing off. I spun the segment the other direction, and watched in amazement as I tanned, turned brown, and then finally became blacker than I had ever seen a human being be. I looked like a pair of eyes and lips hanging in a sea of darkness. Forget disguises, this thing would be a miracle for hiding in shadows; shadows dark enough, that is.

I realized you'd have to keep your eyes closed though, and hair would be a problem. Shaving your head and going around naked would work, but of course my lips hadn't changed completely pitch black, and I saw that my palms had not either. I figured other parts of my body were probably still brownish color, and quickly gave up that idea. I resisted the urge to check and see.

I went, ran even, to my desk at the other side of my bedroom, and fetched out a sheet of parchment and my quill. I brought them back to my dresser and the mirror, and began to write.

Catalog of magical effects of bronze choker

— Segments numbered starting from clasp end going to loop end.

— 1st: UP: skin grows lighter – DOWN: skin grows darker.

Note; impossible to make body entirely black.

I could barely write my hand was shaking with so much excitement. After I finished my scrawl, I returned the first segment to its original position, trying to get my skin tone back to normal. Then I held my breath, and turned

the next link. I watched as my cheeks and neck thinned, and my eyes sunk. The choker tightened to match the thinning of my neck, but this time I was not startled, because though I could see it tightening in the mirror, and indeed felt it move under my hand, I didn't actually feel it moving around my neck. As I watched, I grew thin as a skeleton, a scary sight to be sure; I still felt the same, not weak or frail or indeed any lighter than I had been.

I turned it the other way, and watched as I became normal again, and then watched as my cheeks filled in, and my chin became two, and then three, and then several dozen. I glanced down at myself once more, and saw that I had put on over a hundred pounds at least. Thankfully I still felt the same; I imagined that being this fat must feel horrible, at least as horrible as being as skinny as I was a moment ago. That's when another shocking revelation came. I hadn't noticed it before, when I became skinny, but now it was shockingly evident. Not only had the choker changed size to match the change in body volume, but my clothes had as well. What had been a rather attractive yellow dress for a woman my size, looked wholly preposterous for a woman of my new size. At least it hadn't constricted around me as I inflated, or I'd be dead right now.

Unwilling to see myself as massive for another instant, I pulled the choker off and watched myself instantly return to my true appearance. I was slightly dismayed to see that I was a tad curvier and not so fair skinned as I had remembered. I might have to keep this thing on. I wrote,

— 2nd: UP: weight loss – DOWN: weight gain.

Note: clothing automatically changes size to fit wearer, though results may be unfavorable.

I thought about adding a note to explain that you needed to put the clothes on before changing your weight, but felt that extra study was needed to fully understand the mechanics of this, and I didn't feel like doing that now, so I just forgot about it.

I put the choker back on, and resumed my study. The next one adjusted my age. I noticed that it too effected the size of my clothing, and found myself laughing at I shrunk below the height of my dresser, so that I could no longer see myself in the mirror. My room, which now appeared to be a huge empty space, was a great place to run around in. I also thought that my yellow dress looked particularly cute on a toddler, especially one that was laughing hysterically after I had backed far enough away from the dresser to see my little self. After I had returned myself to my true age, or close enough to it anyway, I wrote down the effects, and made note that voice will change with age. Turning the segment the other way, I found that I could not bring myself to explore what I would look like beyond what I hoped was fifty, but feared was forty. It's just a simulation, I told myself, trying to believe that the thing couldn't actually predict what I'd look like in old age.

I continued, cataloging the effects of each segment, as well as any quirks I found. I found segments that altered my height, musculature, bone structure,

sharpness or roundness of my facial features, the size of my breasts (I wondered what effect that one would have on men), and the color of my hair and eyes. The second to last changed my skin texture, shifting it from what looked like smooth wax, all the way to what looked like mud soaked tree bark.

Then I came to the last one, and with great expectations, and a bit of a melancholy that my adventure was almost over, I tried to turn it. It wouldn't move at all upwards, it seemed to be already at the maximum in that setting. Slowly, I rotated it downwards. I watched in morbid fascination as I died, and began to rot. As I reached the end of the rotation, I became nothing more than a dusty skeleton. I tried to speak, but heard only the rattling of air passing through old bones. It was amazing.

Feeling a little sick to my stomach, in spite of my fascination, I pulled the thing off, and found that I was alive once more. I tried to turn the segment back to its original position, and found that I could not. It was already there. I recorded my findings, and then put the choker back on.

I spent the rest of the hour experimenting with it, seeing what sort of effects I could create by combining the individual settings. I even tried to make myself look as close to various people I knew, trying to recall as best as I could their appearance. I found that it wasn't so easy; as a person's physical characteristics are made up of far more than just variations of bodily proportions. While it wouldn't let me pass off as anyone else, it would of course still be great for disguises. I could have played with it all night long, but I saw that it was getting very late, or early, and decided it would be best for me to get some sleep.

I didn't return the choker to the lockup, though. I wasn't done with it yet. I slipped it into my dresser before getting back to bed.

— Jyre: Els's Punishment —

Day 3: 8:00 am

Dawn had come and went, and with it, my determination to make it out on my own. My anger for Els had been replaced with remorse, and a sullen realization that he probably had a good reason for yelling at me. Weary and hungry, I quietly unlocked and pushed open the door to my hideaway...to Els's hideaway.

Part of me wanted him to be there, so we could make up, but mostly I didn't feel like dealing with it right now. After spending the night in the streets, something I was no stranger to, I yearned for my cot, blanket, and something to eat.

It was very quiet inside, a silence ruptured by the clack as I bolted the door lock behind me. It was very still in the room, so still that the only movement I could detect was the dust motes dancing in the sunlight which poured through the cracked shutters. I was certain that I had to be alone.

I opened up the cupboard at the command of my unhappy belly, looking for something sweet in a sealed jar. Els had indeed gotten more food, as the

cupboard was now filled with various tins and sacks. I wasn't interested in any of it though. I reached for the raspberry preserves, but then remembered Els sticking his fingers in it. I changed my mind, and went for the blueberry instead. They were expensive, but once opened, they would go bad in a week or so, so there was no sense in trying to make them last.

Just then, I heard the sound of coughing from the next room. It wasn't a casual cough; it was a deep painful cough. Startled, I dropped the jar onto the counter, which landed with a teeth clenching bang. Silence followed. I turned my head slowly to look at the closed inner door.

"Jyre?" called a raspy voice.

I nearly ran for the outer door to escape back into the streets, but something made me stop. Els had been right; I couldn't go to Thresh. I had been blind not to see that. Rather than trying to work with Els, and trust him, I had run off to pursue an unreasonable dream. Head hung, I shuffled into the next room to face Els, and whatever scolding awaited me.

He was sitting at the table, with his head resting sideways on the wooden planks. When I got closer I saw that his mouth was open, and there were streams of liquid dripping down his cheek. His skin was the color of moldy bread. His face twisted in pain as he coughed some more with little flecks of spittle shooting out to join the others. He lifted his head slowly, eyes unable to focus on me. "It's begun," he wheezed.

"Els!" I cried weakly and rushed to his side, trying uselessly to support him with my slight form. His weight hurt my shoulder, and the gray stubble on his face hurt my hand as I tried to lift his head. I don't know what I was trying to do. I just wanted to help him. "Els, what happened? Are you sick?"

"No, not sick. Poisoned."

"What? No! Els, throw it up!"

"Can't. It's not poison like that."

"How did it happen? Who did this to you?"

"I'm sorry, Jyre," he uttered, "I...wasn't honest with you before."

I trembled and shook him, frightened, "Els...what...what happened? Was it her? Did she find you?" Unable to support his weight any longer, I gently lowered him back to the table, so he could rest.

"Yes...the other night, I...Jyre, I saw her."

Though my heart pounded with fury, I could feel my face and hands go cold. "Els," I murmured, putting both of my small hands over his.

He was quiet for several minutes, just breathing, just trying to stay still. Finally, he spoke. "I didn't wait for you last night, like I said I did. In fact, I left early so you couldn't follow. I didn't want you in danger. I went back to the wrecked factory...the one she turned into some type of temple. Do you remember it, Jyre?"

I nodded, and the memories of that awful place flooded back to me. From the outside, it seemed just like a dark abandoned building. It was sealed, and very hard to get inside. We knew she had claimed it. I remembered the old machines that had been painted with blood in all sorts of symbols. I remembered seeing all of those skeletons with the skulls smashed in by

rocks. "Why would you go back there? There was nothing there but death."

"I thought there must be something there...some clue. Before when we saw...we ran, we never looked. I had to go look."

"Tell me what happened," I said slowly, though I really wished he wouldn't.

"They caught me. She was there. Jyre, she's here, in The City, right now. She was...unhappy." He lapsed into a coughing fit, so deep and brutal that it made me hurt just watching him. I clutched his hands tighter, helpless.

"The Lady had plans for all of us," he said finally. "Back before, it might have been a choice, but things got harder for her in recent years. Same with all of the old cults. A city dweller like me...who moved into the woods...didn't hold as much favor with her as some of the others. At Barlosk I was made a captain over other...city dwellers...but we weren't going to be shamans or shape shifters or one of her skin-takers. We were just for the experiments.

"Spells were cast, rituals were done. It was never clear what she or her shamans were doing to us, but I knew it had to be something awful. We were told that it was going well, always going well. Something about...being reborn her children. It made my blood chill. It was never finished, there was always more to do.

"That was what you were seeing and hearing in the dark of the lower floors. That's what I was trying to shield you from."

I sat beside him listening, soaking in what he had to say. He had never spoken of this before, and though it was an awful topic, I had always wanted to know. "Thank you," I said to him quietly, reaching up to stroke the thinning sandy hair above his forehead.

"Last night, when I broke back into the factory," he paused here, taking a deep breath, "I found it not so empty. There was a lower floor, and then another, and the deeper I went, the louder the sounds got. I came to the lowest floor, and I saw them. I knew some...others I thought I did, but it was hard to tell through the...face paintings and piercing...mutilations. Others looked barely human. The arms and fingers were longer, and the face jutted out further than it should for a man.

"Then...I saw her, real as anything. I almost leapt from where I hid to cut her throat! That would've been stupid though, I had to escape with my proof for it to be any good. It was only when I tried to move from my hiding place that they caught me. I was unwilling to test the sting of their blades, so I gave myself up. I thought maybe I could talk with her, reason with her."

"Reason with her?" I said, astonished. "Els?"

"I did it before, Jyre. I was a captain of her guard, remember? But I reasoned over other lives then, not my own."

I kept quiet and let him go on.

"She remembered me from years ago. She looked angrier than I had ever seen her before, but I didn't know if she was angry at me, or just angry.

"She asked me why I never...why I left...and I told her the truth...that I didn't want to be part of her experiments...that I wanted to protect you from them as well. She said the experiments were complete, a success, and it

would be best if she finished with me, otherwise dire things would happen.”

“Els, what did she do to you?” I uttered, barely a whisper.

“I just told her no, I was a free man now, and I wouldn’t have her rituals or dark arts. She told me to stay away from the city folk...and the Hammerheads...and then they set me loose. They didn’t lay a finger on me.”

“But Els...they must have!”

“A curse,” he replied, “She said dire things would happen, and they are happening. She’s punishing me. She knows what was in my heart. Jyre, I was going to go to *them*. I was going to betray her to the Hammerites!”

I pulled my hands away and stood up, shocked at what he said. “Els, we agreed...”

“Jyre, don’t you see? It’d be so simple! I’ve proof she’s a pagan! All I’ve to do is give the Hammerites the map, tell them to go to the old factory or the villa and they would see for themselves!”

“But they would *kill* her!” I shouted. “They would kill them all!”

“What is it with you and that?” He demanded, though he began to cough. “You may have been able to sway me before—so noble your love of life...refusal to kill—but after seeing what I saw down there fresh...knowing beyond a doubt that she is responsible—there is no doubt in my mind that the only thing that can be done is to destroy it all! Jyre, she’s not human!”

I didn’t answer him. I just looked at the floor. I couldn’t believe what he had been planning to do. The Hammerites were worse than she was. How could he go to them for help against her? How could he even consider it? How could he dream it? Was this the Els I knew?

“Jyre, please listen to me. You have to go to them instead of me.”

“No Els,” I said firmly. “I would rather *die* than go to the Hammerites. They are wicked, wicked men.”

“I’m not arguing with you, Jyre. You know what I believe. I just...I can’t stand the thought of her being allowed to continue with this,” he said, his voice turning harsh. “She’s a *witch*, Jyre. No more talk, I *know* what I saw!” As his anger mounted he began to cough again, one arm gripping his chest and the other covering his mouth. It was just like it had been before.

“And what about us? We have her markings on us. They’d kill us too!”

He tried to say something through his coughs, but didn’t get much out. I went back to him, put one arm around his shoulder and the other on his hand. As bad as this was, I knew that the Hammerites would do worse things to us if I went to them. They wouldn’t care that I was turning her in; I was once one of them. I had to be *purified*.

My mind was made up; I would not go to the Hammerites. However, I did change my mind about one thing. This was the same Els. He was just sick, his mind clouded with fear and hatred for her. Her dark curse had poisoned more than his body. He needed my help. Lifting the curse or the poison or whatever it was she did to him was more important right now than our revenge. “You’re going to be okay, Els, I’ll get help, I’ll find a doctor...”

He managed to stop the coughs, and then said weakly, “I didn’t want to get him involved. He’s a friend. He didn’t want to get mixed up in this anymore

but...but..." He started to choke, and heave, and blood spat out of his mouth. I again took a step back, feeling nauseous at the sight. "Jyre, get me my paper and charcoal."

I quickly did so, and brought it over to him. He hastily sketched out a map and then wrote down an address, and then quickly pushed it into my hand. "Take it, it's an address, of a friend, a doctor, he may be able to help...Go, Jyre, please, get him..."

I nodded, and closed my eyes shut, not wanting to see him like this. "I...I'm sorry for running away," I managed meekly. If I hadn't run away, I could have been here for him; I could have gone for help before he had gotten too bad. I could have done something. But no, I was off chasing after nonsense, and now he could die!

He spoke quietly, laying his head back on the table. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, Jyre. I just don't want anything to happen to you. You're the only one I can trust. Don't let her get to you. She'll do this to you too."

"I won't fail you, Els," I insisted, placing both my hands over his, and squeezing, before dashing out the door. It would take me maybe an hour to get to the address in question. I just hoped that this doctor friend of Els would hear me out. I couldn't stand to lose Els. The thought made me quiver and shake, and be sick. He was the only person who had ever shown me genuine kindness, and now I was going to lose him. No, I was not, I would run like the wind, and get help, and Els was going to be fine.

The journey seemed to take forever. I ran until my legs were burning, so then I walked until I felt like I could run again. I sprinted through back alleys, shoved my way through crowded streets and plazas, and took shortcuts through narrow cracks and by leaping fences. Exhausted, I finally realized I was almost there.

Things were nicer in this part of town. The streets were not so narrow, and the buildings not so tall. This was Newmarket, I thought, or at least close to it. The name didn't matter; I was just following the directions Els gave me on the note. I double checked the building number before knocking. This time there was no hesitation, no trepidation. I had to save Els.

A man answered the door to find me staring wide eyed up at him. He was a large person with dark skin, and tattoos around his eyes. Bushy black hair covered his head and came around to cover his chin in a beard. He looked like a wild man from the woods, but was dressed like a gentle city dweller. "Yes?" he said in a deep voice.

"Do you know Els?" I said, still panting for breath after the run. "He's sick, he said you can help!"

He blinked, and paused for a moment... "Sick how?"

I caught my breath and swallowed hard. "*Poison*. He said she did it... something about changing!"

A look of death came upon the man's face. "You must be Jyre."

"Who cares?" I barked. "All that matters is *Els*. You've got to save him!"

He glanced all around past me, into the streets, and then leaned forwards a little, whispering to me. "Listen very carefully, little one. Were you

followed here?"

"What?" I stammered, shocked at the question. "No!"

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Why does it matter? You've got to come now or he'll die!"

He said something that I didn't understand, and then said, "Wait here." He vanished back into his apartment. I had nothing to do but wait. I supposed he was going to get his medicine. With horror I imagined returning to the hideaway to find Els dead in a pool of blood. It could not happen like that. I wouldn't allow it!

Finally he emerged with a black sack. "Yes little one, I will come help your friend, but I warn you, if you were followed here, it will mean death for us all."

The next few hours were like a daze, or a dream. The man took me secret ways through the streets, under the roads, between buildings, through some. We got back to the hideaway much faster than I had come. When we got there, we found Els much as I had left him, but he had much less color in his face, and he was moaning in pain. The healer told me to wait in the other room, and I did so, huddling in a corner, wishing that Els would be okay.

With tears in my eyes, I looked back to the cabinet with the paper and charcoal. I didn't know what else to do. So far, Thresh had done nothing to help me, but something inside me told me to keep trying. I got out the paper and charcoal stick, and I wrote.

Lord Thresh,

Captain Els, he is sick. He coughs much and his lungs do wees. I fear for his life. The healer man did give him medsin. We cannot go to the villa.

He cannot steal, so money is now up to me. Money for food, and medsin. I seek work, Master Nightfall. For anything I would be grateful. I wish to meet with you. Go to the Red Dragon Inn, plees and ask for me.

Your servant,
Jyre

I stared at the finished letter and wondered how was I supposed to get it to him?

No, I couldn't, and in fact, I wouldn't try. Why had I even written it? What was I thinking? I was a fool. Thresh would not help me. I tore the letter in half as I clenched my teeth together, then balled up the halves of the letter and tossed them out the window into the street.

— Nightfall: A Call to Action —

Day 3: 9:00 am

The tea was very good; awfully similar to the tea Jossimer made, in fact. I was sitting opposite Lord Canard in his sunny parlor enjoying some breakfast. It was my second breakfast actually, but it was very light, just tea and some biscuits, so I didn't mind. "Do not worry, son," he said to me after taking a long sip of his own tea. "Raputo and I get along well enough. I'm sure he'll see the sense in turning over the prisoner for proper questioning and punishment."

Lord Canard was an ancient man, and though his hand trembled under the weight of the teacup, his eyes were steady and strong. A wispy, smoke-white beard framed his pale gray face, with a small golden crown atop his mottled bald head. He looked as if he considered himself a king, though I knew of none who would dare dispute this idea. Through decades of conflict and power games not even Ramirez, for all his gall and guile, could push that little gold crown off of Canard's head. He had seen the coming and going of many dozens of other wardens, now Ramirez would be no different. As he was fond of saying, his father was warden of Hightowne before he was, and his son would be after him. Indeed, Ramirez's presence here was a simple footnote in the district's long history.

"Very well," I said finally. I didn't patronize him with suggestions or requests or further anecdotes. "Thank you, Lord Canard," I then added, with a small smile.

"Oh, he'll think twice about sending his murderous scoundrels after you again, my boy," he said with a shallow chuckle. "We'll make sure of that. Don't worry another thought about it."

I hesitated for an instant before I brought up a concern. "If you see any leads that may suggest that someone other than Ramirez had something to do with this, you'll look into it, I trust, and let me know."

His brow furrowed and nose wrinkled, making for quite a sight. "Whom do you suspect? A lord of the Downtowne wards maybe, such as Fitzaviar or Agus? Possibly Lord Raputo himself?"

"No, my lord, I suspect no one in particular. I was once told long ago that for every problem there was always a solution that was simple, logical, and wrong. I simply wish all avenues to be considered, even though a perfectly obvious one lies before us."

His brow un-furrowed and his nose un-wrinkled (actually it stayed very wrinkled, but less so). "Very good words. We'll keep an open mind, don't you worry."

I nodded. Lord Canard knew what he was doing. This was his district, his game, his City, not mine. I was just a guest here; a foreigner.

"You've been doing a good job there in the southeast of Hightowne. Many of the shops that Ramirez oppressed into closing have reopened, people have begun to inhabit the apartments and homes again; life and business is returning to what was once a forsaken area. You should be proud."

I smiled generously at him, and nodded. "I am proud, Lord Canard, and I

thank you for your praise.”

“Bah! Not praise, simply the truth. If I wanted to praise you, I’d...I’d compliment your very fine hat,” he said with a slightly less shallow chuckle.

I responded with one of my own.

“How long are you planning on staying this morning, Daelus?” he then said after finishing his tea.

“Unfortunately, sire, I have a meeting near Towne Square with the stone cutter whom I have employed to re-cut some gemstones sold to me yesterday.” I responded earnestly.

“Ah,” he said. “A good fence knows to disguise the gems he’s sold; they may decrease in value, but they become impossible to trace by those they were stolen from!”

I smiled and nodded. “Indeed.”

After another brief exchange, I bid him farewell, and departed from his mansion confident that the situation would be dealt with competently. When I got to the streets and began to make my way southeast to Towne Square, I realized that I had tarried at Canard’s far longer than I should have and I was running rather late for my meeting with the stonecutter. Maybe it was about time I bought for myself a carriage. I was getting plenty of exercise like this, but it was getting old. How much time could I save in a day if I simply had horse drawn transportation rather than walking everywhere?

I navigated the bustling streets as quickly as I could. Shortcuts I had previously discovered simply to make the trip more varied and interesting now were essential to my passage. A full five minutes before I would have arrived, and still a full ten minutes late, I found myself amidst the swarming masses in Towne Square before the stately structure housing many a fine business-owning tenant; such as the stonecutter in question.

The entry to the shop was at the top of a flight of stairs that sank into its recesses, and then formed a cross with doors at each of the other three ends. As I briskly ascended the stair the noise of the busy square diminished behind me. It was dimly lit by the ambient daylight outside, and quite quiet. I was about to knock on the door when I noticed a small note folded and wedged between the door and the doorframe. I pulled it out and read it quietly aloud. “Very sorry Lord Thresh, an emergency came up, I won’t be able to see you today. I hope we can reschedule for tomorrow...Crichton.”

“Huh,” was my reply, though the note did not have ears. It would have been nice if he had told me earlier and saved me the trip. I had nothing to write with, so no way of making out a reply to him, so I just wedged it in the other doorjamb, and descended back into the square.

I stood there at the edge of the square, like a solitary jutting rock in the midst of a raging rapid looking out over the piazza. If the people and businesses of this place were indeed a mountain river, then it was clear which mountain had formed it; The Cathedral. Though it had been my intention to take in the busy comings and goings of the citizenry in their various shop stalls and enterprises, I found the sight of The Cathedral inescapable. The structure drew my attention in and would not let me budge from its grasp.

It was The Cathedral of the Sacred Forge of the Holy Builder's Soul, though most just called it Soulforge. It was the seat of the Order of the Hammer, from where their High Priest commanded his holy legion. As much as it towered, this hulking monolith seemed to hug the ground as well, the rough hewn blocks of gray stone claiming as much land as it did sky. The colorful stained glass window which adorned the central facade seemed jubilantly profane as part of the grave and solemn structure.

A million lands and peoples, in all the worlds and realms, and within them a million gods and traditions; and in this place called The City, it is the Hammer which rules as the one true God. Yes, they claimed to worship The Master Builder, neither man nor deity, neither historical nor divine, yet all of these things at once. In reality the focus of their worship was that thing which they gripped in their gloves: the hammer. That was what they bowed down before. That was what they would have all of us bow down before. I, like all those around me, were subject to their whims. They would claim the rule of law, but their dogmas and those hammers gave power to those who were swift of judgment and driven by impulse. It was both of these virtues that led me to the peculiar relationship I had with them. Some called me a collaborator. This was less true than even I would hope. The truth was that I was a meddler; a meddler by design and meddled with in practice.

In all of the years and countless ages which had laid themselves out before my coming here, it was at the very eve of my arrival when one sought to shake The City to the ground, and melt all of these Hammers back into the earth from which they came. Constantine, I was told, was the name of this pagan lord. Some said he was a God, here, now, real, and more so than The Builder had ever been. Some called him The Trickster, devil to the Hammerite's God. Some said he was a man possessed by demons; a mad criminal drunk with bloodlust, with occult magics of destruction at his fingertips.

What if he had succeeded? What if this pagan lord of the wood had seen his plan through to its conclusion? Ruin, most assuredly. His goal was not to kill the people of The City, but to kill The City, so that this place of stone and light would be reduced to yet another wilderness, wild, untamed; his domain. Would Soulforge too have been laid to ruin? The Hammerites fell so easily before the first wave of the attack. It was a great mystery to all how they suddenly managed to turn the tide.

Of course, many denied that any of that even happened and that Constantine ever existed; a lie, they said, propaganda. Some claimed it was a Hammerite lie, meant to spread the news of victory over their greatest enemy. Some claimed the opposite, that he was a fiction propagated by the pagan heretics, supposed proof that their God was real and willing to die for their cause.

In The City, what is *said* can often be more important than what is *true*. It is knowledge that is power, not information, not fact. What the people believe is what gives an idea strength; not the legitimacy of this idea. In essence, the people believe that a sin before The Hammer will cause it to

come crushing upon their skull. That is power enough.

And what did The Hammerites believe? That they were lords over The City? That an insurrection was curbed and their role as The City's guardians cemented? From it they swelled like a sponge in the sewer. Now their numbers massed at double what The Order had seen in many years, their leaders bloated and like a turgid fungus, dizzy with their newfound power and sense of purpose. How quickly their goals shifted with the sweet taste of power. When once all eyes turned forward with times uncertain, future unclear, and an enemy at the gates, now eyes turned within; the future is bright, but how much of it can be *mine*?

I shook myself from this trance, weary from the strain of it, and focused instead on what was before my own eyes. Lost in thought, I had wandered through the piazza and beyond the opposite side, to a place much quieter and still. Little bits of gold and brown fluttered across the scene, like autumn leaves dancing freely though a graveyard. Once free of my daydream and focused on what was at hand, I realized that I had wandered into a service area behind the inner ring of The Square, and that I was witnessing many large bits of paper being blown in the wind. I gave pause as one flew quite close to me and snatched it out of the air. Before crushing it in my grasp and discarding it, I noticed that there seemed to be a definite source to the stream of pages, out of an alleyway further along the direction I was walking.

I spared the paper its previously decided fate, and instead, sought to discover its nature. I saw at once that it was a flier and read the neatly printed text in full.

Attention fellow citizens!

The pagan menace must come to an end! Constantine's bloody massacre last fall was the last straw! How many of us lost a loved one when the foul sub-human abominations conveniently labeled 'pagans' tore into The City on a killing spree? I say the spilling of one more drop of pure human blood by these savages will be too much!

Day by day they take more of The City from us, while the so-called protectors of civilization and rational thought, the Hammerites, squabble amongst themselves with petty political disputes and do nothing! Our protectors have failed us, and now it is time for us to be called to arms!

Join the Bloods!

A meeting has been called at Cruller Street 45R just northwest of the grand park of Towne Square. Come and see how many have joined the cause! Meet a group of mercenaries who were tricked into the service of the pagans, and barely escaped with their

humanity intact! Hear their story and their call to revenge!

The meeting will be held at the 8th hour of moon watch following
the third fortnight of spring Bring a friend!

“Speak of The Devil,” I whispered to myself, “and he is sure to appear.” The flier was now wadded into my fist, seconds away from being tossed back among the rest. It seemed that the wrath of Constantine was on the mind of others as well.

Alas, in my hand the crumpled flier remained. In my brief hesitation I noticed a detail which had escaped me before; the fliers had appeared as autumn leaves of red and brown to my distracted mind. Many of the sheets were bloodied. A thought struck me like a spear. The meeting they had called was just the other day. They had been attacked. Before I had time to reason it out, I found myself following the stream of papers, which led directly to the address posted on them.

The alley I now found myself in seemed to sink into the earth, with crooked buildings on either side casting my way into deep shadow. The only sound I could hear was the continued motion of the fliers as the wind pushed them this way and that. My eyes followed the torrent to their source; a door, or what was left of one. However, the papers were not the only trail leading to the door; streaks of blood marked the street, as if bodies had been struck down and then dragged back inside.

The doorframe remained where the door had been, but instead of a passage inside, all I could see was a consuming eerie blackness. It was not darkness—as dim as the alley was some small ambient light would have found its way through—but a surface of pure black. Only after a moment’s pause did I notice that the blood around the doorframe was not incidental; crude pictographs which I would not be so generous as to consider glyphs were painted into the doorframe. I felt that it must have been an inscription which formed the magic of the barrier. I pushed my gloved hand against the black field, and though I felt no pressure against my palm, neither cold nor warmth, I found that I could not will my muscles to proceed any farther.

The blood on the doorframe was dry, and resisted my attempts to smear or rub it out. I recovered a small bit of wood from the wreckage of the door, sharpened to a splintered point, and chafed it violently against some of the glyphs. The blackness popped like a bubble, and a wave of rancid odor struck me. I could now clearly see the place drenched in blood, with heaps of flesh scattered about. I tried to protect my nose with my sleeve as I ventured inside. Every form of vermin from The City’s sewers had found their way in here, in spite of the ward, and they were now doing their best to clean up the mess. The insects and rats didn’t seem to mind my intrusion. I didn’t know what I was searching for, but I found myself looking, unable to tear myself away and leave this place alone like my stomach was insisting.

The bodies were gone; all that remained were bits of unidentifiable flesh left behind as if a hunter took the meat and the pelt and discarded the rest.

The thought eased me for an instant. Were these just animals? What if these Bloods simply decided to have a demented butchering party? The sight of shredded and bloodied bits of clothing dissuaded my comfortable flight of fancy.

The chamber seemed to have been set up for a large meeting with a speaker at one end. Chairs, some still intact and some broken, littered the room along with the carnage. At the back of the room stood a podium; I approached it. Atop it I found some pages which seemed to have been spared from the massacre. Closer inspection revealed them to be notes for a speech, as would be expected considering their resting place. I read over a page or two of rambling which basically said everything the flier said over and over, until I got to something which caught my eye.

...My contacts which I had mentioned previously must for now remain anonymous; for he and his followers are in great danger, as would we be if they were to open direct contact with us. But their leader has confirmed what I had suspected for some time. The pagans' murderous ways will only increase, as they burn with a lust for vengeance at their brutal defeat last fall—a defeat in a conflict they started! They attacked us, murdered dozens if not hundreds of helpless citizens, and when they were driven out, they call out for revenge. Is it not apparent to the most blind that they are truly the face of evil?

I have been informed by my contact, by our precious new allies, that the pagans have a new leader. This new leader is not simply one of their barbarous priestesses who dresses in animal skins and conducts arcane voodoo magic. This is an occult sorceress who possesses a rational mind of cold evil, and will not rest until our way of life has been destroyed. This sorceress, The Lady as they call her, has a headquarters deep within the forest; a villa. This is a dark, evil place, filled with the most vile of magics, torn flesh, weeping, and the rattling of chain on stone. My contact knows how to find it! He's given me a map! As soon as we have enough strong arms, and enough blades to fit every hand, we will take this villa and send this Lady back into the fire from which she came!

From there it descended back into rhetoric. I had grown callous to such talk; the bellowing man at the lectern vomiting his idealisms at the feet of those so enthralled by these concepts. It did not matter how much I agreed with the message; such language and methods of conveying it reduced me to ennui. When I reached the bottom of the stack of pages, I found the map mentioned in the speech. It clearly noted the location of the villa in the woods in relation to the city wall, with written directions on how to properly navigate the forest to get there. There was also a detailed map of the villa itself, showing towers, fortified walls, a wide moat with drawbridge, and a long list of tactical notes. He wasn't kidding. They really were planning an

attack on The Lady and her villa. I wondered if any of these men had survived, and if The Bloods were still meeting somewhere. Their contact had probably survived. I wondered what chances I would have of getting in touch with this mercenary leader.

Suddenly, as I wondered about this leader, I shook my head with the fury of one who wished to snap some sense into a fool, when I came to the realization of who he might be. My letters from Jyre spoke of such a place, and such plans. Their contacts had to be none other than Jyre and her friend Captain Els. I at once felt an immeasurably gratitude for her warning about The Lady's potential wrath concerning her stolen, coveted painting, and great relief at my decision, against what seemed like better judgment, to secure it in the vault beneath my tower. Even if it could be traced to The Circle, it would be a dead end.

At that thought I departed the scene, not wishing the putrid odor to infect my brain and fill it with drunken conceptions. Once outside again, clutching my nose as if somehow my glove would filter the noxious fumes, I attempted to put my hasty considerations in order, with the speech and map still grasped tightly in my other hand.

It would not be long before a watchman in this district happened upon this scene. What then would occur? Most likely nothing; even if I replaced the documents, I was sure that this would instill little reaction from law enforcement. And what of the Hammerites? Unless the watchmen showed finesse and discretion in dealing with this scene, and those two adjectives are never associated with such a mundane group, the Hammers would soon be involved. And what then? Things would be set in motion, I hoped. Things would get done. Why shouldn't I be the fountainhead? It would serve The Cause. I was already a playing piece on their chessboard. I would try my turn as a rook instead of a pawn; I would go straight to the matter.

I pocketed the map, and quickly left the disgusting scene behind. I walked with urgency to the edge of the piazza. I looked into the marketplace streets nearby through the thongs of moving people, and spotted a familiar Hammerite soldier standing beside a lamp post at a corner. He looked as if he was carved from solid stone; motionless, hammer gripped tightly in his hands, his eyes staring straight forward.

I approached him quickly, and addressed him with urgency. "Brother, a word with you!"

He jerked his head in my direction, as he blurted, "State thy need, citizen, or be off with thee," and tightened his grip on the solid iron hammer.

"Not a fraction of a mile from where we stand is the site of a grisly crime. It appears from all manner of detail that none are aware of it, save the victims, the perpetrators, and me, as I stumbled upon the scene by happenstance not thirty minutes ago."

He scowled at me. "Thine impudence will be forgiven, citizen, provided that thou canst prove that thou art not wasting my time."

"Follow me, and you will see that not only do I speak the truth, but it is of great importance that The Church be made aware of this event." Without

another word I turned, and set back towards the alleyway. I could hear him following heavily behind me.

Our return found the scene just as I had left it. As the Hammerite took it all in he seemed repulsed; tight lipped, but steadily growing nervous. Finally he spotted one of the fliers, and read it. He snorted indignantly, "The Bloods. I doth know of them; they art criminals. They didst deserve this fate."

I was appalled. "Is it not clear to you that this was the work of your enemies, the pagans? Is it not clear to you that you must now do something about this?" The words of the flier ran through my mind...the words about how the Hammerites were doing nothing.

"There art no pagans within The City!" he said authoritatively. "'Tis simply a ploy to cover underworld activity. They wert killed by their own enemies. 'Tis not our lot to clean up the mess."

It angered me that the man at the podium had been so correct about the Hammerites. "How can you be in such denial?" I charged him. "You know that there are pagans within The City. You are constantly hunting them down and arresting them!"

"I wilt thank thee for not wasting my time further," he said, and then left. I chased after him.

I did not want to do things this way, but he was leaving me no choice. "Hammerite soldier!" I shouted as he walked back to the park. He gave an angry rasp and turned around to me again. "You are under the command of Brother Daven, correct?"

This seemed to make him more irritated. "Thou art correct."

"And he, to Brother Oberon?"

"Indeed, correct."

"Brother Oberon and I are of close association..."

"Thy point being?"

"...just as I was with Brother Oberon's former master, Father Markander!" He seemed to twinge at the mention of the recently deceased high priest.

"He would be very disappointed in you if you failed to properly address the concerns of Lord Thresh!" I insisted.

He said nothing, but I could see in his eyes that he was starting to panic. The tough exterior, the shouting, the throwing around of weight, usually it was just for show. He was a lap dog to his superiors.

"I have it on good authority that the murder of those people was orchestrated by a powerful pagan leader, and this will not be her final act of barbarism. They were killed because they knew the location of her headquarters, and now I too am aware of this secret."

"What is it thou dost wish for me to do, Lord Thresh?" his voice was lower now, guarded.

"There needs to be a meeting. A meeting of the council, with the High Priest present. I need to bring what I've found before them. We have to do something," I told him quickly.

He nodded. "I shall talk with Brother Daven—"

"No." I said forcefully. "Talk with Brother Oberon or directly with Father

Rafael about this!"

"I can not. I must speak with my direct superior only. It would dishonor him if I bypassed him to his superior."

That seemed likely, so I didn't push it. Suddenly it occurred to me that I needed more time, maybe with this Hammerite needing to follow every link in his chain of command, he would buy me some. "Very well; go quickly. Lives depend on this." Then he was off, and I seemed to have successfully instilled a sense of urgency in him, for his pace was quickened and seemed to lack the usual pomp.

A little too late, I wondered if it was wrong of me to have acted so quickly, without council or lengthy analysis. It had become apparent that I really needed to contact James. My list of reasons had suddenly seemed to double. We intentionally made it difficult to get in touch with him while he was on holiday, as I certainly did want him to enjoy it and not be bothered by me at every little whim, but it was agreed that in the case of an emergency, contact information would be left in his apartment. Thankfully, James's apartment was near Towne Square, so I would be able to get there rather quickly at a brisk pace.

His apartment was in Lady Antonette's ward, between the business district of Downtowne and the slums closer to the river. This was once a prosperous part of The City which had fallen on some very hard times, mostly due to perpetual conflict between neighboring Wardens Agus and Antonette. As difficult as things were with the Hammerites, I was glad that I did not need to concern myself with such things...yet.

The apartment building which housed James's flat was originally built by the Hammers to be a monastery for acolytes. It had been converted into a secular building after they had built some far more impressive structures further into Downtowne many years ago, and so it had become derelict. James, however, always insisted that it was the perfect choice for his base of operations.

The sun was now reaching its apogee, and I was feeling every instant of its climb. My destination, that ghastly piece of rock James called home, now towered above me. The building looked like a fortress; however, unlike the clean and polished Hammerite fortresses of today, it was a paragon of rot and deterioration. James always refused my suggestions to take a fine apartment in Three Gates Bridge. I even offered to pay for it, but he claimed that he needed to be close to his agents. I never could argue with James's logic.

I arrived at the front door shortly after making my way up a deteriorated set of stairs, which wasn't without several smelly bodies sleeping on it. His doorway had a multitude of locks, which seemed frivolous until a person realized that his door was actually iron with thin wood strips glued to it. On the wood of the door above the locks I quickly traced out a glyph with my finger, and all of the locks opened. That was my key. It was a neat device that James had acquired from one of his competitors. The locks bypassed, I let myself in. Once inside, the harsh reality of the awful structure became invisible. There was no sign of the moldy dilapidated stone walls or floors;

no, James had managed to hide it all fairly well.

James and his wife, Corinne, did not appreciate others saying their home was messy. They contended that they knew where everything was, in their 'Underlying Order in Superficial Chaos,' and indeed the first impression any visitor had would be one of chaos. Books, scrolls, and half-finished dissertations covered the tables and much of the floor as well. Massive filing cabinets overflowing with papers and books were stacked two ranks deep on the wall-to-wall bookshelves. They lived a simple life overall, happy to eat simple meals and sleep in simple beds, day in and day out. On the other hand, they would spare few expenses in the pursuit of their mutual passion; knowledge.

Stepping over some new volumes on an eclectic assortment of topics, apparently received shortly before their departure—they had not yet disposed of the packaging, though one of the books, *Principia Mathematica*, had clearly been skimmed—I found, sitting in the middle of a clear spot, a letter addressed to me. I knew it had to be the contact information. The letter was written in James's typically ugly, blocky, but very easy-to-read print (one of his eccentricities: he only used script for languages other than his native tongue).

D:

As you know—an old friend came visiting. We are out of town examining battle sites, traveling in the west for this week and the next. For the first week our location is predictable and I can be reached via Drop Box 74f. I regret to say that the second week will be less predictable and communications will probably be temporarily interrupted, but I shall post my movements as they occur so you can reach me in the event of emergency.

J

James had a method for message disbursement which did not rely on standard postal addresses, but rather highly discrete drop boxes. A drop box was hardly ever a box at all, but a location where the recipient would never personally be present when the courier arrived. James claimed that this increased security if part of the network was broken. The courier leaves the message in the pre-arranged location and then leaves a mark at another pre-arranged location to indicate that the box has mail. The courier leaves. The recipient checks the marker site every so often, and when the mark is spotted, erases the mark and proceeds to the drop site. After observation to ensure the site is not watched, nor the recipient is being followed, the message is collected. It often helped to place the drop box in locations where the delivery can be easily and unobtrusively grabbed even if in plain view, such as between two posts of an iron fence atop a low brick wall, mostly obscured by vegetation.

At any rate, I myself would never know what Drop Box 74f was. I would

simply give it to one of James's men and it would be delivered there with trust. I pulled a chair up to his desk (I first had to find a chair, and then find a desk), and wrote a letter for James.

J:

It is with considerable regret that I must invade the sanctity of you and your companions' exploratory venture with news of circumstance from The City. Following our agreement to always state the bottom line first and supporting information second, I convey to you that I have just moments ago called for a meeting of the Hammerite Council concerning a discovery of mine; the slaughtered remains of an anti-pagan group called The Bloods, with a link to a petty criminal whom has recently made a plea for my service.

Please find included an approximation of a document which I discovered among the remains of the deceased band. Transcribed exactly is a map to and depicting the headquarters of this pagan group, led by one simply known as The Lady, which is apparently gaining power within The City, and has very violent intentions. I was warned several days ago of this group by the above mentioned criminal; a waif girl named Jyre who claimed to have once been a part of this group, along with a guard captain named Els, in the direct service of The Lady. They escaped this servitude some time ago and were recently appalled to discover that The Lady was now at large in The City. A painting, property of The Lady which Jyre stole and sold to me, is now safely locked away in the vault of my mansion. Its significance is as of yet unknown.

The discovery of the massacred band confirms Jyre's claims that The Lady and the group she represents are of vile disposition, and a potential threat to The Cause.

Of potential boon to The Cause is an improved relationship with the Hammerites. I feel that responding proactively in this instance puts me in a better position amidst their politics, as I demonstrate that my goals coincide with their own. Of additional boon to The Cause would be contact and eventual friendly dealings with The Bloods, who at the very least are a thuggish band of malcontents, but could have widespread roots in The City and could potentially have influence among many walks of life. Finally, we can not discount the general positive impact the vanquishing of a hostile element would have to the general populace. To be blunt, it seems a jolly good thing to do.

I will attempt to contact Jyre and arrange a meeting with her in order to gain as much information about The Lady as possible from the existing source. I will offer her and her friend asylum within the organization to offset any potential retaliatory measures which may occur as a result of her assisting us. Finally, I

will attempt to determine if The Bloods are still in operation after their gruesome assault, and if so, hatch dealings with their leaders.

It is my hope that you will employ your considerable skills of investigation to determine the identity of The Lady and what knowledge can be used to our advantage against her. I thank you greatly, as always my friend.

D

Then, with painstaking attention to detail, I made a copy of the map. I read through the speech notes one more time to see if I had missed anything. Seeing that I had not, I packaged the copy and the letter into an envelope and exited the flat. Once the door was closed behind me, I traced a second glyph at the same point as the first, and the locks sprung into action; each locking themselves simultaneously. I descended, once again stepping this way and that to avoid the vagrants, but this time took a different route to the building's back exit.

The alley I now found myself in was filled with garbage; both in huge bins and scattered about the streets. Some of the trash down the way stirred, and out came an old man. He was an extremely thin old fellow, skinnier than Jossimer, which I found quite shocking, and slightly grotesque. Given how unforgettable his visage was, I was sure that I knew him to be one of James's agents. He walked up to me slowly, limping badly, as if his left leg was nothing more than carrion. I admit I was rather skeptical that this man could be any sort of courier. As soon as he was within striking distance of my walking staff, he spoke.

"Ohh, heelew Massteer Nitfell." He spat his words out along with some phlegm.

I didn't waste time with pleasantries or small talk. "Take this to Drop Box 74f," I ordered him.

He reached out and plucked the envelope from my hand like he was picking an orange. "Aye ssser!" he spat, and then suddenly bolted off down the alley as if he was no more than eighteen.

My brow rose involuntarily. James always claimed that in the intelligence business, one needs a cold mind and a warm heart. He also noted that with a bit of careful selection, a small investment of basic human decency towards society's unloved outcasts, often as little as a regular cup of tea and a sympathetic ear, can reap a great return in dedication and loyalty. What he never did explain was how he could find such crippled-looking types who were also professional sprinters.

I made an about-face, and walked back to the main avenue. The day was still just getting started. From there I went straight to The Circle, and found business as usual. Things were going to be anything but, however, as I now had a long list of fairly extraordinary things to do.

I did not tarry in the courtyard nor take stock of the attendance in the library. I proceeded directly to my office, where I was greeted by Sheam's

sunny smile. It was, perhaps, the only delightful thing I had seen all day.

"I did not expect to get The Lady's painting so quickly this morning," I said immediately. "Miraculous work, as usual. If you keep this up I am going to have to start expecting it and then it will become harder for you to impress me."

Sheam seemed delighted to hear this, replying, "I couldn't sleep on something like that. It seemed urgent so I took care of it at once. I'm glad you're happy." She took a sip of coffee while she organized some papers in front of her, which were undoubtedly filled with busywork for me. "How did it go with the gem cutter?"

"Ah," I said with a brief hesitation, and then closed the door separating her office from the waiting room. By that point she realized that in spite of my words of praise I carried with me the grim trappings of a man who had seen horrible things. I sat before her, in the chair usually reserved for her guests, and recounted the previous events, ending with my plans for the day which would, regrettably, override whatever pressing issues I had stocked up previously.

Sheam looked worried as I told her all of this. It was fair for her to be. She had only recently gotten used to the idea of the business I did here, and in fact, only recently became a proponent of my dealings and methods. I had even entrusted her with an inkling of The Cause, though I understood that it would be some time before she was ready for full disclosure. However, something like this was very different. The great conflict between the Hammerites and the pagans had always been the stuff of storybook for her; far away from the simple and grave concerns of day to day life. Now the clouds of that reality were beginning to fill her sky, and that sunny smile which once graced her face so wonderfully was now very difficult to imagine.

My attempts to reassure her were shattered along with my train of thought as an explosion of sound filled the small office. I recognized it at once as a sound I loathed; a chorus of simultaneous gongs so loud that an ignited powder keg would have seemed like a strike of a kettle drum.

Sheam nearly jumped out of her skin. Teeth bared, she slammed a fist down on the desk before throwing herself back into her chair, quickly trying to wipe the scowl from her face. She *hated* when the Hammerites called. "I guess you had better get that," she said. She then looked to me, her expression softer by several measures, and added, "I'll get things moving. Don't let them keep you too long."

"Sorry Sheam," I offered, my face covered with regret.

She forced a smile and looked up at me. "You're sorry I am upset, not sorry that any of this is happening. But that's okay. Go show those Hammerheads who's boss, yeah?"

I nodded, and knew the real reason she was so upset. Sheam empathized deeply with people, even ones so detached as myself.

I departed from my office and quickly made my way to the east exit. I opened the door just in time to see (and hear) five iron sledgehammers strike five gongs. If I hadn't been gripping the doorknob the sound would have

thrown me a good distance backward. As it was it knocked the wind out of me, and caused my ears to ring for a good hour thereafter.

Seeing me, the entire squad jolted to attention. There, standing at the front gate to my domain, was a full garrison of Hammerite Troops. My wonderful escort, I thought to myself, cussing under my breath. There were twelve Hammerite soldiers and a crowd of workers and engineers who were tending a large device sitting in the middle of the wide path just outside the open eastern gate. I went out to greet them, fast enough to not make a show of my reluctance, but slow enough to allow my reluctance to feel satiated.

The middle bell-gonger stepped forward and shouted, "Brother Daelus! We, the servants of his high eternal majesty, the Master Builder, stand ready to escort thee to the Grand Cathedral, upon his Lordship's, the High Priest of the Order of the Hammer...er, request!"

"Yes, good," I said simply, as I approached the group.

"Thou art prepared to travel forth now, Brother Daelus?" he shouted into my face.

"Please sir, you do not need to *shout* sir, I am right *here* sir," was my reply. He seemed dumbfounded, or maybe just an idiot. "Yes, let's go," I then said simply.

"Pardon?" he shouted into my ear. Suddenly it occurred to me that the man was quite deaf.

I said again, shouting, "Yes, good!"

"Please step into the Street Locomotive!"

I looked at the contraption, and my brow furrowed. I had seen one of these in operation before once or twice about town, but I had never been this close to one. It was a very large mechanism, mostly taken up by a riveted iron cylinder which sat upon several large wheels. Smaller cylinders were linked to the larger one by pipes, and these smaller cylinders were linked by rods to the wheels; beyond that, I could not fathom its workings. Towards the back were perched a pair of compartments. One was occupied by a trio of Hammerites, and the other was mostly taken up by a large mound of coal and a small tank of water. Crammed in on one corner was a pair of seats under a small awning. The coal furnace threw off a great deal of heat, and the occasional cinder came floating back towards me from the smokestack. The Hammerites operating the beast seemed to consist of a driver, in charge, and two with shovels to feed the furnace; all three were blackened by soot, drenched with sweat, and wearing the peculiar grin worn by those who truly adore their mechanical toy.

Once I was aboard the engineer moved some levers, and with a loud hissing noise and a jolt and a shudder the machine lumbered into motion. The engineer was frantically turning valves and pulling levers back and forth as it rotated slowly in place until we were facing east. I knew I was in for a slow ride, considering that the twelve soldiers obviously planned on marching alongside the thing. I was going to miss my meetings for the day, but meetings could be rescheduled, and Sheam was great at damage control.

I had wasted so much time going to Towne Square, going all the way back

to The Circle, only to retrace my steps back to Towne Square *again*, and, once my business with the Hammers was concluded, I would have to return to The Circle a third time. I would have to treat myself to a shopping spree consisting of horses, drivers, and buggies later on.

For the second time today Soulforge Cathedral loomed into view, and for the second time today I was caught off guard by the majesty of the place. I watched patiently in silent anticipation as the enormous rose window set high above the main entrance became obscured behind an array of spires and pointed arches that soon enveloped us.

— Jyre: A Gray Ray of Hope —

Day 3: 3:00 pm

I lifted my head up from the pile of burlap I used for a pillow and looked around the small front room of our hideaway. It was quiet, and sometime in the afternoon. I stood, stiff from my rest in an unnatural position and face still flushed from crying. I put my ear to the door leading to Els's room and heard nothing. Slow and careful, I cracked it open and peeked inside. The medicine man had put Els to bed, and was nowhere to be seen. I made my way to Els's bedside, and looked over him. He was asleep and looked much better than I he'd been before.

Satisfied, I went back to the other room, and sat back down on my cot with folded legs. What was I supposed to do now? I could wait and see if Daelus would write again, but it seemed pointless to do so. I could try going to The Lady's Villa alone. Why shouldn't I? I did so much already on my own without Els. But how would I know what it was Els had been searching for? He never really told me what it was; only what it wasn't.

As I pondered I lay myself back down on the cot, this time in a more comfortable position, and gazed up at the bottom of the old cracked floorboards we called a ceiling.

I didn't know how much time had gone by when I heard a whispering of my name. It could have been just a few minutes or maybe I had dozed off and it had been hours. It still seemed afternoon outside. I looked over in the direction of Els's door and listened more closely, in case I had just been hearing things. If it was real, whoever it was would call again.

"Jyre," whispered the voice once more, but it wasn't in the direction of Els's room, it was in the direction of the door leading outside.

Quietly I sat up in bed, and then very tentatively, responded, "Who's there?"

"A friend."

I thought for a moment that it could be the medicine man. The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't really remember how the medicine man sounded, except that his voice was very deep. This voice didn't sound deep; it was raspy. For some reason it made me think of rough leather. Cautiously, I crept over to the wall to the side of the door, and pressed my face up against the boards, peering through the small crack there, so that I could see who was

outside. I saw a person wearing a large black cloak and a...My heart leapt inside of me; the visitor was wearing a brimmed hat.

"Daelus," I whispered to myself as I quickly went to the door and pulled it open. Light flooded into the hideaway from the late afternoon sun, and I looked with astonishment at the man before me. It was not Daelus at all. He wore a black cloak and a brimmed hat, but neither the cloak nor hat was Daelus's. His face was hidden, with a scarf wrapped up tightly around his chin, and his eyes dark under the shadow of the brim. In my shock, I hesitated for a moment too long before trying to shut the door.

He was too quick; his hand went out and easily stopped the door in its path. I tried to force it closed, but he was too strong. "I am a friend," he said again in that familiar voice.

I just stared back at him wide eyed, too frightened to say anything. I took several steps back from the door.

"I found this," he said, pulling a note from the folds of his cloak which he then showed to me. It was the letter I had written earlier today, and then thrown away. He, or someone, had patched it back together. "You say that you are looking for work. Go to this Red Dragon Inn of yours tonight at eight. There you shall find your challenge."

"Who?" I called out to him, but it was too late. He shut the door. I stood stunned for an instant before I had the sense to re-open it, hoping to catch sight of him leaving, but he was gone without a trace. I looked back and forth several times, up and down the empty street, and saw not a soul.

I went back inside and closed the door behind me. Had I dreamed it? I went to the window, out of which I had tossed the note earlier, and saw that it was no longer there. Who could have found it in the alleyway along with the trash? What would they want with me? If they meant to do me harm, why didn't they do it now, here, alone, and why instead ask me to meet them in a busy Inn in the evening? As I sat back down on my cot, I felt my curiosity getting the better of me. Nightfall had failed me; perhaps this new person would not. I would go to the Red Dragon Inn tonight and seek them out, and see what it is they had in store for me.

— Nightfall: Convening with Hammerites —

Day 3: 3:00pm

"Master Thresh, even if thou hadst more accurate information regarding this structure and its occupants, thy source is discreditable at best!" Father Rafael, the High Priest, didn't look at me when he spoke. His half-closed eyes spent most of their time examining the golden gavel he held tightly in his left hand. He sat erect in his grand marble throne. After a short pause, he looked up at me, his sharp stare attempting to pierce and wound my icy composure.

I gave him a reply. "I ask you, what more information and creditability do you need? The very hinting of a rumor that such a structure exists, deep within these woods, should be enough to call you to action to investigate."

His face erupted into a grimace as he saw the nodding approval of his

subordinate Hammerite priests. He suddenly stood and looked away from the council, stroking his beard with the hand that did not clutch the gavel.

"I am trying to help you, Father Rafael. Will you at least grant me the honor of that?"

He snorted at my last comment, and spoke again without looking at me. "Help me? Grant thee the honor?"

I was silent, waiting to see what he was planning to say. He too was silent, a silence which was soon broken by a murmur amongst the council. Finally, I spoke up. "That is why I am here."

"Regardless of what thou dost think, I am quite certain that I have no idea why *thou art here*. However, thy timing is interesting," he replied, and then turned around. His tone and expression had changed. He still looked angry, but it was less of a jealous anger and more of a righteous anger. His eyes had shifted from narrow and stern to wide and flaring with intensity. It had always struck me that Father Rafael had a great capacity for expressing anger. "And because of thy timing, what thou hast brought to us cannot be ignored. Art thou aware of the tragic events which befell the order just a few nights ago?"

This had to be it; the attacks on their temples. I had a choice to make, and had to make it fast. I feigned partial ignorance. "I am aware that there have been a great many funerals for our brothers as of late."

He nodded gravely. "Yes, the deaths most tragic and barbaric, in many cases the skin of the face was peeled free from the skull."

I tried not to think hard about that, but my mind couldn't help but flash back over what I had seen today. I could feel my face twist with revulsion before relaxing into simple remose.

"And I take it thou art unaware of what we awoke to this morn?" he said. I could almost feel the room grow darker, as if all of those present were exuding anguish.

"Completely unaware, I am afraid," I replied.

"It was the most recent in a string of attacks, and so far the vilest. Our temple in Downtowne, the same one desecrated by The Trickster's minions not long ago, was attacked yet again last night. I wilt not describe what I saw, but suffice it to say, that many of our sons and brothers were murdered—nay, not simply many, all of them. Every priest, soldier, acolyte and novice in the temple was murdered. This time, however, they were not simply impaled by arrow or blade, and then the face removed. Each one was torn asunder, as if they had been drawn and quartered."

"Builder," I whispered in shock.

"No one was seen. We have no leads. It is indeed a dark day." He spoke plainly, but I could tell how upset he was over this. I didn't blame him. "When we find who is responsible for this, a new book will have to be written, for I plan to reinvent the manner in which a holy cleansing takes place, so that every thread and fiber of this demon's being may scream out in horror and repentance."

I regarded him grimly and nodded my head.

"So," he went on, "it is with that in mind that I wilt accept thy lead as our only one, and act upon it with urgency. I pray for thee that this news thou dost bring, indeed brings us the culprit, for if I find that thou hast wasted our time..." he left his sentence hanging with a sneer and a twitch of his brow. He then jerked his head to the side, and thunderously called out, "Brother Masok, quickly send five of thy fastest men to the villa in the forest. Instruct them to search the area which Brother Daelus hath described, form a tactical report, and return here at once." He then retook his seat.

"Yes Father." Brother Masok immediately rose and walked out the grand double doors.

The High Priest again brought his eyes to me, but spoke to his fellow Hammerites. "If this building houses, as our ally Brother Daelus suggests, but a single pagan, then we shall make an example out of it. When our brothers return with information concerning the fortification of this structure, we shall launch a full assault, crush the building to its foundations, and slay all that reside within. It shalt be a grand example to ALL who would oppose our rule that our justice is swift and merciless!"

"May the Master Builder guideth us to victory!" a particularly old one shouted, and was greeted by many enthusiastic agreements. It was then that I caught the gaze of a man whose name I invoked not long ago; Brother Oberon. I wasn't sure how long he had been staring me down, but he did not look at all pleased. I knew that I would have to deal with him shortly, and that it would be an uncomfortable moment.

The High Priest struck his gavel to the table three times, and the meeting was adjourned. As many of the priests stood, I saw Brother Oberon coming towards me. His stride was interrupted by Father Rafael however, as he said, "My brothers, please allow me a moment alone to speak with Brother Daelus in private." At that, they all left promptly, though I could still see Brother Oberon staring me down as he departed. I had gotten up myself, but turned back around and placed my hands on the back of my chair, facing him. This was going to be interesting, I was certain.

He just stood and looked at me, his arms folded across his chest. He was rather young for a high priest. This is of course attributed to the fact that the last high priest, Markander, whom I had the misfortune of being very much acquainted with, died last winter as a result of pagan poison; part of the lasting legacy of Constantine's massacre. This man was the most worthy of Father Markander's apprentices, and was thus chosen by the council to lead. He appeared to be in his late forties, a very young age for the leader of the entire Order of the Hammer. He was sturdy and tall, and didn't stand with the common frailty one may expect from a Hammerite priest. I could tell he was examining me just as I was him.

"I have only this to say to thee, Daelus of Thresh, so-called righteous sorcerer, who summons magnificent towers from the bare earth. I do not know what form of bewitchment led to your arrangement with Father Markander, but it is only out of respect to my predecessor, may his soul reside eternally by the Master Builder's side, that I recognize thee as anything

more than an arrogant nobleman, who undoubtedly has countless ties to the underworld. If it were up to myself, I would have thee executed immediately, mutilated, thy head cast in bronze and displayed on my shelf, and thy burned broken body paraded through the streets of The City as an example to all that NONE are above the law of the Order of the Hammer!" As he stood there saying this, the tension in this face grew to a scowl, and his voice thundered.

I was silent for a time, and Rafael also remained silent in his rage as I gazed back. It seemed that he would give me power over him no matter what I did. I had come here on a peaceful mission of comradeship, and he, as always, turned it into a chance for me to force him into submission. It was not my will, nor my intent to do so; it was all Markander's arrangement, and Markander knew that no matter what I did, even if I did nothing, I would still cause Rafael grief.

I simply looked at him coolly, and replied, "The Master Builder appreciates thy skepticism, my brother. Yet faith is also needed for thee to truly serve thy master."

"Such impudence!" he growled low.

I had let arrogance win me over, and quickly regretted it. It was a mistake to speak as I had; I didn't want things to go this way. I only hoped that it was not too late as I opened my mouth to reply, saying, "Father Rafael, please, allow me to speak further." I tried to be as polite as possible, for after all, I was here to make peace.

He snorted, and replied in a low tone, "Speak, so that the cause for removal of thy tongue may yet only be hastened."

Ignoring the threat, I went on. "I meant what I said earlier. I am trying to help you. I am here as your comrade, Father Rafael. Regardless of how we feel about one another, you cannot deny that I am here trying to do the work of The Church, to do the work that you desire done. My ends and thine are the same, Father Rafael."

"Then next time," he said, no longer growling, but narrow eyes fixed upon me with scorn, "speak to me in private about thy plans, so that I may go before the council."

"If that is thy wish, for me to become invisible, then so be it." As much as it looked like I was making peace, it made me worried. I had other people within The Order to keep happy, and making Rafael too happy would make them unhappy. I could feel Brother Oberon's gaze as if it were still upon me. "However..." I began, and then quickly reconsidered.

"What?" he growled, immediately on to me.

Hoping this would not stir up more trouble, I admitted, "I did call for this meeting; that is true. However, it was within your power not to grant it. Why did you?"

He huffed. "It was the manner in which thee called for it. The brother who acted as thy messenger spread the news like a buffoon. It was for the sake of *unity* amongst the council that I did this, not for thine."

"I see. In the future I shall employ a private messenger to hail you directly."

He nodded sternly. "I wilt send for thee," he said finally.

I nodded in return. "Very well," I said, and opened the door to leave as I turned around.

"Wait," I suddenly heard him say before I could take a step. Cautiously, I turned to look at him.

He was walking around the table to me, arms folded behind his back. "Close the door," he went on to say.

Now what was he up to? I closed the door and turned to face him, looking up a little, now that he was within a few feet of me.

"I wilt not rest until the demon who has slain my kin has been destroyed," he said gravely.

I nodded to him. "I understand."

"As do I, *Nightfall*." A shiver passed through me as he said the word, as if my spine had been replaced with ice. My occasional use of that name was no secret, but I found it surprisingly disturbing to hear the High Priest use it now, in that tone of malice.

He continued, "Yes, I know of thy dealings; the games thou dost play, thy connections. I know that thou wilt not hesitate to use these connections if it suits thee. I know this is how thou learned of this pagan villa. And I also believe that there is more thou art not telling us. I want to make it abundantly clear that thou art to use all of thy power, divine, mundane, and profane, to further this cause, or I wilt make good on my previous threat. Thou knowest I can."

That was it. He was keeping me alive and not punishing me for being the lying sinner that I was, because he could use me to travel dirty paths that he could not.

"Tell me what else thou dost know," he demanded with a dour expression.

"Only that I am confident that we will be victorious against this threat." I didn't want to give away too much too soon.

He seemed to finish his thoughts, and then snapped back to his previous expression. "Thou shalt continue whatever investigations thou hast been conducting, and I trust share thy findings."

"This evil shalt be blotted out. Such a thing cannot be allowed to exist."

He seemed to rearrange his shoulders to make them a little bigger, "No, certainly not. Any who do harm even the most inept novice must be punished. Allowing them to escape would only earn thee their same fate. I suspect that the totality of my intentions are abundantly clear, Brother Daelus. Deliver to us our enemies, and I shalt see that thou art indeed a friend."

"Abundantly, Father Rafael," I replied coolly, trying not to think too hard about the part he said before about me being burnt and chopped up and all. It was another test, I knew it. He wanted to see if I would turn in anyone who I knew to be a Hammerite killer. Damn him. A dozen names sprung into my mind; the names of friends, people who trusted me.

He nodded, and turned from me. "As I said, I wilt send for thee. Good day."

Once dismissed, I quickly exited though my mind lingered for a time upon our parting conversation. It was different when I was simply concerned with my own neck, but now the idea of turning my suspicions into something that could lead to a person's brutal murder by torture at the hands of the Hammerites...had I been a fool? It seemed as if my misfortune was going to intensify; waiting for me outside the council chamber was none other than Brother Oberon.

"Hast thou lost thy mind?" he hissed with bared teeth, ushering me down a side passage. "Do not forget thy place here, Brother Daelus. Markander would have had thee executed for going before the council as thou did. What measure of miracle prevented Rafael from removing thy bowels?"

"Have a little more faith, Brother Oberon," I replied bitterly. "It was your own Brother Daven who failed to channel my message first through you. Besides, Rafael knows a great deal more than he has let on."

His eyes grew wide, and mouth shrank into a twisted frown. "Daven, pfeh, the fool, but you are wrong; Rafael knows not of Markander's plans...if thou hast betrayed us to him, Daelus, it shalt be I who shalt remove thy bowels!"

I said, "Have more faith! I have betrayed no one. He is simply aware of my ties to the underworld; ties that you seek to use as well. I knew Markander's plans, Oberon, maybe more than you do, because you don't seem to be following them very well."

"Thou dost know nothing of Markander's plans, boy. All thou dost need to know is what thou art told. Thy privileges here are a tool; my tool, not thine own."

"Are you mad, Oberon? Can't you see what is going on here? Someone has declared war on The Order, and all you can think about is your petty internal politics!"

He gave me a look which might have given Rafael cause for worry. "Speak to me again in such a way, my son, and my brothers shall be forced to scrape thy ash from the stone of the wall behind thee."

I took a deep breath, and tried to contain my anger. I had to face it; I was powerless now. I was in their court, and now I was little more than a pawn to be pushed this way and that. I should have kept to my own world.

"Thou can be replaced easily, Daelus. Do not allow thyself to fall for foolish pride. I could sweep thee away in an instant, and replace thee with one more obedient."

"What is it you want, Brother Oberon?"

That seemed to calm him down. "Let Rafael believe that he has you underfoot for now. He is blind to all that goes about around him, it wilt only add to his blindness. We wilt let the current situation blow over, and then resume as we were previously."

Blow over? He talked as if this were a trivial affair. An entire temple *murdered*, and he wants to let it *blow over*? I wanted to tell him that he was a damn fool, and then *punch him*, but I did neither. I just nodded.

"Now get out of my sight," he said, and stormed off.

Then I was finally able to escape, if such a thing were indeed possible. As

I passed through the cathedral doors I was bathed in the afternoon light. I walked down the great stairs to the streets before me. Most of the pedestrians gave the cathedral a wide berth, but there was one man standing alone at the foot of the stairs, looking up at me.

"Good afternoon," he said, calling up to me as soon as he noticed me noticing him. He was a handsome, sharply dressed fellow whom I did not recognize, standing still amongst the goings and comings of folk with business at Soulforge. I briskly made my way down the steps to meet him, wondering what this could be about.

"All real processes are irreversible," he said to me. It was one of James's favorite pass codes.

"And all theoretical concepts are invertible," I said in reply. He nodded, and as I drew near, his hand slid from his pocket and reached out to me, holding a letter. I took a quick glance around, noting the proximity and quantity of Hammerites about us, and even some potentially suspicious non-Hammerites passing by. Even so much as a wary glance could be interpreted and judged, so I did not linger. I took the letter from him. "Come," I said simply, and then dove into the busy streets with him close by my side.

Once on the move, with Soulforge vanishing behind me, I broke the plain seal on the letter (James always used a flat implement, he had no use for fancy seals) and read it as we walked.

D:

Intelligence will begin investigation of The Lady, effective immediately. I will begin archival work on my return, which should be today, for I have cut my vacation short due to the urgency of this matter.

I am presuming this is a long-term operation and that stealth is more important than speed. Please advise if haste is warranted; and if so, to what degree we should be willing to risk exposure of our operation to the target. From the material presented I suggest we move slowly and carefully for now; if The Lady is who I suspect her to be from this information and their disturbing correlation to certain veiled hints in ancient writings, this may be an extremely hazardous operation—as hazardous as and closely entwined with bloody events of last fall. We will, of course, work to confirm or deny this hunch.

— J

I read the letter with a frown, thinking of what I would now have to say to James about what had just happened.

I neatly tucked the note away into a pocket in my vest. I didn't like the way passersby were parting to let us through, I felt unconcealed; obvious. I turned to him and spoke in a casual tone, "James is as quick while he is on vacation as he is while he is at large," I observed aloud. "Are you just a

messenger, or are you in the know?"

"Well in the know. Sorry we haven't met before; I tend to stay on the fringe. I am Agent Othello."

"How did you know who I was?" I asked, though I didn't mean it as a test so much as a concerned question.

"You tend to be obvious, Master Nightfall," was his reply. I was afraid he'd say that. Egos be damned.

"And how did you know where to find me?"

"Hammerites tend to be obvious," he said with a slight rounding of the lips.

Well, at least the gentleman wasn't humorless. "Very well," I said in a monitored tone, "Send word back; make sure all are clear of that villa. Hammers are coming, am I understood?"

His grave face nodded, and replied "With clarity."

"Oh, and one other thing," I said, though my mind itched with discomfort at broaching the subject. If the Hammerites wanted me to hand over to them a known murderer of their kind, then I might as well kill two birds with one stone and give them the man also suspected to be the next phase of my assassination plot. "I already have Rembrandt investigating a grave-robber named Ghost, but I'd like to step that up a bit."

"Rembrandt, the independent?"

"Yes. Please put Somno's night-crew on this task too. Have them trail this Ghost, observe him, and do a character examination. If the opportunity presents itself, Ghost should be taken into custody and held for a possible interview. If they have any experience with Rembrandt ask them to coordinate with him."

"May I enquire as to the reason behind this?"

I gave Othello a sidelong glance. James's agents had a bit of a nosey streak to them. "It's possible that he may have to be used to purchase Father Rafael's favor."

He gave a stiff nod, turned around, and vanished into the crowded streets.