

Aid to Canard...

My elderly employer looked over my report slowly, taking far too long to read it than he should have. I had offered to read it to him, but he insisted that his eyes still worked, and that I talked too fast. Finally he looked up from the page, after what had seemed like half an hour, and said, "And thus far there have been no conflicts between the Hammerites and The Gryphons?"

It was already stated in the report. I forced myself not to grow weary with Lord Canard's senility, but for the past months my patience had been growing, more and more, thin. "Yes sire, Captain Wendle and his men have shown complete restraint. They have observed and prevented bystanders from becoming involved, but have in no way antagonized the Hammerites."

"Bloody shame," he said, and looked like he was reading it over again. "Don't scratch Thresh off the books yet. He may still find a way to win this one."

Hammerite Deconstructivist...

I didst pause from mine work with mine brothers at the approach of Father Rafael. 'Twas only for an instant however, for he seemed to want not my attention but simply to observe. I was surprised then to see another of our leaders approach him, Brother Oberon. I didst switch mine task, halting mine work to inspect book titles in Brother Thresh's library for blasphemous themes and merely began to stack them aside, that I may eavesdrop on their conversation whilst still appearing to be occupied.

"Art thou finished wasting our brothers' time?" Oberon didst say,

"Dost thou intend to begin wasting mine?" mine father didst reply.

"Father Rafael, I cannot see how thou dost employ these faithful so frivolously, whilst our enemies surely march against us elsewhere!"

I couldst not believe what I then observed. Father Rafael, in a fit of rage, took Brother Oberon by the throat and didst press him to a nearby wall. "Surely thou dost not speak of mine enemies within The Order itself! For I believe one doth stand before me!"

"It is not this enemy thou shouldst fear! 'Tis not I that doth plot against thee, but another!" I couldst not believe mine ears at this talk. I quickened mine work, growing reckless with the stacking as mine heart didst race.

"Thou speakest as if thou hast knowledge that I do not. Thou art more a fool than I didst suspect."

"And thou art a fool if thou dost think..." I couldst hear the grip upon mine brother's throat tightening, "O blast it all to the demons—Rafael, you are a fool if you believe that you know all of what goes on under your gaze. Your suspicions for this man have been craftily forged to draw your eyes from an even greater threat!"

"Couldst I believe that a single word thou hast spoken is not a vile lie, I wouldst surely be driven to fear. However, I do know that thou dost fear that I may uncover proof of thy own wrongdoing in the dismantling of this house

of sin!"

"If thou believe me a liar, strike the tongue from my mouth this instant!"

I couldst not continue mine work at this point. I looked and watched, fearful that Father Rafael would take Brother Oberon's invitation. Instead, he removed his hand from mine brother's throat, and said, "I couldst not count on a single hand all of those whom I know work against me. Just because thou promise to betray the others to me doth not mean thou shalt be excluded from this list."

"Then I wash mine hands of this. When thou falls and another rises in thy place, I shalt know where to stand."

I quickly resumed mine work before I wouldst be caught staring. I felt I couldst not breathe until Father Rafael had departed. With a long breath, I didst attempt to sooth my nerves. 'Twas only then that I noticed a similar look of dismay and doubt amongst the others that worked beside me.

Chapter 7

On the Run

Some Hours Prior**— Ghost: Not Over Yet —****Day 4: 8:00 pm**

My fellow escapees and I were still running. If any of them ever tried to slow down, I just reminded them about the zombies that were still coming. The sky was all red and orange. Was it a sunrise? No, I wouldn't be so lucky. The sun was setting. I had a whole night of zombie troubles coming.

No, no; I couldn't take it anymore. I had to stop and rest. I went down on my knees, panting, and lowered Lytha down to the ground. She was still in the same state as she had been before, but considering all that went on around her without her noticing, I'd say that her sort-of-awake state was overestimated. The other prisoners took this as their cue to also stop for a rest.

"Have they stopped chasing us?" one of them said, hands on his knees.

"Dunno," "I" ... "just" ... "can't" ... "run" ... "any" ... "farther."

"Hey, hey!" one of the, shouted, pointing. "I just saw a guy up there and then he ran off!"

"A guy?" I said, able now to form two word sentences. "Hammerite?"

"No, just a guy. He saw I saw him and bolted."

"Gaah," I grumbled, and got back up, this time slinging Lytha over my shoulder. It could have hurt her, but it was easier to carry her this way. "Let's go. You guys don't have to go with me you know. We're free—get lost."

"Road's cut through the mountains. Ain't nowhere to go but to follow it," said another. I was going to have to have to get names.

"Look, it gets smoother up ahead. Let's go." We went, even though I felt like my legs were going to fall off.

Just a few dozen yards ahead the steep walls on either side of the road flattened out. Hopefully we'd be able to fan out and all go our separate ways. Of course, the zombies would still all follow me. I found that I had enough energy to keep going, just a few more steps, just a few more steps, just...

Then I heard "Aw cripes!" and the sound of multiple crossbows being locked. We were surrounded from above by men in cloaks.

"Do we look like we have anything you want to rob?!" I demanded. "We just broke out of prison, give us a break. And besides, there's a mob of..."

"Aha! Ghost!" one of them shouted. He was shorter and rounder, so I guessed he had to be the leader.

I blinked up at him, wondering why the 'someone' who finally had heard of me had to be the guy who was robbing me. "Er, yeah, that's me."

"He's got Lytha!" he shouted, and all of the men around cheered and lowered their crossbows and various knives.

I went "Heh," and felt like a hero. Whoever these guys were, they seemed to be very happy to see me and Lytha.

"Come on; let's get you guys out of here. Decided to take half the prison with you on your way out?" he said with a chuckle. "Come...around these rocks...you can climb up."

He directed me to a spot behind a boulder where we could all climb up. I let the others go first, and then handed Lytha up to him. "Listen," I said. "We're still being chased...I am going to keep going this way. You get her and the others to safety."

"Nonsense!" he shouted. "Up, up!"

Reluctantly, and glancing down the road over and over, I decided to do so. I didn't see any Hammer Haunts coming. I let him help me up. Lytha had been put down on a large blanket, and wrapped up in it.

The rounder one was now shaking my hand. "I'm Somno, and just so you know, you've got a big reward coming your way for springing Lytha from the pen!"

That's when it hit me. This was the ass-bastard who tricked me with the water and the knockout drug. I wanted to kill him! But the sound of the word reward took the wind out of my outburst, and I only sort of half smiled half made a baffled look. "Reward?" I muttered, like a small child. I would have to save his pummeling for later.

"Uh-huh. Ten thousand! Oh yes, and Nightfall will be buying that star from you, and looking about getting that curse removed." He chuckled. "He won't rest until he's got you a clean slate!"

"Nightfall?" I muttered again, still a small wide eyed child, but this time one who had just been told that the tooth fairy had been papa all along.

"Nightfall?" was repeated by the other prisoners, and then they started to look really upset. "Hey, I know you! You're the guys that threw us in that place!"

Somno looked at his accuser with an "Uh...uh...uh..." expression, and I did a double take. Then another. I wasn't sure why I hadn't noticed it before, but most of the guys who had made it out with me were wearing red hands on their shirts, just like mine. Then it clicked: the interrogation, questions about my experience in underground death traps, everything they knew about my scuffles with Hammerites, and that psycho-babble about my compulsion to help out girls in danger. They *knew* I would spring Lytha if I had the chance. I had been played like a fiddle.

"Yeah, I remember them now!" another one shouted. "It was you guys! You ambushed us and beat us and gave us to the Hammers!" "Come on boys, we can take them!"

"Now just calm down!" Somno insisted, holding both hands up. It was too late; his men were aiming their crossbows again.

"Will you guys just cut it out?" I demanded, ready to hit the dirt if the arrows started to fly.

"Yes, do calm yourselves." Now there was a voice that didn't belong. It sounded more like tea time than a late night brawl. I looked up and saw that we were surrounded—again.

During the beginnings of the scuffle another band of men had crept in for an ambush, but these weren't cloaked brigands; these were uniformed soldiers. Green and gold; these were Ramirez's boys. "Now what?!" I whined.

"What's the meaning of this?" Somno shouted.

"Did you really think Milord Ramirez didn't know what Nightfall's lackeys were up to?" Mister tea-time replied from the top of his horse. He had a monocle, and a curly mustache, and a hat that made him look like he'd rather be at sea.

"Hey! It's us! We escaped!" one of the prisoners shouted, waving his arms.

"By my word, so you have!" Tea-time remarked, looking befuddled.

"It was him," another prisoner said, pointing at me. "This is the taffer that sprung us, he's a bloody hero!"

"His name's Ghost he said," another one cried out. "Three cheers for Ghost!"

"Hip-hip—"

"Enough of this!" Somno insisted. His boys hadn't yet lowered their crossbows, in spite of the longbows being aimed at them by Ramirez's soldiers. "This is clearly a misunderstanding!"

"Hardly," Tea-time balked. "We know all about what you've been up to. Nightfall isn't the only one with spies—Operative 98?"

One of Somno's boys smirked, lowered his crossbow, and walked over to stand by Tea-time's side.

"Oh shit," Somno hissed. "And you're almost a triple digit too!"

"Listen, guys," I tried to interrupt.

"Yes, we have been watching you this whole time. I was aware that you kidnapped my comrades and what you did with them. I was aware that you sent them to Cragscleft. I had come to negotiate for their release, but then Operative 98 told me that you all were lying in wait for someone."

"Hey, guys, I think you should know..." my eyes were fixed down the road, back towards Cragscleft.

Tea-time kept rambling from his high horse. "So we decided to lie in wait as well and find out too, and now I see that it was this Ghost and this Lytha, who shall make very interesting additions to my list of prisoners. You all however..."

"You can't take him hostage, he saved our asses!" a prisoner shouted, and was joined in cries of agreement by the others.

"Silence, common thugs have no say in this. Be glad we don't kill you like the rest of these dogs."

"Kill us?!"

"Hey, I think you may want to look down the road you guys..." Actually I kind of wanted them to keep arguing.

"Laverly when I get my hands on you," Somno shook his fist at Operative 98, who just smirked and looked like he was about ready to whip out the shoe shine kit on Tea-time.

"Oh, and Ghost," Tea-time said over a bubbling grin, "We know about the zombies. Take care of them men."

All of the soldiers on his side quickly put away their arrows and took out new arrows, ones with big glowing fire crystals at the ends. As soon as they had readied their arrows, the undead Hammerites came screaming into view. There were twangs, and whizzes, and flashes, and big balls of fire, and limbs

flying everywhere. I covered my head as the other half of Ramirez's group fired a second salvo, just as another line of haunts crossed over the threshold. But, this time bottles of oil were tossed into the mix, and now the whole world was red as an intense fire blazed in the road, forming an insurmountable zombie barrier between us and Cragcleft.

"Oh, damn," I mumbled, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Now, while they're distracted!" Somno shouted, and all of his men screamed and turned quickly and started firing their crossbows at Ramirez's men. I hit the dirt. My fellow escapees tore into Somno's men with hand, foot, and tooth. I crawled on my belly over towards Lytha as the fire-arrows started to fly overhead as well, adding chain mail projectiles to the mix as the explosive bolts struck Somno's boys, sending their armor into the air in pieces.

I scooped Lytha up, still wrapped in the blanket, as the battle raged all around me. Thankfully I was the only one that no one had a quarrel with, or wanted to sink a quarrel into, so for the moment I wasn't in complete, total, and all-encompassing danger. I was just in really deep shit.

I waited until it cleared up around me, but I couldn't wait too long. Ramirez's men were making short work of Somno's. Then I thought I saw Tea-time point some soldiers to go after me. My fellow escapees tackled them.

"What the devil!" I heard Tea-time scream out at the top of his lungs. "Get off me!" he yelled.

I stopped watching and got up, put Lytha back over my shoulder, and headed away from the road as fast as my newly panicking legs would carry me. "It's going to be okay Lytha," I whispered to her as I stumbled over jagged rock and thistle bushes.

Within a minute the sounds of the fight had died behind me, and were replaced by the sounds of Ramirez's men searching for me. I was dead meat. I was exhausted, wounded, carrying an unconscious woman—and they had probably just had supper.

But then the moans came. I knew I had to be hungry, but that couldn't have been my stomach moaning. "Ah," I said to myself. "Those killed in the fray were starting to rise."

"They're turning into zombies! Get them! Get them!"

I hoped a zombie was killing Tea-time. Maybe I'd run into a zombie wearing a monocle. I'd have to keep it. I found a narrow crack between two big rocks and stuck myself in it as sounds of battle roared out once more. They were launching fire-arrows again, but this time they were scattered and unprepared, and so I heard just as many screams of pain as I did exploding zombies. One of them sailed overhead, thrown by undead might, and fell to the ground limp at the front of my crevice.

I emboldened myself and scuttled out, claiming his bow, quiver of fire-arrows, and sword. The battle seemed to be going in favor of the undead; soon they'd all be dead, and undead, and I'd have zombies on my trail again. "Come on Lytha," I said, almost laughing at the absurdity of the situation as I

scooped her up from my hiding spot, and started moving again.

"I think I know where we'll be safe for the night," I told her. "Not all graves are zombie friendly." The problem was getting there. I was not so lucky to have any of the old mountain shrines nearby; the Hammerites tore out anything that wasn't theirs around stuff that was, but I knew of one that was still pretty close. Armed with my fire-arrow and the idea of a reward somewhere waiting for me, I set out into the darkness of the mountainside, determined, above all else, to live. Ten-thousand gold would also be nice.

— Jyre: As Delivered —

Day 5: 12:00 am

The stale water below lapped with a calm rhythm against the festering brickwork of the canal. I inched my feet closer to the edge, listening as pebbles clattered down the wall into the shallow waters. My mind swirled with a thick stew of ideas and uneasy feelings that I should be somewhere but somehow couldn't remember where or how. I felt slightly dizzy as I stared into the canal, just a few feet below. It was a vein to the city. Road gates were guarded. Rooftops sometimes were too far apart to leap the span. But the canals went everywhere, and no one ever watched them—but I did. I always watched.

My state of mental numbness was broken as a large crowd pushed itself out through tavern doors across the marketplace. Suddenly the whole world seemed to slide back into focus, un-muted, un-fogged, and I remembered what I was doing. The night was hot, and the flies wouldn't leave me alone.

I was back in The City, though I had never really left. I had been in a daze ever since I forced myself up from where I lay sobbing, and wandered listlessly to the edge of the walled district to make my escape. After *what happened* even that forbidden place was difficult to distinguish from the city streets, so desolate of mirth, that surrounded it.

I was following the canal to the place where I was to meet the men who wanted me to get the scroll; only I didn't want to give it to them. I delved my hand into my pocket to run my fingers against its surface, feeling the small grains of dirt fall loose from the soft, thick material of it. Something was in that scroll. Something bigger than the whole city, and I, the smallest, most worthless nothing in the whole city, had it in my pocket.

I thought for a second about throwing myself into the canal, drowning, letting my body rot and leaving the scroll lost again forever, or until another worthless nothing like me scumming about in the canal came across it and released the creature just as I had done. I lifted my eyes from the water and pressed on. I followed the canal out of the marketplace to the west as I had been instructed, and as I walked between two tall narrow buildings, I came upon the factory with its narrow windows and its lumbering iron columns. I continued on my path, using the water as my guide, until I came to a guarded gate. Night sentries, with tired eyes and clouded minds cast an unwatchful gaze across the avenue which was bisected by the canal. I knew they would

ignore me.

I pressed on until I came to the side door to the factory, nestled snug against the guarded gate, disregarded; just like me. I turned the heavy iron handle and found it unlocked; opened it, letting myself in, without as much as a glance from the sentries. I closed the door behind me and left the guards behind forgotten.

Dim red light came from a dying torch in the hall. I spotted the stairs, and went on. They spiraled upwards. The dim red glow of the first torch gave way to darkness before another torch, this one even dimmer, lit the top landing and the heavy iron door there. This also opened easily, and I found myself in a long hallway. I glanced to my right at a dirty window through which shreds of light from the streets and surrounding buildings left ghostly stains on the brickwork. I followed the hallway, though my back and shoulders felt as if a thousand needles were piercing me.

Why was it so quiet? Did I have the wrong place? No, all is as it was described in my directions. It was late. Maybe they had expected me to come sooner, and had left? As I reached the end of the hall I heard voices. I pressed my ear quietly against the door and listened.

"...know she'd be dead in there. None of us could make it. What makes you think—" the first voice was interrupted by a second, but it was farther off and I couldn't make out what was said.

"Well do you have a backup plan in case she was killed? I'd swear you were making this up as we go."—"How can I question your plan when you have no plan?"—"Look, we're following your 'ideas' but you're not the leader here; Lord Crowley is. Sure, you have inside experience and know her better than any of us could. Sure, you have a bone to pick with her 'cause of what she did to you. Sure you..."—"You don't scare me, not with that talk, not with those looks, so just cut it out and stop pretending like..."—"Hey, you're lucky I don't let the boys kill you like they want to!"—"Yeah you heard right!"—"Damn straight you're worth something to us! That's the only reason why we're keeping you? What?"—"That talk's nonsense."—"And that's none of your business!"—"Look, Ranson—"

A shriek of horror escaped me, and I found myself pressed against the far wall staring at the door in fright. Ranson! The next words came loud and clear. "Someone's at the door! I'll bet it's her!"

I had known it all along, but lied to myself to keep myself a fool. It was Ranson who had found my letter to Daelus and invited me to the Red Dragon Inn, and then who described the scroll to me. I had fallen right into his hands.

I tore myself away and dashed, in panic, the way I came. I threw myself through the door at the end of the hall, slamming it behind just as I heard the door I had been listening at fly open, and angry voices shout. Then I realized this was not the way I came; I was in a stair hall. There was another door on the other side. If I went down they'd catch me. If I went through the door they may not. I pulled off one shoe and dropped it down the stairs just before I hurled the opposite door open, unlocked against all odds, and shut it behind me just as I heard the previous one being slammed open.

I could hear them shout in confusion over the direction, but there were two of them after all. They only had to split up to find me. No, I spotted my salvation; my shaking hands flew to the deadbolt and spun it locked.

"Hey, it's locked!" one of them cried. "She went this way!" I felt a rush of nausea as my salvation suddenly became my undoing; I heard the distinct sound of keys. I rushed from one end of the short hall to the other; all the doors were locked. There were windows. I pushed against one and found that it opened easily.

The ground looked like it was a hundred feet below. But I knew that if I just pushed far enough, I could make it to the canal. If it wasn't too shallow I should be able to get away. If it was too shallow, I'd be dead, and it wouldn't matter. Just as I had gathered myself up for the jump the door behind me swung open. I couldn't help it. I looked.

Ranson's eyes met mine. In a panicked instant I realized I was not looking into the eyes of a man, but of a beast. They were yellowed, and the pupils tall and narrow. His nose was different, longer, closer to his face, and his jaw jutted out slightly, like a beast's. Then the fear mixed with hatred. I couldn't tell if it was his or mine. As he lunged for me I turned sharply and flew out the window.

The air filled my ears, blocking out the sounds of his howling rage. The world became a blur of light and shadow as I fell. A thousand razors tore at my flesh before I knew that I had even hit the water, and then I felt my nose and lungs burning. I met the bottom of the canal with a harsh crash, hard enough to send a jolt of pain all through my bones, but not enough to kill me. I pushed myself to the surface, which seemed like a mile away. I broke it, coughing and hacking, trying desperately to clear the putrid water from my nose. I was blind; my eyes stung. I rubbed at them, trying to clear the mucky water away.

Shaken, but alive, I looked up to see the silhouette of Ranson in the window looking down at me. As soon as he saw me looking up, he was away, and I knew that others would be with him. He wouldn't be afraid to dive into the waters after me.

I had to swim, but I didn't know where. All around me were castle walls and turrets and pointed roofs reaching up to the sky. From this angle it was all alien. I didn't know where I was. I had come out on the far side of the building. I would have to let my instincts be my guide.

I picked a direction and swam. I could hear commotion in the streets above. I wouldn't stop to look back, even to see the huddled, armed figures peering into the water where I had fallen. I just had to know they were there, and that they meant to kill me if they found me. I saw up ahead a tunnel where the canal went under a building, and plunged into darkness. The sounds of my thrashing through the black water echoed through the chamber, broadcasting my location to all in the streets. I could only hope that there would be no easy way to get around the building.

I came out on the other side, but did not slow. I could hear the footfalls above and behind even above the sounds of my thrashing through the water.

They had made it around the building. They were following. I swam harder as I rounded a bend and caught sight of a gate on the waterway. This would be my escape.

As I neared the gate I heard the heavy splashes of my pursuers as they dove in behind me. They thought that they had me cornered. I came to the gate and easily slipped my narrow shoulders between the bars. I could hear them shouting with anger. But not all had followed me into the water. Some were still chasing on the street level, so I kept swimming.

Just on the other side of the gate I spotted another tunnel. It was higher, the water shallow enough to wade, and seemed to again travel beneath a building; possibly to a private sewer. I chanced it, and pulled myself into the tunnel, now up to my thighs in the water, and thrashed on.

Just as before the enclosure and the bricks intensified the sounds of my passage, making me a beacon. I found that I could still swim faster than I could wade, so I plunged back in and stroked as hard as I could. My pursuers did not get the idea. I gained distance quickly as they tried to work against the water, though it only came up to their knees. I rounded a bend up ahead, and to my surprise a stairway up to the streets was before me.

I didn't think I just climbed. I pulled myself onto the stairs, and scrambled up them as fast as I could. Maybe I had left my pursuers behind in the tunnel. As I reached the streets, I quickly glanced all around. My heart leapt as I saw a group of men appear down a street nearby, point at me, and start running.

I ran too, as hard as I could. I took corners blindly, running through the empty streets with nothing but the light from windows far above to guide me, and the echo of footfalls far too close behind me urging me faster. They were gaining. I reached the end of one street and charged left, the only way I could go, knowing that if I kept this up it would only be a matter of time. I had to use my head; go where they couldn't follow.

There was a wooden structure clinging to the side of a building up ahead. I latched onto one of the wooden poles holding it up, and climbed. I moved faster than I thought possible. I was halfway up the structure when I spotted an open window. I dove inside, hitting the carpet within like a pile of wet rags, and curled into a ball in the shadows.

I could hear them outside. They knew that I hid. They knew I could not have gotten out of that alley without them seeing me. They knew that there was this wooden structure there, and that I probably climbed it. I had shaken them for the moment, but I had to keep moving. They'd be coming inside after me. I pulled myself up from where I huddled, and pressed on.

I was in an apartment building. I started trying doors, and found all of them locked. I ran up the flight of stairs to the top floor, and immediately spotted a wide open window filled with stars. I ran to it, and without thinking it through, leapt out, landing nimbly on the sloped roof of a nearby building. I was, for an instant, proud of myself. The rooftop was too steep to scale, but I could run along the edge. I went, slower than I wanted for fear of slipping and falling to my death, but still far faster than any of they could follow.

Then the unthinkable happened. I heard a crash behind me, and saw that

one of my pursuers had managed to follow me to the rooftops. It wasn't Ranson: it was a stranger, tall and dressed in a brown coat. Long black hair hung free around his narrow face, and a patch covered one eye. He hadn't been among the men from before, and I couldn't imagine someone like him working for Ranson. He has to be higher up the chain, like one of The Lady's top men. I nearly froze when his good eye locked onto mine, like a hunter who was staring down his prey. Soon more were leaping to the roof, and the tall man was closing the gap which I had just previously felt so proud of myself for creating. I ran.

I reached the next building, which ran at an angle to the first, and kept going. By the time I saw that there was a gap between this building and the next, I was upon it, and had to leap. I flew through the air with nothing but my speed, panic, and small stature as my assets, and once again landed nimbly on the other side. I did not stop for an instant thinking that my pursuers wouldn't be able to do the same. This time I didn't run along the slope, I ran over the peak, and down the other side, waiting until I knew that I wouldn't be able to be seen from the other side before running down the length of the building.

I came to another alley and leapt again. This building connected to one with a flat roof. I made a break for it. I knew I was putting distance between them and me. I could hear them getting farther away. On the far side of the flat roof the next roof was much higher up, but with a running leap I could grab onto the ledge and hoist myself up. I was now on top of a cluster of flat roofed buildings, and sprinting to the other side. I didn't know which direction I was going, I just knew they were back there, and I was getting away.

I reached the far side of the cluster and leapt down to a smaller building. This time I was not so graceful. I slipped, stumbled, and narrowly stopped myself from sliding off down to the streets some twenty feet below. I stopped to catch my breath and my bearings. I was burning with exertion. I had no sense of direction anymore, but I knew that I would have to start getting an idea of where I was if I was going to really escape and not just wander back to where I was before. In one direction I thought I could see a cemetery. In the other was the canal again, winding its way through the buildings either leading back to or away from where I had been. I wasn't going to risk it.

A building nearby had a balcony, which I leapt to, and then let myself drop the shorter distance to the streets. I did not land gracefully. I was lucky I didn't break my leg. But, I was on the streets again, and all was quiet.

I wasn't going to go into the cemetery. I just needed to use it as a landmark to get a sense of direction. I pressed myself into a shadowy niche not far from the cemetery gate, and thought, trying to decide where I was. I knew that there was supposed to be a cemetery due north of the marketplace. If I could get back to the marketplace, I could find my way home. So I had to go south, but which way was south?

I remembered the moon hanging low in the sky before me when I went west, away from the marketplace before. I could see the glow of the moon, so

I reasoned that must be west. I headed south. I worked my way past buildings keeping the moon to my right, until I came to an iron gate, which I easily slipped through; easier than I had in the canals. I continued on, and lo and behold, caught sight of a familiar bakery ahead. I broke into a run once more, and before I knew it, I was back in the marketplace.

My celebration was short lived, however; I had to throw myself up against a crevice in the wall. Again all bad luck, for who was in the marketplace but Ranson himself along with a few of his cronies. It was like he knew that I would come back here. Of course he knew. He knew me.

The old man in the forbidden district had told me the truth. The scroll never belonged to The Lady. It had been hidden there, probably to keep it safe from *her*. *She* wanted it, and had sent Ranson to *trick me* into delivering it to her. I had been such a fool, but all of that was about to change.

I slipped away now. He wasn't coming after me, and I hadn't heard the men who were chasing me since the rooftops. I knew that I had lost them. I was surprised that Ranson didn't set an ambush here in the marketplace for me if he knew I was coming. It didn't matter anymore. I had escaped and was heading back to my hideaway to find Els.

As I rounded a bend, walking now with only a pressing urgency rather than scrambling in panic like before, I nearly rammed my face into the chest of a large flabby man. I looked up in shock and a rush of panic as I quickly recognized the man to be Ramirez, or at least, who I had mistaken to be Ramirez. It seemed pathetic that I could make that mistake now, seeing him dressed as a common thug, as his true self; one of Ranson's lackeys.

"J-jyre?" he stammered.

The fear quickly subsided and was overwhelmed with anger and hatred. My hand went to the dagger on his belt almost as fast as my eyes did, and then it was at his throat. "You, looking for me?" I said with a hiss.

He shook his head quickly, "No..., j-just doing a little shopping." He raised his hands up to either side of his head and began to back away from me like a coward.

I snorted and shook my head. "Somehow I can't picture the mighty Ramirez doing his own shopping for pleasure after sundown." With a poke of my dagger I steered him up against the wall, "I can, however, see him sending someone away to die!"

He shook his head vigorously, "Never!" His pathetic display was useless. I didn't see him anymore; all I saw was Ranson standing in his place. All of the anger and tension and adrenaline and the fear of the chase were being focused tightly on my dagger point. I lifted the dagger pushed it to his cheek and pressed it hard against his flesh. A single droplet of blood formed at its point and slowly slid down the blade, leaving a thin shimmering trail on the cool iron. I watched it, fascinated. That little droplet held his life inside. With a single flick of my wrist I could turn the trickle into a flood and drain him.

"We're all on the same side, Jyre. You, me, Ranson, Els. We all want The Lady dead and done. Ranson knew we had to trick you to help us, because you ha—"

I clenched my teeth and pressed harder at the mention of the name. My eyes burned as I glared into his. "Ranson tricked me into helping him! What were you going to say, that I hate him? Yes I hate him! You can't imagine how much I hate him!" I pushed the blade harder with every 'hate'. I could feel the hot tears streaming down my cheeks before I even knew that I was crying.

His tongue flashed out as he licked his lips. I could see his little brain ticking away as he searched for what to say. "It's not too late Jyre. Did you get the scroll? If you got the scroll, then our plans—" his words ended in a squeal as I dragged my blade down his round cheek. I watched with fascination as droplets of blood formed at the line made by the shallow cut. I drew the cutting edge over his skin a second time, captivated. Blood swelled in two neat parallel lines until the drops streaked down to his jaw. He was growing pale. The coward; he weighed three times as much as I did, and could have easily pushed the knife out of my hands and crushed me in his grasp.

No. What was I doing? This wasn't Ranson; only some fool. Why was I torturing him? Did I intend to kill him? Would I have killed him if it was Ranson? The thought sent shivers through me. I saw the blood on his cheeks, and on my hands, and I felt again like I was awakening from a daze. I shook it off and tried to regain my look of ferocity, though I could hear my voice shake as I said, "Tell Ranson that if he knows what's good for him, he'll never come looking my way again. Now if you don't want me to put your eyes out, you'll cover them as I leave."

I didn't know if he covered them or not, but it didn't really matter. I ran from him, going to where the streets were tight and twisty. I threw the dagger away; I couldn't believe what I had just done with it. It occurred to me that maybe he wasn't actually a coward; maybe he knew that I wasn't going to actually hurt him, that I wouldn't have the stomach for it. He just needed to play it safe and I would let him go. I was the coward, not him. I should have just killed him, but I couldn't. I just ran, like always.

— Ghost: A Holy Place —

Day 5: 12:00 am

I put Lytha down gently on a bed of dried weeds, and then dropped myself down to the stone floor while panting with exhaustion. "We're gonna"—*pant*—"be fine," I told her, though I doubted she could hear me.

The journey to the abandoned mountain shrine had been longer than I remembered. I kept a good distance from the approaching zombies all the way; in fact, I hadn't used any of the fire crystals yet. I was pretty sure they couldn't come in here. If I had read the glyphs right that were all over this place back when I robbed it a few years back, this was some temple of life and healing or some rubbish, so it made sense to me that if all that was true, the zombies wouldn't care for it much. But if it wasn't, and the zombies had no problem with it, at least now I had the tactical advantage.

I pulled myself up from where I had dropped and sorted my things out proper. It would do no good to sleep with my quiver of explosive arrows on

my back. I set it all, plus my new bow and sword, where I could get to it easily, and felt myself drifting off to...No, I couldn't sleep yet. I had to...

— Sheam: Myths and Lies —

Day 5: 1:00 am

We were all seated around a small fire. Foster and Stephens were sitting apart from us, having a private conversation. I sat across the fire from Els and Moody. It had been over twelve hours since we were locked down here. Other than the mysterious elevator, our hours of searching led to nothing. In the end we didn't even need to use the trail of chain mail to find our way back. We stumbled upon it ourselves, over, and over again. The tunnels were all interconnected, looping this way and that way, before doubling back and heading back to the source. It was a closed system, James would have said.

We agreed that the next time we stumbled back upon the main chamber; we'd stop, and just wait it out. Besides; we were starving, and Foster let us know the last time we went through that he had found some stores of preserved eatables. Stephens was pretty disappointed that his chain mail trail had been for naught; and he used up his whole sleeve too. It hadn't been though. Because of it, we always knew when we had come to a corridor we had already been down, so in the end it became very useful, just not for its intended purpose.

We had been sitting in silence for the better part of the hour once we had eaten. I felt rather defeated. I tried to take charge and get us out, but in the end we just wasted energy. I sat with my chin in my palm, and finally broke the silence. "I really don't understand what's going on," I admitted to them. "After the pagans attacked and were defeated, I thought it was all over, but now it seems like that was just the beginning. I thought their leader was killed. Shouldn't it be over now?"

Els and Moody lifted themselves up a bit. Els seemed a little surprised at my statement, but it was Moody who calmly said, "No my dear girl, that is not so at all. Just because Constantine was killed does not mean an end to the pagans," in his slow, deep voice. "You do realize that I am a pagan, don't you?"

"Well, yes," I said to him, suddenly feeling like I said something wrong. "But you're not like the others. You live in The City, and you talk normally."

He gave a wide smile. "We are a very misunderstood people. It is true, Constantine, the one the Hammerites called The Trickster, is dead, but the Lord of Woods was not the only God of our pantheon. Those who follow each are very different people; very different indeed. The Hammerites would have us all called pagan, and I suppose that is true, if you consider anyone who does not worship their builder a pagan. But then, that would make you a pagan too, would it not?"

"No, I'm not," I said, never having really thought of it that way.

"Well, are you a Hammerite then?"

"No, not at all."

Els shifted uneasily from the crate where he sat, and then rose. He walked

to the perimeter of the fire light, arms folded across his chest, gazing into the empty shadows.

“What are you then?”

I frowned at him, and felt myself growing defensive. I wouldn't have it though. “I am Sheam. Why do I have to be anything else?”

He laughed. I was annoyed. It wasn't an answer that should have been laughed at. “Indeed, indeed,” he said. “You know, the wonderful thing about The Hammerites is that they do their best to maintain salvation for themselves. The first thing they do is claim that there is such a thing as salvation, and then they claim that their way is the way to it. Now, consider this. With the exception of broad ceremonies but a few times a year, none but those indoctrinated into their order may attend their services or worship in their temples. True, any are allowed within their churches, but that is for means of tithing. Services are offered for the general public, but those are for the purpose of intimidation and propaganda, rather than educating the people on the teachings of their order.

“Now, many would consider the builder as a God, or at least as the Hammerite's God, but I find this laughable. A God demands worship, piety, penitence, adoration. The Builder asks for none of these things! He only asks for obedience; obedience to his laws, obedience to his creations, submission, and punishment at the forefront of failure.”

“How do you know so much about the Hammerites?” I asked him, growing slightly weary of this exposition.

“Do you think what I have said is ‘so much?’ No. I know very little, only what I have observed.”

“You speak of worship and adoration. Do you do these things for The Trickster? Do you know how many have died at his hands and in his name?”

“No dear girl. I do not worship ‘The Trickster’ as you say. My God is Searowrenc, the Lord of Hurse; ‘Earthsie Lord’ some would call him. He is a very different God than The Lord of Wood, and so are those that follow him. Searowrenc, unlike the Trickster and the third God, the Lord of Char, has never antagonized the people of The City, though he did turn a blind eye when the people of all this land were threatened by terrible horrors. It is for these two reasons that the sons and daughters of Searowrenc are so few, and often scorned by our fellow pagans.”

“A pagan would scorn another pagan?” I asked him, suddenly feeling interested again.

“Yes! In fact, the animosity between the followers of The Wood and The Char was so great, war broke out between them, and did not cease until all those who claimed obedience to Char were, like their God, slain. The Order of Char is no more.”

I rested my cheek against my palm, and tried to imagine a great war where barbarians fought against barbarians until every last one of the opposing side, women, children, were slain. Was it so wrong to fear and loath the pagans? Even they admit to what they were capable of. How could this man sit here and dictate to me his people's dark past without any display of

regret. "So, what was this dead Lord of Char like?" I asked, curious to hear more.

"Imagine a bat-like creature, with the legs of a man and the head of a ram. His skin moved like a lava flow. Fire came from his lips, and death from his fingertips."

Poetic. "And why haven't I heard of this before?"

"Ah, allow me to explain. The Lord of Char, 'Flamsie Lord,' or Brynegled as he was called by those who served him, was the one who sank the civilization of the precursors below the earth that The City now stands on. It was through him that the city of Karath Din perished in fire and smoke, and was swallowed up by the ground it stood upon. It was also he who returned in the days when The Master Builder walked this land, and in seeking to slay this false prophet, was destroyed. The Lord of Char may yet return; but most believe that the destruction that the Builder wrought upon Brynegled was the last this world will ever know of him."

"Thank goodness for that," I said, idly running my hand through the hair at my temple.

"I am not so hasty to say so. I am certain that if the Lord of Char had been alive during the Forgotten Age, things may have been much different."

"So you believe that your God failed? You believe that their Lord would have done better?"

"I believe that we failed him, and drove him away. The Lord of Earth, Searowrenc, was in his time a Lord of this world of greater devotion or power than The Builder could ever hope to attain. Unlike the lords of Char and Woods, the Lord of Earth came not to punish, but nourish. The people calling themselves The Bigeng worshiped Searowrenc as a father and protector, and it was the Hammers, in those days, who were considered the pagan cult. But, as the centuries went past, the Bigeng became not the children that Searowrenc had nourished. Their temples of ivory and palaces of gold and vast gardens and zoos became the objects that they worshiped, not Searowrenc himself. But he did nothing to punish his people, he simply left. And when that Horrible Evil came to this world, of which no memory or trace has been left, the Bigeng called to their God for aid, and their prayers were not heard."

"If all of that is true, why would he abandon his people like that? If he was truly like a father to them, I think he would have stood by them no matter what."

"He did not abandon them, they abandoned him! They prayed to their marble statues for aid, not to their God himself! He would not have heard their cries."

He didn't seem to like my suggestion, and I didn't really care, so I just let it slide. I gave a sigh and then stretched my neck. I had been sitting still too long. "So, if your God, didn't save The City from this evil; then who did?"

"No one knows! It is a time that has been erased from The City's memory. I could not tell you of it, for I know nothing of it, and know no others that do. It is speculated, that the only way for this evil to be defeated, was for it to be

removed in such a way that it would be stripped from the memories of all those who witnessed it; or, those who would not forget would be stripped from this world itself. Searowrenc has never returned to his people, but I represent the ever shrinking community of those who dream that one day he shall. Look in any book of history you come across. There will be two similarities. One, no two books of History ever written in The City can agree on anything. Two, all books of history ever written in The City will have a gap, a tremendous gap, a time when records simply do not exist, or were completely destroyed."

At this Els started to laugh, and turned his head so that I could see him in profile. "Have you ever read any books on history, old man?"

His eyes widened a bit, and seemed startled. "I certainly have!" Moody insisted, turning to Els.

"So have I, and you're right that there are plenty of inconsistencies, but I never remember seeing any gaps. It's all wars and politics and absolutely no talk of anything you've said just now."

"Of course not! Come Els, I am aware that many books are content to fill this gap with their made up wars and politics, and that..."

"If it's forgotten like you say, then how do you know about it? How does anyone know that there was this evil at all, if all trace of it has been stripped from this world?"

"Els, when there is a hole; one may still see the hole, even if one cannot see what was once there before there was a hole. The hole was there, so one may acknowledge that something is missing!"

"Let's say for a moment that what you are suggesting is true. I am compelled to write it off as mythology and let you ramble on to this girl for another five hours, but I respect you more than that. Maybe the great evil you speak of was not defeated at all. Maybe what people have forgotten is that this force which you say took The City is still in power. Maybe we were made to forget that it was evil. Maybe it won, and as a mark of its final victory, spun the tale which you have just recited to Sheam."

I smiled slightly at Els's words, always finding something to admire in a skeptic, and then waited for Moody's reaction.

"That is a compelling theory, Els. Another possible explanation is that this evil is a metaphor for the Biegeng's betrayal of Searowrenc, but we will never know."

"There's another thing that bothers me about your stories, Moody," Els said, coming to sit down next to him once more. "And I am sorry if I offend you. You did, after all, save my life, but I want to let Sheam hear both sides."

He shook his head. "I am sure that it won't be anything I haven't heard already. Proceed."

"These names you are reciting, Brynegled, Searowrenc, Constantine, are all just different words for the same thing; different names, different times, different people—same being. There is only one Woodsie Lord, only one Trickster."

Moody seemed to grow surprisingly irate in light of his previous show of

apathy for Els's argument. "That is Hammer talk!" he insisted, almost growling.

Els cracked a smile, knowing that he hit a nerve. "Not just Hammer talk, my friend. Consider the following. First you had your Flamsie lord, then your Earthsie Lord, and now we have the Woodsie Lord. We know that these beings require avatars in order to walk in this world. The man, Constantine, was simply a man until the Trickster took him and became him. I believe the same is true for all of The Tricksters other incarnations.

"Your description of Brynegled matches the Hammerite stories of the Builder's battle against The Trickster, and how he slew him. So why do you say that it was Brynegled who caused Karath Din to perish? I'll tell you why; it's because he's dead. The ones who wrote this mythology were not comfortable with such a great and powerful being who could cause an entire civilization to sink beneath the ground to be still knocking about, so they say that he was the one who the Builder killed."

Moody was silent, though I could see from his face that he was not happy.

"Secondly, you want to call your God Searowrenc and Brynegled two completely different beings, because you cannot fathom that your father-like lord could be the same creature who destroyed Karath Din, and was then killed by the Builder. You also cling to the belief that he simply vanished, walked away, and is somewhere still alive, unlike Brynegled and Constantine, who are now dead."

"I was right; I have heard all of this before. Whose books have you been reading Els?"

Els smiled. "Actually I came up with all of this while you were talking. I am happy to see that there's those who are educated enough to write books that talk about the same ideas I deduced in five minutes."

"Maybe we ought to save this discussion for later," I ventured, not wanting Moody and Els to get into a fight.

Els ignored me. "It gets better, Moody. You also want to claim that you good, law abiding, city-dwelling pagans are not the same people as the ones who, led by The Trickster, attacked and killed dozens, maybe even hundreds, of people not even a year ago. And you wonder why they shun you. You think you're better than they are. You live in The City, you speak like we do, and you hide behind an ancient and benevolent God that has abandoned you, praying that someday you will return to his favor and he will come and save you all from your plight, persecuted by both Hammerite and your fellow pagan."

Moody stood up, just as I feared. "You had better watch your words, son," he demanded. Foster and Stephens seemed to notice that there was hostility in the air, and came running.

"Moody, if there is any man who needs to hear what I am saying, it's you. Stop for a moment and just think logically about what's going on here. Some say that these Gods that you speak of are beings of Chaos, not evil. Fine, that's all well and good; but do remember that there are people following them, and people are capable of evil, great evil. You've seen it yourself. Admit it, Moody.

You've seen it."

Moody seemed to cool off a bit, anger replaced by simple frustration. "I have seen it, yes."

"I am no pagan, Moody. I was hired as a soldier for The Lady, not as a pagan follower, and I can tell you what I saw."

"You don't need to tell me, Els. I know of what you speak."

"True, but she doesn't." he then looked to Foster and Stephens. "They don't. What we are dealing with here is evil. You can't pretend it isn't. The pagans are here, in the streets, in the sewers, in our marketplaces and places of study, and they mean us harm. Call it chaos, call it piety towards a God they worship with all of their soul; you cannot change the fact that they mean people—innocent people, guilty people—harm."

"I don't see what this has to do with what you were saying before, Els. What does this have to do with there being only one Trickster, if I must continuously dirty my mouth with the Hammerite term for our Gods?"

"It has everything to do with it. You can't acknowledge that the being you worship is the same being who is responsible for so much bloodshed you can't even fathom. There is no such thing as Searowrenc, Moody. It's a myth. It's a myth to hide the fact that your god is the same god who is responsible for the slaughter of countless millions over the centuries."

"I have heard enough."

"Evidentially you haven't, because you aren't hearing what I am saying yet! Sheam is right to question Searowrenc's abandoning of his people. If he really was who you claim he was, then he should have stood by his people in the time of their greatest need. The Trickster is capable of tremendous power, but evidentially not Searowrenc. There is no Searowrenc."

"I am a man of faith, Els, who has stood by my faith through a long life of persecution. I will not be swayed just because a patient of mine who is trapped with me in a cellar has some bright ideas that he dreamed up in five minutes!"

Els just shook his head, and Moody sat down. "It sounds to me," I said, wondering if I was making a big mistake by offering my input on such a sensitive topic, "that this downfall of your people, that you described Moody...it sounds like they became just like the Hammerites."

Moody nodded. "That is a worthwhile assertion."

"And you don't believe that the Builder is a god."

"No, he was a man like any other."

"So if the Bigeng became like the Hammers, and the Hammers worship someone who wasn't a God, isn't it possible that the Bigeng were worshipping something that wasn't a God?"

Els smiled, and folded his arms across his chest, looking at me. Moody had a rather unhappy look on his face, and was quiet for some time. When he spoke, it was with a slight change in tone. "What do you believe, Sheam?"

"I think I already answered that question," I told him, remembering Els's reaction to it a few minutes ago.

"You told me what you were; I'd like to know what you believe."

I wished I hadn't stepped in, but it was too late now. "I feel like I am in the wrong place and time to believe anything. I feel like everything is right, and everything is wrong. I feel like there should be something more out there, some greater truth that everyone else has missed. But I don't think it will ever come here. I think this place was made to exist in confusion. I think I will never know what to believe."

"Smart girl," Els said, smiling like he did before. Moody was quiet, and seemed to be setting out to relight his pipe.

"I am sorry I grew angry with you before, Els," Moody said. "I am just very anxious about our current situation."

"No," Els said, with that same smile. "You got angry because you are afraid, honestly afraid, that I am right."

Moody lit his pipe, and gave it a puff. "I offered you an apology, and you seek to continue the fight?"

Els shrugged. "You're right, and I am sorry too. Like I said, my goal was not to upset you, I just felt like my thoughts needed to be heard, for Sheam's sake, and for your own."

Moody shook his head. "You'll only make her as confused as you are. She's already admitted that she's totally confused."

"No," I said, cutting in. "I don't think confusion is the right word. I honestly don't think about this sort of thing very much. I just think that the truth has yet to show itself."

— Jyre: Ransacked —

Day 5: 2:00 am

At long last I saw my tiny home again. As I approached the door every step was agony as pain jolted through my whole body. I kept discovering new ways that I had injured myself which panic and adrenaline had hidden. It was all scrapes and bruises and twisted muscles from every time I fell or pushed myself too hard, which combined into enough torture to make me want to just collapse. When I managed to stumble up to the door, I fumbled in my pocket and took out my key. It felt like a lead weight in my hand. I lifted it to the keyhole. The door swung open before I could put it in the lock. My heart leapt into my throat. I knew something was dreadfully wrong. Els never left our home unlocked. I stepped into the main room and found myself facing a nightmare.

The furniture had been smashed. Our things were strewn about all over the floor. The shutters had been ripped from the window and now lay in splinters underneath. Surprisingly, the oil lamp remained intact and its tiny flame gave the blood that seemed to coat everything a sickening orange tinge. I stepped over the shattered crockery that lay just inside the door and stared at the destruction. In a panic, I searched the place for Els, or Els's body.

I went over the place three times, but there was no trace of Els anywhere. Either they did this while he was out, he chased them off and then fled himself, or...

Or they killed him and took his body back with them. I fell to the floor with my back to the wall at the thought of them dragging off his dead body to cut it up into clothing. I was on the verge of tears in panic and fear again, but I knew I could not tarry here. I did not know who had done this.

No, yes, I did. Ranson knew where I lived. When they lost me on the rooftops they of course went straight here to get me, but they were early. My slowed pace from my injuries had saved me. The idiots, rather than lie in wait and ambush me, just tore up my home and left, defeated.

I could not stay here in fear and torment. I had to go. I did not know where, yet, but I couldn't stay here. They may come back, and I had to find Els. Maybe he went to Moody's place, or maybe to our tavern.

— Sheam: The Elevator —

Day 5: 3:00 am

My eyes opened. I had no way of knowing what time it was. I remembered the five of us drifting off to sleep, one by one. I looked up to see Els and Moody to one side, with Stephens and Foster on the other. I had slept apart from them all. Quietly I gathered myself up. Foster never did manage to find oil for more torches, but the sleeping men only needed the one right now. Before I had reasoned with myself over what I was doing, I had taken one and was walking down a corridor.

The elevator haunted me. Yesterday, if it could be called that, I was afraid to try it. Now, after feeling helpless for so many hours, after falling asleep in despair and waking in the same dark, lonely, silent fortress as I had before, all I could think about was crossing the bridge and trying the elevator. I didn't want any of the men to come. They would just make things too complicated. They'd worry and fret over me, be condescending, and silly. I didn't always mind that sort of thing, but now wasn't the place for it.

I found that I knew the way. After wandering around with Stephens and Moody before, suddenly this whole network of passages didn't seem like a network anymore. In fact, I reasoned that it was barely bigger than The Circle's yard itself, though the function was lost to me. I came to the chamber with the elevator in short order. For a while I stood and looked at it in the dull red torch light. I was looking into the past, I knew, though the elevator told a tale of a past not so unlike the present.

I followed the ledge around to the threshold of the bridge, inching my feet towards the metal grating. I fixed my eyes on the elevator car at the other end of the short length—it couldn't have been longer than twenty feet—and took a tentative step. The structure groaned as I put my weight on it, but it did not budge. Tentatively, I put my other foot forward, ready to spring back at the first sign of it giving way. I took another step, and grew in confidence that I would make it to the other side. I gathered myself up about my shoulders, and moved forward, taking each step one at a time, my hands going from rail to rail to steady myself, more afraid of losing my balance than touching the dusty, cobweb covered iron bars.

Then my hands were on the bars of the elevator shaft, and I found quickly that the gate wouldn't open. Had the door rusted shut, or was it locked? I held my torch closer, examining the metal workings, looking for a latch, or a catch, or a stopper, or something. I didn't want to tug too hard. I didn't want the whole thing to wrest loose from its bonds at the ceiling and go crashing into the depths.

I felt silly coming all the way over here only to be stopped by an unlocked door that wouldn't open. On the other hand, this was a perfectly good reason to go back. It wouldn't open, but there was no reason it shouldn't open. I examined it again. Just a good solid tug should, logically, open it. I frowned, braced myself for the worst, and gave the door a good yank. It opened. I also had to keep myself from falling backwards and from screaming at the sudden shock of the structure trembling under me. Then all was still, and I hadn't screamed.

I was more confident now in the stability of the structure. I went around the door and stepped gingerly into the elevator car, which gave a few inches as I stepped inside. Naturally I clung to the door now, expecting the whole thing to fall down, chopping me in half. Slowly I relaxed, and let myself go. It seemed to be holding steady now.

And for a moment I began to doubt that this was even an elevator at all. I looked it over, and over, and could find nothing that resembled controls. All I could fathom was that the pulley had to be hand operated, but if I understood simple machines and the basic laws of gravity, it looked to me like there was only one way this car was going down, and that would be at the speed of falling.

I bared my teeth as I spotted a bit in the corner which was completely covered with cobwebs. With nose wrinkled and brow lowered, I grabbed the edge of my sleeve and pulled it over my hand. With the makeshift glove, I pushed the cobwebs out of the way, determined to restrain any recoil from the sight of creepy crawlies scurrying away. Nothing moved by the webs. I was the only thing living in here. But a surge of excitement mixed with fear washed over me as I saw what had to be a small button. As the moment drew near, I hesitated. Was I ready for this? Could I deal with whatever awaited me down there?

Once again, I gathered myself up about my shoulders, and with breath held and the other hand gripping the edge of the elevator car firmly, I hit the button. Nothing happened. The button shifted under my fingertip with only the sound of the thin rusted metal disc scraping against the metal plate on which it was positioned. Insistently, I hit it again. Nothing. I hit it a third time for good measure. It stuck to my finger as I pulled it away and then fell to the floor with a tap and a clatter. *Taff it.*

I let out a sigh and sank to my knees. That was that, and I had to be satisfied with that. As gently as I came, I stepped back onto the bridge, and closed the door behind me. Uneventful, but the alternative could have been much worse. At least now my curiosity was sated. But I would have to ask Daelus why he never mentioned the elevator.

— Jyre: Competing with Rats —

Day 5: 3:00 am

I pounded on the door for a fourth time, and still there was no answer. I could have tried climbing up the side of the building to get in through one of the windows, but I was sure that Moody kept his home locked tight when he wasn't here, and I had no reason to be here if he wasn't. Giving up, I looked around frantically once more. On the entire way to this place, which I remembered with startling accuracy from my previous trip, I kept looking over my shoulder in fear that I was being stalked. I never saw any sign of it then, and still didn't now.

I had only one more place to look; The Red Dragon Inn. I wasn't sure what time it was, but even if they were closed there should be someone there late cleaning and maybe they could tell me something. There was a problem though, and it didn't dawn on me until I was halfway there; Ranson also knew about the Inn. I was lucky when I clumsily came to my apartment and found no trap waiting. Maybe this time I wouldn't be so lucky. This time I would be careful.

I didn't approach the Inn from the usual way; instead I made a big loop and came around from the back. The way the Inn was nestled into the street, I had to travel down the block the long way before coming back on the other side. As I suspected, the lights were still on in the service areas of the building, the door was open, and a single man in a soiled white apron was dumping some black water into a sewer drain. It was the innkeeper. There wasn't a trace of anyone else.

A growl from my stomach distracted me from my plan. Lying in wait, I watched as the man went inside, and then returned to the street with a large tin pail. He lifted a heavy ceramic lid off a pot big enough for me to fit inside, and dumped the contents of the pail into it. I could see that it was the remains of food. The inn grew some of its own vegetables in a lot nearby; the pot must have been for compost. As soon as he went back inside I made a dash for the pot, but the vermin had already beaten me to it. I beat off two rats that had begun to squeeze into a crack at the edge of the lid with my fist before me; straining under its weight, I pulled it open and stared inside. A cloud of putrid odor and flies stung my face, making me nearly stumble away. Inside the pot it was too dark to distinguish the fresh food debris from the rotting garbage. A roar of encouragement from my stomach propelled my hand forward, fishing out a bit of bread that was half soaked in the juices from a rotting tomato.

I sank down to my knees with my nose held and began to gnaw at it as the rats, content that I was done, swarmed into the pot; the removed lid an open invitation to feast. I ate the bread, even the soiled part, and looked back at the pot with a feeling of disgust. This was horrible; what was I doing?

Just then I heard a shout, and the sound of the innkeeper running. I darted away into the shadows. He was cursing and smacking the rats with a lit torch, but they were emboldened by the feeding frenzy and didn't scatter the way he would have liked. Unfortunately the torchlight destroyed the

darkness of my hiding place, and soon he was shouting at me.

"Li'le brat! Scrawny rat! Get the taff off!"

I picked myself up quickly and began to run, thankful he was content to just yell at me and not hit me with his torch too. Then I heard him running and soon I felt his strong grasp around my forearm which spun me around. I wanted to kick at him, but instead my ankle failed and I just fell. He pulled me back up quickly, the torchlight covering his wrinkly, stubbly face like water trickling down a rocky hillside.

"Oy, Li'le brat, I know you! Saw you at the bar! Someuns looking for you!"

I didn't say anything, but my eyes grew wider.

"The fat un who dragged you off last time, and some otheruns. Worth your weight in dust motes, the lot uhya. Toldun to shove off."

"Please let me go," I whispered with a squeak.

He let go, and I dropped to my elbows with a crack and a wince.

"Don't let me catch you around here again. Same goes for the otheruns. I don't need your types!"

Then he turned around and left. The fear quickly turned to anger; I wanted to rush at his back and sink a dagger into him. Then anger turned to remorse; I couldn't believe I was thinking that way. I wanted to ask him more, to find out what had happened with Ranson and the fake Ramirez, but more than that I wanted more of the food, even the rotting garbage.

Instead I just ran, like always. Was this what was to become of me, now? Stealing garbage from rotting pots? Competing with the rats for food? I was even more pathetic than I realized.

— Lytha: A Stranger's Company —

Day 5: 8:00 am

Something. I felt...something. An ache, creeping through...something.

My body. It was my body. It *hurt*. There was a coldness; something hard. I didn't know where I ended and it began.

I tried to move. I felt constrained. But it felt *different*. It was all around me. It was not hard or cold. It was warm. Soft? It could not have been *soft*.

I moved...It was my shoulders. I could get a sense of them now, just a shift, a tug—slowly. Ache flushed through me. It reminded me where everything was. Something was pressed against my chest. —my chin? I breathed. My chin pressed against my chest as it filled...and my back—my back was a field of anguish. My neck tightened. My jaw clenched.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. Soon they would come for me again, and then the pain in my back would be just a distant footnote. What was next? Would they start *removing pieces of me*?

No...they said it was over. I confessed to everything. No more questions. Now they would either forget about me, leave me here until I died...maybe push in scraps of food once a week—or they would come for me one last time, and I could only beg for a quick end.

Something was touching my cheek. Something cool. Was it...wind? A

draft. I took another breath. The air smelled of dirt and pollen.

I pulled myself up before my body knew what it was doing. A layer of thick fabric fell from me into my lap. There was light all around me and the sounds of moving plants and chattering insects. There was gentle warmth on my face and dampness all about me. Quickly then my vision and my senses came into focus.

Streaks of light were pouring through the dusty air from holes in the vaulted ceiling above. Weeds reached up to the light from beneath overturned stones and between whatever edges their seeds could find earth. Toppled columns and cracked walls surrounded me. An opening, not a dozen feet away, was filled with bright blue sky over a distant horizon. I was free.

The joy hit me before the doubt could surface, and soon the confusion and the pain were washed away. I gasped, barely able to withstand the shock of my good fortune. But as I pulled the blanket away and tried to stand, the reality of my wounds sent me back into a trembling, ruined state. I fell back to the ground with breath held, fighting desperately to contain the cry of anguish as the reminders of my torture stung my every bone.

Where, was I; and what, was I doing here? Had I been rescued? I remembered...*something*. Less of an event and more a...*proximity*. Someone had taken me out of that place. I didn't know who he was, nor could I remember anything being thrown back into my cell and waking up here in this strange place.

"You do not even know his NAME!"

"He could be a Hammerite and do even worse to you!"

"Shut up," I growled the faintest of growls. I felt all the muscles in my neck clench as I imagined myself strangling the throat of whatever it was that whispered to me. As soon as I was satisfied that it was gone, I quickly turned my mind back to where I was. It looked like some sort of abandoned temple. It wasn't Hammerite. It wasn't pagan either. Ruins. Forgotten. A relic from a forgotten time and a forgotten people. Why did he bring me here? Then the doubt, ever an annoying instinct, crept in to say its piece. Was I free after all? Was I now only to be a different type of prisoner? Did I now *belong* to him?

I fought these wretched thoughts away and turned my attention to my ruined state. My arm, it still had that...thing they put into it. I began to shake and hyperventilate as I looked at what was left of my shoulder. Metal shafts protruded from my flesh, which was seared, cracked and torn. I was amazed I had not bled to death where I had lain. I shut my eyes and turned away from it. The sight put me right back into that cell. I would have to find some way of getting it out...without losing the arm. I had already lost so much...

Someone was coming. My instincts told me to flee, screaming; *"Now they will come and take you back to Cragcleft! And you know what? You deserve it!"*, but my body could not do as I commanded. I grew stiff. My eyes searched for a place to hide. I tried to crawl away from my resting place, heading mindlessly to the far side of the chamber. Moments after I *knew* that someone was coming, I heard the sound of feet sweeping through grass and crushing loose gravel. Then I saw the silhouette as he came into view of the

opening, framed by the bright sky behind him. He was alone. I had only to reach out to his mind, touch and see if he was friend or foe, but somehow I hesitated.

"Oh, you're up," he said.

I looked up at him, trying desperately to not let my vision be twisted and distorted by my mind. My eyes were adjusting to the brightness, but I still found it difficult to focus. He entered the room with a casual stride, though I at once felt that he was trying desperately to hide a limp. He did not approach me, but instead went across the chamber to lay a sack he had been carrying atop a large flat block. He was a little over six feet tall, and dressed in bedraggled pleasant attire similar to what they gave all the prisoners, only his had a large red hand painted onto his tunic. He was skinny but not gaunt, like he had eaten well and it was tightly packed. I did not dare look at his face. I didn't want to risk seeing something hideous in his eyes.

"While you were sleeping I decided to go scout around, gather food; do a little hunting," he said, but his voice was quickly followed by a chorus from inside my head.

"Only because you can't see them does not mean that they won't come!"

"And where else did he go? To them, I bet!"

"You deserve it, you Betrayer. You deserve everything!"

I clenched and strained as before, uttering "Go away, go away," over and over under my breath, lips barely moving as I chanted it so often and so quickly it ceased to become words and became merely a mantra in a fruitless attempt to blot out anything but it. But it wasn't the mantra that brought me to my senses, but modesty. I found myself attempting to cover my body from his view. Not because I was dressed indecently, which I was, but if my body was to be seen, I didn't want it to be in this bloodied soiled state.

"Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

I kept my eyes averted. He was obviously waiting for an answer. "Who are you?" was the only answer I gave him.

"Oh, uh, Ghost," he said with a grin. "That's my name."

"The name is not who he is!"

"He's hiding something. He doesn't want you to know!"

I commanded the voices away again, but could not help but heed their warning. Finally, reluctantly, and without looking at him, I reached out to touch his mind.

He nodded as well, and began to undo his bundle. "You slept all night," he said. "To be honest I tried to stay awake to keep watch. Couldn't—no way;—kept nodding off. But I never saw you move, not even once. Still, it was for the best. Nothing happened during the night, and if I hadn't slept I'd be too much of a mess right now to have gotten us some food. Turnip?"

I wasn't listening. I was searching. Everything he said passed through me, and I understood, but I wanted to find something *else*. Where was the deceit? The eventual betrayal? Where was the part where he wanted *payment* for what he had done for me? I felt that had to be *somewhere* within him, but I was grasping at thin air.

The next thing I knew, he was standing before me offering some kind of round root. "Hey, come on. It's not that bad. I had to search around these hills for hours before I found something edible. At least try a little. Or a lot. You'll feel better. I know I did." I looked up at his face. It was thin, like the rest of him, with a long chin and high cheek bones; broad forehead, with a long nose which seemed to cling to his upper lip. His skin was pale, hair short and dark, and his eyes...his eyes I still avoided.

I didn't want his food. I didn't trust him. Fortunately the instinct for survival outweighed paranoia, and eventually I gave in to the extreme hunger I felt. I grabbed it. It was hard, dirty, and tasted awful; but he said it was food and my mouth had accepted that as fact. I'd see what my stomach thought later.

"Poison! Don't you know? Such things are deadly!"

"goawaygoaway..."

He sat down across from me, and began to gnaw on one as well. I now found myself looking directly at his face, forgetting my earlier fears. I wanted to see his reaction to the awful bit of dirt he had demanded that I eat. From the way he was devouring it, it seemed as if he was used to eating things like this. Or, maybe he was just very, very hungry.

"Why were you in there? Prison." he asked, after he had inhaled his food and sat there listlessly for a moment.

Was it another trick of the Hammerites, to get more confessions out of me? Before the voices offered their insights I resumed my mantra, repeating it so quickly and with such intensity, that any other thoughts would surely be drowned. Only when I was again satisfied did I consider answering. I couldn't. Even if I had wanted to share that with him, I couldn't have brought myself to. Instead, I just echoed back to him, "Why were you there?"

His face grew irate, and he looked away. "The past few days have been nothing but insanity for me. Was abducted by strange men, interrogated, and then shoved in there."

No, he knew more...he was hiding something. I sensed confusion from him, and anger, but not towards me. Still, what he said seemed both true and not true. I wanted to know more, but still I hesitated. Why was I so afraid?

"You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to. I understand," he said, his irritation fading back into his listless state. Somehow, I felt that he didn't really even care why I was in prison. He only cared that I was now out. He was going back through his sack of spoils, and pulled out a prize which I knew he coveted. It was a burnt bird. Why did he force me to eat that root when he had this? He would force me to watch him eat it, no doubt. I glanced dejectedly back at the tuber in my hand; marred by mere teeth scratches for all I had managed to eat. He sat before me working at it with a sharp object for several minutes before handing me, to my astonishment, a seared bit of its flesh. "Funny thing about hunting with fire crystals—it cooks the bird for you," he told me with a smile, the bit of meat dangling before me.

This time the voice didn't warn me it was poison. I suspected it wanted the meat as much as I did. I snatched it from his hand and wolfed it down.

He continued for a while, working off bits and parts of it, eating some, giving some to me. Together we cleaned it down to a skeleton—and even some of that we ate. Finally he returned to the sack for the last time and produced two large shining water crystals. “I nearly crapped myself when I found these,” he told me. “I was sure we’d both be done for if I didn’t find some water, but even if I did I had no idea how I’d get any back to you. Then I found a little mountain steam, and what do you know?”

He cracked off a bit of the top of one with his makeshift knife, and gave it to me. The edges of the crystal seemed to melt against my lips. I sucked the pure, cool water from the crystal a slow mouthful at a time, diligently gentle to not crack or shatter the whole thing and have all of my drink in my lap. I saw he was not so timid with his own crystal, tipping it back over his head and quaffing it with the finesse of one who has clearly done this many times. Far too quickly I found that mine was empty, and the brittle remains were soon to follow, the crystallized water crunched between my teeth a fragment at a time. I licked the residue off my fingers, desperately wanting more.

He had been watching me finish. Finally I looked back up at him, and rewarded his quiet patience with an admission. “I was in a villa. In the woods, in the north...and then they came.”

“Was it a Hammerite villa?”

“No, it belongs to—to...” I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Do not tell him! How do you know he isn’t one of hers?”

“He could go to her and tell all! You will be ruined!”

“Betrays you he wills to her, and then she will gives him her pretties and he will swimsie divine in her milky rapture!”

“goawaygoawaygoaway...”

I hadn’t wanted to tell him, but now I felt that I needed to, if only to be defiant to the voices. “To this rich lady. No Hammer villa. But I—” I stopped. No, voices or not, why was I even telling him this? It was none of his business.

The long pause seemed to have made him very curious, “But what?”

“Nothing,” was the only answer that came into my mind. I looked nervously down to my hands. “I have no idea what the Hammers wanted there. It was just an unguarded villa. I was looting it.”

“Well I imagine that the Hammerites are going to be very, very mad for a very long time, and they’ll be looking for you, and for me too, so we had better lie low.”

For him, too? I found more and more that I wanted to trust him. “I told them more than I wanted. I can’t remember what I told them; but definitely far too much.” I hesitated a moment.

I wanted to ransack his brain and take what I wanted to know, but something kept preventing me. And as I asked my next question, I found that I had accepted this. “Why did you save me?”

He didn’t waste a breath before replying. “I could hear what they were doing to you in there! I couldn’t just let that happen!” Then he seemed to calm down, getting a grip on his outburst. “Besides, I was on my way out anyway, and you’re not very heavy,” he added with a faint laugh.

"Why me?" I pressed.

He scratched his head, like he was trying to make up an answer, or he didn't want to say the answer. "To be fair I let a hell of a lot of people out of there. Most didn't make it to the exit of course...but..."

"But I am the only one you carried."

"Well you were unconscious..."

"I am sure many others were."

"Couldn't just leave a lady like that..."

"Plenty of whores in there for you to rescue."

"I heard them torturing you, Lytha. To be quite honest, I was only out to save my own skin...but when I heard them torturing you I just couldn't leave without you. Springing everyone else just made things...easier for me to slip by." He knew my name; who I was. My reply came slowly, formed long before he had finished speaking. "So you saved Lytha because she is Lytha."

He seemed to disassemble before my eyes. To be fair I was accusing his selfless deed of having selfish motivations. Maybe he didn't realize it himself..

"Alright...you've got me. Yes, I've heard of you. But I think a lot of guys in my profession have heard of Lytha; in our profession."

I didn't know what to say to that. Still, I was thankful. He saved my life...what was left of it anyway. I did not believe in random acts of kindness, and I could see that I still had no reason to believe. He wanted to be known as the guy who rescued the great Lytha from Cragscleft. Fine. He could have it. "Thank you," I finally told him, "for saving my life."

It seemed he really enjoyed my show of gratitude. "By the way, thank you for making it so easy. You're excellent at being light and being carried."

I snorted, but maybe to cover up a flicker of a smile. "I don't remember a thing about it. I must have been out cold."

"You didn't even complain when you fell on the floor!"

I let my amusement show this time, more in my tone than my face. "Didn't I?"

"No. You were a good escapee."

"Oh well. At least that's one good thing about me." I said. Feeling less stiff, I found myself tucking my knees up against my chest. The blanket which I had been using to cover myself snagged on the metal fused to my arm, forcing a wince of surprise and pain to my face.

He was watching me...he felt...empathic. "Was awful nice of those guys to give us that blanket..." But then the empathy was gone, and it was replaced by confusion—or was it my own?

"Who gave you the blanket?" I said immediately.

He was fretting, and unsure. He did not want to answer, not because he wanted to keep it from me, but because he did not know how to explain it. "The strangest thing happened as we were getting out. A bunch of guys were waiting for us. Said they worked for Nightfall...this crime boss...gangster, small time. But there was this huge reward for getting you out." He was angry. I felt it intensifying...but I didn't need to. I could see it on his face.

"You never told me why you were in there..." I sensed only confusion from him now, not deceit. He seemed far too simpleminded to be crafty, at least right now.

"I've got no taffing clue!" he blurted, growing defensive. "All I have is this crazy idea that Nightfall abducted me and threw me in there just so I could rescue you, but that's crazy. How could he have known I'd do that?" he said, trailing off.

"You're predictable," I said in half a whisper, the thought escaping my lips. "Eh..." he said, giving half a frown.

"He knew you could survive, and he knew that you..." I paused, giving his mind a light brush as I thought. Yes, what I was sensing had to be true. "Have a need to defend the weak, especially when the weak has breasts."

His pale skin flushed. He knew I was right, and he didn't seem like he was going to bother denying it.

"So you were played for a fool and it worked," I continued, feeling emboldened.

"Not quite...you see; all of those men who were ready to whisk you away to Nightfall's clutches are dead now."

"I figured something had to have happened...because clearly I am with you still and not them. Why?"

"Another group showed up. Soldiers from a rival. Only they weren't there for you; they were there for them."

I lowered my brow at his words. It was starting to get complicated, and he was growing uneasy again.

"All I could do was escape with you away from their fighting before we both got killed."

"So if the others had not shown up, then you would have handed me over," I told him, feeling my hope in his genuineness fade.

"No!" he shouted, feeling cornered.

"Yes," I corrected him. "You would have."

He sighed, and seemed to accept my answer as the truth. "It was all happening so quickly; I didn't know what to do. They seemed like they were on your side."

"I have no side," I whispered, looking away from him.

"Listen," he demanded. "I have no grand plan for what's what and what to do when. I have to live each second deciding what to do next, because I never know what's going on and a guess is the best I can ever manage. That's why you're out of there, and why we're both alive now. It's all dumb luck and guesswork. Maybe you would have ended up with them and became their prisoner instead of the Hammers'. But that didn't happen, and so here you are; alive and free."

I accepted it. I had no choice. I was out of there, and alive. "Who is Nightfall?"

"Nightfalls! Wants you in his grasp!"

"Uses his dark Magiks on you! Turn you into a Beastie!"

"And You Deserve it! You Deserve it all! Burn in Hell!"

The voices crowded me out, overrunning me and toppling my defenses as if they had been doing nothing to keep me sane all along. I wanted to just be swept away by it, to be free in the madness and to never again have the strain or agony of fighting against it. I could just give in, let it take over, and then nothing I ever did again would be my fault. I would be free.

"I told you all I know already. He's...this guy, this fancy crime lord socialite schmuck, I tried to sell him this trinket, because I have this curse..."

Something that he said broke me free of the sway. The voices went silent just as suddenly as they had cut through. "Curse?" I said with alarm.

"Yes. It's a long story. No, no, it's a short story. I robbed a tomb, got a trinket, and got cursed. Now the dead rise wherever I go and chase me and try to kill me."

I just stared at him. The voices were silent. I felt foolish to think that my mantra had been effective in keeping them at bay, and even more foolish to think that I could give myself completely to the madness and have it carry me to whatever end they saw fit. No, the madness would betray me then, too. I let out a long breath, suddenly feeling absurd in the sanity that chose now of all times to surface. "I too am cursed."

"Oh," he said, tilting his head a little.

I was quiet. I didn't know what to say on that, I only knew that I was. "Am I a prisoner here?"

He didn't answer as quickly as I would have liked. He seemed to be pondering the answer in fact. My intensifying glare seemed to encourage him to words.

"No! No, you're not! But..."

"How can there be a 'but?'"

"But if Nightfall wants proof that you've been rescued, then I'm going to need you to show your face."

"What?" I said, feeling myself once again grow angry and distrusting.

"See? See? See, see, see?"

"Bound and tied, like a beast, dragged behind, a prize to be delivered to the great greedy one!"

For once the voices and I seemed to be on the same page. "So you can get your reward and they can take me prisoner?"

"Okay, you're right, bad idea...bad idea...but...aren't you at all curious?"

"Why would I be curious?"—

"I'm curious as hell. I know you have to be. Why would he go through so much trouble?"

"He didn't...He put you through the trouble."

"No, trust me, this was a very elaborate plot, and there were a lot more guys involved with it than even the ones I saw. I know it. There's a big deal behind this."

"Many, many hands, many mouths, all wanting you, wanting you, you, you, you!"

I almost lost my senses; almost ran, or lunged for him, or tried to kill myself—I wasn't sure what I would have done if I hadn't forced myself to take

control back. Slowly, calming, breathing deep, I attempted a return to rational thought. "He already betrayed you once...why risk it?"

"Because I'm an idiot?"

I sighed. He was right, he was.—A brave, charitable, greedy lusty idiot. "What do you want from me?"

He blinked. "Uhm, what do you mean?"

"I'm helpless. If I can even walk I wouldn't get far. I am barely strong enough to eat and talk. I am totally at your mercy. So, what do you want?"

He shook his head. "Nothing," he told me. "Honest."

I couldn't be sure. Even as I probed, I felt a haze of needs and wants floating in and out of his consciousness; but I could not discern which of them involved me. "Do you want money?" I asked him.

He shook his head, frowning.

"Yes you do...you want the money Nightfall offered you."

"Argh, yes, okay, true...but I do not want *your* money."

"Do you want me to accompany you and allow you to present me before Nightfall, so you can get your gold?"

"Yes! Yes! It was his plot all along! All else is a lie!"

He wanted to run away. He didn't like these questions. He wasn't used to thinking things through like I was now forcing him to. It was true, he wanted the money, but he didn't want to do what he knew he had to do to get it. "I won't..." he began with a stammer. "I won't make you do anything against your will. I'd rather...I'd rather turn myself back into the Hammerites than do that to you."

"Lies! Lies, lies, lies, lies!"

No, it was genuine. This time I hushed the voice as if it were no more than a persistent child. "I see. Then that is not going to happen. But I am still at your mercy. So what are you going to do with me?"

"I don't know...help you get better?"

"Are you a doctor?"

"No," he said sheepishly.

"Just...going to keep feeding me and hope none of my wounds get infected and I die?"

"I can try to...find some help."

"It is you he wants! Your flesh, your supple flesh!"

I gave in. I said what it wanted me to say. "And I suppose that after you get me back in working order you'll want to have sex with me."

"No!" he shouted, immediately turning red again.

"Lies! He cannot deny! He craves you; and just like the other, he will have you!"

"Tearing at your skin, forcing, forcing!"

I had to push for it. I wanted to know. If he had lied, I would have been able to tell. Still...the idea was definitely floating around that cloud of needs and wants inside his brain. "Oh, so before I am back in working order then?" I continued. "You will have me now, here, helpless to stop you." Just as I had been tempted to give into the voices before, I found that now I surely had; but

there was no relief involved. No abyss to fall into. Just the cruelty of my words directed at another, rather than inwards to myself.

"Cut that out! I am not interested in having sex with you!"

"Scared?" I wasn't sure where that came from, but somehow now the voices were silent. He was scared. He had good reason to be.

"Look, just rest up, and be on your way. I don't want or need anything from you."

"I settle my debts, Ghost. You saved my life. I'll not have that hanging over me."

"Worthless to him! How could you be of any use? He holds the power, not you!"

"Empty, empty, no value, no worth, what good are you to HIM? He does not want you!"

He puffed and looked back at me, frowning. "Okay, look, there may be one thing."

"Oh?"

"Now you are begging for scraps!"

"Take his petty leavings, wretched dog!"

It didn't matter what he said or I said; if I agreed with the voices, if I fought against them, it was always the same. Hatred, distrust, misery...I just begged him to resume speaking so I would have something besides *It* to listen to.

"This curse of mine, you see. If you happen to know anything...anyone who could maybe help me with it."

"I...don't know anyone who's into that kind of thing."

"See? See? Of no use to him! Worthless! He doesn't need you, don't want you—you can't do anything to repay him!"

"Well if you're dead-set on paying me back, that's really the only thing of value to me right now."

I hesitated, but there was nothing else to do. "I'll try to find someone who can break your curse, Ghost. Then we will be even."

"Lies! Empty promises! Even now you deceive him! Treacherous! You now plot to betray him as well!"

He nodded, but wasn't smiling anymore. "I wish I could stay and rest, but there's something I have to do. I am still going to The Circle. I have to find out what's going on. I promise...I swear, I will not tell them where you are. You're not my prisoner. You don't have to stay here. I don't want you wandering off into the wilderness and bleeding to death though, so if you do decide to leave, please be careful. No one but me knows you're here, and it may be safer to stay until you're strong enough to fend for yourself. Whatever you do, I will be back to check on you as soon as I can.—Before the sun goes down. This is the only safe place for me after the sun goes down."

I nodded. "I'll stay."

He nodded back, but now smiled a bit.

I would not be able to silence the voices; that much I now knew. I also could not be sure how much control it had over me. I didn't know if I could

tell the voices from my own thoughts, but I had to believe that I could. I had to believe that I still had possession of my own mind, and that this *other* was a parasite, and not an artifact of my own self. I had to cling to that thought, even if I didn't truly believe it. I wanted to thank him for what he had done, again, and tell him that I trusted him, but instead all I could say was, "And if you send Nightfall's men to find me here and claim your reward, I *will* find you, and I *will* kill you."

He stopped smiling. "Right," he said, as he got up to go.

— Jyre: Contemplation —

Day 5: 8:00 am

I saw his feet first, sticking out from behind the bed. My heart was like ice. I suddenly knew without having to look—this was his blood! I stepped around the bed to find him lying on the floor, stiff fingers curled around the hilt of a bloody dagger. At least it was not all his blood then, I thought grimly. He had been stabbed in his chest, in his legs. His throat had been cut.

I stumbled backwards. My back slammed against the wall. I slid down, drew my knees up against my chest, wrapped my arms around my legs and wept...

I awoke, and found that I was really crying. I had to stop; it was only a dream after all. I gathered myself up from where I had lain to rest and looked around. Woods. I was in the woods.

For a moment I couldn't even remember how I got there. Slowly it came back to me; Ranson, the chase, then the canals, and the rooftops, my confrontation with the fake Ramirez, and then the ruin of the hideaway and Els missing, maybe dead, maybe alive, finding nothing at Moody's home, stealing garbage to eat, and then running from the innkeeper. I kept running, trying to get out of The City, getting through the wall and escaping into the woods.

There was something other than that, though; something worse. Why had I been running from those men through the canals and the rooftops? Did I have something that they wanted? Yes. The memories came back like I was being swallowed up by a thick black liquid; the forbidden district. The scroll. They wanted the vile thing I still held in my pocket. How had I gotten it, though? I didn't want to remember. Something told me that there was a reason why the events escaped my mind; they were so horrible I could not bear to think of them. Yet, as I felt its weight tugging at the pouch of clothing which held it, I could not help but get a sense of some *movement*, the feeling of being surrounded by long twisting *shapes*, like black worms the size of tree trunks.

I pushed the thought away. I felt as if all my nerves were going wild at once; my body felt hot and yet cold, and like I was being coated by needles. I grabbed at the dirt and the grass as if I was clinging madly for something real to convince myself that I was not going to slip into madness. Slowly the

feeling went away, and all I was left with was a vague idea that I had gotten the scroll from the forbidden district, and that I needed to keep it away from Ranson. I accepted it as being that simple.

I propped myself up against a tree. It was morning. I was safe here, but I could not stay. I got moving. It wasn't long until I found a stream. (The forest was littered with them.) I drank, and then pulled off all my clothes and washed them, trying desperately to get the blood stains out. It didn't work, but I didn't see how it really mattered. It was how I had been taught, but in the end, it was just filthy clothes for a filthy person. Satisfied that I could do no more, I bathed, and then tended to my own wounds. Nothing seemed as bad as they felt. My arms and legs of course were bruised, cut, and scraped, but there had been no broken bones. I was horribly sore, and the wounds stung as I cleaned them in the river water.

I walked downstream for about an hour before it came to a place where it fell over some steep rocks, and I could see the city wall at a distance. I sat down on the rocks by the stream, dipping my hand in the water, and watched. I could see the city gates further off, and the trickle of traffic that passed through them. Four guards checked every person through, asking them their business and checking their possessions. I had avoided the gate last night, instead using the place where the stream entered The City to escape the wall. It was a tight squeeze but I had used it fairly regularly in the past.

I sighed and dropped my gaze. I had no desire to go back there again. My eyes roamed over the rolling green land that eventually led to the woods and beyond, to The Lady's realm. Truly, was The City any different from that now? The impossibility of the situation was creeping up on me. All of the places where Els and I could possibly meet were no longer safe. In all likelihood I could wander The City for days and never run into him; years even. I didn't even know if he was still alive.

My eyes went to the road again. Where did it lead? To another city? A smaller town? I could follow it and see. I could forget about The Lady, and Els, and Daelus. Better yet, I could go to the docks, stowaway on a boat and see where it would take me. I didn't know where the boats went. Maybe they followed the shore to another coastal town. Maybe there were other cities on islands. Maybe there was another land out there, a completely different place, with new people. Maybe I should find a new life, and forget all of this. I had no reason to stay. I wasn't even from here. Home was a village in the woods, and that was now gone. The only reason was revenge—and friendship—and love.

I was lifted from my idle thoughts when my eyes picked out something on the horizon that didn't belong. Several plumes of smoke were rising up above the treetops. Their path in the sky told me that the sources of the smoke were moving. I didn't know what to make of it. As I followed the trails of smoke into the sky, I noticed how the sky was darkening. It was a good thing. The days were always so hot now, some shady clouds and cool rain was always welcome.

Feeling comforted by such simple ideas as rain and an escape from the

day's heat, I turned to look in the other direction to where the clouds were small and thin. The sun's dawning rays cut through; giving everything they touched a gentle orange glow. A flight of birds passed overhead, flying in a perfect arrow formation. I followed their course, turning my head as I did. As they flew to the mountains I soon found myself staring at something I had spent many days and nights staring at before, a tall narrow structure looking like just a toy in the plain morning light and the clear air, Daelus Thresh's tower.

I didn't know what to think about that anymore. With the possibility of a new ally I was more than ready to decide that Daelus was a lost cause, but now that the new ally turned out to be an old enemy in disguise I didn't know what to believe. Again I felt the weight of the scroll in my pocket, as if it had willed me to remember it. I suddenly knew what I had to do, and knew that there was a reason for all that had happened so far: if I presented this scroll to Daelus, he would be forced to take me seriously. He would know how important it was and would do the right thing. It was the key, after all. It was the one thing that The Lady needed and I had.

I wanted to go now, but he would be at The Circle during the day, and I didn't want to risk going back into The City to a place where Ranson knew I might go. I would wait until dark and go to the tower, for the third and final time, and confront him. After what I had experienced, the gate guards and butler would not frighten me.

I hesitated. What if Ranson got to him first and lied to him? What if they had already struck a deal? I would have to risk it. I couldn't believe that Daelus would deal with someone so awful, as Ranson. Even if Ranson did get to him first, Daelus would never believe his lies. He was better than that.

Satisfied with my decision, I chose to look for some food. The woods might offer something to eat that wasn't garbage. Then I would sleep and, I hoped, there would be no more nightmares.