

Decree...

DISPATCH
ORDER OF THE HAMMER

FROM: FATHER RAFAEL MORTANGRO STEINKLAW, HIGH PRIEST OF
THE ORDER OF THE HAMMER

TO: DAELUS THRESH, MASTER, THE CIRCLE OF STONE AND
SHADOW

OUR SCOUTS HAVE RETURNED FROM INVESTIGATING THE STRUCTURE, THE LOCATION AND NATURE OF WHICH YOU INDICATED TO US DURING THE EMERGENCY SESSION OF THE HIGH COUNCIL OF THE ORDER OF THE HAMMER. THE VILLA WAS ABANDONED, AND THE INTERIOR WAS IN SHAMBLES. AT FIRST GLANCE, THE BUILDING COULDST HAVE BEEN MISTAKEN FOR A WOODLAND RETREAT, BUT INSPECTION HAS REVEALED THE PRESENCE OF HUMAN REMAINS BENEATH THE FLOORBOARDS. THE BUILDING ITSELF IS AN ACCURSED WORK OF EVIL.

AS SAID, THE VILLA WAS ABANDONED, BUT WE DISCOVERED ONE WOMAN TRESPASSING ON THE RESIDENCE. THIS WOMAN APPEARED TO BE A THIEF, WHOM WE CAUGHT DURING HER RAID. SHE WAS CONVICTED ON FIVE ACCOUNTS OF RESISTING ARREST, BREAKING AND ENTERING, TRESPASSING, THEFT, BEARING FALSE WITNESS, AND CONCEALMENT OF EVIDENCE. AFTER BEING BROUGHT TO THE TEMPLE OF THE INQUISITOR, SHE WAS POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS ONE, IF NOT THE ONE, RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RECENT BLOODY ATTACKS AGAINST OUR KIN, AND CAN BE DIRECTLY LINKED TO THE SLAUGHTER WHICH OCCURRED TWO NIGHTS AGO. THE SEVERED HANDS OF OUR BROTHERS WERE DISCOVERED HANGING FROM THE WALLS OF HER DWELLING IN THE CITY. IT HAS BEEN REVEALED THAT HER NAME IS LYTHA.

SHE IS BEING INTERROGATED AT CRAGSCLEFT PRISON FOR INFORMATION ON THE FOLLOWING TOPICS: HER HISTORY, THE MOTIVE BEHIND HER ATTACKS AGAINST US, HER POSSIBLE INVOLVEMENT WITH THE PAGANS WHO MADE RESIDENCE AT THE VILLA IN THE WOODS, THE LOCATION OF THE EVIDENCE SHE UNDOUBTEDLY STOLE FROM THE RESIDENCE AND IS NOW CONCEALING, THE NUMBER OF, NAMES OF, AND LOCATION OF ALL HER CONSPIRATORS AND CO-CONSPIRATORS, AND ANY AND ALL OTHER INFORMATION WHICH MAY SERVE US IN DETERMINING HER PAST CRIMES, THUS INFLUENCING THE SEVERITY OF HER PUNISHMENT, AND THE METHOD OF HER EXECUTION.

AT THIS POINT IN TIME, THE SEVERITY OF HER PUNISHMENT WILL BE LIMITED, AS WE FEEL THERE IS STILL MUCH INFORMATION WE CAN EXTRACT FROM HER, AND FOR THAT WE NEED TO MAINTAIN THE CLARITY OF HER CONSCIOUS MIND. GUILT OVER HER GRIEVOUS SINS SHALL COMPEL HER TO GIVE US THE INFORMATION WE REQUIRE.

AT NOON TODAY A TASK FORCE BESEECHED TO DEMOLISH THIS STRUCTURE SHALT SET OUT ON ITS JOURNEY. I ASK THAT YOU BE THERE AND ACCOMPANY THE FORCE DURING THE ENTIRETY OF ITS MISSION. YOUR ABSENCE FROM THIS EVENT SHALL BE CONSIDERED A DIRECT INSULT TO THIS ORDER, AND WILL BE ANSWERED ACCORDINGLY.

IN THE MASTER BUILDER'S NAME,
FATHER RAFAEL MORTANGRO STEINKLAW,
HIGH PRIEST OF THE ORDER OF THE HAMMER

Chapter 5

Trapped

— Nightfall: Quickly Then —

Day 4: 3:00 am

A heavy knock echoed through my chambers. I was jolted violently from my sleep, sitting bolt upright with a startled breath. My eyes quickly went to the door. I pushed myself from my bed, the wood creaking as I shifted my weight quickly and rose to my feet. My bedside candle flickered as I moved quickly by, making everything in the room seem to move with me.

I grabbed the brass handle of my door and yanked it quickly open. Light from another candle struck me in the face. Outside the door, framed in pitch blackness, stood two men; Jossimer and James's agent Othello whom I had met the other day on the stairs of Soulforge Cathedral. Jossimer stood behind him, holding aloft a large dripping candlestick, and the agent stood before him in silhouette against the light. Both were silent as I was handed a large bound scroll, bearing a broken Hammerite seal. I unrolled it quickly and ran my eyes over the page.

"Our scouts have returned from investigating the structure," I whispered as I read, leaving the doorway and bidding the gentleman and my butler to enter. Jossimer went into my chamber and quickly busied himself tidying up some of my discarded clothing, and then moving to shut the windows before assuming a statue-like stillness by them, watching me. "Human remains beneath the floorboards," I continued, "accursed work of evil..."

I glanced up at James's man, who watched me with a steady gaze, hands folded behind his back. He slowly lowered his brow, and nodded, and my eyes went back to the page. "...discovered one woman trespassing on the residence," I uttered, and then read faster, "...a thief...responsible for attacks...linked to the slaughter...severed hands discovered... It has been revealed that her name is Lytha," I finished, and looked again up at James's man.

"It's confirmed," he said simply. "It's no bluff."

I continued reading, stopping again when I reached "the method of her execution." I drew a breath, and tried to sort my mind out.

"I do not believe that her punishment has yet begun. Hammerites are patient and methodical, as you know."

"I know," I said in a low breath, and then my eyes fell upon the last paragraph. "Noon today a task force...shalt set out on its journey...I ask that you be there and accompany the force during..." I blinked and looked back up at James's agent. "They mean to move in on The Circle," I said immediately.

He nodded quickly. "All signs point in that direction. Rafael's man, Brother Chispin, will be on the expedition to keep an eye on you, and while you're away Rafael himself will oversee the dismantling of The Circle."

"And you know this for certain?"

"All signs point to it."

I leveled my gaze upon him. "We have to move quickly. Has Sheam been notified yet?"

"Sheam is the one who got this to us. She knows everything the letter contains, but I do not know her current understanding about the inevitable

Hammerite seizure of The Circle.”

“Make sure she knows, as soon as possible,” I quickly said to him as I idly placed the scroll on my desk. “Send a courier quickly, we can’t delay. I wonder if Canard will help us too...but I need to talk to him personally about that. A letter just won’t do,” I said, thinking out loud. “Let me get dressed and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Sir, I also bear news from James regarding The Lady.”

“Can it wait ten minutes?” I asked, noting that Jossimer had already begun to arrange and outfit for me, busily working back and forth between my wardrobe and dresser. The man nodded and vanished out the door.

“Master,” Jossimer ventured before I dismissed him too, “What if the Hammerites attempt to seize your tower as well?”

I began to undo my nightshirt, but then paused. “Get the guards ready,” I told him, “in case that happens. We’ve always known this was a possibility, and there’s a plan for it. Do you recall?”

“Explicitly, master,” he intoned back to me.

“Then follow it to the letter, and assume the worst,” I told him, and then bid him to let me change in peace.

Nine minutes later I was dressed, downstairs, and found the agent Othello waiting outside. His stagecoach was at the foot of the stairs. The driver, a silent huddled figure in the chill of the night, gripped the reins and his whip greedily as he watched us quickly approach and board his vehicle.

“A courier has been sent with instructions for Sheam,” he told me as we walked and entered the stagecoach. With a dull click the outside world was framed from small windows, and I found myself in a small dark compartment with the strange but trusted man. He handed me a folded note, which I took and read. The horses began to trot with a lurch, drawing us down the winding path through the hills to The City. Othello held a candle near me so that I could read the letter.

D:

Tread carefully with The Lady. Her name is Delphine, and the suspicions I had earlier can be confirmed; this is no normal threat. She has been positively linked to the pagans, but seems to represent a new or previously unknown group. I shall advise you when we have information of more substance, but for now I strongly suggest that any and all activities on the part of The Circle which may draw her attention are to cease.

- J

“The Hammerites are right to amass such a large force to assault The Lady,” I said to him, pocketing the letter, “Though it seems that they are aiming this force in the wrong direction, why are they still focused on the villa? What more do they hope to do there? Dammit, we need to get in

contact with Els and Jyre and find where The Lady's other bases are!" I wasn't asking for the agent's input, just thinking out loud.

"I would recommend," he began, as if reading my mind. I cut him off.

"Is it your recommendation or James's?" I said, trying to establish where he stood in all of this.

"James has not yet been informed about their prisoner, Lytha," he said, "however I can say with some certainty that he would be very interested in what information Lytha may possess about The Lady."

"Yes, of course," I said, nodding. "I am anxious to learn what The Hammerites extract from her."

Othello cleared his throat, and bore a look in his eyes that bespoke great discomfort.

"Is there something wrong with what I said?" I asked, curtly.

"I am just a little surprised that you seem content to leave Lytha in the hands of a Hammerite Inquisitor."

I grimaced. Was this agent assuming I knew something he thought was obvious? "Why? Who is Lytha?"

"Lytha," Othello began, "is a thief of the highest caliber. Her skills and methods have become something of a legend, to the point where other thieves who show a particular attention to leaving no trace of their passage are said to be emulating her. It is *quite* unfortunate that she has been captured by the Hammerites. She is something of a folk hero in some circles, and news of her downfall could have unpredictable results."

I took all of this in quietly, and then said, "Yes, now that you mention it I think I have heard of her. But if she's so legendary, why haven't I heard more?"

"It's simply that as she grew in fame, she grew in secrecy. She hated it, loathed it in fact, and worked actively to avoid any type of attention. I don't blame her; that sort of thing is what gets a thief killed. I haven't heard of a heist that had been clearly linked to her in years. By the time you had arrived in The City, she had effectively vanished without a trace. She's still spoken of in some corners of the underworld, naturally, but there's no reason someone in your position, new here as you are, would be well acquainted with her."

"Well, I am glad I have an expert," I told him. "Of what you know of her *legend*, do you believe that she is the one who killed...butchered...all of those Hammerites?"

"Personally, no, I do not. It does not match her style at all. However, James would be your expert, and should have the definitive say on that. Following her exploits was a hobby of his. I'd say it still is, but he hasn't had much to follow for quite some time."

"Then I can see why he'd be so anxious to get her out of Cragscleft alive. Is this hero worship, or does he actually think that saving her would be best for us? Can he really be certain that she isn't a psychopath?"

"You know James better than that," Othello insisted, looking offended. "The simple fact is that she is an extremely strong lead in The Lady investigation. Her presence at the villa makes that clear. If interviewing her

is left to the Hammerite Inquisitor, then we might as well flush everything of value she knows down the sewer. They will extract nothing pertinent from her and then they will kill her.”

“I have no doubt about that. But we’re talking about springing a potential monster from the clutches of those who are already looking for any excuse to parade my broken corpse through The City. Is it worth the risk?”

“Well, think of it this way. The Lady, at this point in time, seems capable of destroying everything you and James have built. I choose my words carefully here. I would say ‘kill you both’ but I fear, James and I fear; that it is worse than that. More like, kill everyone you and he have ever met.”

“Isn’t that a little bit of an exaggeration? How could she be so powerful?”

“Are you well acquainted with the pagan gods, sir?”

“I’ve done some reading. Get to your point.”

“If The Lady is who we think she is, she may very well be capable of, and inclined to, kill far more people than just the limited spheres of your acquaintance. Even the rather lengthy sphere of James’s acquaintance would pale in comparison. When the pagans attacked The City last fall, they would not have stopped where they had if they were not defeated. They would have, and were capable of, painting every street with blood. There’s no reason to think that this couldn’t still happen. As massive as The City is, it is easy to forget that the pagans of the wood outnumber us ten to one, at the very least. If they were organized into a unified army, The City would be in terrible danger.”

“Okay,” I nodded, feeling a little sick. “So you believe that it is worth the risk.”

“Definitely. If I may be blunt, The Hammerites are idiots. I’d say that left up to them, we can look forward to the downfall of civilization. Yes, we definitely need to get Lytha away from them, even if she *is* a psychopathic Hammerite butcher. I suggest that it is far more likely that the Hammerites jumped to that conclusion without the slightest semblance of an investigation. The evidence could have been planted in her home by The Lady’s agents in an attempt to frame her.”

“We can no more assume that she did not do it than the Hammerites can assume that she did,” I replied.

“Of course. Unlike the Hammerites, we will investigate. And, of course, even if rescued, even if innocent, we would have to treat her as an extremely dangerous person. I doubt she would find our hospitality much more desirable than the Hammerites’.”

I shook my head, trying to wrap my mind around what was happening. “Getting her out will be extremely difficult.”

“I’d say it will be exceedingly difficult to do properly, and maintain any level of status with the Hammerites that doesn’t involve them trying to kill you.”

“Indeed.” I paused, a footnote from the back of my mind surfacing and suddenly becoming relevant. “Quite famous, you say?”

“I believe the term I used was *legendary*.”

I nodded. "Alright, what news of Ghost?"

"Ghost? The last I heard he is being held for interview at The Shed along with the other, *ah*, captives that you requested. That is the only information I have, though."

"Perfect. Tell the driver that we need to make a detour before heading to the Shed: I'd like to find out what Rembrandt discovered about Ghost. Sheam has been informed and will be able to get The Circle ready without me breathing down her neck."

"The driver will need directions," he said.

They were conveyed, and the carriage was taken off the road down a narrow path through the hills, so rocky that our candles had to be put out in fear of hot wax being splashed everywhere. Before long the driver reached the point I had described, and I bade the agent to follow me on foot.

Rembrandt's shack existed under two boulders leaning precariously one against the other like some ancient ruin. Like myself, he preferred to live away from The City in the rocky crags of the hillside, but unlike me he sought to do so in a style which would make the pagans proud—or maybe not. The scorched earth from his campfire and littered debris of city-bought food was an easy indication that this man was no friend of nature. He heard us coming from a mile off, no doubt, and stood before the wall of rough boards spanning the gap from one boulder to the other, creating a rudimentary barrier between the outside and the inside of his dwelling. His rough face and dark skin were none the more charming in the darkness of this moonless night.

"Didn't expect you to be here," he offered as soon as he was satisfied that we could hear him without him shouting. "I was going to deliver a message to you about Ghost in the morning, but since you're here now I take it it's a little more urgent than I thought."

"A bit," I said, growing closer still until Othello and I were standing across from him, with the outdoor hearth between us.

Rembrandt's hand also went to his pocket, "So far all I've got for you is this," he said as he pulled out a note, which he offered to me without moving any closer. I quickly walked around the cold campfire to him, and snatched the note from his hand.

Ghost. Real name unknown. No other known aliases. Small apartment in South Quarter. Petty crook turned grave robber. Former guildie of "Reynaud's bunch." Slightly notorious, suspect in at least a dozen murder cases, but currently not actively wanted by any authorities.

Character profile:

- He's intimidating when he wants to be. Most folks who know him are either friends with him or afraid of him.
- He gets himself into of all sorts of hell and lives to see another day: a real survivor.
- He's well liked in his own circles. His friends seem real loyal

- to him.
- He also seems to be a real sucker for women. I'd say it's his main weakness.
 - Tends to keep himself well armed. Prefers daggers and bombs to swords and arrows.
 - Nasty temper. Tends to kill out of rage or self-defense. No known links to premeditative murders or assassination jobs.

"Is this all you have so far?" I asked, a little annoyed that I was being told so little. Still, he was sounding like who I hoped him to be. One point in particular sounded quite promising, plus it was looking increasingly farfetched that he would be in any way connected to an assassination attempt on me.

"Give me a break. What did you want, a taffin' encyclopedia entry? Besides, this doesn't include the stuff the night-crew found out. I was doing background work; they had a guy actually tail him. I think their report is where all the meat is."

"You are aware of the contents of this report, then?"

"It's crazy. There's a pair of burnt up and mutilated corpses in Ghost's classy abode. They're so far gone identification would be impossible, but our money is on it being none other than his fence and missus fence. Plus the entire building the fence lived in burned down just the other day. Considering Ghost's affinity for the explosives, I'd say there's a connection. But that's nothing compared to the catastrophe at Witches' Plaza."

"What catastrophe?"

"Looked like a bomb went off...lots of folk's dead, lots more dazed and confused. A few reported seeing him going in that direction, and then running away after the explosion. The night-crew managed to track him down after that, and found him passed out in what looked like the aftermath of a nasty fall. He was still alive, *somehow*. Last I heard they brought him to The Shed for holding."

I frowned and nodded. "We don't have much time. The Hammers will be moving in on The Circle around noon today. At the same time I'll be going into their custody for an unknown length of time. Everything needs to be set in motion before then. The Hammerites must not discover anything in The Circle. There must be an adequate diversion to keep them from focusing too strongly on me. I think Ghost may be our best bet for that, serendipitous as this may be. I'll deal with my imprisonment on my own terms when the time comes.

"And what if they cut your tongue out?" Rembrandt asked.

"Then I suppose I won't be speaking very well," I replied harshly.

"There's one more thing," Rembrandt said lazily. "Some of the folks on the night-crew were muttering this and that about the walking dead."

I paused. "Mutterings?"

Rembrandt shrugged. "Yeah, seems those that were tailing him and found him at Witches' Plaza swore they saw what looked like zombies. Take that

how you will.”

I frowned. “The Shed is nowhere near Witches’ Plaza, so I don’t expect there to be much danger of an attack from the undead.”

Rembrandt snorted. “Hey, it was just an FYI. I’m not afraid of any rotting corpse.”

“Zombies or no, perhaps you ought to come along. Ghost needs to be interviewed before I make a decision, and the interviewer could use your insights on Ghost’s background.”

Rembrandt nodded, lifted himself up from where he leaned, and walked along without another word. We walked back to the carriage. On the way Rembrandt and Othello exchanged pleasantries; they had apparently met before, most likely just the other day when I told Othello to contact Rembrandt, or perhaps long before that.

We rode quickly back into The City, or at least I instructed the driver to get us quickly back to The City. I wasn’t impressed by the pace we were making. An uneasy silence was in the cabin; the air was thick with unspoken sentiments between the agent and the independent, a philosophical maelstrom of opposing doctrines forming an inaudible roar. And yet oblivious to it all was our driver, of questionable competence, seemingly unaware of the dire situation of which he was a part.

It had to be at least four-thirty before we finally got to The Shed. Many years ago this building housed a family business. The front shop on the ground floor was probably a shoemaker’s, and the artisan’s family lived in the floors above. Now it belonged to me, and was used to temporarily hold enemies until we decided what to do with them. It hunched over the street, the upper floors pushing the limits of what the lower would support, greedily attempting to lay claim to more space than the lot it was built upon would permit. While not derelict, every plank and brick was smeared with decades of grime, betraying the building’s history of sorrow. Today would be no different.

I pushed my way out of the stagecoach with Rembrandt and Othello at my sides, fishing into my pocket to produce the correct key from my collection. I fretted with a grumbling sigh when I didn’t seem to have the proper one, and then did a double-take when Rembrandt plunged a massive iron key into the lock in the center of the door, and then yanked hard to draw it open. “The night-crew got me one as a ‘borrow’, seeing as I’ve been coming and going so much,” he told me with a wink as he vanished inside. I dismissed what sounded like Othello chucking as simply the passing of the wind, and followed Rembrandt inside.

The wooden door had been reinforced within by iron, as was appropriate for a compound of its occupation. Rembrandt led Othello and me through the threshold into the dark chamber, with only the sounds of his shoes against the metal floor to guide us forward. A spark was struck, and a torch lit, illuminating the gutted shop we found ourselves in. Where there were once displays now stood iron bars, encasing the room like a cage. Rembrandt led us upstairs, where we were greeted by several other men; the armed and

armored staff of The Shed.

The top floor had been gutted as well. The walls had been removed in favor of a large open chamber subdivided into cells by iron fences. Like the bottom floor, the exterior walls here too were encased in iron. In many of the cells sat prisoners, but before I could examine them I was greeted by the chief ward, Somno, a small balding man who seemed far too happy to be here.

"Ho boss, allow me to present the Red Hand Cult. A band of filthy blighters what been assassinatin' Hammerites for the pagans and all that rubbish. It's they that been stalkin' and murderin' and stalkin' and murderin' the Hammers and defacing their temples for bloody nigh on however long as you'd like." He then spat onto the floor.

I looked at them. Most were unconscious, and one was trying to fight with one of the guards. The base of the guard's sword hilt knocked him in the temple, so hard I swore I could hear the bone crack, and he went down in a heap. I noted that all seemed to be wearing crude uniforms with red hands painted all over their clothes and bags over their heads. The one who had just been put down was having his bag put on now, and it would be soon saturated with his blood from the wound. "How much of your story is true?" I asked him in reply.

"Not a bit," he said, almost sounding proud. I glanced to Rembrandt and Othello to gauge their reactions, but both stood stone faced.

"But the Hammerites will buy it," the guard added, maybe thinking I was skeptical.

"No, they won't," I said quickly. "Rafael wants me as much as he wants the pagans who have been killing his people, and if these prisoners lead him back to me, it's over. These goons will tell him what he wants to hear."

"Ah," Somno said, "they don't know nothing."

"You'd be surprised," I said, eyeing him harshly.

"If I may," Othello said, speaking up, "The master is right, you can't be sure that these prisoners won't lead the Hammerites—"

Othello was cut off. "Then we'll just kill them all!" the ward proclaimed, clearly pleased with his solution.

"Nooo..." I said slowly, my eyes going to each of the five.

"Hammers will anyway, and if they do it, it'll hurt more. We'd be doing 'em a favor if we..."

"I'll think about it. Who are they really?" I said.

"Ah, known murderers and monsters. They were in Ramirez's pay, actually. He keeps them about to do their thing; keepin' fears up and the need for his protection fees high. But we've kept tabs on 'em in case we ever needed to nab one or two for blackmail, or for this."

"So they are in Ramirez's employ..." I winced.

He kept going "Psychopaths, the lot of them. We kill 'em and hand 'em over to the Hammers no problem. They have their butchers; you deliver them, they see you're on their side, problems solved. Done a boon to society in the process too you know."

"And what happens when Ramirez comes after us for this?"

"We can make it look like someone else is to blame," Rembrandt said. "I can take care of that if you'd like. Ramirez will get word that Fitzaviar or Agus did it. They both hate him well enough. It'll be convincing."

"I'm not so sure," I said with a doubtful grimace, "and anyway, where's Ghost?"

"Ah, he's upstairs," Somno told me as he spun around and practically ran to another flight of stairs that led to the top floor. "Maximum security area!" he shouted after us proudly. Soon we were all up top in a very dark room, looking through a glass opening in an iron wall into a large chamber with a bound and gagged man sitting in the center under a bright light.

"So that's Ghost," I muttered. "Unharmed?"

"Only what was done to him before we got to him, though I imagine those ropes don't feel so good," he said as he craned his neck to look in at Ghost without stepping to block my view.

"He needs to be evaluated to determine his suitability for the task ahead. Confirm what we already think we know, and find out more that might mark him as right or wrong. If he's right, mentally prepare him for the task but do not lead him on to what that task might be. If he's wrong for the job, just...get rid of him. Don't let him know who's captured him and why. And don't hurt him. We need him strong and healthy. Of course I'll make the final say when I get back."

"Some of our questioning methods require hurting!" Somno peeped.

"Fine, just don't make it permanent." I turned to leave, when he spoke up again.

"Begging your pardon boss, but we aren't exactly staffed at the moment for any type of interrogations," he stammered. "That kind of thing requires tact, and we have none of that here."

I looked at him, rather shocked. "What do you mean?" was all I could say at first.

"Just that we're used to standing back and watching while trained interrogators take care of the actual talking to of folks that's got stuff we want to know."

I turned to my two guests. "Rembrandt, Othello, do either of you have any experience in this sort of thing?"

"Extensive," Rembrandt replied, and then glanced at Othello, "But it works best with two; one to be his enemy and one to be his friend. I'm best at the first part, but maybe Othello here can give me a hand with the second. It won't take more than a moment to explain how it's done, and he seems like a friendly enough sort; maybe smart too," he added with a wink.

Othello nodded. "I shall try to be of service," he said to us both.

"Good. Just keep in mind our ends and it should be fine." I looked at Ghost once more, and took a long breath as I thought things through.

"Forgetting something, boss?" Rembrandt cooed.

"Hm?"

Othello clarified. "It would help our interview of Ghost if we knew what task we are supposed to find out if he's suitable for."

— Lytha: The Cell —**Day 4: 4:00 am**

This place...The feel of it...so much fear, and despair...it was filling me, I was drowning in it. The voices all around me were weeping, wailing in their anguish. I buried myself away, hiding, trying desperately to block it out.

I opened my eyes. My face was on the cold stone floor. I twitched, scared by the cold feeling and the pain in my left side. I tried to put myself in an upright position, but the chains between my hands hindered my attempt. Both feet and hands were shackled.

I looked around the place. I was in a very small cell, lighted by a very intense electrical light. It flickered irregularly. Walls and ceiling and floor were made of solid stone. Behind the bars of the door, I could see into the opposite cell. A very tall, ugly man was there imprisoned, staring at me.

The villa...Delphine...I had failed. How had I been so clumsy, so reckless?

Horrified at what I might find, I brought my hand up to where I had been hit by the quarrels, first to my left shoulder then my arm, and finally where my arm had broken on the stair. It had been wrapped, the bandages still hot from the blood which had saturated them. Which a shock that brought tears to my eyes I felt the sudden hard cold of the metal splint which they had screwed into me. Losing control, I curled in upon my stomach and vomited onto the cell floor. I could hear laughing from somewhere behind me; or maybe it was in my head. I did not know. I felt myself sobbing, coughing on the remains of the vomit in my throat, and trembling uncontrollably.

— Sheam: Pried from Bed —**Day 4: 4:00 am**

I knew I shouldn't have done it, but I did it anyway: I had stayed up extremely late playing with the choker again. In fact, I wasn't certain I had gotten even an hour of sleep when the buzzing began. At first I did not know if it was part of my dream or real, but when I found myself definitely awake and the buzzing of the electrical bell incessant, I knew that someone did not intend for me to get any sleep tonight. I hissed through clenched teeth and gazed through my tangled, matted hair through the darkness at the buzzer and flashing bulb which represented the villain who had disturbed me at this hour. Normally the buzzing lasted for a few seconds and went silent, but the person behind tonight's disturbance had triggered it over and over at least three dozen times by now.

Feeling dreadfully irate, I paced across the cold floor to cut the power to the buzzer and the light in order to shut them off. Whoever it was, they were extremely impatient, so rather than get dressed I found the robe which I almost never wore and wrapped it around myself. I tightened it before I tied it, making sure that it was snug around my neck.

I quickly took my candlestick and key, and ascended to my office. Feeling far more awake than I ever wanted to be at this hour, I opened my office door and quickly went to the box where the urgent messages were kept. It was

empty. Odd; the electrical buzzer did not trigger by itself. I had to get to the bottom of this. I locked the office behind me, and made a quick detour to the kitchen. As a precautionary measure I borrowed a foot-long chef's knife and hid it in my sleeve.

That's when I began to hear pounding. Whoever had misused the paging system was growing impatient. I approached the staff entrance quickly, and shouted "Who's there?" before I was close enough to open the peek-hole to look outside.

"Sh-sh...Schinler!" he peeped. I growled once more, but didn't let go of the knife. Someone could always have one to his back, I reasoned. It was more likely that I just really wanted to stab him for all that damned ringing. I pulled the door open slowly and saw his thin, pale face in the candlelight. A gust of cool nighttime air accompanied him. "The Hammerites are coming!" he stammered with wild eyes.

"What, now?" I shouted back, eyes going almost as wild.

"Well no," he muttered, looking sheepish. "At around noon I suppose."

I narrowed my eyes at him and slammed my fist into the doorframe where he could see; the fist that contained the knife. "You woke me up at this time of night to tell me that the Hammerites are coming...at noon?"

"Well, well yes, I...but..."

"Go back home, Schinler."

"But, but I..."

"Schinler!" I screamed, knuckles going white where I pressed my fist into the doorframe, and he vanished like a ghost in the night. Anything for a chance to see me undressed, I thought to myself as I slammed the door behind him, stormed back downstairs into my chambers, slammed the door behind me, tossed the knife onto my nightstand, dropped the robe to the floor, and fell back into bed.

After what seemed like only an instant, I heard another knocking, this time on my own door. I cried in exasperation, pulled my sheets around me, went right for the knife, and threw open the door, expecting to see a meek Schinler cowering and being pathetic. Oh, he'd get what he wanted alright. Instead I found myself staring into Daelus's chest where Schinler's eyes should have been, and suddenly I felt very meek, very pathetic, and a little naked.

"Sheam, what are you doing?" he said, not sounding very amused.

"I...uhm," I lowered the knife, "thought you were Schinler."

"And is it common for you to attack Schinler with a knife when he tries to wake you up early in the morning?"

I managed a pathetic smile, feeling my face go hot with blush. "Yes."

"Sheam I had a messenger sent to warn you that the Hammerites were coming to occupy The Circle nearly two hours ago!"

Daelus's words piled into my brain; like a stack of books thrown into my arms, nearly pushing me over. The disappointed look in his eyes didn't help, nor did the fact that I was only wearing a wrapped up sheet. "Occupy? Two hours ago?" I said in a panic, dropping the knife, nearly impaling my foot.

"Sheam, get dressed, we have so much work to do, and hurry." he vanished.

I was shocked and confused, and furious with Schinler for leaving out such a vital bit of information, and furious with myself for not letting him, and even more furious with myself for disappointing Daelus. I wadded up the sheet and threw it as hard as I could before getting into some simple clothes and ran up the stairs to find Daelus, cursing at myself the entire way.

When I got upstairs, I found Daelus and many other men, some agents I recognized, and some Gryphons, looking very busy running this way and that way with boxes. Schinler was at Daelus's heels like a puppy trying to explain to him how awful I had been to him, and that it wasn't his fault she didn't get up and get to work, and that he didn't know what to do, until finally Daelus grabbed him by the shoulders, and with a look and a voice that would have made me faint dead away, said, "You knew what was at stake, Schinler. You should have done what had to be done. You were given a simple task and that was all that was expected of you. In the future, far less will be expected of you. Now pack up your things and go back to your mother's house."

I wanted to cry. I reached out weakly to Schinler as he stood there petrified after Daelus left him to get back to work, barking orders this way and that to sleepy men who grunted replies. "Schinler, I'm so sorry," I wanted to say, but could only squeak.

He glanced at me for half a second, and then ran off towards the mail room. I ran off after Daelus. "Daelus it wasn't his fault!" I shouted, entering his office just as he was unceremoniously emptying the contents of his desk into a large bag. "Yes, it was. I had James's agent send a messenger to The Circle. The emergency procedure when faced with the danger of our secrecy being compromised is that the mail operator, in this case Schinler, be notified, and that he immediately send out notices to the staff first, the Gryphons second, and the agents third. The messenger did as he was supposed to; he went to Schinler's apartment and delivered the notice. Schinler was supposed to copy the notice three times, and deliver each one to the emergency boxes. Did you find such a message in the emergency box?"

"No," I said timidly. "It was empty. I checked. Schinler was at the staff door. He tried to deliver the message personally..."

Daelus shook his head. "Not his job. He was supposed to then deliver the other two messages to the other two emergency notice locations—failing to do so on all three accounts—and then get to work cleaning out the mail room. Two hours were wasted." He finished with his desk and started taking choice items from his shelf and shoving them into the bag. "I arrive, find out that none of the guards had been notified, none of the agents had been notified, and worse, you hadn't been notified. I'd say it is very much his fault."

"But he did try to get me up!" I choked, trembling with anger at myself. "But I wouldn't listen to him and told him to go home. He just did as I told him."

Daelus handed me the full sack, and said in an even tone, "I don't need him right now, but I do need you. I need you to take charge of the situation."

You know the plan; you know where everything is and where everything goes. Let me show you the secret chambers. I'll hear no more of this, no more blame, no more regret or anger. What happened, happened; and now we have to deal with what is going to happen; worst case scenario. The Hammerites are coming to occupy The Circle, and probably plan to disassemble it brick by brick until they find what they need. We don't have time to move everything out, so we have to move everything *in*."

I just nodded. "I'll try not to disappoint you again."

"Wrong attitude," he said to me, his heavy hand coming down on my shoulder. "I want to hear, 'I will not disappoint you', period."

I frowned and nodded, and then took the sack from him.

"Collect yourself. I need the Sheam I hired, not this girl I see before me now. Get yourself together and get to work. I have to go now...I don't know when you'll see me again."

Now I really felt myself about to cry, but that would have gone completely against what Daelus had just told me. I just choked. "Where are you going?"

"You read the Hammerite brief. I am going with them on their expedition. Sheam," his hand went on my shoulder again, but this time gentler, "get yourself together, and follow me."

I nodded and followed him out the door. He gave more orders to several other newcomers as he passed, instructing them on what they could do to help, as he led me down to The Circle's basement. "Do you remember how to access the secret chambers?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, and fumbled about the stones on the wall until I found the right one, and pressed it in just the right spot. The wall rumbled and slid open.

"Good," he said, vanishing inside. It was pitch black within, but Daelus didn't seem to care. I pulled a torch from the wall and followed him, wondering what he could be doing. "There's an even more secret chamber," he said to me, feeling around on one of the walls, and then crouched to feel around on the floor, "that I never told you about. I haven't told anyone about it. The Hammerites may find this room, but they'll never find this one. Ah..." He dusted off some bricks, and then looked up at me. "Sheam, help me with this would you?"

I quickly went over, and gently put the torch down on the stone floor. He seemed to have completely forgotten about what had happened just a few minutes ago, but it was still all I could think about. I saw what he was doing, and was totally baffled. His hands were flat against two stones, not holding or gripping them in any way, and he seemed to be pulling up somehow. Not wanting to disappoint him again, even though I had no idea what we were doing, I did the same. To my amazement I felt a force taking hold of my hands, and gasped as I yanked my hands away. He looked up at me, slightly amused by my reaction.

I tried again. As a first, nothing happened, but as soon as I opened my hands and pressed my palms to the stones, I felt a force take hold, and as I lifted, the four large stones came up with our palms in the shape of a square,

and hovered under our open hands as we pulled it away and set it aside, releasing it gently as we closed our hands. "That's amazing," I whispered in astonishment.

"Old magic of the building," he explained, taking his bag of things and my torch and using it to look into the man-sized hole in the floor. "The open hand may take what the closed hand cannot." At that he was climbing down into the hole, and continued saying, "and strength doesn't matter either. It takes two to open it, regardless of how strong they are. Two children could open it while the strongest man alive cannot." And then he was gone, though I could still hear him climbing down. Reluctantly, I followed, though I was worried about kicking his hands as I climbed down after him.

"How did you know about it?" I asked, trying to convince my knees not to shake as I climbed down the ladder.

"When this whole mess is settled, I'll tell you the whole story," he said back up to me.

The tunnel seemed to go on and on, but eventually I could hear him land on another stone floor, and I found it as well. Then his torch was lit once more, and I found myself blinking against the light.

"I think everything will be able to fit in here," he said, and when I was able to see properly again, I saw that he was right.

"Where are we?" I asked, gazing wide eyed at what the torch would reveal, acres of chambers and tunnels, with brickwork and carvings just like what was on the outside of The Circle, but ancient; covered with dust and cobwebs, and air smelling of a tomb.

"I'm not sure. These passages go on and on. I haven't even explored it all yet."

"They could lead anywhere," I muttered, staring down a tunnel into the darkness.

"I'm rather sure it's self-contained," Daelus replied, setting down the bag in a choice spot by the wall, "but we can't worry about that now. I have to go, and you need to get to work. Remember, the Hammerites can't just find the place empty; they need to not find the bad stuff and do need to find fake good things we put in as decoys. That way they won't be suspicious of empty holes in the collections."

"Yes, I know. I'll make sure they don't suspect anything is strange."

"They already do suspect; you make sure they don't find they're right. Back up now; come on."

He went first again, and for a moment I was alone in the dark ancient chamber, with twisty passages going in all directions. The ribbed vault of the ceiling made me feel like this place was somehow sacred, or haunted, or enchanted. I didn't know why. I stopped my fretting and climbed up after Daelus. When I got back to what I used to think of as the secret chambers, Daelus was already way ahead of me, once again talking with some men and women who would be helping me move things around. It sounded like he was telling them I was in charge. I didn't feel very charge worthy. If I could go back in time and get up when Schinler got me up, and had taken charge

then, and Daelus arrived to find the place bustling and things well in hand, I would have felt in charge. Now I felt like I should be dismissed along with Schinler.

"Sheam," he told me. "You are to set up office in Eisenhower's Hotel up the way from here; that is how I will keep in touch with you. I'm going there next to set up things with him; he's a friend and owes me some favors, and you'll find things waiting for you once you're done here. I hope you can expect more help from the Gryphons as soon as I've talked with them; I'm going to their nest next to speak with Captain Wendle. Finally," and then he glanced to some of the others who had been listening intently, "I'm going to appeal to Lord Canard himself for some aid. Hopefully he's feeling generous," and then he looked back at me. "Thankfully he likes you, Sheam," he said with a smile, "though hopefully not in a creepy way."

I hoped not too, but found the idea of help from the only man in the area who was more powerful than Daelus slightly comforting. "I won't let you down," I said to him, trying to sound brave.

He nodded, and introduced me to some of the newcomers, who turned out to be various crooks and rogues who owed him a favor or two, and were now looking to me for guidance. After I had collected myself and managed to get them all to work in various parts of The Circle, putting things in boxes and getting them down to the super-secret area, I realized that Daelus was long gone. I wanted to stop again and fret over how I had managed to disappoint him so thoroughly on what could be the last day I would ever see him, but I wouldn't let myself. I wanted to stop and fret over how he didn't even say goodbye, but I didn't have time for that either. What I really wanted to do was beat myself up some more for messing up, worry and wring my hands over the impending doom, and convince myself that I was incapable of getting The Circle in order for the Hammerite takeover, and how we would all go to jail and be executed because I was too slow and stupid and lazy, but I decided that it would all only come true if I sat around thinking about it. I worked, and I organized, and I planned, and the whole while I couldn't stop thinking about everything I had decided not to think about.

— Ghost: Interrogation —

Day 4: 5:00 am

Waking up and finding myself tied to a chair in a dark room wasn't doing much for my mood. I felt even more cheerful when, after giving my bonds a good tug (in spite of the shooting pain in my arms), I felt a big gauntleted hand come down on my bruised and battered shoulder. I grunted in pain, and tried to twist my head around to see who the jerk was so I could remember to remove his hand later, but he was standing too close behind me, and I was a little distracted by the two other guards on either side of the room. "Stop squirming," was all he said in his low, brooding voice.

I couldn't see what they had done to me, but I was pretty good at guessing. I had been tied up like this enough times to know. The chair was

iron, and bolted to the floor. It had to be or I would have felt it give when I was squirming. I had rope around my chest, stomach, knees, and ankles, all holding me to the chair. My hands weren't just tied up, but had bags around them so tight I couldn't un-ball my fists. I could feel my fingernails cutting into my palms. Whoever had me, they knew how to tie someone up.

"What the shit is going on?" I rasped hoarsely through a burnt throat out of aching lungs. That's when the bright light came on, stinging my eyes in the instant before I could shut them. After what seemed like an hour I heard a door open, and then close. I forced one eye open, but the bright light was still blinding. I could barely make out the shape of a hooded man putting down a chair in front of me, and sitting in it. A moment later a small table was placed between us, close enough so that if my hands had been untied I could have put my elbows on it.

I squinted, trying to see the asshole who was in front of me, but the light was behind him so all I could make out was the shape of his hood.

"What time is it?" I said urgently.

"What?" the hooded man replied with disdain. His voice sounded like sandpaper.

"I asked you what time it was. I'd just like to know, okay?"

"It's whatever time I want it to be," he said with a dry snicker. "Dim that light a bit," he then said over his shoulder. "Watching him blink like a sissy is giving me a headache." It quickly diminished, though I still couldn't see much of his features under the hood, except for a narrow chin and nose.

Fine, be that way. It was their funeral if it was nighttime. I wasn't going to warn them.

"We have some important topics to discuss, Mister Ghost," he said, leaning back in his chair and letting the words slide out of his mouth like a charmed snake out of a basket. I heard a distinct click, and then my eyes went to the razor-sharp switchblade which he was now using to clean his fingernails.

"Who the taff is we?"

"My partner and I," he said, gesturing to the man who was pulling up another chair beside him. I still couldn't make out much with the bright light behind them, but I could tell that this guy was wearing a fancy suit and a silly hat, the kind that was domed on top and had a curly brim.

"And do you two *gents* have names?" I demanded.

The second one spoke up, using a young, priggish voice. "Please do not concern yourself with our identities, for we are merely intermediaries, and knowing who we are will bring you no closer to understanding why you are here."

"We're going to make this quick," the first one said with a snort. He had finished cleaning his nails and was now spinning the switchblade between his fingers. "First question. How many Hammerites have you killed?"

"What the...what kind of crap question is that? What the taff is this?" I hissed through my teeth.

"Please, Mister Ghost. We simply need to confirm the information we already have."

"None. Zero. I've never killed a Hammerite." I said with a sneer. They weren't going to get that kind of dirt on me.

The switchblade jabbed down into the wooden tabletop in a split second. I hadn't even seen the bastard's hand move. It vibrated eerily for an instant before the hooded one spoke. "One. The Mausoleum of Saint Julian."

Crap, how did they know about that? I was after Saint Julian's golden rosary, which the Hammerites had been so kind as to bury with him, only to be caught on my way out with the goods in hand. I fought my way through then, even killed one of them, but it was to save my own skin; it wasn't a fight I started. I said nothing.

"Two," the hooded one continued, getting out of his chair, snatching his switchblade back up with a dart of his hand, and then vanishing behind me. I could still hear him breathing. "Saint Figmund's chapel."

"Hey, I didn't kill him!" I proclaimed before I realized what I was doing. It was true, though. I had been hired to steal the fingernail of Saint Figmund himself. I didn't believe the job myself at first, but it turned out there was a real trade in the body parts of saints. That one also didn't end well, but I don't think the Hammerite who caught me died; I just planted a dagger into his thigh and left him to bleed.

The one in the funny hat spoke up in that same snooty voice. "A Hammerite soldier bled to death after being stabbed through the thigh with a dagger confirmed to belong to you."

"Three, and Four," the hooded one said, leaning in close to my ear. He rested his arm on my shoulder, so that I could see him spinning that switchblade around between his fingers just inches from my nose. That was when a huge bead of sweat dripped right into my eye. "The Church of Saint Ellen."

Dammit, I was really hoping they didn't know about that one. I was running from the mansion guards at Lord Kile's, and decided that sprinting through the grounds of the church next door was a good idea. Once I got over the wall I ran smack into a full Hammerite patrol. I was young and stupid back then, had to be since I was robbing from the living rather than the dead, so I tried to fight them off. I put two of them down before I saw another squad charging me, and somehow escaped with my skin intact, though they did manage to break one of my collar bones.

"Five," the hooded one continued, this time running the edge of his blade across my forehead, and after lifting it away, ran his finger down it so I could watch all of my sweat drip off the edge of his knife. My stomach turned inside out. "The Cracked Tankard."

I twisted slightly to look at him, eyes wild. "Wait a sec, I didn't kill any taffing Hammerites at the Cracked Tankard! If anyone that was Drew the Shoe!" I glared into his dark eyes, set in a dark leathery face, above a twisted, curly grin. I wanted to spit, but he'd probably repay me with his knife in my ear.

"Drew the Shoe, you say?" the one with the hat asked. "So you were at the Cracked Tankard when the Hammerites came, as we have been informed."

"Yeah, taff them, who told you I killed one of the Hammerites? Stupid fools making up stories, trying to get me killed... I'm not an idiot like Drew. I ducked and ran."

"That rather severely contradicts the story we were told about it," the one with the hat continued. The hooded one slinked back into his chair, grinning like an imp, flicking his blade closed, and then open, over and over. "We were informed that you acted rather heroically in the defense of a pair of prostitutes."

"Heh, yeah, I guess I did," I admitted.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you come to the defense of the prostitutes against the Hammerites?"

I shrugged. No point in not telling them. "All I did was stand guard in case the Hammers came for them. I didn't actually get into any fights that night."

"Their names please?"

"What?"

"Tell us their taffing names before I see how many holes I can stick you with before you pop, you pathetic stammering whelp."

"You'll not go near them!" I roared, trying to jerk forward helplessly. I felt the gauntlet come down on my shoulder again, making me wince.

"Giving us this information only helps you in the long run," the one in the hat said calmly.

He was right. What was I protecting them from, anyway? They'd probably get more customers out of this deal. "Fine. Laurela and Betty. You should have no trouble finding them."

"Thank you," the one in the hat said.

"Aren't you going to write that down or something?" I asked with a sneer.

The hooded one snickered wickedly, and held up a sheet of paper for me to see. On it was not only Betty and Laurela's names, but a fairly accurate summary of what actually happened. "You bastards! You knew this whole time?" I nearly screamed.

"Sure did, turkey," the hooded one said. "Now things are going to get *really* fun, since you now have a pretty good idea of how much we actually know about you. Oh, I bet you're just *dying* to find out what I'm going to do every time I catch you in a lie."

"Taffing shit," I hissed. "Who the hell are you people and what the taff to you want with me? You work for a crime lord, don't you? This is just their bloody style. Did I cut in on their turf or something? Some big bad crime boss, afraid of little Ghost? How pathetic!" I definitely screamed that time.

A moment went by. The hooded one just grinned like he had a living canary in his mouth. The one with the hat just tilted his head a little. "Let us please move on to the next matter," he said in a disturbingly even tone. "The murder, by your hands, of Ragbert and wife."

My jaw dropped. My mind raced, wondering why the hell someone would

think I murdered them. Then I realized that both of their bodies were still in my apartment. "Oh crap," was all I could manage.

— Jyre: In the Company of Strange Men —

Day 4: 6:00 am

After I had fallen so helplessly under the spell of my new prospects, ready to go immediately to the most dangerous part of The City—nay, it couldn't even be called part of The City—I was punished for my enthusiasm by being crammed with my new employer into a small stagecoach, a detestable crate smelling of mold and rotting wood and with the springs underneath the torn upholstery of the cushions stinging my thighs. Somehow I expected something nicer, but maybe this was all part of his attempts to blend in. There was only one seat, and he filled up most of it. I pressed myself against the door and away from him. Every time the stagecoach hit a bump, a sharp metal spring under me gave a fierce poke; I winced, but dared not move; doing so meant getting closer to Ramirez's mass. The ride had been miserable, as was the room they showed me to once we got to where we were going; where that was, I had no idea. I was beginning to feel less like a new hire and more like a prisoner. As far as I knew the door to my room, or cell, was kept unlocked, though I never worked up the courage to actually test it. I simply told myself it was unlocked, and took it in faith that it was.

I was given a meal which, while poorer than I had experienced in my servitude under The Lady, was nicer than anything I had eaten while living free with Els. I was glad that my hosts didn't expect me to leave my room when I ate; the meal was delivered and then the owner of the arm which pushed it through the door vanished after I had lifted the weight of the tray from his palm. The smell of my dinner improved the smell of the room; masking the odor of lichen with that of boiled potatoes and what looked like it may have been corn at one point; it tasted more like sawdust.

The morning came; I don't know if I had slept or not. The bed was fine enough, again less than I had known with The Lady, but far greater than what I was sleeping on in the hideaway. I never truly found sleep; the passage of time itself was kept hidden from me. I didn't have any way of knowing when the sun came up; the brick walls offered no chance for sunlight to peek through. I felt as if I was deep underground. When a man came to get me he had a cloth tied around his lower face, and a hood pulled low over his eyes. "Come on," he said, holding the door open wide for me to pass.

I looked over him quickly, looking first for any obvious weapons, and then closer for any that may be hiding. I shouldn't have had to expect to be held at knifepoint, but that's what I had learned to expect. He never did draw any weapon at me; just led me quickly through a brief maze of narrow brick corridors into a dim room filled with other such men. "Why are you all wearing masks?" I said immediately, trying to cover my fear with boldness.

"We're all Ramirez's top agents," said the one behind me. "If we knew who each other were, we'd have to kill each other." A roar of laughter

erupted around me. So he wanted to joke rather than give a real answer. Fine.

"Yeah, listen girl, here's your gear," he said, pointing to the table my eyes had naturally been drawn to after I got over looking over each of the men without looking like I was looking them over. He reached over and pulled off the top flap of a heavy-looking pack. "Caltrops, bombs, holy water, flashers, you name it. You ever handle this kind of stuff before?"

"Yes," I said automatically. Actually I hadn't, but I didn't want to appear ignorant. I knew how a bomb or a flasher worked well enough, but I had never gotten my hands on holy water before. I didn't even know what a caltrop was, but I assumed I could figure it out.

"Well good, because it's all highly dangerous, and explosive, and flammable, so don't blow yourself up. You don't smoke, do you?"

"No," I said, wanting to go over to the pack and pull it apart to see everything they were giving me. "I mean, yes," I corrected, remembering my previous attempts to appear tough, "but I won't. Not while carrying this."

That got a few snorts, and the guy who was showing me the pack said, "Er, yeah, and don't drop it neither. You know how to use a bow?"

"Of course I do!" I protested. At least there I was being honest. I was proud of my skill with a bow.

"Right, good," he said.

Then I noticed a familiar form to one side of the room. I wasn't sure how I missed him before, but now he stood out like a beacon. "Aren't you Ramirez?" I said immediately, hoping that my cunning skills of observation would earn me some points.

All eyes went to him. He shuffled around a bit, and said, "Er, yeah, why?"

"Why are you wearing a mask too?" I said frowning, getting a very funny feeling.

"Because if the men knew what I looked like, I'd have to kill them all!" he said with a bellow-like laugh, which everyone else in the room echoed. I didn't. Called out, he moved to the center of the room, and seemed to take over for his other man. I took another glance around, just in case someone else I would recognize would suddenly manifest themselves. All I got were pairs of eyes glaring back at me, as if daring me to hold the gaze. I never did.

"So what am I looking for?"

"There's this old scroll, see," began Ramirez. "Boss says, erm, I mean..."

My tongue moved faster than my sense. "You have a boss, Ramirez?" Again came the laughter, but I didn't think it was because what I said was funny.

"I was speaking in the third person, of course. All men of noble blood do so from time to time. Now then, as I was saying..." Ramirez was just as bad as his reputation led on. I felt like I was standing before a complete buffoon. "There is a scroll in the old homestead of The Lady's family, which will be the key to destroying the lot of them, her and all her followers!"

I stopped cold. My eyes went from my gear up to him, frowning "I don't want to kill anyone..." I said in a low voice. I glanced around the room, and I

understood for the first time what I should have realized immediately. I was in a room full of killers. I wanted many things. I wanted many bad things to happen to The Lady. I didn't want anyone killed.

"Now, now, I don't mean kill, I mean, you know, ruin!" The men in the room seemed to shuffle around a bit more than usual at that moment. "It will destroy her magic!" he then added, and there was a chorus of snorts and snickers.

"What do I do when I find the scroll?" I said, just not wanting to really know what these men planned to do. I would get them the scroll and that would be that. It wasn't any of my business.

"Uh, you get out." Then the whispering started. I swore I heard "stupid girl," amongst the crowd, or "we're doomed," and I know I heard someone say, plain as day, "you eat it and then..." but then he descended into a mutter and I couldn't make out the rest.

I pulled my shoulders tighter together and pressed on. "So what does it look like?"

"Er, it's a scroll."

This time no one said anything about me being a stupid girl. I watched him closely, waiting for Ramirez to produce an answer to my important question.

"The scroll won't be made from sewn flesh, as was the practice in ancient times, and still to this day by the pagans." The familiar voice came from the back of the room, sounding like rough leather. I tried to find the speaker. The crowd parted a little, turning to look at him as well. I couldn't see his face at all; his hood too low, his mask too high, and the room too dark. All I could see was a glint in his eyes, a reflection of the torch light, as he gazed at me. "Nor will it be made from pressed reeds or wood pulp, as is the practice of Hammerites and modern times. It will be more like cloth; I have seen scrolls of this type before. The outer roll darkens with age and dirt, but the inner layers remain white as snow. It's rough, but soft, softer than wool, almost like feather down. The writing won't be done in ink, but branded, burned in stroke by stroke. You will consider yourself lucky to lay your eyes on such a work. But, you must not, under any circumstances, read the text within aloud."

I didn't care about laying my eyes on that work. I was trying to lay my eyes on the speaker, but as he finished the crowd merged again, blocking my view of him. "Who are you?" I called out, and no answer came. Faint footsteps came from his end of the room as he left. "Who was that?" I begged of these strange men who crowded around me.

"Just like the rest of us," Ramirez said with a smile. "A friend."

Without proof, I had already made up my mind. He was the one who came to me first, who dressed up like Daelus after finding my note, who directed me to meet with Ramirez. I would have to find out more about him, since I had a feeling that when Ramirez let 'boss' slip out, he was talking about this man. I felt like nothing about this was what it seemed, but I kept my mouth shut. I wanted to see the Forbidden District to see if the stories

were true. I wanted to find that scroll, and I wanted to find out what these men planned for The Lady.

— Ghost: Interrogation Continued —

Day 4: 6:00 am

“We are not asking you *if* you killed Ragbert and wife or not; we are asking you *why*.”

“So you’re the taffin’ police now, is that it? The bloody City Watch?” These guys were singing more tunes than a drunk bard. As much as they were acting like they had me, I didn’t buy it. Those bodies were practically ash. No one could have given a positive identification on them. It was a pure bluff. Or was it? What if there was a possession in Ragbert’s pocket or something that made it clear who he was? Crap. I couldn’t be sure.

The hooded one was laughing again. He had wandered off behind me once more, though I could still hear him flicking his switchblade open and closed over and over. “You really need to help me understand this, because right now, it looks like you’re a sick bastard. Which did you do first, lure them into your apartment and murder them, only to set their bodies on fire, or burn their apartment building down, along with everyone else inside of it?”

“You’re the sick bastard for suggesting it!” I could have just told them about the curse and been done with it, but they probably wouldn’t have believed me, and if they did, they would probably have just killed me on the spot. “Okay, look, here’s what happened. I was visiting Ragbert alright, because we’re old friends. A lamp got knocked over, and the next thing we knew, the whole building was on fire. We got out okay. Some people didn’t, and that’s really sad. I go home, and he goes to his wife, who’s staying at her mother’s. She loses it, gets vengeful, grabs a torch, and runs over to my place to burn my place down too! He comes with her trying to stop her, there’s a big fight, they catch each other on fire, nothing I can do to stop it, and the whole thing is really sad. That’s it.”

The guy with the hat was quiet for a second, idly tapping his finger on the table so that only the fingernail made contact, producing a click, click, click. Finally he lifted his eyes from me to glance up at the hooded one somewhere behind me.

The hooded one sauntered back around the table, throwing himself into the chair so that it probably almost broke, and then remarked, “That’s the most inane, ridiculous story I’ve ever heard.”

“Bah!” I shouted. “Okay, you want ridiculous? How about this one! I’m cursed and whoever dies or already is dead near me turns into a zombie, and they try to hunt me down and kill me! A zombie came to Ragbert’s place while I was there, and I killed it with fire, but it caught the building ablaze by accident. Ragbert was killed by falling debris and became a zombie. His wife found him, and he killed her and she became a zombie. Then they stalked me to my place, tried to eat my brains, and I was forced to kill them both. There, do you like that one better?” I couldn’t believe I had just told them all that,

but it looked like I was about to go to the gallows for murder, so I might as well have gotten it off my chest.

The hooded one snorted. "You should have stuck with the vengeful housewife yarn."

"I'm bloody damn serious, though. Come on; give me a break. If you guys have been keeping such a close eye on me, you've got to know by now about the zombies."

"What exactly do you feel that we should know about the zombies?" the one with the hat said in his usual dull tone.

"That they're after me, following me wherever I go, and they're extra nasty at night. That's why I asked you what time it was before—if it's still dark out, watch out, they'll be here busting your door down any gods' minute!"

"Yep," the hooded one said with a crooked smirk. "We know about your zombies. Don't worry, we've dealt with that. There will be no zombies getting in here."

"Oh, oh, oh," I said, half mocking and half terrified. "You have no, no-oh idea what happened to the last guy who said something like that."

— **Lytha: Yes, Father Inquisitor** —

Day 4: 6:30 am

They came; two of them. They took me from the cell and dragged me through a long hallway. Behind a metal door was a torture chamber. The draining grid on the floor caught my attention most of all; it had blood on it. I was overwhelmed with the stench of excrement and gastric acid. I started to shake.

In a corner of the room was a desk with a young man behind it. A large fan was behind him blowing in fresh air. They pushed me down to my knees in front of the desk and stepped back. The young man wore the clothes of an official Hammerite priest, with a delicate pair of spectacles on his nose. He continued his study of the papers on the desk. The desk was very tidy, with small paperweights arranged atop a neat stack of loose pages in a perfect square, and three quills in different colored ink jars all pointed in the same direction. Its tidiness looked obscene in this room, in this smell.

After some more minutes reading, he looked up and at my face. "I am your Inquisitor. You will address me correctly with 'Father Inquisitor.' The rules are simple. You obey and cooperate, and you will be rewarded. Otherwise you will be punished. Is this clear enough?"

I simply stared at him. His voice did not match his profession. It sounded so young, and so intelligent. He didn't even use those, 'thy's and 'shalt's. I held myself back from him, terrified of what I might find if I let my mind touch his. A lash from behind brought me back from my thoughts. I nodded.

"Good. I am not fond of the usual brutal way to get information, but I know when force is needed, and I do not hesitate to use it. I believe you have the ability to speak?"

I nodded slowly. He sighed, and gave the guard behind me a sign; another lash.

"You do want to go through all of this, only to agree that you can speak? So, can you?"

Whipped again, I pressed a "Yes," through my lips.

"Ah, you can. So, I think we can continue. What is your name?"

I parted my lips to reply, but instead found words whispered into my ears.

Thalia!

"Thalia," I said, as the voice commanded, though I knew not why.

I felt another lash. These were mere pin-pricks; a smack on the wrist. I knew how much the man with the whip was holding back. I had felt it before. *Thalia had felt it.*

"We are both aware that this is not your name. I ask you a question to which I know the answer so that we can allow you to grow accustomed to speaking the truth. Now, tell me your name."

"Lytha," I whispered.

No! That is a lie! You are Thalia!

I cringed. The voice was more painful than the lash.

"Lytha. Tell me, do you worship The Master Builder?"

Demons! Lies!

How was I supposed to answer that? Tell them what they wanted to hear knowing it was a lie? "Yes," I said, before I knew what I was doing.

I felt another lash; this one much worse than the others. I shook, feeling the tears collect on my chin.

"It would do well for you to quickly understand the situation you are in, Lytha. Now, I ask you again; do you worship The Master Builder?"

Curse him! Curse his name! You are a coward and a fool!

"No," I whispered.

"If I cannot hear your answer, it will be taken as a lie, Lytha. Do you worship The Master Builder?"

My face twisted into a mask of rage. With teeth clenched and flared eyes, I shouted to him from my deepest core, "NO!"

"Thank you, Lytha," was his reply. His cold reaction to my outburst filled me with a defeat. I was helpless in my rage. "You have confessed to your first sin against The Builder, and the greatest. This alone is enough to seal your fate. However, we have much more ahead of us. Each sin, taken alone, is just as dreadful; the sum of many is not the value of the greatest, but each compounded upon the next. Only until you have confessed to all of your sins, will we be finished."

Tear his face from his bones! Gouge his eyes! Take his hands from him!

I could not make it stop. With every moment, the voices grew louder and louder, flooding my mind, separating me from my thoughts. Tormented from within, the words of the inquisitor seemed meaningless. I did not know if I was crying or laughing; if the pain in my arm and on my back were real or imagined; if the man at the desk were flesh and blood, or an apparition.

"Remorse is expected, and shall not be ignored. Know that through

punishment, forgiveness of even the most vile of sins is not beyond possibility. Now, I must move on to my next question. Tell me of your sister, Thalia."

— **Ghost: Interrogation Continued** —

Day 4: 7:00 am

The hooded interrogator was looking less and less happy. I couldn't tell if it was because this was going well or really badly, but I wasn't sure it mattered. "We know you were doing a job for Ragbert before he died," he hissed, "and we know that your mission remains incomplete. The buyer if the item in question remains waiting for his merchandise. Why has it not been delivered?"

"Uh, Ragbert's dead. He was my fence. How am I supposed to deliver it to a dead man?"

"So you are not, in fact, aware of the buyer's identity?"

"A good fence never spills that. Otherwise I'd skip Raggie and go straight to his buyer! Don't you know this stuff? Hey... is this what it's all about? Are you working for the buyer, and you think I skipped out on the deal and am trying to find a higher price for the trinket? Ha! This is my lucky day after all!"

"No, that's not what this is about at all," the one with the hat said.

"Then why the taff are you asking me about this stupid stuff?" I demanded.

"What was the nature of the job?" the hooded one asked.

"Who cares? Do you want to buy this thing off me or not? I've been dying to unload it."

"What is *it*?" he said with a scowl.

I relaxed against my bonds. My upper body already ached from the beating I took, and now my legs were starting to feel the same way. If I was going to turn this crappy night into a way to get rid of the star, I'd have to play it cool. "Priceless bauble, real snazzy."

The one with the hat calmly said, "It must have a name. Identify it, and from whom you stole it."

"I'm a grave robber. You know that. I steal from the taffin' dead."

"What tomb?" the hooded one said, almost shouting.

"Alarus."

"The Alarus tomb collapsed. There's no way in. Everyone knows that," the hooded one continued.

"Yeah well I got in. Pretty damn impressive, isn't it? So are we dealing?"

The one with the hat gave a faint laugh of surprise. "Actually, I would say that is quite impressive. Tell me, how much experience do you have in navigating subterranean complexes, Mister Ghost?"

I frowned at him. He kept saying what I didn't expect him to say. "Plenty. Let's go back to the part where we're talking about me selling the star to you, or your boss, or the jerk behind me who can't stop breathing out of his damn

mouth.”

The hooded one was cutting ribbons of wood off the tabletop now. “Why are you so desperate to get the star off your hands?” he said idly, without a trace of his previous rage.

Shit, and I had already told them about the curse. Even if they didn’t believe me, if I told them it was connected to the star, I’d never be able to sell it to them. “Because I need the money bad, is all.”

The one in the hat spoke up. “Is someone after you? Someone who wants the merchandise, and will kill you for it?”

I frowned. “Nah,”

He continued. “You’ve been on the move constantly since you acquired it. It seems like you are on the run. Who is after you?”

“You didn’t believe me the first time I told you.”

“What, the zombies?” the hooded one said with a scoff as a particularly large shaving of wood broke free.

“Yeah,” I said with a shallow laugh.

The one in the hat said, “Zombies are something you have considerably experience dealing with, is that correct, Mister Ghost?”

“You could say that.”

“Is it not also the case that you were the one to recover the Pendant of Thereon from the Crypt of Sanctified Rest?”

“Heh, word of that got around? Nice. Yeah, that was me.”

The one with the hat continued. “And the Garnet of Eternity from the Dreaded Sanctuary of the Damned?”

“Right, funny thing about that place...It’s not as bad as the name makes it sound. Well, except for the swinging axe-blades and the pits of spikes under moving platforms, oh, and the spears that shoot from the walls if you happen to breathe wrong. Yeah, piece of cake for a guy like me,” I grinned ear to ear.

“In summary, Mister Ghost, how would you rate your skills as a plunderer of underground chambers?”

“Uh, this is getting really weird,” I muttered, but played along. “I’m a gods-damned expert at it. I don’t think there’s anyone better in the field. Most people lose their sense of direction when they’re underground, but not me. I don’t get claustrophobic either, which is a plus. So, uh, is there a job you want to hire me for or something? Because otherwise, I’m really confused right now.”

The one in the hat shook his head. “I am afraid we are going to require you to remain confused for now.”

“Ah, crap...”

— Nightfall: Appealing to a Higher Power —

Day 4: 7:00 am

“For you, this, I cannot do,” Canard said, placing his pipe back into its case. I nodded. “I understood it was a long shot.”

“But maybe not for the reasons you think I can’t,” he said, looking up at

me with watery eyes. "Wendle is fond of you, and is keen on more types with your character being around for him to be fond of, so he aids you and does things he normally wouldn't. I'm going to let him do as he wants; he's a smart man, wouldn't be where he is if he wasn't, and I'm sure you can count on him to do what he's doing right now, over and over again."

"And your reasons are?"

"I'm not afraid of the Hammerites. If I had to be, I couldn't have been who I am for all my life. The Hammerites know what men like I do and they turn a blind eye, because it's good for them to. They're not really what people think. They're really much worse, and it's because they're worse that I'm not afraid of them. No, it's not attracting ire from them that worries me; it's my peers and my other underlings. If the other wardens find out that I helped one of my underlings who was in a bad spot with the Hammerites; they'd set about trying to get more of my underlings in bad spots with the Hammerites. Then they'd say to me, you helped Nightfall out when he had trouble with the Hammers, why not me? Then I'm so tied up in knots trying to keep my house in order, it will leave me weak to more direct attacks. You know how they operate."

"Yes sir, I do indeed." He was right, that wasn't the reasons I was expecting, but I had learned that wardens were always full of surprises.

"There are certain codes we have to follow if we want to stay in business. You get in trouble with the Hammers; you're on your own. Now you had better get on with yourself. I should still be in bed, and if I wake up just a little more, I may resent you having gotten me up at his hour. I'm going to pretend you've already left the room." He started to get up, but I beat him to it.

I was escorted by his guard quickly back to the stagecoach, which I had managed to put quite a few miles on this morning, and was once again seated and back on the road. "Take me back to The Shed," I ordered the driver, and was once again in a rush.

— Ghost: Interrogation Concluded —

Day 4: 7:30 am

"So was that before or after you threatened to knife him in the back?"

I jerked helplessly against my bonds as tension flooded me. "I was joshing with my mate," I said, almost gagging over the feeling of betrayal. The hooded bastard was opening up old wounds. Somehow he had heard about a certain incident before I had met Ragbert and become a grave robber; one that made me look really bad.

"Apparently your mate wasn't joshing with us. After that I'm told that you threatened an entire crowd of bystanders. You are clearly a dangerous sort. Tell me, did you plan to kill your boss before or after you got the gold from him, assuming you had something to sell in the first place?"

I couldn't help it, I jutted forward with a scowl, and then gasped for air as two heavy hands came crashing down on my shoulder and chest to hold me

steady. I winced, teeth bare from the pain.

"Ah," he said, walking another circle around me. He had, not a minute ago, kicked the table clear across the room and pressed his knife against my cheek until I admitted to having killed my old guild boss. "I see that we have hit a nerve. I must remember to repay your old guildie for his service to us."

"I'll cut that worthless turncoat's throat," I hissed, my mind flooding with various ways to shred that man's jugular.

"Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't stop until every member of your old band was cut wide open, and you were standing, laughing, over their mutilated bodies." I could almost hear the smile on the devil's lips as he twisted my words to mean what he wanted.

I bit my tongue to keep myself from replying stupidly. I already made a fool of myself, allowing myself to be bated so easily into a rage. I fumed for another instant, and then tried to reply as rationally as I could. "Listen, you. You don't need to wait for me to say the wrong damn thing. You can do whatever you want with me. But you haven't; you're playing this stupid game, so obviously you're not looking for an excuse to kill me, you're looking for information. What information, I haven't a damn clue. This is the most confusing, random-assed interrogation I've ever had to put up with! Why don't you just tell me what the hell you want with me and give me a bloody chance to actually help you? You've got me, okay! I'm giving in! Let's just get this damned bullshit over with, because as far as I can see, all you're doing is wasting your boss's time!"

Damn, that sounded good. I didn't know I had it in me.

I could see the hooded one; grinning his usual smug grin. He began to slowly, mockingly, clap his hands, "Marvelous speech."

The one with the hat, who was still seated, cleared his throat, and called the hooded one over. He did so, and they exchanged a few whispers.

I sat in silence for a moment, panting. My neck still stung as my sweat flowed over the burns from the other day. My bruised and battered arms and ribs and throat ached under the tight ropes with every breath I took.

Then, suddenly, they both got up and left. The door at the back of the room opened, and then closed again. I snorted. "Guess that worked," I muttered to myself. Maybe they were going to get their boss.

The guards around me still hadn't moved. I was afraid to turn my head again to try to look at them; partially from the pain in my neck, and partially because I expected them to mash my face if I did.

The door opened again. The bright light that had been keeping me nearly blind was dimmed and turned away, so that I could, for the first time, see more than just the basic shape of the man's head. He looked like quite a dandy: dapper, trim, groomed, not at all the type I expected to find in a place like this. I couldn't see what he was holding in his hand until he had put the table back in its place and put it in front of me: a tall cup of water.

"I am sorry about my partner. He seems to enjoy playing cat and mouse a little too much," he said in a mellow tone. He then lifted the cup to his lips and took a sip, before setting it neatly back in the center of the table. I just

stared at him.

He stared back. Finally he said, "Would you like something to drink, Mister Ghost?"

I frowned. He didn't wait for me to answer before he took the glass back up, and leaned forward far enough to bring the rim to my lips. He gazed at me steadily with a pair of gray eyes.

Then I remembered the old trick I fell for that got me into this mess. "So is it drugged, or is it just a ruse to get me to take the drugs?" I asked with a smirk.

"Why would we play the same game twice, Ghost?" he asked, sounding pretty earnest.

Taff it; I took a sip. The water was yum. Then he took it away, and set the glass back down at the edge of the table in front of me. I relaxed a little, and took a deep breath.

"You've already been very helpful, and I thank you, but there are a few details that are still bothering me," he said calmly.

"What?" I said, blinking. While this certainly was an improvement, I hated that I was still going to have to answer more stupid questions.

"Why were you so anxious to protect the prostitutes? Clearly you held no personal stake in their survival, since you were merely their customer."

"What? Come on, you can't tell me you wouldn't have done the same."

He nodded, "Possibly. Is this something you do often? Risk your own neck for the sake of others?"

I shook my head. "Eh, I don't know. I don't really think about it. It just seems like the thing to do sometimes."

"Was it because they were women?"

"Heh, well I'll tell you what, if it was a pair of boys down there I would have just stood my ground up top and said to taff with them."

"I see. Oh, by the way, I really am very sorry about all of this." He indicated to the bonds, and the guards. "Our employer simply is concerned with my protection. Your reputation is a potent one," as he spoke he raised the glass to me once again.

The water soothed my throat.

"So far you've done a lot to ease my concerns, though I suppose you might find that surprising considering how you've been behaving." He was smiling, like all of this was just fun and games for him. Well, mister happy-pants, I didn't like being tied up and beat up just so you could feel better about me, so you could jolly well taff off. I wasn't going to tell him any of that, though. I was going to keep on easing his concerns, so I could get the hell out of here. "Well that's good," I just said.

After I had a drink, he leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtful for an instant before tilting his head slightly, asking, "How far would you go to protect someone, a woman specifically, even a stranger, whom you felt was helpless in the face of mortal danger?"

The question hit me like a dart to the chest, pushing a sigh from me as I tried to answer. "I have no idea. It depends I guess. I don't know. I'd do

what I needed. Why the hell are we talking about this?"

"How far would you go, Ghost? Would you be willing to kill, or be killed, for that cause?"

"Here we go again. I told you; I'm no taffin' killer."

"Just because you insist that this is so, does not change the fact that we have evidence to the contrary. I suggest that you drop the act and simply consider my question."

I gave a long, long sigh. "Alright, let me tell you a story. This was a long-assed time ago so I doubt it matters. And don't you bloody gods-damned laugh, or I swear I'm..."

His normally smooth forehead was wrinkled in an expression of curiosity.

A moment passed, and then I finally said, "Whatever. Yeah, I killed a guy once over a girl. I had no idea who he or the girl was, all I saw was him raising up his arm to give her one hell of a punch. We were in a bar. I had a few drinks in me. I was feelin' real loose, like the king of the world that night. I didn't like what I was seeing, and I just lost it. Before he could punch her, I reached up behind him, grabbed his head, and gave it a good twist. Snapped his neck clean. He falls down, she screams, some people laugh, and I quickly realize what I did. I beat it. Haven't been back to that bar since. It was years ago and there hasn't been any trouble about it. I have no idea to this day who they were or what it was about, and I guess they never found out who I was. But there, that's my story. Does that satisfy your damned curiosity?"

I thought I could hear a pin drop somewhere in the next room. I glanced back and forth to the guards to see if they were snickering, and saw only icy composites. I looked back to my interrogator expecting some type of reply, and fast.

He was leaning back again, studying me quietly. "I see."

"What do you see," I said, sneering at his meaningless reply.

"That you are incredibly impulsive, violent, dangerous, and have an almost involuntary compulsion to defend a woman who seems to be in imminent danger."

"Yeah, that's me in a nutshell," I just said with a shrug.

"Would you like another drink?"

"I'm fine," I said, "don't change the subject. I'm still caught up on this whole admitting-to-be-a-murderer thing. If you'll give me a sec' I'll think you up another good yarn."

"That won't be necessary. You are a peculiar man, Mister Ghost. You have a strange animalistic nobility about you, that could easily be mistaken as a simple desire to destroy, but in reality it is merely the inability to tailor the potency of your violent impulses to properly suit the situation, and then people wind up dead."

I just eyed him suspiciously. "You said an awful lot of words just now and I really have no idea what you're getting at."

"You are a powerful man, and driven by your emotions. You tend to act first and think later, which often gives you the advantage over your enemies whose actions might be more governed by caution or rational planning."

I was now totally lost. Just as soon as I thought that I had my captors figured out, I'd be spun like a bottle. "I...I'm ready for another drink now," was all I could think to say.

"In a moment," he said, lowering his brow thoughtfully, and pressing his fingers together. "You have admitted that you have, in the past, committed murder. You have done so in a way that suggests you have a history of this conduct, and that it is extremely impulsive. Now, I believe you recall how this session began."

My heart was pounding so hard that I could feel my entire body throb against the ropes. Hammerites. That's how they started this whole conversation; asking about Hammerites. They wanted to know if I had killed them before—no, they knew I had. "No—no," I stuttered. "I don't know what you're talking about." That had to be what this was all about all along. They wanted a Hammerite killer; which meant they either wanted to turn me in for doing it, or they wanted to hire me to do it some more.

In the distance I thought I heard something, a sound that troubled me to the core and made my previous shakes seem like harmless twitches.

"I think my partner does," he said, "and would be happy to ask those questions again if you prefer him to me." I wasn't sure what he was talking about; I had forgotten what I had said which led to that reply. He didn't really matter anymore, not after my ears rang with that hideous sound. He heard it too; I could see it on his face. He glanced over his shoulder a bit, unable to help himself.

I couldn't help but run my mouth. "Even if you don't know what it is, when you hear a sound like that, you look. It's an instinct; those who don't have it die young. I on the other hand know exactly what it is: something I gods damned warning you about not half a taffing hour ago!"

They were ignoring me. I was more afraid than they were; they didn't know what was coming. If they did, they wouldn't still be standing there.

"Open up your ears, idiots. I'm telling you they've found me! They're coming, and it's not for a cup of tea and to chat about old times!" The reaction from my captors was still minimal, like they wanted to stay cool and collected in front of their prisoner, but really they were just looking like fools. "The zombies!" I shouted. "What, you really thought I was making that part about the zombies up? I was telling the truth those times! Why are you still standing there?" I screamed.

Noises beyond the darkness ensued. The hooded one had said they were ready in case of zombies, but I didn't believe it then, and I still didn't believe it. They had no idea that the zombies would actually find me here.

Then came a sound which got their attention; human screams. The guards left my side and vanished into the darkness behind my interrogator. A bit of light poured into the room as they opened and shut the door to let themselves out, someone in, and then the inky blackness returned. The guy with the hood was back, and he was whispering to the one in the hat.

"Hey, yeah, how about you untie me and let a pro handle this?" I suggested urgently to them. They glanced at me, and then continued to

whisper. Another human scream shot through the air, and they both looked. Then there was a crash, and another scream, and then the chilling sound of a mass being thrown against a door. I could only assume that it was the door between us and them.

"Stay here," the hooded one told me, and then both vanished into the darkness at the back of the room, followed by the same glimpse of light as they let themselves out. Right, stay here; as if I could do anything else.

I was alone. "Untie me you idiots!" I shouted as loud as I could into the darkness, but they probably couldn't hear me over the screaming. I pulled at the cords that bound my hands with any strength I had left, but it only shot pain through my back.

The yelling in the darkness before me was now augmented by the sound of flesh being hacked. "No!" I shouted, "Hacking at them just makes them mad! Use fire! Holy water! A flash of light even!"

There was a very, very loud bang; I was sure it was something hitting the door, like a body. Then there was another, and finally a blood chilling scream. The door was pushed open, and the formerly hat-headed gent ran flying into the room, gripping his face, making that scream. Blood was pouring out from behind his fingers. He ran past the table, caught the corner with his side, spun around out of control, rammed his head against a wall, and then crumbled to the ground. As he hit the floor, his hands fell free from his face, and I saw that he had been trying to hold his cheek in place. A loose flap of meaty skin hung from his jaw, the gaping hole in his face revealing teeth all the way back to the last molar.

"Ouch," I said cringing. "Guess you won't be able to hold your drink anymore, and never mind kissing..."

I couldn't be making jokes at a time like this though; his zombie attacker lumbered into view an instant later, shambling through the doorway. I could tell from the looks of it that it had made it here from the black pit. It jerked its head to look in my direction; dead eyes wobbling in its skull. It grinned.

I pushed all of my fear out my mouth through clenched teeth and barked, "Took you long enough! Come finish me off while I'm helpless!" If was time for me to go, at least it would be by my say-so.

It took a step forward, and then the blade of a sword thrust through its chest from behind. The zombie let out a roar-like moan, but wasn't even stunned. The blade vanished, but returned an instant later, another stab through the back.

"That's not going to do anything!" I screamed, so hard that I felt like my eyeballs were going to shoot out of my head, finding that fear was a great catalyst for achieving levels of loudness I hadn't thought possible.

He ignored me, jamming the sword through the zombie's chest a third time, but this time the zombie spun around to face him, yanking the sword from his grasp. The hilt still protruded from between its shoulders. It made a single lunge, followed by a scream, and then silence.

"Stupid taffer!" I barked, watching the body of the guard crumbled to the zombie's feet.

It turned to face me, and didn't waste any time in resuming its single-minded determination to punish me. "Cursed," the zombie hissed, "join us!" The light behind the zombie, in the hall, seemed to get brighter.

The zombie swung to knock the table out of the way. The glass went flying, spraying water everywhere, and shattering against the wall.

Then there was a second sound of glass shattering, and liquid splashed over the zombie's shoulders. I blinked. It wasn't holy water, or else the zombie would already have been a steaming pile of goo.

It raised both arms high, hands like claws poised to strike, "Join us now!" it roared.

Behind the zombie there was a faint crack, and a faint flash.

I shut my eyes, and held my breath.

The darkness erupted into red, and I was bathed in intense heat. All I could hear was the blaze of an inferno. Then the pain hit me; like I had been thrust head first into a roaring fire. All I could think was, damn, I'm in hell already...that was quick.

An instant later I felt something heavy hit me; not striking me, rather covering me, smothering me! The red was gone, replaced by blackness, and the sound of the fire faded. Then the striking came, on my head, face, chest, back, arms, legs, all over. The heat went away, but the burning sensation persisted. The weight was lifted from me, and again I felt like there was light beyond my shut eyes. I blinked them open, not sure what I'd see...

The room was lit by electric lamps all along the walls. The table was upside down beside the wall. The others were back; the hooded one was nursing his own wounded arm, and watching as the other guard was tending to the cheek-less and hat-less partner, who seemed to be waking up. There were smoldering zombie remains on the ground before me, along with a blanket used to smother the fire that showered me as my zombie attacker burst into flames after being covered with oil.

"Is he dead?" I asked, looking at the fallen guard who was not being tended to.

"Yes," said the hooded one, who looked like he was trying to set his own broken arm.

"Damn," for an instant forgetting about my treatment minutes ago, and instead feeling like a guy who just watched a stranger take an arrow for him.

The hatless one was quiet, as he was helped up and led out of the room. This left me alone with the hooded one.

"Told you there were zombies!" I said, with more than a little contempt, "But no, you were too smart for all that! Do you expect me to believe that? That's what you said! Feel like a jackass now, don't you?"

"My arm's broken, he's dead, and the other guy's face is gone...I'm a little distracted at the moment, so just shut up."

I snorted. "Untie me."

"Couldn't untie my own boot right now, let alone untie you. Not that I would want to if I could, so shut up!" He let himself down into a chair with a groan, still clutching his broken arm.

I didn't say anything at first, but then couldn't help but feel that the roles were reversed now. "Are you going to tell me what this was all about, now?" "Shut up!" he yelled.

"That's a no, I guess. At least tell me that this doesn't have anything to do with Hammerites."

He was silent.

"Shit, it does."

He didn't tell me to shut up this time. He just got up and left, leaving me alone with the dead guard.

I frowned, and looked over at the body. "Hi," I said to the corpse. "Uhm, you're not going to go all zombie on me now, are you?" I asked, blinking.

It didn't move.

"Uh, guys?" I said loudly. It was met with silence. "This dead guy is going to turn into a zombie any minute now!" I shouted.

Nothing. I looked at the corpse. I could have sworn I saw it move.

A deadly silence followed. I could feel the time tick by. Any moment, the corpse would rise, and that would be it.

But then the door reopened and the uninjured guard came forth. He and I were silent as he covered the body in oil, and set it on fire. Then he stood there, looking at it as it burned.

After I figured he had enough time to pay respects, I said, "You're not going to leave me in here, are you?"

"Nope," he said. Then he got out a bottle and a rag, uncorked the bottle, and poured a bit out into the rag. He turned his eyes to me, and started to approach.

I had seen this before. I guess they didn't feel like tricking me into drinking an 'antidote' this time. "Oh crap..." I muttered.

— Jyre: Where Angels Fear to Tread —

Day 4: 8:00 am

I stood before the wall that separated the forbidden district from the rest of the city. Its shadow eclipsed me, bringing goose bumps to my arms. I turned my eyes to the sky and spotted the sun through a thin veil of clouds. It had finally cleared the horizon of towers and great vaulted roofs which separated day from night. It should be safe to go in there, now.

Lowering my eyes, I turned to look in the direction of the hideaway. With a bit of luck, Els would have the sense not to worry about me, and just focus on getting better. Moody, the medicine man wouldn't let him leave the safety of our shelter, I told myself, and even if he did, where would he go? He'd have no way to find me here. No, he was safe, and I was on my own.

With a sigh I turned back to study the wall. It was constructed from large blocks of gray stone, now mottled and covered in patches of green and yellow moss. The wall looked ancient, but how could that be so? I had heard enough talk to know that many men still lived who remembered the days when there was no wall here, and the streets that lay hidden before me were once no

different from the ones behind. The cataclysm that befell this part of town was no distant memory. I just wish I had found more who were willing to talk about what I could expect to find there today. As I thought back to all of the stories I had heard, I realized that they were all just that; stories. No advice, no hard information, no instructions on what to do if you ever found yourself in there—just tales of adventure and mystery. As I found myself on the verge of spinning an adventure tale of my own, the doubt and regret that had been nagging at me were starting to cry out. But it was too late now.

I checked my provisions again; food, flash-bombs, mines, holy water vials, arrows, maps and charcoal for making notes. I had my magic bow and the men had loaned me some lock-picks. If what Ramirez had told me was true, and I had no reason to believe otherwise, this would be a cinch.

"Go on girl," Ramirez said, maybe trying to sound encouraging. "We'll be here waiting for you when you get back." I hated him calling me girl, but I didn't want to get snappy. He and the others were standing around that same rickety stage coach that I had to ride in before. It would have been amusing to see just how many of the men could be stuck inside of it with only fat Ramirez to keep them company and with the rest of them piled onto it or holding onto its sides and roof as it rode away.

I took pride in the fact that it was I going in and not them; they needed me to do this task. They may have been better in a fight than me, but I could fit into places they could not, climb things they could not, and if need be, escape from things they could not. It was dangerous to go in alone, but they'd only slow me down. I tucked my toes into a small crevice near the base of the wall, felt for handholds above, and began to climb.

— Nightfall: Ghost's Aftermath —

Day 4: 8:00 am

I knew even before the stagecoach stopped that something was wrong. There was a smell about the place, like old rotting leaves and crushed insects. I pushed the door open before we even came to a halt, and immediately saw the broken door torn off its hinges. It looked like a war zone outside; guards with awful wounds were laid on the side of the road, being tended to as best they could by their comrades. I was surprised the scene hadn't drawn attention from any authorities. The fact that they were outside meant it was far worse inside. I quickly went from the coach as Rembrandt (I barely recognized him in a hooded cloak rather than his usual floppy hat) appeared and greeted me, while nursing a badly damaged arm. Nursing may not have been the right word; more like wishing it would just fall off already.

"See what trouble I get into because of you!" he charged.

"What in hell happened here," I demanded.

"Seems Ghost is as bona fide a grave robber as they come; complete with an army of zombies hunting him down wherever he goes."

As I surveyed the scene, looking for Othello and Somno, I wondered briefly how things had gotten so bad. "Is this everyone? Was anyone killed?"

"Few were, yeah. Othello's in real bad shape, but he's going to make it I think. Somno's fine, bastard must have hidden."

"Has anyone sent for a doctor?"

"Yeah, but who knows how long that will take." I looked back and forth again, and took my hat off, mashing my palm against my forehead. "Where's Somno?"

"Right here boss," he said, marching up in a hurry. He looked exhausted, pale, and still had plenty of blood on him even though none seemed to be his. "We've got a medic on call, actually, it's the doc that we usually have to tend to our prisoners, heh, but he'll do. Should be here soon, damn it."

They quickly filled me in on what happened, though there was some shouting back and forth between Rembrandt and Somno, who were both understandably very upset. I gradually got the picture though, as displeased as I was about the outcome, and had to think fast about what to make of it.

"So Ghost is drugged again, right? How long will he be out?"

"Not sure, we weren't really careful with the dosage," Somno replied.

"What is the conclusion of the interview with Ghost?"

Rembrandt recounted quickly. "He's a live one, alright. We pretty much confirmed everything we suspected, and Othello went a little above and beyond and had a real heart-to-heart with him about defending innocent girls. It was enough to make me taffing *weep*. Considering that he was telling the truth about the zombies I think we can assume he didn't kill his fence. No chance in hell he's in league with your would-be assassins, either. He's got a real hate for authority and avoids any type of organized crime like the plague. He's a killer alright, but only impulsively and in self-defense. I'd say he's our man. I'm also pretty sure that he has no clue that this involves you in any way. We neatly avoided any mention of his recent attempts to do business with you."

I nodded. It sounded promising, "And what of the other prisoners? Were there casualties among them as well?"

Somno replied. "Actually the zombies didn't get to any of them. Guess they were only interested in getting to Ghost, and through us to get to him. Blast it all, I hate the idea that my boys died defending some prisoner."

"I know, and I'm sorry." I wanted to offer more words of commiseration, that their deaths would not be in vain, but quite frankly I had no idea if any it would be true. Those thoughts seemed hollow in my mind: too hollow to give voice to.

"So are we going to kill those Red Hand Cult guys?" Somno clearly wanted to take his frustration out on something, and the prisoners were handy.

I shook my head, "No, not before, and not now. They'll wind up dead eventually, but it won't be by us. I need you to listen very closely and do exactly as I say. I think I know what we need to do in order to come out on top here. It's going to take plenty of mad risks, but at this point it's our only shot..."

I had to make some very big choices very fast that morning. Somno shouldn't have been the one I had to depend on, but sadly Rembrandt and

Othello had already joined the list of casualties in my charge. He took everything in with many nods and grunts of affirmation, and enough sweat pouring down his face to fill a small bird bath. When I was finished, I glanced at the driver of my stage coach, and then back to Somno. "And one more thing," I said, calculating, "Have Richen meet me at Cragscleft prison. Let him know there's money involved; lots of it."

"Richen? You mean the best damn getaway-driver in the quarter?"

— Ghost: Unable to Protest —

Day 4: 8:10 am

I wasn't sure if I was being carried head and foot or if my bed had sprouted legs and was walking me down the hall. The pillows didn't feel right.

Disembodied voices hovered over me. "Aw-right, how much longer he be out?" "Some time longer, but then he'll be wide awake." "Go 'head and give him another sip, we need him out cold nice and long-like."

No, no, I was awake! I tried to say, but I found that my lungs wouldn't work right. My hands and legs also didn't seem to be paying attention to what my brain was trying to tell them.

"He needs to be completely recovered by the time he does wake up though! He's got to be downright chipper for the Hammerites!"

Crap, no! Not the bloody Hammerites! I wanted to scream, but my mouth wasn't working.

The light changed and it seemed I was not being carried anymore, either that or the bed's legs had fallen off and it was stationary again. "Come on, come on, I said he needs another dose! We'd rather he wake up too late than too soon. What? Eh? Alright, that'll do. Yes, better to be sure about these things. Besides, I don't think any of us would rather deal with them."

I heard what sounded like a bottle being uncorked. "This is going to be complicated, but I think it will work. I need these instructions carried out to the letter. Do you have someone who you think can handle it?"

"I'm not sure."

"I'll see if Rembrandt is up to it, broken arm or no. If not I'll go down the list."

I felt something hot and wet being poured into my mouth. Before I could figure the taste out, the world faded...

— Jyre: Forsaken and Silent —

Day 4: 8:10 am

Daylight did nothing to lessen the severity of this place. There was a fog about, thick with the smell of decay, which seemed to overpower the sun, reducing the white disk in the sky to little more than a pale haze. Paving stones, somehow loosened from their resting place, laid strewn about, tall thick blades of sickly grass jutted up around my ankles. Fallen houses choked

up the streets. How? How could a place be so consumed with evil that the brickwork would cave in upon itself?

I pressed forward. Though the sun could not be clearly seen through the haze, which amazingly did not exist but ten feet away behind the wall I just topped, the heat could clearly be felt, and it felt like an incubator. I hadn't walked ten steps, trying not to twist my ankle on the uneven pavestones, when I felt drenched with sweat from the heat. Reluctantly, I pressed, on, pulling my pack closer, hands wrapping around the straps that went around my arms, tugging the top flap of the leather pouch up against the base of my neck.

Ahead of me was a bridge, the wood bowing with decay, but constructed with metal beams that seemed to hold fast against the grip of condemnation which held this place. As I passed over it I happened to glance down over the edge. The water was deep below, black, sitting still in a narrow brickwork channel, a water wheel hanging motionless from the side of the stone bank. I glanced to the side, noting something that looked like it had once been a mill.

I checked my map. I had come in where the wall was shorter, or at least where the ground came up higher to meet the wall. The district formed a rough L-shape on its side, so that the tall part of the L pointed west. I had to go to the northwest end, somewhere past the old cathedral. I saw where I was based on the location of the bridge, and noticed that maybe I could take the canal to that end of the district. It seemed to go directly there, but the thought of entering that thick black water kept me away.

I continued up the path, and saw that I was on Market Street; the sign still stood. I glanced up and down the road, and then checked my map. Market Street ran east to west. I glanced up and down the road again, and then checked my compass. The road I was on was running north to south. Frowning, and giving a quick puff of frustration, I turned the map, but then had no idea which way was which. Angry, I shoved the badly folded map back into my pocket, and picked a direction, looking for a landmark of some kind. There were still signs on the buildings; baker's shop, pub, metal workers. I pulled out my map again, trying to see if it indicated which shops were where, but I only managed to convince myself that I was already totally lost. I turned around, and ran back the way I came, only to find that the bridge wasn't where I thought it was.

I was glancing up and down the street again; good, still on Market Street. I realized I had no idea where the bridge I had just come over had gotten itself to. I spied a tall building which had its door hanging off its hinges, and I decided I should try to climb up to the roof, or the top floor, and get a better vantage point of my surroundings. I crawled around the door, not wanting to actually touch it, and found my way up some winding stairs. The stairs weren't very useful, but thankfully the craggy brickwork was enough to let me hoist myself up.

I glared out the window, eyes stinging from the brightness of the fog aglow with the sun's diffused rays. The forbidden district was laid out before me; and it looked as if it had been shaken by an earthquake. "Why would they

send me here?" I coughed faintly in the back of my throat, but my brow lowered with determination as I frowned. My high vantage point would do me no good. I could make less sense of the layout from here than I could from looking at the map. Instead, it only frightened me. This place seemed impossibly vast, and with my map useless, I would be forced to wander, maybe in the wrong direction, before I found the manor house of the Delphine family.

Not interested in fretting any longer, I clamored back down the stairs. As I was passing the way I came, or at least what I thought was the way I came, I noticed that the fireplace in the building had been carved out. There was a low tunnel behind it. Curious, and thinking this route no less logical than wandering the streets, I got down on my hands and knees, and pushed into the dark hole.

— **Nightfall: Delivered, As Promised** —

Day 4: 11:00 am

"We are sorry, but our Brother Inquisitor is currently performing an interview."

I was in the company of gentlemen and Hammerites. My men waited calmly, a collection of the surviving staff of The Shed, and a few additional men I had summoned to help. Truthfully, it was a pretense of calmness.

Steam rose off the metal handrails surrounding the solitary tower of Cragcleft prison, and beads of sweat poured down my body under my clothes. Behind me was the stagecoach; before me stood a Hammerite soldier. He knew who I was by my reputation, but I had no way of knowing which faction he was loyal to, and thus how I would be treated here.

The prison was about a mile up a road through the mountains from the Temple of the Inquisitor. The bulk of the prison was a dungeon with twisting hallways deep underground; and even the upper portion, peeking out of the craggy rocks, was still mostly underground. Only a wide tower bore its brickwork to the sun, which as noon approached finally cleared the bulk of the mountainside so that the shadow of the rocks no longer protected us from the scorching summer rays. The dampness of night was now turned to steam.

"I was told when we passed by his temple that he would see us when we arrived. I am on important business, and I cannot relay my prisoners. They must be taken directly to the Inquisitor." I cringed slightly as a harsh breeze of hot air carried a waft of rancid odor up from the moat below. The water lapped against the sides of the carved rocks rhythmically as the wind blew, and all seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for the wind to pass. The gust of steamy hot air did nothing to cool the sweat on our faces.

The Hammerite craned his neck to look over my shoulder at my men and the captives who lay unconscious and bound on the stretcher: the notorious and fictitious Red Hand Cult. It's criminally ironic that many of the men of The Shed were killed at the hands of the zombies, yet all of these men survived safe in their cells. Of course, amongst the villains who were to be the

Hammerite's guests lay Ghost, bearing an identical uniform to the others. They'd probably all die within the day anyway.

"Why are not thy prisoners restrained and standing?" he asked gruffly, as if I was in breach of formal procedure.

"They were sedated for their protection and ours; these are dangerous men, and we wished to deliver them alive. I beseech you; summon the Inquisitor from his work. It is imperative that I speak with him. I come as a servant of Father Rafael; it is his bidding I have come here to do. I pray that Brother Inquisitor would not show disrespect to Rafael's envoy."

"Very well," he said finally, glancing behind himself at some unseen persons within. "Thou and thy party may enter; I shalt notify Brother Inquisitor that he has guests."

"Please, time is short. I must be at The City's edge to meet with Father Rafael no later than sixty minutes from now," I said to him as he was leaving. He glanced over his shoulder with a nod to let me know that he heard me, and then I signaled my men to follow. We circled around the walkway which made the perimeter of the wide tower, and passed through the narrow doorway into the chamber within.

Inside we were led down a hall with a few twists until we came to a cramped office. A narrow window illuminated the room with sunlight, but thankfully the air within was still cool and somewhat dry. Bookcases lined the wall, filled with identical tomes—records no doubt, unlit lanterns hung low from the ceiling, and a large wooden desk occupied a full quarter of the room. An iron hammer rested on its top, where neither quill nor scrap of paper could be seen. The office was an image of order; carpeted, with decorative wooden panels adorning the walls where bookcases did not stand. The only place to sit, aside from the chair behind the desk, was an old iron bench which looked like it had been borrowed from the nave of a chapel.

"Bring the prisoners with me," said the Hammerite, and I nodded to Somno and the others to follow. I hoped I didn't have to reiterate to Somno my instructions.

— Lytha: A Pause —

Day 4: 11:40 am

"I knew your sister, Lytha. You resemble her so much. She was stubborn, headstrong, and feared not the wrath of our lord. You know what became of her, Lytha. Do you wish the same fate upon yourself?"

The inquisitor's words were cool and stung like ice upon wet flesh. My head faced the stones, staring between my forearms that were chained to a wooden brace. I watched the sweat and blood drip from my sides; my naked back was raw from their thrashings, but I knew that this was still just the start. They were still toying with me; the lashes mere stings; the stabs would come later. If I watched the blood drop, counted the specks that fell to the brickwork with a splash, maybe I wouldn't hear his words. Maybe I wouldn't hear him when he described, in detail, everything that they had done to

Thalia.

But he was silent. I did not dare look up. I heard a whisper, and then his chair being pushed back. A door opened and closed.

— **Nightfall: Delivered, As Promised, Continued...** —

“Fear not if I make you tardy for thy rendezvous with Father Rafael. I shall send with you an official memorial to ensure that you are forgiven for your delay. I am sure that he will be most pleased to hear that you have delivered to me the accomplices of this Lytha. What did you say their names were?”

The Inquisitor was not what I was expecting; young, and with an air of scholarly aristocracy about him. He seemed more the student of the sciences rather than a zealot of god. He sat at his desk before me, making an entry in his journal to mark the delivery of my prisoner, small wire spectacles sat on the bridge of his nose as he gently thumbed through the book to the proper page. He dabbed his quill into the ink once and began to write.

“The only name we were able to divulge was The Red Hand Cult.”

He nodded, penning it in. “Well, by the time we are finished with Lytha today they will hopefully have awakened from the drug induced slumber you have inflicted them with. I must convene with you at a later date and acquire the recipe for this sedative; it would be most useful for some of our prisoners who are making extended stays.”

I nodded. “It’s simple, really. It’s made from the vapor within crystals. It would be wise to wait until they are fully cognitive. The drug warps the mind; they would not be able to tell reality from the demons in their mind, if such a thing is ever possible for them.”

“I see,” he said, closing the book and placing it, along with his quill and ink, back into his desk. “Maybe then that would be the precise thing we want; to hear what the demons are whispering. But no, I cannot halt what I have begun with Lytha. I feel we are making progress, and I expect to break her within the hour.”

“Very well,” I said to him, nodding grimly. I kept heavy guard on the conduct of my eyes, keeping them fixed on him, straining to keep my face relaxed and my hands gently folded on his desktop.

“Is it true that it was you who directed us as to the location of the pagan villa, which led to the capture of this possessed woman?”

“Possessed?” I said, letting my icy composure slip. “What makes you think she’s possessed?”

“I know,” he said with a smile. “No mortal frame, built by the hands of the builder; for even our flesh is his creation, is capable of committing what I know she has done. Nay, I am sure that it is a demon within her that is responsible for this conduct, and it must be flushed from her body, soul, and mind.”

“That’s a bit of a radical view,” I said to him, earnestly, for I had never

before heard a Hammerite speak of The Master Builder as also the creator of the human flesh.

“Not at all,” he said, folding his hands on his desk to mirror mine. “As much as I’d love to stay and discuss this with you, my brother, I am well aware that your time is short and mine is as well. I must return to Lytha and you to Rafael. Here, take this official memorial with you in case you have trouble upon your arrival to the envoy; I am aware that Father Rafael does not always trust you. I shall ensure that he does. Give it to him. He will see that it finds its way back to me.”

“Thank you,” I replied solemnly, and took the small brass token. It was totally generic, identical to other tokens used by other priests, with one exception. Around the edge of the brass piece was etched: Brother Adam, Inquisitor.

— Jyre: Fear —

Day 4: 12:00 pm

I crawled through that dark tunnel until I felt like my knees and palms were bleeding. The air was thick with dirt and the stink of old rotting things, causing me to cough so hard I’d bump my head on the low ceiling above me. It was pitch black after only going a dozen feet, so I was forced to navigate with outstretched arms as the tunnel passed this way and that. When I saw a light up ahead my heart leapt for joy. I frantically crawled until the light was all around me, and then fell to my back, panting for air.

Once the relief of freedom from that horrible hole had faded, I took a look around me. I had just crawled out of the fireplace of another ruined home, so similar to the first I thought for a second that the tunnel had just doubled back and I had returned the way I came. That might have been better, because when I stepped out of the front door and back into the streets, I felt more hopelessly lost than ever.

I wondered for a moment why there would be a tunnel between two houses, hidden in the back of their fireplaces, and reasoned that they must have been smugglers. The thought made me feel like life in this place was once not so different from the rest of The City.

I did not make me feel better, though. As I walked slowly from the house I was reminded far too firmly that there was no place to go. All around me streets led off this way and that; doors hung open, windows too, crevices here and there, even crawlways and trapdoors leading back underground. I was paralyzed by confusion. How long was I to wander the streets, lost, hopelessly lost, before I stumbled upon a house I wouldn’t even recognize? It was marked on the map, right, but I had already found out how useless the map was. I was exhausted, too.

It seemed safe enough. There was nothing living here, and I was told that the undead would not come out until it was dark. I pressed my face into my open palms, and tried not to question why I was here. How long did I sit there, wishing I was not there. How hard did I try to stand, to get up, to press

on? Could I have tried harder? I didn't know. I let myself fall into a heap onto a patch of sickly pale grass which had pushed up through the stones. I let my pack slide from my shoulders, and pressed myself into the soft earth. I closed my eyes, and wished I was home—not the hideaway with Els—my real home. I let myself relax, and tried to imagine that I was in the valley which had the creek. The one I would always go to play in when I was little. The one where I would watch mum wash the clothes. The fog shrouded around me, the air...

...Cooled, a shadow of a crooked building fell over me. Soon I felt as if I was no longer there. Soon it was...

...In a place dark and silent. I saw nothing beyond the heavy black veil of night, heard nothing through the thick air that surrounded me. I was alone in an empty world without a single ear to hear me scream.

A gust of wind, like a heavy sigh... A spot of gray in the distance...My eyes fixed on it and drew it in. My heart thudded in fear of what I would find.

"How many times, Jyre?" Els's voice, it filled the void with echoes. "The Lady knows best. It is not your place to question."

"Not your place...not your place..." The words rebounded inside my head, taking on the voice of the dead. That which had been black was now gray. I could see figures in the mist. One of them turned to me, pointing. "Foolish child..." he started to cackle.

I was in the dining hall, standing before Els. Guards filled the room, their eyes focused on me and their voices filled with laughter. Els seemed to grow in front of me. His skin became gray and lifeless. His eyes held the same glazed expression that adorned the living dead. "You should have listened to me." His words filled the whole room, blocking out the laughter. "But no. You had to ask, didn't you? You had to know!" The laughter came back, harsh and overpowering. I dropped to my knees, clamped my hands over my ears. The taunting refused to go away.

Hands grasped mine, pulled them from my head. "Hush." My face was pushed into something soft. "Ranson's here. He won't let them get you." I wept into his chest, shivering. He lifted a hand to my chin and slowly raised my head. "Just, be a good girl like The Lady says."

He began to change. His face became softer, his eyes harsher. The fingers that cupped my chin began to squeeze. "You were coming along so well, child,"—The Lady's voice. "If only you had learnt your place." She shook her head. Her fingers burnt my flesh. "Such a bright girl—So much potential—Ranson did well bringing you to me. If only you had learnt your place..."

Guilt tore at me. I looked up at her, begged her forgiveness. Her voice joined the laughter. "No child. You do not mean what you say." She gave me a push and I was falling.

I landed in something soft. The stink of rotten flesh met my nostrils. Looking up I could just make out The Lady's form, staring down at me. I shuddered, rolled over and let out a scream.

His eyes were shrunken hollows, his hair nothing more than a few brittle tufts. His skin was gray and dry, drawn so tightly over his bones that I could see

the skull underneath. I was staring at the face of a dead man. "Els!" I cried in all my shock and sorrow.

"See your fate," The Lady called down to me. "And learn its face well. For soon it will come to collect you."

I ran. Horrors of rotting flesh pursued me through the streets of the forgotten city. I took turn after turn but always found myself in the same place. One last turn, and a familiar figure caught my eye.

"Daelus!" I cried out, but he would not turn around or stop. He just kept walking. Tried as I might to reach him, I could never get close enough...every time I thought I could catch his cloak in my hand he was suddenly a block away, and I stumbled and fell into air. He was leading me somewhere. I didn't know where I was or how he got here, but I knew that he wanted me to follow. He kept glancing over his shoulder at me, but never enough so that I could see his face.

Then he was before me, and behind him was a towering form. The sky grew whiter and whiter, and the form darker and darker, until I felt like the whole world had flattened out around me into a pattern of black and white shapes. I tried to shield my eyes, but it was like my hands, and eyelids, were gone. Then things seemed to rearrange themselves, and the black shapes grew in definition and detail. I knew I was looking at a building, a very large one, majestic, important, like the home of a king, or an emperor.

Then Daelus was before me again, hat, cloak; yet, I could not see his face. I went to run to him, but I stopped cold when I realized that the building was gone again, replaced by a new shape, just as big; hulking, writing, burning with emotion. It stretched out across the sky. My eyes burned at the sight of it, but still I could not shield them.

I tried to look to Daelus for escape, but as I did, I saw that I could not discern him from the beast.

— Nightfall: The Expedition —

Day 4: 12:00 pm

"I want you to understand that if you reject this proposal, then it shall be as if it was never made." I had to hold onto my hat as Richen drove his carriage through The City streets. I didn't expect him to go this way, but he insisted that cutting through The City from Cragscleft to the site of the expedition would be faster than trying to find a way around the edge. Vendors by the side of the road had to clutch their booths as he sped by, to say nothing of those who had to leap from his path.

"Bugger it, I'd be taff not ta Sire," he belched out in his usual brogue. "I ain't scared o' them 'ammer 'eads either."

A flock of birds that had been occupying an open market took flight at the approach of the galloping thoroughbred, its blue and silver carriage in tow and with its cargo of a hatted nobleman (or behatted if the wind had its way), spurred on by a reformed getaway driver—not so reformed maybe. After making sure none of the escaping birds got me in the face, I replied, "I needed

someone who I was familiar with, but not connected with, me in any formal sense. You seemed like the logical choice; that's why I picked you. That and"—I had to grab on tight as we took a quick turn, narrowly avoiding some hanging street signs—"you're a damn good driver too."

"Half's taff an' th' other's tupp," he said with a smirk, and then turned to me, grinning, letting go of one of the reins to tap his temple. "I'm a madman I am!" he said with a laugh, steering the horse, with blinders on, around a stack of crates at the last possible moment with one hand, while looking at me. "So mayhap you be th' one who might be reconsiderin'" he said with another laugh, taking the other reign again and ushering the horse faster. "I told ya'd I'd get y' thar at sun-peak, bugger, how late 're we?"

I checked my pocket watch, though the carriage was shaking so violently I could barely see the tiny hands. "About five minutes. When the ordeal we are currently facing is over I'll consider buying your services outright. You'd be paid a salary, and no longer responsible for upkeep of your carriage, and all provisions for the horse would be paid for."

"Suzy," he shouted, but only because we were going over a metal bridge and I wouldn't have been able to hear him otherwise. "The 'orse's name is Suzy; and tha's powerful gen'rous of y' Sire, but wha's tha catch?"

"As an employee a percentage of your fares would go to me, though with you on a salary that means you'd never have to worry about making ends meet. Besides, I will be your primary passenger, so—" I was cut off momentarily as we hit a large bump, "so most of the time, I'll keep you too busy carting me to and fro for you to worry about any of that!" Now I was shouting as well, for we were taking a corner a little too fast, and the carriage wheels were skidding across uneven cobblestones.

"Soun's fair," he said, randomly spitting out into a crowd of people as he sped by. "I jus' 'ope tha 'ammers don' get spooked by a lark like me trav'lin' wit' y'."

"Don't worry Richen. As long as you don't cause trouble, there will be none for you." We approached The City gate and blasted through, without so much as a nod to the gatekeepers. Richen wasn't shy, that was for sure.

As we drove out into the open road, I signaled Richen to take a left off the trail, and head towards the woods to the arranged rendezvous point. There was an open grassy field ahead of us, and in the distance I could see that the Hammerites had raised a pavilion at the spot, no doubt to make the expedition as formal and militaristic as possible. Between us and the pavilion was one of the Hammerite's locomotives, chugging away slowly over the soft grass. I knew at once that it was carrying Father Rafael to oversee the launch of the expedition and to make sure that I was with it.

"So, we can still beat him there," I said with a sly grin, not realizing that Richen would take it as a challenge. With a slap of the reins and a command to charge, Suzy the horse seemed to double her speed, and the carriage seemed to almost fly over the landscape, literally becoming airborne as we crested every gentle curve of the terrain. Great sheets of mud spewed out behind us, and I held on for dear life. As we gained on Rafael's locomotive,

Richen drove the carriage to one side so we'd pass them. We flew by with such speed that I was only able to catch a glimpse of Rafael's scowl as we showered the locomotive with mud. Richen was cheering.

"Don't overdo it!" I shouted; brim of my hat thoroughly mashed as I clung tightly to it, all while trying to hide the euphoria over Richen's display of bravado. He continued to laugh as we bore down on the pavilion, and then his laughter subsided and he began to try to slow the horse. We came to a screeching halt right at the edge of the tent.

"W' may be late," he said, "but 'e's la'er!" he declared with a chuckle. I jumped off the carriage, shaking, and a bit dizzy, and began to try to clean off the bits of mud that the horse had kicked onto me. It wasn't that big a deal; I wasn't dressed in my finery, and there would be enough mud on the ground to sully me up no matter how much I had accumulated from the ride. Richen didn't seem to mind being covered from head to toe with mud; he had already scooped up a handful of feed into his hat, and was giving Suzy a bit of a treat, patting her neck and kissing her nose. "Tha's a good girl," he muttered as about a dozen Hammerites glared at us from under the tent, all bearing the same appalled expression.

I looked back at them like they had no reason to be alarmed. "I didn't want to be late," I explained. Really, I should have told Richen to cool it. I didn't want trouble right now, especially since I knew what was about to happen, and anything I could do to make things go more smoothly would have been smart. I seemed to have already stuck my foot in it, so to speak.

I recognized some of the Hammerites straight off. The first one I noticed was Brother Chispin, Rafael's head lackey and all-around thug. He was glaring at me with a look of contempt usually only Rafael himself could muster, and I happily avoided his gaze. Beside him was Brother Ivan, personal lackey to Brother Oberon, and possibly the only person who hated Chispin more than Chispin hated me. On the other hand, I was no friend to Ivan, considering that his mentor is my puppeteer, I would rather dine daily on the mud beneath my boots than confide with him against Chispin. The third man I recognized was the only one who didn't notice me; he was too busy pouring over the plans for the exciting expedition to notice the ruckus Richen caused, or that everyone else had stopped what they were doing to glare at us. Brother Thurm was lackey to no-one, maybe because he suffered from an overabundance of attention span; once he fixed his eyes on something, it was nearly impossible to get his attention elsewhere.

After they decided that there was nothing more to see here, most of the Hammerites went back around their business, all but Ivan. I didn't wait for him to come up to me and start nagging; I was too busy looking out at the four mechanical monstrosities which were sitting at the edge of the wood. This was the source of the business most of the Hammerites went back to; these four machines, all of which seemed to possess an array of sharp or blunt implements, all designed to swing, jab, or plummet, and the small but powerful locomotives to which they were affixed.

I could avoid Ivan no longer; if I hadn't turned to face him, he would have

tried to grab my tunic and pull me. "What is meant by this display? Art thou trying to show disrespect? Art thou trying to get thyself beheaded?"

"I just didn't want to be late," I said with a smile, and then dismissed myself from him. I used Chispin as a shield, going to him quickly, paraphrasing my reply to Ivan. "Forgive the manner of my approach, Brother Chispin, for I felt that tardiness was out of the question."

He just eyed me for a moment and then growled, "It was out of the question, but thou were still tardy!" he boomed. "It is of little import. Thy presence here is simply ceremonial. I expect thee to stay out of our way. Father Rafael shalt approach in moments; I expect thee to be more gracious to him than thou wast to us."

"Naturally," I said with a half-smile. I wished I believed him about the 'ceremonial' bit. I knew good and well that my presence here was of little import to the actual expedition—the idea was to get me out of The City.

It would have been impossible for Rafael to sneak up on me. His locomotive created all sorts of noise, and kicked up a fair bit of mud itself. Naturally, however, that would be my fault. I could see him glaring at me from the back podium of the vehicle. As soon as it came to a halt, he was off it, and coming at me.

And he walked right by without as much as a word. "Hm," I breathed, and turned my head to watch him go. Of course, I thought. I was here, and that's all he cared about. He wasn't here to spar with me, just make sure that I was under Chispin's thumb and then he'd take off and put in motion his plan. I knew why Chispin was here, that was obvious. Why, though, did Oberon send Ivan? Was it to keep an eye on me, or to pull the strings some more? Oberon was cunning, but a lack-wit like Ivan was just annoying.

Rafael was convening with Chispin quietly, and I took the opportunity to try to say hello to Brother Thurm, with whom I was friendly. He was at a table pouring over some maps, and I knew immediately why he was along; he was the actual brains of the outfit. "Hello Brother Thurm," I said with a smile as I stood over him.

Maybe my thoughts earlier about the difficulty of getting his attention were inappropriate, for he did immediately look up and proclaim in a glad voice, "Brother Daelus! How good it is to see thee. Come, let me show you the plan," he said, waving for me to come over to his side of the table. "Here is the villa, as approximated by our scouting party," he said, pointing to the newly inked-in location on the map.

I was distracted, keeping one eye and one ear on Rafael and Chispin, though it was hopeless to hear what they were saying. I interrupted Thurm, "Is something troubling the High Priest?" I asked him, curious to get more of a feel for Thurm's thoughts on the man.

"I know not," he said, "I trust that 'tis the task at hand which troubles him. Many of us fear that there is far more at work here than simply a lone pagan."

"I'd say that is certain. In fact, have you not wondered why such a large task force has been dispatched to the villa that we know to be abandoned? Surely they know we are coming and will be setting a trap."

"That is precisely it, Brother Daelus. We expect a trap, which is why such a large force is being sent. Once the trap is sprung, we wilt handily dispatch them."

"And when they become aware of this task force, and change their plans to suit?"

Brother Thurm seemed to think this over for a second, his face finally crossing with concern, and finally came back with, "Whatever it is our enemies have in store for us, we shalt meet to the best we are able."

I nodded, sharing the concern. I regarded the older gentlemen with thick curly gray hair. I had worked with Thurm before, and knew that his passion for knowledge and science were undeniable. In fact he was the only Hammerite priest I had ever seen truly jubilant about his work. I pushed deeper, trying to get more of a feel for his take on the situation. "Do you believe that the one captured at the villa is actually linked to this group or just an unfortunate soul at the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"I know not, Brother Daelus," Thurm replied, looking a bit perplexed. "In fact, I never gave it much thought. I have been too busy preparing my machines for their work."

That was Thurm alright; bugger the details, just give me a chance to build some contraption and put it to use. It was innocence, I knew, and not apathy which drove his reaction. I would be wasting my time to continue in this direction. Instead, I asked him something I knew he'd be able to respond to, "Brother Thurm, what is the nature of these, machines?" I thought that the swing-blades the motorized saws were a dead giveaway, but I figured he'd be more than happy to tell me about it.

He smiled broadly. "Ah, well; these two, closest to us, are designed to demolish unwanted structures. This is indeed old technology, however, in the past there have been much larger machines built on site and then dismantled when the job is finished. These new versions are completely mobile. They are smaller, and less powerful, but the time saved by not having to construct them makes up for the loss!"

And now it was time to pop the big question, "Thurm, how are you going to get these machines to the villa?"

He smiled, delighted I asked. "We are building a road!"

I humored him with a confident smile and nodded. "Of course, how else would it be done?" No wonder Rafael had wanted me to go along—this would take days.

"Those two machines up by the forest are specifically designed for clearing land!" He pointed proudly. The two he was referring to appeared to be quite similar to the machines that were towing the demolition equipment. The only difference was a large plate affixed to the front of the machine. This plate had two surfaces which met at a sharp angle in the center. The machine moved forward, and every tree that was hit by the plate was thrust to either side and down to its death. I was skeptical as to how successful it would be in practice.

"And it works?" I said, letting my skepticism show.

"Well if there's a tree too strong for it to simply push out of the way, that's where the motorized saws come in," he replied sagely.

"Of course," I nodded, "Very good, Brother Thurm."

"Yes, they are quite an accomplishment. By this time, three days from now, we shalt be at the villa." He looked back at me, "There thou shalt see these creatures of metal doing what the Master Builder guided me to create them to do!"

Rafael had remounted his locomotive and was commanding the engineers to take him back to The City. I saw out of the corner of my eye Brother Chispin folding his arms, glaring at me. Three days. Rafael could do a great deal of damage in three days. I had played right into his hands with this one; I was trapped, stuck out here in the woods. I didn't so much fear for myself; my men had their orders and everything would be taken care of. I was worried about Sheam.

— Lytha: Break the Will —

Day 4: 12:00 pm

He sighed. I knew what was coming next. Knowing was worse than it happening. The lasher put his whip away, and was giving the knob attached to my splint a slight turn at the Inquisitor's command. I wailed in pain at every bit he turned it, ready to beg him to return to the whip.

"I did not want to do this, but as I said before, you had a choice. This was your choice, and now you must face it."

"I am not one of them! I hate them!" I screamed; blood came from gashes I wore into myself from my restraints.

"All you must do is confess to worshiping the pagan gods, and you will have to endure no more pain," he assured me.

Lies! Tear his flesh from his bone! Evil, cruel monster! Do to him what he did to you! Kill him Thalia, kill him!

"I am not Thalia!" I moaned and coughed through my tears.

"You are correct, Lytha. You are not Thalia. Thalia would not break, and so we broke her. You, however, have the chance to put right what she did wrong."

The big gloved hands were on me once more, and without a second's hesitation, the knob was turned almost a full rotation. I screamed, the pain more than I thought possible.

If you break I will hate you forever! I will hate you, Thalia! How could you do this? How could you betray me! Your own sister!

I no longer knew anymore; maybe the voices were right; maybe I was Thalia. Maybe I had been all along. Maybe there was no difference.

You will betray everyone! How could you! I hate you, Thalia, I hate you!

No, it was not true. I could not hate Thalia. I could never...

"Lytha, if you do not reply, I will be forced to order my brother to resume."

"Yes!" I screamed, not knowing what else to do. "I worship them! I gave

them my soul!"

You will kill him! You have sworn your very soul on this!

"Thank you Lytha." I could barely hear him now; he seemed so far away. "I feel that we are done for now. We still have much to discuss, though we have made tremendous headway. I see that I can now trust you to tell the truth, when asked."

My tears mixed with the blood on the floor as the pain subsided ever so slightly; the knob was being turned the other way. It stung almost as much for him to do this, but the pain afterwards was lessened.

Someone undid my shackles, and I dropped to the floor, hitting my face on the bloody stones. I just lay there, face down. I had lost conscious once or twice. I didn't remember. My back was numb now. I could smell my blood.

I heard the footsteps of the guards behind me. They came closer, and I felt their hands at my bare arms. The gloves stung my torn flesh. They brought me back on my feet, and then placed shackles on my ankles and wrists, binding me.

"Before we resume, there is another stage of your treatment which is necessary. I find that once a penitent opens their mind to truth, the next step will ensure that this path remains cemented in their will. After this brief recess, we shall resume."

They dragged me back into the cell blocks. I looked up to see my cell, its door open, but then I was turned away from it. I heard a different door open, and then I was thrust inside. Again my face hit the bricks. I heard the locking of the door and the leaving footsteps.

I blinked at the dim light. I could make out a figure out in the corner of the cell. It was that tall man who I had noticed earlier. I saw him grin, like an animal baring his teeth before his prey—long, crooked, hungry teeth. He just stared at me with this horrible grin for a time. I shrunk back against the cell door, trying to summon any strength I had left. The rough iron bars stung my raw back. I knew and I feared what he was going to do. My hands and feet were still in chains. He stood, and stepped closer, without a single word. I could not back any further. He was so close that I could smell his breath in my face. All I could see were those teeth.

In a sudden movement, he reached out and pushed me against the floor with his entire weight. I tried to kick him, but my legs were chained too tightly. He grabbed me by the hair, and pulled me away from the cell door to lie flat on my chest, with my cheek pressed to the stone and my shackled hands pinned beneath me. The Hammerites had already taken most of my clothes; now his sweaty and grimy body stung the open wounds on my back. He bit me on the shoulder, and then the neck. I felt helpless. So absolutely helpless, I could not even scratch him, or pull myself out of his hold. I could not even cry. Trying to repress everything, I formed fists with my hands, so strong that it hurt. He punched me at the back of my head again, and again, each time my head seemed to explode as my face rammed into the stones. My vision started to go dark—

— Sheam: The Plan is Launched —

Day 4: 12:00 pm

Hours had passed, and there was still no time to be wasted. We never opened for business today. All were turned away at the gates. Cleansing The Circle was a process we were always prepared to do, and thus provisions were always in place to quickly do so, but it was still arduous. The contents of the building were always in flux, and we weren't always as prudent in cataloging what could be considered blasphemous as we could have been. There were always improvisations to be made, and my wit had to be sharp in order to detect them all.

Almost an hour after Daelus left, the place was swarming with Gryphons; evidently his plea to Canard had at least met with a partial success. We all worked quickly, they at my command, making The Circle appear like a legitimate place of business, devoid of any sinful dealings. As noon came all that was left was to make the place as Hammer-friendly as possible. Banners were hung, the description of some artifacts were changed to better suit Hammerite dogma, and many books were pulled from the shelves; books they would not approve of. We were ready, but there was always something else to do.

The Hammerites also hated locked doors. I unlocked them all; even the cabinets and chests in my own bedroom. If they wanted to go through my things; fine. I knew they'd break open the cabinets to do so, so I may as well make it easy for them. I'd rather my things be thrown all over the floor and stomped on than for them to break my furniture to get to it all. With a very special choker tucked away in a pocket of my breeches, I now was in my office tidying things up; just to make sure I wouldn't be found guilty of aiding and abetting, and subsequently hauled off and mauled.

I toured The Circle with a Gryphon at my side, making note of everything, just to be safe. They had done a good job. My next task would be to go down to the super-secret chambers and take an inventory (assuming I had time) but we were interrupted by a commotion nearby. I rushed over to the adjacent hall to see what the fuss was, and came face to face with a rather riotous scene.

Several Gryphons seemed to be trying to restrain and remove a pair of strange men. One was draped in a chain mail shirt and heavy linen trousers. His hair was short, slightly thinning, and sandy with specks of gray. He had a rough face, and by the wrinkles around his eyes I'd put him somewhere in his forties. A long sword was strapped to his back; thankfully he was making no motion to try to get to it. The other was unmistakably a pagan; the symbols drawn around his eyes and corded hair gave that way. He towered over his companion by almost a foot; skin of rich brown and a thick beard came halfway down his chest. He wore a brown overcoat over a white buttoned tunic and matching trousers. It didn't seem right that he'd be dressed that way. I couldn't guess his age, he seemed old, but his hair was pure black without a hint of graying.

When they saw me they all seemed to settle down, and for an instant the

Gryphons eased off, maybe startled by the intruder's sudden yielding, and then resumed trying to force them out the door. The smaller pale one gazed at me; there was certain desperation in his brown eyes that bothered me, and his wide frown seemed to make his jaw larger than it was. He shouted over the shoulder of the Gryphon, "Are you Nightfall's aid?"

I rushed over, telling the Gryphon, "Hold off a bit, stop this ruckus; tell me what's going on."

He replied, "They tried to get in an hour ago, but we told them that they couldn't, and to taff off. Next thing we know they've found a way inside and are snooping about, so we're getting them out!" he said with a chomp.

I looked at them, "Why are you so desperate to get in here? This is a very bad time."

"Has Jyre been here?" he said, the desperation in his eyes becoming more prominent. His companion loomed, but stayed still.

"Jyre..." I said, pausing to think about when I saw her last.

"A youthful girl. Short black hair. Round pale face. Sort of scrawny. Small, smaller than you."

"Yes, yes I know her," I said, and then remembered the intercepted letter and the danger she may have been in. "I have not seen her for some days. Is she missing?" I said with urgency that now matched the man's own.

He sighed. "Yes, about a full day now. My name is Els, and this is my friend Moody. Normally I wouldn't worry, but things are dangerous right now. I can tell you where you can reach me. If you see her, you'll let me know?"

"My goodness Els, it is very fortunate that you came to me about this. I—" I began to tell him what I knew, when another ruckus had begun.

Barging in from behind Els and Moody came, none other than Captain Wendle himself, the leader of the Gryphons. All others parted in his path as he came straight to me, saying quickly, "They're here, and it's worse; they mean to arrest you, Sheam."

"I," I started to proclaim, and then stopped, frowning with eyes wide. "What must I do?" I said, feeling myself suddenly go very white.

"It's too late to risk an escape; they've already begun to surround the building. They came in fast and all at once; there was very little warning...well, aside from us expecting them around this time. No, we have to hurry, and I need you to stay calm."

"I am not in my current employ by virtue of a faint heart," I insisted, annoyed at his suggestion. "I assure you calm is how I shall remain. There are the super-secret chambers," I said, my mind there the moment they mentioned my arrest, "I can escape down there, and maybe find another way out. If it's good enough for our loot, it's good enough for me."

He in turn seemed annoyed at my tone, but did not speak on it. Perhaps he, as I, realized that our lack of civility was rooted in the tense aspect of the moment, and bore no disrespect. "No," he said, "If they think you're inside they'll search the building until they find you. If you don't walk out of this building in plain view, they'll dislodge every stone until they find where

you're hiding."

"Daelus seemed confident that they wouldn't find this..."

"Yes, but it's your life we're talking about here, not stacks of junk." Then Wendle did a double take. "Who are you two?" he demanded to the newcomers.

They didn't answer, rather, seemed to be more concerned with what I was just told. "The Hammerites are here? How are **we** supposed to escape?" Els said, sounding rather cornered.

"Let them come with me," I said quickly. "I don't know what else to do, Wendle. We have to go, now," and began to usher the men in the direction of the basement.

"Sheam, at least take Stephens and Foster with you," Wendle called out, and I nodded over my shoulder as the two Gryphons began to follow along with us.

Els protested as we went. "What if the Hammerites saw us coming in?" he said, eyebrow twitching. They'll be looking for us when they come in to search; they'll find the secret passage."

"The Hammerites are very, very good when it comes to brickwork," said Moody, finally. "What makes you think that they won't find the secret doors just from the skills of their crafts?"

"This is the disaster situation," I told him. "Worst case scenario. There's no perfect solution, but try to trust me; the Hammers won't find the secret door. It's one of the best damn secret doors ever made. Come, this way."

As commanded, Moody, Els, and Foster descended the narrow passage to the deep reaches of the super-secret chambers. Stephens demanded that I go first, but not after I instructed those staying behind on how to open and close the stone floor trap and then to be sure that all secret doors between us and the surface were secure and invisible before leaving. I descended, with Stephens just a foot above me. We came into darkness, with only the fire of torchlight to lick the walls of the voluminous chamber. As I heard the passage above shut and seal, I gave a shaking sigh.

Moody seemed haunted. He glanced around us, looking this way and that at the stone work in the pale red light, saying nothing in his agitation. Els was just staring at me, unreadable in the dark. Stephens and Foster were trying to find other things to be used as torches. I looked around once again. "There has to be another way out," I said, as I only imagined what was going on upstairs.