

Borrowed Confessions...

The confusion was working out well for me, as was the borrowed Hammerite uniform. Cragscleft was in shambles, but they were working double time to restore it to order.

James had quickly gotten word of Nightfall's hasty, ballsy plot to spring Lytha from Cragscleft while also making good on his charge to deliver Hammerite killers to Father Rafael, and devised a plot of his own to fill one small gap in Nightfall's essentially, but not completely successful plan. That's why I (one of the network's top agents) had been sent—to compensate for any level of success that did not include Lytha becoming James's guest.

I discreetly worked for only a moment to pick the door's lock, after which I slipped through and re-locked it behind me. Once inside, I found Brother Adam's office to be an oasis of sanity in the middle of the big mess. I didn't know how long it would take for him to comb through the old mines below the factory (they figured it was about time that place was put right, since it seemed to have contributed to the problems), but I knew it would take hours. In addition, it seemed logical that as long as no one suspected him to be in his office I wouldn't be disturbed.

He had already packed up some things for his return to The Temple of the Inquisitor, so I went through that first. Again I had to pick the lock on the small luggage, but found that it opened easier than the door. Within moments I was removing a small brown satchel, filled with loose papers and small booklets. I opened the last booklet and turned to the last entry.

I had found it; his notes from Lytha's interrogation. Using only dim light filtered through the stained glass window to my back, I began to copy, replicating everything as true to the original as I could. At least now her interrogation at the hands of The Hammerites would see some good come from it. It took me only thirty minutes to copy it all down, during which time I heard not a peep. I had my notes tucked away, and the booklet returned to the satchel exactly as I had found it, with the spine up, and the top to the left. The satchel was then returned to the luggage, which I relocked.

I would not immediately depart from the prison grounds, as a soldier deserting his post would get in trouble. Instead I fell back into the ranks. I would bide my time until I could work my way down into the mines, and an escape route presented itself.

Chapter 8

Serious Distractions

— Nightfall: The Original Design —

Day 5: 8:00 am

“Brother, we are ready to resume.”

I opened my eyes narrowly as I was wrested from my sleep. In the morning light, dimmed by the density of the wood, I saw a Hammerite soldier standing over me. As I opened my eyes wider I saw that his face was covered with sweat, and his uniform nearly covered in mud. I nodded to him slowly, and he left my side without another word. I wished then that he hadn't; without his shadow cast over my face my eyes had to face the reality of daylight.

The night had been uneventful, and my sleep un-restful. The attack I had anticipated was, as far as I could tell from the good news, unsubstantiated. As I rose and began to stow my sleeping bag I found that Richen had woken up a few hours ago and was tending to his horse. He greeted me cheerfully as he brushed the beast's legs over and over, to what end I could not fathom. From the looks of several discarded shipping crates, the new parts for the broken machine (as well as a new set of tools) had arrived during the night. Once I saw this I remembered stirring when the boxes arrived, all delivered by hand truck. It would have gone much faster if the Hammerites simply cared to employ a horse.

As far as I knew, that was the only thing that had happened. Though I had slept, it was a light sleep, and during all of it I listened: for the sound of a carrier pigeon bearing news of The Circle, or James's investigation. I listened for the sound of impending attack from our enemies; or for something much worse. That *feeling* that haunted me during the night stirred within me, but I could not form into a memory. I heard nothing other than the steady toil of the Hammerite workers repairing the machine.

To my shock Richen seemed content to breakfast upon the same grain he fed the horse, leaving me a chance to sample the Hammerite's field rations. I wasn't sure which was more palatable, but at least the field rations were meant for a human. I sat on a log with my cloak placed beneath me as a cushion (it was too hot to wear) and for my pants as a shield from the morning dew. While contemplating the bar of nearly inedible substance in my hand, I saw, to my disappointment, the news of our resuming proved to be highly exaggerated. An hour seemed to go by, and the furnaces of the machines hadn't even been lit yet.

As Thurm approached me I did not alter my gaze to watch him come, but kept them fixed on the work on the machine. As much as I wanted to trust Thurm and consider him my only ally on this expedition, I did not know if I could do so. It was not an issue of if he was a pawn of Oberon or Rafael. I knew he was neither. The problem was that he seemed to have no idea that his Order had factionalized itself all around him, and thus he would have no idea when he was betraying one side to the other. He was deeply earnest, and that earnestness ironically made him untrustworthy. He would not betray me intentionally, but through absent minded 'small talk' which he would think irrelevant. As a result, I had to keep him at arm's length, even though I

needed for him to be the one I could confide in. Finally as the sound of his boots hitting and pulling free of the slushy mud ceased, I turned my head slightly to the left to look at him. "Good morrow Brother Thurm."

"Good morrow Brother Daelus," he replied with a slight bow of the head and that smile he always wore. "I am sorry for the delay. We are *finally* about to reactivate the woodland wrecker. Wouldst thou like to accompany me as we resume progress?"

At least he had acknowledged that there had been a delay. I suspected that the request to get me up had come just a moment before the decision to delay things, and the previous order had not been updated. Nevertheless, I lifted myself up from where I sat, saying, "I would join you, yes, brother."

The furnace was roaring. Pressure in the boiler was building. Brother Thurm seemed to be growing in excitement right along with it. Log after log was thrown into the fire, and then when the jumping dials settled into the proper ranges, levers were pulled and cables unhooked. With a great thunderous roar the machine came to life, and then it was all steam and the grinding of gears. Hammerites ran to and fro, shouting orders, turning knobs, and pulling levers. Thurm seemed ready to jump out of his skin with excitement, pointing constantly to various operations and explaining them to me, though I could barely hear him over the noise, and understood very little of it.

My attention, sadly, was divided. As the machine's wheels began to break free of the mud, I could feel Brother Ivan's gaze on me. I didn't turn to look at him, instead appearing to be completely focused on the machine's stalwart attempt to wrest its wheels free of the muddy slosh they had sunken into during the long repair job.

Finally the machine lurched forward free of the mud; the massive iron bars of the treads rotating slowly around their wheels. The water that had condensed on various metal surfaces splashed free and dripped to the ground, adding more wetness to the mud. All the sounds were of metal roaring against metal, the slosh of conquered mud, and the thick heavy rumble in the ground under my feet. The machine reached its proper speed, and charged towards the woods before it.

The ancient pines before the bladed scoop at the front of the machine were pushed and lifted from their roots like simple twigs struck from a branch. The trees fell harmlessly to either side, and the men went to work, axes and hammers in hand, chopping and clearing the fallen debris from the road. They dumped the branches unceremoniously in the underbrush on either side of the path, and prepared the logs for use as fuel for the steam engine.

In spite of the magnificent display, I couldn't help but notice that something wasn't right. "Thurm, I don't understand. How are we to catch up to the other crew if we resume clearing? We will move at the same pace and never catch up with them."

He hesitated for a moment before speaking up with a slight stammer that was a little unlike him. "Oh, well, thou dost see, I merely need to discover

with certainty that the machine was in proper working order before we declared the repairs finished."

"I see. That is wise. How long do you expect to keep the machine under observation before declaring it in proper working order?" I said, skeptical that this was the real reason.

"I have not decided," Thurm replied after a very long pause. I wasn't sure if it was because he needed time to think of that answer, or if the sight of the machine working had simply taken his breath away. I expected it to be a combination of the two.

"Well it seems to me to be in perfect working order, but I will defer to your knowledge and experience."

"Yes, yes, it does seem perfect, does it not?" he beamed.

I paused, looking to him with a raised brow. "Then you agree that we should halt deforestation and proceed?"

His glowing grin faded just slightly, he glanced over to me, and then grinned even wider. "Actually I believe this means we can do both! Thou dost see; I slightly altered the design. The destruction of key components gave me the freedom to do as I did see fit to re-attain functionality, as did the mandate to get this mission accomplished at a high priority. Thus in the urgency of the command and the, I do admit, vagueness of my requests; none asked questions about the parts I did order, for thou dost see, none but I knew exactly what was damaged and what actually needed to be replaced. 'Tis a disadvantage to being a specialist in The Order's newest field of progress that most of mine brothers simply do not know what I am speaking about, but in this case it worked to an advantage after all! The capacity of the boiler hath now been increased by almost twenty percent! I didst not only replace damaged parts, but perfectly good parts that were simply of a design caliber several orders lower than what was truly needed. For example, the carbon content of several of the iron pieces was much too high, making them hard and brittle, when more elastic pieces were needed to allow them to give and bend slightly without breaking. That is why I didst specify that the pieces come from the Westsmith foundry rather than the Saint Bunten one. The machine is now even stronger than before; faster, sturdier, with an armored boiler, and even more agile. The same accident shalt not happen twice, and we should be caught up with the other machines before noon."

Brother Thurm was very nearly foaming at the mouth. However, one thing that he had said stuck with me; he believes that few of his brethren understand him. He meant his work, of course, but I was certain that he did not distinguish between his work and himself as a person. "So, you have made quite a breakthrough. How was it that you came upon these decisions in the field without the use of your drafting table? Clearly such alterations demanded precise calculations." The concern was false; I was merely making an attempt to seem like I was someone who had an understanding, even a very small one, of what he does, in order to get him on my side.

"Aha, true!" he said, raising his index finger. "That wouldst have been the case were these new alterations! However, 'tis in actuality my original

design! Hadst I been given the materials and work force I needed when the machine was originally proposed, it wouldst have been this way from the start! But no, they did demand that I, quote...scale back...unquote, my design in order to fit how much gold..." here Brother Thurm paused, as if the word had a dreadful taste to it, "they felt they could devote to the project."

I smiled myself, slightly. Thurm had a streak of rogue in him, it seemed. "Then congratulations on seeing your original vision come to pass. You must be very proud."

His smile faded into a modest expression, though he could not hide the look of excitement in his eyes. "Pleased. I am pleased. Pride is for The Builder, not a servant as myself."

"Yes, of course," I responded quietly. "Your men must be also very pleased at such a job well done, and so quickly."

"My brothers in the corps of engineers do not boast and carry themselves about with a self-congratulatory manner as our kin the soldiers do. However I shalt not speak ill of the soldiers, for their work to clear the road and prepare the wood to fuel the machines is invaluable, and my brothers the engineers, strong though they may be, are not meant for that kind of labor. We are the thinkers and the craftsmen."

So it was true; there was a division, maybe even animosity, between the two types of Hammerites. He referred to the soldiers as kin, but to the engineers as his brothers. I could not be sure if Thurm's men saw things the way he did, but it was clear that even beyond simple familiarity he felt higher regard for the engineers than he did the soldiers, whom he saw as overly proud work-grunts, whose place is to be a servant of the craftsman. I chose my next words carefully. "But without the strong arms, the brain and the heart cannot do the acts they so yearn to do."

"Or the soul," he added. "But 'tis not also true that without the brain, the heart, and the soul; those strong arms, no matter how strong there are, are useless even idle, the playthings of evil?"

He was more bold than I had expected, and I was satisfied. I would not encourage this any farther, as I was certain that Ivan, who represented a third and distinct type of Hammerite, the clergy, was listening, and I did not wish for him to attempt to drive the soldiers and the engineers apart for his own advantage. He may have been the sole clergyman on this expedition, but clergymen were used to being in charge, and regardless of his orders from Oberon, he was definitely not happy about being third in command under Chispin and Thurm.

Even as the machine tore into the woods and progressed many yards ahead, the Hammerites were still putting away camp. It wasn't that they particularly cared about leaving debris in the woods; it was that they simply did not wish to leave anything of value behind. I was preoccupied with the absence of my driver, and the fact that the horse was not yet ready to pull the cart. Only several minutes went by before Richen showed himself again, seeming distraught and slightly out of breath.

"Sorry Guv, is jus' tha' I need t'find Suzy a bit o' water," he said to me

emphatically.

Thurm replied before I could even defer to him. "Oh, thou shouldst have asked at once. We did locate a stream not far from here which we used to replenish our stores and to refill the boiler. Come, I wilt have some of mine brothers show thee the way!"

"Ah, much obliged from me and me 'orse!" Richen replied, though I was puzzled that he could pronounce obliged normally but not horse.

As I observed, Thurm ended up going along with Richen and one of the other Hammerites, probably because he wanted someone new to talk to about his great achievement with the machine. When they returned I found that they seemed to have made friends; in fact, Richen was telling Thurm about what you need to do to properly keep a horse, and how a horse is more like a co-worker than a machine. I felt that in Richen's case 'wife' may have been a better word, but I kept my mouth shut. This had not been anticipated, but it was good. Having Thurm not only on my side, but on the side of the only other person who was already on my side, would simplify things later if I had to put maneuvering to the test.

Soon I was back in the carriage with Richen, and closed the gap between the camp cleanup crew and the workers. As I was enjoying some of the replenished water supply myself, I noticed that Thurm was keeping his distance from the machine, watching it with his arms folded behind his back, and had a look of pleased tranquility on his face.

"Brother Thurm," I called out. "Won't you join us and spare your feet from the mud?"

He glanced down at the ground as if he had no idea that he was up to his ankles in mud, and then quickly looked back at us. "Oh, certainly I wouldst, but I do not wish to burden thy horse!"

"Ha!" Richen shouted. "Half a ton o' carriage behin' us; one monk ain't gonna 'urt 'er!"

"I am certain that it will not burden the horse, Brother Thurm," I said, clarifying with a smile.

Richen stopped the carriage and I leaned to the side and offered him my hand to help him up. He hoisted in easily, and then sat in between Richen and me. It was a little tight, but Thurm was a small man. Chispin would never have fit, in more ways than one. Once Thurm was settled and convinced that the lack of fastening belts was not a problem (he was at first alarmed; he had been sure that he saw us strap ourselves in whenever we got up here) Richen amused him by driving the carriage back and forth over the big ruts the machine had left in the torn earth, causing the three of us to occasionally bump off our seats, and always making Thurm cry out in laughter.

— Sheam: A Voice Calls Down —

Day 5: 8:00 am

The torches had died. There was enough food to last us another day, but only because we had rationed it down to just a bite for each person every few

hours. The real problem, of course, was water. The only food we had was very dry, and there were no stores of liquid of any kind among the protected stock. Without some water, we wouldn't last much longer. I kept trying to imagine where the water supply to and from my bath were, and if I could access them from here, but we didn't have the strength or tools to begin tearing open the walls and floor looking for the well water even if we did have any idea where to look.

Wendle and the others above weren't stupid, though. They would understand that we needed water down here eventually, so they would think of some way to keep us from dying.

Dying. I hadn't allowed myself to think about that until now. I could die down here, perish from dehydration, along with four strangers. Would that be a fitting end for my life, thanks to this dangerous career I had chosen? No, it would not be, but it would still be better than dying in a Hammerite prison. I began trying to convince myself that I regretted nothing, but I knew that deep inside, I was wishing that I had chosen a safer and less fascinating place of employment.

What would Daelus tell my parents if I actually did die down here? Would he even be able to? I had never actually told Daelus how to contact them, nor ever really spoken of them to him. I wasn't in the habit of speaking about my parents much at all, or even really thinking about them. We weren't estranged, we just all had our lives and more or less took for granted that we'd still be there to rekindle things the next time we happened to meet. The three of us were all of very independent stock. Even my mother and father had no difficulty going six months without seeing one another on trade voyages, rarely writing, without any noticeable strain on their relationship. It seemed as if I had inherited that from them fairly well. It was no surprise that I could never seem to keep a boyfriend.

I supposed my parents wouldn't discover news of my untimely death until they returned to The City from their private island getaway in the fall, and they came to visit me. I had written to them to let them know about my new job at The Circle, so they would know where to find me, or rather, where to go to discover news of their daughter's death. Such things were not unusual in The City. People died all the time, for many reasons. That fact would not comfort them, of course.

Time was passing, even though there was no sign of it. With the pitch blackness and the sound of only four men breathing, I was never sure if I was awake or sleep. The only way I could occupy myself and keep my mind off thoughts of death was to make sure that the sound of breathing never, ever got too close to me. The last thing I wanted to deal with was one of these strangers deciding I was suddenly 'interesting.'

"Sheam? It's Wendle! We're coming down!"

The muffled shout seemed like a thousand miles away, but I was certain that it had not been my imagination. I wasn't sure if I should have shouted back "thank goodness," or "about damn time," so I kept my mouth shut. I could hear the two Gryphons immediately perk up and get to their feet. With

the secret door high above open, streams of light came trickling in, I could see that Els was standing nearby, watching the opening carefully, and that Moody was still seated, his legs crossed and his eyes closed. Stephens and Foster were at the foot of the ladder, ready, I figured, for the possibility that Wendle was being followed by Hammerites.

Thankfully he was being followed by other Gryphons. The fact that he was coming down to us rather than simply asking us to come up struck me as a bad sign. Finally he got to the foot of the ladder, and I quickly went to meet him. "What's going on?" I pleaded.

"Most of the Hammerites have gone off. Seems they were more urgently needed at Cragscleft. There was a disaster there last night; they weren't saying what, but Rafael and most of his posse rushed off as soon as word came this morning."

"The Circle?" I begged, starting to tremble with the anticipation of any bad news.

"They tore the place apart, of course, and even started dismantling some of the brickwork in places where they had a hunch the secret chambers might be, but it's nothing that can't be restored. The important thing is that now we have a chance to get you and the others out. We have to move quickly; we have no idea how long this window will last."

I just nodded, glad to be getting out, but worried what he meant exactly by dismantling brickwork.

"Sheam will stick with me. Stephens, Foster, scout around and try to find a hole for these two to escape. If need be you two can meet back up with Sheam later, but for now I suggest you just get the hell out of here."

Els nodded, "Got more than I bargained for by coming here." Moody was now by his side, listening, and silent.

I turned to the grizzled ex-captain. "Els, I want to help you, but I am not sure what I can do at this point. I will be going to Eisenhower's Hotel a block to the north of here. You and I should be safe there, but I am afraid that Moody should get as far away from this area as possible."

"Agreed," Moody said sternly.

"Okay, we'll figure out what to do. I'll come see you as soon as I can. Thank you for whatever you can do to help."

Wendle seemed impatient, so I cut the conversation short. I went up behind Wendle with Els and Moody behind me, and the other Gryphons taking up the rear. When we got up to the regular cellar I felt a chill of dread pass over me. The lighting was all wrong. It was too bright. It was too...daylight. As we were ushered up to the ground level, I felt my heart slowly sinking at the sight of what had become of my home. Walls had been torn down; parts of the ceiling had caved in after the Hammerites had recklessly removed walls. Wendle had definitely downplayed the damage. The whole place was a mess. Bookcases had been pulled from the walls and dumped in heaps; the books still on them fallen into complete disarray. Some of the books were old and fragile; possibly now destroyed.

I didn't have time to peruse the damage and fret over it however. Els and

Moody were already rushing off, and Wendle was leading me on quickly through day-lit corridors that used to be torch lit. "Stay," he said, and then exited the corridor. I waited. Five seconds went by, and then ten. I counted to fifty, and then Wendle reappeared. "Come," he said, and I quickly sprang forward.

We walked quickly past the backs of occupied Hammerites. None turned to watch us go. I wasn't breathing. We took another corner, one should have led us into the yard, but it was all blocked off now with rubble. Wendle went on anyway, and led me through a newly created opening in another wing. No sooner had we passed through did he push me behind a disheveled bookcase, this time not even bothering to tell me to stay.

"Halt! Who doth go there?" I heard a Hammerite voice shout.

Wendle charged over to him. "I represent the warden of Hightowne, and I am overseeing the damage. There's no sin in that!"

"'Tis a closed area!" he boomed. "None of the public may enter!"

"I am not public!" he retorted, just as loud. "I am a legitimate captain of the city watch, and I have more jurisdiction here than you do!"

"Well, we shall see about that when Father Rafael doth return!" he intoned nasally.

I looked on the other side of the bookcase and saw that I had a clear shot for the exit. I didn't know if there would be Hammerite patrols that way, but Wendle didn't tell me to stay, and he didn't seem to be having any luck getting this Hammerite to go. On the other hand, he had managed to maneuver the Hammerite around so that his back was to me. I went.

The room seemed longer now than it ever had been before. I almost tripped on fallen books several times before I made it to the end, glancing fearfully back to see if the Hammerite had seen me. No, Wendle was still arguing with him. Then I felt a grab. Big, gauntleted hands closed around my shoulders and pulled me. I shrieked, but a hand went over my mouth. I was pulled through the door and turned around, just as I was about to kick and claw for my freedom, and saw that it was a Gryphon.

"Damn you!" I hissed, "You didn't need to grab me like that!"

The guy seemed dumb as a brick, and probably thought that he was a hero. "Wendle told me to get you out when you came this way," he said in a blundering, low voice.

I restrained my rage and just said, "Get me out then!" as he nodded furiously.

Crossing the courtyard would be the hardest part. The Hammerite patrols were everywhere. I didn't see how Wendle expected this clod to get me through. He looked back and forth frantically, keeping me shielded from the view of any patrolling Hammerites, but clearly clueless as to how to get me across. I could only assume that Wendle hadn't counted on that other Hammerite being there and that this guy was only meant to help me as a last resort.

"Wait," I said, glancing up and down at him. He was built nothing like a dainty woman. "Give me your armor."

"Uh, what?" he said, suddenly looking panicked.

My hand went to the pocket of my breeches and pulled the familiar beaded choker free from its resting place. I quickly put it on and turned a few of the beads gracelessly. I had committed all of the functions to memory, and wanted to go for something very un-feminine with a build similar to that guard's.

He just stared at me in shock as I changed. When I saw that he was making no move to take off his armor, but only stood with dumbfounded slack-jawed bewilderment, I began pulling off my blouse and breeches; getting the idea, he quickly followed suit. He kept trying to cover his eyes, which was silly considering the modesty of my undergarments and the manliness of my new figure; moreover, it really hindered his ability to undress. "Stop doing that, you idiot, and just hurry!" I said in my now ridiculously deep voice; like either a very manly woman or a rather womanly man.

As he got each article off I pulled them on. Where something didn't fit, I adjusted the choker just right so that it would. Finally, after what seemed like half an hour, and what was probably five minutes, I pressed his helmet down over my head, which chafed uncomfortably against my bulbous nose. Then I threw the man, who was now standing in only a pair of linen under-pants, my outfit. "Keep this safe for me," I commanded him, and then began marching across the lawn.

"Halt! Who doth go there," a Hammerite shouted, just as the other did before. I kept on going. He and his buddies moved to intercept, and got in front of me. "I said, Halt!" he screamed, and finally I did.

"I am a soldier of the Silver Gryphons, and my business here is lawful, just, and valid. You will allow me to pass or your superiors will be forced to contend with legal repercussions!"

"Save thy threats of legal repercussions for thy paper-headed nit-wit politicians," he growled. "Thou shalt leave these premises at once!" And here I thought that he was going to force me to stay. Well, I couldn't argue. I resumed my march without another word.

He continued his patrol, saying to the others, "If thou dost see any others of those sorts, make sure to expel them. They are up to something."

I raced just a little faster for the perimeter wall. Once I got through the wall I kept going until I was on the other side of the street, then I stopped and rested my arm against the brickwork while panting for air. The armor was heavy, but this *body* was heavier. I had to steady myself for a good moment to get my heart rate down. I couldn't stand it any longer. I pulled the choker off and immediately found myself returning to my normal shape. Of course, now the armor ceased to fit right. I couldn't take it off now though; not in the streets. I began to look around for other Gryphons, and disappointedly saw none. Then I remembered Eisenhower's Hotel. I quickly walked to that familiar place, almost tripping on the oversized chain-mail trousers and struggling under its weight.

I threw the door open and slammed it behind me, pressing my back to it,

still panting. I was in a small cozy office with the drapes and the shutters open, letting sunlight cast rays against the dark wooden paneling of the walls. From behind a desk on the far side of the room a totally bald, mustached man with a fancy suit, and a starched collar up and came over quickly.

"Sheam!" he exclaimed. "We've been worried sick! Quickly Thatcher, close the windows!"

"I know," I said, still panting, still with my heart in my throat, it pounding so loud I could barely hear him, "But I got out."

He was at my side and helping me steady myself as a boy ran to each window, worked a lever to close the shutters, and drew the drapes closed. Suddenly the room was very dark. "This is how Wendle got you out? By dressing you up as one of his troops?" he said in disbelief.

I gave a shallow, humorless laugh. "Not quite..."

"We've already got a room ready for you and a letter to Daelus we got ready to send as soon as we were sure you were safe. Thatcher!" he called just a moment before the boy finished with the last window. "Finish that up and get the letter to the drop box!"

"May I see it first? I want to add a few things, maybe," I told him, now on my feet and trying to straighten the chain mail tunic so that the neck hole didn't hang so low on my chest.

"Of course, I have it here at my desk," he said as he wiggled his curly mustache back and forth. "Thatcher! Fetch the lady a decent set of clothes, would you?"

The boy was now halfway between running to get the letter from the desk and closing the drapes on the final window, looked conflicted for a moment, ran to close the drapes, and then ran up the stairs. I was sure that he had no idea what to get for me.

"I am afraid we cannot send this directly to Master Thresh, but through an intermediary names James, I believe, who will see that the information is then conveyed by something called a *carrier pigeon*."

I wasn't sure if he didn't know who James was and what a carrier pigeon was or if he expected me to not know, but I was too occupied to care. As I read over the letter and decided what I needed to write, I looked up to him. "Eisenhower, be on the watch for a man, a sturdy looking middle-aged gentleman who identifies himself as Els. He has urgent business with me."

"Of course, of course. All of the favors I owe to Thresh I convey to you."

I smiled. "I hope you owe him a lot of favors."

— **Nightfall: The Monk and the Cabbie** —

Day 5: 10:00 am

To my amazement, there was never a moment of silence between Thurm and Richen. After Richen began talking about his various nephews the topic somehow changed to alcohol, and the two men found great joy in critiquing the other's taste when it came to intoxicants. "I'll be sure t' give y' a bo'le when we get 'ome," Richen said proudly, patting Thurm on the back. "One oh

one proof rye gin, blast, it'll blow y'ead clean off!"

Thurm tipped his head back and laughed. "We shalt have to hide it from the vicars. They would make a show of offence, and then sneak it off to enjoy for themselves!"

"Aye, n' why not? After the foul church wine they have to drink all day!"

"Oh no, no. I dare say they do not drink that. 'Tis meant only for ceremonies!"

"Aw taff it, y'know they'll be sneakin' a sip now'n'en, eh?"

"Perhaps," Thurm said trying to grow serious. I sensed danger. "But truly, it wouldst be wrong of them to do so." His seriousness then faded when he added, "And besides, the ceremonial wine 'tis truly awful!"

"Ahha!" Richen cried, pointing to him. "Ya've tried it!"

"Oh tried it, yes of course I have. During the ceremonies of course. Hast thou not?"

"Nah, never even unce."

I sensed danger again, but still kept my mouth shut. "Dost thou mean to say that thou has never even 'unce?" Thurm coughed, and repeated himself, "once attended a Holy Service?"

"Oh I er well, mayhap..."

"If thou hast then surely as part of the ceremony thou hast partaken in the sharing of the wine!"

Richen sighed, probably not thinking that this was important enough to lie about. "Er, ya', ya got me. No, ne'er unce."

Thurm then turned to me, dragging me into it. "Brother Daelus, dost thou know that thy friend hath never attended Holy Service?"

"Yes," I said. "I just heard him. Brother Thurm, you must realize that most citizens of The City will never in their life have the good fortune of having access to one of the order's holy services, let alone partake in the sharing of the wine." I was sure that Thurm lived in a very sheltered world in his monastery, and simply had no idea of how the Hammerites and the common city-folk mixed, or did not mix.

"Aye, 'tis true," Richen said with a nod, trying his best to look like he regretted it.

"Well, it would give me a great honor to be the first to witness to thee the glory that The Builder hath to offer!"

"Er," was all Richen offered.

"Perhaps," I cut in, forming an attempt to rescue the man, since it was my fault Thurm was up here to begin with, "though Richen has never formally been taught the ideas and dogma of The Order, he is no stranger to them. After all, he builds his livelihood from this carriage we now sit in, a built device, product of tamed wood and metal, which he uses for not only his own benefit, but for the aid of others, such as you and I at this moment, Brother Thurm."

Richen nodded with a smile on his face, "Aye, tha's it."

"Ah, a start, but one must acknowledge the greatest truth. Just as we act upon the world, creating and using our good creations, so we are worked

upon by The Master Builder's good tools. Hammer, anvil, forge and fire; we are all, even us, here, now, in that fire at one moment, tortured, becoming malleable, and the next thrust onto the anvil, to be struck over and over by the hammer. Life thou see, 'tis always but one or the other, the fire or the anvil. We will be heated, and struck, heated, and struck, and we can not know to what end. However, there 'tis always an end, though we do not know it, and that end is to be the finest tools for the builder, to be that fire and anvil and hammer to others whom we do meet, that they may in turn become great tools! But one must always remember that 'tis the hammer itself that does the good; the fire, for its ability to make us shapeable, 'tis in itself neither right nor wrong. 'Tis only the actions of the hammer afterwards that does the good with this shape-ability. If one fails to submit himself before the hammer in this state, one shalt be at the mercy of whatever circumstances, and thus whatever shape, one doth befall."

Richen actually seemed impressed by this, and was nodding quietly. "Welp, I know f'sure tha' when smithy makes a bad 'orseshoe, e'rybody suffers!" he said with a laugh. I was curious to see how Richen's fairly non sequitur response would be interpreted.

"Indeed, indeed," Thurm said, laughing. "We all have the power to promote order or chaos to our fellow man. The chaos is our fate should we come forth from the fire with no force to shape us. We become useless, like that bad horseshoe. Here, the order would be the good horseshoes which keep Susan's feet dry."

Richen burst into laughter. "'Orseshoes don' keep 'er feet dry, ya taff tupp! They pr'tect the 'ooves from stones and rough ground. And 'er name's Suzy, nay Susan," he added with a chuckle.

"Oh, how silly of me!" Thurm remarked, laughing as well. "For some reason I didst imagine four large rubber boots that fit over the horse's hooves!"

Richen seemed like he was going to split in two from laughing so hard, and Thurm didn't seem too far behind him. It seemed that both of them had survived their brush with theology, and survived. More importantly, I had survived, and didn't have to step in to save either of them. Things may indeed go more smoothly than I had anticipated.

— Lytha: Inevitable Return —

Day 5: 11:00 am

I opened my eyes. At some point I had fallen back asleep, but I was awake now. The sun was high in the sky. I shifted uncomfortable in the blanket I had kept myself wrapped in; it was now drenched with sweat. I pulled the blanket away, freeing myself from its confines and exposing my torn skin to the baking sunlight.

I tried to rise and move to a shadier spot, expecting to feel pain shoot through my bones, but was amazed to find myself able to move easily in spite of the stiffness. The blanket was left behind, and now a cool dry stone was my

resting place. Slowly and carefully I reached to my back to feel the wounds left by the whip. They still stung as I touched them, but they were not as bad as I had feared. They were already scabbed over, as were all of my other open wounds. My skin was still stained with my own blood. I wanted to wash. Ghost mentioned a stream nearby, where he had found the crystals.

I had barely managed to scoot five feet across the ground; wandering around in the rocky cliffs to find a stream was out of the question. I recovered the blanket, and tried to use the dampness to scrub myself off, but the salty deposits from my sweat stung the wounds, and the coarse fabric caused some to resume bleeding, defeating the whole effort. And I didn't dare touch my arm and that metal *thing* they had attached to it. I refused to even use that arm, keeping it tightly tucked against me. Somehow, I felt, as long as it was still there I would still be in that cell, still waiting for them to come for me again, so I could tell them more, and more, and more, but I told them everything. *I had told them everything.*

"Koyne," I uttered aloud with a gasp. Had I told them about Koyne? I had to go to him. I had to warn him before they got to him. Somehow, I had to, and had to get back here before Ghost knew I was gone. I owed it to them both.

I had to go, but I couldn't be seen like this. The rags they had given me in prison were now so badly torn they barely covered me or stayed in place. Simply wrapping myself in the blanket would not do. I needed both hands. Reluctantly, trembling, I attempted to move my broken and now bolted arm. It hurt intensely, but I found that it still worked. With tears streaming down my cheeks from the pain, I worked at the blanket using the same sharp bit of debris that Ghost had used to cut at the burnt bird.

I would appear as a beggar, or worse, but at least I was covered. I tied thin strips around my torso and hips until I appeared decent. Anyone who looked closely would still be able to see the lacerations, the blood soaked skin, the deep gouges left by the whips. The last pieces I tore off went around my head, masking my face with only a gap for my eyes. I was sure that I looked completely remarkable in my attempts to remain anonymous, but I dared not show my face. I used the remainder of the blanket as a sort of shawl, which would hide the trenches left by the whip. I was still barefoot, but I could manage that.

I felt it was hopeless for me to expect to reach Koyne's before the Hammerites did, and that meant they could be waiting for me there. I went anyway. I had betrayed him. I had to try.

— Sheam: A Mission for Els —

Day 5: 11:00 am

I was beginning to worry about Els, as it had been several hours since our escape and there was still no sign of him. In the mean time I had eaten and changed into the clothes Thatcher had found for me, though it took him several tries to get something in my size. I tried to be much kinder to him

than Eisenhower tended to be; but he reacted to me the same way the reacted to everything, with a mute expressionless bustle. He reminded me of Schinler quite a bit, only as a little boy, which only made me want to be kinder to him. Once I put on the short-legged bloomers and petticoat, squeezed into a too tight bustier, slipped into the fitted blouse and the skirt with side pockets, and put on the apron, apparently the outfit normally worn by the female servants of the hotel; then I set up a makeshift office in the back of Eisenhower's large back room, though it was only to take care of some lingering pressing business.

Wendle had visited briefly shortly after I had arrived, just to make sure that everything was fine, to return my clothes to me, and to recover the uniform. He never asked what had happened; so I could only assume that the guard who had loaned me his uniform kept his mouth shut about the changing, since he probably couldn't believe his eyes. I was glad; the fewer people who knew about the choker, the better. I wanted to keep it safe, sound, and *mine*. Before Wendle left I asked him if he could send over some gear and provisions which I intended to give to Els, which he did so about thirty minutes later. My old clothes needed to be cleaned, so I elected to keep wearing the outfit Thatcher had worked so hard to figure out for me. Besides, I reasoned that if the Hammerites decided to pay him a visit; it was best that I looked like staff.

At around ten in the morning, two hours after our escape, Captain Els was led in by Eisenhower. He had changed in the meantime out of his usual rugged attire and into something more common, presumably in hopes that he would draw less attention from the Hammerites if he appeared to be a simple townsman rather than a mercenary. Now we were seated together going over the report from the agent who had been observing Ranson's faction and The Bloods. It had only just been delivered to me shortly before he arrived. More importantly, I had some coffee.

"Ranson," he said with a growl. "I never thought I'd hear that name again. He's a twice traitor; first to his fellow humans, and then to The Lady herself. Of course, The Bloods don't expect him to be a traitor a third time, but I'm sure that he's well on his way to becoming that. He's just a boy, really, though you wouldn't be able to tell from looking at him."

"How can be we certain that he's turned traitor against The Lady? Maybe he's working as a double agent, feeding her information about The Bloods to help destroy them. Sending Jyre after the scroll could have been her idea." I pleaded with him, certain that what Els was saying was plausible, but not ready to jump on it until we had proof.

He quickly shook his head. "I don't believe that The Lady is particularly concerned about The Bloods; certainly not enough for that kind of trickery. If she wanted them dead, she'd simply slaughter them. No, Ranson's single-minded focus on our girl tells me he's working on his own. The Lady wouldn't allow him to operate the way he's been manipulating Jyre: even she's not that low. On the other hand I have no idea what this scroll is that your agent writes about, but it's possible that he was sent to The City to recover it for

The Lady, but instead wants to use it for his own benefit. It's just like that disgusting worm Ranson to send a little girl into harm's way while he sits back and waits like the pathetic whelp he is."

"Well," I said cautiously, trying not to get caught up in the emotion of Els's situation, "I suspect if you go to The Bloods, you will get to Ranson, and will get to Jyre." As I said this we poured over a map, and I showed him where we had marked various Blood strongholds.

"So be it then. Shall I consider them a friend or foe, though?"

"You, I don't know. I would be very careful about Moody, certainly. They hate pagans, after all."

"They can't hate them that much if they're working with Ranson. He's barely human after what he let The Lady do to him. He was a very willing test subject. Did it all for her favor, too. I think The Lady is the only woman he is more obsessed with than Jyre." I was getting a clear picture of Ranson, and I was liking it less and less. Still, he seemed far less malevolent now. He was just a foolish and sick young man who let his desire for a particular woman, whom he should have had nothing to do with by all that is right, run his life. This was fairly typical.

Els continued. "There has to be someone within The Bloods who I can go to, and will listen to reason. If they're not brain-dead they'd be able to see what a worm Ranson is."

"According to our agent on the inside, there's a very little organization within The Bloods. A long-time member named Common Soore (that's an odd name, don't you think?) has been working very closely with Ranson, while their leader, Lord Crowley, has kept his distance. It's a tough call which of those two you should try to contact—maybe neither."

"What about your man on the inside? I'd like to get in touch with him first."

I pondered. "I am not cleared to know the identity of our agent, much less, tell anyone," I told him. "It may not even be a man," I added for good measure.

"Okay, fine. What about the soldiers then? Stephens and Foster seem like good sorts. Can I count on their help?"

I sighed, wishing he hadn't gone there, because I really didn't want to say no. "I am afraid that their help before was really just an accident of circumstance. Not even the master can actually tell The Gryphons what to do; those orders need to either come from Lord Canard or Captain Wendle. I could ask, but Wendle has already strained his generosity to the last, and I really doubt he will be willing to devote some of his men to this mission when the security of Hightowne is being compromised by Hammerite bullies."

"Very well, then. Really, I ought to just do this myself. Jyre is my responsibility."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

"No, you've done much more for me than I expected. I am sorry that I misjudged you and your master. Jyre did a poor job of convincing me that we could trust you, and I did a poor job of listening to her. But still, none of this is

any of your business, and she should have kept you out of it. I am the one who is sorry, for getting you and your master involved in this mess. It's all far, far too much. Once I find her and get her safe, if I can, we're going to just get out of here. I've put her in far too much danger in my quest for revenge."

He seemed deeply troubled, even mournful. I was sorry that he would probably never feel that justice was done, but I had to agree that Jyre's safety wasn't worth the revenge he sought. I just hoped that he was being honest with himself and that if and when he had Jyre safe and sound; he wouldn't forget his promise and remember his thirst for vengeance. I said nothing, only patted the parcel of supplies that I had requested for him. He nodded and took it under his arm.

"Thank you again, Sheam," he said, and then gave a slight bow. Little Thatcher was already standing ready, silent as usual, to show him out.

With Els sent on his way I suddenly found that I had very little to actually do. As I promised to Eisenhower, I began packing up the makeshift office to move to the room he had set aside for me upstairs. As soon as I had things back the way he wanted them, I felt a tug at the edge of my apron, and found little Thatcher standing there with a blank stare. Behind him was a very impatient looking man whom I recognized as one of James's agents, but whose name escaped me.

"Communications are in a jumble, right now," he said with the urgency I had sensed. "Are Els and Moody secured?" he asked.

At first his statement made no sense, but then it quickly dawned on me what had been expected. "Secured? No," I said with a gasp. "I was supposed to?"

He very nearly cut me off. "Toad warts!" he cursed, and then quickly, "Do you have any idea where they are? It is very important for the Delphine investigation that James or a collaborator interview them!"

I felt myself going flush, and a sick feeling that I had done something wrong. "N-no, not sure. I gave him the location of known Bloods bases, and that's all. He's hoping to find Jyre. He left not ten minutes ago."

"Thank you," he said, and then bolted out the door. I expected him to want to know more, or to tell me more, but I understood that he urgently needed to correct my blunder. With a sigh, and an attempt to convince myself that it was the fault of the broken down communications and not my own, I went upstairs.

— Ghost: The Bird Man —

Day 5: 12:00 pm

The Hammerites had gone nuts, running around like a bunch of headless chickens. The usual patrols weren't happening, but every now and then I saw a pack of them running, not marching, somewhere. When I finally got up the nerve to not duck for cover when I saw them, I saw what they were doing: posting wanted posters. The Hammerites didn't usually post these; they tended to never admit when they wanted to get someone and couldn't do it,

so this had to be a big deal. I didn't even have to guess who was wanted, either. I had a hunch.

When the group moved off to the next square to post the fliers I ran over to inspect one. I was only a little disappointed. Right in the middle of it was a surprisingly good sketch of Lytha, which was a little ironic, considering that almost no one actually knew what she looked like. They would have been better off showing her face covered in a veil since, 'according to legend,' that's the most anyone's ever seen of her. I read the fine print.

LYTHA — WOMAN
SLAYER OF MAN AND SERVANT OF DEMONS MOST FOUL
IF SIGHTED DOTH NOT ATTEMPT TO APPREHEND
—A CURTAIN OF DEATH FOLLOWS IN HER WAKE—
SHE IS SERVED BY HER VILE HENCHMEN 'THE RED HAND CULT'
IF SHE OR ANY CULT MEMBERS ARE SIGHTED
FLEE AND INFORM HAMMERITE AUTHORITIES IMMEDIATELY

With a warning like that, they would be lucky to get any help at all. The chin-lickers didn't even offer a reward. It was likely that they didn't actually expect anyone to help, or didn't want any help. They just wanted to cause a stir and hopefully drive her out into the open. The disappointing part was that there was no mention of me, aside from the red hand cult thing. Of course I should be glad; who else could have gotten away with what I had done while remaining completely anonymous? Of course I wouldn't be anonymous for long with that big red hand painted onto my shirt. I quickly pulled it off and, not wanting to tan the amazing *blancheur* I had acquired through years of midnight skullduggery, turned it inside out and put it back on.

"Might as well do some good," I muttered as I pulled the posters down and shoved them into a nearby barrel. "Can't have anyone but me knowing her face!" I went around to the other places I had seen the Hammerites stop, and pulled those posters down too. I knew that I couldn't possibly get all of them, but it made me feel good, and I didn't really care.

Now I marched down the city streets feeling like a small god, not even trying to hide from The Hammers. They probably expected the red hand guy to be lying low after all, not walking proudly through the center of the street. Lytha's warnings about The Circle and Nightfall seemed unimportant now. All that I really cared about was getting my gold, and the opportunity to slug him one right in the jaw. Oh yeah, I also wanted a big explanation for why the hell he thought any of this was a good idea. When I got to The Circle's wall I noticed that the place was unusually quiet. The gates were also all closed off with Hammerite guards posted at each one.

"What the hell?" I wasn't about to just jolly up to a Hammerite and ask him about the weather, compliment him on his shiny boots, and then ask; oh, by the way, why are you guys on Nightfall's doorstep? Snagging a passerby for the same treatment would also be hard. Normal people avoided people

like me like I had plague.

Then I saw a tin solder and decided to ask him instead. I ran over to him. "Hey, sword guy!" I said, and then stopped as he gave me a look of complete contempt. It could have been my prison clothes, or it could have been the fact that I had called him sword guy. "No, wait, sorry," I said, "ah," I searched my brain for the right word, but it wasn't coming. Then I saw the symbol on his chest. "Birdy...bird guy...bird guard...bird-shirt-wearing sword guy..."

"I believe you are incorrectly mistaking a gryphon, illustrated with impeccable clarity upon my tunic, for a *bird*," he said in a low voice through his teeth with a tone that didn't fit his vocabulary at all.

"Yeah, sorry. It was all, you know, wrinkled up. I see it now. What the taff is a gryphon? You make that up?"

He sighed. "A Gryphon is a mythological creature; with the head, wings, and front claws of an eagle, but the size, and rear-body of a lion. They are the fiercest and most deadly creature in mythology! Now why the devil am I talking with you?"

"Uh, because I needed to ask you a question, I guess." I said with a shrug. "You know, *serve* and protect? I figure that since you're marching around you know what's going on, and since you're so smart that you know *myth-algae*, I'll be really disappointed if you—"

He cut me off. "What do you want?" he said with a look on his face that told me that he was going to punch me in the mouth if I kept acting like an idiot.

"Yeah, sorry, I just wanted to know; why the hey are there Hammerites guarding The Circle?"

He went "Pfft," as if it was a stupid question. "Hammers seized The Circle yesterday. Most of them left this morning because of some emergency, and we tried to move in and retake the place, but things got a little messy, so we backed off. Now they've just got the place locked up; won't let anyone in or out anymore. I hear they're tearing the place down."

"Oh Shh..." I started, and then stopped, glancing at the Hammerite again, and then back to the bird man, as I decided to call him. "Well where the heck is Nightfall?"

"Not sure. Rumor has it the Hammers have him locked up somewhere outside The City. I don't think they're going to kill him, not yet anyway, not now...but we're really not sure if or when he'll be back."

"Mother of a motherless goat!" I barked. "Alright, is anyone left in charge then? Is that it, no more circle?"

"Oh I wouldn't say that. There's some good news, though I'll thank you to keep your trap shut about this one. This morning we managed to help Nightfall's pretty little slave girl out of there. She's holed up right now at Eisenhower's Hotel across the way there. Good thing too. It would have been pretty bad if the Hammers got their hands on her. I hear they're extra nasty to the ladies they put to prison. Extra nasty."

"You have no idea," I told him, cringing. "Pretty little slave girl, eh? Blond hair, about yea high, really taffin' obnoxious when she wants to be?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Just uh, don't tell anyone I think that of her, okay?"

"Oh, not a soul. Not a single person birdly-boy. You can count on me."

He looked like he just realized he was about to be in really big trouble. I didn't push it. "So, Eisenhower's you say?"

"Why the devil am I telling you all this?" he asked with that same look.

"Because you're a bored blabbermouth what likes to gossip like some girlie!"

"Hey!" he growled at me and moved with a jerk like he wanted me to think he was about to come at me.

"Don't make me turn your nose inside out, feather flighted bird boy!" I said, mostly ignoring him, and mostly trying to spot the hotel across the way.

He never did do anything about me calling him a girlie, probably because he was one. In no time I was on the doorstep of the venerable hotel. At this point a trap or a dire plot to mishandle Lytha didn't seem like they were in the cards. In fact, it seems more like the Hammers had caught Nightfall with his trousers down and were now acquainting his bollocks with their hammers, so for once I felt like I had the upper hand. What I didn't have was a plan.

— Sheam: Guilty Pleasure —

Day 5: 12:00 pm

It was a very pleasant, somewhat spacious room that had a quiet tranquility to it. It was nothing like the stone tomb-like space under The Circle; but it had an important thing in common, I was to stay here. Eisenhower insisted that I would not be found by the Hammerites provided that I did not leave the safety of this room. I sat on a soft bed with a lacy cover, looking out a window that faced The Circle, wishing I wasn't so helpless.

By now the Hammerites believed that I was never at The Circle in the first place, and so they were searching everywhere but here for me. Some in James's organization wanted to get me farther away, but as someone famous once said, the best place to hide a letter is on the mantelpiece. Besides, few could be as trusted as well as Eisenhower; not even Canard.

Nothing was happening anymore. The window that Wendle had feared would close turned out to be more of a holiday. I was glad for that at least, but it made the narrow and dangerous escape I had just suffered through seem a bit superfluous. We had no way of knowing that it was going to go like this, so I just stopped fretting and was thankful that they had stopped tearing my home down. If I was to look at The Circle in ruins, at least I would not have to watch them make it worse. I tried to occupy my mind with other things, like wishing that the curtains were another color, or that the bustier wasn't so tight.

I was going to have to wear it for a bit longer, it seemed, that because after my clothes had been washed and dried and returned to me; I discovered that they had been ruined. As I had noticed during my experiments, a curious

property of the choker was that it actually made your clothing change size to fit your body. I was very puzzled initially as to how this was possible, and then realized that the choker changing your body at all was equally impossible, and just gave up. Unfortunately I had taken my blouse and breeches off while I was in the shape of a five-foot-eleven two-hundred-and-fifty-pound man, and so it was stuck in a shape suitable for that physique. Horrible.

I had time to kill, so I figured I might as well try to do something about it. I undressed, finding that removing the bustier was a very striking reminder of how tight it actually was, and put on the choker. I tried to change myself back into the manly shape from before, but I was not exactly being methodical when I did it, and so there was no way to remember exactly which beads I had turned and what amount. With my best guess in place, and a disgusted look on my face when I glanced in the mirror, I put my old clothes on. They fit, more or less. With my breath held, I took off the choker.

I immediately shrunk down to my true self and found my old clothes hanging like old linens all over me. The breeches even dropped clean off my hips into a pile at my feet. I sighed, and wished I had my notebook, only so I could write: 'Warning:—removal of clothes while in altered body state permanently alters the clothes.'

Defeated, I began to put my new clothes back on. I was used to dressing myself without the aid of a servant, but in those cases it was clothes that actually *fit*. Exasperated at the tightness around my torso, but not wishing to simply go about without the proper undergarments, I eyed the choker once more. I hesitated at first, but then told myself I was simply being silly. I put it on, turned a bead just right, and then sighed in relief. I could breathe! Content, I finished dressing, and then looked at myself in the mirror. The outfit looked much nicer when it actually fit correctly. Without thinking, I was running my fingers along the beads, and felt a blush come to my face. Why not? No one was here, and I literally had *nothing* to do. I might as well amuse myself.

— Nightfall: Averted —

Day 5: 1:00 pm

We no longer had to fear a pagan plot to attack us while we were divided. In spite of the fact that the deforester, as Thurm commanded, continued its work rather than traveling at cruising speed along the path already cut, we still caught up with the other team exactly when Thurm had predicted, and much to their surprise. When Thurm noticed his men up ahead working to power down the machines, he leapt from the carriage and quickly sent a runner to inform them that they need not slow their work, but rather challenged them to go as fast as they could to see how long it would take for us to catch up. It didn't take long at all. The improved machine not only deftly maneuvered around the two demolition wreckers as it went, but forced all of the trees in its path to fall away from them with perfect precision.

Finally, as it came to the front, the deforester and the improved version went into a neck and neck race, holding back only to make sure that no trees carelessly fell onto the machine next to it. In spite of the best efforts of the other team, the improved deforester soon overtook the other; a deed met with cheers from all engineers present, and even a few of the soldiers who had accompanied us.

During the entire event Chispin watched from a distance, never once approaching Thurm to compliment him on this display of excellence. Maybe he was disappointed that we were going to be staying on schedule. Ivan on the other hand continued to play his own role he seemed to invent for himself, keeping his distance from engineer, soldier, and outsider alike. Whenever I craned my neck over my shoulder to look at him, I would see him swinging his incense burner from its chain as a pendulum, uttering quiet prayers to bless the path. Once, he came upon a small tree which somehow survived the onslaught of the machines. He lifted his hand to it, palm facing it, and after uttering a short chant under his breath, a small, fiery hammer appeared floating before his fingers; a spiritual hammer. He closed his fingers onto his palm, and the summoned weapon flew away and struck the tree, quickly engulfing it in flames, and reducing it to cinders within minutes. I couldn't tell if he was driven by fanaticism or boredom.

Through it all I stayed like a shadow in the background as I sat by Richen on the carriage watching and listening, not eavesdropping on Hammerite conversation, but waiting for the distinct and familiar sound I had been praying to hear all night and morning. The flighted messenger landed just as it had been trained. I casually untied the note from the bird's leg, as if my heart was not in my throat. I strained my eyes to focus on James's tiny print, thinking it probably too suspicious to ask Thurm if he had a magnifying glass.

- Good news—Sheam is now safe. She is being protected at point B. Damage to Circle moderate but reparable.
- Bad news—Somno and his entire unit have been lost. Suspect Ramirez involvement.
- Fate of Ghost and Lytha unknown. Results of Hammerite interrogation of Lytha recovered.
- Chaos at Cragscleft drew forces away from The Circle, allowing Sheam to escape. Rafael convening with Inquisitor shortly, after inspection of Cragscleft.
- Foul play of Ranson and The Bloods implicated in disappearance of Jyre. Her location remains unknown.
- Contact with Els was made; then lost. He was reported last seen heading to The Bloods to sway them against Ranson.

- J

I felt my heart settled back down to its correct anatomical position. Sheam was safe; for now at least. The rest of the message was all details.

Grave details, yes, but my primary concern had been abated. Suddenly I found myself asking a question out loud before I had even realized what was going on. "Why are we slowing down?"

"The 'ammers are slowin'," Richen just said, and then pointed to Thurm who was running over to Chispin.

"Brother Chispin! Pray brother, why do we slow? We must press on!"

"Yes. I am ordering the expedition to resume half pace. Several of mine soldiers have vanished."

"Deserted their post? Unthinkable!" Thurm exclaimed.

"Yes. 'Tis Brothers Ranthos and Christopher. I have sent forth search parties. I wish not to travel too far from their point of departure."

Thurm sighed, "Very well. We shall continue at half pace."

It made no sense, and Thurm knew it. The search party could easily catch up to the machines even if they were going at double pace, which was still slower than a healthy man's gait. If the two men managed to escape whatever befell them and tried to return to the envoy, they needed only follow the road! I felt myself scowling and feeling pain in my jaw as I clenched it. I had been two whole days already! Two days wasted! These pinheads could have been to the damn villa, torn the place down by hand without their infernal machines, and been back home already in two days! Chispin was using the abduction of these men as an excuse to fulfill Rafael's orders. This expedition was designed to last as long as possible, even if it meant complete foolishness.

As Chispin walked off Thurm sent a knowing look in my direction. He wasn't a fool; he knew that politics were at play here. I still wasn't sure if he was blaming me for the delays or if he was looking for commiseration from his confidant, but as long as Chispin was around I didn't feel safe talking with Thurm. I also knew I could not stew or the bird would get bored and fly away. I quickly scratched out a reply on the back of the note, though I found that I had very little to say.

Let Sheam know that I too am well, and send her word of my great satisfaction at her wellbeing. Still no information on how long I will be out here. I guess 2-3 more days. I believe Chispin is intentionally drawing this out.

I wanted to say more, but I couldn't think of anything that wasn't obvious. Besides, I couldn't write as small as James could and there was only so much room on this damned bird's leg. I affixed the paper, and the creature flew off. As soon as it had, I felt a raindrop fall onto the back of my hand. Looking up to the sky, I saw only a field of gray. I was glad for an escape from the heat, but was now very much afraid that a rainstorm would cause even more of a delay.

— Ghost: Green Eyed Girl —

Day 5: 1:00 pm

“Hey,” I said to the overdressed, chrome-domed man at the desk. I tried to sort myself out and get all civil and such.

“Yes?” he said as I approached. “We have vacancies if...” he looked me up and down. “We also have a laundry service and hot baths,” he said with a bit of a smile that looked really funny under his curly mustache. It was like his smile was wearing a hat.

“Yeah very funny,” I replied, forgetting all about that civility idea I had been musing about for the past thirty seconds. “Look, I am not here for a room. I’m looking for a friend. A business friend. A business...partner. A friend who’s also a business partner, you see.” I cleared my throat. “Actually she’s more of a—”

“Are you here on business for The Circle?” he asked with the tilt of a head and a twirl of his very fancy mustache.

“Yeah, how’d you know?” I asked, a little surprised that he cut right to the heart of it.

“A good guess. Sorts like you who pass through here are usually looking to do business there. And I think you may want to reconsider my offer for a bath and laundry. Would you like for me to describe to you how exactly you smell?”

I wanted to get mad, but there was just something about this little guy with his shiny head and curly mustache that just made me happy. Instead I laughed, and said, “How?”

“Like a slab of meat that’s been rotting for a week, wrapped up in socks that were worn for a month straight inside boots that were tracked through puddles of human waste.”

I laughed even harder. “That’s pretty bad,” I said, and sniffed under my arm. “Holy crap,” I said, recoiling. “Yeah I may take you up on that. Do you uh, extend credit?”

“Normally no, but in your case I feel like I’d be doing the entire city a favor by making sure you got a good wash. I’ll have a servant launder your clothes and give you some new ones, on the house. Thatcher! Fetch a services attendant!”

“Damn, why are you so nice? In your, *funny*, I just insulted you but somehow managed to not make me *mad*, sort of way?”

He grinned. “I’m a businessman. Trust me, you’ll be back here when you have money, and ready for more.”

I laughed more. “I look like a beggar. I smell worse. What makes you think I will ever have any money?”

Now he was swaggering. “I know how a man moves. You don’t move like a beggar.”

“Fine, fine...but—erm, don’t worry about the clothes. Better to just burn them.”

He was probably right. I wasn’t much for baths, but the huge tub of steaming liquid was pure gold. On the other hand, taking off my clothes was

going to be scary. I hadn't yet taken inventory of all my various wounds, cuts, abrasions, bruises, or lacerations yet, and I knew that pulling dirty fabric off dried blood was going to smart. With much cringing, stinging, cursing, and general hopping about in pain, I managed to get myself naked, and carefully took note of all the places I needed to favor for the next few weeks.

That's when I remembered a lovely detail that had totally slipped my mind since I had escaped from my cell: the fake scar and what it hid. I almost ripped the goop off my shoulder right then and there, but I stopped myself. What if I get thrown in another slam? It would sure come in handy. I didn't know how long the fake scar would stay there or how long I wanted to keep a lock pick hidden in it, but I decided to do as I usually did: take each day as it comes.

I lowered myself into the steaming water going, 'Oh, oh, hot, hot, hot!' to myself. Of course the water was black almost as soon as I got in it, and later some servant guy (not the kid who got the bath ready for me) started to fuss about me permanently staining the tub, but that was a minor trifle. After maybe a quarter hour of soaking I was out, dried, and dressed in some rather fine duds. They weren't really my style, the tunic was too white, and too soft, and too something, something. Perfumey...that was it. The stuff smelled funny.

Once dressed and entirely too presentable, I decided to go look for Sheam. I thought; if I was mister curly mustache, where would I put the obnoxious one? As far away from me as possible. I marched up the stairs to the top floor. I tried a door, knocking. It was a hotel; no one stayed in a hotel during the day. All the rooms but the one she was in would be empty. I knocked on another one. Silence. I knocked on a third. Nothing. I knocked on a fourth, and heard someone stirring inside.

"Who's there?" the familiar voice called out.

I tried to reply, but all I got was, "I...uhm," and then I heard more shuffling at the door. Soon I realized that there was a peep hole, and that the door was being unbolted.

The door opened just a crack, and she leaned her head over to look out. All I could do was whimper. There she was, golden hair glowing in the sunlight, moving gently in the ever so slight breeze. Her big brilliant green eyes met mine, and seemed to grow even bigger. The long graceful lashes fluttered as she blinked at me. I had to stop, look away, rub my eyes, and look again. Smooth, flawless pink skin with full lips that were just ever slightly a deeper shade of pink; my mouth hung open slightly. It was definitely Sheam, definitely that crazy, mean, ridiculous girl I had met the other day, but I hadn't remembered her like this.

"Ghost?" she said, as if she recognized me but wasn't sure.

"Eh, heh, yes, I uhm," I glanced around myself nervously. "I clean up well. You do...too." Green eyes. I couldn't take my eyes off of them, until I noticed her...

She cleared her throat and I jerked my gaze up back to her face. She was smiling suspiciously and even blushing slightly. I must have been blood red.

"Can I help you?" she asked with a voice like wind blowing through silk drapes.

"Uh, yeah...I was here to see your boss, but...I'm to see you...instead." I was trying my best to not let my view drop below her neck. I didn't know why. I wouldn't care too licks if I was caught staring at Laurel's ample bosom, but somehow I felt like it just wouldn't be right with this girl. She was just too—

"I'm sorry Ghost, but Nightfall is out of town right now on important business. I am afraid I simply can't say when he'll be back." I could hear the concern in her voice.

"Uhm, well, I came to...demand payment. Heh." I suddenly felt like the biggest jackass in the world.

She laughed gently, which gave me goose bumps all over. "I'm afraid that I am really in no position to pay you for anything Ghost. I am sure that you noticed the state The Circle's in."

"Yeah," I said, giving up and just staring. I was sure she noticed what state I was in. I found myself backing away. "Look, seriously, I really need to be paid. I mean, I met some of Nightfall's men outside the prison, and they told me there was a reward for rescuing Lytha."

She seemed to light up at this. "The one the Hammerites kidnapped from the villa?" she asked.

I grinned stupidly. "Yeah, I guess so. I got her out safe and sound."

"I had no idea the master had hired someone to free her. Thank you for delivering such good news. I certainly hope you will get your reward, but I am serious when I tell you that I have no reward to give you right now." Now she looked less like she was toying with me and a little more earnest, and somehow this made it easier for me to regain composure.

"But...I really need it. My, uh, rent is due."

She smiled, and I felt myself melting again. "You'll have to lie better than that."

"Uh, gah, hey, how do you know I'm lying?" I asked, feeling my face burning off.

"Seen enough men lie to know when one's doing it." She then opened the door a little more, and leaned into the opening a great deal more...

That was the last straw. Before I could handle it, back when the door frame blocked most of my view of her chest, but now I could see everything. Worse, her blouse had a rather low neckline, and when she leaned forward like that...wow. Okay, Ghost, you've seen better in a bar. But there was something about her that was different—jumping nymphs and jackrabbits. Okay, Ghost, focus. I couldn't even remember why I was there anymore. Had I come just to see her? Did I get far more than I bargained for? Was there something in the bath? Something in the steam, the fumes? Had I been drugged?

The money, right, the money, "Look, I really, really, really need to get paid..."

She laughed, and shook her head. "You keep asking and I keep telling you. The answer isn't going to change."

She smiled at me. I looked up at the ceiling and tried to count to twenty. She started to giggle, and then I heard her open the door completely and step into the opening. I couldn't help it, I had to look.

I couldn't understand it. Why was she only moderately attractive before, and now I couldn't keep my jaw from hanging open. The slender waist, the gracefully curved hips, those long legs... "I..." I trailed off, starting to feel dizzy.

She started laughing, and then folded her arms about her breasts and sighed. One hand went to the choker around her neck and she started to fiddle.

I rubbed my eyes. I blinked. I looked again, and rubbed my eyes some more. I really was losing my mind. "What happened?" I asked in shock. Her hair was dirty blond, her eyes a pale gray, and lips thin. Her chest was modest, her hips wide, and she was a good foot shorter than she had been. The frankly seductive look on her face was gone, replaced by an obnoxious one of condescending amusement.

"I'm sorry Ghost, I couldn't resist," she said, one hand going to her face as she lowered it and shook it from side to side. "Really naughty of me, I know."

"Some sort of trick?" I said, baffled, "Witchcraft?"

"Yup," she replied, laughing some more. "Oh you should have seen the looks you were making."

My face was still red, but this time I was steamed. "You—you..." I clenched my fists and scowled at her—"You took advantage of my...my maleness, and made a fool of me!"

She shrugged. "I can't help it if a beautiful face and amazing body made you act that way."

"Turn it back on," I demanded, for some reason unable to think about anything else.

She laughed. "No, I don't think so."

"Come on," I said, unable to hold back the look of desperation.

She shook her head, and frowned.

"Please?"

"Get off it."

"Did you put it on for mustache downstairs? Is that how you got this nice room?"

"Hah!" she barked, and then slammed the door in my face.

I was quiet. I couldn't believe she just did that. "Sheam?" I called out after a moment. "Sheam?" after another moment.

Silence.

"I'm...sorry I got mad and said the stupid thing," I finally said.

Silence.

"And I'm sorry I asked you to put it back on." Odd, usually I was saying the opposite.

I thought I heard her walking to the door.

"And I am sorry for staring at your rack."

I heard her laughing faintly, and then she opened the door again. To my dismay, she hadn't turned the beauty spell back on. "And?"

"Uh..."

"Come on," she said, her hip going to the door frame and her arms folding tightly.

"Sorry for...asking so many times for money?"

"And?"

"And for being...me?"

She laughed. "You don't have to apologize for being you, Ghost," she said.

"And, uh," I looked up at the ceiling and scratched the back of my neck. "Sorry for acting like the real normal way you look isn't already pretty as hell."

She smiled a little. "You're clever. I didn't think you'd figure that one out." she said. Honestly, now that I saw her again, I really liked her better this way. I could talk to her without getting all mind-blown.

"Want some coffee?" she asked, closing the door behind her and moving past me.

"Uh, yeah," I said, following, unable to possibly consider doing anything else.

— Lytha: Helping Myself —

Day 5: 1:00 pm

I found that the more I moved, the easier it became. The rocky terrain soon gave way to wooded plains as I approached the city walls. As I found walking easier I reorganized the shreds of blanket about my body to give more ease of movement, with slightly less modesty. Less paranoia was more like it; I wasn't sure what state of mind I had been in when I left the ruins, but I was starting to feel more and more like myself with each passing moment. I pulled the fabric from my face, which only restricted my breathing and vision, and discarded the bit I was using as a shawl as well. For brief moments I even forgot about the metal splint bolted into my shoulder.

Reminded of why I was here, I doubled my pace. There were no roads in this direction, so the city wall was fairly informal and unguarded. Residences and businesses had spilled out over the walls, creating a second perimeter which was no more than a fence in some areas, with the old city wall in dismantled fragments several blocks in. To any who saw me, I would appear as a wandering leper.

Thankfully Koyné didn't actually live in the Devil's Tongue, which would have been a very long journey through some of the tightest, busiest districts. I tried to control my pace as I hurried through the streets. If I was in too much of a rush, it would draw attention; and once attention was drawn, the blood and rags would arouse suspicion. The last thing I needed was trouble. Still, I hesitated at every corner and intersection. Even the sight of a Hammerite would send me shivering with fear to hide, or maybe boil my blood with rage. I wasn't sure which it was yet. The Hammerites were scarce today.

He lived on the fifth floor of an apartment building. It was time to climb

the stairs. Once I got to the top I was ready to collapse in exhaustion. Each step up had made me curse his name.

The building thus far had seemed undisturbed. The front door was locked and showed no signs of forced entry. It was a trick door. The knob and latch were fake. No matter how brilliant a person was with a lockpick, or how forcefully they pulled at the handle, it wouldn't open. The hinges were on that side. On the opposite side was a deftly disguised wooden lever which would pop open if you knew where to press. Still, the door was heavy and required a great deal of effort to open.

The inside seemed fine. No sense of Hammerite intrusion and no sense of Koyne. Maybe he had caught wind that the Hammers were coming for him, and fled? Maybe I didn't actually tell them anything about Koyne. It was all such a blur to my mind now. I wasn't certain which words were spoken and which were imagined. I settled to the ugly imported rug in a heap. He wasn't here. I didn't need to search the apartment to tell; I couldn't sense his mind.

The rug still smelled like the inside of a ship's hold, at least what I imagined one would smell like. The apartment was filled with exotics of every sort. Very little of it had apparent value in gold or silver, but all of it had great value to the educated appraiser. I noticed a few things I had stolen for him sitting on the shelf, in fact.

It was no time for reminiscing. I was here, and all seemed to be well. If he didn't already know that he was in danger, I could possibly warn him. I went into his study to his writing desk. He also slept in this room, and the bed was of course empty. It was strange; he usually slept during the day. I wrote a short note.

Koyne, it's Lytha. I was captured by Hammerites. Tortured and interrogated. But I escaped. Rescued. I'm afraid I told them about you. Get out of the city as soon as possible. Avoid your usual contacts. I am sorry. I am so very sorry.

I made several copies. I would have one sent to his usual rented room in the Devil's Tongue. I'd have another sent to a bar I knew he liked; there were trustworthy people there. I'd leave one here. I wished I knew more about him, so I knew of other places to leave word, but this would have to do. I left the apartment and filed the notes into the postbox downstairs on the street. I had been quick. If I left now to return to the ruins Ghost would have no reason to be concerned.

But upstairs was a bathtub, and *clothes*...

I let myself back in for a second time, and intruded upon the man's bathroom. To my relief it wasn't nearly as disgusting as I supposed a forty year old un-married scoundrel would keep his things; in fact it contained a surprising quantity of grooming gear. Considering how nice his place actually was, and the curious way he treated women I was starting to suspect...

But he had *running water*, and for that I could forgive anything. My rags were on the floor, the tin basin was filling up with water, and the room was

filling up with steam.

That's when I noticed the mirror hanging on the wall. For a shocking, heart-wrenching moment I thought that I had glanced through a window and caught *Thalia* staring back at me. My body was misshapen, swollen, some parts of me were blood red, some parts deep purple and still others so pale as to seem lifeless. I was covered with dirt and encrusted blood from cuts and gouges; I could only assume far worse was on my back, which I refused to attempt an examination of. However there was no escaping the sight of the splint now. I had no idea why it wasn't bleeding; I could only suspect there was some dark Hammerite technique which could be used to fuse metal to flesh, and now I was an honored recipient.

The bath was ready, so I tore myself from the mirror and shut off the valve to halt the flow. It was amazing: mirrors and preheated water. What sort of luxury could I be living in if I gave up the life of a thief and became a fence? I slid in and leaned back. The water stung my wounds, but it felt *good*. I tried to calm my mind and allow my muscles to relax. No more Hammerites, no more hallucinations, and if I could help it, no more pagan tormentors. I would go where they could not find me. Such a place had to exist. Right now, at any rate, submerged in a basin of water would do.

— **Nightfall: An Alarming Discovery** —

Day 5: 1:00 pm

It had begun to drizzle again. I had hoped that the rain would cool things down, but it only made the heat worse and added steam to the mix. The machines were able to carry on in spite of the rain because the soil they were moving over was still regular forest floor. It was the damage that the machines did to the ground which caused it to become a horrible muddy mess. The two wreckers which followed behind the deforesters had to occasionally be shoveled out when the ground got too soft, but for the most part progress was steady, in spite of our continued half-pace that Chispin insist that we keep.

A party of Hammerites came running from up the road, if it could be called running. We had been showered off and on through the afternoon with light rain, making the muddy soil nearly unnavigable. I knew at once that they had to be the ones sent to find the missing soldiers. "Brother Chispin," one of them cried, when they approached. "Our brethren have been found, though all 'tis not well."

I quickly let myself off the carriage, not wanting to miss what was going on. Ivan was already behind us greeting the men and demanding to know what was going on. A moment later Chispin stormed past me, whom I followed at a slight distance.

"Ranthos is in need of our help," the soldier said, panting for breath. "The branch he dangleth from precariously, shalt give way at any moment, causing him to plummet to his death."

Chispin put his hand on the shoulder of the man who spoke, questioning

him with ire in his voice. "And Brother Christopher?"

"Brother, I fear we have found *pieces* of Brother Christopher."

"Devils!" "By the Builder's Hammer!" Ivan and Chispin said at once.

"Collect his body as best thou canst, Brother, and hast his remains returned home," Chispin commanded. "As for our Brother Ranthos; hast a party sent to secure his safe return to solid ground; I shalt not have another death before the enemy hath even been engaged! I shalt order all men to be at the ready, and extra watchful. 'Tis our punishment for sloth. It shalt not occur again."

Thurm was now beside me, shaking his head, his hand to his mouth. Ivan looked over at me with a blank expression on his face, but his eye cutting. Don't get involved, he was telling me. He faded away into the background once again, as he was apt to do, and Chispin returned to the front lines. Thurm was still.

"'Tis a grave danger we face," Thurm said to Chispin as he was walking off. "I only hope our numbers shall be enough."

"Tell him that we need to go back to full pace," I said to Thurm as soon as Chispin was out of earshot. "The weather is worsening. The slower the machines go the more risk there is that they will become caught in the mud."

Thurm looked agitated with me telling him to tell Chispin to do something, but he knew I was right, and he knew that only he, as second in command, could make this suggestion. "But what of the..." he stopped even before he finished the statement, knowing that both of us knew that the reason to slow was nonsense. "Very well, I shalt reason with him. He doth understand the dangers of the mud, at least. I am sure I shalt come up with other arguments as well."

I nodded. Richen was lifting the canopy of the carriage up to give him and our supplies a little protection from the rain.

— Sheam: Confidant —

Day 5: 3:00 pm

Ghost did join me for coffee, and we had a nice talk. I felt a little bad for messing with him the way I did; only a little. I felt worse for what I had done to myself, but it was no matter. I told him the story of being locked under The Circle, and he told me his story about the abduction, interrogation, Cragscleft and Lytha. I did my best to try to explain to him what was going on from Nightfall's point of view, why he would do the things he did, though every word of it from me was conjecture based on my past experiences with Daelus. Truly, I had no idea he had planned something so rash, but nonetheless found myself amazed and impressed that it had worked. I was surprised at how well Ghost was taking it all. It was probably because I kept insisting that Daelus chose Ghost for the task based on Ghost's remarkable reputation, which the interrogation was merely meant to confirm. He never admitted to being flattered, he just kept saying that he was glad he was able to get Lytha out of there. His concern for her truly put me at ease.

Now we started at our mugs in silence. We were still in Eisenhower's Hotel, but on the second floor café. It was a welcome change from my room, but I was still a prisoner.

"So," Ghost finally said, thumbing his empty mug, "how does a girl like you get to be assistant for a shady mysterious aristocratic who-ha?"

I smiled a little. "Just lucky I guess."

"No really," he said, "I'm curious. What's your story?"

"My story's not very interesting," I replied without a smile.

"Rough past?"

I shrugged. "No. I've lived a fairly comfortable life actually."

"You find him or he find you?"

"He offered a job, I applied, and he hired me. There isn't much more to it than that." I took another sip of my drink. I could deal with telling him the crazy story of my adventure with the Hammerites, but I preferred to not talk about myself even with friends whom I was fairly well acquainted with. It was true, anyway: my story wasn't very interesting.

"Okay," he just said with a frown, and then continued after a moment's pause. "I guess it just seems weird for a type like you to be working in a place like that. It's pretty impressive."

I shot him an irate glance. "And where should a *type* like me be working?"

"Uh, uh," he stammered, and then tried to hide his embarrassment at saying something stupid. "I don't mean you personally! I just mean, you know, lots of girls your age with your looks usually work in taverns or as housemaids or something."

I rolled my eyes at him. "You're not the first to think I'd be better off waiting tables."

"I didn't mean you!" he insisted. "I just mean it's what's typical! And you're in no way typical! I'm trying to flatter you, damn it!"

I gave a short sigh, trying to clear my mind of memories of drunks trying to grab my dress and ask for some *milk* with their next round. If that's the life expected of most girls who seem the same *type* as me, I wasn't sure how they kept from slitting their wrists at night. Brushing it from my mind, I tried to change the subject. "And you? I don't suppose you have a story you want to tell."

He laughed a bit, as anxious as I to move to another topic. "Runaway. Always had a thing for old ruins. Found I could make a living by knowing which ones to break into and how to find the stuff worth selling. That's about it really."

"What did you run away from?"

He leaned back in his chair, "Everything that was keeping me from being who I am."

I smiled. "My, aren't we vague today."

"Only as vague as you."

"Do you have a real name?"

"Ghost..." he said, after a bit of a pause.

"Is that the name your mother gave you?"

"It's the name I gave me," he replied, and started to look like he really wanted something else in his mug.

"So when you ran away, you left your old name behind."

"Was no old name," he said quietly.

Another pregnant pause followed.

"So what's it like working for the great and *mysterious* Nightfall?"

I took a breath. "Always, different," I said, trying to find the right words.

"How does a guy like that make it so rich?"

"He was rich when he got here," I explained quietly.

"That doesn't answer my question."

I wasn't going to elaborate. "He likes it here. I know The City is changing him. Now I am worried that I may never see him again."

"Ah, he'll be back. He made it this far, right?"

"Right," I said, looking up at him with a smile.

After a brief pause he asked, "So what do you mean, changing him?"

I shuddered inside. "When I first met him, I don't think he would have done what he did to you...but it turned out okay in the end. I don't know how he knew it would, but he did."

He frowned. "It's easier to gamble when it's someone else's life."

"Yes," I said quietly. I wasn't going to argue with him on that, as much as I wanted to.

"So are you going to tell me how you did that?"

I blinked. "Did what?"

He waved his hands around his face and his chest. "You changed. Some spell or something. You were all..."

I smiled and felt myself blushing again. I reached to my throat and unclasped the choker. He looked a little surprised as I got up out of my chair and walked around the table to him. "Hold still," I said as I reached in close and put it on him. He squirmed uncomfortably for a second and then seemed to relax. He craned his neck a little to give me more room. Once in place, I made a few choice adjustments, and then stepped back to look over what I had done.

"What?" he asked very perplexed.

"Come with me," I told him curling my finger at him. He obeyed quickly, as was becoming his habit.

I led him back upstairs to my room, and invited him inside. He stood there looking uncomfortable, shifting from foot to foot. He really needed to get his regular clothes back. The stuff Eisenhower gave him just wouldn't do. "Well?" he asked.

I winked and then walked over to the washroom door, which was opened, and shut it. There was a small mirror on it. Ghost looked and nearly jumped out of his skin. I almost fell to the ground laughing.

"Ahh! What did you do!" he whined, and then he started to laugh. He went right up to the mirror, looking at himself, turning his head, feeling his face. His skin was pale, pale white. His eyes were sunken and dark, and his cheeks were thin. "I look like a Ghost!" he proclaimed, laughing. He was pawing at

his face, as if he didn't believe it was real. "This is insane," he said over and over.

"Here, let me do one more thing," I said as I reached over and turned the last bead, which I had previously left untouched since I first used it. I watched as Ghost died and became a rotting corpse.

Ghost was quiet for a time, looking at himself in the mirror, dead, wasted away, dried rotting skin and bare bones. "Never wanted to see myself like this," he said, suddenly not finding it all so funny. Then he turned to me. I really didn't like the look of it myself. I wanted to go over there and turn it off, but I found the sight of him so repulsive that I couldn't take a step. "Sheam, this gives me an idea," he said.

"Idea?"

"Yeah, let's have some fun," he said, moving towards the door.

"Fun?" I said, instantly going on guard.

"Yeah, fun!" he shouted, out the door and down the hall. I chased after.

— Ghost: A Little Fun —

Day 5: 3:30 pm

I really wasn't thinking about that money anymore, nor was I thinking about Lytha or my curse. The past few days had been utter hell, and now all I wanted was to have some fun and mischief. I quickly walked down the hall towards the stairs; as a zombie.

"So what are you planning?" She said, following, sounding more than a little worried.

"Hmm...not sure. Scare a few guys shitless. Some vandalism. Maybe...where does mustache keep his money?"

"Ghost!" she called out, sounding more than a little irritated. Too bad.

I stopped and turned back to look at her, grinning broadly. "Diversions are good. You distract them while I pilfer."

"I'll do nothing of the sort, and neither shall you!" she demanded.

"Yeah, you will," I said casually. I had always worked alone before. Then again, the stakes had never been lower. From what I had seen this guy only hired local riffraff who would pee their pants and run away screaming at the sight of a zombie. I also knew that there was no way Sheam could get in trouble here; she was the guest of honor.

Now we were downstairs, and I was contemplating. "Alrighty, Sheam, let's get down to business. I'm betting one up front, one in the back, and one in the money room, who is probably bored stiff. We're about to do him a favor and relieve him of his boredom."

"Ghost!" she demanded. "If you don't stop this foolishness this instant I will march straight to Eisenhower and get this whole place on alert, and have you hunted down!"

"Come on," I said with half a laugh. "What are you going to tell him? Oh mister Aye-sen-hoor, there's a zombie loose in your building! He'd be the first to run!"

I could tell she was repulsed by the sight of my undead jaws flapping. She backed away and looked like she was about to throw up. "I'll tell him the truth."

"Sure you will. Like, he'd believe you. Mister mustache, the zombie is not really a zombie, but a man in disguise! They'll still all run in terror. I'm a bloodthirsty, undead horror and am here to eat their brains right from their skulls!" I shouted with a growl.

I casually walked through the door and down the hall. I had a pretty good feel already where the money room would be. Places always had a money room; a whole room just for money, just for me. I could hear the guards up front laughing and carrying on. I peeked around the storage room door, and saw a solitary guard, sitting on a stool, head down. He seemed to be singing to himself.

"Dum de dump de dum de da da, de dat de da de dada, dum dum de dumdidy dum!"

The room was packed full of supplies for the Hotel. Crates and boxes lined all the walls to the ceiling. I knew a safe had to be in here too. I felt Sheam behind me, so I spun around quickly to shoot her a scary look, and go "Shh!" with a boney finger to my nonexistent lips. She turned white.

"Dum de dat de de dada. Da de dat de da de da, Heh he heh..."

I snuck around the perimeter of the room, taking care to remain utterly silent. The guard grunted, and shifted his view across the side of the room opposite from where I stood. I kept moving. Finally I was behind him. I crept up slowly, then tapped his shoulder suddenly.

He turned around with a startled jerk.

"BOO!!"

"AAHHHHH!!" He screamed and fell out of his chair. He then passed out.

I was laughing so hard I felt like I would turn inside out. "Oh man, that worked better than I thought," I said, between fits of laughter. I fiddled around at my neck to undo the thing, and pulled it off once I had it free. I saw immediately that my hands had returned to normal, and the choker itself looked as normal as a thing could possibly look. "Oh damn, I *love* this thing!!" My eyes darted around. "Anything here to steal?" No sooner had I said it did I notice the safe on a shelf, and the key on the guard's belt. "Oh, this is too easy."

"Ghost you are not taking that money!"

"Why?" I said, suddenly not feeling so amused anymore. I turned the key in the lock, but then left it there, approaching Sheam. "Why not? I'm a thief. I steal. You deal with thieves all the time, don't you! Sitting at your desk all pretty, taking things people steal and giving them money for them. Huh? Why's that okay and this isn't?"

She backed away a little, looking awfully upset. I was just getting warmed up.

"This was nothing, kid. Sometimes the thieves don't go boo and the guards don't pass out by themselves. There's violence. A sock on the head. Maybe an arrow in the neck. Or a knife. Some do it with their bare hands.

Murder!"

She was looking away from me, but I could see her face trembling with anger.

"Doesn't matter to you, though, does it? All you see is the pretty gold. You don't see the blood on their hands. You don't see the tears of the poor sod who just lost everything to some cutthroat in the night. No, you don't!"

She slowly shifted her gaze to me. I was almost on top of her now, towering over, her back to the wall. She looked terrified.

"What do you know! You don't know anything do you? Who are you to tell me don't steal this? If I came to your bloody circle tomorrow, and handed you all the gold in this damn building, this blasted hotel owner's life's savings, his life's work, his entire livelihood, his future, would you ask any questions? Would you care? No! You'd turn a blind eye and just take it, because it's your job; because from where you're sitting, it's legit. Well you're not sitting there now! You're at the scene of the crime! An accomplice!"

She just stood there, frozen, eyes fixed on mine. She wasn't trembling anymore. I backed away slowly.

"Told you I needed the money," I said, no longer shouting, as I went over to the safe and opened it. "How did you think I was going to get it?" I told her as pulled out several neat bags of coin. "You think I have a job or something?" I pocketed the bags, emptying the safe. "It's just me and the world, and starvation is always around the corner."

"Ghost..." she said, her voice hard and low.

I looked back at her. "Besides," I said as I made sure my loot was secure, "I'm going to need money if I am going to get Lytha help."

She sighed and closed her eyes, her back still up against the wall. "We could have gotten you money if that's what you needed money for."

"Yeah, that would have been real convenient. All nice and organized. Very professional. Glowing with a conscience. And where would that money have come from? Who got robbed in order for that money to get to you, to get to me? None of it matters. Gold is gold." I walked passed her into the hall. Suddenly none of this seemed fun anymore.

"Give me the choker back," she said from far behind me.

"Why?" I asked, stopping.

"Because it's mine..." she said with the faintest of hiss.

I laughed. "Yours? Last I checked it was mine. It was on my neck. That makes it mine. Used to be yours, I guess. Where did you get it from? Oh, I bet someone *stole it!*"

"No, it does not belong to me, it belongs to The Circle!"

"Circle's Hammerite rubble now, girl," I scoffed. "Besides, that just makes me want to keep it more."

"Ghost you have to give it back!" I could hear her storming up behind me. "It's important!"

"Yeah, that I know," I said, heading for the back door to the place. "It's really important to me too."

"So you plan on going around on a rampage scaring people and robbing

them pretending to be a zombie? Is this some kind of sick parody to you? Is this your way of getting back at someone?" Oh, she was seething.

"The curse, remember?" I said bitterly, kicking the back door open. I was surprised no one had come running yet, with all the noise I had been making.

She stopped, glaring at me with the mother of all frowns on her face. "Yes..."

"What if the undead see me like this and think that I've died...they've won. They would give up. I could break the curse."

She was silent.

I looked out to the alley behind the hotel, and then back to her. "Or I could wind up dead for real. The only way to test it would be to let the zombies get close enough to me see me like this...or whatever it is they do."

She was quiet at first, as if she was thinking this over. "What if you don't smell dead?"

"That can be arranged," I said with half a laugh.

"I trusted you..." she said, almost a whisper.

I was about to bolt, but then I stopped. "I know. I'm sorry. I'll give you the choker back when I am done with it. But you have to let me try to break this curse. I can't keep on living like this." I looked over at her. At any time during all of this she could have run for help, gotten guards, even attacked me herself; but she didn't. That had to mean something. "Look for me tomorrow at the old ruin just east of Cragscleft. You'll either find my corpse, or me waiting there ready to give you your toy back. Either way, you get it back, and I get peace."

I watched her. She blinked a few times, like she didn't know what to say.

"Now I am trusting you," I said, winking at her. "I'll see you..." At that, I rushed away.

— Lytha: Sprung from Open Wounds —

Day 5: 3:30 pm

I was floating on currents of air. I settled upon a familiar face in a familiar den. Something was amiss. Chairs were pushed back, tables flipped over, a door blocked. The familiar face hid.

The currents shifted, growing warmer, faster.

There was panic. Screaming. A banging at the door. Splintering. A move to hide again. To escape.

The current was now a gale, blasting downwards, beginning to spiral.

"You betrayed him," came a voice like the rasping of old wood.

There were many others now. Minds like iron. His shoulders grasped, pushed to his knees, punched in the face. Fear. Terror. Cowardice.

"And now he will betray you!" came a voice like the last dying breath of a flame going out.

The current spiraled, hot, glowing now with flame, losing control.

Questions were asked. Truths were told. Just as before. But Koyné didn't allow them to hurt him; he obeyed quickly. He mixed lie with truth with a silver

tongue. I could feel his mind work. As soon as he was on his feet, he was licking theirs.

The current was now a rain of fire, beating down on bare skin, searing it.

All moved. Like a vein dried of blood, with new fresh hot blood thrust back into it, towards me. It cracked and shook and billowed its way back to life, and charged.—

I jerked myself awake with a voiceless scream; my lips gaping in horror but no sound escaping. A shiver passed through my whole body and seemed to reverberate back and forth, washing over me again and again like a pendulum. I gripped the sides of the tub so hard that I thought I felt the tin denting under my fingertips.

My eyes were wide, staring at the ceiling. I couldn't tell myself it was a dream; I knew that was a lie. But then it must be true. Was what I saw real? Had it happened, or was it yet to happen? How had I known? My mind hadn't worked that way before.

I lifted my hand to brush my hair out of my face, and then pulled it back, startled. At first my eyes could not conceive what was before me. It was just a blur, not real, yet no sooner had my eyes finally come to focus did I feel it deep within my flesh. Leaves. Vines. Something, some plant, was growing out of the open wounds and wrapping its way around my arms.

I pulled and tore at it, panting with panic, trying to get it all off, wishing that it was some hallucination. My face grew tight as I pulled the vine from the gash in my wrist, feeling the roots slide out from under my flesh, they were burrowed deep. I did the same for my other arm with tears falling down my face from the pain.

I dropped back down into the water once all of the vines and leaves were scattered about the floor. The water was beginning to turn red with my blood from my newly torn wounds. I felt something move beneath me, like a mass of...

I pulled myself from the bath in a fit of fright, and looking down on myself I saw the first tendrils of young vines licking about my sides. I reached around my back in quick, jerky motions, grabbing onto the shit and ripping it free from the cuts from the whip. I did this frantically, spinning around, not once caring that tearing these vines from my flesh hurt more than the whip had.

What had they done to me? Was I going to wake up again in another moment? Was this just a hallucination? I begged it to be, but I knew that it was not.

Blood now splattered the floor, with vines and leaves piled on top and more blood splattered on top of that. As I ripped another hunk of green from my shoulder which had wrapped itself tightly around the metal splint, tore it away and threw it down, I paused for a moment in mixed wonder and revulsion. A single red flower, with petals like the open talon of a bird, lay amongst the vines.

Before I knew it I was on hands and knees, emptying whatever had been

in my stomach onto the mix of plant and blood on the floor. Panting, and sobbing, I shook myself, pulling myself from the floor, holding fast to the back of a chair, feeling as if it were about to shatter under my grasp.

It was not the future I had seen; it had to have been happening at that very moment, somewhere else. Koyne could have had more than one home, even led multiple lives. Maybe they went to the right one because they didn't need me to tell them about him; maybe they already knew him. He could have been already on their 'list' and all they needed was an excuse to go get him. They would want more. They would come here soon. I didn't know how long it would take for them to get here, but I couldn't stay. The mess would be proof of my passage...proof of...of what? What did it prove? What didn't I know about myself that this...this, made clear? I shut my eyes from the scene and ran out of the room, going to where Koyne kept extra clothing. I wrapped myself, knowing that the fresh cloth was now being soaked in blood, but not caring. I raided the dwelling with haste, taking boots and a belt, a cowl, daggers, knives, blades of all sorts, and money too.

I halted at the door, about to exit. I looked down. Blood was dripping down my leg and onto the floor. I half expected the droplets of blood to sprout with buds and for vine to slither their way out like small green snakes. The blood dripped, and was still.

"Don't let them kill you," I whispered to myself, willing the words to reach Koyne. "Don't let them kill you because of me. Don't let me kill you." I sprang forward, and was away.

— Sheam: A Winding Path —

Day 5: 4:00 pm

I slammed my fist into the doorframe, biting back tears of rage. I let Ghost go. I could have gone after him, but I realized quickly that I had no idea if he wouldn't just put his hands around my neck and kill me, just like that. Why had I been so anxious to trust him, and why did everything he said hurt so *damn* much? Yes, everything he said was true, but none of it was anything I didn't *already know*.

I wanted to run upstairs to my room and lock the door, but I couldn't just leave the mess Ghost had left behind. I quickly went to the back room where I had set up my makeshift office not a few hours ago, and found the guard still lying there in a puddle of drool. I patted his hand and shook him, saying, "You're alright. Come on, wake up."

"Uff?" he said, propping himself up. His eyes then quickly went to the safe, which was open with the key still in the lock. "Alarm!" he shouted in my face, splating me with spit, and then pushed himself up and ran out of the room. I chased after him.

"It's my fault," Eisenhower said to his staff. "It must have been that varlet I let in earlier. I shouldn't have just assumed I knew what he was about, and I should have been suspicious when he vanished! Blast! Here I stand, more ear-wax than brains!"

I wasn't even given a chance to be honest. Soon the whole place was abuzz with news of the robbery, and Eisenhower was yelling at Thatcher to take me back to my room. The guard, at least, didn't trust his own eyes, claiming that the man who spooked up was wearing makeup, but insisting that it was a knock on his head that put him out. Inspection revealed a bump alright, but it was where he hit his head when he fell.

When I got to my room, I found a letter waiting for me on the table. Anxious for news about Daelus and to forget about Ghost, I quickly opened it and read.

S,

As you know, due to a breakdown in communications, Els and Moody departed from your presence before my people were able to make contact. In spite of our efforts, Els's location continues to remain unknown. Please, if he returns to you, or if there is any way you can get back in touch with him or tell us how to now find him, let me know.

- J

I was the one who was more earwax than brains. The letter didn't really require a reply, just for me to have a *single wit* about me, but I felt the need to say something to James in return, if only to scold myself. With deliberate motions, I pulled the chair out, sat on it, took the quill, and jabbed it into the paper with such force that I nearly broke the tip. I wrote...

As you know, due to me being an insufferable clod that deserves to be beat to death by the Hammerites, Els and Moody departed from my presence...

...only to ball it up and throw it against the wall. This kind of self-pity would not fly with James, and would only inspire him to send me a doting, sickening kind reply telling me to cheer up and that it was not my fault, which is exactly what I did not want. With my face twisted into an expression of disgust, I tried again.

J,

I'm sorry. I'm afraid I can't do much to try to get back in touch with them right now, but if I hear anything I'll try to let you know. If they return, I won't let them out of my sight again.

- S

I gave a long sigh, folded the letter, and then glanced woefully at the stack of clean sheets. I felt like I wasn't done yet. The letter to James wasn't enough. There was someone else who I needed to write to, and there was no

sense in putting it off. I curled my arm up under myself as I leaned on the desk, staring at the stack of clean sheets like they were a hated enemy I needed to parlay with. Reluctantly I uncurled my arm and reached for the stack, choosing to do what I had secretly been considering ever since yesterday morning. I slid the paper to position it in front of me just as I had done with the letter for James, and began to write.

Dear Daelus,

When I woke up yesterday morning I couldn't have imagined that I would be writing this letter today. In fact, I never imagined in all the short, but seeming eternity, which I've known you, that I would be writing this letter. But today, suddenly, I feel as if there's nothing else that can be done.

When I submitted myself for consideration for the position you were offering at The Circle I never imagined how it would change my life. I don't think I fully understood, until today, until an hour ago, how much it actually has.

I think my eyes have finally opened to what accepting this position has gotten me into. For all of this time I kept my eyes shut, focusing only on what I wanted to see, and ignoring the hard realities of your existence and the type of existence I would need to have if I stood by your side.

So that is why I must now tender my resignation. I only hope that you will allow me to do so, considering the secrets I am already privy to. I promise you that I will never betray your trust. I am not leaving because I feel the need to reject you and your plans. I just can't have them for myself anymore.

Sincerely yours,
- Sheam

I just stared at the letter blankly for a moment. It was overly melodramatic, the sentence structure was a mess, it used the same phrases over and over, and I seemed to gush and ramble in the last paragraph. It didn't matter, though. I folded it in two, and then again, and then a third time, and then a fourth until it was just a tiny square. Another long sigh escaped me as I looked at the little square of paper with distain.

With a grimace, I tucked it into the top of my tight bustier. I folded my arms before me on the desk and lowered my forehead to rest against the backs of my hands. "Don't send it," I whispered to myself. "Don't you dare send that letter, Sheam." I felt convinced that I wouldn't send it, but I couldn't throw it out either. I needed to keep it for a little while longer.

How long was "a little while," anyway? By all reasoning I had only held this job for "a little while". I remembered clearly sitting, half a year ago, probably less, in the room that would someday be my office, sizing up my competitors. They were the usual sorts I was accustomed to seeing when

trying for secretarial positions, so I didn't pay their outfits or ages very much mind. Most of the ladies were far better dressed than I was, all in the latest fashions with high collars and ribbed corsets. Most were far older as well, with the exception of one girl who seemed no more than sixteen. A few men were present as well, which was not unusual for a secretarial position of this caliber.

I wondered why my friend Caroline thought I should bother submitting my application to work at this new library-museum that was slated to open within a few weeks' time. She and the other girls at our boarding house were all well employed in various similar jobs, but none this high profile, so it would have been easy for any of them to swoop in and grab the secretarial position at The Circle of Stone and Shadow with their years of experience and glowing reviews from their current employers. Instead I, the one who could never seem to keep a job for more than a year, was sitting there feeling overwhelmed by how much more qualified everyone around me seemed. They all had these neat satchels and binder which were no doubt filled with examples of their accounting work and letters or recommendation, and I just had a brief resume. Even the sixteen year-old who sat there empty handed was prettier than I was. I could have said the same about some of the men, too.

Finally, after waiting about an hour and seeing five go in before me for interviews lasting roughly ten minutes each—I thought this important because he hadn't seemed to favor any of them with a longer interview—I was called in. I had all but given up at that point, certain that I would get the same ten minutes and then be forgotten while he crafted his short list from those with the impressive satchels.

Back then Daelus's office was much the same as it remained to this day. I remembered being surprised by how young he was, being clearly under forty. I usually expected socialite gentlemen of his age to be far more interested in gold, power, spirits, and women, than of books, art, and artifacts. Considering that I was there for him to judge me, I felt it only proper to return the favor. I was certain that he had gotten himself in far over his head, that he was chasing some wild ambition of his with no plan for how to realize it, and needed the assistance of an experienced secretary to ensure that he had someone to blame when it all came crashing down.

"Please, have a seat, Miss...Sheam?" he said in a calm, almost bored tone. When he looked up at me from the interview schedule his eyes quickly locked onto mine, but betrayed nothing. Even that told me something, though: there was no flirtation, so he was serious about filling this job.

I sat down neatly, folding my hands before me. "Yes, sir, my name is Sheam."

"Forgive me," he said in a polite tone, "but I am accustomed to most having a family name and a given name. May I ask which Sheam is, and why the other is absent?"

I forgave him of course, for it was rather unusual for someone of my social class to go without a family name. "The women of my boarding house drop

the name of their father out of tradition. I understand that this tradition was once widespread, but it no longer holds within most groups for young ladies, as they fear that a woman with no last name won't be taken as seriously as one who does, regardless of her marital status." That was, of course, entirely the point. We weren't *supposed to be* taken as seriously as married women.

"I see," he replied, looking down at the page. The inflection in his voice showed how odd he felt it was. I happened to glance where he was looking, and noticed with some discomfort that every other name on the list was at the very least three words, some as many as five, with myself being the only one to go by a first name only. "Very well, Sheam," he said in a much more brisk tone. "Please, tell me about yourself."

"Well," I said, sure that I had already completely blown my chances and that I might as well relax, "I love to dance, my favorite color is yellow, I—" at this I began to grin and blush, feeling how silly I was being with my bold disregard for what I knew he was actually asking, "—I love coffee. I swear I drink at least five cups of it a day! Let me see...hot baths, too. I can't live without hot baths—"

That's when I heard him laugh. I jerked my eyes up to him, to see him rubbing his eyes with one hand, his elbow resting on the desk casually, getting the last few chuckles out of his system before meeting his eyes with mine once again. "Would you like some coffee, Sheam?"

Even though I felt like a tremendous idiot for the flippant way I was acting, I nodded politely and said, "Yes, I'd love some."

"I'm afraid it's not very hot anymore," he said to me as he poured from the tall metal pot into a clay mug he pulled from the shelf beside him, "but I find this particular breed of bean to taste quite nicely even at room temperature." He then poured his own mug full, and dropped a single sugar cube inside.

"One lump, please," I said, finding that I was unable to do anything but smile. I suspected that he had given up on the interview as much as I had, and was content to simply enjoy the next eight minutes as a coffee break before shooing me out and getting on to the next serious applicant. With my tepid coffee sweetened, I took a sip, and found that he was quite right. It didn't taste bad at all at this temperature.

"Where do you import them from?" I asked, more certain than ever that the next few minutes were to be killed with idle chit-chat.

He gave a crooked smile, and his eyes seemed to become more expressive for just a fleeting instant. "Is that your resume?" he asked, gesturing with a slight motion to the paper I was holding in my lap.

"Oh, yes, it is," I said, feeling my face go suddenly flushed. Maybe I had been wrong. Maybe he was going to pretend to read my resume for the rest of the session and I was to sit here in silence. I handed it neatly to him.

As he looked it over, his eyes far more intent than I was expecting, he said, "The beans are grown near a village which, by all City reckoning, does not exist. It's considered a pagan settlement, and as a result, this coffee is actually quite illegal. It has been quite difficult for me to acquire, but once I had discovered it, I found that I wasn't satisfied with the quote-unquote, legal

coffee anymore.”

“Ah yes, I know *exactly* what you mean,” I said, after taking a long and quite enjoyable sip.

“Oh?” he asked, lowering the paper. His eyes had lit up with interest.

I swallowed, suddenly feeling quite nervous, but not so much that I had lost my tongue. “When I worked for a shipping company,” I began, anxious to tell a story that I doubted any but he would appreciate, “we often dealt in pagan goods. They were as illegal to sell within The City as this coffee, but we had trusted suppliers who had secure trade routes and could bring us crates full of pagan luck charms, amulets, bracelets, and other curiosities. They were *extremely* popular with the fringe nobility who felt attracted to anything quaint or *sinful*.”

“Or magical,” he added, the glowing interest in his eyes simmering down to a gentle, but still heated, concentration. I liked his addition. I didn’t personally believe that the pagan goods were magical, but if he was to be running a museum, it did him credit to have some personal beliefs invested in some of his artifacts. In time, of course, personal experience would sway me to his point of view.

I nodded at his comment and continued. “Well, it was simple really for me to get around the trouble of selling these things openly. They were real, but if anyone ever audited the company’s books to see where we were getting the curios from, they would find the supply chain lead right back to honest artisans in The City who had a penchant for crafting fake pagan trinkets. It made us *look* fraudulent to our customers, but was totally legal. Of course, the customers did get what they paid for, and they were never the ones who investigated our business, so it was a perfect solution. I’m really quite proud of it, and don’t get much chance to actually talk about that kind of thing.” I was already almost done with my coffee, smiling into my mug as I took another drink.

“That’s impressive,” he said simply. “But why were you let go?”

“That,” I said quietly, “was because the company’s owner got nervous about the whole affair, decided to stop the trade, and fired the one who had been encouraging his managers to do something so illegal. He went out of business a year later. They never did get caught for selling contraband, though.”

“I see,” he replied, looking at my resume once again. “I see you also worked at The Clandestine Stockade, taking inventory and...waiting tables?”

I nodded, sighing briefly, and crossing one leg over the other. “In spite of the name which conjures up images of a secret fortress, it was just a simple restaurant with extremely pretentious clientele. They hired me to manage their inventory but as time went on they had me spend less and less of my hours doing my actual job and more and more waiting tables. They said a girl like me should be seen up front, or something.” I shook my head quickly and made a dejected look, making sure he knew that I thought this was stupid. “They actually fired me for spending too much time doing my main job and not enough time flirting with customers.” I glared into my now empty coffee

cup. "I was about to walk out, anyway. They had no idea how to run a proper business. Their books were a mess, inventory in chaos, and I wasn't given nearly enough time to make heads or tails of it."

"How much more time would you have needed?" he asked rubbing his temple with his pointer finger as he studied me intently.

That's when I realized that the interview was still very much in progress, and I needed to either give a very good answer or just excuse myself and there. "I needed exactly as much time as they had initially given me. Four hours a day. Instead they had me working six hours on the restaurant floor and then two hours in the back after I had already exhausted myself catering to the whims of drunk, *spoiled* idiots."

"That does sound frustrating," he said with a nod. "I have just a few more questions, Sheam. Your boarding house was not a school, correct?" he asked quickly.

"No, sir," I replied, feeling myself clam up.

"So..." he said, as if he were expecting a longer answer, "where then did you learn how to do this kind of work?"

"From my father's business," I replied just as quickly. "He's a merchant. Right now he operates out of Dayport, but during the summer he switches his headquarters to Indiesglen, a small island with a shepherding community a few miles from the coast, to avoid certain seasonal tax hikes."

He waited for a moment after I had finished, before finally asking, "And he taught you these things?"

I was turning red. It was ironic that as soon as I realized he was actually interested in me I turned into a complete idiot and was failing to answer his questions intelligently. "No, sir, actually my mother did. She handled that aspect of his business, and taught me everything she knows. Record keeping, accounting, trade law, penmanship, calligraphy, how to take dictation, proper etiquette when dealing with customers and clients, uhm..." My brain was locking up. All of that was already listed on my resume, plus a dozen other skills I was completely forgetting. I then quietly added, "How to smile even when you're having a bad day," with a small, sheepish smile.

"It seems she's taught you very well," he said, finally putting the resume down. "Do you still have ties to your family business?"

I shook my head. "No, sir. I actually never did. I was taught these things by my mother, but never formally took part in the business." Feeling nervous, and stupid for not giving him enough information before, I rambled on. "I left home for the boarding house when I was fifteen, and got my first actual job then with the help of their placement."

He nodded, giving no indication that I had told him too little or too much. "This may seem like an odd question, but do you have any unlisted employment experience at all?"

I did seem taken aback, but answered without stuttering. "No, I honestly don't." I didn't realize it at the time, but he was trying to make sure that I did not have any *inconvenient* loyalties. If I had any connections with mercenary organizations, competing nobles, or any wardens, it would have disqualified

me. Too strong of a family tie would have also lowered my candidacy. Thankfully, none of that was true.

He just nodded, and from there, we launched into a discussion about payment, schedules, and if I was open to living on the premises, which I was. Finally he thanked me, and told me to expect to hear from him soon.

And I did. The next day, in fact, he invited me back. He had a fresh pot of coffee, steaming hot, ready for me when I got there. We talked about his plans for The Circle and what he expected from a secretary. Then he offered me the job. I remembered feeling quite overwhelmed by the complexity of what he was asking for, but quickly grew excited. I had no, absolutely no, idea what I was getting myself into.

And I still didn't. I had no idea I'd end up a fugitive from the Hammerites and an accomplice in a robbery. What would be next? Murder? I didn't want to find out.

I shook myself out of my trace, realizing that I had been raking my fingernails through my hair across my scalp so harshly that I had skin under my fingernails. I got up from the chair and moved to the bed, looking out the window to the hazy shape of the ruined Circle through the slightly foggy glass. Was this how I was going to leave it? Would someone else, some new hire, be the one to oversee its rebuilding? The thought frankly sickened me, but was still not worse than that cold, dreadful fear in my gut, telling me that I needed to run far, far away from Daelus Thresh.

Worst of all, the bustier was too tight.

— **Nightfall: Origin of the Controversy** —

Day 5: 5:00 pm

The sky was now black as night. Gusts of wind tore at the Hammerite's torches. There was a lull in the rain, but I knew it was about to get worse. Richen had dismounted from the carriage and was walking with Suzy, attempting to keep her calm in spite of the occasional crack of lightning. I walked on the other side, though a greater distance away. The men who had gone to save Ranthos had not yet returned. Chispin finally heeded Thurm's pleas and ordered the machines to proceed at full speed.

Soon the distinct smell of an underground abbey (of candle wax and parchment and, most of all, incense) invaded my nostrils. Like a creature that had crept onto my shoulder to whisper evils into my ear, Ivan was beside me. "Will all of our blood be on thy hands?" he asked in a cracked, squeaky voice as his incense burner creaked back and forth on its chain.

I turned to look at him, knowing that he would not come to speak to me if all he had to say was a fatalistic anecdote. "What's on your mind, Brother Ivan?" I asked.

"The fate of all of our souls, *Brother* Daelus. I know that all others, with the possible exception of thy driver, wilt be at peace following our deaths. But what of thee, *Brother* Daelus? None here need salvation more than *thou*, with thy life of deceit and treachery. What shalt become of thee once thou

dost face thy judgment, and the deaths of all here fall on thy conscience?"

"So you've decided that we're all going to die and it's all my fault. Is that what you want to tell me?"

"Nay, *Brother* Daelus," he said, and I was beginning to grow weary of the way he put so much emphasis on '*brother*'. "But thou dost know that 'tis a possibility that we shall meet our doom here. Dost thou feel the intensity of this evil storm? We are in the wilderness, in the realm of our enemies, where naught can shield us from it. We are far from our blocks and beams, and it is thou who hath put us in this deadly place. Thou must be prepared for the eternal consequences of thy deeds."

I wasn't buying it. He was after something. "What is it you want from me, *Brother* Ivan?"

"A just death! If I am to die, I wish not for its cause to be an unjust heretic! I didst hear thy conversation with Brother Thurm this morning. I saw the look in thy eyes at his words. Though Brother Thurm didst witness to the driver, it was thou he shouldst have been concerned for! Thou who are so close to us, who hath a voice in the council, however small, an unbeliever! I cannot stomach it any longer!"

"Is that what this is all about? You do not want to die here knowing that an unbeliever is in your midst?"

"So thou dost admit!" he hissed.

"I am merely attempting to clarify your position. I admit nothing." I was beginning to think that Ivan did not actually have an ulterior motive for speaking with me. He truly was concerned about the fate of his soul should he die due to the actions of a heretic.

"Thou," he said, poking his finger into my face, "*disgust* me. Thou art taken under the wing of His Excellency, Father Markander, and yet thou dost pay naught but pretense to our Lord Master Builder. Dost thou not see the favor that thou hast been granted, the immense honor? Then, even as Father Rafael rejects thee, Brother Oberon takes thee under his wing in Markander's stead, to continue the wishes of our late Father. In spite of this, still thou remain a heretic, still an unbeliever, still thou do not pay homage and respect and reverence to The Master Builder!"

"Very well, Ivan, if you must know, know that you are mistaken. I do all of these things, but in my own, private way. It is not my choice to parade about my devotion as some might. I would appreciate it if you understood that."

"Swear to me!" he barked, his finger still in my face. "Swear to me that thou dost hold The Master Builder as thy God, and that thou dost reject all others, now and forevermore!"

I locked my eyes onto his, just as I felt heavy raindrops begin to pelt my shoulders. "I swear that I hold The Master Builder as my God, and that I reject all others, now and forever."

He seemed shocked that I had said it, so willingly and without hesitation. I was certain that the man was quite insane. "And may the tongue be cut from thy head shouldst this be shown otherwise."

"Will you be satisfied, now, *Brother* Ivan, that even if we should all die

here, it will not be the fault of a heretic?"

"I am satisfied, Brother Daelus, that it will not be the fault of a heretic. It shalt still be on thine own conscious, but at least now there shalt be the possibility of salvation for thee." At that he turned away, walking with the fumes of incense pouring from its metal cage in great clouds. I lowered the hat closer to my eyes, and glanced over to Richen. He was gazing at me from over the neck of the horse. The drizzle had become rain.

The oddest thing was that Ivan was the first Hammerite to ever show concern for me in that way, misplaced as it was. Most Hammerites either took it for granted or simply did not care. Father Markander was even the opposite; he supported the fact that I was a heretic, even encouraged it, because he himself was making a conversion to hereticism. It was the reason why all of this began.

I remembered my first meeting with the late High Priest well. I had no idea who he was when I was brought before him, only that he had to be someone very important. In that room, not so long ago, I gazed across the long strip of red and gold carpet at the seemingly ancient, seated figure. "Leave us," the High Priest had said, accompanied by a gesture of his hand. The Hammerites in the room then obeyed, stiff, formal, like they were in the presence of royalty as they departed. I could hear the sound of bolts being locked. I was left alone in the room with the old man.

From the moment I had arrived in The City, I knew the Hammerites would be a problem. They were the hammer and tongs that gripped the hot iron and beat it into the shapes that pleased them. I knew that I would be forced to deal with them, and soon, but I had not then realized that it would have been that soon. Mere days after my tower had set a new point of light amongst the rocky foothills at The City's edge, they came for me.

Markander spoke to me. "Forgive my appearance. The Trickster's poison hath set itself deep within my bones, Builder be cursed," he had said, accompanied by a raspy cough which sounded like his lungs were scraping bare against his ribs.

As I stood there, I emptied myself of all thoughts and feelings which would incriminate me. I set about myself an appearance of earnestness and reverence. "What is it I can do for you, your honor?"

"Please, address me as father. I am Markander, the high priest within the Hammerite Order, though not for long. I called you here on a matter of the utmost importance, and trust."

I was skeptical, cautious, and a little nervous. "Then the honor is mine, father," I replied. "But why trust me?"

The old man lifted a leaflet of paper from his robes. He held it before him and read it aloud. "This dawn mine brothers and I didst see a shocking and humbling sight. A man, clad in black, didst summon forth a curtain of darkness from the stone of the mountains, which stretched into the sky. 'Twas as if a shadow of darkness separated itself from the earth and didst form a magnificent and awful tower. We felt as if night was falling upon us as its heights eclipsed the sun. We did run trembling in fear, for this 'twas either

the Master Builder himself or a vile pretender using dark, mystic arts to mock our ways, building through witchcraft rather than strength and sweat. We did debate amongst ourselves which was the truth and have agreed that it must be the latter. However, we withhold judgment to thine eternal wisdom." The man then folded the paper back up and placed it within his robe.

Finally it was clear, the fear in their eyes. When they had come for me that morning, they waited until I was through The City gates. They wouldn't dare approach me while I was still within the realm of my tower. They wanted me on their own turf. Then they had me surrounded. They made their demands. They would not approach me. I was escorted by armed soldiers, slowly, carefully, through street after street, until the great cathedral loomed overhead. Markander's words of dark arts and witchcraft sent a dull pain through my jaw as my teeth clenched. My eyes would remain steady.

"Are you, in fact, Daelus Thresh?"

I nodded, ceremoniously, bowing ever so slightly. "I am."

The old man nodded and then narrowed his eyes sharply. "Be ye a man of wicked sorcery, or faith to The Builder, or none; I care not. The Builder has damned me, allowed me to suffer and soon die at the hands of his enemies. I know not why I have been fated as such."

I later learned that during the pagan lord Constantine's attack on the Hammerites, the High Priest had been briefly captured. Rather than kill him outright, they chose to infect him with a disease which would cause a slow, debilitating, and fatal illness, so that he would live to see Constantine remake The City as he pleased, but be too weak to fight against him. Constantine was defeated, the High Priest rescued, but the disease proved incurable.

He continued, "I believed I had served The Builder well through my years, but evidently my deeds were not great enough, and I am being punished. But, I am not dead yet, and I have one last deed I wish to perform; and for once, it is not for The Builder, it is for myself."

I had read their books. I even listened to their sermons. Their builder was a wrathful, jealous god, who saw a man's worth in the quality of his work. How utterly crippling it must be to feel as if one's deeds had come up short, and at the very moment of death no less. This man had been driven mad by the faith that his value as a being was measured in how many stones he had stacked one atop the other. In his desperation, at the moment of fulfillment of the most dire of outcomes his own dogma could foresee, he had turned his back on everything he believed in.

After a moment he went on, "When I die, the council will elect a new High Priest. I know who they will choose, and there is no stopping it. My protégé, Rafael, will be named. I have no doubt of that. It is with a great deal of anger and hatred that I face this fact. That spawn of the Trickster has cheated me at every turn, constantly attempting to prove himself more worthy than I to be High Priest. Even as I yet live, he makes plans to move into the position, robbing my grave before I am even in it. I damn him to a thousand hells." The old man turned even more pale as he said this, and his eyes grew very watery, tears running down his face. But his voice did not waver or shake, though I

could hear the anger behind it. "If I shall be denied supremacy in the eyes of my followers, then he shall as well.

"Allow me to read to you what I have written..." He cleared his throat, and pulled out another leaflet from his robes. "And thus, it shalt cometh to pass that, in the days following the vanquishing of a hated enemy, shalt come to The City, a stranger, performing great miracles of stone and beam. This man shalt be known as an emissary from The Builder, a mortal being of divine blood, who hath sipped from the goblets of The Builder's table, and bringeth forth his guidance, words, and glory to his children, as they march forth into a new time of prosperity. His name shalt be Daelus, and he shalt lift the darkness from our souls onto his shoulders, bearing our burdens, so we may be free to feel the light of The Builder surrounding us." He then lowered the leaflet.

"What does all this mean?" I asked, finally. "What is it you are asking me to do?"

"I am not asking thee to do anything, my son. 'Tis the role I have bestowed upon thee. As a servant of The Builder, thou art *obligated* to perform the duties I have bestowed upon thee."

"And those are?"

"To be forever a thorn in the side of Rafael. To draw from his authority at every turn. I do want him to go to bed each night, doubting that he is truly the apple of the builder's eye. I do want him to live each day knowing that some of his followers may yet regard someone else's word as being a higher authority than his own. This is my ultimate revenge, for what he hath done to me."

"If I am obligated to perform thy will, is not the council as well? Can you not command them to elect a different High Priest?"

The High Priest coughed. "They are NOT true servants of my will. They allow conjecture and study to interfere with their obedience to me. They are heretics! I can not trust them."

"I see..." My mind was working fast. I felt that I had understood. I was to assume this role within this religious order. It was a tempting and powerful offer, and certainly beneficial to my role as a delegate, but this man was a fool. He expected the council to have obedience to him rather than true service and faith in their God? He was clearly unfit for his position, and I wondered if I would be doing the Order a grand disservice by being a pebble in the shoe of a potentially just and honorable High Priest.

Markander, however, had every angle covered, including how to make it impossible for me to refuse. "If you choose to not comply with my requests, I have more than enough evidence to brand you as an anti-builder, an evil sorcerer, and have you destroyed."

So in the end it was blackmail. "What is to stop the others from branding me an evil sorcerer following your death? And what makes you think that I am not an evil sorcerer, who intends to destroy the entire order?" I was walking a very thin line when I said this, but I knew it had to be said.

"Thou couldst burn all of the temples and cathedrals to the ground, for all

I do care. The Master Builder hath forsaken me, now I do forsake him. And do not worry; the council may not serve me, but they are blindly obedient to The Builder, and if one of his scriptures claims that thou art as I do say that thou art, then they shall not question it. I have those who are still obedient to myself above all others, and they will argue the case for this scripture devoutly, if there is chance of debate.”

“Surely the appearance of a new scripture will set off warning with those who are quite well versed in them.”

The man laughed. It was a dry, haunting laugh, rasping of death. “I have, as have those before me, written many supposed scriptures to further an end. It is not uncommon, and almost all are accepted without debate. The council may not be loyal to me, but they are loyal to their scriptures.”

“So why not write a scripture claiming that Rafael should not be High Priest?”

The man grew visibly angry at my suggestion. “No! It would not work! What about after my death? I need someone of power and wisdom to ensure the permanence of my revenge. If I wert to leave it in the hands of that suggestion, I would have no assurance that there wilt be success! ‘Tis the only way!”

“I understand.”

It would have been fruitless to cause further strife. It was never a question of if I would accept his offer or not, but how I would play this game I had unwittingly been dealt into. I was already many hands in; there was no turning back. Markander was a fool and a cruel, vengeful man, but he was cunning and a thorough tactician. He had every angle covered—every eventuality or contingency planned for. In the weeks that followed, I spent much time by his side, being taught not only about the Hammerite order, but about The City as a whole; the ways, the culture, the secrets.

He was a fallen monarch of a dying empire. The poison in his bones was now a poison in his people. He happily turned over the keys of sovereignty to that poison, willing it to do the same to it as it had done to him.

In the months following his death I tried to have as little to do with the Hammerites as I could afford. Brother Oberon was the one whom he spoke of as his loyal servant in the council, but it turned out that Oberon was just as calculating and cold, using his apparent devotion to the High Priest to further his political career. Oberon saw me as a convenient pawn to do with as he saw fit when needed, but otherwise I was ignored. I never worked to actively undermine Rafael, but as Markander knew, my very existence and the existence of the fake scripiter would be enough.

Now, for the first time, I had taken that situation and used it for my own purposes. The result, it seemed, was to be standing up to my ankles in mud, drenched by rain, expecting to be pummeled by Chispin’s hammer at one moment and then be seared by Ivan’s holy fire the next. Another hour went by, and still there was no news of the party to rescue Ranthos and retrieve Christopher’s remains. I watched quietly as Chispin foolishly ordered another two men out into the woods to track down the last group, as if they

had a hope of success in the slowly intensifying storm and the quickly diminishing light. As I looked up into the trees I felt as if there were large black shapes moving about, shifting from branch to branch, smilingly spying down on us, waiting for their numbers to grow large enough to strike. I prayed that it was my imagination.