

DAY FOUR

Henry awoke at dawn. This was a sensation he was not used to, as he often preferred to spend his evenings very late, which did not lead to a general love of the rising sun and all the glories which it brings.

However, his head was killing him, and this *was* a sensation he was used to. He rolled over on the bed and promptly fell off. As his head struck the floorboards, he was struck with the notion that he had just woken up in a bed that was not his own, which was a sensation he had never before experienced. Holding his throbbing head, he opened his eyes to see the room he was in was a woman's bedroom, a sensation he thought he would never, ever experience in his life.

Overwhelmed by nearly four different sensations in the span of about thirteen seconds, Henry shut his eyes again, hoping the world would get all straightened out before long. He opened them, and found the room around him unchanged. He groaned, realizing he was in an unfamiliar situation that was not a dream, and he'd have to find some way of coping. With his hangover, coping was not something he wanted to wake up to.

As for the bedroom, he knew it was a woman's bedroom, not because of any particular décor (gender is not often identifiable when nearly every object in the room is black), but because the woman who owned was looking at him, shaking her head, and tapping her toe in disgust.

"You really look awful, you know that?"

Henry waved at her. "You think I look awful? You should see the thirty goblins running around in my head."

Cait bent over and helped Henry, gently, to his feet. "I have something that will work on that, but you have to come to the kitchen. I made some eggs for everyone."

"Thank you, I..." Henry paused, thinking about what she had just said. "Everyone?"

"Yeah, Jack and Pete are downstairs. I must say, I still don't approve of what you've done, but it is a really nice piece."

Cait nearly fell over as Henry suddenly moved like a caffeinated racehorse to the door and towards the stairs. There came a loud banging as Henry's mind, trying to see what she was talking about, moved faster than Henry's feet, which tripped on the top stair and cascaded him down.

"Really something, isn't it?"

"I'll say." Henry turned the Builder's Hammer around to admire it, doing as Pete advised by keeping it wrapped in the cloth bundle. Though it shone magnificently, Henry looked rather ridiculous himself, what with his hair still askew and a fresh, cold pack of ice wrapped around the side of his head. "So, we really got it, didn't we?"

Cait turned away from the stove and shoved some eggs onto Henry's plate. "Yeah, I'd say you got it all right." She waved the pan towards the other two. "Anybody want more?"

Jack, having licked his plate clean, put it down and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "I'll take another dozen, if you've got 'em. And some bacon."

Cait looked over at the three cartons of eggs she had already gone through. “Right. I’m glad I asked.”

The kitchen was a small affair, like the rest of Cait’s apartment; despite her having a second floor, the building appeared to have been a much larger townhouse at one time, but had been divided up by someone whose idea of low-rent housing was simply to provide much less of it to more people. Where the paper-thin wall separated this half of the house from the other half, one could hear the family living next door bouncing around. As he had... ‘refreshed’ himself earlier that morning, and finding the roll next to the toilet empty, Henry had half a mind to simply punch through the wall and ask the woman of the house if they had any extra toilet paper in *their* bathroom. After hearing the sounds emanating from the woman of the house as she used her own facilities, the idea quickly lost its glamour.

The rooms themselves were barely decorated, but like the bedroom, anything that was there for decoration was either black or had been recently painted black. It lent the place a sort of strange, monochromatic air that put one ill at ease. The only thing with any color in it at all were the three people gathered around the cramped kitchen table and the small brown and white Sheltie that sat under Jack’s seat, waiting for more delicious egg scraps to fall from above. Jack tended to be viewed as some sort of minor god by canines everywhere, for whenever he visited food began to appear on the floor as if by magic. They had a difficult time getting them, however, as Jack often got vicious when attempting to retrieve the scraps.

“So, Cait, what’s your dog’s name, if you don’t mind me asking? Since I didn’t know you had a dog and all.”

Cait grabbed another fresh carton of eggs from under the countertop and started cracking them open onto the pan as fast as she could. “Oh, him? Yeah, my neighbors had puppies and gave him to me for free. I call him Happy.”

Henry looked under the table at the dog, looking up at Jack with unconditional faith, his tongue nearly to the floor as he panted. “So it’s not really a clever name, I take it?”

“No, I call him Happy because he’s bloody sad all the time. Of *course* he’s happy! He’s a dog.” She reached back into the same larder where she’d gotten the eggs and pulled out a smoked side of bacon, cutting off a few rashers and throwing them on top of the eggs. “Unlike you, dogs are content with whatever they happen to get. They don’t need to go out and prove themselves, risking their lives for a few bits of gold.”

“Oh, Cait, don’t start on me again. By the way, you got a newspaper?”

Cait sighed, stuck the knife she was using to carve the bacon into the hunk of meat, left the room, and returned with a rolled up paper, tossing it onto the table. “I already looked. Section C, front page.”

Henry flipped through the paper, handing over the Entertainment section to Pete, who immediately opened it to an article entitled ‘Punch and Judy in the Poorhouse? Rent Going up on Stageboxes.’ He unfurled Section C, ‘Life,’ and saw it. He smiled.

LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE? HAMMERS ROBBED TWICE IN ONE WEEK

City officials and the Hammerite community come together once again as another sacred artifact is stolen.

Last night, a robbery attempt was foiled when two thieves, names unrecorded, were caught attempting to steal the Builder’s Hammer.

The thieves later escaped during a routine burning, when the proceeds were interrupted by the collapse of the clock tower and the arrival of some sort of terrible supernatural force which aided in their egress.

While the Times was unable to reach Confessor Titus for comment, sources wishing to remain anonymous describe the creature as a “driver of a caravan from the depths of the underworld itself.”

The creature rescued the two anonymous burglars as well as wrenching the Hammer away from the grip of one Jessup Krinkles, who is currently recovering from his injuries and what he claims are “severe psychological damages” from being asked far too many questions in one day.

The whereabouts of the mysterious driver and his two cohorts are unknown, but Watch sketches of the driver and his two cohorts have been reprinted below. If you see either or all three of these people, please contact us, your City Watch, or an old priest and a young priest to aid in their capture and return of the Hammer.

The article went on in depth about the history of the Hammer and the previous robbery, but Henry wasn't interested in that. What was far more interesting was two things: the sketch of the skeleton driving a funeral cart being pulled by a gigantic horse with a mane and tail made of roiling flames (it looked like it belonged on the cover of something), and the mention of only two thieves stealing the hammer.

Henry didn't remember much of the night before. What did remain were swirling images of trying to kiss a beautiful girl who just kept staring at him from across the bar and of single-handedly defeating an army of enraged octopi on the deck of the good ship Mulvaney, and he wasn't sure if he could trust those images implicitly. But what was more important was what he *didn't* remember...and he didn't remember ever being invited to join in on the festivities.

Henry said nothing. He kept these private thoughts to himself, but glared over the top of the paper at Pete. Pete ate a small chunk of bread and kept on at his reading, but Henry knew what lurked behind those black eyes. He'd already seen enough, it was clear what Pete was thinking. He knew it from the moment Pete had suggested that plan two nights ago.

He wanted it all for himself. After playing at the crazy, unpredictable sidekick all these years, Pete comes back, after going through 'therapy,' and suddenly has all these bright ideas and little tricks up his sleeve. “Oh, I just wanted my own little puppet stand, and mind my own business!” Nonsense. Henry knew how bad Pete wanted it, because he wanted it so badly himself.

But the worst of it, the sheer utter blasphemy, was that, if the Hammer was as hard to get as the newspaper pointed out, then that meant one thing: Pete was better at this than him.

That would not stand. He'd show him. He'd show them all. *He* was the master thief. He'd read all the books, done all the homework, gone through the ups and downs, whereas Pete and Jack had gone on to do other things. They didn't *deserve* the rewards.

Henry neatly folded the paper and placed it on the table. “So, who's ready to knock off the Pagans?”

The library itself was not very large, but it was very old; one of the oldest buildings in the City, in fact. Like most libraries in other cities, this one was visited rarely, since most of its clientele would best be described as “those blokes who could read,” and blokes like that were in short supply. Thus, the books and shelves alike were coated in dust, long strings of it that peeled away as one removed them from the shelves. Henry did so now, placing a dusty tome on one of the empty tables. Bits of hair, dust, and flies scattered as he did so, the specks illuminated by the dim light from the nearly opaque glass of the ancient window. He opened the book, revealing not only passages of long-winded prose written by people who had no word for ‘brevity,’ but fancy pictures illustrating some of the worst examples of perspective ever captured in print. The pictures themselves were frightening enough, showing pagan dancers cavorting with walking trees, speaking to rat-like figures, and even engaging in the occasional full-blown orgy, but when no one cares about where the horizon lies or the angle that one’s face is supposed to be pointing, it only made everything more terribly surreal.

“See this?” Henry pointed excitedly at the text. “I found these while I was doing my research about a year ago. It’s a collection of the old oral traditions of the Pagans; the guy who made the book almost got killed by them for writing all the stories down. You should see some of them...you wouldn’t *believe* how bonkers it gets, with the blood-letting, the monsters in the woods...”

Jack nodded, his eyes trailing to one particular drawing of an orgy. “Sounds great. Listen, I have to go to the bathroom, can I take this with me and read a little? You know how I love to...”

Henry gave Jack a look. “Jack, the only thing you’ve ever read in a bathroom is the back of a bag of rice. With a maze on it.”

“It was a challenging maze...”

Pete leaned in and looked at where Henry was pointing. “So, what’s the story that’s got you so interested?”

“Well, according to the Pagan legends, after the Conception of the World from Chaos, and the Birthing of Wood- and Flesh-Things, there was the Giving of the Seed. See, there’s a picture of all that right here.”

Jack’s attention refocused to the new picture. “I mean it, I really have to use the facilities.”

“Shut up. Now, the Seed in question is the Seed of Eternal Fruit. The Woodsie Lord apparently planted it in the earth and from it sprang all the plant life that exists today. Let’s see here... ‘When He Saws how delightfuls sprang the fruits, He plucked the seeds from its pot and putsered it in the Great Tree. Then, in the times when the stone overtakeses the lands and manfools believes he is at his most powerfuls, the seeds will set all to rights agains.’ See, you can tell it’s authentic because he even managed to write it with all the ridiculous syntax.”

Jack turned white. “They...they tax you for that?”

Henry slapped Jack on the back of the head. “No, no, no, you idiot, it’s a word, it means...you know what? Never mind. You wouldn’t understand even if you tried.”

Jack rubbed his injured head, hissing. “I could write you up for that. That’s striking an officer of the law.”

“Excellent. You can write me up for it as soon as you turn over the Builder’s Hammer to your friends in the Watch House and tell them how it just happened to show

up in your other pants. Now, may I continue, or does the House of Sirloin have anything further objections?” Henry leaned in close to Jack, who leaned away just as much. Crestfallen, Jack slumped his shoulders and waved his hand permissively. “Thank you. Now, if you look ahead at some of the other legends...” He pointed to a caricature of a very happy pair of Hammerites armed with a gigantic saw, cutting down a tree at least seventeen stories taller than they. “The Great Tree was cut down about six or seven centuries ago by Hammer Priest Corblimey and his retinue, and the Seed apparently went along with them. They displayed it in their newest cathedral, St. Barnacle on the Hill, and there it remained until the cathedral was burnt down in an unfortunate smelting incident.”

Pete, who had been watching Henry beat up on Jack with some level of disdain, folded his arms. “But what about the Seed? I’m guessing you found something or we wouldn’t be here.”

Henry raised a finger in the air, smiling, and went over to the book shelf, grabbing another dusty volume. He peeled it open, the pages making crackling noises as they turned to the weakest portion of the spine. On it was a map of the City and the surrounding environs, dated about 50 years earlier.

“Look at this point here.” He pointed to a spot to the east of the City grounds, a forest about 30 acres square. “Notice the distinct line of the woods, how it curves a bit along the south side. You’d recognize that shape almost anywhere, wouldn’t you?”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I do. Could I study it over there, in a bit more private setting?”

“No. Pete, if you would compare that distinct line to this drawing here?” Henry flipped open to the second to last story in the “Book O’ Pagan Legends,” which showed a woodcut of the Woodsie Lord, standing in a forest, holding a small round object in his hand.

Pete bent closer, comparing the two images. “Hey, yeah, look at that. It’s the same place! But what’s that have to do with anything?”

“Have to do with anything? Take a look at this other map!”

Henry flipped back a few pages in the map book. There was an older map, this one at least 200 years old by the feel of the paper. On this map, the forest was nowhere to be seen.

“I’m no expert on trees, but what are the odds of a forest that size springing up in less than a century? If I’m correct, this legend is only a hundred years old or so. Jack, Pete...*the seed made that forest, and it’s right outside the City!*”

Jack stared at the two books, slack-jawed. Pete shook his head and waved his hands at them. “No, no, wait, this can’t be right. Something’s wrong here.”

Henry paused, genuinely stunned. He knew he wasn’t right about a lot of things, but he was pretty sure he was right about this. “What are you talking about...”

“Henry, there’s no way you figured this all out on your own. I understand you wanting to read about the Pagans and everything, but checking a map? Comparing outlines? I’m sorry, bud, but there’s just no way I see you putting two and two together like that.”

Henry clenched his fists. “And what, pray tell, are you getting at?”

Pete pointed across the library. “What I’m getting at is, how much does *he* know about your research?”

Pete's finger pointed directly at the kindly old librarian, Mr. Codsfodder. Mr. Codsfodder, blissfully ignorant of the comments directed at him, was checking in books. As his head swiveled back and forth between the stacks of the returned to the needing-to-be-returned, his long, droopy white mustache wiped dust off the table like the world's most pathetic feather duster. One couldn't even see his eyes, because even without an apparent light source his glasses were always glare-coated. With a little whump! he stamped each book in succession.

Henry smirked. "Mr. Codsfodder? He's about as dangerous as a puppy in a piranha tank. You'd probably like him, actually. He's always recommending books to read, like the map book, and he loves to tell stories. He once told me about this one patron, who checked out a bunch of books about 'How to Start Your Own Mob,' and how he was telling that story to another patron, Sergeant Willis of the Watch and oh my I suddenly see exactly what you mean."

They approached the main...well, the only desk in the library. Mr. Codsfodder didn't react, still swooping clouds of dust in the air as he stamped away. Henry coughed a little to grab his attention, which turned into a real cough as a particular large cloud of particles flew up his nose.

At that, the old man turned toward them, noticing them for the first time. "Oh, hello there, Master Cresswell. Still wanting that copy of 'How to Remove Unsightly Moles?' I believe our last copy just came in..."

Henry blushed as the other two looked at him in a mixture of surprise, disgust, and hilarity. "Uh, no, that's fine, thank you. Actually, my friends and I were wondering... anyone come in here lately looking for anything? Something along the lines of buried treasure, you know, that sort of stuff?"

Mr. Codsfodder stroked his mustache, which would have been quite elegant if it had been attached to a Persian cat. "No, nobody recently...nobody except you and that fellow dressed all in black."

Henry fidgeted. It was about all he could do. "All...in black?"

"Yeah, nice feller and all, except for the giant sword he had strapped to his back. Seemed real interested in all sorts of old treasure. Of course, I told him 'bout you and how yer lookin' for all that stuff, figured you might be able to work together and make yerselves a bundle."

"Ah. Wonderful. Pray tell, you wouldn't have happened to catch his name, or maybe noticed some sort of distinguishing features, like, oh, say, scars, tattoos, a criminal record, anything like that, would you?"

"Not that I could see, but I think he did mention his name. Something real weird, started with a Z, maybe? Didn't write it down...Zo Chan? Zar chin? Zaxxon? Somethin' like that."

Henry gulped. "It wouldn't, perhaps, be Xochar, would it? With an X, like 'xylophone?'"

"Hmm, maybe. Like I said, I didn't write it down. I tell you, times is gettin' strange when they don't give people proper names no more. You know that real high-falutin' singer, what's-her-name, the one that named her kid 'Banana?' What the sam hill kind of name is that for a kid?"

Henry took that moment to faint dead away. His fall didn't interrupt Mr. Codsfodder's reminiscence in the least.

There are names that are spoken of in whispers, in the manner of old superstitions; be they reverence or fear, these are people that can only be referred to in hushed tones, lest they realize you are talking about them and start asking questions about why they are being talked about and by whom so they put a stop to it.

Xochar was not one of those names. It was the sort of name that was never mentioned at all; in fact, one barely tried to *think* of the name, on the off chance that the man could read minds and decide you had to be taken out as quickly as possible.

Little was known of the man's past; no one really wanted to find out, mostly because those who dared to try found themselves with very short futures. All that one really needed to know was that he was a treasure hunter. But, he was called a 'treasure hunter' in much the same way that a serial killer could be called a 'social reconstructionist.' When he placed his eye on a prize, his goal was not simply to claim an object that was lawfully (or unlawfully) his, but to make absolutely certain that anyone who even thought of claiming it for themselves had a brief chat with the business end of his crossbow (or sword, or high-end explosive, whatever he felt like using). His methods tended to be brutal, quick, and effective, though he could be subtle when he felt like it (which was rare).

His sheer ferocity could not be put squarely on greed, since he never seemed to do any of it for money, or even the acquisition of the item in particular. One time, showing up at an archaeological dig for the City Museum, he demanded they hand over the Golden Staff of Bellini, a massive, ornate object valued at over 60,000 gold. When the museum staff laughed and told him this was government property, he left.

That night, the entire dig site exploded, killing all inside. Not only was the Golden Staff reduced to a pile of slag, but the uncovered Lost City was reduced to rubble. From that day on, anytime Xochar appeared at a dig site, he was immediately given anything of value, whether he had asked for it or not. It seemed wise not to tempt fate.

The only logical explanation for his unconscionable behavior, then, was that he was a right bastard that hated people even more than he liked shiny objects. Many brave and foolish souls had tried to kill him, but that was very difficult because he had a tendency to eviscerate anyone who came within ten feet of him, whether they wished him harm or not. The man seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to assassination, or, at least, the stories about him suggested as much; one particularly interesting one involved him sitting at a bar (by himself, naturally) when someone shot an arrow at him from across the street. He caught the arrow before it reached him, spun around on his stool, and threw the arrow back, catching the hapless assassin in the neck. Though the act seemed to defy the very laws of nature, so did Xochar. Even the Hammers steered clear of him, a church official stating, "There are just some things you don't even try to purify. Whatever that man is, he's certainly one of them."

And Mr. Codsfodder, kindly old Mr. Codsfodder, who wouldn't even think the worst of anyone or anything, had just told the world's most sociopathic treasure hunter all about Henry Cresswell and his search for the Seed of Eternal Fruit.

For the first time in his life, Henry had hoped he hadn't simply fainted. He'd heard there were people elsewhere in the world who had the ability to will themselves to death. It would have been preferable to what surely awaited him.

But he felt a few slaps on his face, and smelt the faint odor of bacon and waffles, and knew it was not to be.

"Jack? If you try to resuscitate me, I will disown you completely."

"Right, well, I'm just tryin' to help."

"You want to help? Either get me a passport out of the country, or kill me, right now. In the long run, I think the latter will be more efficient."

Pete sighed and bent down, grabbing Henry under the arms and lifting him up. "Just get up, you pansy, and tell us what we're going to do about that Seed."

"Do? Do what?" Henry peeled a long strip of dust off of his pant leg. "Do you really believe I'm going to go after it now? Xochar would snap my head in half and use the two parts for a bongo set."

"Well, well, if Mr. Master Thief isn't a little scared of getting his feet wet." Pete folded his arms. "You plan this whole caper to show how amazing you are, and then you turn tail and run from the first sign of trouble?"

"Do you hear what you're saying, Pete? This is a man who once stabbed thirteen people in the face because the bank wouldn't let him keep the pen. He's an absolute loon."

"And so was I, until recently. I must still be, if I'm working with you after all this time." Pete pulled up a chair and sat down. "Look, Henry, I understand if he's got you all upset, but really, it's not that big a deal. All we need to do is get to it first, so that way we can say we stole it. Then, when he shows up, we hand it over to him. It's win-win, right?"

Henry shook his head. "No, it's not win-win. The man isn't interested in the Seed itself, it's the sport of getting it in the first place. If we steal it first, he kills us, takes the Seed, and burns the whole forest to the ground to teach us a lesson."

Pete tapped his fingers on the desk. "Well, buddy, if you want to, you can stay here and sulk. You pulled me away from a successful puppet show so that you could fulfill your romantic fantasies of sleeping on top of a big pile of money, so you know what? I'm going after it. I'm taking that Seed whether you're with me or not."

That was it. *You're with me or not*, like it was his idea in the first place. Suddenly, something even more devastating than Xochar's wrath took over Henry's brain. He stood, saying nothing, trying his best to keep his breathing under control, fighting every urge to jump at Pete and beat the living crap out of him. The only sound in the whole building was Mr. Codsodder, who couldn't tell that no one was listening to him and was now prattling on about some book that was returned 13 years overdue.

"So, what'll be, Henry? You in or out?"

Henry took a deep breath. "Fine. Whatever. I'll do it. But if Xochar decides you'd make a nice duvet slipcover, don't say I didn't warn you."

Pete rubbed his hands together. "Great! So, how are we going to pull this off?"

Unlike The Builder's Retreat, where there had been a general idea of "The Hammer has to be in one of these buildings," the forest offered no better option than "Well, it's gotta be around here somewhere." The time got to be around four o'clock in the afternoon when it became clear that no one knew where to look or even what they

would do when they got there. At least the Builder's Hammer had the decency to be a giant hammer; the Seed of Eternal Fruit could look like anything, and knowing the Pagans was probably stuffed in a tree stump somewhere.

Even Henry had to admit the cause seemed hopeless to try and find it tonight, especially since for the past three hours Jack began complaining that he was getting hungry. Pete made the suggestion that they split up for the evening, find out what they could, and they would convene back here bright and early the next morning to plan their next move.

As they filed out the front door and down separate side streets, none of them noticed the figure, dressed in black, calmly eating an egg and cheese sandwich, who watched them from the rooftops across from the library. He finished his sandwich, licked his fingers, then drew a dagger from his belt. Without turning around, he stabbed behind him, impaling the pigeon who was just trying to get a few leftover crumbs from his sandwich. Flinging the unfortunate bird off into a rainbarrel in the street below, he wrapped his cloak around him and watched the paths the three took, and followed the one who looked the most promising.

Jack had barely stepped inside the door of his mother's house before she dived at him, wrapping her arms around his corpulent physique. "Oh, Jack my boy! Come quick!"

Jack was certainly surprised, but then, lots of things surprised Jack. He was not known for his deductive capabilities, after all. Thus, it was even more surprising when he entered the living room, and a figure rose, with the rustling of thick plastic, from the sofa. The figure was a man, solid, well-built, hair graying slightly, a well-trimmed beard, and wearing the uniform of a military officer.

Jack shuffled his feet and refused to look at the man, choosing instead a small chunk of fossilized muffin stuck to the wood flooring. "Hello, Dad."

Captain Eustace Roberts said nothing. He stood at attention, scanning his large offspring with an air of general disdain. After a minute or so, Captain Roberts burst into a smile and approached, clapping his son hard on the shoulder.

If Jack was surprised before, he was utterly flabbergasted now. Mostly, on the few times his father ever had the chance to come home from military leave, their meetings tended to not go well. This mostly stemmed from the fact that Captain Roberts thought his son ought to lose a lot of weight and do something significant with his life. Not to say Jack disagreed on those same points, but losing weight involved not eating so much, and doing something significant involved...well, doing something. Their chats would start friendly enough, but would devolve into the Captain trying to explain advanced concepts such as "Read a Book Sometime, You Lazy Lout" to which Jack would retort with an actual raspberry tort. Luckily, the Captain's uniform was very easy to clean, or Jack could very well have ended up in a court-martial.

To have his father, out of the blue, slap him like an old poker buddy, meant he was missing some important point (again, a fairly regular occurrence), or his father had gone completely insane.

"Jack, my boy, how good to see you!"

"Uh...yes, that's great and all. How...how are you?"

“Couldn’t be better! So, how’s the Watch treating you?”

Ah. He should have guessed that his hiring at the Watch would have reached his father by now. Mum would’ve probably spilled the beans weeks ago. Problem was, he hadn’t shown up for work for two days in a row; probably not a good career decision for an up-and-coming young officer.

“Oh, it’s...great. Donuts and everythin’.”

“Donuts?” Captain Roberts laughed. “Donuts are tools of the weak, my boy, for those who have no strict regimen. Even the Watch have to remain in tip-top shape to catch those who prowl our fair streets!” Captain Jack dropped, put one arm behind his back, and started doing one-handed push-ups. “Regimen and discipline, that’s the key to victory! And three! And four! And five!”

Even Jack knew better not to point out that of the one hundred sixty-seven members of the Watch, only three were in “tip-top” shape, and they probably committed more crimes than most of the criminals brought in. Besides, trying to impress Jack by doing numerous push-ups of any kind was like showing “Chariots of Fire” to a three-toed sloth; it was a nice effort, but ultimately unrewarding.

“And thirty!” Captain Roberts leapt to his feet. “See, son? A little work, every day, and you’ll turn out just fine in the end!”

Jack felt a tug on his arm. His Mum was beaming up at him. “Your father has over a month of paid leave due him before he has to get shipped off to Fort Pascal again, so you two will have plenty of time to catch up!” And, having completely rectified any and all problems between Jack and Captain Roberts, left the room, knowing they would just get along famously.

The two stood there. Captain Roberts was waiting for Jack to say something, waiting for his son to finally ask him about all sorts of war stories, about how Fort Pascal was such a horribly scummy place, leaky, bad food, constant attacks by enemy soldiers, and how absolutely fantastic it was to be there, in the thick of it all.

He waited, waited to hear anything at all.

Jack cleared his throat. “I’m just going to get a sandwich. Real quick. Back in a minute.”

Jack left the room. Even though he remained solid on the outside, somewhere inside Captain Roberts felt like he’d been bayoneted in the heart. Granted, it was nowhere near as bad as when he was bayoneted in the nether regions, five years ago, but...

Pete wasn’t in the mood for lots of alcohol tonight. Though hours had past, he still felt a rush of exhilaration from the night before. There he’d been, in the midst of certain death, and had gotten the prize! The odds against success were astronomical, but he pulled it off nevertheless.

Still seemed a shame to leave the Hammer at Cait’s, though. They hadn’t even gotten much of a chance to look it over before Henry had them jetting off to the library. And that was something else, too; Henry was acting awfully strange lately.

Pete thought it might be jealousy, since Henry *had* missed out on a good portion of the fun the other night, but what was he supposed to do about it? Get all the way into there, only to look at it, nod, and walk out? No, with the security on that place, there

would have been only one shot, one chance to get it. By sheer luck they had gotten as far as they did before anyone found them.

Of course, it was easy to rationalize all this after the fact. When he had been standing there, looking at it, for a few minutes thinking it might have been out of reach forever, he realized then and there he wasn't leaving without it. Henry could be jealous all he wanted, but he'd done the legwork, and without Henry's help.

But he would've been there, if you hadn't sent him to get supplies...you just wanted to show him up for once, didn't you?

Pete stopped. He looked around the darkening street, but it was deserted; odd for this time of day in this part of the City, but it didn't look like anyone was around to say anything.

Oh, don't look for me around you, I'm in here.

That time, Pete heard the voice in his head, clearly. It was a friendly voice, but something about it sounded familiar, too. "Who's here?"

In life, I was your friend.

No, it couldn't be. "S...Sockman?"

Yes, Pete. And I'm trying to tell you, what you're thinking is not very nice.

Pete looked around again, this time not looking for anyone, but hoping nobody could see him. "You're not actually here. You're not real. You're just a figment of my imagination. And besides, he's not very nice to me."

Does that mean you can't be nice to him? He's your friend, Pete, and like it or not he needs your help.

Pete grabbed his head in his hands. "I am helping him...even though he doesn't deserve it..."

That's good to know. If you weren't, my other friend might have had to show up. "Other...friend?"

Oh, yes, you know him very well. He's not nice like me. He'd prefer to show you the error of your ways in a more...direct approach.

Pete slumped against the wall. "No, not...not the cannon?"

Well, if you don't want to be all mysterious about it, fine, the cannon. I have to say, you'd better stay on the straight and narrow, or he'll show up. And you know where he wants you to go.

Pete knew. The thought of the cannon wanting him to go there made him go running down the streets screaming in terror. He shut his eyes as he ran, which was a terribly bad idea, since it wasn't long before he bumped into someone and sprawled in a cobblestone lane.

He opened his eyes. He didn't know what street he was on. But wherever he was, it paled in comparison to the figure in front him. The figure wore a large cloak, silhouetted by the fading light of the sun. It was very tall, and somehow familiar.

It leaned closer and spoke. "Are you the one who robbed the Builder's Retreat last night?"

And Pete knew, right then, that his plans for the evening were not going to go the way he had expected.

Henry started up the steps of the Haunted Foghat, but stopped at only the second one. He didn't even know why he was going in tonight. He didn't feel like getting anything to drink, nor did he have the money or inclination for any of the games.

It suddenly occurred to him that this was just something he did now. After doing whatever it was he was going to do, he came to the Foghat to hang out. That was all. He turned around to go, and got to the first step when he heard a laugh inside, a laugh he had heard many times, but not so much in the past few days. He turned again, reaching for the door handle.

The bell rang. He stepped aside as the door opened and an unfortunate fellow flew out. Nick, dusting his hands, saw Henry standing outside.

"Hello, Henry. Come on in, got the bar all warmed up for you."

Through the open door, Henry saw Cait at the bar, smiling brightly as she poured a mug, sliding it down the counter to a man who looked as if what he needed more than a drink was a good spray-down of disinfectant. She leaned over the counter, casually throwing her new bar rag over her arm, listening to the fellow in front of her, a surprisingly decent-looking chap who was happy to get her company.

For a moment, Henry began to notice things he hadn't before: the way one strand of hair hung in front of her face, even though she kept brushing it back. When she smiled, the left side of her face pulled back a little bit further than the other. When she nodded, her shoulders bounced ever so slightly. Across the room, someone yelled out an order, and she turned her back to him, and he watched her fingers as she slipped a mug out from under the bar and in a smooth motion started the beer flowing from the draught.

For a moment, Henry realized why he came to the bar tonight. And in the next, realized why he couldn't be at the bar tonight.

"Thanks, Nick, but I just remembered I have some, er, things to get done."

Nick folded his arms. "You're looking a little tense tonight. Well, more than usual."

"No, no, I just really have a lot to..."

Nick leaned against the door. "You know, Henry, life is a funny thing. Often times we spend it in hot pursuit of things, and when we finally get to them, find out that's not what we really want in the first place."

"It's not?" Henry had never thought about anything like that. He always figured in life that if you wanted something and got it, that was great, because now you had it. What was the point of getting something if you never really wanted it?

"No. And sometimes, things we take for granted are what we really want, but we never stop to admit it to ourselves."

Henry didn't think that made any sense at all, but he nodded anyway, because while Nick could be a wise man, he was also a very scary man as well. "Uh-huh. So, what do you think I should do?"

Nick reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small book. It was leatherbound, with gold-leaf lettering on its cover and a folded paper bookmark stuck in its middle. The cover read, "Seeking Your Path: A Guide to Your Greatest Treasure." He handed it to Henry, who, still somewhat dumbfounded, took it.

"And what do I do with this?"

Nick simply smiled. "I think you'll find your answers in there."

And, oddly, he winked.

Pete sat down in the chair as the figure in the cloak removed it, hanging it on a nearby hook. The figure sat down as well, in a seat across the table from Pete, and began drumming the table.

Pete twiddled his thumbs under the table, a little nervously. “So...what happens now?”

The figure raised an eyebrow. “Now? I would have thought that was obvious.”

A second figure approached their table, holding a pen and notepad. “And what can I get for you this evening? Tea? Coffee? Some other Thick Brown Liquid Often Times Mistaken for Ice Cream but I Can Definitely Assure You It Is Not?”

Sister Janet glanced at Pete. “I believe I will let the gentlemen decide for me, thank you.” The glance turned into a glare, as if she wanted to add, “And when you decide, it had better be something I like. I will not tell you what I like, because that would be cheating. If you get it right, I may nod my head in agreement. If you do not get it right, I will bite your head off, pulverize your innards, and generally make you wish you had never been born, and when I leave you will still have no understanding of why I did it.”

Glares tend to get a little wordy; that is why they are glares and not paragraphs.

Pete began to fumble worse than a footballer with sweaty hands. “I...um...what I mean is...what I’d like...*she* would like...I mean, what else do you have?”

The man rolled his eyes, seeing many a date go this way and knowing very well how they all ended. “We have tea, coffee, and Something Else. If you’d like to add a flavor, we have an endless variety of Flavor Boosts for an additional copper.”

“Oh. Well, make mine a medium coffee...”

“You mean a tall, sir?”

“No, just a regular-sized medium, heavy on the cream, no sugar, and the lady will have a...tea, medium as well, with a shot of raspberry and vanilla boosts. I will also have a bowl of your onion soup, please.”

The man made a tick on his notepad, smiled, and walked away.

The coffee shop, for what it was, was about as far away from the atmosphere of the Haunted Foghat as one could get. For one, the only thing that smelled like urine was whatever came out of the yellow Flavor Boost dispenser, but that was probably because all lemon Flavor Boosters tasted of urine anyway. Almost sinfully quiet, the only other patrons this time of night in the place were another young couple, making googly-eyes at each other over a small Panini-type sandwich (which was nothing to make googly-eyes over), a poet up on a small platform reading off terrible poetry about the darkness of the night of his soul, and a fellow near the entrance with a big pile of paper scribbling madly on it in ink, tossing pages over his shoulder as he did so. He seemed to be one of those writer types who always want people to see them writing but not actually getting anything finished. This was confirmed when one of the pages flew onto the table, just missing Pete’s recently delivered onion soup, on which was written the words, “I thought I saw a talent agent the other day, but it turned out to just be someone who bought and sold people for a living. Why? Why doesn’t anyone notice my greatness? Damn, my foot itches.”

Sister Janet watched Pete as he slurped at his soup, her stone face sizing him up. She didn't even seem to be trying to drink her tea, which had arrived in a much-taller-than-medium glass with a novelty umbrella sticking out of it. "Enjoying your soup?"

Pete sat up sharply, a string of melted cheese stretching from his lip to the middle of the bowl. "Hmmm? Oh, yes, very good." As his lips moved, the cheese bobbed up and down, as if strummed by the world's most culinary harpist. "I'm sorry, did you want some?"

"No, thank you. I have made an oath to never eat soup again. It is part of the whole training process." Without moving her head or her lips, Janet raised the glass to her mouth and sipped without sound.

"How's the tea?"

Janet lowered her glass again, her expression remaining unchanged. "It is not without its charm."

For a moment, they said nothing, Pete trying his best to not yank out all the cheese in his soup in one go, Janet occasionally sipping her tea.

"You seem different from last night."

"Hmm? What do you mean?" With a slurp, a large blob of cheese shot out of the bowl and some soup splashed onto Pete's shirt.

"You seemed a lot less...tense."

"Tense? Oh, that. Well, you know, sometimes you find yourself in a position where you are...what's the word for it..."

"About to be burnt at the stake?"

"Yes, exactly, and when you see something you aren't expecting, it sort of makes you all funny feeling inside and suddenly your fear gives way and you find yourself saying things you wouldn't normally say."

Janet made a quick look into her half-empty glass, tipping it a little to examine its contents better. "So, you are trying to say you would not have asked me out for coffee if you had not been ready to be put to death, is that it?"

Pete turned ghost white. "No, no, no, of course not, what I meant to say was...you see, I..." Her glare went from the glass to him. He could feel his forehead starting to smoke, and he was sure at any second her gaze would make his head explode, like those old horror stories he used to hear late at night. "It's just that you're the most..."

He floundered for the word. *Beautiful?* No, bad idea. By the way she wore her armor, she'd twist his head off three seconds after he said it. *Intelligent?* Again, bad idea. Saying that might mean she'd think he thought she was ugly or something, in which case she might twist his privates off. He decided to go with a third choice, something right in between that hopefully covered the bases without her going ballistic.

"You're the most *interesting* person I've ever met, and it just took me by such a surprise I almost forgot I was about to die."

Janet said nothing. It was so weird watching her, looking for a sign that he hadn't just pressed the "Ass-Kick" button. But maybe he was looking for too much, like a single emotion, or a hand gesture. Maybe her not saying anything at all was the best he could hope for. He could certainly do a lot worse.

He tried to start things again. "So, anyway, why'd you join the..."

“How does someone like you end up stealing things for a living?” This wasn’t so much an interruption as it was that he had decided to talk right before she had something much more important than him to say.

“My friend got me into it, for the most part. We met in prison when we were younger. It was my first week away from ‘home,’ and I wasn’t quite in my right mind, what with all the tragedies. I tried to disembowel a police officer with a—”

“Tragedies?” For the first time that evening Janet appeared to show interest in something. It was a bored sort of interest, but any interest was good interest.

“Oh, yes, I was orphaned at a very young age. The other kids said my parents had to leave me here so they could fly south for the winter, but the head of Shalesbridge said they had both died in...what? What’s wrong?”

Janet had just given her most extreme reaction of the night, which was to raise both eyebrows. “Shalesbridge? As in the Shalesbridge Cradle?”

When she said Cradle, Pete’s eye began to twitch, and in an almost convulsive reaction he felt his hand tightening under the table. He looked at it and saw it clenching into the shape reminiscent of...a puppet.

“Is something wrong?”

“Wrong? Wrong? Why would anything be wrong? Ha, ha, nothing’s wrong. Whatever gave you that impression?”

“Well, besides your laugh, you are clutching your wrist and it looks like you are having a stroke.”

“Am I?” At this point, Pete wasn’t sure. Part of him wanted to get under control, to resume his conversation with the very good-looking woman who was one of the few people who would actually give him the time of day, while another part retreated into dark thoughts, of memories that he wanted to forget, of those things best not spoken of, lest one wets the pants.

“I certainly hope not. Brother Mayai had a stroke once. We had to take him to the furnace.”

Pete took a deep breath, keeping his eyes closed, chasing away the bad thoughts. Soon, they began to recede, and his hand began to resume its proper functionality. “Ah, there we go. Just a little gas, I think. So, Brother Mayai was shoveling coal for your furnace, eh?”

“Not...exactly.” She took another sip of tea, draining it to nothing but ice. “But why a life of crime? Why not a life in the church?”

“Why not?” He laughed. “Why *not*? Look at me! I’m not Builder material. I don’t have the patience, the devotion, the stuffiness, and I look absolutely terrible in red. I know, I’ve heard it many times.” He picked up his bowl, slurped down the rest, and wiped his mouth. “So, what about you? Why did *you* get into the church?”

Janet slid her glass to the center of the table and stood. “Because I have the patience, devotion, stuffiness...and I love the color red.” She grabbed her cloak and threw it around her shoulders. “Thank you for the tea. It was nice meeting you.” Before Pete could say any more, she strode to the door and opened it. Before she walked out, though, she turned one last time, the cloak swirling about her shoulders. “By the way, Confessor Titus is placing a bounty on your heads. Unless you return the Builder’s Hammer to us within 48 hours and receive the proper due punishment, the notice will be

posted: 10,000 gold, wanted completely and utterly dead.” She nodded her head. “Have a good evening.”

The door closed behind her. Pete looked around the shop. Everyone was looking at him. The two lovebirds were leaning over the table, holding each other tight. The writer sat, slack-jawed, until he cunningly thought of a way to use this plot point in his story.

The poet, a gangly kid of about 19, wearing black clothes with even blacker eyeshadow, whose makeup made his already pale complexion absolutely cadaverous, said it best.

“Wow, that’s harsh, dude.”

Henry found a nice seat on top of a barrel in his apartment, casually scooping a rat away before sitting down.

Like Cait’s apartment, Henry’s was what one could consider ‘small.’ Unlike Cait’s apartment, it was not a place where most people could live. What constituted his bed was a pile of rags on top of some old feed sacks, which he accessed by climbing up a broken set of stairs. His living room, where he now sat, was filled with barrels, crates, and other sorts of debris.

On the plus side, he never had to pay rent. It probably stemmed from the fact that Henry snuck in here three years ago, right underneath the ‘Condemned’ sign that hung outside his building.

He reached behind him and grabbed a box of matches and an old, stubby candle from the shelf on the wall above him. He lit the candle, set it down, and opened the book.

A second later, a big hairy nose began pressing against the side of his head.

“No, boy, sorry, I don’t have any carrots. Try looking around over there.”

Huge, apparently understanding, went over to a box in the corner and tested to see if it was edible. Henry wasn’t quite sure how the horse had gotten in here. Well, physically, yes, the gigantic hole that hadn’t been in the wall yesterday was a dead giveaway, but Henry didn’t ever remember taking him here. He didn’t even want to know what happened to the cart. Other than the remnants still attached to Huge’s hauling gear, there was no trace of it. Having woken up in a girl’s house, while his horse went to his house, and with over several hundred gold in gear missing, something told him that perhaps ignorance was the best way to approach the subject, and he left it at that.

As the animal crunched off an edge of the box, Henry flipped through the book Nick had given him, looking for an answer. But the book itself appeared to have nothing. Every page was filled with “can-do” messages, with lists of meditational practices as well as what sort of wheat grasses and vegetable juices one should take to obtain a state of pure cleansing. Henry always figured the best way to achieve that was to put Crangham Gin’s Ultra Hot Sauce on everything. The one night he had that stuff, he came out of the bathroom feeling pretty cleansed.

He was about to give up when he noticed the bookmark, still stuck in the pages. He pulled it out and looked it over. Other than being a folded piece of paper, there didn’t seem to be anything remarkable about it, until he unfolded it.

It was a flyer. On it, apparently drawn in blood, was the symbol of the Trickster. Below it, in text that got shakier and shakier as it went along (Henry guessed the one who made up the flyer used his own blood to draw it, and had made quite a few copies before this one), read a message:

Tireds of Manfool Hammersies and their tricksy ways? Wants to revel in our secret knowledges of the Woodsie Lord, and the sweetnesses he brings? Then comes to the meetings this Saturdays, at nine thirties, to finds out more. Brings friendsies if thou wilt. Teas and cakes provideses.

Nine thirty? Henry waited for the big clock to confirm the time for him, but remembered reading in the paper that the clock tower had exploded last night. He ran past Huge, remembering to give the enormous fellow a pat on the side for luck, and went into the street, looking for the time.

He finally found it. Outside of a bookstore, the time read 9:20. He checked the directions on the flyer, then looked to see what street he was on. It wouldn't be far. If he hurried, he'd make it just in time.

As he ran, he thought for a second that maybe he should bring along Pete and Jack. And a second was about as long as that thought lasted.

“Welcomes, one and alls! Please, have a seat. Cakeses are ins the back, next to name tagsies.”

Henry found himself amid an very un-Pagan meeting hall, with a variety of folding chairs set up in rows facing the front, where a very Pagan-looking woman wearing a cloak over very little else stood. She glared at everything and everyone, her stern features not doing a very good job of masking her impatience at all she surveyed. Next to her were three young women, wearing similar cloaks but a good deal more clothing (and a lot of black lip gloss) were smiling and guiding people to their seats. It was one of these, a brunette, who had spoken about the cakes, which Henry found to be hard as a rock.

To be on the safe side, he had written the name “Chester Winfield” on the tag. He didn't know where it came from, but it sounded official enough. Holding his tooth-breaking cake in a napkin and a cup of scalding tea in the other, he found his way to a seat near the middle; in the back he might miss something, too close to the front and he might give himself away.

Not that the middle was without incident; at least three people tried to climb over and around him, even though there really seemed to be no good reason why. He even had to move one seat over when a fop with an outlandishly tall hairstyle somehow decided the seat in front of Henry would be an ideal venue.

Once the commotion died down and the seats were filled, the three young ladies came up to the front with their Amazonian leader. The brunette stepped forward, clasping her hands warmly and beaming over the crowd.

“Hellos, and welcomes to our new communities outreachie program! Wes be most glad you could come and join us this evenings!”

The girl had clearly not been a member of the Pagans long; though she seemed to have all the proper mispronunciations in place, she didn't have the grating quality most Pagans go to such pains to perfect. She actually talked like a college student, and the juxtaposition of the two was unnerving, even more so than the Pagans themselves. And yet, compared to the scowling figure that stood behind her, she did seem a pleasant enough host.

"Wes invites you alls to participates, though if you are new to us wes bes understanding. Would yous all rise as we gives glory to the Woodsie Lord, in the forms of a hymn most pleasings, and thens goes around the roomsie, saying our nameses and one thingsie about ourselvses."

And so they began...and went on...and on...and on. Around eleven o'clock (as noted by the non-sound of the clock tower), Henry had already sung four hymns, hugged thirteen people and told them each one fact about himself (which of course he lied about), and listened to one of the young ladies give a grand homily about what she thought the recent theatrical production of "What's My Odor?" had to do with an ancient prophecy she'd heard about. And what was with all the ducks? Henry knew the Pagans were strange, but this wasn't the same thing at all. This was...absurd.

What was this? Where were the wild, crazy dances under the moonlit sky? Where were the bonfires, magic words, the ancient spells? For Gob's sake, where was the *sex*? All they had done so far was get everybody all touchy-feely with each other in an environment more saccharine than a chocolate factory. This wasn't religion; this was therapy.

He was about to bring up this very point when someone else towards the back, a woman weighing twice as much as Henry (but not even half as much as Jack, thankfully) stood, wearing a nametag that read "Imelda Brunly." "Excuse me, what is the point of all this? What kind of community outreach program traps us all in here for an hour and a half to listen to some half-baked philosophy from a lady not even old enough to know which end of hers to wipe after using the bathroom?"

The room fell dead silent. The brunette, who until this point had been enjoying herself immensely, stood there slack-jawed at this statement. The smaller of the other two, a blonde, turned and buried her face in the cloak of the older Pagan woman. For most of the men in the room, this was the most exciting thing that had happened all night.

The Pagan woman, patting the girl on the shoulder amid sobbing, looked directly at Imelda, who stood in a manner suggesting that she was being held here against her will, that this was all a big waste of time, and besides, the cakes appear to have vanished and I'm getting a bit peckish. When she spoke, her voice, unlike the one presenting the program, was not only tinny and distinctly Pagan, but sounded as if it carried enough venom and hatred in it to kill an elephant, as well as most of its future descendants, in a single bite.

"My dear ladies, if this program bes not to your likings, you are frees to leave. The door behind you is the exits. Let it not slams on your behind on the way out."

Imelda, satisfied that she had won this conversation, looked at everyone else in the room, with a smile that alone said, "See, you spineless jellyfish? If you all had it in you to be as gigantic a bitch as I am to a complete, impressionable stranger, you too could be headed home right now." With a toss of her short cut hair, she strode to the

door, opened it, and went out onto the darkened street outside, which, to Henry's surprise, seemed much darker than it normally was.

Just before the door shut completely, Henry noticed several sets of red eyes suddenly appear in an alley across the street. As the door shut, there was a surprised scream, and horrible tearing and rending sounds that soon followed. The screams descended into a gargle, and all was still.

Henry found the whole thing a little too familiar for his liking.

The Pagan woman smiled. "May we continue?"

Shortly after midnight, the little session ended. The three young women waved goodbye to everybody, and ushered everyone out through a door to the back, instructing them to follow the ropes until they reached Canal Street, at which point they should be perfectly safe.

Many said it was the most convincing religious experience they had ever had. The rest merely shook the hands of the presenters and left, pale as a sheet. Henry was the last to leave, acting politely enough, though after shaking hands with the leader he checked to make sure nothing was broken. She had a grip that could form diamonds.

As the back door closed behind him, he didn't descend the stairs to the street below, but listened until he heard footsteps retreat to another area of the building. He pulled the door open and stepped back inside.

Other than the folding chairs, the room was empty (save for a few ducks quacking amidst the chairs), but he could hear voices coming from a side office. He didn't know how much time he had, but he hoped it would be enough. Near where he stood was the area where the 'ceremony' had been conducted, and a large canvas bag sat there, from where the presenters had pulled their crystals, dreamcatchers, medicine balls (for a 'trust exercise' that had ended rather badly), and the top hats they used during that one confusing bit about 'the Fallen Oaks.'

Henry didn't know what it was all about, but then, not much of the ceremony had made much sense in the first place. It was like some bizarre sideshow carnival where the idea was to baffle the audience to the point where they would think it would make some sort of sense if they came to the next show, at which point you would do something even crazier, and so on week after week. At some point, everyone in the audience would lose their minds, and, bingo, there were your followers.

Henry didn't much care for it, but something about it did make him want to come to the next meeting; he did want to know what the world they did with the ducks afterwards.

He pulled open the bag and rifled through it, looking for something, anything that might lead to the Seed. Granted, it was a long shot; just because you were a Pagan didn't mean you were automatically given the key to the sacred, forbidden artifact, but these were the only people he knew about that had any kind of a link. Plus, their leader was clearly someone high up in the chain of command; only long-time Pagans have that level of hatred for mankind, the kind normally reserved for rabid badgers or mother bears separated from their cubs.

But after yanking all of the garbage out of the bag, he found nothing. No clues, no maps, no keys. All it seemed like he had stumbled upon was the lost artifacts of the Amazing Kreskin.

He sighed. Well, it was worth a shot, anyway. He turned and went to the back door, ready to leave, not even caring at this point if they found all that rubbish scattered around the floor.

He turned the latch and opened the door. Before he took a step, he noticed something below him. Or, rather, somethings. The alley, which had been lit up previously, with a large rope guiding the spectators away, was now in pure darkness. Lumpy shapes with red eyes loped along the cobblestone streets, occasionally hissing to each other. One of them, annoyed by the hissing of another, grabbed the offending shape and proceeded to devour it in a loud, messy fashion, complete with the sounds of ripping flesh and inhuman screaming.

Henry shut the door. It seemed for the best.

He went to go check at the front, sneaking past the office door where he heard the snippets of the women discussing how wacky the presentation would be next week, and peeked out the front door. Again, the street was dark, and strange, frightening forms wandered on patrol up and down it.

Where could he go? Looking up, he didn't see any rafters, or convenient air vents, or any other way out of the building. And from the sound of things, the conversation in the office was wrapping up. If they caught him here, he'd probably end up on the street; if he was incredibly lucky, whatever scooped him up would eat his head first.

And then, he saw it.

Eleana barely paid any attention to the girls as they babbled on and on about how great the evening had gone, and how it was going to bring in *so* many people to the wise words of "Ol' Woodsie," as they called him.

And that was just it. Yes, turnout had been dropping lately. Somehow, after that stupid thief went and ruined the Woodsie Lord's full return to this world, and then somehow got Viktoria on his side just before she died in that whole Karras fiasco, the people had been having their doubts about how long they would last against the encroachment of civilization and the destruction of their beloved nature. Some were even beginning to report that their magics weren't working as well as they used to, but that could have just been self-fulfilling prophecies at work.

Eleana knew they were in trouble, certainly, but all this new nonsense? Community Outreach programs that made everyone think the Pagans were crazier than they already did? All these things were just games, parlor tricks to make everyone think the Pagans were hip, with it, on the ball, the next big thing.

Gilly would call it "bringing the word to a new generation." Eleana would call it "ridiculous." Melody would then cry for about ten minutes.

Honestly, where *were* all these new recruits coming from? None of them had any stones anymore. They somehow got enough money to get higher educations, to learn a few things about the world, and then got it into their minds that, while they were at school, they somehow knew more than everybody else about how the world worked.

They then got into things like the Pagan cabals because they “heard from their friends that it was totally something they wanted to get into.” They had no history, no concept of where this all derived. Even if they had gifts, like Gilly, they squandered them, ignored them in a drive to seek out cheap thrills.

They hadn’t seen the times before. They didn’t know how the Hammers used to be, smashing in the skulls of ‘the wicked’ in the streets, about how her mother and father had been ruthlessly executed because they had been out late at night near one of the Hammer temples and accused of plotting sabotage. They didn’t know how that night she fled out into the woods, and cursed their names with all her heart.

They didn’t know how the Lord came to her then, beautiful even in his savageness, and gave her a new name. He told her his ways, and how to venge himself upon them all, to restore the world to how it once was; where man went back to his place as a mere animal, humbled by the monsters his walls and buildings now protected him against, frightened of the dark night where the Lord’s children danced in their glory, their faces covered in the crimson blood of their fallen prey.

To them, this was a game. To her, it was life itself. And to stand in this building, listening to this prattle, was telling on her nerves. She was not comfortable here, only doing this whole thing because she had been told to watch the young ones, but she would never admit that to them. Let their youthful exuberance play itself out; when they found out just how deep the war was, and how they were now a part of it, they wouldn’t be laughing anymore. Not until the day that the City, and all the cities like it, stood in ruins, and the children of the Lord hunted in those ruins freely, would they be free to laugh again.

They had to leave soon, though, before the Watch became suspicious about the extinguished lights in the streets. The Children could defend themselves, but the fact that they were here could be considered an act of war, and bringing that down upon her fellows when they weren’t ready would not be prudent.

“Enough. Lets us bes on our ways.”

She heard them giggling. The way they spoke the ancient tongue sounded wrong, and she knew they found it silly. But again, they would learn of the power of the ancient words, when the time was right.

They came back into the main room, and they set about cleaning everything up. Gilly, the brunette, poured the rest of the tea back into the pot (if only those fools knew what they had been drinking) and wiped up any spillage. Amelie, the taller blonde, started sweeping up cake crumbs and the cups. Melody, the shorter blonde whose eyes were still a little red from crying, grabbed the canvas bag and, despite her stature, easily hefted it over one shoulder. After a second, she made an odd face.

“Hey, did anybody hear that?”

Eleana turned to her, raising an eyebrow. “Hear whats?”

“Sounded like somebody saying ‘ow.’”

“Sounders? Maybes.”

They looked around the room. As far as could be told, the room looked clear.

Gilly shrugged. “Maybe somebody walking by outside. Or, you know, one of *them* could have banged into something.”

Melody shook her head. “Don’t think so. Sounded like a guy.”

“Well, whoever, theys gone now. We must bes on our ways.”

Amelie put her broom away and they all went out the back way, down the steps. With a whisper under her breath, Eleana called to the Children, telling them they were approaching. In the darkness, many pairs of red eyes began to move away, into the shadows around the alley, heading back towards their home.

None of them noticed the gigantic pile of fresh garbage sitting by the steps, on which sat a pile of top hats.

Henry couldn't make much out from inside the bag. Voices were muffled, and what he could make out wasn't doing much for him.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?"

"Hey, I can't help that I can't see in the dark! And you watch your feet, you almost stabbed my foot with those heels!"

"All of yous, bes quiet! Sounders travels in these tunnels!"

He no longer knew what time it was, he simply knew it was getting very late, and the constant rocking of the bag was making him very sleepy. He must have dozed off for a moment, because the next thing he knew he was thrown, very painfully, into a corner.

"All right there, stuff, see you next week."

A door shut, and from the dark and the silence, Henry was certain he was alone. He pushed open the top of the bag, looking around and seeing nothing but dark. He finally pulled himself up to stand, tripping over the bag as it stubbornly refused to let go of his feet, and crashed into a shelving unit apparently designed to hold lots of sharp, rusty, noisy objects.

After checking to see if he needed a tetanus shot, Henry felt his way around the room for a way out. It took him two full passes before he found a handle he could pull. Doing so, he found himself in slightly less dark, lit by small shreds of moonlight that filtered through a grill above his head. The sound of rushing water, as well as a very unpleasant odor, suggested he was in the sewers somewhere.

Trouble was, Henry knew the sewers pretty well, from all his time he'd spent down here. But this was a tunnel altogether new to him. The walls, instead of the usual brick, were a smooth, grey surface, and the walls curved, giving the tunnel a cylindrical feel.

Where in the world was he, and how was he going to find his way back? And where was he going to find a good headache medication at this hour? His skull was very upset that it had gotten to this state without any alcohol to have made the trip fun in the first place.

He decided the only way he'd find his way out was to head in one direction and hope he got to somewhere he recognized. He picked one and followed it. At least there didn't seem to be any of those monsters around; he couldn't see any red eyes or hear any monstrous groans.

As he rounded a corner, a monstrous groan echoed throughout the tunnel. He stopped, then sighed. "Oh, good. It's just a zombie."

Then he realized what he just said. And he started to move more quickly.