

Interceptions...

"Wait here all day," the boss told me. Stinking brat, that Ranson! As if he were still in charge just 'cause The Lady once said so. Well, she ain't sayin' so no more, so why we still got's to take orders from him? Bugger it all. I was doin' as he asked, but weren't likin' it one bit.

I was pickin' bits of my dinner out of my teeth when I saw the horseman stop at the mailbox and dismount. He acted like he was used to deliverin' letters to this abandoned building by now. My instructions had been spot on so far. Now it was time to see if the letter was *from-and-to* who I was told it would be *from-and-to*. I waited for the man to put the paper into the box, and then remount and gallop off.

I pulled myself up from my hidey hole and gave a bit of a stretch before goin' to collect my loot, patting at my soaked underarms absently as I walked over. Now I had the torn envelope in my hand and was giving the note a good read.

Dear Jyre,

Events, combined with your interest in confiding in me, have compelled me to grant you immediate audience as well as safe asylum for you and your friend. A plan has already been set in motion to deal with The Lady, but we will need your help in order to do so. Your experience with her, as well as the experience of your friend, will be invaluable in the coming ventures. Please come to either my home or The Circle at your earliest convenience. Together, we shall see this matter dealt with.

Yours in confidence,
Lord Thresh

I cackled while pocketing my prize and thinking of the sweet rewards I would be gettin' tonight. I immediately thought that I should write a new letter for Jyre from Nightfall, a mean and nasty one to make her cry, but then I realized that I had nothing to write with. Damn, it would have been fun. I had seen neither hide nor hair of her while I waited at her spot, so she probably wasn't expecting the letter at all. It didn't matter. I had what I was sent for; next was to get paid, and then to get all dolled up for a trip to the good ol' Red Dragon Inn for a little happy-go-round with little Jyre. I loved that place. They served real *beer*!

Second Interceptions...

I awoke with a start, hearing my last snore fizzle out as I opened my eyes. Something had been pressed into my hands, a rolled letter, and then the giver vanished before I knew what was what. Quickly I opened it, and started reading it right in the middle. It had huge, blocky letters, smelled like candle wax, and was written in all upper-case: had to be Hammerites.

REPORT WITH YOUR UNIT AT ONCE TO SAINT MAGELLANS, WHERE YOU WILL YOU BE GIVEN PROVISIONS AND GEAR FOR YOUR JOURNEY. DO NOT TARRY AND DO NOT SPEAK OF THIS ASSIGNMENT. IF WE ARE TO TAKE THE PAGAN FORCES BY SURPRISE AT THE VILLA, ABSOLUTE SPEED AND SECRECY ARE REQUIRED.

“Pagan Villa?” I nearly barked with surprise, and then started to skim farther down. “Out in the woods...map to its location...”

There was no way of knowing if this was talking about *The Villa*, but we couldn’t risk it. The last I had heard, The Lady was still using it for meetings, and frequently. I nearly fell off my stoop and down twenty flights of stairs into the sewer as I scrambled around to find something to write with and on. I began, scratching it all out in sewer-tongue so that no one but me and my boys could read it.

Off with ya! The jig is up! Hammerites’a’comin’! Tell The Lady, and quick!

“Shin-cloth!” I hissed as I tried to think who could run this down to the next outpost fast enough. There wasn’t time to find someone for the job; I had to do it myself. One of the boys had risked their neck to get this message from The Hammerites to me, and I wasn’t going to let their hard work go to waste. I put some boots on, stuffed the scrap in the left one, and scrambled down the ladder, wishing I could just make the jump, but not willing to risk it. With a splash I was down into the pipes, and off at a full run. The Lady wasn’t going to have Hammerites show up in the middle of a meeting; not if I could help it.

Chapter 4

Innocent Bystanders

Morning, of the very same day...**— Lytha: The Box of Yesterday —****Day 3: 9:00 am**

Thalia hung limp on my arms. "I'm going to get you out of here," I told her, unsure if she could hear me, or even recognize my voice. I, on the other hand, barely recognized her face. The years she had spent inside that Hammerite prison had clearly taken its toll. She was disfigured, broken, and barely alive. I turned the keys in the lock—keys covered in the blood of the guard—and pulled her free of her shackles. Once free I held her body tightly, weeping over her, finally letting my rage melt into sorrow. Suddenly, she stirred. I studied her face, feeling sick with the sight of how life in the dungeon had aged her. Finally her eyes opened, and they met mine. I was drawn inside.

Immediately we were somewhere else, and Thalia was no longer in my arms. Men dressed in red and silver had her in chains, wrists to the ceiling, ankles to the floor, so that she hung with her face to the floor, draped out over a bed of spikes. The way that her wrists and ankles were twisted in the shackles...they had to be broken. Behind her stood a large man, dressed in blood red and black leather, whipping her. Before her was another man, a Hammerite priest, dressed in clean white, draped in red satin, obscenely clean in a room of filth and blood. He was counting off as the brute whipped Thalia.

I wanted to run to them, destroy the torturer, and break Thalia free, but I was held back. All around me were arms, holding me, preventing me from moving forward. Faces surrounded mine, woodsie faces, pagan faces, painted and marked. The markings moved over their faces as if the ink were alive.

"Let me go!" I screamed to them, "I have to save her!"

"No, you cannot," they all chanted in unison. Damn the pagans, they left her to this fate, and refused to save her. I screamed, cursed their gods and goddesses, cursed them, and cursed their children.

The Hammerite whipped Thalia. Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three.

I bit and clawed at the arms holding me back. The arms became vines, twisting and looping around me, around my torso and neck, squeezing me, choking me. All went dark.

...and felt the crack of the whip on my back. Twenty-four. And another. Twenty-five. Rows of spikes lined the floor below me. I looked up, eyes stinging with sweat and blood, and saw the faces of my betrayers, pagans, staring at me with unmoving eyes; and behind them, cloaked in black, eyes hidden from view, yet somehow piercing into me, was Thalia's killer, haunting the room like a black ghost, the grim reaper herself. Twenty-six. Twenty-seven. I screamed in agony as the whip broke my skin, and watched blood pour to the ground on either side of my body, speckling and coating the spikes. I tried to struggle in the shackles, but my wrists and ankles were broken. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Still the woman in black stared at me.

"Who are you?" I screamed.

Thirty. Thirty-one. The pagans betrayed Thalia. The Hammerites tortured

*Thalia, but who had **killed** Thalia? All the world was against her. All the world was against me.*

*Thirty-two. Thirty-three. I struggled against the shackles as I was whipped. The **thing** in the room gazed at me with unmoving eyes. I strained to recognize it, a face I thought I knew so well. But it was as if I could not see. It was a hole in the world, and I was filling myself with it.*

Thirty-four. The Hammerite's voice rang in my ears, the sound of his counting growing more painful than the sting of the whip itself. Thirty-five. I clenched my eyes shut, yet could still see the priest, his impartial face coolly taking in the scene. Thirty-six. There was kindness in his eyes; it was obscene. Thirty-seven. A halo about his head; it was vulgar. Thirty-eight. Now his hands were around my throat. Thirty-nine. He kissed my forehead. Forty. The kiss was like a flaming sword that pierced my skull, sinking into my brain, filling me with fire. Forty-one.

"O Holy and True Master Builder, Cleanse This Body of Sin from The Demon Which Doth Possess it, And Free This Woman From The Evil Which Poisons Her Mind."

Forty-two.

"Drive The Minion of The Trickier From Her Soul, So that She Might Taste the Pure Spring Water of Thy Eternal Goodness, and Find Peace in Thy Embrace."

Forty-three...

I screamed, awakening with one hand clenched about my throat, the other gripping my forehead. I curled up tightly where I lay, sobbing, shaking, panting for breath, yet I could still hear the words echoing in my mind. Forty-four. Forty-five. I forced myself silent, choking back the sobs, and opening my eyes. Forty-six. Forty-seven. I shook my head fiercely, and pushed myself up from where I lay, to gaze at my room.

Forty-eig...The sound faded from my mind as what I beheld filled my senses. There were hands nailed to my walls, long streaks of blood flowing down from them and pooling onto the floors. Between them was writing; the same indecipherable pagan gibberish as always, written in blood. Knives and razors were strewn about the room, not piled into the washbasin as usual. There was blood all over everything, even the bed, even me.

I saved their kin, my sister whose mind they poisoned and they ultimately betrayed, and this was how they repaid me. They didn't have the guts to confront me outright; they just broke into my apartment at night and filled my home with their gore. They and the Hammerites were so much alike; both sought to brutalize those whom they hated. Both hated humanity.

*Hammerites, unable to come to terms
with their own human flesh,
lied to themselves and told themselves
that they had a divine soul,
and were servants of a Builder.*

*Pagans, unable to come to terms
with their own human flesh,
lied to themselves and told themselves
that they were beasts,
and creatures of the Wood.*

Both were pathetic, and both were beyond reproach.

Whose hands were these? I now stood, looking at them. The hands were large and strong looking. They were clean, aside from the blood, and without marking. The hands had never touched soil, yet were no stranger to hard work. They were Hammerite hands. Now I understood. The pagan witches were trying to leave me to the same fate that Thalia had suffered. They would implicate me in the slaughter of Hammerites, but there would be no one to save me like I had saved Thalia. It was their revenge.

I couldn't stay here any longer, not with this, not with this much blood all around me. The Hammerites rarely came to this part of The City, but they would. I wouldn't be able to hide it all. Fingers would be pointed, blood trails would be followed, and soon they would find me. I wouldn't give them that chance. I also would not be swayed from my true enemies. The Hammerites may have broken Thalia's body, but it was the pagans who betrayed her to them. They were my enemy. I would take this fight to them.

I peeked out the window. Everything seemed to be as it should be. City folk milled about, a carriage passed by; the fruit stand I always visited was open for business, with the vendor hawking his wares.

The chest; I had forgotten about the chest in Thalia's cottage. In my shock and grief over the chase of the intruder, I never opened it; I still had no idea what was inside. I would go, now, and look. Maybe it had the answers I needed.

I tried to wash the blood off myself, and prayed that my robes would be clean. I couldn't walk the streets looking like a psychopath. As I hurried to get ready, something caught my eye that didn't belong, something that I hadn't noticed amidst the blood, and the severed hands; three bottles of cheap wine.

"Taff it all to hell!" I shouted, slamming my fist against the wall of my closet—the mission. How could I have forgotten about the mission? I thought hard about last night, retracing my steps after I left Koynes place. I went to my usual supplier, got some extra gear, and then returned to my apartment to get my lock picks and gloves...that's all I could remember. "Taff me," I grumbled, figuring that somehow I found my way to the bed and just dozed off. "The scotch," I reasoned. I'd had quite a few glasses that evening with Koynes, but not that much. Maybe it, combined with the stress...it didn't matter anymore. I hadn't done the job, and now I probably would have to find a new fence. Damn.

I wasn't coming back here, so I had to bring everything with me I'd need for the immediate future. I found my belt amidst the chaos and gore, and

collected my knives that had been scattered around the room. I washed them, and placed them on my belt; one on each hip, the longer of the two on the left. The third, a small throwing dagger, went in my boot. Then I strapped on my special harness, made just for me. It buckled at my chest, and on my back I now carried my short sword, short bow, and quiver. My robes and veil were thankfully unsoiled, and so I put them on quickly, wrapping myself tight. The robe and harness went together, the robe being designed to conceal the weapons on my back while also giving me easy access to them via a flapped hole at the back of my neck. The rest of my tools I could replace; I still had a fair bit of coin in my purse, so if I needed something, I could just buy a new one. My lock picks were already on my belt, as was my coin purse.

I put my hand on the doorknob to go out, but something made me stop, an instinct that stayed my hand before I was even aware of what I suddenly realized. I pushed my ear to the door and listened. I could not make out words, for there was the steady murmur of dozens of mouths saying dozens of words, but I picked out a voice which stood out in distinction. There was a Hammerite out there, in the streets. Maybe there were several.

I rushed over to a place in the wall where there was a hole I could use to watch the streets. I was careful not to touch the wall, for I'd bloody myself. I squinted, peeking through the hole. There were two Hammerites in the street. They were talking to the man who ran the fruit stand. One pointed to my door. He was shrugging and shaking his head. One of them was getting irritated, jabbing the man with his finger. The other was holding his hammer in both hands, as if he was ready to pull it back for a swing at any moment. The fruit monger gestured, waving his hand before his face and over his head, possibly indicating hood and veil, and then waved his hands back and forth, shaking his head.

I shouldn't have been surprised that they were here already. No, the massacre must have left their temple thick with blood, and half of that had to be between here and there. Why weren't there more of them? The place should be crawling with Hammerites after something like that. I had to assume that it was.

I leapt onto the chest at the foot of my bed, and grabbed onto the rafters. In an instant I was up, and pulling open a small window about as wide as my shoulders. I slid through, taking hold of the eaves outside. There was a second floor to this building which I could get to by using a few bricks that stuck out a little too far. I did so, and then lay prone on the rough shingles of the slanted roof.

I crawled to the peak, and peeked over to the other side. The Hammerites were still harassing the fruit monger, but I could only see the two of them. I glanced at the ground in front of my building and could see nothing but the loose cobbles of the street. I lifted my veil to get a better look, but my first impression had been correct. There was no blood trail. The two Hammerites must have just been following a hunch, or some other deduction, which was why there were only two of them rather than an army.

It was a little shocking to think of woodland primitives capable of carrying

out such an attack and frame, but if they had wanted to frame me, why such care at covering their tracks? Wouldn't they want an army of Hammerites at my door? Maybe this wasn't a frame at all, maybe it was just intimidation like I had first suspected. It didn't matter now; it was done, and these two Hammerites wouldn't be the last.

I was about to make a break for it when I saw the Hammerites getting rough with the fruit monger. They wanted answers from him, and apparently he wasn't telling them what they wanted to hear. One of them grabbed him by his tunic, between his neck and shoulder, and pulled him out from behind his stand. The other, with his back to me, hit the man in the face with the back of his gauntlet, yelling at him.

I was up, my robe tossed aside to free my movements, and sliding down the incline of the roof on the opposite side. I flew through the air, and landed with my boot at the back of the Hammerite's knee, and my shoulder at his neck. There was a great cry of shock in the streets all around me.

The second Hammerite pushed the fruit monger aside and raised his hammer high above his head, so that his arms were clear of his torso. I came at him with both daggers, the longer one pushed into his chest through his ribs on the left side. I spun around him, dagger following the curve of his ribs, until I was at his back, and came at him with my other, shorter dagger, reaching around his raised arm to jab it into the right side of his neck. I continued my spin around him until I was back in front and with my dagger cut though his neck down to the bone. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The people in the streets were scattering. The fruit monger was staring at me and what I had done with terror, claspings the sides of his face with both hands, jabbering something incomprehensible. The first Hammerite was beginning to get up, reaching for the hammer which he had dropped when I landed on him. I drew my short sword and pushed the blade through his shoulder and out the other side. I could feel the sword grating against his bone as I pulled it out.

He screamed, falling back to the ground, hand grabbing at his wound, as if trying to hold the blood in. "Congratulations, you found me," I said. I considered, should I kill him, or not? It really didn't matter, either way. Dead men can sometimes speak the loudest of all.

"Should I kill him?" I asked the fruit monger, who was still gazing with a look of horror on his face, half hiding behind his stand.

He didn't answer; just whimpered half words.

I crouched by the Hammerite, and said, "Should I kill you?"

Again there was no answer; just screams of pain.

I got back up, and turned to the fruit monger once more. "You have to leave here. Find another place to set your stand. You can never come back to this spot. If the Hammerites find you, they'll kill you." At that, I ended the life of the Hammerite who had been curled up on the ground, weeping over his injuries. He wept no more. There would be no more weeping for either him or his brother, for none present would shed a tear for a Hammerite. I recovered my two knives and departed briskly. The crowd parted for me and

descended upon the corpses, searching them for anything of value.

I took my robe from where it had fallen and wrapped myself back up in it to conceal the blood that had splashed on me during my act of graceful butchery. I walked quickly through the streets, soon leaving the area behind. As I walked, I could still hear talk, people asking what had happened back there, and news of a Hammerite killer spreading. No one who hadn't seen it would suspect that the robed veiled woman had done it.

I found a quiet and secluded spot, several blocks away, and cleaned off my daggers and sword. I always hated when I had to put them away dirty; it got blood on the scabbards, and so I had to clean those too. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had to do something like that; I never engaged enemies unless I was on a mission, and I hadn't needed to go into combat during a mission for years. That was how I gained the reputation that tubby had taunted me about; the golden heart who wouldn't harm a fly. I supposed that once you knew how to do such things, no matter how long it had been, it never really left you.

The road to the gate seemed longer this time. Maybe it was because I was forcing myself to walk casually when all I wanted to do was sprint. When I got to the gate, I saw that the gatekeeper and some of his men were wounded. I didn't ask, but he told me anyway.

"That Hammerite came back, and he brought his buddies," he said, as he turned the wheel to raise the portcullis for me, "but we showed them. They put some of my men down, down for a while I'm sad to say, but we showed them they can't push us around. Sent them running back to their daddies; they'll think twice about messing with us again."

I should have told him that he was being foolish. I shouldn't have said what I said before, sowing the seeds of rebellion. They'll be back, and in greater numbers, and the next time I came through here, if I ever did, I was sure it would be the Hammerites running this gate. They were cowards, and bullies. They were vengeful, even if they were in the wrong and beaten fair and square. I knew that this gatekeeper was a dead man, but I said nothing. I hoped he would die with honor, standing firm at his post. I bid him farewell. Even if my predictions were untrue, I felt like it was the last time I'd see him.

As the hum of the city faded behind me, I began to run. My feet struck the ground at an ever increasing tempo, climaxing quickly into a sprint. As my speed grew steadily I felt that the mounting pressure building up inside my heart continued to grow beyond what my legs were able to endure. In a fit of frustration, I tore the veil from my face and threw it aside into the woods; my robe soon followed, tearing free what I had so habitually adorned myself with. They hindered my speed. I did not watch as the robe fell to the forest floor, tangling itself in brambles as a curious puzzle to some future traveler who came this way. I had no need for disguises now. I wanted the pagans to know who I was.

I knew I was getting close as the burning in my lungs suddenly registered and the pain in my legs compelled me to slow. Why was I running like this? Was I running *to* Thalia, whom I knew to be gone, or *away* from The City, or

was it *myself*?

I forced myself to slow, panting, gasping for breath. Sweat poured from my brow, obscuring my vision and stinging my eyes. A nearby tree became my crutch as I came to a stop, pressing my arm against it and my forehead against my arm. Breathe, I told myself. Breathe. My sister would still be gone, no matter how quickly I ran; and I would still be Lytha, no matter how long I ran.

My heart compelled me to resume my sprint, but my legs protested. I had only a short distance to travel now, and the sun was so very hot. Soon Thalia's cottage was before me. I pushed my way inside, half expecting in some deep corner of my mind to see her sitting there like she always did, but I found all as I had left it. Thalia was also just how I left her: dead. I was alone.

One shutter slammed closed as a breeze picked up, only to ease its way back open and shut once more. Outside, birds carried on in their musical way and insects buzzed and rattled. I could hear tall grass rubbing against itself in the wind, and the occasional riff of tree branches chafing against one another. There was nothing else. To my mind, all of this was silent. How I longed for the sound of her voice; the sound of her mind.

I sank to the floor once more, feeling tears fill my eyes once again; all I had done, all I had risked and sacrificed for her, all of my effort only for it to end *this way*. At that very moment, I felt as if I would do anything to have her back once again. No risk nor sacrifice was too great. I *needed* her.

The chest was pushed to the front of my mind, as if it had whispered into my ear. I shook the threat of tears away, and took another look around the room. There was the key where I had dropped it. Picking myself up from the floor, I retrieved the key and knelt before the chest. The key pressed into place, I turned it. The lock slid open with a reluctant click. Timidly, expecting a horde of spiders to come flowing out at any instant, I raised the lid up and away.

Cloth. My hands slid over what appeared to be coarse fabric, but found it oddly pleasing to the touch. It was deep brown, with streaks of green woven through it, like the colorful layers in stone. As I began to lift it my nose was filled with a clay-like odor. I pulled it from the chest to get a better look at it and found a set of delicate wooden clasps lining the front and a tight opening at the top for the neck laced with green chord. It was only then that I recognized it; Thalia's priestess robes. They had been a mark of her stature among *them*, but to me it was a haunting reminder of betrayal and hopelessness. I wanted to throw it aside, tear it up, burn it, but instead I simply gathered it back together and set it to one side on the floor. Then I looked back into the chest.

A wooden rod. It was slightly warm to the touch, and felt much harder and more brittle than it appeared, as if it were made from wrought iron rather than a gnarled branch or root. It was short, resembling more a scepter than a staff, with a peculiarity at one end; a swelling of the wood with peculiar gemstones set into its surface. A closer look revealed it to be amber. I felt a twinge of revulsion at this; amber had always been a favorite of mine. I

brought the wood closer to my eyes to inspect the dark mottling, and found dozens of small symbols burnt into the surface. What magic this rod held, now or in the past, was beyond what I truly wished to know. The less I knew about Thalia's time with the pagans the better; yet why did I feel so compelled to dig deeper into the chest?

I discovered a chain, and at the end of it, a carved bit of wood; a locket. The locket was hinged, not with metal, but with parts carved into the wood itself. I opened it, and inside found an etching on the wooden surface of remarkable detail and clarity. It was of a man and a woman; the man's face I did not recognize, but I knew at once that the woman had to be our mother. She and Thalia looked so much alike that much of my memories of her from my childhood became confused with my memories of Thalia, who cared for me after our mother died. The man must have been our father—I remembered him, though I found it difficult to attach any face to those memories. Thalia never spoke of him; she always insisted that she knew nothing. I did not want to think of this as a lie; what was the meaning of this locket if she knew nothing?

I looked over our mother's face; the wild hair, the angular chin and nose, high cheeks and large, intense eyes. Even in this wood carving, so detailed and lifelike I found it hard to believe, those eyes were haunting; like Thalia's eyes, like my own. The man's eyes by contrast were small, deeply set, and guarded. He looked like he could have been stone; his face was oddly shaped, like a rock jutting out at the shore. His ears were large, and hair very short. His nose was wide and turned up at the tip, revealing narrow nostrils. Not wishing to see it anymore, I shut the locket with a flick of my fingers. I placed it gently on the robe, as I had done previously with the rod.

There was a pair of sandals, with the imprint of feet worn deeply into dark recesses. Thalia's toes were long and spread apart; not unlike my own of course. It helped me to climb. Under the sandals I found a large book, bound in wood and reed but very smooth, like it had been handled many times. I pulled it out slowly, and spread it open in the middle. Symbols, pictographs, nothing I could understand. I flipped through page after page, and found all the same. I did not know if it was a diary, a collection of tales, or perhaps even a library of enchantments; whatever it was it was of no use to me.

There was a ring, simple, wooden, with no discernable markings on its surface. I tried to remember if I had ever seen Thalia wear it. I could not. I found some other garments, rougher, wilder, more *visceral* than the robe, perhaps suited to other rituals, or maybe even for daily life. I did not know. I pulled them out and put them aside. This revealed a necklace, made from bits of stone, teeth, and wooden beads. I saw that there were several of them, and maybe some meant as bracelets or to go around the ankle. It seemed to go with the primitive clothing.

There was nothing beneath. All that remained in the chest was the book. I looked upon it, sitting silently in its resting place as it had for years now. If only it could tell me what it contained. I reached in once more and lifted the

book from the chest, but this time something slipped free from its pages. A loose bit, I thought to myself as I went to retrieve it, but quickly discovered that the markings which covered it were legible. I put the book down quickly and grasped it between my hands, eyes dancing across the page. I saw at once it was a letter to Thalia.

Thalia,

Know that my door ever shall be open to you. I know that all things were not as they were meant to be, what with my own actions and inactions, and the deeds of our sister, who clearly cares for you very much, misguided and blind though she is. It is not too late; the path has not yet been closed to you. You too can still take your place amongst the Gods and Goddesses of the wood.

Come back to me at the place where the great serpent sets in the late winter night sky. Where you can see the brightest star of it touch the mountain tops; there you must go. Travel that way for a fortnight and a day, and you shall find me in a place called Barlosk. The woodlands in this way bow to my grace, and shall grant you passage unabated. Come to me and you shall find my arms open, your seat unoccupied, and atonement on my lips.

On that day all shall be set right.

But I beg of you, do this before the dawning of the sun on the fall equinox of the eighth year of your exile. If you fail in this, nothing shall ever be as it was meant to be.

~ Delphine

I almost choked on my rage. Delphine, a name Thalia had uttered from time to time, also known as The Lady of the Fae, was a powerful pagan priestess; some even worshiped her as a queen, or a fae goddess. She was the one responsible for Thalia's corruption, and betrayal, and yet here she was trying to turn Thalia against me, and had the audacity to refer to me as "our sister". That was all I knew; Thalia would never tell me more than that. But now I knew where to find her.

Fifteen days travel through the wilderness...that I could manage. I knew little of the stars, so I would have to do some investigation before I learned about this great serpent and where it hit the horizon at that time of year. Eight years of exile...this was the ninth year. Was Delphine predicting her death? Was she threatening it? No, the fall equinox...that was the time when the pagans waged their little war against The City, when they destroyed that temple and killed the high priest. I suspected that Delphine expected that conflict to end in the pagan's favor. I wonder how it changed things for her that it had not.

I folded the page neatly, and placed it into a pouch on my belt. I packed all of Thalia's things back into the chest, as well as I could in their original

position, closed it, and locked it. The key I kept. I would return to The City by a different path, and seek the aid of an astronomer. They should be fairly easy to find...it was not a common profession, but those who partook in it were usually well known. Then I would go and face Delphine, and make her truly understand the meaning of the words she had written; atonement on her lips.

I found a shovel in the back yard and dug a hole near an old oak tree. Sometimes I would find Thalia sitting in this very spot, both before and after her time with the Hammerites. When I was satisfied with it I went inside, lifted up her chest, and brought it out back. First I dropped the key in. I had to make the hole a bit wider for the box to fit inside, but soon it was resting several feet below. The ground was always bare here, with little grass growing under the dense canopy, so there wouldn't be much of a trace that anything was buried. I felt like burying it was more honorable to her memory, like there would still be some piece of her that lingered on forever, even if I never had anything to do with it again.

Once the hole was covered, I took kindling from her storage shed and brought it inside, stuffing it under the bed where she lay. I no longer felt sorrow as I did this; only release. When no more would fit, I struck a spark into it, and stood back as the fire began to spread. As smoke filled the room and the tongues of flame reached up to claim my sister, I departed. I could not bear the sight of her body being devoured by the fire. I watched from the back, next to where I had buried her chest, as the flames licked out of the windows and began to claim the roof. I let out a long breath to calm myself, but it was no use; I felt the quivering of my heart once more, and the tears welling up behind my eyes.

I slowly lowered myself down to sit just as she would sit, eyes closed, feeling the heat from the fire and seeing the flickering light beyond my closed lids. I allowed myself to weep openly, going on for what seemed like hours, until my tears had all dried up, and the small cottage had fallen in on itself, Thalia's body nothing but ash, and her home nothing but burnt wood. It would continue to smolder until the next rain, and by then all that would be left were some charred boards and the brick chimney. In a hundred years, that chimney would still be there, and so would the chest buried at the foot of the tree. Maybe in time the roots of the tree would reach out to claim it, hopelessly engulfing it in those strong arms, so that none else could touch it until the tree itself had died, another hundred years hence.

My life would not be so long. I could die tomorrow, for all I knew, and it would not matter a great deal. All I had to live for was revenge, and I knew that this was a pathetic purpose. I felt like it was not only Thalia who had burned away just now, but myself as well. Lytha was gone. All that was left was Delphine—and she would join us soon in our mutual ashen fate.

— Ghost: Stood Up —

Day 3: 9:00 am

Her name was Sheam, and I didn't notice her until I got angry, and she didn't get angry back. She didn't become submissive, either, or shy, or apologetic. She didn't react at all like how I expected women to act around me. She seemed to think it was funny, like the whole thing was a joke, or a game. When she refused to let me see Nightfall, I should have been pissed, thrown a fit, scared the crap out of her and made her do what I wanted. It would have been a show of course. I'd never hurt a girl like that. Instead, somehow she managed to calm me down and convince me to just set up a *meeting*. That's what stuck in my head about her; what I couldn't make my mind up about; she had me jumping through her hoops from the get-go.

The typical sort lingered inside The Drunken Mermaid; some fisherman types, some pirate types, and some cloaked unscrupulous types like me. They all sat around drinking and making sure not to make eye contact with anyone else. It wasn't anything like The Cracked Tankard. You went there when you wanted a slick bartender, fast women, and a crazy-good piano man. This was a den of salty dogs with eye patches and peg legs, with fishnets draped across the walls, the occasional mounted ships wheel, a big stuffed shark that was probably fake, and barnacles on the legs of all the tables and chairs that were also probably fake. Arr!

When I came in, I saw that there were some taffers at my usual table, and not an eye patch or peg leg among the lot of them. I didn't recognize them, but I didn't examine them either as I went to the bar to get my drink.

"He's not coming," the barkeep said as he poured me a pint of beer.

I looked up at him, breaking the eye contact taboo, knowing what he meant, but asking anyway. "What do you mean?"

"He sent word last night, said he doesn't do this sort of meeting. I don't blame him neither; said to meet with him day after tomorrow at his place, around three. It's an appointment, so you can be sure he'll be there. But he ain't here, so no use waitin' around for him."

"That rotten bastard...coward, that's what he is. A bleedin' taffin' coward. Hah, afraid to meet a man in a bar. I should knife him just for being such a useless git." Now I wasn't just angry; I was seething. Unfortunately this time Sheam wasn't around to not react.

"Afraid the knifin' part is why guys like him don't meet guys like you in places like this, son."

I sneered at the bartender. "Don't call me son, Sonny Boy Bob," I said as I took another drink. I slammed it down on the bar, and ordered, "Top it off or it's going in your face," with a scowl.

The bartender shrugged and replenished my drink. I turned around and glared at the guys sitting at my favorite table. They looked like they were really comfortable until they realized they were getting stared down by a man in a cloak with a beer in his hand and half dozen daggers on his belt. There were three of them, and they weren't so addled by the sea that they didn't know an unfair fight when they saw one; they moved to another table. I

repaid them by not putting a dagger through their hands. Then I sat down like a pile of bones being tossed into a body bag and slammed my beer down on the table.

Sheam; damn the girl. I didn't usually notice girls like that; simple, boring, and the way she handled me didn't exactly put a smile on my face either. That may have been what was bugging me; most girls either made me mad, excited, or I didn't notice them at all. The way she treated me should have been insulting, but it was so bizarre and unexpected, it just left me standing there, blinking, wondering who the hell this creature was. I just couldn't get her out of my head, and I didn't know why.

"Tomboy," I finally said, with a snort. I took another slosh of the suds and then tossed my pint glass at the barkeep. The bastard caught it. I pushed my way out of the doors without paying for my drink. The taffer's payment was that I didn't kill the messenger.

I knew the *real* reason why I couldn't get her out of my head, of course. I was afraid that if Nightfall got cursed, she'd get cursed too. She was an idiot to work for a guy like him, so she probably deserved whatever fate came along with the job. I just didn't want to be the one to cause it. That was probably why I had no intention of keeping the meeting tomorrow. Nightfall was a dead end. Even without the girl, even if he did plan on buying it, he'd draw this deal out for weeks. I needed a faster way of getting rid of the curse.

I stormed into the street and the smell of the salty air made me almost gag. I already had a crazy idea brewing in my skull. The curse was magic, and the best way to deal with magic, was magic.

— Lytha: The Sky as my Guide —

Day 3: 2:00pm

When I did finally eat, I devoured the food like I was a starving beast. By the time I had finished I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Combined with my over-large lunch which I had eaten far too quickly, I was left feeling sluggish and brain-dead. It was not very good either; just some bits of bland bird meat and a few small loaves, but at least the meal had made me feel like a person again. I had thought that returning to The City without my veil would make me feel exposed and paranoid, but it turned out that I barely noticed it was gone. Oddly, in this case, becoming plain for all eyes to see was my disguise. Any who knew me and who would identify me only saw me in that veiled robe, so now, face un-obscured, hair loose about my shoulders, weapons unconcealed, I would be dismissed as a stranger. I didn't return to The City the way I had come; I was visiting a district I had never visited before.

I propelled myself into action, leaving the shaded corner where I had sat down to eat. It did not take me long to discover where I needed to go. There were minds all around me, subtle in their dense murmur, but ideas and thoughts which I was keen on stood out as a wave among the ripples. I usually needed the veil; somehow its shield made me feel more at ease as I

did this, but today it did not seem to matter. I was like the farmer passing through his fields, fingers gently extended to feel the crops as he walked, hips deep in his or her produce, each stalk parting bending in his wake, completely unaware of the passage of this higher mind.

I knew enough about astronomy to know what to look for. I supposed that an astrologer would also do, although their ideas were silly and superstitious, not rigorously scientific, they studied the same stars. I did not think that a ship's navigator would do; they too knew about the movements and locations of the stars, but I did not expect them to have such things memorized. I did not plan to reason out the information for myself nor ask someone else to do it for me. I was going to take it from their minds.

I walked for a time, just listening. I had to remind myself not to close my eyes now and then. I did not need to see what was around me, what with dozens of minds with their own eyes to give me enough sense of where I needed to walk, but it would have looked odd. I caught some inkling at random, distracted thoughts on the topic, and then finally a recollection of a day where a place was visited, a fortune told, and a great reaction resulted. An astrologer then—that would do. I did not try to pinpoint who was thinking it or where they were. I had now what I needed, a memory of the paths traveled to get to this place where the visit occurred.

I opened my eyes—I found I had shut them instinctively when I found the information I needed—and altered my path so that it did not look like I was doing a complete about-face. I switched off to a side road and began to walk in the opposite direction. I did not have far to go; it was several miles, maybe an hour's walk. I was retracing the steps that still echoed in my mind...it seemed that this one had visited the fortune teller many times. I shuddered to think about what that must have been like. All I could do was hope that this mystic actually had a genuine knowledge of the doctrine, and was not merely a scam artist preying on the impressionable.

The destination was tower-like, and ancient. The stones used to make it were so oddly shaped I thought it impossible that the building was so straight, so tall. The memories included being greeted at the door, so I avoided it. It was difficult to find a surface of the building unwatched, though this area was less busy than the ones I had walked to get here. I did not want to wait until night, and I had done daytime jobs before. I hoped that I would not even need to get inside, that there would be a reckless mind present which I could feel from the outside of the tower walls. The building was tall though, so I felt I would have little luck in searching from the city streets.

As I explored I found that there was more to the building than the tower. Going by the type of construction, it included a few low halls and chambers, and even an underground area, though I had accepted this as fact before I realized that I had not directly observed it. Somehow thoughts from within had drifted outside and I had accepted them without confusion or discomfort. Inspired, I found a place where I could sit at the edge of the building without too much suspicion, and then once I was confident that I was not going to be anywhere near anyone's line of intention, I leaned to the side and pretended

to be asleep. I felt a napping traveler would be less suspicious, even a beautiful and heavily armed one, and I would be able to tell a mind of vulgar intent a mile away.

I tried to regain contact with the mind within that had so willingly divulged information and found that I did not need to search so much as glance. I immediately sorted out that there were five within the lower portions of the building, some doing chores, some standing guard, and some studying. I honed in on one and quickly discovered that there was one chief with three apprentices, one of whom had been so for dozens of years. I found him as well, his mind whirling with envy at his peers, who had achieved, in months, what he had spent years striving to achieve. I discarded the irrelevant wash of emotional turmoil, and sought deeper within him for my answers.

Thoughts and ideas slipped through my hands like wet noodles out of a spoon. It was not so much that his mind was difficult to handle, but that his ideas and memories were ill formed and miniscule. It was no wonder he had not advanced in so long. I instead turned my attention to possibly using him to locate his master. My mind was gently filled with many years recollection of the place, though it was sometimes hard to separate the memory of events from the memory of locations. Now I could pinpoint where exactly the astrologer was likely to be at this time of day: asleep in his bed.

My first thought was to get up from where I lay and find a way inside, use my mental map to sneak through the place and get into the astrologer's room to read his mind. This idea faded before I could open my eyes though. I felt comfortable doing this; maybe more comfortable than I had ever before. I had not thought of it while doing it. These actions seemed as natural as mounting a horse would be to a rider who had done so for thirty years, so only in retrospect did I realize how adeptly I had just preformed what usually took much time, concentration, and error.

I did not dwell on my accomplishment long however: I experimented. Once inside the mind of one of the guards, a dull place with cobwebs it seemed, I found it trivial to jump to the mind of another guard far beyond what I had accepted to be my range. I tried it again, and again, jumping from one mind to the next, like a frog leaping upon leaves to cross a pond. I kept reaching upwards until I felt a mind inside the tower, and jumped to it. I knew I was almost to my goal, but gave myself warning: a sleeping mind can be like a boiling kettle, easy to find, but dangerous to touch. I was now in contact with a mind farther away from me than I had ever touched before; except Thalia's of course. He must have been forty or fifty feet above me. I would not have much farther to go. I collected myself into the mental outpost high above me, feeling out for everything around, until I heard my kettle.

An instant after it registered, I leapt instinctively to it. Just as expected, I found it to be like stepping suddenly onto a carousel which was spinning far too quickly. With effort, I righted myself. Once I grew accustomed to the way the figurative carousel moved it became reasonable in its own unique way. A mind usually operates independently from its sensory influences; it reacts to

these and consumes them as memories. However, in a dreaming mind the sensory input is indiscernible from the workings of the mind itself and operates at speeds independent from the actual passage of time. I pushed and pulled my way against the currents of his subconscious illusions, trying to access his memories of work and study, hoping desperately that I would know what I was after when I saw it.

I soon began to feel that it was an impossible task. My search was too specific. His dreaming mind was too radical. Attempting to assemble several separate concepts from a bank of knowledge into a new thought which was my own creation rather than his made me grow dizzy, confused, almost to the point of becoming lost in the maze. Still, I kept trying, even though doubt crept into me and implored me to give up. Today I had done things I did not think possible; there was room for one more.

I tried to broaden my search with the hopes of narrowing it down from a new discovery. I now knew what the constellation of the serpent was, and sought through memories of snow and cold, feelings of being weary of this cold, as if it had been going on for many months, and then observations of the sky above the mountains. I saw flashes of what I wanted, random bits too out of context to discern what I truly needed, and then there was a flood of thoughts and memories piling into me as if a nail had just been driven into my skull....

In the blink of an eye, I saw the stars of the serpent above the mountains, which were white with snow, and felt the biting cold all around me. The land slid below me like raging rapids, and then I was among the mountains as if I were a mouse scurrying between blades of grass. On and on they rushed by, until finally they were replaced by hill and valley and stream and yet more hills, and planes and woodlands and lights, many lights which I dove into; houses, many, and then the largest one: a castle.

I saw faces, torches, many more faces, halls, all flying by me. A table set with food: a banquet. At the end of the table sat a woman whose face was the only I could make out: white, with dark features and eyes cold and cruel. I had never seen her face and yet I knew her at once. Delphine: The world spun about her. The world knelt at her knees. The world kissed her hand. Words whispered into ears. Promises made.

The world spun backwards. Faces: happy faces, giving, devoting, ensnared. Back, back I spun. I was again in the woods, a strange, low building illuminated by fire, a pentacle, and the woods, and The City, and....

I tumbled back into myself with the same force as before, like the nail had been yanked out with a pry bar. I was disoriented, confused by what I had seen, but slowly things returned to focus. I was still outside the building, and from the look of the sky and the city around me, very little time had passed, if any. I reflected on what I had gleaned from the astrologer, and found that I knew more than I realized.

He knew her: Delphine. He had met with her at the very place where she

had invited Thalia, and even worked for her. I suspect that he rendered to her services as an astrologer, but the association could have run far deeper. The two new apprentices: they were also hers. Their faces in the room at the banquet were familiar to the master. He had met them there. No wonder his old pupil felt slighted; the master clearly favored his connections to Delphine. But there were more of them, many, many more, but how many? I could not say. The man felt a certain way about all of those who met with Delphine: he knew them, and was connected to them all. The city was filled with her servants. They were all men of stature, of standing, of *use* in The City, just as he was. They were trusted. Powerful.

They had met recently; far more recently than the memory of the mountains and stars showed. Near the end, I saw a place in the woods: a building shaped as a pentacle. The villa, his mind called it. She was here, now, in The City, and that there was a place where she and her servants could meet in safety, in privacy, to discuss their business. But he did not know where she was; only of the meeting.

I felt it unlikely that I would find Delphine at this place beyond the mountains. This might have been part of the warning she gave, about how if eight years passed, it would be too late. What else had changed in that time? I wanted to know. I wanted to know why Delphine had returned to The City, and what business she had with so many in so much power. I wanted to know what use she had for Thalia, and why she would beg for her return. Most of all, I wanted her to share the same fate as Thalia; to waste away slowly, body and mind broken, until there was nothing left but a ruined husk of flesh. I wanted to save the Hammerites the trouble. I would torture her into this state myself.

I picked myself up, and felt a pang of pride for my accomplishment. I had robbed a building without ever setting foot inside. My boast to Koyne about never unsettling the dust suddenly carried a fresh, potent meaning.

— Sheam: A Humbled Master —

Day 3: 5:00 pm

The door to my office creaked open. I had heard his footsteps a few seconds prior, so it was no surprise when I saw the dark shape of Daelus before me, looking somehow to be half the man he normally was. “How did it go?” I asked, sensing that not all was well after his meeting with the Hammerites at Soulforge.

He let out a sigh, taking his hat off and rubbing his forehead as he closed the door behind him. “About like always, or worse. The good news is that the Hammerites are sending some troops to investigate the pagan villa.”

“Good for whom?” I asked, a little uncomfortable at the idea that Daelus seemed so completely on the side of the Hammerites.

“Good for my uneasy role with the Hammerites,” he said, looking a bit riled that I had asked such a thing. I kept quiet at that point. “The bad news is that Rafael wants me to cough up Hammerite murderers, and fast. For some

reason he thinks my connections to the underworld means I have a cache of them on standby. I wonder why he would think *that*."

"He *knows* about that?" I blurted, agog.

He sat down at my desk across from me, just like he had earlier that day. "Oh yes," he said, slowly. "He called me *Master Nightfall* and everything. I suppose we haven't been nearly as clever as we always supposed we were. I am also not sure if he actually thinks I may have a genuine lead on the now infamous Hammerite butcher of Downtowne, or if he's just testing my loyalty; if I will betray someone merely for his sake, on his say so."

I maintained my silence, and understood why his shoulders hung in such a way. He had already set things in motion, and now there was no turning back. I wanted to ask him why it was worth it, but I knew the answer. I knew what would happen if he didn't cooperate with them. I hated the idea of weighing strangers' lives against the life of my friend. It wasn't his fault he was in this position, I told myself over and over again. The Hammerites would brutalize and kill people even if Daelus had never come to The City; maybe less, maybe more. I just hated the idea that the identity of their victims was now to be based on his say-so. I didn't want that on his conscious, and I didn't want it on mine either.

After a long pause without my saying a word, he resumed. "I have an idea of what I must do, and I do not like it."

I was afraid to ask. "You have someone, or a group, who you are going to hand over to them?"

"I have something in mind...but it requires a great deal more thought."

I grew even more afraid to ask. If it had been something he wanted to discuss with me, he would have been more forthcoming with what these orders were, and to whom. "I do hope you are right," was all I said, and by that I meant less that he was correct in a guess, and more that he was in the right; doing the right thing.

"Did we hear back from the messenger sent to observe Ghost?"

I nodded, handing him the brief report I received just minutes ago. Daelus looked it over for a moment before saying aloud, "That rotten bastard. Coward, that's what he is. A bleeding taffing coward. Afraid to meet a man in a bar. I should knife him just for being such a useless git."

I wanted to laugh, or at least smile the way I had when I first read it. There was something about the bored monotone way that Daelus recited Ghost's words that amused me, but Daelus himself looked far from amused.

"I also had a letter delivered to Jyre," he said, changing the subject abruptly. "I sent it as soon as I got done with the Hammerites."

"Oh?" I said, perking up, though there was something in his voice which convinced me that I had no reason to do so. "What did it say?"

"It was very short, an offer to help, and for protection. I kept it free of more details than that just in case..."

Something crept up from the back of my mind like a spider, leaping from my tongue before I could consider what it really meant. "Daelus, you don't...you're not thinking of—"

He cut me off before I could say it, a flash of anger in his eyes, "Of handing over Jyre and Els to the Hammerites? No. They may be connected to The Lady, but they would not do at all as potential butcher suspects."

The way he knew what I was thinking only told me that he had thought of it too. I was glad that he denied it, but I didn't like the way he denied it. It was not, 'no, I wouldn't do such a horrible thing to those who appealed for my trust,' or, 'no, she is just an innocent girl,' but rather 'no, they would not do.' I knew that bad times could make good people do bad things, but I was freshly reminded that I had no idea of the scope of what Daelus was capable of, good or bad. Meekly, I asked, "When do you think she'll reply?" hoping we could both forget that it had come up, and hoping not to see another flash of anger in his eyes.

"She won't. I had a man shadow the courier and wait by the delivery location, the same one Jyre asked me to deliver the first letter to, to see who picked it up. If it was Jyre, he would have escorted her personally. However, someone else was lying in wait for it, and it did not seem to be her captain friend.

"Oh no..." I said in a brief gasp. The thought of someone wretched stalking after Jyre filled me with a cold dread. "Did the agent follow the stranger?"

"Yes. The one who intercepted the note seemed a most unscrupulous sort; he seemed to waddle as he walked, and was constantly rubbing at his underarms. Our agent followed the subject all the way to Newmarket, and lost contact when the subject entered a building. The agent was dressed for blending into a crowd, not sneak work, so he decided it was not worth the risk to intrude, and instead immediately reported back to me. I got word of all of this just before I stepped inside your office."

"But you know where these people are operating..."

"Yes," he nodded, "and I will be briefing another agent later tonight on a mission to infiltrate this place and tell me all they can about who these people are."

"I hope it's Ranson," I volunteered. "So that rat can get what he deserves."

Daelus smiled. "Agreed; however, the mission will be one of gathering knowledge, not confrontation. Hopefully we will know by the morning if Ranson is having Jyre stalked, as suggested by the note about the paintings, or if something else is going on here."

"And James?" I asked, hoping to learn that he would soon be involved in all of this.

Daelus held up a folded note in his hand. "Well on task. I shall be drafting a letter to him tonight in reply to his most prompt communiqué."

I smiled, and tried not to give a little squeak of excitement that the only man whom I respected as much as Daelus was about to work his magic, and fetched a quill and parchment, "In the mood to dictate?" I offered, though it was more of a demand.

He gave a light laugh, and began to rub his forehead again. "You drive a hard bargain, Sheam."

I stuck my chin at him and grinned, saying "I am a woman of many

complicated needs.”

“...Perfect for such a complicated world. Now, to begin...head it in the standard fashion of course.” He cleared his throat. “Yes, this will potentially be a long term operation, and stealth is absolutely vital, whereas speed is simply highly suggestible. That said, I agree with your initial assessment. But, due to a very recent discovery, not ten minutes old in fact, it seems that Jyre may be in grave danger. I do not know how directly or indirectly this danger is linked to The Lady, and I shall be doing all within my power to amend this situation independent of your investigations, but if there is any end your means can achieve concerning her safety, I feel it must be arrived at as quickly as possible.

“New paragraph: Your intuition is rarely off the mark, but for the sake of us all and The Cause I hope that your insights concerning The Lady’s entwinement with the bloody events of last fall are far short of the truth. The fact that you have suggested it, however, lends credence to my approaching The Hammerites on this issue. If she is indeed linked to forces unspeakable, I can think of none who I would rather have handling it than you and The Hammerites. I hope that circumstances allow for many detailed and promptly delivered reports. Thank you.”

He paused as he usually did when he was done dictating, and finally said, “End in the usual fashion.”

Then he caught me giggling to myself. “What?” he said, a bit bemused.

“Oh nothing,” I said as I ended the letter with his initial. “It’s just that you talk like James whenever you dictate a letter to him.” I handed it to him to review before I fetched an envelope and sealing wax. It wasn’t that he wanted to check the accuracy of my dictation; he just always seemed to change his mind about this phrase or that, and if it bugged him enough I would rewrite it for him. Thankfully he only dictated the short letters.

“Do I...?” he said, now even more bemused.

“Well, you still have your own unique choice of words, but the way you phrase things and the tone of your voice, even a bit of your pronunciation...it’s all very James. It’s funny. I like it.” In truth he tended to be a mirror to whomever he spoke too, but it was more obvious when that other person was not around. I was always curious if he did the same to me.

“Well James and I do speak very much alike...” he reasoned, after handing the letter back to me with nary a suggested change. I had the envelope ready.

I grinned, pressing the circle emblem into the hot wax, “Miles apart, actually; which makes you talking like him even better.”

“Well now that you’ve told me, you’ve ruined it, you understand. Now I will be thinking about that as I dictate, and either try to do it and get it horribly wrong or try not to do it and just sound odd.”

I grinned more, but did not reply to his statement. “James can be reached now by the usual address?”

“Drop Box 74f, actually; he did not tell me of a different one so that is still the one to use.”

I attached a note for the courier, and slid it down the chute reserved for

James.

"Sheam," Daelus said in a way which usually meant that he was about to try to say something unique. "I know I have discussed The Cause with you before, but these discussions usually centered on only what you directly needed to know, so you could help me, and for your protection. I am afraid part of that will have to change...for those two ends can become mutually exclusive, and in fact at odds with one another."

"There is very little about what you do which does not put me in some form of danger, Daelus," I said in earnest. "I think we know where I stand on that."

"Not this kind of danger," he said. "James mentioned it in his letter to me...I know you got that much from what I dictated to you."

"Yes," I said, understanding. "The-Bloody-Events-of-Last-Fall," I recited with some measure of cadence. "James thinks that The Lady is linked with Constantine." I felt like I should have some bit of dread over this, but these concepts seemed so distant and alien, I had a hard time believing them. The horrors I had witnessed over my own lifetime were far more real; I simply could not muster anxiety over what seemed little more than a fairy tale.

"It has entered into my mind that this Lady may put everything we have worked for in jeopardy. If left unchecked, our vision of a changed city could become impossible; The Cause would be dead before it truly began. I am sure that she and those like her also have a vision for The City, and it is undoubtedly in direct contrast with our own."

I could tell that he was very worried about that. He was not telling me so he could warn me, or that I could do something to help prevent it; he just needed to talk to someone about it; someone he could trust, someone who could understand his fear. "We won't let that happen, Daelus," was all I could think to say.

"But there is another side to it. If we deal with this correctly, and end this cloaked siege The City is under..."

"Then it will do much to further The Cause," I said in completion. I could tell by his satisfied look that I was correct. "What else can we do tonight to help ensure that happens?"

His look of satisfaction turned to one of pride; not pride in self, I knew, but pride in me. It filled me with a warmth which made all of the dreadful things which led to this moment seem worthwhile. "There is one other lead. I want to try to get in touch with the Bloods, but first I need to discern if they are friend or foe. They could be a handy ally in this, or a ripe nuisance. It's too soon to tell."

"What can I do?" I offered.

"Go through our records, I am afraid. See if there's any mention by any of our buyers or sellers of the group. See if there's any mention of the group anywhere at all. I'll help you. But there are two things that are very important which we must do first."

"Yes?" I said, not enjoying the idea of the work he had planned, but perturbed over the suggested vital acts.

"You need to tell Maxwell to shut the gates and lock the doors, and then that he and Schinler can go home. I need to go make us some coffee. Deal?"

That statement was almost as beautiful as his previous display of pride. "Done!"

— **Nightfall: The Price of Favor** —

Day 3: 8:00 pm

While Sheam was occupied with locking gates and getting rid of Maxwell and Schinler, and the coffee was brewing, I quickly wrote out an order I did not want her to have any part in.

Somno,

I have an urgent mission which I feel that you and the night-crew can help me with. I have recently been charged by none other than Father Rafael himself with delivering into Hammerite clutches individuals who are allegedly responsible for organized violence against the church.

Your group, talented as it is with all manner of thuggery and so forth, should have no trouble procuring for our benefit an assortment of villains to fit the bill. Make sure that they are no one anyone would miss, and that they are no one anyone could trace back to me. If they actually *are* Hammerite murderers, so much the better. Do what you can.

Please proceed as previously ordered concerning Ghost.

I need this fast. Overnight if possible.

~ M.N.

The message was sent before I could change my mind. Perhaps I would not have to use Ghost for this purpose after all, but it was a possibility I could not yet abandon.

— **Ghost: Divorced from Salvation** —

Day 3: 8:00 pm

I could see the sun beginning to set over the rooftops, turning the sky a bright bloody reddish color. Even I had to admit that it was an awful sight. The wooden bridge I slowly made my way down went thump, thump, thump with the sound of oblivious pedestrians making their way home, or to work, or whatever. I paused for a moment to admire the view over the narrow strip of black water, just as a collection of cawing crows flew overhead. "Gotta keep moving," I told myself, though I really wanted to sit on the edge of the bridge and see if I could get any spitballs to land on people's heads.

A few hours ago I was in The Black Alley, asking around about a witch doctor. That was the start of a long goose chase that led me here, to Witches' Plaza, a part of The City that didn't know if it wanted to be creepy or elegant, but somehow managed to be neither. I honestly couldn't see a witch doctor living around here. It was a pagan practice, after all, so it was a job more

suited to being out in the woods somewhere.

I got to the other side of the bridge and glanced up at the clock tower to see how late it was getting: way too late was the answer. I sped up a bit as I moved through a tunnel that cut right through a gigantic building which was covered from foundation to rooftop with all sorts of spinning and looping woodwork.

When I came out on the other side, I shuddered. I was in the middle of a gallows; or right next to one anyway. The tall building I had come through hunched over a pit filled with black water. All over the side of the building were wooden beams with nooses hanging from them, most of which still contained bodies. I could just imagine those bodies coming alive, and thrashing helplessly at those ropes. It might have been funny if it wasn't such a horrible thought.

I looked the other way, and saw a series of towers spiraling up into the air, with dozens of dead trees squeezed in between them. This place was nasty. Pedestrians still wandered here, though less than in the other square, and seemed not to care that they were wandering around a place that looked like it designed for dying, not living. I changed my mind; it was a perfect setting for a witch doctor.

"Hey, uhm," I said to a peasant who got too close to me. "I heard that old mad Ghirardelli lived around here. Know which way to him?"

He pointed in the direction of the towers, and said, "There, that way, and down as far as you can go, then go under the dead." He nodded with a jerk and quickly walked away. I frowned as I looked where he had pointed. The walkway I was to follow sank down, *very* far down, cutting a path through the crooked towers and dead trees.

I snorted, put on a bold face, and went. To my disgust I soon saw where I was headed: the path wound back on itself and headed right down to the bottom of that black pit. I had to clutch the palm of my glove against my nose to keep out the fumes of rotting *everything*. A crude boardwalk wrapped around the perimeter of the pit, with shady, ugly looking shops clinging to the sides. I took a breath and pressed on, heeding the peasant's instructions to go under the dead. I glanced upwards at the gallows above me and the fresh corpses still dangling, and wondered how many bodies there would be lurking under that black water.

"Zombies," I whispered to myself, feeling the hairs on my neck stand up at the thought of dozens of zombies reaching out of the black water, coming to get me. I turned around quickly and followed the boardwalk, inspecting each shop sign carefully for the name of the witch doctor. I didn't see it. When I got to the end of the walk I saw that my path plunged unto a cavernous corridor which sunk into the ground beneath the towering structures lining the edge of the pit. With nothing better left to do, I went in.

It was chilly inside, and very damp, with torches blackening the stone ceiling and woodwork trusses which seemed hardly adequate to keep the whole place from caving in on itself. I lowered my head and pressed on, hoping that the tunnel would come to open air soon, and that I'd see a cute

little shop sign that said "Old Mad Ghirardelli, Witch Doctor and Soap Merchant."

The tunnel finally came back out to open air and I found myself once again surrounded by dead trees and even taller dead *buildings*. The streets were much quieter here, with very few pedestrians, but with the rotting smell of the black pit so heavy in the air I understood why. With just a moment's glance I finally saw it, nestled between two dead oaks, standing like a crooked tower over the surrounding dilapidated hovels, a building that looked like a thousand year old grain silo with light in the windows. In front of it an old wooden sign bore the letters: "Ghirardelli". Sadly, it said nothing about him also being a soap merchant. Hopefully he had about ten tons of incense burning inside. He'd need at least that much to make the air breathable.

I knocked firmly at the door and waited. Then I saw another sign, this one in the window, which read; "Customers welcome, come on in!" "Cheeky," I muttered, and then pushed the door open.

It had definitely once been a grain silo; the inside looked exactly like I had always imagined one would look. In the middle of the room, twitching like a corpse that had been hooked up to an electrical transformer that was going berserk, was a little old man with an animal skull on his head who seemed very intent on getting something out of his ear; or maybe in, I couldn't really tell.

"Old mad Ghirardelli?" I asked, hoping I was saying the stupid name right.

"Geer-are-deli," he chirped, and then gave up on his ear, "yep, that's me!" he said, offering his hand, the finger with green ear-wax goo all over it right at the forefront of his polite greeting.

I didn't take his hand. "Yeah, hi, I was told you could break a curse."

He peered at me through a thicket of whiskers; his eyebrows seemed to somehow meld into his mustache. "Gender change is it? Someone's gone and trapped you in a man's body?"

"What the taff? No!" I shouted, stepping away.

"HA-ha!" he bawled, "Sorry son, old witch doctor's joke. Come now, what's the curse? Sit, sit!"

I sat, as soon as I found a chair that didn't look like someone had tried to use as a chamber pot, and recounted for him the whole story as quickly as I could. He nodded and stroked his beard...mustache...eyebrows...head-hair, I couldn't be sure where one ended and the other began, and listened, going ah, ah, ah, all the time.

"Well that's a classic tale son, and I have good news and bad news."

"Oh, shit...look, can't we skip the bad news?"

"Bad news is that while you were telling me your story, the sun's gone down, and there's now sure to be zombies on the prowl for you!"

"Duh, yeah I know," I scowled at him, wishing he wouldn't waste my time with obvious things.

"The good news is that my tower is warded against the undead, so you're safe as long as you need to stay here," he said with a chuckle.

"I'm not here to stay, I'm here for you to cure me!"

"Yes, ah ha, indeed," he said, getting up and beginning to flip through a book. "I expect you can pay?"

"Anything you want. If I don't have enough on me right now, I'll work for you until I can pay it off. Anything. I just want this curse over with!"

"Ah ha, indentured servant, strong and healthy one too, sure to be popular with the ladies," he said with another chuckle.

"Heh, yeah...whatever; just as long as you cure me, okay?"

He chuckled some more and flipped through his book, muttering to himself something that didn't sound like any type of language that anyone who wasn't an idiot knew about.

Since I was visiting a doctor, I may as well take care of other issues. I shoved my bitten hand into his face, so he could see the tooth marks left by the Ragbert zombie. "Got this bite here from a zombie, too. Do you think it's infected? Am I going to become a zombie any minute?" He looked at it for a second before trying to grab my hand with his smelly claws (his fingernails had started to curl) to pull it closer.

"Infected, yes, absolutely," he crooned, nodding his head so that his beard rustled like dry leaves.

"Gah!" I blurted, ramming the heel of my other palm onto my forehead. "Well can you do something, doc?" I demanded.

He shrugged, "Clean it, leaches, add some herbs, wrap it up good and proper...it will hurt for quite some, take longer to heal, but it's nothing to be upset over."

"What?" I said to him, peeking out from behind my wrist. "Oh! You mean it's just infected, not...you know, infected-infected."

"Uh, yeah," he said, one eyebrow jutting up. "You're not going to turn into a zombie from a bite like this, son. They have to get you in the neck or groin."

"Groin!" I shouted and jerked my hand away from him. "You sick dirty old man!"

"It's the truth!" he said with a creepy laugh. "Ah, I think I know what I have to do," he said, closing the book. "But first, where's the star? Let me see it."

"Can't, sorry, I stashed it. I didn't want to risk someone like you snatching it from me. It's still worth a ton of money, and I aim to collect."

"Like a monkey with his hand stuck in a jar," he told me with a laugh.

"Are you calling me a monkey?" I said with a sneer.

He chuckled and gestured madly to me, though I had no idea what he was trying to convey.

"Uh, I don't know...hand-wave-ese," I said, examining once again the inflamed bite on my hand.

"I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to the spirits! Don't interrupt me, son!"

"I'm not your son," I said, and then added quietly, but loud enough for him to hear me, "crazy, dirty old man..." He was still gesturing like a blind man trying to find a doorknob. "Hey, are you going to clean this up or not!"

"I'm not a nursemaid, clean it yourself, the leaches are over there," he said

without pointing. "I'm asking the spirits about your curse, so shut up!"

"Greasy, taffing...taffer," I proclaimed to the air, and began to look around behind me for a big jar with the word 'leaches' written on it. "Where the hell are my bloody leaches?"

"Shove it, rogue! I converse with the dead! They're already pissed at you, so don't make it worse!"

I continued to glance around the silo. It still smelled of rotting wheat, but was filled with jars and boxes, none of which had labels. I got up and paced around the perimeter of the chamber, occasionally peeking out the opening into the streets outside. "Not finding leaches, doc!" I muttered while glancing at him every now and then as he continued gyrating his arms about in silence.

He scooped up some sand and tossed it into the fire pit in front of him, and with a flash a flame ignited. I guess it wasn't really sand. He continued to gesture madly, but now he was chanting, sounded like "gee joo yoo ya pee que." It sounded like baby talk.

"Hey," I shouted to him, not caring if I interrupted his conversation with 'the spirits'... "Don't you have any potions or something? You know; one sip, all your wounds be-gone!"

"Yah yae jou nog few pee que!"

I sneered and shouted back "goo goo ga ga hokus pokus dingalingaling! You must be talking to the ghosts of wee tots and folk with brain rot!"

A gust of wind carried through the windows and with it the smell of the black pit, only it was ten times worse. "Oh crap," I said aloud, and looked out the door of the hovel. There was a crowd; a crowd of the most disgusting zombies I had ever seen. They all oozed with the black liquid, and were little more than soaked skeletons. In the distance I could hear screams as pedestrians came in contact with the mob of undead and ran, or died. I shut the door quickly and demanded, "Are you sure that your wards are good enough!"

The witchdoctor was too deeply entranced to reply; I was on my own. I didn't trust his wards; this place was surrounded by dozens, maybe a hundred zombies, and I was not about to let this be the end. I saw that I could climb up the shelves and get to an upper window. I pushed and kicked jars and boxes out of my way as I climbed up, and no sooner had I gotten off the ground did I hear the sounds of scraping and thumping against the door, walls, and windows. The witch doctor's fire grew dim and smoky, filling the room with a haze, and up I went. The upper shelves were less sturdy, and threatened to come free, but still I climbed.

Finally I was to the window, and punched it open. The glass shattered, cutting my already wounded hand. Below the zombies had also broken through the doors and windows, and were now clawing over each other to fit through the narrow openings, with the entranced witchdoctor in the center of it all, seemingly oblivious. That didn't last. In an instant they were all over him, rotted teeth and slimy claws sinking into his frail old body. I couldn't watch; I knew what was happening. So much for his stupid wards. I made haste through the narrow window as the zombies who weren't busy pulling

out the witchdoctor's intestines had started to try to climb up the shelves after me.

Their random chattering focused into a roar, and as the sound hit a crescendo, they all cried out in unison, "You are cursed!" Yeah, I know.

I got my legs through the window, and leapt through the air to grab onto the overhang of a nearby building. It broke as I grabbed onto it, sending me tumbling about a dozen feet to the ground. I was used to that by now. I scrambled, knowing that at any moment a dozen slimy claws would come down on me. They swarmed at me just an instant too late; for them at least. I was on my feet and running, sadly back in the direction of the black pit.

"Time for this," I said, pulling out a zombie-away special, and tossed it over my shoulder. The effect was almost instantaneous; a massive fireball erupted behind me, engulfing the pack of zombies, and throwing me, and piles of rotting flesh, in the direction of the tunnel. I landed in a heap along with chunks of smoldering zombie parts, and tumbled head over heels a few times before I was able to steady myself and get back up. First I saw that there were no zombies directly behind me, and then I saw that I was on fire.

"Gah," I complained as I patted out the flames. Then I saw that being on fire was the least of my worries. The black slick of ooze the zombies had trailed behind them led back to the pit, and the ooze was on fire, and in two seconds the pit would be on fire too. Well, at least it would take care of the zombies, but that meant I was trapped. I turned to run back to the silo, and saw that there were still plenty of zombies ambling towards me; black, oozing, on-fire zombies. The muck must have been protecting them from burning somehow. Then, just to make things worse, the silo exploded. I guess the flames from my bomb had reached something in the silo that could go boom, and now I was once again being rained on by burning zombie parts. I ducked down to shield myself from the barrage of flaming ribcages, but that's when the black pit finally caught on fire, and now there was a second explosion, this time filling the tunnel I was in with a torrent of flame.

I don't know how I survived; I just ducked down as far as I could and hoped that what I was wallowing in wasn't going to ignite. As soon as the ground stopped shaking I looked up, and saw scorched stone everywhere, and nothing moving. There was a crater where the silo had been, and smoldering stumps where the dead oak trees had been. Well, I guessed they would have to take this place off of the official tourism lists. I got up, pushing off bits of zombie from my shoulders, and staggered in a direction that wasn't currently on fire.

"Sorry. doc," I muttered, making my way back to the crater of the silo. Naturally, that was when I heard the cry of a watchman's horn, and realized that I was the last man standing in an awful scene of carnage, that the watch would mistake all of these mutilated zombies for innocent people, and that I was about to be convicted of the worst act of arson in the history of forever, so I ran.

Suddenly this part of The City didn't look so gross, which meant I wasn't nearly as nervous about finding cracks and crevices and places to sneak and

hide away, but sadly now that I wanted to go into those deep dark places where evil things lurked, I couldn't find any. I knew that at any moment the bad guys,—or was it the good guys—would be all over this place, and I wanted to be as close to somewhere else as I could be. The sloping overhang of a short fat building looked like as worthy an escape route as any, so I pulled myself up and scampered across the shallow pitched roof, leaping over the peak and sliding down the other side, only to see that the building wasn't so short on this side, and I found myself falling at least three stories to the street, with only a crappy awning that wouldn't have been able to support a swallow's nest to break my fall.

And that, I assume, was when I blacked out.

— Jyre: A Change of Plans —

Day 3: 8:00 pm

I peeked into the room where Els was lying down. I had thought of a dozen stories to tell him about where I was going, all of them half-truths, but as soon as I saw him lying there, snoring, I forgot the one I had picked, and just stepped inside to get a closer look. His face was a normal color, and his nose and mouth were dry. I was happy he was going to be okay, and also happy that I wouldn't have to lie to him one more time.

"It was a close call," a deep voice came from the other side of the room. I was almost startled, but the voice was so low and gradual, it was hard to be. The doctor, who I now knew was named Moody, was sitting at the other side of the room on the floor with his legs crossed, and with a long pipe in his hand.

I turned from him and looked back at Els, speaking softly so I wouldn't wake him. "What was wrong?"

"I found substances in his blood, much of it had been there for years, which were attacking his immune system."

I looked back at Moody just in time to see him blow a series of rings out of his pipe. "I don't know what that means," I said.

He smiled, the hair on his cheeks brisling out, but then it faded as he began to explain. "The Lady was using the city-born humans for experiments. From her successes, she would treat her own people. But in case of failure, she had a method to allow the test subject to die quickly, or at least more quickly than they would from the failed experiment, which could potentially leave them in a very, ah, uncomfortable existence. They were delivered a serum, requiring nothing more than a pinprick, which would infect their blood and quickly remove their natural ability to resist disease. It would only work on those she experimented on, because it was merely a link in the chain of the mutagens which opened up the infectious path. In most cases, it was used to curtail any rebellion in the experimented; if they grew violent or if an insurrection seemed imminent, their lives would be weak and short. In the case of Els here, it was done so that the rest of his time living as a free man would be as brief as possible."

I wasn't sure I understood, but I didn't want to bother him any more with it. "How did you cure him?" I asked.

"I have an antidote," was all he said, giving another puff.

"How did you get that?"

He moved the pipe away from his lips, and paused before answering. "Because, I helped The Lady devise it in the first place." He didn't pretend to be remorseful or ashamed. He probably felt that his current situation, dressed like a man of The City, speaking like a man of The City, and here helping us, spoke louder than any displays of regret. He was one of us; he had helped her, and had escaped.

"Els knew, and that's why he had me go right to you," I said.

He nodded, "And it's the only reason why I am now involved. It was our agreement." He resumed smoking, taking a long huff.

"I wonder why she didn't just kill him," I said, thankful, but still confused.

"I wondered that myself, and a few moments before you stepped inside, I decided the answer. I fear it was in order to get me out of hiding, to be perfectly honest," he said, the smile returning to his face. Even though he smiled, I knew it wasn't a joke.

"I'm sorry," I squeaked.

"Nonsense. What kind of life would I live if I had let an old friend die in order to live it?"

I smiled back at him. Right then and there, I decided I could trust him. "Thank you," I said, and turned to go.

"Where will you go now, little one?" he said when my hand went to the doorknob.

I didn't mind him calling me little one, since he was so big that he could have called Els that too and it would have made sense. "I need to go to the Red Dragon Inn, to meet with a friend."

"I see," he said, blowing out a puff of smoke. "I will let Els know when he wakes up. Is there anything else I can tell him?"

I remembered what I had just thought about trusting him, and suddenly wondered if it was hasty. Reluctantly, I continued, "Tell him I found some work, and we will be able to eat tonight, and we will be able to pay you for your medicine."

"Worry about the food, little one. My medicine belongs to whoever needs it."

Thankful for that, and even more thankful that he didn't ask any more questions, I left, locking the door behind me.

I knew the way well, but like a bad dream somehow my legs refused to obey me, and I found myself taking one wrong turn after another. I was distracted, and I didn't know why. The only thing that was racing faster than my mind was my heart. Trembling slightly, my hood pulled down lower than usual, I passed unnoticed into The Red Dragon Inn, a building which hugged the ground like the sleeping beast of its namesake. The title was inappropriate; it conjured up an image of majesty that was sorely lacking from this place, but had it been any other way, I would never have gotten in.

There were no bouncers or armed guards; it was a watering hole for souls like me.

The ceiling was low, rafters hovering just inches above the heads of the busy patrons, and tables pushed together like little spools of thread tilting this way and that on an uneven floor. It was a wonder how any drink managed to stay upright. I crept into my usual corner, and the reality of my anxiety became clearer. In the letter I had made it sound like this was my turf, but the truth couldn't have been farther away. I had come in here before, but never as a customer, only as a beggar looking to steal scraps of food from the plates of drunks. Later, when we actually had money and I had convinced Els to come with me, I just followed his lead, staying in his shadow, letting him do the talking and making sure everyone knew that I was his. But this time I was neither in his shadow or here to beg, so I wasn't sure how to act. How would the 'friend' I was here to meet find me? I would have to go to the bar. I shivered at the prospect, but let my determination be my guide.

I must have stood at the bar for an hour, clueless to the customs of this place, before I got up enough nerve to climb up onto one of the high stools, and stare over the bar much like a mouse would stare over the top of the stone he had been hiding under all night. No bartender came to take my order, or even glanced my way. I began to feel invisible. I mouthed an 'excuse me' to a man behind the bar, busy with laughter and pouring dark liquids into the tall ceramic mugs of those he laughed with. I don't know if he just didn't hear me, or if I hadn't spoken at all.

I froze when a fat man pushed his way onto the stool next to me. I was about to sink away back into my corner, sick with the irony that I should be made so nervous by a man who normally I would be trying to steal from, when he suddenly turned to me and moved his hand as if to grab me, saying "You are Jyre, yes?"

I recoiled, putting up both my arms to defend myself, but then realized that he was extending his hand in friendship. I still didn't let my guard down. With my arms still raised to ward off any sudden grabs, I said, "Yes."

"Good. I must say that the description I was given of you doesn't do you justice. Your eyes contain a certain fire that *excites* me. But do not allow me to make you uncomfortable. I am as harmless as a newborn pup, or more so, for I won't try to gnaw on you out of affection!" He then let out a dry chuckle, which crept me out even more than his attempt to reassure me. "Allow me to get you something; what are you drinking?"

"Liquor makes you slow..." I said in an attempt to be cutting. I didn't want anything, but I couldn't just say that.

"Suit yourself." he said, and then barked to the bartender to bring him a pint as he patted twitchily at his underarms.

I studied him carefully, noting his fancy dress, tunic, trousers, and overcoat all bulging with pockets and various bags and compartments, straps and buckles slung this way and that to hold even more pouches; it was like he wanted me to try to take something off of him. It was a test. Would he want me to take something to see how good I am, or was the test to see if I would

respect him as an ally and not steal from him? It didn't matter. I was so nervous my hands shook in little fists under the folds of my clothes. I wouldn't be able to steal the hat off a sleeping head.

"Who are you?" I asked suddenly, watching his bearded profile as he took a long drink from his freshly delivered glass.

He stopped drinking, lowering his glass just a bit so that it wouldn't spill when he removed it from his sticky lips and, turning his eye to look at me, said with a slowly growing smile, "Just like the messenger told you! *A friend.*"

"No, he said that *he* was a friend. He didn't say anything about a fat man in a frilly outfit." I was turning my anxiety into nastiness, hoping it would make me appear tough, and also hoping that it wouldn't upset him and make him violent, or make him run off and ruin my chances.

He just laughed. "Oh, you don't like it? It's just the thing to wear, you know...us important business types. Your friend Lord Thresh is the rascal when it comes to that; such drab, colorless taste."

"He's not my friend," I muttered quietly, not sure if I wanted him to hear that or not.

"We have more things in common by the minute! He's not my friend either; quite the opposite, in fact." He was handed his drink, a frothy something which was overflowing from the stein, and began to sip at the edge, getting the bubbly substance all over his mustache.

"So he's your enemy?" I asked, as if he hadn't made that obvious already. If he truly was Daelus's enemy then he was no friend of mine, regardless of what I had said about Daelus not being my friend.

"Oh I wouldn't call him an *enemy*," he said, "just one with whom my interests conflict." He laughed at this, as if something like that was a joke, or he was bragging.

"So, do you have a *name*?" As bold as I thought that sounded, I knew my voice was trembling. I searched my memory for the names of people who could be Daelus's rivals. It seemed somehow beneath him to have them, but I knew this wasn't true. Every person of power had those who wanted to take that power from them.

"Eh," he said, "Such things are not *very* important. There is one name I *could* drop, but..." he glanced around the room as he trailed off, taking a moment before he finished his comment, "I don't know if it's wise to do so *here*." He then leaned in close, and with a ghastly wink, said in almost a whisper, "It starts with an R."

His name started with an R. My list of Daelus's enemies quickly narrowed down to one name which I blurted out in spite of his insistence that it shouldn't be said aloud here. "Are you Ramirez?"

He was just taking a sip from his cup as I said this. His eyes got big for a moment, and then he slowly turned his head to me. His lips were still locked in the shape they held against his tankard, forming an O, with the bubbles from his drink dripping from his chin. "You're so sharp! You've heard of me?" he asked.

At first I was sure he was going to be angry that he had been outed, but he

seemed pleased instead. "Yes," I told him, finding strength in my voice. "I think everyone living on the streets knows about *Ramirez*. He put half of them there." I had definitely heard of him; he was a pompous bastard and a pretentious dandy, even for a warden. What a man like him would be doing in a place like this was beyond me. Maybe he was trying to be inconspicuous, but he was failing miserably. If someone like me could recognize him, anyone could.

"Well," he muttered loudly, "not *half* of them; maybe a third." He chuckled dryly.

"I'm leaving," I said, and then turned away from him. I should have actually left, but I wanted to see what he'd say first.

"He seems to take you for granted, Jyre. Such a woman as yourself, who has inside knowledge concerning a certain female acquaintance of ours..."

"You know The Lady?" I said with a huff. "Oh, *of course you do!*" I then barked, hoping my sarcasm would bite.

"Don't pass up this chance, Jyre. With both what you and I know, we would bring her down, and then all that is hers could be yours."

I wasn't fazed by such offers. People who offer you the world are only there to stab you in the back. "You're lying," I told him with a fierce frown.

"Your lack of cooperation could bode ill for you," he said coolly, his empty glass now sitting on the bar.

"I have nothing you could possibly want." I said quietly, and then more loudly, "Look at me! Take a good look! Does it look like I have anything you could possibly want?"

"Yes, your attention, and for you to shut up," he said, not exactly sounding harsh, but sounding much how a slap in the face would feel.

I don't know why my legs didn't let me run off right then and there. I actually slid back onto my stool, and stared at the wood of the bar.

"Good, now listen closely. The family of our esteemed acquaintance, The Lady Delphine, used to reside in the walled district. The Delphine family is ancient, and their main manor home, a great castle, sat on the edge of that district, but they all but vanished not long before the cataclysm, and the castle sealed off. It is said they left in a great hurry with many things left behind in the confusion; books, letters, scrolls, all abandoned, and much treasure too no doubt. I would pay you commission on any such that you find. On the other hand, you should be aware that the walled district is haunted."

The walled district, haunted; how could someone put it so mildly? The true name was The *Forbidden* District, and the simple word haunted did nothing to conjure up the stories I had heard about this place; a haven for phantoms and mythical beasts, the walking dead and cursed, self-aware treasures which polluted the air with their powers. Yes, the stories told about that place captivated me and filled me with wonder, however, I never dreamed of setting foot inside those walls. It was *forbidden*. He blinked at me, and I thought maybe he wanted me to reply. "How come Els and I never heard about this?" I managed, trying desperately to not allow my great interest in this treasure trove to show.

"Of course you two haven't!" he said, sounding pleased. "Why would a guard and a serving girl be told about her lineage?"

"No, I mean, her name. Who the taff is bloody Lady Delphine?" I said, honestly a bit angry that he should know her name and we did not, even after all of our searching for information on her.

He laughed. "Did not I make it clear, my friend, that you and I possess two opposite halves of the same whole? It is together, combining our knowledge that we shall bring The Lady down. That is why you are important to me—as much as I know about her, there are things you know that I do not."

"Will I be given supplies? Fire crystals and holy water? Flash bombs? A map?" I asked, having accepted the task without realizing it.

"Yes, that and more. We need this done soon, as soon as possible. How soon can you do this?"

I hesitated, not because I was reconsidering taking the mission, but because I was wondering if I should allow Els the chance to talk me out of it or not. Now that the friend had revealed himself as a powerful nobleman, and presented me with a dangerous but very lucrative mission, I was sure he'd try to stop me. "Right now," was my answer to Ramirez.

— Lytha: Villa of The Lady —

Day 3: 9:00pm

I returned, once again, to the remains of Thalia's cottage. Even though it had burned to the ground, I found that I was unable to proceed without going there one more time, especially since it now seemed to be the only home I had left. I had found my discarded robe and veil in the underbrush; thankfully it had not been overly damp during the day, so they were mostly unsoiled. The cottage was as I expected; a pile of charred lumber which was still smoldering. I watched it for a while, not sure why I came, and even less sure why I was staying. My eyes went to the tree out back, and at its base, the chest. Frowning, I promised myself that this would be the last time I came here.

With only a vague compelling sensation of where to go, I set out for this meeting place of The Lady and her ilk.

Through the dead of night with only the stars and moon to guide my path, I walked through the dense woods in the direction imprinted upon me. I did not know how far I would have to travel, but reasoned that it could not be a great distance; city folk, no matter how friendly they were with pagans, never wished to travel more than a day's walk from The City limits.

Where do you think you're going?

Thalia's voice rang through my head as naturally as if she had been beside me all along, yet it sent a chill through my core. I looked around me frantically, and saw that I was still alone. Alone. Thalia was dead, and I was losing my mind. I continued, trying to forget about the impossible occurrence.

I walked for miles, the woods sometimes becoming impossibly dense, and

sometimes opening into small fields and clearings. All around me were the sounds of the night, crickets chirping, nocturnal beasts rustling through the thicket, and the occasional croak of a solitary frog. *You're going to turn yourself in, aren't you? Turn yourself in to them!*

I clasped my hands over my ears, though I knew that to be no use. The voice was inside my head. This time I focused and felt, trying to sense who was around me, but I sensed not a soul. The voice was different this time, like Thalia's, but sharper, harsher, more animalistic. I shook it from my thoughts. I did not need insanity now, only to find the villa.

You're going the right way! The voice urged, or was it my own thoughts trying to assure me? Don't be late!

Ignore it, I told myself. It was the silence; it had to be. When I was away from The City the silence of being free from any minds made me a little crazy; that had to be it.

I pressed on, and was bothered by the worrisome voice no more. The woods became more and more dense and began to have a feel to them; a presence. I felt like an intruder in the midst of a malicious consciousness. I knew this was a sign that I was getting close. Without warning, I pushed aside a layer of underbrush to find it completely clear on the other side; and then after a brief gap, more just as thick. I had found a path through the woods.

I felt like I had been here before, but knew quickly that I had seen it in the memories of the astrologer. What's more, I knew which direction to go. I went back into the thicket, and traveled parallel to the road; careful to neither deviate too far, nor get too close. If I was to be led directly to this place's front door, I wanted to stay hidden.

Sooner than I expected, I saw that the woods ended ahead of me. Step by step I saw my destination revealed from between the trunks and vines of the wood, until I was at the very edge of a large clearing hidden only by some tall weeds and the darkness. All was still. The sounds of the crickets and frogs prevailed; only silence came from the villa. More importantly, the silence which I always felt in the woods was just as maddening here as it had been on my journey. I was totally alone. Either the place was empty, or Delphine could shield this place against me. I wasn't going to risk it.

The villa had the shape of a five pointed star, the pentacle I had witnessed in the mind of the astrologer, with a sloping shingled roof that went upward toward the center and ended at a steeple topped by a spire. It was not tall; one story, and probably an attic under the vaulted roof. At each point of the star was a tower, which rose higher than the point of the roof, each with a shingled, pointed crown. The building was wooden, with glass windows around the top of each tower, and a few here and there on the ground floor. All of these windows were dark. There was a shallow moat dug around the perimeter of the building in a circle with a gate and drawbridge on one side. The drawbridge was down, and the gate open.

The towers were close to the moat; some closer than others. As I circled the building, always staying in the thicket, I noticed that one of the towers

actually stood in the moat, so that the eaves of the tall, pointed roof hung above the far bank. It was like an open invitation.

Under the cover of darkness, I went to the edge of the moat, and shot a rope arrow up into the eaves. The rope unraveled itself and hung above the moat within an easy jumping distance. I made the jump, catching hold of the rope tightly, with my feet hitting the wooden wall with only the faintest of thumps. I scaled the wall quickly, and found that the windows of the tower opened easily. It was quiet inside, empty, but little dust had settled. There was naught but a single chair and a trap door. I peeked through the door to see a ladder, and then a narrow spiral stair dropping down to the ground floor. Once again, I focused, and concentrated on finding something, anything, below me which resembled a mind. Nothing. There was no one. I went down the attic ladder and then the stair.

Before I came to the threshold at the end of the stair, I gave pause. It felt different inside. The building creaked and groaned around me in the dark and the silence. I walked silently, avoiding the pale starlight which gleamed through the occasional window, a habit impossible to break no matter how alone I felt. The tower's door was ajar and through it I glimpsed a kitchen and dining area. I opened it and crossed the hall.

Pale light poured in through the glass panes of the skylight in the tall ceiling. There was a table here, set for three, but with room for many, many more. This was the place I had seen in the memory; at the point when the distinction between Delphine's abode in her faraway land became blurred with the villa in which I now stood.

She had just met with someone; two some ones, or was about to. Had the meeting taken place? Did something happen to call it off, but so soon before it occurred that the place settings were left unattended? I had no way of knowing; my abilities did not work that way.

The plates were of fine porcelain, and had cheerful pictures of rural life painted on them. The cups had cute flowery patterns, and were clean; no tea had been poured into them. The rustic impression was completed by a delicately carved wooden tea tray in the center of the table. The teapot was full, and cold. The strainer was clean; it had not been used. The creamer was on the tray. I opened it, and found that it was full. I lifted it to my nose. It was not sour. If I had to hazard a guess, it would have been an interruption followed by a swift departure; the tea had been served, but somewhere in between the tray being set down and the first cups being poured, everyone left. I opened some of the cupboard drawers and found that it was remarkably sparse, with only the normal cutlery and some jars of sugar and packages of tea leaves.

The kitchen and dining hall were formed in a triangular shape, fitting into a point in the star. I moved on to the next point, and found a den with a dark fireplace and bookcases lining the walls. I read the titles, but found nothing incriminating. It was probably all junk brought in from The City to create the illusion of a library, popular novels and some love stories, but nothing on witchcraft or even a journal concerning pagan cults. There was a painting of a

couple on the mantle, but it could have been of anyone. I didn't recognize either face, and it seemed to be set in The City, based on their clothing and the room about them. Why was Delphine so intent on convincing her guests that she was one of them? Did she expect those who helped her to be afraid of what she was?...Of course she did.

Slowly and quietly, I returned to the hall to move on to the next point, where I found a sitting room with nothing of value or interest whatsoever. The furniture looked like anything one could expect to find in a stately apartment back in The City; rich embroidery, fine woodwork, and little sign of daily use.

I became slightly annoyed, feeling that my journey was all for nothing. I moved onto the next chamber. It was a bedroom, with furniture similar to the other rooms. I inspected the bed, and found my suspicions confirmed. This bed had rarely, if ever, been used for sleeping. The mattress was too firm and unworn. This place would only be used to meet with and discuss plans with her contacts in The City, and the bedroom, I suspected, for that certain type of extra persuasion. The entire villa was a front to provide a familiar face for her, so that her associates would feel comfortable in taking tea with the devil herself.

Finally, I came to the last chamber, and found it much like the other four; a study decorated as if this was simply a woodland vacation spot of a city dweller; a hunting lodge or something equally pretentious. I gave the room a good search, opening drawers, looking under chairs and desks, moving furniture away from walls, and rolling back rugs. I found nothing. I did the same for each of the other chambers. I tugged at each book one by one, looking for a book-switch, and found nothing. I crawled into the fireplace; nothing. I tossed the mattress aside; nothing. I checked behind the painting; nothing. I even looked under the soap in the washroom; nothing.

I cut the drapes free with my dagger, and tossed them into a heap. I shattered every cute dish and teacup in the dining area. I pushed every book from the bookcase onto the floor. I cut the throats of the cute couple in the painting. None of that made me feel any better. This place disgusted me. An entire building formed as a lie.

But there must be something here! That same, sharpened, distorted voice of Thalia echoed through my mind, though this time with an edge of panic. *She is hiding something from you! Look! Look!*

Was something whispering into my ear, or were they my own thoughts disguised in some way? It did not matter. I imagined a map of the house. I knew that there had to be a chamber in the center of the building, but none of the five rooms had any door to it. There had to be a secret passage somewhere, but my search had revealed nothing. I remembered that there seemed to be an attic from the outside, but all of the chambers followed the pitch of the roof with their ceilings, so that was ruled out. I hadn't checked the other towers yet, though. I did so, no longer caring to be quiet or avoid the light, almost running around the hall as I went from tower to tower, searching each stairway and the tower above for hidden switches. My search

came to nothing.

I fell to the floor, rested, and thought. The floorboards were hard against the back of my head, even with my hood and hair to cushion me. A possible solution came. I went back up to one of the towers, and let myself drop to the building's pointy roof. I climbed up the steep slope, and hunted around the steeple for any sign of an entry into the center of the villa. The shingles were solid and firm. I couldn't even rip them off, or pry them with my sword. Exhausted, I lay on my back, eyes to the stars above, panting.

There's a secret in there! You know it! How do you think she comes and goes? Do you think she walks the path through the woods? A lady like her?

I couldn't think of anything else. I wasn't ready to give up, but I couldn't get back into the villa from here. I slid down the roof, and leapt clear to the other side of the moat. I bit my lip, looking at the building, circling around the outside, wondering if there was anything I was missing. The open gate and drawbridge beckoned. I shrugged, and entered, listening to the wooden boards thump under my feet. Then it clicked; it didn't sound dissimilar to the floor in the villa itself. There had to be a basement.

I ran through the gate, which led into the hallway that made the perimeter of the building, and went to my knees. Sword in hand, I began to pry at the wooden floorboards, but they wouldn't budge. I strained, and pulled, and heaved until my muscles burned and I felt dizzy. Not willing to give up, I jabbed my sword between the boards once more, and pulled with all my strength. The board cracked, and instantly my lungs were filled with the smell of rotting flesh. I almost gagged, stumbling back, hand covering my nose in a petty attempt to block out the stench. Insects and maggots crawled out of the crack I had made.

Forcing myself to resist the putrid stench and grotesque images, I looked through the hole, trying to make out what I could in the darkness. I thought I could make out bodies, stacked one atop another like cargo. At the very edge of discernable vision, I thought I could see the outline of an opening, leading elsewhere, but my eyes must have been playing tricks on me, for all I could see within it was bare earth. I lifted myself up from the floor, and began to once again claw and pull at the floorboards, hoping to widen the crack to allow me to see, or even better, to get inside. I just hoped that the smell wouldn't make me vomit.

A moment too late, it dawned on me that in my emersion in the physical labor, I had become oblivious to what I could feel around me. Just as the appearance of many minds filled my own, I felt a stabbing pain in my left arm. It was of such force that it pushed me to the ground as I gasped out a scream. My other hand went to the point of impact; I found a quarrel deep in my arm, probably lodged in the bone. I rolled away, after pulling my long dagger from my belt, to face my assailant. Standing in the arched doorway, which I had left gaping open, was at least a half dozen figures; Hammerites, some wielded hammers, but others held something even more worrisome—massive mechanical crossbows. They were taking aim again.

I pushed myself to my feet and ran. I could circle around, come at them

from behind. I knew the layout of this place; they didn't. I could feel them spreading out to search, not just chase me. Of course, how stupid; they didn't realize I was the only one here. They wouldn't just follow me, they'd swarm. Maybe I could take them out one by one. I darted from room to room, trying to turn the tables on them, to make them the hunted instead of me, but every time I found one he wasn't alone; the building had filled with them in just a matter of seconds. This wasn't going to work; there were too many of them, and they were on the offensive. Surprise attacks were my game; at forward assaults I was an idiot. By dumb luck I found myself at the tower I came in through, and before I knew it, I was climbing the stairs to make my escape down the rope arrow that still hung from the eaves.

I got to the top of the tower, reached for my rope out the window, and felt another quarrel burst through my shoulder right above the first. They were outside, waiting for me to leave this way. I stumbled backwards, falling to the floor, hitting my head hard. I could hear them shouting all around me, coming closer. I tried to stand, but another salvo burst through one of the windows, showering me with shattered glass. I could leap to the roof, I thought, but I was too late, a hand was around my ankle.

I tried to kick it free, and then knife it free, but the armor on the gauntlet was thick, and my attacks erratic and panicked. I couldn't find a weak spot. I was being pulled to the ladder, and down I went, tumbling through the trap door, and then pushed down the stairs by the Hammerite whose hand I was unable to stab. I landed on my upper arm on the left side, the same side where the quarrels had hit, and felt the bone snap. I hit my head on the stairs several times as I fell, only to be met with several kicks to my sides and head when I hit the ground. I had no control over my body anymore, and my vision was going dark.

Fainting, I heard them say, "This doth seem to be the only inhabitant...from the looks of the villa, possibly a thief here to loot."

"Very well. Inform Brother Masok of our discovery, and bring her to Brother Inquisitor."

— Ghost: A Drink With a Friend —

Day 3: 10:00 pm

"How long have I been out?" I gruffed audibly as my fingers rubbed my sweaty forehead.

"About two hours," a voice came in reply, which was rude, since I was talking to *myself*.

I jerked up, clawing frantically about as if I would somehow be able to draw all six of my daggers at once. Instead I only managed to fall out of the cot I had been put in, and flip it over on top of me. Not to be dissuaded by this turn of events, I battled the cot furiously until it was off of me, and managed to get to my feet before I knew anything other than that I was alive and that I was victorious over my foe, the cot.

"Whoa there, calm down friend," someone said, who neither sounded like

me nor like a zombie; both plusses, I supposed. My vision was still a blur and my head still cloudy, so I was still not sure where I was or what I was doing here, or why exactly I had been asleep.

"Fuhduhduh," I stammered as I rubbed my face furiously, though all I managed to do was make my wounded hand hurt more. "What the taff..."

"Witches' Plaza caught on fire, huge mess...saw you had fallen off a ledge to escape the blaze, wonder you ain't dead." The voice was even and assuring. I did not trust good deed doers, as a rule. Either they expected something in return from you, or even worse, in return from their God, which meant that they were nuts.

"What do you want from me?" I coughed, rubbing my eyes some more as if somehow it would help now, after not having helped the last three times. I just knew that as soon as my vision came back I'd be in a room full of zombies.

"Easy, easy," he said, in that same calm, reassuring voice. The room was starting to come into focus, but unfortunately it was still spinning. I could feel him guiding me into a chair, and for some reason I didn't protest. "Here, drink this; it will make you feel better..."

"Better be liquor," I remarked, and then added, "or 'shroom tea!"

"Neither, just some water...sorry friend, I don't have the gold for either."

I didn't protest; I was too tired to, and just wanted the room to stop spinning. I could sort of see where I was now; a dark small room with a wooden floor and ceiling, and cracked plaster covering the walls. A single electric bulb hung from the ceiling, with a door in a corner which seemed a mile away, opened slightly. I wasn't sure if I would have preferred it to be closed and locked or not. My host was a short balding man, whose forehead caught the light of the bulb brilliantly. He had a tan vest on with a gray shirt and loose trousers. He looked like any other peasant.

I took a sip. Cool water had never tasted so good. I still didn't feel bad for demanding something better as I drank the entire cup in one draft. "Mugggh," I said afterwards, catching my breath after the long drink, and then added, "thanks," in case my grunt of satisfaction wasn't enough. "Now, who the taff are you?"

He gave a little half laugh before he said, "I don't suppose you would believe me if I said that I was just a concerned citizen who happened to see you left for dead and still breathing..."

Odd choice of words that, left for dead, and disgustingly appropriate. "Actually I would, if you had just said that, instead of the whole 'don't suppose you would believe me' thing." The room had finally stopped spinning, but something else was wrong; my cup was empty. I hated empty cups almost as much as I hated zombies.

"Are you aware that you are being followed?"

I sneered at him, "Yes, I figured as much, and what's it to you?"

"For someone who tries as hard as he can to make sure his reputation precedes him, you are certainly offended by the prospect that you were entirely successful."

"Yeah, well, I just don't like being carried off and taken somewhere when I am out cold, you know?" That reminded me; I checked the back of my head to make sure it was still there. Ouch, crap...yes, there was a huge bump there, and it hurt like taff. "So?"

"Well, I am pleased to inform you that the chase is over, Mister Fenster T. Wot!" he said with a domineering cackle. I just started at him with a blank look on my face.

"You are the biggest taffing idiot I have ever laid eyes on," I said with a groan.

He looked at me like he'd just discovered that his wife had just given birth to boy triplets, and he really wanted a girl. "And why is that, Mister Wot?" he demanded after the shocked look was washed away.

I leaned back in my chair and sighed heavily. "Who the bleeding taff is Mister Fenster Taffing Wot?"

"I uh..." he stammered, and then looked at the door nervously. "You?" he ventured.

"The name's Ghost, you nitwit. You've been shadowing the wrong man."

He slumped down in his chair with his face in his hands. "Oh, they are going to kill me!" he proclaimed.

"Yeah-yeah, look buddy, I won't tell them if you don't. Now I suggest you get back to work...I've never heard of that guy, so good luck finding him." I got up to go, and leave the idiot to his misery.

"Wait!" he shouted, with a crazed, panicked look in his eyes. "The water you just drank: it has a deadly drug in it!"

"The taff!?" I shouted with a lunge, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck and pushing his chair backwards.

"It's okay!" he sobbed, "I have the antidote right here!" He fumbled around inside his vest pocket and produced the yellow vial.

"Give that shit to me," I snarled, and dropped him to the floor. The vial was uncorked and down my throat before you could say bottoms up.

"Oh thank goodness you told me in time," he said, picking himself up and dusting himself off.

"Yeah no kidding," I said with a cough as I wiped my mouth with my sleeve. "I'm liable to rise as a zombie and kill you back anyway." Somehow, I felt compelled to sit down again.

"Well, in spite of the circumstances, it is agreeable that we met, Mister Ghost." He said this in a third tone of voice, quite different from the initial do-gooder and the cackling villain.

"What?" was all I could think to say.

"Yes," he went on. "Forgive the antics, but I had to be extra certain that it was in fact you, before I gave you the vial of knockout drug to drink. Yes, it is quite agreeable for all parties concerned that you remain asleep a bit longer. You see, I've just been delivered orders of where to take you, and I doubt you will go there willingly."

"What?" I said again, though this time with much greater effort. The room had begun to spin like before, and he was once again just a blur.

"Quite right; the water, cool and refreshing, was indeed merely water. The antidote was the drug. There is no Fenster T. Wot: only you and me, Mister Ghost."

"Oh shii..." was all I managed to produce before it all went completely dark.

— **Lytha: Identified** —

Day 4: 12:00 am

I awoke with a bright light in my eyes. I squinted, trying to see. My arms and legs were restrained; I couldn't move. One arm was in intense pain. I thought I could see the shape of a man looking down at me.

"She is awakening," I thought I heard the man say, though I wasn't sure if it was just another voice in my head.

"That is very well. I know that thou shalt do thy utmost with craft and skill, Brother Surgeon," a young, intelligent voice came from the background. It was hauntingly familiar.

"Thy arm was broken, apparently when thou didst fall from the stairs," he said to me, words barely audible over the screaming in my mind. I felt the bright pain of metal in the flesh of my arm; the sharp, heavy pain of metal in the bone.

"I am making an iron splint, affixed directly into thy shoulder. Not only shalt it set the bone properly, but if need be a gentle turn of the dial will rotate the gear, causing the splint to widen. The pain will be considerable, so I suggest that thou dost cooperate, and then this means of torture wilt not have to be used."

I clenched my teeth, trying to bite back my screams against the pain. I could feel another screw being slowly driven into my bone. With each twist the pain made my vision grow darker and darker, in spite of the bright light in my eyes.

"Bring forth the witness," I heard a voice come from somewhere beyond. The surgeon turned to look.

"Yes, that's her," came the voice of the fruit monger. "She's the one that did it, and she lives there alright, I see her come out every day and she buys fruit from me sometimes. She always wore a veil, but I am sure that's her."

I couldn't think. I then knew how it felt to have someone who you tried to look out for point the finger at you. The pain in my arm was too great; I had no room in my mind for any other. They'd kill the fruit monger if he didn't tell them what they wanted to hear, I reminded myself.

"And her name?" asked that same young, intelligent, eerily familiar voice. "Tell us this and thou shalt go free."

"Lytha."