

**Jossimer's Message...**

Scantly visible, yet gleaming in the noontime sun, the machines stood at the woodland's edge. These devices were offspring of those who would treat us as all as tools ourselves. Doubtless, the master was amongst them (the fool). Ah, yes, unmistakable; the dark carriage bore passengers *not* of red and silver.

My spyglass was compacted, and placed gently away. All I had observed was but a speck on the distant horizon. Carefully, I lifted the feathered creature from its cage and released it to the sky. My frown deepened as I considered the urgency of the message it bore. Now, it seemed, Thresh would be tested; tested in the eyes of all those who stood to gain or lose by his simple existence. It was yet to be seen if my servitude here will be worth the effort.

**Somno's Holiday...**

"Down men and over here!" I ordered as my bastardly bunch settled down to make camp in the jagged thorn-infested countryside near Cragcleft prison. "This is where we wait." It would actually resemble a sort of a holiday—a camping trip. We were to sit here as long as we needed to; we had enough food and port to last us days, and if we ran out we'd send a boy to fetch us some more. The only trouble would be sleeping, or if it rained, or if bugs found us and decided to make us lunch. With various groans and chattering my men settled down. Many instantly went to our stores of meat and bread, some set about putting up some crude tents, and still others stood about fretting over the disaster at The Shed and the loss of some of our mates. "We'll have time for a burial later," I insisted, "right now it's the job, and the job says we wait right here, so you may as well enjoy the fresh air." Fresh air, indeed; all I could smell was un-washed body.

**Wendle's Guests...**

We could have gotten her out; if it wasn't for those damned fools who pushed their way in, and the damned fools who let them. It was no matter anymore. A company of my lieutenants and I marched out of The Circle to greet the Hammerite occupation party, just as the cantankerous joy-ride which chauffeured the iconic Father Rafael to our doorstep came to a cobble grinding halt. We watched with low gazes as several of these trolleys rolled in, bursting at the seams with Hammerites. The whole lot of them spread out like water let out from a splitting barrel. Father Rafael glared at me from his throne-like perch atop the mightiest of the mechanical beasts, and only stood and disembarked when his men had properly opened the gates and extended the ramps for him to make a majestic descent. "Welcome to The Circle," I declared as soon as I saw in his eyes that he had accepted me as the head of his greeting party. "My name is Captain Gary Wendle, and as the senior law

enforcement officer of Hightowne, and friend to Master Thresh, please allow me to aid you in your unexpected visit." If he was to believe anything, he was to believe that this was protocol.

"That will not be necessary," he said as his eyes left mine and drifted over my shoulder to fix themselves on the arched gateway into The Circle's court. "My brothers and I shalt do as we will without thy watchful eye at our hands or thy nose over our shoulders. Thou shalt be summoned, should we require thy aid. But for now, I would thank thee to remove thyself from our path, lest there be a...official disagreement, between The Church, and the secular guardians of this fair district."

I would do all I could, but for now, all I could do was nod once, and step out of his way.

# **Chapter 6**

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## **Tests of Fortitude**

## — Sheam: Four Strange Men —

Day 4: 1:00 pm

"There has to be another way out," I said, dreading the thought of what was going on upstairs.

"You can't just light a bit of wood on fire," Foster said to Stephens condescendingly, trying to pull the burning stick away from him. "You need oil, and something to act as a wick."

I tuned them out as they began to argue. I was locked down here with four strange men; some stranger than others. Realistically, I had to maintain a position of leadership, or we would all be doomed. "Who wants to stay here and who wants to help me look for a way out?" I asked.

Stephens stomped over after brushing off Foster's lecture, saying, "How do we know we can trust these two?" indicated to Els and Moody.

Moody spoke before I had a chance to. "How does she know she can trust *you two*?" he gaffed.

Foster cut in, "Because we're soldiers of the Silver Gryphon, that's why! And what are *you*—"

Els interrupted, stepping between Moody and Stephens. "*Quiet* before you say something you regret, tin soldier!"

"Quiet!" I urged in a harsh whisper. "I hear something!"

They all instantly shut up and grew tense, casting wary eyes in the direction of the closed hatch far above. A moment went by. Finally Foster said, "I don't hear anything."

"Sorry," I told him. "It must have been the sound of four *fools* arguing with each other!"

They all seemed a little shocked at that point. I decided to not give them the chance to decide to get angry with me. I continued. "We have two torches. I'll take one, Foster gets the other. Foster stays here and looks for a way to make more torches. Els stays here to help him. If the Hammerites come down, try to talk your way out of it."

"Talk our way out—" Els blurted in disbelief.

"Yes, talk your way out. Bluff. Make something up. Grovel. Beg the Builder for forgiveness. You know, use your mouth to save your skin. Lie, plead, let your honor and your conceit and your aggression and fear take the back seat for just a few minutes to save your *taffing skin*."

Els looked at Foster for a moment, who shrugged at him, and continued rummaging through the various boxes looking for some oil. Els turned back to look at me with a bit of 'who does she think she is?' on his face.

"Moody, Stephens, you two, come with me. We're going to look for a way out. When we find it, I'll send Stephens back for you two. I don't mean to be selfish, but Moody and I are the ones who really need to worry about the Hammerites."

"We'll need to leave some sort of trail so that Stephens will be able to find his way back," Moody suggested.

"I'll leave bits of chain mail. Armor's torn; it was falling apart anyway. It'll show up good in the torch light and I have plenty of it. Like metal

breadcrumbs." Stephens said as he showed us the tear in his sleeve.

"Hah, came in handy after all," Foster said with a chortle.

"And we can find you if we need to," Els put in, sitting down.

"I said work together," I reminded Els. "And try to keep it down. The Hammerites aren't deaf."

"Yes ma'am," Foster recited ceremoniously as he opened another crate, and then eyed Els wondering if the guy was going to get up and help him look.

"Alright," I said to Stephens and Moody. "Let's go."

— **Nightfall: Feathered Emissary** —

**Day 4: 3:00 pm**

There was a fluttering of feathers and then the familiar coo of the carrier bird as it came to rest on the narrow bar at the edge of the carriage. Such a remarkable creature; to be able to find this subtle signal, a small blue flag tied to the bar on which it now perched, in all the uncertainty of the woodlands. Why didn't we abandon the messengers altogether in favor of these winged servants? The feathery creature behaved calmly as I removed the small note tied to its leg.

D—

Dangerous tidings: I have been given word that Sheam is now trapped beneath The Circle, after the Hammerite order came out to arrest her. The secret chambers which hold our treasures now hold her as well, and four others, the one you know of as Els, a pagan companion of his known as Moody, both arriving by happenstance, as well as two Gryphons sent to watch over and protect them. Els has indicated that Jyre is missing—possibly claimed by their enemies. It is as we worst feared; the Hammerites are not simply searching The Circle, but dismantling it. The skyline of Hightowne is now punctured by lofty cranes—erected with startling speed—to aid them in the deconstruction of your museum.

Your obedient,  
Jossimer

It stung me deeply; not only the thought of a building so ancient and regal would be torn to pieces block by block, but the idea of losing Sheam to the Hammerites.

"Why canno they jus' march ta the villa? The thicket's no tha' dense," Richen complained.

I looked up, my thoughts interrupted by the sudden speech of my driver beside me. We had been silent for hours; watching with no insincere fascination as trees were pushed to the ground, streams and clouds of sawdust and dirt erupting at any moment, our ears constantly filled with the sound of straining steam engines, the buzz of mechanical saw blades, and the

crack and splinter of wood as each tree was felled. The air was thick with the smell of sap and soil. "Because this is more grandstanding, more symbolic and," I emptied the contents of my cup onto the forest floor, "it will keep me out of their hair for days."

"'Ell I am a getaway driver, so jus' be sayin' the word and off we be."

I nodded. "It may be a few days."

"Tha's alright. I been needed an 'oliday anyway,"

"Indeed," I said quietly, reading over the letter for the third time; as if some new hidden meaning would be revealed to me. The bird fluttered restlessly on the bar, anxious for a weight on its leg to command it to return home. I wrote one.

To Captain Wendle: make no attempt to rescue her. Pieces have been put in place to create a diversion which should distract the Hammerites, at least momentarily, from The Circle. Only when it is clear that this diversion has had its intended effect should a plan be enacted to retrieve them from danger.

To James: Indicate location of Els and existence of Moody to him, as well as their report of Jyre. The recoup of these two as well as Jyre is a priority.

— D

The bird was not as cooperative when I tried to attach the new note to its leg as it had been when I removed the old, but I imagined this stunt would be impossible were the bird not trained to accept it. No sooner had the message been satisfactory attached, it took to flight and vanished into the sky. The Hammerites were oblivious.

My hand returned to my pocket to probe once more the item which had held my contemplation in its grasp for the past few hours—the official memorial of the Inquisitor. I had forgotten to give it to Rafael; an oversight I was considering turning to my advantage.

— Sheam: Deeper Still —

Day 4: 3:00 pm

It wasn't exactly a maze, but it wasn't exactly straightforward either. Moody and Stephens were content to remain quiet as we walked. Stephens dropped his chain mail links very frequently. It seemed to fascinate and consume the entire extent of his concentration and mental capacity. It was like he was picking off bits of his own skin and dropping them behind at carefully timed intervals. It was his art; his science; his religion. It was as if he had waited his entire life for a chance to walk through dark underground tunnels picking off bits of chain mail and dropping them. And I felt all I could do to occupy myself was be amused by Stephens.

Moody was a mystery. He felt the walls now and again. He sniffed the air. He kept equal distance between me in the front and Stephens behind. I had met pagans before, and pagan sympathizers, but they were all city dwellers. Moody was the genuine article, born and raised. It seemed absurd to see him dressed like any commoner in The City rather than in animal skins.

For some reason the torchlight wasn't illuminating the ground in front of me. I held it behind my head so that I could see better, but still my eyes met with only pitch darkness. I got the feeling of a space before me, an expanse, a—

I gave a cry of panic as Moody suddenly grabbed me and held me back. I didn't scold him or get angry; I realized what he had saved me from. There was a shear drop just another footstep before me. I tried to push him away without seeming to rude about it, and looked around.

The tunnel opened to a large chamber, circular as far as the eye could see, though the other side vanished into darkness. I could not see the floor, but the ceiling only raised a little bit overhead as it transferred from brickwork to natural cavern. The path continued to the left in the form of a ledge, wide enough to walk down, which went on for a few dozen feet before it stopped and a bridge began. The bridge was metal, red with rust, and made from many small thin members stitched together into a complex truss. It seemed to be suspended from the ceiling.

At the other end of the bridge seemed to be an electrically-powered lift. It was a cage of rusty metal lengths with spools of cable sending lines every which way. Inside was a small platform. The vertical beams of the mechanism's shaft sunk into the darkness below. The entire thing, including the bridge, was covered in dust and cobwebs.

Stephens went for the bridge. I held my hand before him. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Well we're looking for a way out, right?"

"The elevator goes down," Moody observed.

"Well sometimes you have to go down before you can go up!" Stephens insisted.

"It's old, really old," I observed. "It may not be stable or even work. It may collapse, and we'd die. We came here to escape death, remember?"

"How about I try it, and if I die, then you know it's not safe."

"Okay," I shrugged.

He looked like he didn't expect me to give in so easily. "Uhm, okay then." He edged towards the bridge, but hesitated. He glanced back at us, "Looks stable enough."

I crossed my arms. He put one foot on it to test it. I heard creaking and crumbling, and he hadn't even put his entire weight on it yet. "On second thought!" he quickly said.

"Yeah," I replied, and turned around.

— Jyre: Whispers —

Day 4: 5:00 pm

My eyes jerked opened wide as a chill ran through me. I sat up quickly, eyes searching frantically for anything unexpected, but found myself in the same place I had been minutes ago. Only the light was different. Then I realized what it meant: it was evening now. How could I have been so stupid to have fallen asleep? I collected my pack nervously and slid it back on, feeling that something was watching me, aware of my being here, though I still could not see anything. Quickly the feeling intensified from a mere discomfort to near panic. Something was after me, and I had to get away.

I moved forward, any direction; it did not matter. I ran. I could have been moving away from the danger as well as towards it. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

My foot caught on a crack in the stone walkway and I slammed into the ground with a thud. My palms burned where I had caught myself before landing flat on my chest; my ribs and chin were spared. I glanced over my shoulder as I scrambled to my feet expecting to see a sickening mockery of life chasing me, shambling closer, but there was nothing there. I got up and began to run once more; growing ever more terrified every instant my stalker remained hidden. A building at the side of the street caught my eye, and instinctively I darted into its ruined form. Its walls were crumbling and in some places completely gone. I paused in my mad dash for an instant scanning the room for a way to a second floor where I felt I would be safe.

I found the half-collapsed staircase. I just hoped it would take my weight. The first few steps were completely gone so I had to scramble up. The wood creaked beneath me, bending. I got to the top, panting and shaking fervently, before I clasped my hands over my mouth and strained desperately to slow my breathing to a halt. I looked around the upper floor and saw that at least half the planks had rotted away completely to leave the thin plaster beneath; I wouldn't be able to go anywhere, I'd just fall through, so at the top of the stairs I stayed, curled into a tight fearful ball. I expected to feel the cold touch of my pursuer any second. I waited, breath held, with only the sound of my own meek sobbing in my ears. Finally I built up the courage to look down. Nothing. Empty. Had I dreamed the whole thing? I brought my fear back under control, and moved to lean my aching body against the brickwork of the wall which the stairs clung to.

Why had I let myself fall asleep? I was supposed to be out of here by now, done and safely away before dark, but now I was trapped, and as good as dead.

"Daelus," I whispered to myself, pressing my chin to my knees. I imagined that I was writing a letter to him as I whispered aloud. "Here I am, in the forbidden district. I thought I was brave and clever, but now all I can do is shake and cry. It was so wrong for me to come here. I was wrong for trusting those men. So wrong..."

I curled tighter to rest my cheek on my knee, and continued to whisper, wishing that by the spirits in the wind someone would hear me. "I'm such an



idiot...I don't know what to do. Els please come find me..." I shut my eyes tightly...wishing that I could open them and find myself back where I belonged, safe in the hideaway with Els.

But then, I heard something; it sounded like the crackling of a campfire. My nose confirmed this a moment later. Could someone else be here? It was not impossible. My fears diminished, I uncurled myself, and investigated.

— **Lytha: A Voice in the Dark** —

**Day 4: 5:00 pm**

The man had finished with me. They brought me back into the other cell.

I stared at the light, at its flickering. I could feel the blood running where he had bitten me. My back was still burning from the lashes. I could not feel my arm with the metal bolted into it at all. The remains of my clothes sat in a heap; they had been thrown in along with me. They were shredded, and soaked in blood. I shook, unable to control it, like my body was no longer my own.

*Lytha...*

It was the voice in my head again...or was it? Slowly I turned, and my eyes beheld the form of Thalia, huddled in the corner just as I had, her back torn, naked, blood everywhere, and her wrists broken.

No, just stone. I was alone; as I always had been.

*Lytha!*

The voice cried more urgently, this time in that barely human mockery of Thalia's voice.

"Go away," I whispered.

The light went on, and off, and on, and off.

— **Ghost: Yanking on Chains** —

**Day 4: 5:00 pm**

The first thing I realized was that I was barfing. It wasn't just a nausea induced gag either; I was puking my guts out. I didn't know why; I hadn't exactly been pigging out. Even though my brain hadn't realized it yet, my body knew it; I had something lodged in my throat. As this dawned on me, I began to gag and choke and puke some more, and finally it came out; a very small glass bottle flew from my mouth and bounced as it landed on the rough stone floor in the middle of my puddle of puke. I gave one more solid choke and then went to wipe my mouth.

Only I couldn't, because my arm was chained to the wall. "What the bloody..." I choked out as I glanced from side to side, realizing for the first time in my disorientation that I was shackled to the wall, ankles and wrists. Before, I had just been hanging there, drooping. My arms felt like shit. My wrists felt like shit. My ankles felt like shit. My stomach felt like shit. My mouth felt like shit. My throat did too. And my stomach. And my head, and my legs, and my...hell, I felt like a living shit-doll, like a human being

comprised entirely of fresh shit. No, old shit, ten day old shit, all infested with worms and grubs, and had mushrooms growing on it.

What the bloody taff was I doing chained to a wall, and why were there bars? That would be because I was in a jail cell; I reasoned using the greatest capacities of my shit-for-brains logic. That's when I remembered the interrogation, and the zombie attack. Even after that the fools still had me locked up, dammit. I could hear the moans of other prisoners; I thought about joining the chorus. Actually if I could tone it right, we may be able to wail out a pretty good melody.

The little bottle that someone had tried to make me swallow was sitting on the floor, staring at me. Actually I was staring at it. I tried to lean forward to get it, but I only had to do that for a minute (yes, a full minute) before I realized that it wouldn't do me any good. Even if I could touch it with my nose, which I couldn't, that wouldn't help me figure out what was in it, or get at it. I'd be able to smell it, but I could do that from here. It smelled like my puke.

I tried to reach out with my foot and kick it closer, and was mildly successful. Great; now it was under me, but I still couldn't get at it. "Come on," I said, as if verbal coaxing would help.

I stomped on it, and it shattered under my heel. Ouch. Ouch, ouch. Bare foot on glass, shattering. Bad idea. I winced and took a deep breath, which was also a bad idea. Gross, vomit air. Yuck. I tried to pull the bits of glass out of my heel with the toes on my other foot, and managed to get some out, but managed to push other bits further in. I whimpered, and clenched my jaws. After working at this for several minutes, I gave up, and settled on trying to identify what was in the bottle. Just like I had figured, it was a tiny rolled note.

I should have gotten some award for being the inmate with the most dexterous toes, for in no less than god-knows-how-long I managed to unroll the paper with my feet and was trying to lift it off the ground, written side up, high enough for me to see the microscopic writing on it. I was going to give myself a nose bleed.

Check arm for lock pick.

"Great!" I almost shouted, and then hushed. I didn't want to draw attention. I quickly studied my arms for the mysterious lock pick.

"Oh," I said to myself, seeing a rather large scar on my forearm which was vaguely lock pick shaped. "No...NO!" I said again, forgetting that I wanted to keep quiet. They cut my arm open and put the pick into my arm! That's just sick! But why didn't my arm hurt? I frowned and then bit into the scar with my teeth; it was the only thing to do. I found that it was not a scar at all, but flesh colored goop that tasted like wax, and in no time I had dug out a pick from the mess.

I laughed at my triumph, but then the lock pick fell from my lips to the floor with a mockingly soft clink; in my puddle of vomit no less. I had to be

the most unlucky bugger on the face of this—

Not to be defeated, I set my toes back at it. Soon I had the pick between them, and had plunged it into the keyhole of the shackle around my left ankle, trying my damndest to maneuver my right foot around to jimmy the lock. “If I manage this,” I said to myself, “I will be a mad genius...” no sooner had I applauded my own future greatness, the shackle popped open with ease. I frowned and looked at it. I’d have to tell everyone that it took me an hour so it’d be more impressive. No, then someone else would try it, and do it in a minute, and I’d look like an idiot.

Now came the even funnier part; getting the pick back up to my mouth. I had never tried to get my foot up to my mouth, nor had I ever seen anyone try, but I decided that this would be the real feat of insane brilliance. I got my toes to within a few inches of my gaping chompers, but then felt my hips start to cramp up, and found myself out of breath from straining to bend down just a little more, or lift my leg just a little higher. I soon gave up when the pain of contortion became unbearable. I tried again. This time I relaxed my arms, and just hung from my wrists as far forward as I could, mouth gaping wide, foot curled up backward offering the small pick up as if it were a little bit of delicious jerky.

Then the smell of the vomit oozing off the wet pick hit me, and as the distance between it and my teeth shrank to but a meager inch, I dropped the pick to the floor. I wanted to scream. No, I was close, too close. I tried again, uncurling my leg, reaching down to pinch the pick between my toes, and lifted it back up. I was already leaning down as far as I could; this time it was my leg’s turn. My hip burned as I twisted my foot up far above where it was meant to go, my toes wiggled to get every fraction of height out of the pick, and my teeth closed neatly onto it. I sighed heavily, holding onto the bit of metal between my teeth like it was food for a starving man and I was pretty hungry.

I relaxed my leg and settled down, but promptly found I was unable to right myself. I jerked and I struggled, but my arms wouldn’t obey. I had the pick in my mouth, and now no way to get it to my wrists. “Come on Ghost,” I whispered through clenched teeth, and tried again. Now it was my shoulders burning as I pulled myself up, with the shackles cutting into my skin as I strained against them, my entire weight resting on the thin edge of rusty metal at my wrists. In more pain than I felt like describing, I was finally upright, and staring with angry determination at the keyhole to the shackle which bound my wrist to the wall.

I pulled my arm to my face, and craned my neck to reach the shackle. It was just too far. “No!” I wouldn’t be thwarted after all of that! I twisted and pulled my arm to my face, and twisted and pulled my neck to get just a little closer, a little closer, a little closer, panting, out of breath, hurting all through my back, shoulders, neck, and not least of all my now bloody wrists. I pushed the pick into the hole, and shortly discovered that picking with my teeth was harder than picking with my toes. Maybe it was because I was straining constantly to span the distance, or maybe it was because toes were, when you

get right down to it, more dexterous than teeth.

When the lock finally came undone, I wanted to sing. The pick fell to the floor once again, but I didn't care. I was too busy kissing my newly freed wrist. It tasted like rust. Like an animal, I licked my wounds, and gave a sigh of relief as I panted out my exhaustion. I easily stooped down and grabbed the pick again, and undid my other wrist and ankle. That's when I realized I was still locked in my cell.

I was feeling pretty good about getting out, though. Just in case I got caught and put back into a cell, I hid the pick back under the patch of goop, and tried to cover it back over as well as I could. Then I kicked the note down the tiny grating on the floor of the cell. Finally I crept forward and peeked out through the barred door, trying to get an idea of where I was. It looked like a dungeon. There was a row of cells on the opposite wall, and another row on the story above, and probably the same on this side. I returned to the back of my cell, already forming a plan.

"Guaarrdd!" No answer came; I knew not to give up that easily. "I'm a killin' man in a killin' mood, and I'm going to kill you too! But you need to let me out first!" I thought maybe if I got him mad enough he'd come down to beat on me a little. I draped the wrist shackles back over my hands and stood back by the wall. Strangely enough, the door to my cell slid open by itself. I didn't dare step out. The guard probably had a crossbow waiting to shoot me if I was loose. Footsteps approached the cell, and a deep voice finally spoke as the guard came into view and stopped just outside the opening. I nearly wet myself. It was a Hammerite.

— Lytha: A Change in Focus —

Day 4: 6:00 pm

There was the dreadful noise of my cell opening again. There was a shape of a man in the doorway: a Hammerite. He came in quickly and put his big hands around my body to pick me up.

I deep growl came from within me I knew not from where. I spun around, raking my nails across his face. I hissed and cursed.

I was thrown to the wall. The same gloved hand cracked into my face, balled into a fist.

I was pulled up once more, but this time my hands were bound in metal. I was pulled up, tossed over his shoulder, and carried.

The lights changed. Doors opened and closed. I saw a familiar floor...my blood was still on it.

I was thrown back to the ground. I heard voices talking, discussing me.

Slowly I lifted my eyes. The talk has ceased. I could see the Inquisitor looking at me steadily.

I saw pity in his eyes. I would have rather seen disgust. How could he look at me that way, and then do what he has done?

"Lytha, my brother tells me that you assaulted him in your cell as he came to bring you back to me. Is this true?"

I hated him for asking questions he knew the answer to. Those were the only kind he ever asked.

"Yes," I hissed again. If only I had to do it over, next time I would have taken his eyes.

"And I felt we had made such progress. In fact the treatment you received in the recess was supposed to have removed any residual traces of resistance from you. It worked so well on your sister, Thalia."

The numb hatred which had hardened me melted at the sound of her name, and I found myself once again shaking and weeping, furious with rage at the thought of what I had just endured happening to Thalia.

"Nevertheless, you have made your choice, and now I have none. You must understand that you are here because of the choices you made, and the choices you continue to make are what keep you here."

My eyes fell from him to the floor. "Ask your damn questions," I said, trying to regain the numb hatred I had so easily lost.

I am not sure if he heard me. I could hear him turning the pages in his book. The sound of each page turning was clear and distinct; parchment sliding against parchment. "We have established your name. We have established that you are sister to Thalia, with whom I am acquainted. You have confessed that you do not worship the Master Builder and in fact worship the pagan beings which they call gods. Now we must move on to the actual facts of the matter, and confessions to the individual crimes you have committed."

Had all of that happened? Was it true, or was he just lying to me to control me?

"We must begin with the numerous attacks upon our sacred temples, where priests, soldiers and sometimes even novices were murdered, with the skin of their faces peeled away and their eyes removed."

A silence followed. I heard his words, but they meant nothing to me. He could have been saying anything; it did not matter. He would want me to confess, and if I did not, I would be punished.

"We are now aware that you were responsible for these acts. What I require of you is a confession, and the identities and whereabouts of those, if any, who aided you in these acts."

I said nothing. None of it mattered. Telling them what they wanted to hear would not help me. I did not even have any way to know that I would die less slowly and less painfully if I cooperated. I said nothing.

He stepped closer, and sat down beside me. He smelled of fresh linen and polished metal, incense and the slightest hint of ink. "You do not have to go through all of this. Just look at the instruments in this room. Thus far you have only experienced a sampling of what they have to offer. They will open your mouth, trust me. But do you really want to learn this from your own experience? All you must do is confess to this act, and name your accomplices."

I shut my eyes tightly. I could feel his breath on my face as he spoke, his lips close to my ear. I tried desperately to shield his thoughts from mine, but

he was so close, and his essence so powerful...I felt as if a great heat was emanating from him; an inferno, hot as the molten pits of their iron smelters, bright as the blazing sun. It moved and spun, methodical; rhythmic; logical. It would roast me alive. He rose and slowly returned to his desk. The heat faded, the brightness subsided...and my mind sunk deeper into its protective recesses.

"As you are aware, Lytha, we have attached the metal splint directly to your bone. The use of this is threefold. First, naturally, it is to set the bone properly to allow your arm to remain rigid and functional. Secondly, as you have become well acquainted, adjustment of the length of the splint can be most uncomfortable. The third reason shall shortly be demonstrated. Brother, bring the generator and the electrodes."

— Jyre: Not Alone —

Day 4: 6:00 pm

I saw a man sitting at a campfire. He looked very old; he could have been sixty or six hundred. He wore a ragged robe of deep brown, almost black, which somehow reminded me of ash. His long beard which coated the front of his cloak was almost the same color; ash. His dark face, only visible above the nose, caught the light from the fire, showing every wrinkle and crevice in monstrous detail. His eyes caught the firelight and twinkled red and yellow. He sat cross-legged before the fire, with the nearly black souls of his calloused feet inches away from the smoldering bits of wood.

He looked up to where I was; yet I was not afraid. His wooly beard and mustache distorted to reveal a smile beneath, as he lifted an arm to beckon. "Come share my fire," was all he said in a raspy, shallow voice.

My lack of fear itself gave me pause, only for an instant, before I climbed down and sat with the fire between us. The warmth was comforting, and the orange glow pleasing to my eyes. It was still dusk; a dimming light still covered the sky, though the sun was no longer visible above the tops of the buildings. I looked up at him again, expecting to see something new now that I was close. The fire still reflected in his eyes in a curious way, though his state of contentment put me at ease.

"Tell me child, why are you here?" He asked in that strange voice.

"I...was sent here," I told him, surprised at my earnestness, "to find something..."

"Ahh," he replied. "There is much still here to find; much still good, if you look hard enough."

"...a scroll," I added, knowing that detail made me more timid than the rest.

He looked up from the fire, "a scroll..." he said as he picked up a narrow stick and began prodding the fire. "Usually when someone means a letter, they say a letter, or a deed or manuscript, or a memoir or transcript, they say so...but when they say scroll, well, that can only mean one thing. It means a magical scroll, doesn't it?" I could have imagined it, but the fire seemed to

grow a little brighter as he said this.

"I..." I said quietly before trailing off. A moment went by, and all the while he didn't seem to expect me to say anything more. "I don't know," I said. "I've never seen a magical scroll."

"I have," he replied, giving the fire another poke. "Not long ago too...someone left one here."

"Left?" I said, a little confused.

"Ihm, yes, quite so," he said "someone came, and left one here...hard not to notice. There are not many magical scrolls in The City. Maybe this is the first one in a long, long time."

"But...I was told the scroll I was looking for was..." I stopped, confused, and not sure I even remembered what I was told.

"Yes child, tell me," he said, though his voice was still absent of urgency—as if I could have waited an hour to tell him and he would not have cared.

"A family named Delphine used to live here, and they had a scroll, and it was left...and I was told I needed to go find it, because we could use it against her."

He considered this for a long time. I wasn't sure how long, but I could feel the minutes slipping by and the sky growing dimmer. Yet, I could not muster the will to get up and move on. "I know no one by that name," was what he finally said in reply. "No, I am most certain that no one by that name ever lived here."

"But...that's impossible," I retorted. "Maybe...ages ago, generations ago...before you were born!"

He chuckled, a distant, shallow chuckle. Suddenly my thoughts of his age became troublesome. What if he actually was six hundred years old?

"That is possible yes," he told me, after putting down the stick and beginning to stroke his beard. "The scroll that I recall," he continued as if my interruption was already forgotten, "was left here not long ago at all...say...fifteen years ago—"

"Before I was born," I realized out loud. How could anyone consider 'fifteen years ago', 'not long ago at all'?

"I do not recall anything about the one who left it here, though I suspect that was intentional...it was hidden in the ruins of a collapsed building not far from here. I could show you the way."

Suddenly I was filled with hope. "Could you?" I asked, almost begging.

He nodded, as if the matter were trivial. "I cannot tell you anything about the scroll though...I honestly never touched it. I did not want to. I do not think anyone could want to."

"No, I don't want to either," I reflected. "But I must...I can't let her have it." "Her?"

"The Lady...Delphine." The name was still new to my lips. It was so odd to think of that woman as anything other than The Lady. I promised myself that this would be the last time I used her true name.

He nodded slightly, and resumed poking the fire, as if what I had said was of no consequence. I thought I should ask him to take me to the scroll, but I

honestly did not want to get up just yet. "What is this place?" I found myself asking, though I thought I already knew the answer; somehow I felt his would be different.

He looked up from the fire for the first time since he first looked up to see me where I sat spying on him. He glanced around at the destroyed buildings all around us. "It is my home," he said, as if the answer were trivial.

"How could you live...here?" I found myself saying without a thought as to whether or not it would offend him.

"One day at a time," he told me, with that big mysterious smile returning to his enormous beard.

"Who are you," I asked, again feeling it more of a 'beg' than a question.

"Just a lonely spirit with a campfire..." he told me, as if that would answer my question.

"Have you...lived here long?" I ventured, somehow not upset at his meaningless answer.

"Not long...No, only since they put those walls up. Once that was done, well, it seemed the only sensible place..."

Not long ago? But those walls had been there for fifty years! I refrained from saying something at this point, for fear of embarrassment. I found I did not need to, as he continued speaking without my prompting.

"But lately a change has come over this place...I feel as if the power that had turned it to darkness is fading...something is missing, but I cannot put my finger on it. It is something in the wind. This place fades...wasting away. Soon there will be nothing left but old stones and pestilent blades of grass...no place for me anymore. Still, I am sure that other places will come to be. I rarely want for a home."

"How could...how could you want to live in a place like this?"

"The next time you find yourself drowning in the sea, ask the very same thing to the first fish you see..."

"But I do not belong here...I will drown in this sea, while you the fish swim free..."

"Let me show you where you wish to go then," he told me, and seemed to be trying to push himself up and unfold his legs.

The campfire erupted in a torrent of flame, racing between the pile of charred sticks and the man. I was nearly pushed to my back from the shock of the display, and had to shield my face with both arms. I did not see what happened next, but I could have sworn that I heard the sound of running; inhumanly fast running. An instant later, when I felt I could afford to bring my arms from my face; I found the campfire extinguished, with a pile of smoking black sticks and a trail of glowing embers leading from the fire out into the streets. I stood, following the trail with my eyes and saw that it did not end.

I shook myself, unable to believe what I had just seen. To make matters even stranger, the ground where the man had been sitting was black and smooth, as if it had been melted in intense heat and then cooled. I could see bits of crystal with an orange glow; fire trapped within the mineral formation,



sprouting from the smooth stone where he had sat, like newborn saplings around the trunk of a mother tree. I was baffled, and stood frozen in shock for several moments, unsure if what I had just seen was real, or just another dream.

The glowing trail he left me would not last forever...soon it would cool and go out. I could not ask him to this again; I would be too terrified to approach him now. What was he? In all my time in The City, I had never heard anyone speak of such a creature. Could he be the last of his kind? And how was it that he seemed so peaceful and gentle? Was it because of what he said; that the evil of this place was fading? If I had come years ago, would he have been a fearsome beast?

As I surveyed the trail before me the same fears of being watched and stalked crept up to me. Would he lead me knowingly into danger? Did he even understand what would be dangerous for me? I could not answer those questions, or any I had asked before, but I knew what I had to do. It was so much darker now; the sky to the west was a pale gold, which faded to a deepening shade of blue before it stretched out to black at the eastern horizon. I could see the first twinkles of light from the heavens. I went.

I found myself tiptoeing, and trying desperately to control my breathing so that my nervous puffs would not be heard. My breath was the loudest sound in this dead city. I kept to the middle of the road, avoiding any shadows in the fear that they might contain one of the undead. The trail of embers was easy enough to follow, so I just kept going. I saw that I was approaching an intersection, and suddenly I felt anxious. What if the trail vanished and I was forced to choose my own way then?

It was as I feared; the trail was now indiscernible. The faintly glowing embers had all ceased, and now all I saw in each direction, including the one I came down, was overgrown cobblestones. Not even a singed blade of grass betrayed the creature's passage. I had waited too long in fear, walked too slowly out of distrust, and had wasted my one chance. I looked to my left, down the road. It was also a main road, but it twisted to the side just a few blocks down, so I could not see far in that direction. Somehow, I wanted to go down that road. I didn't know why. I just had a feeling. Then the dream flashed into my mind. I couldn't pick out any one scene from it that I could clearly picture, but somehow I felt that I had been here in that dream, and that this was the road Daelus had been walking down.

"Do what your gut tells you," I whispered to myself, and took my first step. As I went I couldn't help but feel that the buildings along this path were grander than the others, but at the same time more dilapidated. It was as if they had been intentionally destroyed by some great, angry force. I reminded myself that all of the buildings here seemed that way; destroyed in a way simple time and weathering could not accomplish.

Just as some unknown fear had propelled me before, some unknown desire pulled me deeper into the haunted dereliction. I followed its pull like a blind man would his dog, never once doubting its source. It was Daelus, I told myself. He had led me this way in the vision; there must a reason. Yes, I

decided now that it had not been a dream at all, but a vision. Something was guiding me. Something guided me to that creature and something was guiding me now. As I came to crossroads, I found myself taking a direction without even thinking about it.

Now a great iron gate was before me, with the telltale signs of the passage of my guide; the bars seemed melted into a gap wide enough for a man to pass through. I slipped right through the parted bars. For a surreal moment I took in what stood before me, a long stone walk, torn asunder, with a ravaged garden of dead weeds and dead broken trees on either side. At the end of the walk stood a large stone structure; I knew at once that it was the building in my vision, though I could not for the life of me remember what I had seen then. I just could feel that this was the right place; I had no need to check my map, which had done nothing to aid me the entire way. The scroll would be here. I just knew it.

— Ghost: Escape From Cragcleft —

Day 4: 6:00 pm

“Thou hast killed my brothers, but thou shalt never kill again, heathen!” The Hammerite guard towering before me looked as if he wanted to step in and beat me senseless right then and there, but so far he just held his hammer menacingly with both hands and glared at me.

I wanted him closer, so I stood up and rattled my chains a bit to let him think I was still secure and taunted him a bit more. “Why don't you come on in here and show me how tough you big bad-assed guards are without those hammers?”

“It wilt be my pleasure, knave!” He swung his hammer down by his side and touched its head to the floor. It was so big and heavy that it stood upright after he let it go. While cracking his knuckles, he stepped eagerly through the open gate to my cell. “My fists shall be as a flail against thy bones!”

His jaw looked pretty sturdy, so I aimed for somewhere softer. I ducked down and made a quick jab, straight in the ball-sack. That sent him to right the floor, moaning just like most of the prisoners were doing. I tried to think of a mean name to call him, like knave, or cur, but at the moment all I could think up was “Oaf!” Then I kicked him in the head a few times, until he stopped moving.

Still, he wouldn't stay down from that for long, so I locked him up in the shackles just like I had been. Now I had his keys, which hopefully included exit keys, or maybe treasure room keys. What a guy; I wasn't free for a minute and already I was thinking of treasure.

“Hey...Hey!” I heard another prisoner saying in a hushed shout from behind his bars.

“Shh!” I told him, trying to get a bearing on where I was.

“Hey!” he said again, a bit louder. “You, with the red hand painted on your tunic! Over here!”

“Who?” I looked across the room, seeing no one else free of course, but

noticed that some of the prisoners did indeed have red hands painted on their tunics.

"Yeah I'm talking to you, free-bird! How the hell did you do that?"

That's when I noticed for the first time that I too had a red hand painted onto my tunic. Huh. I guess that means they caught me red-handed or something.

"Are you deaf?" he hissed.

"Shut up or a guard will hear you!" I scolded, coming up to his bars. "Now, where the hell am I and how did I get here?"

"Cragscleft," he said woefully. "They brought you and the others with that red hand on you in a few hours ago. How did you get loose?"

Cragscleft...Cragscleft...oh, shit, not Cragscleft. I still couldn't make sense of it. First I was abducted, and then questioned about all sorts of random crap, and then thrown into the worst Hammerite prison ever built, only to be given lock picks so I could escape? It just didn't add up. "I uhm...picked the locks with my toes, and my teeth!" I said with a bit of a chuckle. He just stood there, dumbfounded. "Listen," I urged, "The cell doors don't open from here. I have to go to the guard station or something. You just sit tight, and I'll have you out in a jiffy."

"The guard station is on the second level, it overlooks the cell block!" he hissed, pressing his forehead against the bars.

"Wait a sec," I said, doubling back. "Why aren't you chained up?"

"Most of us aren't...they only chain up the prisoners they think might try to kill themselves."

I wondered what that said about me. I just shook my head and left him behind, hoping like hell he would keep his mouth shut.

Thankfully he shut up, even though I had no intention of letting him or the others out. The chaos of an all-out jail break was more likely to get me killed than anything else. I looked left, I looked right. To my left, clear as day, was a sign that said "Level Two" and then an arrow. What it didn't tell me was if level two was higher up, or farther down. Hearsay had taught me that if you ever got into Cragscleft, head down to the old mines. The Hammerites didn't guard the exits down there, because they expected any attempted escapees to be killed by the zomb—

Oh crap. Oh for the love of all that's holy. Of all the places for me to wind up, it had to be a prison sitting on top of a zombie infested mine. Still, underground tunnels were my bread and butter, and I could deal with zombies better than anybody; better than I could deal with Hammerites. Of course these were crazed curse-happy zombies; there was a difference. Usually zombies left you alone unless you put your arm into their mouth and told them to chew. I wouldn't be surprised if every zombie in the entire mine was hopping and sniffing and trying to scratch their way through solid stone to get at me up here. Up it would be.

I headed for the sign, and found that it did lead to a staircase going up, so up I went. At the top of the stair I hit a bend, with a railing and a drop that overlooked a chamber below. I didn't go to peek over the rail, because below

I heard the distinct sounds of someone being tortured. Nice. I kept moving.

Soon I came to a balcony looking over the cell block I had just escaped from. At the far end of the balcony was the room the Hammer guard had come from, full of levers that I could use to signal a full scale prison break; well, a prison break for this cell block anyway. Call it a quarter scale prison break.

If I was feeling nice, maybe I'd come back and see about letting some people loose. I went in the opposite direction, and saw a sign next to a door that said "Cell Block 3" I loved people who labeled their rooms for me. I made a note to watch for a sign that said "Treasure Room" or "Loot Room" or at least "Crap-we-pulled-off-these-blighters Room."

I pulled open the door and found myself face to face with a rather shocked looking Hammerite, who had his arm reached out towards me like he was about to grab the doorknob that I had just swept out of his reach. My arm moved faster than my pee-in-my-pants reflex, and before I knew it I had a jaw full of teeth, and a wincing Hammerite crumpling to the floor. Ouch; that was why I had gone for the balls before.

As I was nursing my sore hand someone shouted "What was that?" from around the corner.

I gulped and said, just as loud, "There, taketh that, thou foul prisoner! I shalleth striketh thee again if thou...eth...does...dost not quieteth thy mouthethest...eth. Ah! Had enough hast thout? My boot upon thy...erm, sinning person I shalt..."

I stopped to listen to see if anyone was coming. I guess my act worked. I would have to brush up on my Hammerite-ese if I was going to try to make a living off that. I was at the top of another cell block, wondering where to go. I peeked around the corner, and saw the guy who had just shouted 'What was that?' a second ago, glaring in this direction. It was dark though...too dark for him to really see me. I bolted past the opening, pressed myself against the wall, and listened. Nothing.

No, not nothing. Nothing from the guard, but I was once again near the overlook of the torture chamber; I could hear someone screaming. It sounded like a young women from the cries of pain. I did not hear the lash of a whip though; rather the crackle and hum of very live electricity—sick Hammerite bastards. I was insensitive to a lot of things, but a woman being hurt really, really pissed me off. For a moment I imagined that it was Laurel or Betty down there, getting shocked to death, and I wanted to jump down from the balcony, and take them all on. Yeah, I'd die a hero. Then I remembered all of that crap from the interrogation, about how I do stupid things when I see a girl in trouble. Keep moving Ghost; ignore it. Your life isn't worth some trick.

Now I was in another cell block; I wasn't sure which one anymore; I didn't think it mattered anyway. I slipped as best I could through the place, trying to hide from the prisoners as well as from the guard above, until I had successfully made it to the other side. I stood by a door, bolted iron, with a red light on the wall next to it. The light was on. I was just going in circles; it was the torture room again.

I heard crying, some of the most mournful crying I had ever heard. Then a spark, and the sound of a live electrical current being unleashed, accompanied by bone-chilling screams. In the midst of it all, I could make out the sound of a calm voice counting off the seconds. "One, two, three,"—dammit, those sick, wretched bastards!—"four, five," and it stopped and the screaming was replaced once again by crying, this time worse than before. Five seconds didn't seem like a very long time, but those five seemed felt like an eternity as I stood there, helpless, almost in tears myself as I listened to it. Those screams of pain shot through me like a lance. I almost went to my knees at the sound of it. "Hammerite scum," I hissed through my teeth. I wanted to tear the door down with my bare hands, and fry those monsters with their own electrodes.

"I will ask you again, and if you choose not to respond, next time we shall try six seconds. Do you confess to the slaughter of my brothers?"

I pulled myself from the door and went quickly in the other direction. I didn't even care if I ran into another guard. I would be happy to kill them just to have some revenge against the bastards who were hurting that poor girl, who probably did nothing. Even though I thought I had escaped, I heard it again, the roar of the electrical current, and the howls of pain. I felt dizzy at the sound of it as I ran, the corridors snaking this way and that, until I came face to face with an identical door, and an identical red light. My stomach churned, anticipating another horrible cry of pain, as I looked for a way to escape.

Then I heard it, the same man from before said, "Now Lytha, before we attempt a seven second treatment, do you confess to these heinous acts?"

"Yes..."

I blinked, standing there in shock. Lytha? *The* Lytha? In here? Being tortured into submission? No, not while I could do anything about it. That was the needle that broke the ox's back; or at least the insanity that broke my brain in half. I rushed to the door to fling it open and scream "Die Hammerites!" but thankfully I stopped myself just in time. I looked at the massive iron door. I looked at my bare hands. I looked at the red light. I looked back at the door.

"Thank you Lytha, you will find that things will go much smoother from here on out."

Scowling with conviction, I made up my mind. I would have to leave her here in their hands for a time, but I would be back—Oh, would I.

— Lytha: Submission —

Day 4: 7:00 pm

I was back in my cell. I told them everything they wanted to hear. It was easy, at last. I told them that I was a pagan and a witch, and that I wanted to summon some demons into this world to destroy it. I told them that I had met the Trickster himself and handed him my life, in exchange for some goodies. I told them everything to escape from the pain; and they seemed to

be pleased.

Everything that I was accused of, I confessed to. I confessed to the murder of countless Hammerites; that I tore their faces from their skulls and pulled their eyes from their sockets, cut their hands from their wrists and then ripped their bodies into pieces with my bare hands. They believed it.

And eventually I believed it myself, after they attached those big iron jaws to the metal rod in my arm, and pulled that lever...again, and again, and again...

The light came on, and off, and on.

*"Why have you betrayed me?"* No longer voices in my head; no longer delusions; it felt as if the voices were the only things that were real.

I stared at the light. It went off.

I felt my arm with the metal splint attached to it. My fingers probed where the screws were buried deep into my skin. I sunk my fingernails into the edges of the holes. I cut and tore at my flesh. The pain was slightly satisfying. I continued.

The light came on.

*"No! WHY Have You Betrayed Usss? LISTEN!"*

The light went out.

I continued. I watched the blood pour down my arm. It hurt so much. It didn't seem right that I should feel so much pain, but there be no blood. Now there was blood. Now it made sense.

*"Wasn't it enough that they had captured me? Why you?"*

One feeling—pain. Before today, for years before today, all I felt was numbness. Now all I could feel was pain. Somehow, I preferred the pain. I continued, watching the blood, scratching deeper, and deeper.

*"Wasn't it enough that you left Usss alone when they Captured Usssss, and WHEN we DIED?!"*

I had closed my eyes to lock out sight of the cell, and the door, and the chains from my mind.

The light came on. I let my thoughts wander freely. Before I decided that I had died along with Thalia, that I was only still here so I could have Delphine join in our deaths. Why couldn't it have been so? Why couldn't I have really died that day in Thalia's cottage along with her? Why was I still here, forced to retrace Thalia's steps?

*"And Now you Think WE should Sympathize with You?!"*

The light went out. My mind drifted away.

*"Ohhhh, My Dear Poooor Lytha..."*

I felt my body go limp.

— Ghost: Smirking Chaos —

Day 4: 7:00 pm

If I was going to do this right I had to be careful, but I also had to be fast or there wouldn't be enough of Lytha left to rescue. I knew I was a damn fool when it came to women. But this was Lytha; she was a legend, and as the

legend goes, a real eye-popping, red-headed beauty. Of course, when I got to her she'd probably be looking as attractive as a hedgehog run over by a wagon wheel, but I honestly didn't care. Laurela didn't look too great without her makeup, either.

I urgently slipped through the darkness of Cragscleft prison unnoticed. Between the prison and the mines was a factory, where they built god-knows what. It could work to my advantage. Down I went, treading as carefully as I could. The factory was a maze of metal rooms filled with boiling vats of iron, spinning gears and clouds of steam. Most of the men working there were too busy with their craft to notice the deft grave robber working his way from room to room, getting ever lower and lower, deeper and deeper, and deeper, and deeper into more trouble than any of them could possibly imagine.

"The zombies are getting restless," I heard one of them say. I stopped to listen. Restless? I didn't want restless! I wanted foaming at the mouth!

"Yes, maybe we should arm ourselves with holy water and stand watch at the foot of the stair." "Indeed, brother that we shall do."

Aha, that was my ticket. I trailed them as they meandered to a storage room, picked up a few blue bottles, and then wandered down a hall or two, yawning and scratching their butts like this was any other day. Hah, they'd be sorry they had a bright idea for community service on the neighborhood zombie watch.

As I followed them down the winding stairs that wrapped around the inside of an air shaft that was carved through the mountain straight up to the evening sky, I whimpered. I could have just scaled right up that shaft to freedom. I looked after them and frowned, and then back up the shaft. I would probably die here, trying to save Lytha. Oh well.

The Hammerites seemed to be growing nervous, and I didn't blame them. The zombies were restless alright. All around I could hear them shuffling, mumbling, moaning, and...No, wait, that was my stomach.

"What are they saying?" one of them said, as I crept even closer behind them.

"I am not sure, brother," his friend replied. They were now at the foot of the stairs, cupping their hands to their ear and staring into the darkness.

"Crushed?"

"Hurst?" he moved closer to his brother.

"What the devil is 'Hurst'?" and he in turn moved even closer.

"I do not know, 'tis what it sounds like they are saying!"

By now I was right behind them. I cracked my knuckles nonchalantly, and then shouted; "They're saying CURSED, oafs!" Just as they jerked around to look at me I slammed their heads together as hard as I could; which was pretty damn hard. It was hard enough to make them crumble to the ground like oafs should.

"CURSED!" came from the chorus of all the angry, zombified monstrosities for roughly a cubic mile.

"Yeah, I'm cursed!" I shouted back.

I could see them now; dozens of them, sauntering towards me as fast as

their little rotten legs could carry them.

"You bet I'm cursed! I'm as cursed as they come!"

"Cursed! Cursed! Cursed!" they growled as I scooped up both hammers from where the freshly discombobulated Hammerites lay. Damn, those things were heavy. Next I eyed their boots.

"Yeah-yeah, cursed, cursed, cursed!" I ran back up the stairs, a pair of boots in one hand, and a pair of hammers in the other. "Come and get me, come get your big cursed Ghost daddy!"

When I got to the top of the stairs I quickly put the boots on, and with both Hammers in hand, made a mad dash straight through the factory.

"Hey! We got zombies! Lots of zombies coming your way! Zombie alert! Zombie Alert! Here come the zombies!" I chanted as I stomped the metal boots as loud as I could while I ran, swinging both hammers against the walls to make as much racket as it was possible with only two arms, two legs, and a really big mouth.

Soon the zombies and I weren't the only ones screaming. In seconds the whole place was a storm of factory workers running around like headless burricks. Everyone was shouting. The molten metal poured. The steam billowed. The gears spun. I ran my ass off.

I wasn't exactly sure what was happening behind me, or in front of me; all I knew was that the Hammerites in the factory seemed confused as hell, and frankly scared out of their wits. The zombies were still hot on my tail, but with the Hammerites in the mix the crowd started to thin out as a melee broke out in every chamber. I was narrowly avoiding both hammer and undead claw as I fled. I was running in circles, but that was part of the idea; create as much insanity as possible, long enough to get all the guards upstairs to come charging down; then I'd create more chaos up there.

As soon as I saw that no one was directly chasing me with hammers swinging and zombies screaming and body parts flying, I dashed over to one of the vats of molten iron. I scooped up the oversized oven mitts, slid them on, and then slid both hammers into the molten ore. "Ah, this will do the trick," I snickered, and then turned around just in time to confront a mob of zombies bearing down on me. The hammers by themselves would have been effective, but these were now red-hot-burn-anything-they-touch style, so with each swing I was getting zombie-kettle-corn.

Now that I had the zombie mob on my trail again, a way to fend them off, and most of the Hammerites in the factory either dead or running, it was time to bring the fight topside. I ran, scrambled, dashed, and leapt my way over corpses, both animated and not so, in the direction I remembered the prison being. Sure enough I soon found myself dashing up another flight of stairs; my hammers still nice and hot.

"Halt, who goes th—"

"ZOMBIES!"

"What? AHH! By the Builder's hand!"

That's pretty much how it went with every guard post I passed, which was fun, since I really didn't enjoy sneaking by them before. As the guards



funneled in from the prison and the barracks above, I made a dash for the torture room.

The guards seemed content to ignore me at this point, instead focusing on the mob of zombies who seemed content to ignore the Hammerites and focus on me. This bought me a little time. When I found myself face to face with that damned iron door and the damned red light I had actually managed to shake them all off. It didn't register with my brain that the light was now off. I dropped one of the hammers and took the other in both fists. I wanted to put all my might into the swing. "I'm coming for ya, Lytha!" I shouted as I lunged the hammer into the door, smashing it open, and nearly shattering every bone in my arms.

Panting, gasping, and filled with too much adrenaline to realize how terrified I was, I rushed into the torture room, and found...

Nothing. Just lots of blood, lots of torture tools, and a wooden desk with office stationary neatly arranged.

I howled with rage, took the desk with an upward swing with my hammer and sent it flying against the wall. Huffing and puffing, I went back into the cell blocks.

Insanity. Pure insanity. I had no idea how many zombies I had brought with me from below, but now there was some real dynamite added to this bonfire; the dead Hammerites were starting to rise. I hadn't realized it would happen so quickly. A living Hammerite is bad enough. An undead one? Well, that's just murder on wheels.

There had to be a ton of Hammerites upstairs in the barracks, because it looked like the stream just wasn't ending. I watched in amazement from my dark corner as each and every cell block was filled with a really messy brawl between the Hammers and the undead, both of which had thankfully forgotten about me for now.

Because I was just that crazy, I decided to make things worse. I didn't know which cell Lytha was in, or even cell block, so I had to open them all. I tore out of my hiding place, and felt the glare of every zombie in the room fix upon me. The Hammerites seemed to stop and stare too. It only lasted an instant though, and then the hammers were once again swinging, and the limbs were flying.

The upper level of the prison was pretty empty though. Once I made it, all I had to do was find all the well-marked brightly lit rooms that were filled with shiny red levers; then I had to pull all the levers like some type of mad, tone-deaf piano player. Soon there were shouts of "Jail break! Yeah jail break!" added to the mix of "Zombies!" and "Cursed!" with the occasional "By The Builder's Hand!" and then the body count got really fun. I just hoped that Lytha was either smart enough, or conscious enough, to get out of her cell.

I was about to leap out of the last control room into the chaos below, when I happened to notice a log book for prisoners! Fun! I skimmed through it quickly and saw that she was in block one, cell 4. It was time to make a run for it. I leapt from the control room over the railing and landed on a pair of Hammerites who had just joined the battle. From there I scrambled over to

cell block one.

When I got there, I found that the battle had not yet made it this far. The Hammerites seemed to be holding a line in blocks two and three, but now with the prisoners escaping, it was going to get even messier. I heard some rattling chains and some shouts coming from the cells.

"Hey!" "We're chained up!" "Whoever you are, unchain us!" "Lousy jail breaker you are!" "Mommy!" None of them sounded like Lytha.

Shit. I scurried around from cell to cell, finding grimy looking ruffians in each one. I undid their shackles with the keys I had borrowed from the first guard, and pushed them out to freedom—each one I hoped would buy me more time.

New Hammerites coming down from the barracks ran into the room and started shouting, "Villains! Get back to thy cells!" but were quickly overpowered by an angry mob of starving criminals each with a chip on their shoulder.

When I had emptied every cell in the block, except the special one I was saving for last, I piped up with my best speech-making voice. "Okay, listen up!" I shouted, and soon all convict eyes were on me. "We've got zombies that way and Hammerites that way. Take your pick, but I am going up. Who's with me?"

"Up!" They all shouted, except one guy, who shouted, "Freedom!" and they all stared at him. "Up?" he then ventured.

"Up!" I yelled, and with them all cheering that, plus "Jail-break!" they all filed up the stairs to the barracks.

I went to cell four. In my state of panic, pandemonium, and adrenaline rush, the sight of Lytha half-naked and covered in her own blood again almost drove me to tears, for the second time today. I had never met her before, and this was the last way I had wanted to, but I was here now and I had to keep going.

"I've got ya," I whispered gently as I reached down to scoop her up.

She seemed conscious, but just barely. She murmured something, and seemed to clutch on to me with her good arm.

"Let's get you out of here," I told her, and then left the cell behind us. The Hammerites had now been pushed back to block one by the zombie horde, so it was with the melee hot on my tail that I rushed up the stairs to the barracks.

There was a choke point up ahead where the escaped prisoners were finishing off a few last Hammerites. It looked like the battle hadn't gone well for my team; there were three Hammerites down, but most of the prisoners were bloody and beaten on the floor. "Come on, let's move!" I shouted to them, and kept going, bypassing the chapel. They followed me, clearly thinking that I knew what I was doing.

I didn't have a clue.

"Keep going, keep going," I said to them as we ran down hall after twisted hall. Even though I was carrying someone, they could barely keep up with me. "Let's go!" I insisted, not wanting them to fall back and be picked off by

the zombies and Hammerites one by one, leaving me without a protective buffer.

We passed by another shrine thing, and then ran smack dab into a dead end. "What the shit is this!" I wailed.

"We thought you knew where you were going!" a tall, gangly, killer-type hollered at me.

"Back, go back. Back!" I yelled, pushing through them back the way I came. I rounded a bend and almost fell flat on my ass.

A mass of angry undead flesh was pushing its way towards me, all wearing head-to-toe Hammerite armor; yeah, at least a dozen undead Hammerites had risen now. "Join us!" they hissed, their breath blasting through me like an icicle hail storm.

"Back—back—back!" I shouted again, once more pushing my way through the mob of prisoners. This time I took a side passage, running through a dining room, and then a kitchen. "Where the hell is the 'out'?" I yelped.

Many of the prisoners were now being eaten alive by haunts which, again, bought me some time. Everyone was messing their pants, but they kept following me like I still had a clue where I was going even after all my wrong turns and dead-ends. I ran down a hall I had bypassed before, opening door after door after door. When I opened one of them, I spotted a Hammerite shaving.

"Hey you, don't you know there's a prison break and a mob of zombies and it's the end of the world?" I said before slamming the door.

I kept going, almost tumbling head over heels a few times as I went, probably getting more and more lost. The prisoners behind me now numbered five or less, and even those were slowing. I guess being cooped up for years in a little cell with no food wasn't good for your stamina. Finally we entered a big room and I stopped suddenly, all the others ramming into my back, almost knocking me down.

There was a crowd of novices huddled under a table, trembling with their hands over their ears.

"Hey!" I shouted to the youngsters.

No answer.

"I said HEY! Which way out of here?"

One of them pointed. I looked in that direction, nodded, and said, "Thanks. Better get your asses in line and run like hell, because hell's coming!"

And they did, stumbling out from under the table in front of us as we ran with the zombies right behind. It seemed the novices were ready to graduate; they were right on the money. The mess of us came to a big door that just screamed exit, which broke as a dozen terrified bodies lunged at it in unison.

We all tumbled out into a heap at the top of Cragscleft prison with stars over our heads...

...And a dozen angry Hammerite guards glaring at us. I didn't have time to explain to them about the zombies. The novices who had nothing to fear from

the Hammerites were getting back up and resuming their dash. "Grab them and push!" I screamed. Oddly enough, the prisoners seemed to know exactly what I was talking about. They grabbed the running novices by the scruff of the neck, and charged, pushing them right through the line of Hammerite soldiers and out the other side.

There was so much chaos and panic caused by the prisoners using the baby Hammerites as shields and battering rams I was able to scoop Lytha back up, who by now was coughing up blood, and run after them just as the zombies caught up with me. I dove, head first, into the mass of confused and panicking people.

We kept on running. I couldn't keep up with my fellow escapees now; the taste of true freedom gave them more energy than a dozen cups of coffee. They were sprinting up ahead as only a man can run when he's running from the law. It was only then that I realized that my chest was wincing in pain from fatigue; but I kept running. The zombies would soon overpower the Hammerites, and then be back on me. The night wasn't over yet.

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— Nightfall: The Road —

Day 4: 7:00 pm

After we had gotten underway the Hammerite task force made about three miles progress. The weather was hot and damp, but the forest was mostly submissive. The canopy on Richen's carriage had provided shade enough to keep me sane, but now that it was evening the damp air was keeping things quite warm.

It could have been much worse. The Hammerites seemed content to leave Richen and me in peace. Maybe it was all calculated as part of the plan, or maybe they just didn't want to go near the horse. I thought I caught a few of them sending distrustful glances over in its direction.

Richen had a big family, and seemed content to tell me all about them. He was just getting on to a rather lively story about one of his cousins, when I noted something peculiar up ahead. It didn't faze me at first. I watched with detached interest as I saw a tree begin to fall away from one wrecking machines, slow, stop mid fall, and then change directions, as if it had been caught and thrown, right across the machine that had been chugging ever forward.

The sound of the crash and resulting explosion echoed through the forest and made all of the surrounding trees shudder. Richen stopped in the middle of a word and looked. Hammerites all over the place were shouting and running around in a tizzy.

"Wha' in 'ell?" Richen said, craning his neck to see what happened. I quickly recounted to him what I saw. "Witchcraft," he whispered.

Things looked pretty bad up ahead, but I kept my seat and just watched. It looked as if a fire had started, and the Hammerites were rushing to put it out. I could hear some of them crying out in pain, and others working to pull the wounded, unconscious, and possibly dead, free of the wreckage and out

from under the massive limbs of the fallen tree. They carried another away who was burned from head to toe, and another one in pieces. Hammerites were still shouting in anger. The other machines were being shut down, and most of the marching troops set to work on trying to clear the tree out of the way. It was going to take a while.

"Loo's like some'uhn still dinna want us goin' this way," he observed.

"No," I said, crossing my arms. "We're not marching into an enemy stronghold; we're marching into a trap. This will harden the Hammerites resolve and make them push harder, faster, and be even less prepared for what's to come."

He frowned at me. "My ye're a gloomy sod," he remarked with a bit of a laugh.

I smiled at him, "Aye."

We continued to watch in silence as the Hammerites continued to work. Richen eventually got out of the driver's seat and began to feed Suzy out of his hat. Ivan conducted last rights for the dead engineers, and organized a group to take their remains back to The City. Thurm was overseeing the salvage operation for the damaged machine, but it was looking like it was going to be a lost cause. They managed use one of the other machines to push it out of the path, so that the wrecking machines in the rear could get through.

By about nine there was talk about either stopping for the night or pushing through until dawn. Eventually a consensus was reached and they sent a man over to let us know that they were going to break into two groups: Chispin's would push forward through the night, and Thurm's would stay behind and repair the machine. The group moving forward would work at half pace to give the damaged machine a chance to catch up (which seemed obvious to me, since there would be half as many machines), but progress would still be made. I told him that Richen and I would stay with the repair contingent.

Ivan stayed to keep an eye on me. I was actually surprised at one thing. I expected Chispin to want me to stay with the group moving forward so *he* could keep an eye on me. Maybe he knew that Ivan would do just as good a job as he, even though they hated each other.

There was another commotion, this time close enough so that I could hear what was going on. I paused in my preparation of a place to sleep, and listened as an engineer came to Thurm in a bit of a panic.

"Brother, some of our tools are missing!"

Thurm looked at him in disbelief, momentarily pulled from his roll of schematics. "What didst thou say?"

"Several chests of tools have vanished brother, the chains which held them firm snapped!" The man seemed very, very upset. I could understand why. For a Hammerite to lose his tools...

Thurm shook his head. "Several, but not all? Dost thou still have some of thine tools with which to continue work?"

"Yes brother," he said with a shaken nod. "But it shalt be much slower."

He frowned. "I wilt have to send some of us back to The City to bring

more tools. A shame I was not aware of this when the funeral party disembarked with our honored dead. Do thine work brother, as best thou canst."

"They're splitting us up," I said to Richen. He was, once again, tending to his horse, and met my comment with a startled stare. I turned to him, "They stole some of the tools. The group's been split into three now, and with a fourth sent home to get more tools the time it will take now to repair this machine will widen the gap. Each party will be dealt with in turn. I can't believe the Hammerites can't see this."

"'ell why don't ya tell 'em!" he said, suddenly looking a little worried.

"I don't know," I said, my eyes narrowing. "I almost want to let this play out and see what happens."

He didn't seem to be bothered by my reply, though I was. Maybe it was because I was now a prisoner of the Hammerites on this doomed expedition, and the more chaos that the pagans caused this party, the better my chances of escape.

Richen and I settled down for a bit of supper, and I again found myself lost in thought; if all of the Hammerites were killed but I got away, then what? What would Rafael do with me? If we got to the abandoned pagan villa and there was a glorious battle, with the Hammerites victorious, then what would Rafael do with me? It seemed either way now the strife would continue. There was no positive outcome for me to have faith in. It was only a matter of time before I came to this impasse.

"'eya Thresh."

I looked up, broken from my thoughts. "Yes, Richen?"

"Pass me s'more o' dat pepper, will ya?"

I picked up the red pepper flask from my sack, and handed it to Richen. He promptly shook a dash of it onto his bean and meat stew. Mine was getting cold. I shoveled another scoop of the stuff into my mouth, and found that Richen was a decent chef; I had no complaints about it whatsoever.

Richen helped himself to some more, scooping it out of the pot (borrowed from the Hammerites) that sat on its perch over the fire. I placed my bowl on a nearby rock. "So," he ventured, "'ow much longer 'till these redcoats are done fixin' tha' clanker?"

I sighed, "I have no idea. I don't know anything about mechanisms like these."

He nodded and grunted. "Heh, with the luck this band o' metal larks 'ave been 'avin', I'll nay be surprised if we get where we're goin' and 'ell, we find eh—nothin'!"

I laughed slightly. "Well, if the place up and vanished, I'm sure they would find a way to blame me."

"Imm, aye. 'Twould be da natural thing, eh?" He munched some more. "Still, ah can't help but shake the feelin'...hmm."

"What feeling?" He shifted about uncomfortably.

"Weell, it's Suzy, she's jittery-like. Ya knew, like there's somethin' amiss in de air. Animals, they gots a sixth sense 'bout these things."

I looked up from Richen and my campsite. Suzy was tied to a tree, next to the carriage. She looked fine to me. A bit away from us, the Hammers were still working by lantern on the machines, making a good racket. Finally I turned back to him. "Suzy's not the only one who senses evil in these woods."

"Thresh, what're we goin' after anyhow?"

"A pagan," I told him. "Like I told you before."

"Aye, well, a pagan is a pagan, 'ell, I'm a pagan by mos' reconin'! Not that I worship the woods or anythin', but I'd sooner spit the Builder in the eye than bow down ta the bastard!" He took another bite. "But ye don't see me makin' 'orses jittery and the wood all 'aunted!"

"Richen, all I can say is that there is danger ahead. You told me that you laugh at danger," I said with a smile.

"Oh don't worry! I ain't gettin' yellah, no! I'm 'ere wit' cha!"

I smiled and nodded to him. "Good man."

"Welp, I'm gonna see if in I can get some shuteye. G'nite Tresh."

"Goodnight, Richen."

He turned over and fell asleep. I didn't.

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— Jyre: The Poem —

Day 4: 7:00 pm

I gazed upwards at the dark structure which stood before me; my destination. Was it the mansion of The Lady's ancestors, as I had been told by Ramirez, or was that impossible as the old man said? Ramirez could have been wrong.

The wooden portions of the structure had shattered and lay to rot long ago, and what had been stone was now rubble. This is what I had risked my life for; rubble. Cursing, I made a break down the twisted path, determined to search it nonetheless. With most of the dead trees behind me I could see that half of the building had completely collapsed, forming a large mound on the east side. I began to climb it, inspecting each loose stone for what lay beneath. As I hunted, the sun slowly began to set behind the jagged roofs of ruined buildings, reminding me of the promise I had made to myself; get out of here before twilight.

I knew it was foolish. What were the chances that I would find anything on the surface of the rubble? Anything would be hidden deep underground. Still, the same sense that forced me here compelled me to keep looking. If what the old man said was true, and someone had hidden it here after this building had already collapsed, I could possibly have a hope in finding it. No; that was still absurd. There had to be at least an acre of debris. It would take days for me to search through it all.

I continued to search until my eyes caught sight of something smooth and white in the gravel. Blood mixed with dirt as my shredded palms pulled stone after stone, trying desperately to uncover what now appeared to be nothing more than a decimated corpse. In my desperation I had fooled myself into thinking that the crushed bone was something of value. Sickened that I had

been greedily fingering human remains, I jumped to my feet, kicking at some loose stones with all of my exhausted fury. All I succeeded in doing was hurting my toes.

What was I to do? Fall asleep and wait for another vision? Search for the old man so he could show me exactly where the scroll was, and save me the trouble? I fell to my haunches, and soon found that my will to search was gone. Instead, I examined the cuts and scrapes on my hands with idle fascination. I still had a full pack of gear; I had not even touched it. I remembered my map and how I was so sure that this was the place; that I refused to check it for fear I would see I was wrong. Now I was fearful that I was correct and found myself consulting the map wishing it to not be so and that my true destination was a building still standing with the scroll tucked away neatly in a trophy case somewhere.

Now I saw it all on the map. It was clear as day; everything leading up to the courtyard, and the courtyard itself, matched from the map to reality. I had come to the right place after all; but how could both be right? Ramirez said that the scroll had always been here, and the old man said that the scroll was brought and hidden here recently, yet both pointed me to the same place.

If someone truly wished to hide the scroll here; if it was important enough to come to the most dangerous place in The City to dispose of it, then surely their means of hiding it would be far beyond my powers to find it. Unless...they merely wished to save it away, to be used at a later time? They brought it here because they did not think anyone would look for it, but kept it accessible for the day when they returned for it? This building was in a much worse state of decay than the others. Could the one who hid the scroll here have chosen it for that reason, or was it knocked down to hide the scroll?

I was searching again, but now not for the scroll itself, but for a crevice under the debris reminding myself why I and I alone was chosen for this task. I found one, just wide enough for me to squeeze through. I was in and under, between the blocks of stone that did not budge an inch in spite of how I thrashed myself against them trying to squeeze through. I had chosen my entry point well; I could see what seemed to be the remains of the front stair and porch under the rubble, with only faint shafts of twilight seeping through between the blocks. I thanked fate that it was summer, and the longer days granted me the few extra minutes of light I needed.

The stone rail at the edge of the porch afforded me more room to squirm through. It had kept the fallen walls a good foot and a half above the marble surface below me. Now I was at the front door, which had long since been torn from its hinges. Once I was through I was able to stand. It was nearly pitch black inside. I pulled the pack from my back and fumbled around blind inside of it, until I found a torch. I lit it; small though it was, and saw my surroundings illuminated in a pale red light.

The ceiling had caved in; if I had been a man of average height I would have had to hunch down to stand. For me, it was just right. I saw the remains of elaborate stone moldings and a tile floor—all that remained after the collapse of the top half of the building. My ears strained against the silence to



hear the faintest shuffle, indications of anything alive, or undead.

I went forward, ducking slightly to pass through the opening leading into the main room of mansion's ground floor; the archway had shattered and bits of it hung lower than the rest of the collapsed ceiling. Most of this room was inaccessible; it was much larger than the entry hall, so the collapse of the ceiling claimed much more of the floor. I inched my way through, always aware that I may not be alone, my mind returning to that hidden foe which had chased me earlier. I switched the torch from one hand to the other, my palm so sweaty that I could not hold it properly anymore.

An impossible draft of chilled wind assaulted me, snuffing out my torch and sending it flying from my hand. I could hear it tumble many feet from me only because I managed to stifle my cry of shock. However I did not find myself in pitch blackness, as a pale ghastly blue light filled the chamber. I found myself again stifling a shriek as I saw the source of this light; its visage made me freeze where I stood. It was a glowing shape in the form of a man, features slowly coming into detail as I managed to focus my eyes upon it; an armed warrior sword in hand but not raised for combat. He walked across the far edge of the room. He had apparently walked straight out of the rubble, as if the path he walked in life still held him in death, regardless of the obstacles which now lay in his way.

I willed myself to break free of my statue-like stance of fright, and backed slowly away from it to a place I felt its ethereal glow could not penetrate. There I stood, my back pressed to the wall, my thundering heart making my entire body shake as I choked on my fear. My eyes were fixed on the sentry as it moved silently along its way, until finally passing through the opening leading into the next chamber. I knew I had to follow. It had to have been guarding the scroll; it would lead me to it.

Light from the apparition now funneled out through that opening. I knew at any moment it would vanish again into another wall of fallen stone, so I had to move now. Forward I went one step at a time towards the quickly fading glow. I got to the edge of the opening, and peeked through. I could still see it, walking down the center of this long hallway which seemed to be sloping into the earth. The ceiling here had not collapsed, leaving little debris. The apparition was quite a distance from me now, so I was less fearful of following. With my breath held I approached each dark opening expecting something to jump out at me with every threshold I passed.

The light at the end of the corridor seemed far greater than what was being produced by that one sentry alone; a thought that filled me with dread and made me wish to turn back at once. How many more of them were there? It turned the corner vanishing from sight, and yet the glow remained, shifting in intensity and position every instant, as if there were many moving sources around that bend. I wrapped my cloak tighter around me and pushed myself forward, even though every fiber of my being told me to run back, and run furiously. I waited for what seemed like an hour watching that light, waiting for a moment when it seemed the dimmest. I knew that if I waited too long the sentry would return and I would surely be seen. Inch by inch I crept to

the edge, and at a moment which seemed right, I mustered all of my will to take a peek around the corner.

It would have been beautiful if it were not so horrifying; a large vaulted chamber with great sculpted stone pillars, which stood crooked and cracked, some leaning and some collapsed, about a majestic stair hall. Twin flights wrapped themselves around the edges of the room leading to a dais which overlooked the hall. But it was not only the architecture nor the ruined majesty of the space which enthralled me and terrified me simultaneously; it was the unworldly radiance of the half dozen spectral beings which moved slowly about the room, patrols they paced tirelessly for ages without muscles to grow weary or bones to ache, no hunger nor thirst to halt their eternal vigil. The light they cast twinkled and shifted about the room, more a fog than shining rays, playing against the surfaces of the broken columns and cracked walls as if it were all an underwater scene. I had never in my life seen anything so magical.

I hid in that spot peeking around the corner ever so slightly far longer than I had stood waiting to muster the courage to peek. It was only then that I fathomed how deeply I was in over my head. This guard; these ghostly warriors charged to protect this powerful dangerous thing, were set here to protect it from *her*, from the villainous lady with untold evils at her command; not me, a mere girl with just a backpack full of trinkets to aid her. How could I be any match for this garrison? How could I even hope to survive? This task was impossible.

My eyes caught sight of something which rested at the center of the hall. It was directly below the dais on the ground level, on the marble floor without a table or mount to indicate its importance: a scroll. "The scroll won't be made from sewn flesh, as was the practice in ancient times, and still to this day by the pagans," I whispered under my breath, remembering what I was told. For an instant I forgot about the hopelessness of my situation, too excited by my discovery. "Nor will it be made from pressed reeds or wood pulp, as is the practice of Hammerites and modern times." I almost ran to capture it, forgetting about the ghostly sentries which stood watch over it.

It had to be mine. The danger was no lesser, but my resolve was renewed. It was right there, so close, so easy to grasp. All I had to do was slip in and out without any of the ghosts seeing me; it no longer seemed an impossible task. Remarkably, I felt drunk with desire for that scroll. If it could truly destroy The Lady, as Ramirez had promised, soon this would all be over.

I had the faintest sensation of dread, which confirmed itself as I jerked my head to look over my other shoulder; the sentry was returning, but not from the direction which he left; he had made a loop and was now coming to me from behind. I could not afford to freeze in fright for even an instant. My renewed sense of purpose had not come a moment late. My eyes returned to the room which held my goal, searching for a place within it where I would not be seen. There was a crevice in the wall where the structure had fissured which was large enough for me to squeeze into; the trouble would be getting there unseen. My eyes darted to each of the apparitions, trying to gauge

which were aware of the space between the opening which I peeked out from, and the crevice which would hide me.

It was impossible to say. I had no idea how sensitive these things were to my passage; if I would be completely ignored, or if the slightest hint of my presence would cause them all to descend upon me in a rage, and rip my soul from my ribs. Did they still use vision like an ordinary person? Could they hear? I had no idea. With each moment that I watched and waited, I knew that the one behind me grew nearer. Soon I would be cast plainly within the light of his aura, and then it would be over. It was risk death or embrace death. I kept my mind focused on the scroll and not my fear, and watched.

My moment came. I had seen this pattern in their movements before; this was the third time their shifts aligned to leave a gap long enough for me to make my dash, and so I went; certain my chance would not come again. With breath held, and a pace as quickly as I could manage without causing my footfalls on the ancient marble floor to echo throughout the hall, I went for the crevice.

The passage seemed to take an eternity. I did not utter a single breath, and every fiber of my nerves urged my feet to not step any faster; for I knew silence was more important than speed. I felt as if I was about to faint for lack of air by the time my hand touched the edge of the crack, and I pulled myself into its safety; a space far more narrow than the dim light had betrayed. As I squirmed inside I feared that my snuffling would alert my enemies, but I heard no indication of their stirring. I clenched my eyes shut, too terrified to look out and see if I had been followed. Finally, I did look out, just in time to see the sentry which had been coming at me from behind pass through the arch which had been my haven for what had seemed like hours. How long now would I hide in the safety of this crack before I mustered the strength to go out and capture that scroll?

I could see it so much more clearly now, washed in the blue light of the apparitions. "It will be more like cloth. The outer roll darkens with age and dirt, but the inner layers remain white as snow." The outside of the scroll seemed to be made of the same marble as the floor from where I stood; yet slightly darker and more uniform, more like obsidian than marble. It, like the room, was beautiful and terrifying in an instant.

That's when I saw the bones. Trespassers had been here; and I now saw what I would face if I was caught by the spectral guard: skeletons in pieces. From where I hid I could see that they had been cut clear through; spines broken in two, arms cut mid-shoulder, and a skull with the crown missing, neatly sliced away. My fingers grew white as I clutched the stone which shielded me from their glows. I was again frozen at the sight of this newfound terror, proof of the danger I was in. Many before me had come to claim this prize and all had died horribly at the hands of its protectors.

I sought out the sight of the scroll once more; it had given me strength when I needed it while standing in the archway and I hoped it would give me strength now. I watched the patterns of light play across its surface, like it was made from crystal or some precious gemstone. I felt warmth returning

to the cold dread that filled me. What if, I dreamed, the pages of that scroll contained a spell to summon forth a mighty beast, a dragon of fairytale, to battle away these horrible ghosts; and then I would climb atop it and fly away into the sky...Foolish thoughts; I had been forbidden to read the scroll, and I knew that dragons only lived in storybooks and in the minds of poets. Yet, the old man with the fire did say that this was a magic scroll, and that there were so few of these in the world now; this was possibly the only one left. What could it contain?

I could wait in this crevice forever...it would be my final resting place. Someday some other brave soul would come here, searching for this scroll just as I now, and would try to hide away in this crevice, but would find their way blocked by the bones of a girl who crawled in and died. At least they would find my gear; maybe it would be of use to them.

Why shouldn't it be of use to me? I knew that flashers stunned and could even destroy a walking corpse, but how would it affect an apparition which gave off light? I knew that holy water would burn the rotting flesh of the undead the same as fire, but these spirits had no flesh. I had explosives, again useful against the waking dead, but what good was explosive powder against something with no body? All of my valuable tools seemed useless. Why hadn't Ramirez known what I would face here? Had he betrayed me? Did he intentionally give me gear he knew would be useless?

No, of course not; none of them had gotten this far and come back to tell the tale. He knew no more what I was to face than I did. And how long now had I been hiding here, paralyzed with fear, in a crevice so tight I barely had room to breathe? It had to be the middle of the night by now.

I had timed my movements to match theirs before, and I could do it again. Though they all moved about the room and it was clearly the center of their focus, never did any of them go near the scroll itself, nor dwell upon it. It was almost as if they were fearful of it; that getting too close, or gazing directly into it, would be impossible for them. I had watched so long that the pattern was now very clear in my mind; but the gap of opportunity was much smaller. If I crawled along the floor on my belly, then the sentries on the dais and stair would not be able to see me. I would have to leave my pack behind to be sure.

So, I would not have to worry about the ones above spotting me; but what of the ones below? Some would cross directly over where I needed to crawl, and I knew that one must move far more slowly while crawling in order to remain silent. I could do it. The pillars and blocks that had fallen from the ceiling would provide cover at key moments. I mapped it all out in my head, planning exactly what I would do. It could work. I had to have that scroll!

The pack slid from my back gently, slowly, as to not make a sound. There was nothing in it I needed now; my special bow was safe in its own pouch. I crouched low watching the sentries, their movements now committed to memory, until the right moment came. I lowered myself until my chin was nearly against the marble floor, and went, moving like a caterpillar across the smooth surface. I had only several feet to go until I was beside a fallen stone large enough to conceal me.

I made it, and breathed once more. Not two seconds after I hid my silhouette behind my cover, one of the sentries turned in his patrol route, as expected, and walked across the chamber in a path which would have taken him directly to me. I waited, begging the stone I hid behind to grow larger or for me to grow smaller, suddenly unsure if I was truly hidden. I shut my eyes and waited, knowing that I no longer needed to see in order to understand where they were.

I opened my eyes. The apparition was now leaving the hall, going about his way elsewhere in the mansion. Now was my chance to make it to my next bit of cover; a crooked pillar. I peeked over the stone to observe the remaining guard; one would pass dreadfully close to the pillar on his way, and I had far less time to get there. Worse, this stone was useless to hide me from the next patrol, as they would approach from the opposite side. I went to the ground in the same fashion and crawled at a slightly quickened pace to the crooked pillar, by this time the spirit which would soon turn and look directly at me was in front of me, only feet away. Worse, when I did get to the pillar, I would have to stand up to hide myself behind it..

With each step it took I doubted the clarity of my observations. What if I had been wrong and the sentry turned several seconds faster than I remembered? I found myself counting off his paces, and my body trembling furiously against the ground as I pushed and squirmed my way along the floor, trying to stay perfectly prone, trying to stay perfectly silent; trying to move as quickly as I possibly could.

I was at the pillar. I slid up it like a snake. The sentry turned. I had made it. I wanted to swallow hard, give a sigh of relief, take a deep breath to sooth my nerves, but I could do none of those things. I pressed the front of my skull against the stone of the crooked column, my body shifted to the side to match its angle of incline. It would not see me, I told myself. If it could see me then the others would have. It was closer, far closer than the others, but I was completely hidden behind the column.

When it passed the column, turning slightly in its path to walk directly in front of me, I could have reached out and patted it on the shoulder. Silently it moved, bathing me in all of the intensity of its blue aura; the light playing against my skin the same way that previously held me captive in wonder. With each step it took away from me I felt the muscles in my neck relax; for they had become twisted in a knot of pain. Then fear stabbed through me as if it had been one of their swords. I had not accounted for the possibility of one of them seeing me while I was cast in the light from the one that was still so close to me. Almost in panic, my eyes darted about the room, moving from sentry to sentry, my memories flashing through my mind like a jumbled deck of cards, trying desperately to remember if any on the patrol would turn to look this way at this stage of the pattern.

I did not know. I had to move; I could not risk staying here. It would be a full ten, maybe twenty seconds before the light I was now in subsided. I had to go now. I curled around the column to look at my goal; it was now so close. Everything I had so carefully committed to memory was now spinning from

my grasp. Still, I had a feeling in my gut that if I moved now, and not an instant later, I would be okay.

I was close enough to the bottom edge of the dais to no longer need to crawl. I slipped away from the column, nearly bounding through the air, and slid my toes up against the edge of the low wall; my body soon followed, pressed up against the stone surface. The scroll was now a half dozen feet from me. I had only to slide along the lower edge of the dais, and then reach out to claim it...

But everything changed. I had moved too fast. All of the sentries in the room stopped cold, and then stood straight upright. I clenched my teeth so tightly I felt my jaw would shatter under the pressure. Should I make a run for it, grab the scroll and get out in their moment of hesitation, or had they not really detected me? I could not have acted one way or another; for now in my moment of sheer visceral fright, I could do nothing but clutch the stone surface to which I pressed my back.

Once again they began to move, but now not on patrol. I knew they were searching. Their movements were erratic, troubled, twitchy. They seemed to jerk about; their forms unable to contain the rapidly shifting changes in their attention as they searched the room with some unknown otherworldly sense. I felt myself sinking into insanity at the sight of the way they distorted. I wanted to shield my eyes from it, but I knew that I had to watch and observe everything; my life depended on the next few seconds; I had to give them to thought and reason, not panic.

I fixed my eyes on the scroll, which now seemed so large I had no hope of carrying it, and moved shifting along the wall behind me inch by inch, moving closer and closer. I tore my eyes away from its black form to observe the apparitions, now barely resembling men at all in their agitated state, fanning out through the room. They did not expect the intruder to have made it so far in unnoticed. Inch by inch, I was closer...second by second, knowing that at any moment one of them, any of them, would turn to look at the base of the dais, where the thief was inches away from claiming her prize. And then, just like that, the scroll was finally within arm's reach. My hand extended, shaking so badly I did not know if I would be able to claim it without dropping it first, and I wrapped my fingers around its surface.

"It's rough, but soft, softer than wool; almost like a feather." The stranger's words echoed through my mind. He was right; the material felt good against my wounded hands. It was unreal. I lifted it from its place; surprisingly light given its size—no, that I had also misjudged. It was small enough to easily fit into my hand. I pulled it close to me, feeling dizzy with my success, and enchanted by the sensation of the material against my skin. The searching apparitions seemed irrelevant now; I had it.

"The writing won't be done in ink, but branded, burned in stroke by stroke." Before I knew what I was doing, I was unrolling it gently before me. The black outer layer did indeed give way to a satiny pure white interior. "I will consider myself lucky to lay my eyes on such a work." My eyes ran quickly down the length of the manuscript, characters I did not recognize, but

somehow understood.

"And you must not..." as I started at the first line, the same feeling came over me as before, drawing me forward, "under any circumstances..." I knew this language, somehow; I remembered it, "read it aloud..." and no sooner had I recited the stranger's instructions which I had committed to memory, my trembling lips mumbled out the words on the scroll.

*When shadows grow  
And danger walks,  
Come out, come out,  
Come play with me.*

*When world has emptied,  
And spirits fall,  
Come down, come down,  
And join with me.*

*In caverns deep,  
I make my bed,  
Where city sleeps,  
I lay my head.*

*When time had ended,  
And mortals quake,  
Your voice from death,  
Will me awake.*

I shuddered and felt as if I was coming out of a deep sleep or a trance. I blinked at the scroll in my hands, seeing only incomprehensible glyph markings. The world flooded back to my senses as the scroll pulled itself free of my grasp and wound itself back into a roll; yet somehow remained tightly in my hand. There was shrieking; shrill mournful howls, as if to signal the end of the world. The apparitions had surrounded me; now incomprehensible in their quivering distorted state. I realized in a dreadful instant what my instincts were telling me; they were more terrified than even I.

The marble beneath me lurched. My left ankle twisted painfully and I fell to my knees. Before I could recover the ground lurched again and I was thrown forward. I tumbled head over heels into the midst of the apparitions, which scattered with shrieks and howls into the darkest recesses of the chamber. My head cracked against the hard marble, quickly causing my vision to go dark.

But I willed myself conscious. I told myself, if I were to sleep now, I would never wake up. With the apparitions gone, the chamber was filled with an inky blackness as if I were at the center of the earth. I pushed myself from where I had lain, finding that I had instinctively placed the scroll safely into a pocket, and ran. The chamber continued to lurch and tremble; the crack

which I had hidden in now grew to split the entire room. Starlight, bright as day compared to the darkness I had just bathed in, flooded the room as I ran. The columns buckled and shattered under the weight of the roof and all of the collapsed debris above it. The fresh illumination which helped me get my bearings on the exit was now choked with the dust of falling debris. I moved faster than I thought possible; my mind swimming with dizziness and panic.

I was out of the hall and in darkness once more. I ran, knowing the direction I needed to go, until I felt the ground lurch more violently than even before, and my feet fly out from under me. There was a tremendous sound of falling stone; I knew that the chamber I had just escaped from had now collapsed; but I could also hear the sound of falling stone from up ahead.

I tried to stand but my left ankle refused to take my weight. I clutched my right arm to my ribs tightly, still whimpering. In spite of the pain I was on my feet, and moving forward, arms extended before me to protect me from any surprises. I was being showered with falling debris as I went; too small to do any damage, but like a rainstorm of pebbles and gravel. Suddenly before me, a cave-in; I was buried alive. Frantically, fighting back panic and tears, I searched over the surface of the fallen stone in front of me. There had to be a way through!

When the ground shook again, it was such a violent thrust to make the previous quakes seem like mere tremors. I lost contact with the floor and for an instant I was against the ceiling of the chamber. Starlight once again shot into my stone prison, but I barely knew what was happening as I felt my body being tossed like a doll.

Then it was still. I was panting so vigorously I felt as if my lungs would burst from my chest. I rolled over, and inspected all of my limbs quickly to see if any were broken. I was in tremendous pain all over, but somehow my light form had spared me that kind of damage from my tumble. Something, an explosion maybe, had pushed the stone structure up from the earth and cast it aside as if it were nothing more than nursery blocks. Still, I was out, and the starlight was as welcome a sight to my eyes as my cot in the hideaway could be.

I pulled myself from the wreckage, and quickly surveyed the scene. At first, things did not look so much different than they had before—though what had been a collapsed building was now more of a crater. But then, as if my mind was not fully able to fathom this sight at first glance, an image formed against the horizon. Any fear or panic I experienced underground now seemed a distant irrelevant memory compared to this mass of unknown which now stood before me.

Where the ruined building sat, a tower now stood. I gazed up at it with nauseating fear, and for a strange instant was reminded of Nightfall's tower, though I didn't know why. Then it shifted, coming apart, unfolding before me, unwrapping itself...

It could not be true. Nothing could be so horrible. A pair of long, slender, bat-like wings spread out over the sky. The skin of the wings were black as pitch and blotted out the stars as if I was once again deep underground. With



its wings unfurled I saw the creature; tall and narrow, with arms that looked like masses of bound snakes. The head was a crown of movement, whips of shadow writhing around a black sphere, with eyes like the faintest glints of distant stars.

As I beheld it, frozen as if paralyzed, the worst thought imaginable dawned on me; it too beheld me.

— **Nightfall: The Tear Widens** —

**Day 4: 10:00 pm**

—It was as if the world had just died.

An overwhelming sense of numbness came over me. I opened my eyes and sat bolt upright. All of the color went out of my vision, all of the sounds became distant echoes, and even the sensation of my clothes about my body became unrecognizable. I looked around. Richen was snoring. The Hammerites were working. None else had felt this, only I.

Slowly the color came back, the numbness faded, and my hearing returned to normal. Had I imagined it? Impossible—nothing felt the same. As much as the sensation seemed to have passed; nothing looked, sounded, or felt the same anymore. The world had indeed died and been reborn in an instant; but a changed place. Or had I been the one who died and was reborn? Had I, for a split second, been pushed from this world only to bounce back into place? I tried to settle down. None had noticed my sudden state of disorientation, and I aimed to keep it that way. I rested my head back against the bedroll. I was right to believe that there would be no sleep tonight.

— **Jyre: The Sleeper Wakes** —

**Day 4: 10:00 pm**

As it shifted its weight around it sounded like the snapping of the strings on a mandolin, only thunderously loud and echoing forever. It seemed to be stretching out its arms and neck, and trying to remember how to breathe. I prayed with all my heart that I had imagined it noticed me, and that if I remained frozen; I would be ignored as no more than an insect to a god.

The sounds were changing. To my ears it now felt as if I were underwater, listening to the screams of hundreds of drowning beasts. At one instant the noise coalesced into what was unmistakable for a *voice*, but this voice was not in my ears, but *in my mind*. When I heard the words inside my head, reviling speech in a language I could not understand, I nearly exploded in a wail of panic. The strength to move came with the explosion of fear, spinning me around and propelling me away as fast as my battered legs could take me.

The words came again; an indecipherable, unintelligible garble which could not possibly be spoken by human lips, but carried with it a human *voice* which made it all the more astounding. As hard as I ran, with the words in my mind, I felt sure that I could not escape. But still I ran. The thought of

stopping made my mind seem to cave in on itself. I rushed through the gate and out the other side. I didn't know where I had to go; I just had to get away.

Before me, was an open street, wide, clear, easy to run through, but hard to hide in. How could I possibly hide? I panted for breath, but the air which was once filled with the stink of rotting flesh was now heavy with the repugnant odor of something else; like tar, or a sewer, or something burning which should never be burnt...

Once more I felt as if it beheld me. The sounds, *that voice*, were directed at me. Was it chasing me? Did it even need to? I had to look. Though every ounce of my will told me *no, don't look back, keep running*, I felt myself compelled to twist my head over my shoulder and gaze unyieldingly behind me.

There was no street behind me; no ruined city or toppled walls; only it. It flowed across the land like a wall of water, engulfing all with it, then twisting and discoloring like wax in a fire, not being devoured by it, but *becoming it*. I could only fathom what I was seeing for an instant before a maddening dizziness overcame me. It felt as if my legs suddenly twisted into bent staves; useless, uncontrollable, flailing helplessly as I tumbled.

Somehow I was on my back, staring up at where the world should have been; but all I could see was *it*. It seemed to be comprised totally of worms, long, snake-like worms bigger than tree trunks, squirming constantly over its surface and parting into tentacle-like appendages at its hands, and around the head. The voice had stopped, but was replaced by a different sound. It was like a ripple in the very air around me that produced a deep, resonant boom that repeated itself over and over, pounding my ears until they ached. It was *laughing*.

It was coming for me; at once a mile away and at the same time inches from my face, it was coming for me. The worms were actually separating from one another and flying through the air until they all crashed to the ground like seaweed crushed onto the shore. The gray mass of thousands of worms rushed at me. My legs would not respond. I could not even think. I was no longer even sure if what I was seeing was truly coming from *my eyes*.

I could *feel it*. It felt as unlike flesh as anything could, nor like ropes or chains; hot as blood and cold as the dead. I *felt* it before I even knew it was upon me. It had me. I tried to scream but it seemed as if sound itself had lost all meaning. My ears and mind were filled with sounds that *should not be possible to exist*. I clenched my eyes tight, possibly the only part of my body I still had control over, but even my eyelids could do little to shut out the *visage* which seemed to now be painted into my mind. I could not breathe. What had been once a scent of disgust, now seemed to be a living malevolence in itself, filling my lungs as if the worms themselves had crawled down my throat.

In an instant it all changed. I felt myself falling and all the sensations which had violated me became a vacuum. A bolt of lucidity shot through me; I opened my eyes to see the *coveted* scroll being torn away from me, ensnared in its grasp, and me, discarded. I struck the ground, and fought to maintain

consciousness. The thought of dying in this creature's presence filled my heart with nightmares of an eternity enslaved to it. *But it took the scroll from me.*

Wings agape, it encircled the sky; a pillar of motion, topped by a black sun wreathed in twirling black flame; the two distant stars within the depths of that blackness gazed down at me. The scroll, no longer mine, flew up into that black sun on a chariot of worms. At its crest, the scroll unfurled, trailing long below as if it could have no end. It fell and fell, until the bottom edge hung gently before me. I was *compelled* to look upon the words. My mind could not *fathom* any other function.

Its *voice* once again rushed through my mind, as if I were a stone and it a raging river. Somehow I *knew* that the words before me and the words it spoke into me were one and the same, and before I knew that my own lips were moving, I was once again reciting from the scroll in my own tongue.

*When Forces Grow  
And Enemies Plot  
I will return, unharmed  
When sought*

*A world will change  
An age will end  
A people shall fall  
A race transcend*

*Gods will be banished  
Some born, some slain  
And yet I, asleep  
Shall ever remain*

*When called I rise  
When the time grows nigh  
And the fated one comes  
This world shall die*

The sky broke. It seemed to *unravel* like a spool of yarn cut in two by an invisible blade. The scroll itself seemed to shriek in pain as the black *material* of the creature whipped about it, being drawn within. The blackness was then gone, and the true sky, now once again revealed, seemed to recoil from the experience of hosting it. An almost unbearable silence pressed into my skull, only to be shattered by the gentle drop of the scroll, tightly coiled, onto the stones of the ground. This scroll was not its prison; it was its *chariot*.

I did all I knew to do; the only thing that would make me feel as if I was still a person, with a beating heart in my chest and a mind somewhere behind my eyes. I curled into the tightest ball, and wept.