

The Weaver's Thread: Book One of the Terminus Trilogy
by Amelia Bruce

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So, we meet again, dear readers. Welcome to the result of another November, rife with careless words, forgotten themes, dreadful adverbs, and other such minutiae. Within these hallowed pages you will find at least fifty thousand words, many of which will be good, and many of which will be insufferable. I love each and every one of them! As a second-year winner, I can say with certainty that they all amount to a successful and productive November.

Your familiarity with my usual disclaimers and warnings should be excellent by now, so I will make this quick.

- This is a NaNoWriMo novel. Please don't expect Shakespeare yet. It is what it is.
- Comments, constructive criticism and fan mail are all welcome and appreciated.
- As discussed via Facebook, I am hoping to continue this novel into a lengthier and more complete version. I am very sorry for the current ending, but I wanted you to have at least some closure prior to that happening.

I don't have a huge intended changes list this year, in part because I'm not done. Instead, I will offer you something new: a glossary. I think this story may well be complex enough to benefit from one. I hope it's enjoyable and helpful in clarifying things that need it.

That's all for the introduction. Let the show begin!

--Amelia (Amy) Bruce

The Weaver's Thread

The Pattern hung heavy in the air, tangible to all but the most stubborn of Mutes. Nora paused to rest her damp, cold back against the dirty bricks that made up the alleyway between the rowdy unnamed bar on her right and the prayer temple on her left. The scent of thick alcohol from the bar mixed with thicker incense from the temple left the insides of her nostrils stinging, and her heartbeat pulsed along with the over-loud and repetitive dance beats that arrested her train of thought. She prided herself on her keen senses as a general rule, but she might have missed the strains of choral music from the temple beneath those pounding staccato distractions. She was not old enough to remember the days when prayer temples were forbidden in proximity to such filth, but she allowed the distant memories of souls that were old enough to sway her opinion. Even without their voices, the lack of balance between respectful prayer and careless abandon disturbed her to the core.

The sharp, acidic rain drizzled down in slow, steady sheets, stripping down layers of the dry, scorched earth beneath her boots and replacing them with standing water. Nora felt the foul water soaking through her short auburn hair and plastering it to her face. Her glasses were already inside the pocket of her long black trench coat for protection, though their absence made it twice as difficult for her to see more than the outlines of buildings or other people. If anyone came upon her in the dark, they might overlook her, just as she had almost overlooked the songs of prayer; there were more interesting pursuits at hand that made scrutiny of more arcane things difficult. Only her pale skin might give her away as anything more than a common drunkard, ejected from the bar by an unpaid tender or an offended dancer; she kept her face down and her hands pocketed to avoid detection.

Nora's palms itched; she wanted to stop and appeal to her God and Goddess for comfort and safe harbor for the evening. The

busywork of drawing functioning, clean circles in the wet dirt with her dagger for prayer purposes would be more welcome than the idleness she faced. However, becoming a Weaver of the Pattern at a young age had taught her everything she needed to know about the world's view of her character and intentions; she did not need to wonder why things like concealment and silence were needed. It was less trouble for everyone, herself included, to play it safe and avoid complication. Somewhere in the back of her mind, her mother's soul mocked her, reminding her that a Weaver's life wrought only death. The rebuke only served to harden her resolve from glass into diamond.

Nora slid down the brick wall against the temple side to a sitting position, and pulled her knees up to her chest, doing her best to remain as small and unnoticed as possible. The edge of her athame pressed against her side without drawing blood, and served to keep her awake and alert in the darkness. The alleyways of Axel Grove were no place for a young woman in her mid-twenties, much less a young woman who would be called beautiful by anyone unaware of her Weaver status. The same balance to which she dedicated her life infused her body and soul with its power, smoothing and sculpting the rough edges that most modern humans wore by default into something ethereal and transient when viewed from outside.

Being wary of predators and prepared to defend herself came with the territory. It might have been the same regardless of where she chose to stay for the night; a hotel, a stranger's home or a back alley all held the same dangers, and she preferred the rain, however unpleasant it was to most people. She had the ability to offset the side effects; the Mutes were not so lucky, and the other Craftsmen - followers of the Pattern not dedicated as Nora was to the concept of balance - made a killing on rainy days selling charms and draughts against the poison. If nothing else, the Mutes would spend most of their time indoors out of habit, avoiding the risk of encountering the rain unprotected. She would have only the drunks and her fellow Pattern-casters to fear.

Closing her eyes, Nora relaxed against the sturdy wall, trying to quiet her stray thoughts into an attempt at meditation. The God and Goddess, together known as the Duality, gazed down upon her

with starry eyes; though the clouds interfered with Their view, Their sight remained true at all times. On top of her need for continued secrecy, she had a confession to make to Them - an explanation of the wretched task that forced her caution. The magical ability that the Duality gave to her in return for her sworn faith and devotion was tempered with the need for balance; for each kindness she performed, an injury was needed to balance the scales of the world, or vice-versa. If she failed to adhere to this balance, her power would destroy her. All Pattern-casters, Weaver or Craftsman, paid the same price where blasphemy and heresy were concerned.

She was just about to begin mouthing the words of her confession to herself when the back door to the bar swung open and slammed itself against the bricks next to it. Approximately five seconds later, a burly looking bouncer with tattooed arms that individually might have been as wide as Nora's waist, deposited a singing drunk face first into the dirt. He dusted his hands and disappeared back into the bar before five more beats of the heavy, pulsing music had passed. The closed door only partially muffled the sound.

Nora held her breath, studying the new addition to her hiding place. He was a younger man, perhaps a year or two older than herself, rough shaven with wild hair dyed as green as the jungles that school textbooks said used to be found on Earth, before the Terminus. His eyes were unfocused; one swiveled toward the door he had come out of while he raised his middle finger in a nasty salute to the establishment, the other drifted to the bottle of cheap alcohol in his hand, which served to remind him he hadn't finished it. She watched him continue to salute the bar with his middle finger raised even as he polished off the last of the bottle and tossed it aside with an echoing clank. Nora decided to count her small blessings that he hadn't thrown it at - and hit - her.

Finished with his drink, the drunken man lurched to his feet, a sinister grin spreading from one ear to the other. Nora didn't need her glasses to see that his clothing was impeccable, though muddied. However, it did take her a minute to realize that his belt was loosened and his pants were threatening to fall down around his ankles. A

furious blush of embarrassment and anger crept into her cheeks - she didn't need to guess at what he'd been up to, or what had seen him removed from the bar, much less see it for herself! He was the kind of man that she detested most, the kind that took liberties with women as if they were some sort of prize. There were so few people even left in the world, after the Terminus; at a time when humans needed each other most, they hated each other most. It was the same for Weavers like her as well as men like him, she thought with a grim smile.

That brought her back to the job she had recently accepted, and the reason for her attempt to confess her sins to the Duality. A father of three young women hired her to bring back his eldest daughter from the man who had stolen her away. He claimed all sorts of things - rape, assault, violence of the worst order. He wanted the man killed. And Nora, having just come from rescuing a drowning child from a river for no payment at all, had no choice but to accept the vile act. Killing was the worst sort of job that she took to balance the scales in her life, and no matter how many times she found herself doing it, it never took the disgusting taste out of her mouth. This time, however, instead of being able to balance the act of killing with the act of saving the woman from obvious distress, the story had turned even more twisted than she'd anticipated.

The father had lied. His daughter was living comfortably away from him and her sisters, and the man she'd come to live with treated her well. She had given birth to her first son. And yet, the killing order stood. To deny it would be to deny the power that held sway over her soul; the Duality and her quest for balance. She had managed to save the infant, placing him in a blanket made from his mother's clothing and depositing him at the doorstep of a prayer temple, but she couldn't believe that this act alone could pay for the duplicity that led her to murder a perfectly innocent couple. For the first time, she had refused to go back for her payment; the vile father most likely thought he had swindled her into a perfect deal for him. She would rather let him think that than to show up at his door and risk her temper inflaming her into a third killing. She would not have blamed the Duality for ending her life for the first two; three would be unforgivable.

Now, Nora was in desperate need of a way to balance her recent wickedness, however unintentional, with good. In Weaver and Craftsmen terminology, this translated to the Left-hand and Right-hand patterns, respectively. Craftsmen did not require such balance, instead dedicating themselves to one or the other; each side looked down on the other for their choice. Leftists were forced to hide from the law and their fellow men; Rightists had no mercy, for all their lives were filled with supposed kindness and love. Weavers were unique in that they adopted both equally; they lacked the concentrated power of a Craftsman, but instead could utilize more magical gifts handed down to them by the Duality. It was a fair trade, but a complex one for Weavers, who found themselves as exiled from polite society as the Leftists just for their occasional acceptance of the Left-hand Pattern.

The drunken man was singing again by the time Nora's mind let go of her thoughts. She didn't recognize the song, but judging from the number of unique swear words and insults toward the Duality, she guessed that he must have written it himself. Only a Mute could manage such vile words against the Duality and live; assuming he was one of those humans who cast aside the Duality as pure fantasy was not likely to fail her. Why the God and Goddess allowed for such blasphemy could only be wondered at - she did not wish to deny them their choice to live life without faith, but the sheer vitriol seemed unnecessary. It was one of those old-soul thoughts, she knew, but she tolerated it well.

Nora watched as the drunken man subconsciously brushed the dirt and filth off of his clothing, even though it was painfully apparent that the garments would be in dire need of more in-depth attention. His song complete - or at least, his attention span toward it - he began to make his way down the alley toward the city proper, in search of further ways to menace the local population. She could only wonder if he might forget where he was headed, and end up as further detritus for the Litter; that was an unpleasant thought, and one that she didn't linger on for long. A stray thought entered her mind; perhaps she could pay off her debt to the Right-hand Pattern by helping the man. But could aiding an obviously unstable and difficult man be considered good? Such dilemmas were common for Weavers,

whose minds were always capable of bearing witness to the shades of gray between the black of Left and the white of Right. Too much thought would destroy them, but so would a lack of necessary thought.

Nora had intended to stay silent, but the knowledge that she might be able to complete her task drove her to action. She rose from the ground and cleared her throat in a firm but gentle manner, alerting the drunken man to her presence. His first reaction was panic, but as he looked around and saw nothing but the shadows he had crawled out of, he laughed and shook his head, addressing the darkness around him.

“Those drinks sure do talk, when you’ve had enough of ‘em. I’m not much of a conversationalist, ya know. I’d rather touch than talk, if it’s all the same.”

His words slurred together in a place or two, forcing Nora to listen closely to understand his speech. She immediately regretted engaging such a foul man, but with luck, the Goddess would see fit to protect her from his obvious lechery. Rather than speak again, she lifted her head and pushed back the sleeves of her trench coat, revealing her pale face and hands to him in plain sight. Even in the hazy moonlight and the rain, he could not miss her if he’d wanted to.

“Are you a ghost? I’ve never slept with a ghost. Maybe you can be my first.”

He looked up into her face, and met her gaze with a lazy smirk. Nora took immediate notice of his bright green eyes and crooked, yellowing teeth. She watched with disgust as he reached for his dangling belt and began to remove it. The time for speech, it seemed, had more than arrived.

“I don’t recommend that, Mute. You never know where rain can get, on a night like tonight. One little drop is all it would take on your bare skin.”

He considered the ramifications of her words for several minutes before the light of comprehension dawned on his face. His sly grin returned; she wished it hadn’t. “That’s okay, precious. You can weave me right back together, can’t you? I just happen to have the best needle in the business.”

If Nora had been a Leftist, she would have destroyed him then and there, without question. Even as it stood, she only barely managed to master the impulse. She had come to pay her debt, not incur more of it! She allowed herself to wonder for only a moment whether the kindness of removing such a man from the earth might be considered beneficial and not harmful in Their eyes. Taking a deep breath, she thrust her hands onto her hips and forced a thin-lipped smile in his direction. “Spare me the proof. You seem to be in need of more than my body at the moment. Do you have a home? Can I see you to it?”

“You can see anything you want to, doll, just ask.” The drunken man grinned wider, wagging his hips from side to side in a lewd suggestion of what he thought Nora should ask for. “I’d rather see more of you, first, but that’s me. Why such a long, dark cloak on such a lovely girl? I bet Miss Clarice inside would give you something nicer. Maybe even let me watch while she suits you up.”

“That’s enough, Mute.” Nora knew she could defend herself if pressed, but the man’s overtly frank manner was starting to arouse the wrong kind of instincts in her - not pleasure or excitement, but revulsion. “I haven’t the time for your games. Answer my question or I’ll find another alley to spend my time with. A quieter one, to be sure.”

The grin on his face lessened a little, but did not completely disappear. He shook his head regretfully and bowed it in her direction at last, tipping an imaginary hat toward her. “Pardon me, madam Weaver. What does Your Ladyship want with a lowlife Mute such as myself?”

The overall effect was almost comedic, and Nora had to struggle between the desire to laugh at him or to punch him. “I told you already. I have a debt that must be paid, and if you require assistance, then I might be of service to you. If not, then I must find someone else who needs my aid, as soon as possible.”

“I’ve heard Weavers talk like that before.” The drunken man tried to focus his wavering gaze on Nora’s chest; she ignored it, thankful for any sort of focus from him at all. “You think you’ve got to pay for everything, right? Good or bad, you’re fucked no matter

what you do. That's cool. You're too pretty for it, but it's cool."

Nora opened her mouth to bid him farewell, but he took a stumbling step toward her, and she wasn't certain whether it would result in his reintroduction to the mud beneath him. Impressively, it did not. Seeing her still in front of him, the drunk continued. "Tell you what, sweet thing. You tell me your name, and I'll tell you my apartment number. Fair trade, yeah? Then maybe we can make other deals once we're there."

"Where business is concerned, deals are all I have." Nora sighed inwardly as she put heavy emphasis on the word 'business,' her instincts telling her that eventually, she would have to end up killing the man. He was too foul to pass the breath of the Duality through his lungs; too vile to protect and aid. Yet her duty and conscience bound her. It was too late for regrets. "My name is Nora. Let us make haste to your residence. I have no more time to waste."

"You're Nora?" The drunken man, for a mere instant, looked as sober as if he'd had five days worth of hangover to remind him of where he was. The instant passed, however, and he hung his head, grinning like a schoolboy caught with a love note in his back pocket. "I mean, that's a pretty name, precious. I always like short names. Makes 'em easier to yell at night, you know."

Nora shoved her hands into her pockets, feeling the blade of her athame's sharp kiss against her fingers. She did not enjoy the pain that came with such behavior, but it would be the only thing capable of allowing her continued interest in her mission. Barring that, it would give her a weapon at hand to end his life once she got the opportunity.

Her other hand felt around in its pocket and came up with a tiny wooden statue. She did not need to see it to know what it was; her father had carved it during his days as a Rightist, and had used it often to invoke protection for himself and his family. The eyes of the statue were glass, intended to reflect and magnify the spirit of the user into a more powerful form. Tonight, she intended to weave a spell of protection for her wayward companion, in order to keep him untouched by the dangers of the acid rain. Weaving Spirit into Earth would form precisely what she wanted.

Under her breath, she began to murmur, while gripping the small statue in her right hand. “Great God and Goddess fair, I seek your blessing this dark night. Shine your light upon me, that I might shepherd this...”

The word that first came to her lips was not a kind one. The Duality deserved better.

...forgive me. That I might shepherd this soul out of danger and back to a warm bed and a cold bath. Grant me patience, courage and kindness to complete my task, and to balance Your wisdom within my heart. I call the Threads of Spirit and Earth to my hands; they are one, until by my will they separate.”

The drunken man listened intently to her prayer, and though he could not see the effects of her words, Nora could sense at once the protective invisible barrier that surrounded him. If she had wanted to spend more time, she might have added a component to keep him from reaching out and touching her through it, or simply contained him within it permanently; but those were childish and irresponsible fantasies, and she only needed to get him home. He was too much trouble to pursue for a greater cause; once her task was complete, she would simply have to find another way of paying her debt.

In her haste, she did not notice that the drunken Mute was not laughing at her words, the way most Mutes would have. Instead, he nodded to himself, to a heavy, pounding beat that drew fainter into oblivion as they emerged from the alleyway and into the rain.

The Staplewood Apartments befitted their name; it was the first thought that entered Nora’s mind as she followed the drunken Mute toward the dilapidated building. She expected a good, strong wind to blow the place over, but wind was a common worldwide occurrence; it had weathered far worse than that and survived. As she drew closer to the building, she began to be able to pick out individual pieces of junk: a steel tube here, and a stone slab there, mixed with discarded gears, bolts and glass everywhere. The difference between it and other buildings in Axel Grove was limited,

but whoever built the Staplewood had done it with the cheapest available materials. It was no wonder that the drunken man could afford luxury clothing, when he had to pay so little for rent!

The acid rain had stopped, about five miles back, but Nora's shield still held around the man, who blissfully ignored its presence. Several times during their journey across town, she had regretted again her lack of attaching extra protections for herself to the shield; the next time he tried to grab her coat or get closer than ten feet to her, she would kill him herself, duty or otherwise. He still nursed a long athame slash across the top of his right wrist from the last time he'd attempted to take liberties with his bodyguard. Perhaps the wound still stung; he hadn't attempted it since, but then again, they were close enough to his apartment that he might have been thinking of how best to overcome the knife and instead get her into his bed. She was not looking forward to the possibility.

The drunken Mute led the way up a rickety staircase built from slender steel planks with handrails of rotten rope, and at last arrived at his destination: room 42. He turned abruptly to face Nora, who almost ran into his back - he would have liked that! - and bowed with a sweeping gesture.

"This is it, precious. It ain't much on the outside, but it's the inside that counts. Every girl I've had in here says so."

"I told you before to spare me the proof. Please do so again." Nora turned her back to the foul man, as if she had suddenly forgotten who he was and why she had come to the Staplewood Apartments. For all she cared of things, she had. "My duty is complete and I have seen you safely home. It will not be enough to achieve the balance I seek, but it is a start. See that you do not require my services again."

She began to make her way down the staircase again, cautious; the handrails were useless, and a single trip might send her sprawling face-first into the junk that made up the building. Before she had taken more than a handful of steps, the Mute's injured hand shot out to grasp her shoulder. Without thinking, Nora's athame was in her hands, and she struck instinctively for the spot she had damaged last time. To her utter shock, he dodged the blow with an

agility that would have been surprising in a sober man, to say nothing of his current inebriated state. A studious frown crept across her face as she watched him with cat-like eyes, daring him to touch her again without words.

He backed up against his closed door, his hands spread wide in a gesture of apology and surrender. “Hey now, sweet thing. You’re pretty good with that blade, aren’t you? How many men has that beauty killed by your side?”

She grit her teeth. “None yet. It’s not designed for killing men. It’s designed for spell casting and monster slaying. But there’s a first time for everything. The Duality smiles upon ingenuity.”

He chuckled, and it was a surprisingly warm sound. “They must smile on this building then. It’s all ingenuity and nothing but.” When Nora showed no sign of backing down, however, he scratched his greasy green hair and tried on one of his careless grins. He might have been handsome, if he hadn’t been filthy in body and mind; as it was, Nora was unimpressed. “Shouldn’t I owe you something? A drink, maybe? A place to rest your weary head? Can’t say I’ll let you sleep much.”

“Can you really be so drunk as to believe I would take that offer?” Nora advanced on the drunken man, until she was close enough to smell his rancid breath and her body pressed up against his. His confusion gave way to pleasure at her proximity in an instant. All it would take would be one stab, and he would be gone from her mind and the world once and for all. The Duality proposed quite the test, it seemed! “I cannot make myself clearer, Mute. I have performed the duty I intended to perform. I will now depart your presence, for the last time, and I will never again allow myself to be seen anywhere near you. That is the only payment I require.”

He paused, for a moment, and Nora almost thought he had gone to sleep. His eyes closed, and he breathed deeply, in a sort of trance. It took her only a few moments to realize he was just enjoying being pinned to his door by a beautiful woman. Just as her fingers began to tremble on the hilt of her athame, he opened his eyes again with a cheerful, innocent smile that she had never seen on his face before.

“Now this is interesting. Your duty was to see me safely home, and here you are, trying to kill me. I have a religious question for you, Miss Weaver. Will you answer for me before you go?”

It was a request Nora had limited reason to refuse, aside from the desire to part company with the Mute at her earliest convenience. “Ask. And after I answer, you will allow me to leave without further distraction. Otherwise, my hand may slip.”

He nodded, and then met her gaze without fear. Nora could not look away; she felt as if he gazed into her very soul. The feeling was nearly traumatic. “If I were to go inside, right now, and kill myself, religiously speaking, wouldn’t that put you in a bit of a bind?”

Nora’s eyes widened, and the hand she held her athame in slowly began to drop in hesitation. The foul man! He had dragged her all this way, and now intended to bait her into giving him what he most wanted! Worst of all, she could not deny him; he was absolutely correct. It was far from the first time someone had played her for a fool, and forced her into such a situation, but Mutes rarely bothered to master a rudimentary understanding of such details. When such things happened, it was always a fellow Leftist, looking to put his power to the test by humiliating other people...

The drunken Mute continued to smile in the face of Nora’s discomfort, and at last, when he sensed she would not strike him further, laid his repulsive hand again on her shoulder. “Listen, precious, it’s not as bad as you think. I might even have a present or two for you, waiting in here. You’ll never know unless you come inside.”

Nora could only guess what kind of present he was referring to. Bile rose in her throat, but she shoved the athame back into its scabbard with enough force that she half expected it to slice open the black leather. When she spoke, it was in a low, dangerous growl. “You have a keen mind, Mute. They say you have the ability to learn more than Craftsmen or Weavers due to your separation from the Duality, but you are the first Mute I have seen with knowledge of the Duality’s world. How unfortunate for me.”

“So you’ll stay, then? I’ll have to make up a bed. I wasn’t planning for company tonight, but unexpected company is always the

best kind.” He chuckled, and began to fish around in the pockets of his sagging pants for what Nora could only assume was the key to the apartment. “I’ve always been a Mute that talks too much, you see. Surely you’ve guessed by now? It’s all part of my grand scheme to get lovely ladies like you in here.”

Before he could find the key, however, something unexpected interrupted both of them. The door swung open, causing the drunken man to stumble forward - right into the arms of a buxom blonde woman, with neon streaks in her hair, wearing very little clothing and entirely too much dark eye makeup. This caused her to stumble backward into yet another lovely woman with red hair and even less clothing. The two women looked at the Mute, then at each other, and then back to the Mute, and began to giggle. Only after they were finished laughing did they take their first glance at Nora.

“Hey Johnny, what’s this you brought back?” the blonde asked, looking seriously at the Mute, who had only partially recovered from his drunken stumble. “Don’t tell me Ritsa and I weren’t enough?”

“Yeah,” complained the redhead, putting a hand on her hip and sticking her chest out proudly. “She’s pretty enough, but we’re full up. Can’t fit more than three of us in a bed, genius boy.”

The Mute - Johnny - shook his head. “Honestly, I, uh...” He looked down at his muddy boots. “I sort of forgot you were here. How long have I been gone?”

Ritsa scowled at him, her perfect lips pursed in anger. “I told you he’d get too drunk and get lost, Jezza. We should’ve gone with him.”

The blonde tossed her head carelessly. “I wanted to stay and play. Is it so hard for you to bring back our orders, Johnny? You’re a freaking genius and you can’t even remember three damn drink orders. You drank them all yourself, didn’t you?”

“Guilty as charged.” Johnny shifted nervously, his eyes sweeping back and forth between his girlfriends and Nora. “See, I promised Miss Weaver here that she could stay for the night. Could you two...”

“Is he seriously asking us to clear out for this broad?” Ritsa’s

face almost matched the color of her hair as she glared at Nora, her chin thrust out defiantly and an appraising, jealous look on her face. “Maybe you’re not as smart as they say.”

Before Jezze or Johnny could stop her, she scooped up a pile of clothing from somewhere behind the door and began to dress, if dress it could be called. When she’d finished, she was still more than scantily clad, but at least Nora no longer felt as if she had walked in on something private. Johnny scrambled to find the words to stop her, but Ritsa was done with him for the night. Rather than saying goodbye, she put one hand out to grab Johnny’s muddy shirt collar and then shoved him backward into Nora as she stormed out the door. Her voice echoed back as she left. “I’ll have to decide if you’re worth coming back for, Johnny. Don’t make any bets.”

Jezze waited until her friend was out of earshot before chuckling in a low, seductive manner. “Ritsa always is the tough one to please. Now me, I don’t mind a newcomer, every once in awhile.” Her piercing blue eyes suddenly began to explore Nora in an entirely too familiar way. “Do I have to go too? I think you’ll relax, Miss Weaver, with time. Johnny may be a drunk, but Ritsa and I keep him in line. Most of the time. He’s like a big baby. Maybe you and I could get along better?”

It took Nora a few moments to find her voice, both because of the sheer chaos of the situation and the fact that nobody had spoken to her in minutes. “I think we have a misunderstanding here. I offered to escort this man home as a means to repay a debt I owe to my faith. I have done so, but he seems to wish me to stay badly enough that he is threatening to harm himself if I leave.”

“Oh, Johnny, you old dog,” Jezze sighed, shaking her head. “Not that trick again. He had a Weaver in here just last month with the same line. If not for Ritsa, he’d have lost his life. The Weaver needed a Left job, and killing him sure would’ve done it. Too bad she didn’t know Ritsa’s a black belt. Broken hands don’t cast circles.” She laughed while Nora’s pulse raced - how could it be that this silly creature knew as much as Johnny did about Weavers? They should have been running away. They should have been reporting her. They should have been trying to run her out of town.

“Who are you people?” Nora finally found the courage to ask. “I had no idea when I ran into this drunk that I was about to fall into the hands of two Mutes who behave like none I have ever seen before. If you will be frank with me, I will be more able to assist you.”

The corners of Jeze’s eyes crinkled up into a beatific smile, and she laid a light, airy hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “I think this is the part where I leave you two alone, Johnny. Don’t be too rough with her, sweetie. She looks fragile to me.” She gave a sly, predatory look to Nora before addressing her. “If you get bored with Johnny here, look me up, won’t you? Ritsa got to the last Weaver. I never had a chance to see what she had beneath that coat of hers.”

Before Nora could even work out a response to such absurdity, Jeze had gathered her clothing from a different pile on the floor of the apartment and dressed. Her skirt barely came down to mid-calf, and her top might well have not even existed. Nora said a private, silent prayer to the Goddess to watch out for the two women, who obviously had no faith in anything more than their own bodies, but said nothing as Jeze left. This was a world she had no part in; she would not even know how to react within it. All she wanted now was answers, and the two girls seemed to feel that those answers best came from Johnny himself.

As Nora’s eyes found Johnny again, he smiled, shrugged and stepped through his door, beckoning Nora forward into his domain. “Come into my parlor, precious. I may not be a spider, but I have more than a few legs I’d like to show off.”

Nora began to wonder if she would ever get a straight answer from Johnny, who was clearly more than he seemed.

Johnny hadn’t lied, when he said that his studio apartment was worth more inside than it was outside. Nora almost couldn’t believe her eyes at the difference. Nothing left on earth could be called opulent with a straight face, but Johnny’s belongings were as close to it as she dared to consider. Unbroken glass windows looked out over the town, spattered with rain that sent billions of tiny

droplets of light flashing across the room in the darkness. His furniture was all dark wood, which was a luxury in itself - pieces made from true wood were expensive, after all the trees had burned in the Terminus. A bare lightbulb hung from a chain in the ceiling; it served as the only illumination that did not come from outside, but Nora guessed that Johnny had limited use for light, given his enjoyment of pleasures that came from darkness. He even had a couch, though the ancient fabric was tearing in places and exposed the stuffing through the tears. Between his furniture, his clothing and the strange behavior of his companions, Nora had no question left that Johnny was more than he seemed.

He led the way through the room to the couch and sat down in the center of it, his arms spread wide across the backs of the neighboring cushions - daring Nora to sit down and suffer his arm around her shoulders. His languishing pose also made his lap a more than available target for her to sit in. None of those options suited her; she sat cross-legged on the floor, preferring whatever rats and roaches might have taken up residence there to anything that required her to touch Johnny. She was now quite certain of where he had been!

Johnny laughed as she seated herself, but his eyes, which had been unfocused and dizzy prior to his encounter with Jezze and Ritsa, were sharp when he glanced her way. It seemed that while the drunk could soak up plenty of alcohol, he didn't maintain the high that he wanted for very long. Perhaps that explained his playboy nature. "Come on now, Miss Weaver. Can't a guy even offer a seat to a lady without getting frostbite?"

"This seat will suffice." Nora met his gaze, no longer willing to continue the complex game that Johnny was weaving. "I won't be here long. Your woman said that you have answers for me. I can see now that I was not a random target. What do you want with me?"

For the second time that night, Johnny managed to appear as sober as he had ever been in his life. This time, he managed to maintain the facade. "You're tired of me, precious. Truth is, I need you. And not in the way you think - though I'd take that, if you ever wanted to offer." His grin returned, but it differed from his usual;

Nora took that to mean he was well aware she would never do such a thing! “I was looking for a Weaver by the name of Nora. You scared the shit out of me, rising out of the dark like that. Didn’t expect to find you by getting drunk and pissing off Ritsa, but that’s life, right?”

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Took me this long to come up with an excuse to get you inside, given you don’t like me much. That other Weaver at least knew how to play me that far.” He laughed, but it was a sheepish sound rather than a triumphant one. “She was playing, of course. Long enough to try to slit my throat in private. You should’ve seen her face when she realized we weren’t alone. I thought it was worth the trouble, though I guess Ritsa didn’t like it much.”

“Get to the point, Mute.” Nora had no interest in others of her kind. Weavers were, if nothing, solitary animals. They all had their own ends to serve, in the process of seeking to maintain balance and order in the world, and rare indeed were the times when two Weavers carried the same agenda. The previous Weaver in her seat had been doing her job, just as Nora now was. She had failed. Nora did not intend to.

“You like points, don’t you, Miss Weaver? That knife of yours is proof positive of that.” Johnny grinned, momentarily investigating the scratch on the top of his wrist that the athame had given him. “If you want my point so bad...”

“Damn it, Johnny. Either speak your peace or I will be gone this instant. My duty does not require me to waste my time. The longer I remain in debt, the more likely I am to lose my own life. The Duality demands my action, not your incompetence.” Nora finally lost her temper and got to her feet. “I can finish the task my predecessor failed.”

“I said I was going to give you my point.” Johnny’s laughter maintained itself in his eyes, long after it left his face. “If you want a different one, you’ll have to ask for it, sweet thing.”

He rose from the couch and turned his back to Nora, which managed to prove either his stupidity or absolute command of the situation; Nora wasn’t sure which. She followed him as he made his way toward the bedroom and paused suddenly.

“Now, don’t go sticking that little pretty of yours into my back just yet. Even guys like me have more than beds in their bedrooms.”

Nora waited him out, though she had certainly been prepared for the worst. Instead of trying to go for the bed as she had predicted, he turned to a large bedside table fashioned from broken mirror fragments and pulled out a drawer in its base. Nora couldn’t see what he retrieved at first, but Johnny swiftly closed the drawer and headed back in her direction, almost as if he had something to hide.

Before she had a chance to react, Johnny was suddenly very close to her, and she found herself trapped back against one of the studio walls. She might have been able to attack him if she’d tried, but her surprise was such that her mind couldn’t fasten on an appropriate spell quickly enough to free herself. Instead, she glared at Johnny, whose face had taken on an expression of gravity and need that she hadn’t expected from such a man. His erratic behavior had more than confused her about what his ultimate plans for her were, and this new incident just served to muddle it further. In the end, she could do nothing but wait to see what happened next.

Johnny opened his mouth and began to speak in a low whisper, bringing his head in next to Nora’s in a position that was both conspiratorial and entirely too friendly. “This is what I brought you here for, precious. I can’t have you running off before I explain to you what it is.”

He took one of Nora’s hands in his free hand, and pressed a small, supple black leather bag into it. The bag might have held anything, but Johnny’s grip on her hand was firm, and she couldn’t move to look inside. She judged it to be of sufficient size to hold a spell book or a collection of fruit at first glance.

“It’s something a friend of mine wanted you to have, and it’s very important to her. So important she’d die for it. And she wants you not to look inside, if you don’t mind.” Johnny’s breath was close enough to tickle the hair that swept across Nora’s face, and for once she was too busy trying to understand the situation to notice the stench. “I don’t know how she knows you, but she said you were the only one for this job.”

Nora fixed her gaze on the bag, rather than on Johnny or his disturbingly serious face. “Your friend asks a great deal. Shouldn’t she be asking me and not you?”

He shook his head. “She... isn’t fond of people. She likes me probably less than you do, but she knew I’d find you, so here we are.” He closed Nora’s hand around the bag, and finally let go of it, though he continued to press her body up against the wall, preventing all but the most unexpected motions. “She’s willing to pay a lot. A king’s ransom, not like there’s any such thing anymore. All you have to do is take this somewhere, and not look at it. That’s it. That’s all she said.”

“She didn’t say where I needed to take it?”

Johnny smiled again, and somehow the expression brought Nora relief. For a man that had taunted her mercilessly up until now, he seemed frightening beyond words when he was serious. “That part, I can help with. She’ll talk with you, but only by radio. And only if you agree to help her first. She’s paranoid, but that’s normal I think. Maybe she’s just shy around pretty girls or something.”

Nora didn’t even bother to put him off. She stared at the bag in her hands, feeling its weight. It didn’t weigh much, perhaps the same as a single rock or a can of food, but something about it seemed ominous. What could Johnny’s friend want to keep concealed so badly, and to what end? It had all the trappings of a courier job, which nobody could deny was a job aiding someone; it would suit her needs well. It also seemed like a very grave job; the person was terribly needful of her assistance, thus making her aid all the more beneficial in the long run. And yet, what could the bag contain? If it were a bomb, or a weapon, or a spell to harm others, then her purpose would be for naught.

“Without knowing her intent, I cannot judge whether this is suitable...”

Johnny interrupted her before she could finish. “She said to tell you that nothing in this world could be more right than this. Or something. I forget the terms you Weavers use, especially when I’m drunk.”

This just served to set Nora more on edge. Not only did Johnny’s friend know about Weavers, she also knew about Nora’s

particular need. Given such specialized knowledge and perversity in achieving her ends, Nora would guess she too was a Mute. And yet, the number of names she knew that were Mutes was remarkably small. Tonight alone, the number had increased by three, and three very strange Mutes who knew far too much for their own good. Who could have placed her in this position, and to what end? Still, the chance to pay her debt could not be ignored. Johnny had wasted enough of her time; she was not in a position to bargain any longer.

“Very well. If it will get me finished with this absurd evening, I will accept your friend’s request. I don’t have a personal radio, though. I despise the noise.”

Johnny visibly relaxed. It was as if every muscle in his body had been rigid while holding Nora to the wall, and now he was made of sand and dust, flowing back into shape again. “Don’t you worry about that, precious. Jezza told you, didn’t she? That I’m a genius? What she forgot to mention is that I’m not just a genius in bed. I’m a genius with all things that require hands-on experience.” He backed up, leaving Nora to catch her breath for a moment as the tension between them dissipated. For a moment, she had still expected him to press his luck and seize the advantage...

“Wait here. No surprises, no tricks, I promise. You may not think my word is good, and I may be a drunk, but I’ve never lied a day in my life. Nobody goes into my lab, not even Jezza and Ritsa, and they know better than to interrupt me while I work. It’s a labor of love, precious. Each piece is just like a woman; built from parts of man and shaped into something far more glorious than he could ever be. And she’ll be yours, when I’m done. I’ll even make her quiet, just like you want.”

It took Nora a few minutes to realize he was talking about building a radio and not just spouting more drunken nonsense. She watched him retreat back into the room, and continued to watch as he stripped a piece of junk art off the wall. Beneath it was a panel, which he fiddled with for a few moments before the sound of a door being opened made her jump. Johnny made his way over to his couch and shoved it aside, revealing a human-sized panel leading down into brilliant light. Nora was astounded. Did he own the apartment

below his own as well? And what was he doing in it? Building radios... and something more?

Johnny met her gaze one last time and saluted her cheerfully. "I'll be back. No peeking. In here, or in the bag. She'll know if you do. Don't ask me how. And if you think Ritsa was mad earlier, you haven't seen mad. I've still got scars from your new boss, precious. For some reason, I make her maddest of all."

Then he was gone, and the panel closed behind him, and Nora was alone in the strangest blend of opulence, madness and curiosity that she had ever known.

As a Weaver, Nora was accustomed to hiding her emotions beneath a veil of impartiality. To betray her true intentions would be to court at least half of the world's anger at any given time. Craftsmen of the Left believed Weavers to be soft-hearted fools who lacked the will to fully embrace the darkness; Craftsmen of the Right instead believed that a Weaver's acceptance and use of the Left-hand Pattern negated any worth that their Right-hand Pattern spells gave them. It was difficult enough having people recognize her Weaver status on a regular basis; taking an active role in announcing that presence would be a poor decision at any time. Weavers kept to the shadows, to protect themselves and others; it was one of the many prices they paid in search of balance.

As she sat on Johnny's recently moved couch, staring at the line of light that illuminated the edges of the panel he had disappeared beneath, Nora found that she was having unnatural difficulty with the knowledge of that fact. She could not deny that Johnny's friend, her new boss, must have been aware of her reputation as a successful Weaver; not many could lay claim to the unflinching way she performed even the most twisted acts with a straight face, and did them well on top of it. Though she was far from the most notable Weaver in current history, she guessed that she might have ranked somewhere in the top twenty-five or so. Weavers were not powerful, in the traditional sense of the word - Craftsmen had the benefit of

complete submission to one side of the Pattern or the other, and so carried less risk and more power within their chosen side - but they were instead known for things such as talent, obedience and loyalty to the causes they attached themselves to. The varying nature of said causes, of course, made them anathema to the world. They could not be trusted; a Weaver who saved their life one day might become their enemy the next.

Nora was one of the best. She had handled missions and jobs far more complex and emotionally challenging than this one. As she had told herself before, it was a simple courier job, with one added factor: she could not discern the nature of her package. She had not expected the lack of full disclosure to bother her as much as she did; perhaps the person who hired her had not either, knowing of her spotless record. Every emotion she hid demanded her to take one little peek into the bag, just to set her fears and suspicions at rest; what harm could it do? She was only human, and still suffered from human desires such as curiosity. Yet, Johnny's information in regard to her new boss's temper did not stop her nearly so well as her own conscience. Looking inside the bag would be to fail her part of the job agreement, and that was unacceptable for a Weaver. Absolute confidence between client and Weaver were critical to ensure continued payment and trust. Without that guarantee, a Weaver had little to go on, and limited places to hide their heads when the world proved to be too much for them to handle.

Lesser Weavers might have looked, and failed, with fewer compunctions. That was what made the difference between the best Weavers, and the others. A Weaver's mind, torn between two duties at all times, was difficult for any Weaver to handle. The success of their causes and spells all depended on their absolute faith to succeed; hesitation and refusal to accept the necessity of the jobs before them would see them to an early grave as their spells backfired. If the backfire itself didn't put an end to their lives, the Duality would soon take notice, and that was a far more painful end, as she understood it. Her mother had tried to convince her not to follow the path of a Weaver for many reasons, but that one was the most common for her to use as a scare tactic. Many Weavers didn't get that far, and chose to

end their own lives rather than suffer the emotional death and torture that resulted from the toll their chosen paths took on them. There were few enough professed Leftists in the world; the number of public Weavers could not have been more than two hundred.

Nora leaned back on the couch and came to the realization that she had been tapping the toe of her boot on the floor in perfect impatient rhythm; she stopped it and sighed, trying to find a new way to divert her attention from the suspicious bag still clenched in her hands. She had considered feeling her way around in it - that would not be looking! - but she knew that the Duality would not respect such loopholes any more than her boss likely would. It was better to forget her lack of knowledge and trade her suspicions for obedience, but knowing it didn't make it any easier to practice willful ignorance. Ignorance was something that the majority of Weavers could not afford, in any capacity.

As if in response to her thoughts regarding ignorance, the sound of whistling from the panel nearby attracted Nora's attention, and she watched the perfect line of light break itself around the moving shadows of something beneath it. The whistling grew louder, and Nora heard the heavy clanging beats of Johnny's footsteps on the stairs as he emerged from the panel, a victorious grin on his face. He was still wearing his fancy clothing, but he now sported some kind of bizarre plastic contraption that wound around his face, hiding his eyes from view. Nora could only wonder how he could see to climb the stairs. It was huge and looked heavy, and she thought she could see bare wires poking out from the rear.

In Johnny's hand was a similarly questionable device. Nora knew that technology had changed, after the Terminus - changed into dust. Gone were the beautiful and frivolous gadgets that humans had toyed with for their own amusement. In their place, new systems had to be developed, and none of them were pleasing to the eye. In the world since the Terminus, beauty was a luxury that only the richest could afford, and the sheer scope of what was considered beautiful in the first place had shifted with it. She was still young enough to remember the pre-Terminus toys and games from her childhood memories and the memories of those that came before her, and it was

difficult at best to reconcile the monstrous effigy in Johnny's hand as the same thing as the radios she'd known.

"Is that...?"

Johnny nodded, his bizarre visor nodding with him.

"Thought I was kidding about being a genius? You've got a lot to learn, Miss Weaver." He reached up and lifted the visor off of his face, leaving deep ridges from the weight of it etched into his handsome and greasy face. She hadn't noticed how sweaty he was until then; the visor had somehow been holding it back. Seeing Nora's attention directed at the thing, he moved to hand it to her for further inspection. "Don't mind this thing. It keeps the sweat and the gears out of my face. Flame retardant, too. I could stick my head out in the rain without your fancy spells, if I wanted to lose my hair first. She's a beauty too."

Nora shook her head and moved to rise from the couch.

"Thanks, but I have a job to do. I'm sure my boss would like to get this job underway."

Johnny stopped her, and without waiting for an objection, he sat down next to her on the couch. The overpowering scent of sweat invaded her nostrils. Had Johnny built himself a sauna down there as well as a laboratory? "Let me show you how she works. It's quite simple, really." He pointed to an obvious giant red button hanging off the side of the device in his hand; it looked as if it might once have raised an alarm or fired a missile. "This here's the on button. Would you like to turn it on? Or me?"

"If I could find your off button, I'd hit it."

Nora tried to grab the device out of Johnny's hand, intending to figure it out herself on the way out the door, but for the first time, she noticed irritation flicker across his features. He held it firm, and glared at Nora, pulling it out of her reach; she would have to lean across his lap to grab it again, and he had to know she wouldn't bother. "Patience, precious. This took me a long time to build, you know? I don't do this for just anyone. Truth is, if your boss hadn't demanded I do it, you'd be paying the salary she promised you to me for this baby. I don't work for free."

"Sorry." It seemed appropriate to apologize, though Nora

wasn't sure she still possessed the ability to be truly sorry for what she'd tried to do. "Can you give me the short version? I'd be in your debt." Only after she said it did she realize her mistake.

"Well, in that case..." Johnny's face was radiant beside Nora's immediate discomfort. He proceeded to point to every potential point of interaction on the radio and give one-word explanations for each. The radio antenna, on-off switch, screen and dial tuner were relics of an era Nora had never known, but the souls that resided in her head were enough to fill in the gaps of his explanation and her knowledge. The rest of the device, which could have comfortably fit into the bag Nora carried, appeared to be all necessary components to its function. Nora subconsciously shook her head - she couldn't fathom this radio ever fitting into a regular pocket! It would barely fit in one of her coat pockets.

Johnny reached over and placed the radio squarely in the middle of Nora's lap, then retracted his hand before she could mistake it for an attempt to grab her leg. "There. Now you know what makes her tick. And I'd like to take you up on that offer of yours."

"Um..." Nora's gaze shot toward the door. "I... really need to go, I should find out what the boss wants. Time is... of the essence, you understand."

He cackled and reached over again, this time to pat the side of her leg the way a father might pat his child. "I know, I know. Believe me, I know what happens when I'm late to a job for her. I won't keep you. But you owe me now. Don't forget it, sweet thing, because I sure won't. Who knows? Maybe one of these days, you'll even look forward to it."

Nora bolted for the door, having received all the opportunity to leave that she expected Johnny to give her. As she stepped outside into the rain and closed the door behind her, she could hear Johnny laughing; she could not see his face, which registered all too plainly the fact that he knew what his chances were of such a thing, and regretted it more than he would ever admit to in front of her. He could take his chances with Jezze and Ritsa, if the latter ever came back, Nora figured. It was wisest to get out of his company and into her job before something else happened to derail her plans!

She was down the stairs and out into the street with a protection spell cast over herself as a shield from the rain before she paused, suddenly realizing how foolish she'd been. Johnny had given her the radio, but he hadn't given her the number to dial to reach her new boss! She was just about to storm back up the stairs and break Johnny's nose when she noticed that the screen on the radio blinked bright green numbers up at her: 04.2.

42. The same number as Johnny's apartment. And a woman's voice began to speak up through the radio with only a small amount of static to muffle her words.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Delaney. You may call me Mole."

Mole was the first person Nora had met in weeks that she liked. The woman was short, to the point and perhaps blatantly honest in regard to directions and orders. However, the trust Nora gained for her by these things was balanced by one thing: her unwillingness to answer questions. The information Mole handed out was strictly on a need-to-know basis, and she didn't seem to think that Nora needed to know much. Why that surprised her, after being ordered to keep her nose out of the mysterious black bag she harbored, she wasn't sure.

Mole's voice also left Nora feeling somewhat strange. She could have sworn she had heard the voice somewhere before, on other days and in other places, but the more she thought about it, the less certain she was. Perhaps it was just the fuzzy radio signal - Johnny had managed to silence the random bursts of noise that "modern" radios produced, but even geniuses couldn't work miracles. There might have been some kind of filter placed on the radio to mask her voice, as well. When pressed, Mole had been all too clear in regard to Nora's questions being unwelcome; she had not asked a second time out of decency. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that Mole, whoever she was, had to be familiar in some way. All her questions about how Mole knew of her and her particular need for a Right-hand job fell on the same deaf ears that her questions about Mole's identity

did. It was possible that the souls that took up residence in her memories knew Mole rather than Nora herself, but she didn't have time to try to sort that conundrum out.

The facts she had learned from Mole were simple enough. The bag, as previously stated by Johnny, was important; important and of the utmost gravity. If Nora were to lose it, look inside it or otherwise damage it, the results would be more serious than she would ever know. Nora wanted to laugh; there must be a nuclear warhead inside for that to be true! Mole, however, didn't find the joke funny in the slightest, nor did she appreciate the subtle attempt to determine the nature of the object Nora carried, so Nora held the laughter back. She was quickly learning that with Mole, it was wisest to listen to and immediately obey and accept orders given. Questions only led to anger on both of their parts.

The bag was destined for a long journey. Mole wouldn't offer details on how long, precisely, but she did inform Nora that the job would occupy her attention for longer than the majority of her usual jobs. Her first task would be to make her way through the Litter and beyond the confines of Axel Grove, toward the walled citadel of Ashmouth far to the north. After that, she would be given further instructions. Nora had never been to Ashmouth before, disliking the notion of a city built within the confines of a dark and ancient cave so near the dreaded ocean, but it would seem that there had to be a first time for everything. If it would settle the score in the battle for her soul, she would go anywhere and do anything. She had no will to die young.

The first part of Mole's order would serve as challenge enough to begin. The Litter, as most local towns called it, was a magnificent expanse of waste, garbage and other refuse that stemmed from human consumption. It collected every piece of unused junk that humans did not repurpose for building materials or other useful designs. Where once forests and streams carried beauty and majesty to surround the humans, now death and poison invaded their land and lay waste to all it touched. The scent of garbage already reached most villages, keeping citizens from frequenting the streets, but Axel Grove lay on the farthest perimeter of it, and still had time left to spare.

How long before that changed too was anyone's guess. Researchers released new reports every day on the speed of the spread, and none of them were optimistic about its eventual decline.

Mutes were unable to traverse the Litter safely without aid from a Craftsman or Weaver. In fact, murders were often committed within the Litter just by forcing a victim to die of exposure to the filth. The bodies of humans killed elsewhere often found their way into the mess as well, and human decay only bred further disease in the midst of the swarm. The government had tried to ban such behavior, demanding heavy fines on the families of those who died or left bodies within the Litter, but there were ways to circumvent this; most of the bodies carried no identification, and thus the government had no way of determining anything other than how long the body had been there. There was one other way a Mute could get through the Litter and survive; a government sponsored job involving the reclamation of useful materials from the Litter and delivering them to cities in need of them. It was a job for criminals first and citizens last.

Nora herself would be able to appeal to the Duality for protection from the toxic Litter. Without that benefit, a Weaver would be incapable of finding enough work to maintain his or her existence. However, that did not change the long and arduous process she would face having to travel the wide expanse. By her estimate, it would take the better part of a week to fully clear the garbage and reach the broken highways that led to Ashmouth, and with the weather as foul as Mole's temper, the journey would be even tougher. She would need to find resting places to replenish her strength; casting spells as a constant process and maintenance on protective shielding prayers would tire her, as it would any Craftsman, and faster than a Right-hand Pattern Craftsman on top of it. The march across the city after Johnny had not weakened her yet, but with further use, she would undoubtedly start to feel the effects of overuse.

Nora's feet carried her to the center of town as she considered her options. The night was growing old, and she could barely see the curve of the sun peeking up above the horizon. The town's namesake, a giant wheel spinning in the wind, cast strange shadows against the approaching light. Johnny had wasted too much of her time, to be

sure! She wanted to stay and rest for a few hours, to make certain that she was fully prepared to take on the Litter and survive, but the longer she waited, the more opportunity she would give the Duality to determine that she was failing in her objective. It wasn't as if there were specific time limits on her penance; judgement could come at any time, and could only be staved off by the continued perseverance toward her goal of balance. The God and Goddess had been kind enough to allow her battle of wits with Johnny to end; now she had to repay that kindness with haste, or risk giving the impression that Their kindness was unwelcome or unappreciated.

She was just about to remove herself from the presence of Axel Grove, before the majority of its citizens could rise with the sun and notice a Weaver in their midst, when a voice behind her startled her out of her plans and back into the real world. She turned on a heel to find Ritsa, the redheaded girl from Johnny's apartment, looking daggers at her. The girl had changed significantly since Nora had seen her leave in a fury; instead of the skimpy dancing dress and heels she had worn before, she had replaced them with heavy denim pants, old but sturdy running shoes, and a tight leather jacket that, while still displaying every curve she possessed, kept her protected from the elements. She wore a single bud from a pair of earphones in her left ear; the cord from it dangled down into her jacket and ended somewhere inside; Nora could only guess where she kept her music player.

On top of this, she wore a backpack slung across her back that seemed to carry the weight of the world. Ritsa was not tiny, but she was not strong enough by far to manage the weight she staggered under, no matter how hard she tried to hide the fact from Nora. Nora, unwilling to start a fight with the woman so close to her own departure, tried on as much of a smile as she was able.

"Your name is Ritsa, correct? I didn't expect to see you again, much less anyone else, at this hour. Do you need something?"

Ritsa continued to glare, but as silence stretched between them, the glare began to falter and eventually failed. With a sigh, Ritsa shrugged the tight straps of her backpack off and let the bulging mass fall to the floor; Nora could almost feel vibrations from the

impact through her boots. Ritsa's hands found her hips, but despite the heat in her voice and the rigidity of her body, she could not look Nora in the eye.

"Look, Weaver. I don't know what business you had with Johnny, and I don't care. If he replaced me, that's nothing I haven't seen before. You don't get attached to a guy like him, if you're smart, and I'm smart. I hope you are too. Thing is, I was planning on leaving him long before now. There's something I need to do. But as much as I hate to admit it..."

Her eyes flickered up to Nora's, almost guiltily, and then dropped again. "To get out of here, I need you. You know what the Litter does to us Mutes. I need protection, and you're the only one that can give it to me."

Nora paused before answering her. "I am not the only one you can go to for such things. Surely there are at least a dozen Craftsmen here that will greet the morning by the time I'm gone. You don't have long to wait."

This provoked surprise from Ritsa. "Wait, you're leaving? I thought..." She shook her head, but new understanding seemed to galvanize her hesitation into action. "I guess Johnny's batting a thousand tonight. I hope Jezza's okay."

"Isn't she your friend? Does she know you're leaving?"

Ritsa sighed again, and this time her face looked genuinely troubled rather than angry. "Jezza's been... keeping secrets from me. I don't know what she's got herself into, but she spends so much time with Johnny now, and she always seems to know too much. We thought he was just a funny little playboy drunk when we hooked up with him, but now..." She studied the ground. "I don't know what to do. I'm living with two other people who barely even know I exist. It's like I'm a Weaver without the power, nobody wants me."

Nora chose to ignore the obvious slight out of respect for the woman's emotions. If she had to guess, she would guess that Jezza was somehow involved with the strange conspiracy that Johnny and Mole were a part of. She had stayed only long enough to assist Johnny into baiting Nora to stay and listen to his story, after all, unlike Ritsa, who had been honestly hurt at the thought of Johnny putting her aside

and had rightfully stormed out. Jezze seemed to know his plan, but for whatever reason, she wasn't letting Ritsa in on her secret. Whether it was for protection or for spite, she couldn't possibly guess.

“So you plan to run away, then?”

Ritsa looked up, her eyes wet with unshed tears. “I don't have a choice. I have family up north, if they're still living. I haven't heard from them since Jezze and I ran away together a couple years ago. They'll forgive me. That's more than I can say for the two people I thought were my friends. I've really screwed up my life. And as much as I can't stand stupid things like magic and spells and pretty little Weavers, if it'll get me home and out of this dump, I'll take it. Just spell me and let me go. I'll make it fine, I'm tougher than I look.”

Nora surveyed the girl for a long time, taking in each aspect of her that she had seen. She seemed to speak the truth that she was tougher than she seemed, but many humans who had never seen the Litter before underestimated it. There was a good question to be asked in how she and Jezze had come to Axel Grove safely in the first place; perhaps another Weaver had assisted them then. She didn't much care for aiding a person who openly despised her, but as always, the thought of paying her debt raised its head. How better to follow the Right-hand Pattern than to assist a girl in turning her life around, however hated Nora herself might be? At the rate she was going, she might not even need the job from Mole to strike her balance. That would be something of a problem - honor would demand that she complete her mission, so time would have to be spent following the Left. What new horrors would she commit? She didn't like the thought, but she never did.

“I am traveling north as well. I have never been that way before. It sounds as if you have. Perhaps we can make a deal. If you will travel with me to serve as my guide through the Litter in that direction, I will offer you what protection I can. You will have to suffer my presence, but I will not hinder you in any way. You have my word. You cannot have enough protection through the Litter, whether you believe in the Duality or not. We can be of use to each other.”

Ritsa scowled, but Nora could already see that she was

thinking the prospect over very carefully. In the end she nodded, still keeping her eyes on the ground. “That makes sense. Don’t get me wrong, Weaver. It’s not you in particular I mind, though I thought you were the reason Johnny didn’t give a damn about me all of a sudden.” She struggled to return her heavy backpack to her shoulders. “It’s the magic stuff. If it’s real, why can’t we all use it? What makes you special?”

Nora reached into the pockets of her coat, once again taking up the small wooden idol in her pocket. The protective spell that she had used on Johnny would suffice here as well, though this time she would have to maintain two copies - plus a little something to augment Ritsa’s strength. Without it, the bag would kill her before the Litter ever did. “The Duality gives Their power to those who believe. It is that simple and that hard. If your belief is not strong enough, Their trust will not be, either. I had reason to believe from a very young age in Their gift. I always will.”

The answer didn’t seem to satisfy Ritsa, but she at least didn’t laugh or continue to press Nora with questions. At last, Nora turned again to face the great wheel in the middle of town, and murmured her spells to herself. To her surprise, Ritsa seemed half able to recognize the shield at the moment she cast it. The majority of Mutes were unaware of the Threads of the Pattern that wove about them, unless it directly affected their continued well being or some object they were involved with. Ritsa was full of questions, it seemed!

First, there was business to handle. With her prayers surrounding herself and the reluctant Mute, Nora set forth toward the northern exit of Axel Grove, saying a mental farewell to the city she loved best. No one would ever know it, as she hid each and every emotion she felt, but farewells always made her sad.

The Litter was, in a word, foul. Nora had seen it countless times over the course of her twenty-six years of life, but the sight and smell never got any easier. She might have been willing to spare a ritual to block the stench that made her eyes water and her

companion swallow often, if she had not been so tired. Ritsa's arrival had interrupted her hope of beginning her journey later rather than sooner, and she had wondered at her ability to maintain even her own shielding, without another person involved. The girl was holding her own, though her face belied her disgust at the Litter; doubtless she believed that Nora's status as a Weaver, rather than a Craftsman, made her spells less potent. Mutes always had a funny way of demanding more from a Craftsman or Weaver than they had asked for; they knew little of how specific spells could be. Asking for protection from the Litter would earn them exactly that; they would not be harmed by the Litter. Foul smells did not hurt; they only inconvenienced.

Nora kept a pace that felt slow for her, concerned for Ritsa's ability to keep up. Again, if she had not been so exhausted, it would have been simple to lay a spell to improve her speed or keep her energized for the long haul. With each mile that passed, she found herself coming closer to the realization that she was going to have to stop. She did not trust Ritsa enough to assume the girl wouldn't simply ransack her belongings and go on ahead without her, but she hoped that Ritsa was smart enough to realize the restrictions on the spell that protected her. If she went ahead, she would quickly find herself alone and unprotected in the middle of the Litter, and nobody could save her then. They needed each other to stay alive, and Nora had made certain that no other path would suffice.

When the sun reached clear above the horizon and began to blind Nora's right eye with its ferocity, she stopped, calling a halt. Ritsa pulled the single earbud out of her ear with an air of impatience. "We just got started. Forget something, Weaver? Or did you decide Johnny was too good to waste?"

Nora shook her head. "Before I first entered your presence, I spent a great deal of energy protecting Johnny himself from the rain. Before that, I traveled a long way to reach Axel Grove. I have not had time to rest, and I fear that rest will soon become a necessity."

"Should've stayed in Axel Grove. I don't want to sleep in this shit." Ritsa kicked at a fragment of a torn tire by the side of the road. "We have no choice, right?"

"You seemed in a hurry to leave, and there are things more

important than sleep for me to tend to, as well. If I had the strength, I would ward the need for sleep off, that we might travel faster. Once I am rested, I can ensure that we do not need to stop again for a day or two, at least.” Nora sighed, looking around. “It is not my wish to sleep here either, but I can ensure our safety at least. The nearest town is several hours away, and I’m not sure I can make it that far.”

“Fine.” Ritsa’s sigh mirrored Nora’s. “I don’t know how you even know we’re headed north. There’s no paths around here. If you see a good place to stop, be my guest.”

She was right. The Litter was only an expanse of filth and trash, not intended for human traversal. The government workers that reclaimed useful garbage from the Litter all had special protective suits that made sure getting lost, falling down or long-term exposure would not harm them, but generally they also had ready access to a rough flying helicopter that could pick them up in an emergency. For regular humans, Pattern or otherwise, navigation was a task they had to carry upon their own shoulders, or risk dying in the process. Nora paused, reaching into her coat. She didn’t want to risk using even more of her power, knowing that she was running on near-empty already, but safety for herself and Ritsa was of the utmost priority. Without that, it wouldn’t matter whether she slept or not.

From her pocket, she fished out a tiny disc made of rusted copper. It looked like a penny with no face on it, from the older days of Earth. Ritsa watched, a petulant look on her pretty face. “What are you going to do, flip a coin to see if we live or not?”

Nora ignored her, and began to murmur to herself. “I call upon the united power of Lord and Lady. Unite that I may bring the Thread of Spirit to my hand. I shall weave with it an arrow to light my path and guide me through this darkness. Safe harbor must be found if we are to continue our journey. Be You willing to aid me in my need?”

Silence surrounded the two women, and Ritsa’s face twisted into something ugly as she prepared to unleash another verbal insult in Nora’s direction. Then, a tiny golden arrow appeared on the face of the disc, shimmering with light. It pointed in the direction they were heading; by the position of the sun, that meant north. A second,

thinner line with no arrow head pointed slightly away from that one, to the northeast, and off the edge of the disc. Nora smiled, closing her eyes. “My thanks to you, Great Ones. May this day be a blessing to You.”

“So that’s supposed to tell us where we’re going?”

Nora nodded, handing the disc over to Ritsa for her inspection. It flickered for a moment when it touched the girl’s Mute fingertips, but stayed alight, as if in response to Nora’s request. Both the arrow and the line shifted slightly to accommodate the difference in their current positions. “In the old days, they called this a compass. I still call it my spirit compass. The arrow shows cardinal directions. The line shows me how far we have to travel before we reach what I asked for; namely, a safe place to rest. It will show the arrow’s head when we are closer.”

“Yeah, right. We’ll probably just end up dead. You know there are monsters in here, right, Weaver? You didn’t ask for protection from those.”

Nora took the compass back from Ritsa and turned toward the line, continuing forward without a second thought. Ritsa had to jog a few steps under the weight of her backpack to catch up. “As I said before, faith is what makes this real for me. Even if you do not believe, I do, and that is all that matters. I would ask you to trust me, if not the Duality, but that is unlikely to bring you any comfort either.” At Ritsa’s snort of derision, she continued. “As for the monsters... there are some things the Duality need not be bothered with.”

“Not be bothered? Have you seen one of those things? They’re mutant freaks!” Ritsa’s voice rose nearly a complete octave. “And they’re huge. I don’t care what animal they came from, they’re still huge, it doesn’t matter.”

Nora nodded. “And yet, they are a part of our world. The Duality forbids murder unless it is in self defense or in pursuit of restoring balance to the world. If I must shed blood, I will do it myself. There is nothing more vile than asking Them to dirty Their hands.”

She paused long enough to pull back the sides of her coat and

display herself to Ritsa. The athame she had threatened Johnny with sparkled in the sunlight, highlighting its long, slender blade. At her other hip hung a strange object, wrapped in a leather holster. It took Ritsa a few moments to realize what it was, and longer to find her voice afterward.

“That... you have one of those? Damn, Weaver. You sure know how to make people hate you, don't you? And you just talked about being dirty...”

Nora closed her eyes, letting her coat fall back down and continuing to walk. The line on the spirit compass stretched onward as she advanced. “I do not pretend to glorify it. But sometimes, in this world, there are things more important than what we know. I have paid my penance for it, and it will not fail me.”

“That's what they said before the Terminus.” Ritsa had stopped, her hands once again on her hips. “And here you are, pretending it means nothing! You're a monster just like the ones you're going to kill!”

The words brought a glare to Nora's face before she could stop it. Rather than show it to Ritsa, she kept her back toward the girl. “Machine weapons were the end of our world. I know it as well as you do. Men and women with guns and bombs destroyed all we held dear for their own selfishness. But in the end, there are people yet creating them. The answer I must trust is that no unliving thing in this world possesses good or evil nature. That nature must come from its wielder, and nowhere else. If a kind man sees a gun, he will lock it away for the safety of his family. If a wicked man sees a gun, he will use it upon his enemies. I am neither. My duty is to balance.”

“And how exactly do you balance knowing you took someone's life in an instant? That they never had a chance to defend themselves? Explain that one, Weaver.”

Nora sighed. “First of all, I do not use it as often as you would think. This gun contained six shots when I first purchased it years ago. Do you know how many shots it contains now? Five.” She pursed her lips. “There were times when I might have used it. I have used it, once, and I am still paying for that with every step I walk. Make no mistake. I have killed before out of need, and will do so

again, but not with this. My main purpose for carrying such a thing is to drive those who would harm me into such righteous fury that a shot is not needed at all. Just as you have been. I showed it to you now instead of later so that you would not attack me when I use it, and become more of a threat than whatever might cause me to use it in the first place.”

She shook her head, clenching the spirit compass tight in her fist. “If a monster comes upon us, I am more than capable of ending its interest in us. By magic, by athame or by gun, if it should come to that. I pray it does not, but the possibility is clear. In the Litter, I do not know what to expect any more than you do. All I can do is trust in my faith to guide me, and do all that I can to protect myself and you as my traveling companion, by any means available to me. If you would prefer to return to Axel Grove, I will not stop you, but know that I will not stop carrying my gun either. I might even need to use it. Whether you trust me to use it correctly is your decision.”

“You don’t give me much reason to trust you, Weaver.” Ritsa spat the words at Nora’s heels. “First you show up at Johnny’s door and Jezze and me get thrown out like the trash. Then you hole up with Johnny and come out looking just as pretty as you did when you came in. Then you leave again before the sun rises, wearing as many secrets as Jezze does. And now you have that... thing!” She couldn’t even say the word - most Mutes couldn’t, to say nothing of Craftsmen or other Weavers. “I was willing to humor you when you left that jerk behind, but now, I don’t know.”

“What passed between Johnny and me was a business transaction. All else is in your head. That much I will tell you. I am now following the orders that I was given to travel north in search of further explanation regarding my specific job description. The person giving the orders is not Johnny, but someone through him. That is truly all I can tell you. The person I am taking orders from does not want herself known - even I do not know her true name, though Johnny might.” Nora turned to face Ritsa, her face at last schooled into blankness. “If you have questions about my intentions, you might consider asking one of them if you cannot trust me. One of those is back at Axel Grove. The other speaks to me via radio that

Johnny built, and I doubt she will even answer to anyone but me.”

Her answer given, Nora suddenly felt a wave of dizziness wash over her. She rubbed at her temples with a hand, trying to refocus her strength, but she was growing more desperate for a place to rest, and Ritsa was stalling her more than she had anticipated. Ritsa’s face was unreadable but angry, and it didn’t waver in the slightest when Nora faltered, though it did at least register a flicker of surprise.

At last, Nora had no choice. “I apologize, but my need for rest has reached a point where I can no longer argue with you. My power reserves are very low and if I do not find a place to rest soon, I will be unable to continue protecting either of us because I will be dead. Make your choice, Mute. Follow me if you desire my protection; I have no reason to betray or harm you. Go home if you cannot bear my company. Either way, I will proceed to the safe place my compass has directed me toward.”

She turned away again and continued walking, at her full regular pace, paying no heed to the girl behind her. It was only when she reached the overhang of a quiet yet still foul alcove of trash - the location her compass had provided - that she heard reluctant footsteps following her. In the end, Ritsa arrived and sat down hard on the trash heap that served as the ground just as Nora fell asleep.

That night registered in Nora’s mind as a blur, much as it always did when she was tired. Though she would never confide it in Ritsa, if not for the girl’s presence, she would have left herself open and defenseless against the Litter. She had not been able to place the wards and safety precautions that any Weaver should have, nor had she taken the time to mask their presence from any that sought them harm. It was a fool’s mistake, and Nora, above all else, did not like to be thought of as a fool. She might have blamed the girl for her pointless yet understandable delay, or Johnny for his own, but she knew better; taking responsibility for her own actions was important. She had allowed them to occupy more of her time than she could have, and that mistake was hers alone.

The truth, which Nora also could not admit, was that having the companionship of another human being during her travels was a blessing. She had not intended to enjoy the girl's presence, and had questioned the sanity of her kindness during their argument, but when sensibility set in, she could not deny that Ritsa was an interesting person to watch. She had secrets and told lies as much as her friend Jezze did, if perhaps for differing reasons. Whether she knew that, or hid them behind childish excuses was anyone's guess. Her anger and honesty was a refreshing change for a Weaver who had little choice but to mask her own emotions under a veil of shadow. What Nora might have thought or said in her own mind, Ritsa said to the world, and with limited consequence. It was not the first time that some small part of her longed for the Mute world of irresponsibility and freedom.

Still, the gifts that the Duality gave were not unwelcome. She had meant every word she said when she informed Ritsa of her longstanding faith in Them. She would not entrust the details of that faith to a Mute, much less a Mute that despised her so openly, but the statement was all that mattered. She had trusted Ritsa with her current goal, and that was more than anyone, Duality or otherwise, could have asked of her. She guessed that Mole would not be pleased with her indiscretion, if she knew - and it was very likely that she did - but Nora had taken care not to betray anything that would jeopardize her mission. Ritsa did not even know about the bag that felt as if it were burning a hole in Nora's pocket, and Nora intended to keep it that way. If temptation gnawed at her own heels, Ritsa would never manage not to look inside, if she ever got her hands on the bag.

Nora slept for exactly eight hours before rising as if from the dead. The sun stood directly overhead; if a Weaver's skin could be burned the way a human's could, she might have found herself in extreme discomfort. She startled Ritsa, who had apparently dozed off herself in a patch of shadow, but the girl was almost as quick to her feet as Nora. She was far faster with her mouth. "Beauty sleep over now, Weaver? We've got places to be."

Nora decided that there was no point in addressing their previous argument. Ritsa's presence suggested that the girl would

continue to follow her. Whether she agreed with or trusted Nora's logic regarding the gun at her side was irrelevant to their progression through the Litter. Further delay would make her even more of a fool than she already was. "I am well now, yes. Do you know our path from here, or shall I make use of my compass again?"

Ritsa looked somewhat ashamed. The expression ill suited her face. "Jezze and I went this way in the dark, and I was so worried about keeping up with her and staying away from the monsters that I didn't really pay attention. I think maybe once we get closer, I'll be able to see more." She did not apologize, which didn't surprise Nora at all.

"Very well." Nora restored the spell to her spirit compass, and this time only the arrow appeared; no line accompanied it. When Ritsa gave her a curious glance, she added, "We know we intend to go north. We deviated slightly to the east to rest for the evening. This arrow should be all we need for long term travel. When we exit the Litter, then precision may be needed, if you have not recognized our location by then."

"So I had time to think while you were asleep. You have that compass. Why ask me to guide you, if you could have just found your own way north?" Ritsa looked confused. "You agreed to help me if I helped you, but I haven't yet, and you don't seem to need it."

Nora's lips curved into a faint smile. "I may have need of your help yet. And don't forget, each spell that I cast drains my energy, no matter how small. If you can aid me without appealing to the Duality, it will allow me to focus my attention on more important matters without having to rest often and thus prolong this journey." She would not, of course, mention that she benefitted far more from just having another human's voice in her ears from time to time. She was not the kind of woman that enjoyed constant chatter, but she spent so much of her time alone that any interruption to the solitude was welcome.

Ritsa seemed to approve of this answer, and before Nora could ask her if she was ready to continue, the girl had hoisted her impossibly heavy backpack to her shoulders and replaced the earbud of her headphones into her left ear. Nora had only a moment to

wonder how her music player could still function without access to some form of charge; perhaps she'd installed new batteries prior to the journey. Ritsa's hands went to her hips - their favorite place - and she set her gaze on Nora. "Let's get moving then. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we'll be away from those monsters." She did not need to say that they would also be sooner away from anything that might require Nora to use her gun, but Nora did wonder why she chose not to when she could have.

The remainder of that day stretched on into night, and as dusk fell, the Weaver and the Mute set up camp together to wait out the dawn. Traveling by day would limit their interactions with all but the most brash and crazed monsters, and would also limit their need for additional lighting spells and other precautions. It also hid their passing from other Mutes, particularly the government workers that combed the Litter during the day in search of reclaimable materials. Nora did not wish to avoid them for any particular reason, but the fewer people that interrupted them and caused further delay, the better it would be for her.

One surprise that night came in the form of discovery regarding what Ritsa kept in that heavy bag of hers. Nora had not guessed that she might be a capable pack rat when it came to long journeys; she had thought that Jeze would be the one with the brains and Ritsa would be the one with the strength and courage to press ever onward. Still, the gear in her bag was anything but novice; she had food for at least a week, clean water and clothing, plus things such as rope and bedding for use at need. The sheer magnitude of her pack might have sold for thousands of dollars to anyone that knew she had it, or invited theft; food and clean water were the rarest of commodities after the Terminus. Anything foraged was bound to be tainted by acid rain, and the entirety of the world's water, be it ocean, stream or pond, was tainted too. As the earth had been torn asunder, so had the bodies of water and sky; nothing was sacred or safe anymore.

Then her conversation with Jeze at Johnny's apartment crept back into her head. According to the story that she and Johnny told, Ritsa was a talented martial artist. It was entirely possible that she had

defended that bag before, and would gladly do so again. It was easy to mistake her traveling companion for a weak and defenseless Mute, but that was a dangerous assumption to make; Nora vowed to try to keep it in mind for the future. Allowing the girl to feel useful and powerful in the face of such a complicated ordeal might not be amiss. Nora knew how she would feel, having been betrayed by a trusted friend and then thrust into the hands of an enemy, whether she could give voice to those thoughts or not.

Their night passed without incident, as did the next, and the next. On the morning of the fourth day, however, their successful advance was halted by the very thing that Ritsa had feared and loathed.

Nora heard it first, and froze in place, causing Ritsa to stumble into her rigid back. The girl began to squawk angrily, and rather than risk a vocal order to tell her to shut up, or jab her in the ribs and risk retaliation, Nora opted for a quick silencing spell that enveloped the two. The sounds they made would be undetectable to their foe for long enough to plan some kind of strategy on how to proceed.

“If you’re quite done, we have a problem.” Nora turned to face her companion. “As you so often reminded me at the beginning of this journey, there are monsters in the Litter. We have traveled smart and avoided the majority of them. But we are, I regret to inform you, not alone right now. Worry not, they cannot hear us now.”

For the first time since Nora had met Ritsa, the look on the girl’s face was not brave, stubborn or strong; it was like a child’s, wide-eyed, terrified and frantic. “I knew it... I knew it! What do we do? Can we even fight them? I can’t... if I touch them, I’ll...” Then she looked sick. “But if I don’t... you’ll...”

Nora reached out to grasp the girl’s shoulders. “Stop panicking and listen to me. The first thing to try is magic. It is the easiest and the most likely to succeed. I can attempt to throw them off our scent first, and if that doesn’t work, I can attempt to remove them from our trail completely. I will not kill them without good reason; only if they are able to penetrate my spells and try to harm us.

Your cooperation is critical here. Do you understand?”

Ritsa was smarter than she looked. “You think I’m going to freak and attack them, huh?”

“I recognize the possibility. We all do foolish things when we are frightened. I am no different, though you may find that hard to believe. But if we do not both maintain our composure and follow my plan, we may bring undue risk or harm to each other. At worst, I will find myself forced to kill without need, and that will cause me greater harm than you will understand, as you do not believe in the Duality’s power. They have been known to strike down believers who unbalance themselves in this way without a second thought.”

“So if you screw up, we’re both dead?”

Nora nodded. “That is the short of things, yes. Do you understand how important it is now? Please allow me to do what I must do. If you interfere, it may have more serious consequences than either of us can understand.”

Ritsa’s face did not shift away from her terrified expression, but she nodded, her lower lip between her teeth. “Right. Let’s just get this over with. You’re the star of the show. Have fun with it.”

Nora gestured without words to a nearby section of the Litter that sank down in a crater-like manner with a mountain of trash at its side. Ritsa hesitated for a moment, then realized that Nora was trying to get her to hide, and obeyed with alacrity. Further hand signals from Nora suggested that Ritsa needed to get lower; the girl grimaced, but threw herself down flat on her chest amid the filth. Satisfied, Nora cancelled her silence spell and turned to face the scuffling, scraping sound that she had heard before her discussion with Ritsa. There were at least two of them; more might catch wind of a battle and join in, if she were not careful. From their presence in daylight, she knew they were not simple monsters, able to be intimidated with the simplest of spells; it would be a challenge to handle them, even if Ritsa kept her word and did not panic. Nora was not altogether convinced that she could trust that, good intentions or otherwise.

She could not focus on the strange fear that Ritsa seemed to have of monsters that she seemed to speak of only in second-hand terms. Instead, she advanced slowly toward the noises, hoping to

catch a glimpse of her foes. It didn't take her long to find them. Just around the other side of a towering mountain of trash stood two hulking monstrosities, their seven foot tall wolflike bodies upright on two legs, gaunt with hunger, but agile enough to be a threat. Rancid drool poured from their rabid fangs like waterfalls. This was what Nora had wanted Ritsa to understand; all the mutated monsters in the world were born of things that had lived on earth and survived the Terminus, though not unchanged or unharmed.

Humans barely had enough food to keep themselves alive at a modest rate; the animals suffered most. What Ritsa didn't seem to know was that there were human mutants as well. Even in their altered forms - scientists blamed it on radiation from the catastrophe known as the Terminus - they sought what they had not been able to attain in life; food, clean water, useful items and shelter. However, they had lost their minds to insanity in the process, and would stop at nothing to attain what they desired. Many normal, healthy humans had been reduced to such philosophy just as easily. The monsters were a threat to continued human life, but the Duality frowned on the slaying of Their creatures in any form. Perhaps one day, when the world had recovered from the Terminus's destruction, someone could find a cure to restore them to their previous selves; it was a foolish, sentimental faith for most people, but it wouldn't be the first time that Craftsmen and Weavers were thought insane.

Until then, humans just had to be careful, and clever. Nora continued to watch the two creatures. In the language of the Duality, such mutants were known as Radiants, derived from the cause of their affliction. Thoughts swirled inside her head and discarded themselves one by one; she could not get by with a simple misdirection spell. The creatures were too large and too powerful to be fooled by such a gambit - she had been hopeful at least. That meant a shift to her other magical resort; removing the threat completely. She swore mentally, knowing what kind of power such a spell would take from her; she did not want to waste any more time, but it wouldn't be long before the monsters caught wind of healthy humans, to say nothing of the food in Ritsa's pack. Something had to be done.

The Radiants advanced toward Nora's direction, their canine

noses erect and alert. As Nora had expected, they were getting closer to their goal. She dropped to her knees in the trash, reaching into her pockets and pulling out a bunch of implements that she knew Ritsa would be struggling to comprehend. Three green tapered candles, a simple lighter, a tiny unmarked bottle of clear liquid, and a second bottle, this one made of amber glass and too opaque to give hints to the nature of the liquid inside. She could feel Ritsa watching her, but she didn't have time to explain herself; action would have to take precedence.

Still on her knees, Nora unsheathed her athame, and with one fluid motion, plunged the tip down into the trash surrounding her. With careful precision, she drew a wide, full circle around her at the maximum distance she could reach, then got to her feet to draw a triangle which bisected the circle with its points. The sound of shuffling grew nearer; the Radiants could hear her. She might have maintained the silence spell, but she did not want to risk sparing any power that might have been used to thwart the Radiants; she would simply have to be faster than they were.

Nora pulled the cork from the glass bottle and began to pour the liquid inside along the gouges in the ground that her athame made, in the exact same pattern. When she finished with that task, she hastily thrust the three green candles into the points of the triangle; one to her north, one to her southeast and the last to her southwest. The noises progressed further, and Nora could almost smell the stench that rolled off the Radiants; she didn't have much longer, but she didn't need much longer, either. Making a rapid mental estimate of her remaining time, Nora backed away almost to the pit that Ritsa hid in before beginning to speak in a loud, commanding voice that certainly could reach the Radiants' ears. She no longer needed to stay hidden. Her palms began to sweat around the lighter and the amber vial she held.

“Father of this land, I pledge this circle to You. I have need of Your strength, that I might cease the advance of those who seek to harm me. By the promise I have made Thee, I shall not kill without need; bless me, that I may keep my promise. Hold them in Your embrace, and release them into a life of mercy when we are gone. We

shall not allow them to suffer at our passing.”

Her words spoken, Nora leapt forward, dousing the center of the circle-triangle symbol with liquid from the amber bottle. The pungent scent of blood filled the air, and both Nora and Ritsa could hear the sudden hesitation in the Radiants’ footsteps. They recovered within seconds, driven by the intoxicating scent of what could only be a fresh meal, and came fully into view. Nora could hear Ritsa let out a choking gasp of fear behind her, but she did not run or panic; she simply dove deeper into the pit, as if she might bury herself within the trash and remain safe from the creatures before her. She was partially right; the trash was masking the scent of her blood from the Radiants, which was why Nora had sent her there in the first place. Weaver blood, affected by the Duality, did not smell as strongly, and so Nora had no such need.

The Radiants set their eyes on Nora and lunged forward, snapping and snarling; she held her ground long enough to flick the switch of her lighter and duck, touching the tiny flame to the symbol she had etched in the ground. Within seconds, the entire symbol blazed with glowing green fire, setting the candles aflame in the process. The Radiants, their feet and bodies burning, screamed with rage and pain, and struck out at Nora with avenging rage. One of them was lucky enough to catch the hem of Nora’s coat, and tore a gaping hole in the fabric; the other missed completely, and found itself standing directly on the spot where Nora had poured the amber vial’s liquid.

At that moment, the air shimmered violently, and the world around Nora and Ritsa seemed to spin. Nora stood firm as lines of shielding light tore forth from the triangle, rising up out of the ground to form a triangular prison around the two Radiants. The Radiants, recognizing that they were beat, let out howls of fury and rage that only dissipated into silence as the triangle fused shut into a complete holding cell with no hinges, cracks or other distinguishing features. It looked as if they were encased in a glass pyramid that would never break, no matter how hard they threw themselves against it or pounded on its sides. They would not be able to harm anyone, now.

Nora wiped the sweat from her brow, her pulse racing in her ears. She had played it close, almost too close, but the Duality - God the Father, Ruler of Earth for this particular spell - had granted her blessing. She had chosen to use a spell of protection, rather than one of removal, in order to facilitate her continued quest for balance; to physically remove a person and place them in another area without consent would have been a Left-hand spell, and only added to her grief. By comparison, she was indeed locking up the Radiants without their consent, but for their own protection as much as hers. Now they would be held until Nora and Ritsa passed into less dangerous territory, and then the spell would end, allowing them to continue on their way without further trouble. It was the kindest way to handle things, as far as she knew, even if it took more power - Left spells were always easier. It was always easier to hate than love.

She turned her back on the pyramid prison - her private name for the spell - and glanced over to Ritsa, who lay almost motionless in the pit. For one split second, Nora thought that she might have miscalculated, and the Radiants had somehow managed to harm her, but then she realized that the girl's entire body was trembling despite its rigidity. On top of that, tears streamed down her face and into the trash beneath her. Her jaw and teeth were clenched tight enough to kill her, and her hands were white-knuckled around her pack. Nora found herself beset by the strange urge to take the girl into her arms and comfort her, but she knew that such displays of emotion would only embarrass both of them in the end. Even more, she wanted to know what in the world had happened to frighten such a strong girl in the face of a creature that most humans had seen at least once or twice by the tenth year of their lives. Radiants attacked villages and towns all the time; she herself had seen her fair share of them, even without traveling through the Litter. Could this really be the first one that Ritsa had ever seen?

Nora stepped down into the pit with the girl, and cautiously reached out a hand to touch her shoulder. As she had expected, Ritsa screamed at the top of her lungs and struck out wildly, anticipating the arrival of a Radiant and not of Nora herself. Her eyes were open, but it was clear that it was not Nora she saw, but the hideous monsters

in her place. Nora stood firm, taking the hail of blows that the girl threw at her, until finally Ritsa ran out of breath and began to pant, her glassy eyes beginning to refocus onto the shape of the Weaver. It took her another ten minutes to grasp that she had attacked Nora, and that the monsters were confined, unable to hurt anyone anymore.

“I... I’m sorry...” The words came out as a sort of wail, tears still streaming down Ritsa’s face. Nora wondered whether the tears or the apology cost her more. “I was... so scared... I thought we were... going to...”

Then, abruptly, Ritsa threw herself at Nora, clutching at her the way a young child might clutch at a doll. The hesitation regarding comforting the girl had been broken. A faint blush of emotion crept into Nora’s cheeks as she tried to calm herself at the same time she kept Ritsa close, knowing that any moment, the girl would return to her senses and be mortified at the act. She ignored the pain of the bruises that spread across her body; she no longer found it difficult to believe that Ritsa was a martial artist! It meant nothing, however, compared to the novelty of serving as a cornerstone for someone else. It wasn’t every day that Weavers found themselves a comfort to others. Even after their best successes at the jobs they took, payment and a fond farewell were the best they could hope for. Ritsa was still young, and foolish, and though she hated Weavers with an intensity that gave Nora pause for thought, she yet wondered if perhaps that bias might be changed with time, and enough experience.

They slept together that night, for the first time since beginning their journey. Ritsa cried herself to sleep in the arms of the Weaver, her mortal enemy, and Nora’s need for rest at last claimed her in the process of comforting her ward. At least she managed to get her protective wards in place that night. If only Johnny had been around to see it, he would have considered everything that happened in Axel Grove to be a complete and utter success! Nora dreamt of telling him, someday, and slept with a grin that might have rivaled the wolfish maws of the two Radiants in their pyramid prison. Come dawn, they would begin their journey anew, and it would only be a few more days until they reached the northern edge of the Litter. From there, Nora hoped that Ritsa would be able to guide them the

rest of the way to Ashmouth. She intended to accompany the girl to her home, if Ashmouth was not her intended destination, but that would be her choice, not Nora's.

As they slept, the two Radiants continued to pound on the prison walls, snarling and snapping at themselves and each other. Their drool dripped down the inside of the pyramid. It was pure torture to have to sit and watch their intended meal so close, and yet so far away, but there was nothing they could do. A voice inside their heads told them to cease their feral behavior and sleep themselves, but this they could not do, and instead chose to disobey. It would take longer than they had for the God to reach them thus, and though He knew it, He was as bound as Nora by the desire to try. It hurt Him to bear witness to the fear and chaos that the beasts had caused His child, but it hurt him no less to bear witness to the children He had yet to save. His grief came in the form of acid rain, which poured down across the world and sent all those who valued their lives scrambling for their homes. It would not be the first, nor the last, time He cried.

Dawn rose upon the fifth morning of their journey through the Litter. Nora opened her eyes, half-remembering the awkward position she had fallen asleep in; Ritsa had not allowed for comfort when she fell asleep in her arms! That memory brought her to the realization that though her muscles ached in places she was unfamiliar with, they did so of their own accord, not of Ritsa's - the girl was already awake and moving about the campsite, from the sounds that finally entered her consciousness. As she expected, it was unlikely that Ritsa cared to admit her weakness from the previous day, to say nothing of her embarrassing display of emotion. Now she was putting on her best brave, sarcastic face to try to convince the Weaver that she hadn't broken down at all. How long had it taken her?

She sat up, shaking the trash out of her hair and brushing it off of her clothing. In the distance, she could see the pyramid prison; the two Radiants had fought the prison for the entire night, and now

slept out of necessity themselves. In the back of Nora's mind, she realized that if she and Ritsa did not leave soon, there was a high possibility that the two might ultimately decide to eat each other rather than risk starvation. That would undermine all the protection she had attempted to wield the previous day. With a groan that she kept to herself, Nora got to her feet and headed in the direction of Ritsa's sounds.

She had, for only a moment, expected to find someone else other than Ritsa. The slight distrust she kept for her companion was only wise and healthy for a Weaver, but it still shamed her when she was forced to think of it. The redheaded girl was sitting in the sun, her leather jacket open nearly to her navel and the button of her jeans released. She was apparently working on her tan, from the lounging position she was in. Upon seeing Nora, she blushed almost the color of her hair and quickly zipped herself up, doing her best to cover her midriff with her arms to hide the undone button. "Do you ever make noise, Weaver? One minute you're comatose and the next, you're in my face."

"Sorry." Nora turned her back on the girl, giving her time to finish her adjustments. "Silence is something we Weavers learn fast after we become what we are. It's been too many years for me to make a child's mistakes." When Ritsa appeared next to her, back to her normal self, she tried on a faint smile again; since her journey began, she felt as if she'd been trying that far more than usual. "Consider it proof of my faith, if you will."

The girl looked down, her face difficult to read. "After last night, I think... I think I'm glad for that." She sighed, her hands as always reaching for her hips in what Nora now took to be a nervous habit. "I still don't believe in this stuff, and I know I couldn't do it if I tried, but... well, you did it and I didn't think you could. You stopped them." It was as close to a thanks as Nora expected to get.

"Faith comes slowly for some, if it comes at all. Bearing witness to the proof tends to bring one closer to the truth, if only one step closer." Nora nodded to her, accepting the unspoken expression of gratitude. "Not that I am here to convince you. Your beliefs are your own. But I cannot deny that one more open mind in the world

would be a blessing to me and my kind. Mutes are well enough, when they do not seek to hinder or harm us. We are hated through fear and misunderstanding.”

Ritsa nodded, but her face still didn't seem convinced. “I wouldn't say that. You do some pretty terrible things in the name of balance, you know. Right now you're all noble and fun to be around because you can't afford to hurt anyone. I don't know what I would think of you, once that fades and you have to walk the other path instead. I don't think anyone wants to understand that part of you.” She chanced a glance at Nora. “The world's gone to shit. Most of us Mutes know times are tough. But to have to kill, or hurt others to achieve what we have in life... that's the same kind of thing we still put criminals in jail for. And yet the government protects you instead.”

She was right. The government, or at least what was left of it, had enough problems of its own. It called itself the Grand Alliance, and spanned all of the remaining countries that yet carved out an existence on the earth. Its purpose was to try to maintain at least some semblance of order in a world gone mad, and to seek out new ways to restore the glory that humans had once possessed. The first task proved to be almost more trouble than it was worth; many of the laws that existed were not maintained, and only criminals of the worst variety ever faced punishment. The second task affected Nora more directly. Faith in the Duality and the power that resulted from it was so much a part of human life now that it would be impossible to remove; there would be open war between Mutes and all those who followed the Duality, and that was a risk they dared not take.

After all, the very faith had been borne from a desire to remember the lost green forests, clean blue oceans, fresh air and warm fire of their previous lives. Nobody could say for sure whether the God and Goddess had been there all along, but the truth seemed to imply that they were there now, and guided Their world with Their own hands through the crisis that had changed everything. There were more Craftsmen than Mutes and Weavers combined; there could be no reclamation of “humanism,” or so the government called it - the reign of machines, technology and creativity alone. Humanism had

led to the destruction of the world once, and rather than risk bearing witness to a second breaking of the world, many turned to the Duality seeking another way to shape their lives and those of others around them. The Grand Alliance could not afford to make enemies of them, let alone lose them. Still, there were those that demanded otherwise, and they often made a great deal of noise and trouble for Craftsmen and Weavers making their ways through life. Their radio broadcasts and public demonstrations were a nuisance for anyone but those who agreed with them.

Nora had to take a few moments before she responded - not to keep her temper in check this time, but because she understood the moral quandary that the girl was referring to. There was no excuse for her behavior outside of the necessity of balance, when she performed Left-hand jobs and did wicked, base things. Only Weavers suffered under such constraints; Craftsmen simply chose one or the other, and Mutes didn't do either, though they could be wicked enough by choice alone if they wanted. It was virtually impossible to explain the concept of cosmic balance to anyone who didn't already understand it, and even those who did understand it - Weavers alone - felt the weight of their deeds when they performed them. The corpses of the man and woman she had slain prior to her arrival in Axel Grove still haunted her; their eyes open and accusatory, their faces etched with terror and pain. She would never forget what she had done. If anything, she wanted to believe that being forced to live on, each day knowing the sins she accepted, was a worse punishment than any prison, but few would agree with that sentiment.

At last, she sighed. "The questions you hint at have no good answers. If I could answer, it would make my life easier as well as yours, I think. I must follow my heart, and proceed with caution when I require jobs that harm others. My duty is both my strength and my weakness. I do not claim that I am the gun and my employers hold the trigger, but I have been forced into jobs that I would rather not take by unfortunate circumstance. The same could happen to any Mute, or any Craftsman, under the right conditions. I also possess the ability to atone for my sins as well. The difference between myself and those who find themselves in jail, I believe, is that

need for atonement. I may commit evil acts, but I will always, by necessity, pay them back with good. Can you say the same for those you were comparing me to?”

Ritsa frowned thoughtfully, and in the end, she looked up to focus on Nora’s chest - she still couldn’t manage to look her in the eye. “I guess that’s a fair answer. I just...” She shook her head. “If you could just... always be like this, maybe...” She shifted nervously. “Maybe then I could trust you. I want to. I really want to. I’m just waiting for the change... waiting for you to decide I’m the one you have to kill.”

It was a damning admission, and one that hurt Nora far deeper than she ever let on. Nora had had the chance to be a Craftsman, and to dedicate her life to the pursuit of good, just as all those who followed the Duality did. She had also been given the chance to pursue evil intentions. Her very childhood had been a constant struggle between the two extremes, those she loved demanding her promise one way or the other. In the end, her father had died trying to find enough sin in his heart to change his Path and love her mother, and her mother had laughed over his tear-stained corpse at the fool he had been. Right-hand and Left-hand they had been, and yet they had never truly held each other, much less their daughter. After her father’s death, she had become a Weaver; her mother had disowned her for her weakness. A year later, she learned that her mother had died. The proof she had wanted, and justification for her actions, would never come. She had nothing left but her faith.

“I am your protector, Mute. I am not your mother, your family or your friend.” The words were not harsh when she said them; they were gentle yet truthful. “I protect you because I promised to. That promise will keep you safe from any harm I might do; to go back on my word would be to destroy myself, and that I will not do. Your trust in me, though I would find it more than welcome, is not needed. What is needed now is that we continue north, so that we may get closer to our goal and so that these creatures,” - she paused to glance at the pyramid prison - “can go on their way as well. Until we reach your family, you are safe. After that, what happens to you is

none of my concern, and what happens to me is none of yours. I will be gone from your life as if I had never come. That is all I can promise you. When I fire my gun, you will never see it. When I kill, you will not feel it.”

Ritsa almost seemed to flinch as Nora spoke, though whether from the naked honesty of her words, or the almost dead tone in her voice that she couldn't hide, Nora couldn't be sure. Rather than try to respond, she returned her gaze to the floor. After a few moments, she realized she had to say something. “Let's just... get moving.”

Nora agreed. The sooner they reached Ashmouth, the sooner they could part company. A bitter feeling of sadness lay heavy on her heart as she recast her spirit compass and began to walk, Ritsa at her heels. She had been so blessed with the girl's trust the night before that she had allowed herself to believe it was genuine; anger at her own naivete soon followed the sadness and chased it into a corner of her mind, trapping it in the shadows. The girl seemed at first to be far too innocent and stupid to be real, but as time had passed, she was beginning to show shades of true paranoia, hiding herself from anything that might be an aid to her. She did not know Ritsa's past beyond the very threads of information the girl herself had offered, but she was beginning to think her traveling companion had a great deal of complication that she kept hidden from view. In that, she was very like Nora herself, though the comparison would have insulted her beyond belief.

Perhaps her family would bring out the best in her. She needed time to heal from Jezza's betrayal, and until that happened, she would never trust another living soul again, Weaver, Mute or monster. Only when she slept, after suffering the worst shock and fear of her life, did she still possess the ability to reach out for others. In a way, she was far sadder than Nora ever could or would be. At least Nora was used to it.

They had traveled another half of a day when Nora's radio came alive again. She stared at the screen flashing 04.2 as she listened to Mole's breathless voice.

“Are you still stuck in the Litter? I should tell you you're slow, but there's been a problem, so I guess I'm glad. Change course for

Fall's Garden. It's due east from your location, not north. Ashmouth isn't a great place to be right now, trust me."

Nora blinked, intending to ask what the problem was, but Ritsa's face had suddenly become white as a sheet against her fire-red hair. Before Nora could stop her, she lunged forward and grabbed the radio out of Nora's hand, jamming down the button to talk.

"Ashmouth?! What's happened?! Tell me now, damn it..."

Mole took a moment to respond. "I didn't realize you had a friend, Miss Delaney. No matter, this isn't private. See, Ashmouth just got hit with a massive hurricane. The ocean's right by there, as I'm sure you're aware? Mutes and water don't mix for long. The flooding in the cave tunnels is killing them. I sent your contact to Fall's Garden. He's a Craftsman, so he would have been fine, but I don't think he liked the screaming."

Mole truly had no mercy, or perhaps she simply had no idea what she was saying. In an instant, things began to click for Nora. Ritsa had said she had family up north. Nora had not mentioned her specific destination to her. They were heading for the same place. And while Nora had not had any particular interest in the city of Ashmouth aside from her job... Ritsa did. Everything she had come so far for lay in that city, and it was dying, by the sound of Mole's transmission.

Ritsa did not wait for Nora. She dropped the radio on the trash-laden ground, took one look at Nora's spirit compass to solidify her direction, and began to run east under the weight of her backpack. Her left earbud fell out of her ear without notice. Nora, fearing for her safety and still very much aware of the protection spell over her that only operated within proximity of Nora, made a rapid decision. She still needed to go to Ashmouth, if only to complete her promise to Ritsa. Once there, the girl would, with any luck, be able to stay with her family and continue to aid the survivors. That would leave Nora free to travel faster and make up the difference in a day or two, arriving at Fall's Garden late but within reasonable expectations. It was not as expedient as simply rewriting the spell to allow Ritsa to pass alone through the Litter, but...

If the worst came to pass, then Ritsa would need Nora more

than ever. A Mute alone in floodwaters would never survive the night, and Nora believed with all her heart that Ritsa would not think twice about joining her family at that point - in hell, if need be.

It took them another three days to exit the Litter, and another to correct their course and arrive at the highway leading north toward Ashmouth. The Stretch, it was called now; nobody remembered what it had been called before the Terminus. Ritsa, who had quickly discovered that running the entire way out of the Litter was a fool's errand, still kept the fastest pace she was able and walked. Nora had already been forced to treat blisters, cramping muscles and abject exhaustion at the end of each day. The girl wanted her to cast the spell that Nora had mentioned, the one that allowed a person to travel without need of rest, but this she refused; it took enough of a toll on a Weaver that she didn't care to test its effects on a Mute, regardless of how angry the girl got with her, or how much she pleaded. On top of that, rest was absolutely required after the use of such a spell, and often more rest than a person would have needed to begin with; Nora suspected that Ritsa would have her hands full on arrival, and didn't have the understanding to realize exactly what that would mean. Was it worse to take longer getting there, or to be unable to help anyone or defend one's self upon arrival into a dangerous place?

Nora's attempts to talk sense into her - if her family was already dead, then speed would not help them, and if they were not, then doubtless someone else could aid them until she arrived - fell on deaf ears. She could understand Ritsa's pain, though the exact individuals in question concerned her none. She herself had lost the chance to make amends with her mother before the woman's demise; if Ritsa's family had perished, then there would be no closure for her, either. Nora dreaded what they would find; she held her tongue, but a feeling of impending catastrophe was weighing on her mind. The souls that resided in her body were restless, full of chatter and memory and noise; she could only guess that the Centremain - the place where those who followed the Duality rested between rebirths -

had gathered an unexpected influx of travelers. That didn't necessarily imply anything, since Ashmouth was a Mute community, but often well-meaning Rightists were the first to give their lives in pursuit of aiding those in need. If Mutes were dying, it made sense for the best of the Rightists to fall as well.

Their journey along the Stretch was a silent one. Only Ritsa's panting gasps from the pace she kept punctuated the silence. No matter how hard she pressed on, she never complained or questioned; her dedication was impressive to Nora, who had assumed that not many Mutes shared such qualities with Weavers. If Ritsa had earned a sort of grudging respect for the kinder half of Nora's life, then Nora too had gained some respect for those Mutes who gave as much as Ritsa did. Though they lacked faith in the Duality, they had equal faith in their own hands and their own goals, and they would die for them just as soon. It was not so difficult to think of peace and understanding, away from the cities where the protests and public service announcements incited hatred between the two.

The Stretch gradually began to resolve itself into a looming, wide-mouthed cave opening, beckoning them forward into its depths. Nora frowned, bracing herself; she had never liked the enclosed places of the world, and had often feared dark rooms as a child. To think of a city buried beneath the blackness that engulfed it left her nervous to say the least. Still, it was the home of Ritsa's family, and she couldn't imagine Mutes living in a place that could harm them more than the challenges of daily life did. Beyond the raised highway, she could see the ocean; the memories of blue, writhing spans of life from the souls she carried were swept away in terror by the reality of the thing. Blue it was not; it was brown, almost rust-colored, and still as glass. Nothing lived in it, anymore - not animal or human.

As they progressed, the same tainted red water began to fill in the crevasses in the land around them. What began as strange rivers of red at first grew into ponds and then into new, smaller oceans. Nora began to wonder if they could even get inside Ashmouth once they arrived. The closer they got to the looming maw of Ashmouth, the deeper the water became, and by the time they reached the cave mouth, it was halfway up the supports that lifted the Stretch off the

ground and into the sky. It was no wonder that the humans living in tunnels within Ashmouth were suffering; most had likely drowned before the taint of the water took its toll. She couldn't decide if that was a blessing or not, and silently traced a prayer symbol on the inside of her pocket against evil. The Duality would know what had passed, and she could only pray They had shown mercy.

There were guards posted at the entrance to the cave. Nora studied them both while Ritsa rushed up to address them. One was a tall blonde man in his thirties with long hair that hung loose to his shoulders. His guard uniform, painted in the dour gray-and-white colors of Ashmouth, bore stains that could have been rust, water or blood. He wore a pair of thin, silver-rimmed glasses that glinted in the sunlight. At his waist hung a simple longsword. Swords and other such pointed weapons had replaced guns as the weapon of choice for most people, following the Terminus. They required more skill and finesse than guns, and had less consequence, or so people believed. Guards were now trained in the use of such weapons, and prided themselves on their strength and style rather than speed. Nora wasn't sure that it was a good trade; many guards ended up focusing more on their swordplay than their job defending the weak from danger.

The other guard was a woman, and might well have been the first guard's elder sister, by her age and face. Her pale blonde hair hung in a tight braid almost past her bottom, and her eyes were sharp enough for her gaze to cut diamond. Her uniform was just as poorly kept as his, and Nora noticed that her hands were dirty too, as was her blade. It came as no surprise; most cities were capable of filtering the worst of the taint out of the world's water in order to drink, bathe and function as humans must, but they used as little of it as they could, and what they did use still wasn't what scientists in the pre-Terminus world would have called clean. All the water resources were likely going to aid the sick and injured; they couldn't afford to bathe or maintain their uniforms, as they did normally. That alone spoke volumes about the state of affairs in Ashmouth; Mole had spoken truth.

Ritsa was doing her best to ply the male guard with her

feminine charms. He was implacable, repeating the same canned response that he undoubtedly had been ordered to give to anyone seeking entry: “The City of Ashmouth is under quarantine until visitors’ safety can be assured. Please come back later.” When Ritsa’s pleading guise turned to anger, however, his stern face began to crack with frustration.

“Look, woman, I can’t let you in. I’m sorry your family was involved, but it’s just too dangerous in there. They haven’t drained all the water yet, and it’s going to take some time just to identify the dead. I can’t allow you to risk your life.”

The female guard nodded crisply. “What is your name, child? Perhaps we can be of more use to you if you allow us to help you.”

Ritsa grit her teeth, and Nora was taken aback by the fire in her eyes. It was not unthinkable that she would challenge the two guards in an attempt to get inside; Nora could only hinder her own future by making herself an enemy of Ashmouth’s guards. They had reason enough to despise Weavers! “My name is Ritsa Redgrave. Yes, those Redgraves. I’m surprised you don’t recognize me, but I guess it’s been awhile.”

The female guard blinked. “You’re... but you’ve been gone so long! What has happened to you? We all thought...” Then she paused, remembering her place. “The status of the Redgrave family is yet unknown. We know that your home was hit badly by the first waves, however. You should prepare yourself for the worst.” Her face was troubled. “I don’t know why you chose to return now, of all times. Your family has been searching for you since you left. There were still search posters everywhere, until this...”

Ritsa looked sick. “Please, you have to let me go inside! I demand it! If my family has been hurt in any way, I have to assist them! I made a terrible mistake, I should never have left, and now...” She didn’t need to say what she feared. The guards knew already.

The male guard set his hand on the hilt of his blade. “For the last time, we cannot allow you to pass, regardless of your name. We have told you all that we can. We will be glad to give you further updates as they become available, but the only people allowed through right now are Craftsmen of the Right. In other words, those who can

help us push back the floodwaters, give aid to the sick and comfort to the dying.”

“I can do that.”

Nora cleared her throat and spoke, and the two guards almost visibly jumped. Somehow they had managed to overlook her presence completely. The male guard recovered first, a threatening scowl on his angular face. “A Weaver? The company you keep is dangerous, Miss Redgrave. Surely you know what she is?”

“I’m not an idiot. I may have been raised rich, but I’ve learned a lot since I left.” Ritsa’s hands, of course, were on her hips. “I know exactly what she is. How else did you expect me to get home through the Litter?”

“Yes, but...” The female guard pursed her lips. “You might have found a Craftsman at least. If magic must be employed, the least you might have done is to make sure it is of pure intent.” She did not even look at Nora, as if glancing at her might somehow taint her very being with unwanted evil.

Nora held up a hand, and Ritsa and the two guards fell silent at her command. “I am not welcome here, as I am not in many cities. I understand that well. However, you have fallen upon hard times, and your citizens are in need of aid. I have promised to see this girl safely to her family, and then I have urgent business that requires my attention elsewhere. I am currently seeking Right-hand jobs to balance my sins. If you will allow us through, I am able to offer what power I can to those in need, while completing my task. When my task is complete, I will depart your presence and be no more of a concern to you.”

The male guard wasn’t buying it. “You’ve got to be joking. How are we to believe you don’t intend to take Miss Ritsa hostage? You Weavers switch between good and evil like Mutes change clothes. I can’t fathom what benefit there’d be for you in hurting our people when we are already suffering, but...” He shook his head. “They will not trust you. I don’t trust you. How Miss Ritsa trusts you, I will never know.”

“She doesn’t. You can be sure of that.” Nora’s smile never reached her eyes, and Ritsa had the grace to look ashamed of herself.

“I do not ask for your trust. I ask for your aid in seeing me out of your beloved city as soon as possible. If you do not wish my aid, I will not give it, but I must see her home. That much is incontestable. It would be a breach of my contract with my God and Goddess to fail to do that.”

The female guard looked thoughtful. “May we escort her home in your place? You have seen her to safety. Would that not suffice?”

Nora shook her head. “As you cannot trust me, I cannot trust you. How am I to know what you will do with her? All I have is your word, just as all you have is mine. I am, if anything, less able to compromise than you are. If I speak untruth, you will find me dead before you or your fellow guards can act. The Duality holds no love for traitors.”

A low growl tore itself from Ritsa’s throat. “You both seem to think I can’t speak for myself. I don’t need an escort, and I don’t need a bunch of damn guards telling me what I can and cannot do in my family’s own city. If my family is still alive, then my word should be all you need to get out of my way. If they are not, then I am the last surviving child of the Redgraves. That makes me mayor, I believe? Are you going to stop me then?”

The guards looked abashed, and Nora found another double handful of her questions about Ritsa answered. She was the child of a well-to-do family in Ashmouth, and had run off with Jezze to a life of freedom and irresponsibility that ill suited her. Doubtless she had supplied the funding and Jezze had provided her knowledge of the world. It did not explain her rough speech and brash manner - those had to be skills learned on the street, not at home. The guards themselves spoke well and carefully; the family in charge of the city could do no less and maintain the respect of their people. There were no such things as princesses or socialites in the world anymore, to say nothing of true financial excess, but Ritsa was the closest thing to it that Nora knew of; that explained her attraction to Johnny, who might have been able to give her the closest thing to home that she’d seen in awhile. And he’d betrayed her. Had she intended to borrow more money from him, or had she truly believed he could keep her

safe from the world that Jezza had led her into?

As the guards attempted to decide what they should do with the stubborn girl and her offensive Weaver companion, a ragged looking woman with red hair staggered up to the guards from inside the cave mouth. She walked with a heavy limp and a cane; the bandages tied around her injured leg were dirty and worn. Despite her infirmity, however, when she stopped moving, her back became straight and proud and her gaze rose from the floor straight to the eyes of those she addressed. She fixed that gaze first on Ritsa and Nora, and then brought it back to the guards. When she spoke, her voice trembled, but carried notes of quiet strength beneath it.

“He is fading again, Shieldsire. Will you aid him in his passing?”

The male guard lost his previous intensity and seemed to wilt beneath the news. Then, he shot a look at Ritsa that could only be described as panic. At the same moment, the girl’s eyes widened and her hand flew to her throat. “M...Mother?” She swallowed hard, taking in the miserable figure before her as if seeing a ghost. “I... it’s me, your Ritsa. I’m... home.”

She took a step toward the injured woman, who frowned intensely and turned her face aside. “My husband is dying, child. If you must play such games with my soul, please do it when I am less weak to begin with.”

Ritsa looked as if someone had slapped her. “I’m not playing games! It’s been so long, I never meant to cause such trouble. I just wanted to carve out my own path in life, I didn’t know what I was getting myself into! Please, Mother... what happened to Father?”

The male guard stepped between the woman and Ritsa. “There will be time to talk later. This moment, however, requires silence. I will see him off, Madam Redgrave. It is the least I can do. My sister Alma will guard the gate in my absence.” The female guard nodded in silent agreement, clearly wishing to follow her brother and pay her respects, but obedient to the necessity of the situation. Nora had taken particular notice of the man when she first arrived, and now understood why; he was a doctor, and carried many of the same implements and supplies that she did, for use in the more scientific

form of healing.

The woman looked back at Ritsa, and for just a moment, a ray of hope flickered across her face. Then, before she could speak, it died, leaving only shadows. As she and the male guard - Shieldsires and Shieldmaids were common names for Mute guards - disappeared into the cave, Nora could hear her talking to the man. "Such delusions I have, Shieldsire, and at such times. I fear I may join my husband, after all." The guard attempted to comfort her, but he knew he was lying, and to anyone other than a bereaved, injured and failing older woman, he would have been forced to tell the bitter, unwelcome truth.

Alma, the female guard, lowered her gaze to the ground. "I am sorry. That was not what we had intended you to see, Miss Redgrave. We misled you for your own protection."

Ritsa, for the first time Nora had ever seen, was quiet. Unnoticed tears streamed down her cheeks, and her normal proud posture slumped almost to the same degree as her mother's. When she at last spoke, it was in a harsh whisper. "I've heard enough lies. You told me that I should expect the worst, but you didn't tell me that my father was dying, or that my mother has become a shadow of her former self. You didn't believe I was who I said I was, did you? Maybe you still don't. Hell, she doesn't." That last clearly hurt her far more than the rest.

"I believe you." Alma sighed. "You look just like her, back when she was well. My brother Arram has been caring for your family personally since this ordeal began. He knows it as well as I do. He just wanted to spare her the sight of you right now. You can see why it might have been kinder to wait - for both of you."

"She doesn't even remember me. It's only been three years..."

Alma nodded. "For two years, they spent almost their entire fortune in search for you. Then they had to step back and look to their own survival. As I have said, there were still posters up before the flood, seeking you, but I don't think they expected you to run so far. The posters did not pass the Litter." She looked up into Ritsa's haunted face at last. "They were told by countless others that they should assume the worst about you. Your mother held out the

longest, insisting that she would know if you were dead. But I think time and pain finally got to her. You have to understand, there were others trying to pass their daughters off as you, in order to give them better lives. The more fakes she spotted, the less she believed.”

Ritsa’s face didn’t even seem to acknowledge this news. “So I’m just another fake, am I? I guess so. I’m not the girl she used to know, either. I’ve changed. And I’m too late.”

Alma looked troubled, but in the end, her eyes fell upon Nora, not Ritsa. “You... Weaver. You claim that you seek the cause of good. Understand me when I say that I cannot allow you or the girl to pass. Your intentions and motivations are unclear, and we are in a state of quarantine, for the protection of those within as well as those without.” Her long, slender fingers absently traced the hilt of her blade, not in an attempt to attack, but more as a comfort to herself. “And yet... Miss Ritsa’s father is dying. I do believe she is who she claims to be. If I allow our good mayor’s prodigal child to stand outside rather than bring one final smile to his face, I fear I shall fail my duty in defense of this city.”

Nora glanced at Ritsa, whose head hung down to her chest, and then back to Alma. “If I may, I will grant you insurance. I can bind an object to me that will connect my blood, my body and my soul to the object in question. If I harm anyone, or bring trouble to Ashmouth, all you need do is destroy the object, and I will be subsequently destroyed. You Mutes don’t believe in magic, but it is all the promise I can give you apart from my word.”

Alma shook her head, her ash-colored braid swinging. “There will be no need. If you harm anyone or bring trouble to our people, I will be the one to perish first, at my own hand. This is my decision, and I accept the risk.” She sighed. “Please do what you can for this city. If you can succeed where so many others have failed, we will be in your debt. And Miss Ritsa needs to see the truth, and not the only truth we are bound to give.”

She set her jaw. “Weaver, I ask that you enter the city disguised as a true Craftsman - if you truly intend only good, then you should be able to pass yourself off as one. If your ‘magic’ cannot provide this, then I will provide you with what clothing I am able to

achieve this end. Miss Ritsa as well must be disguised. You know now that all who see you will take you to be a fake, and with the ruling family in such disarray, I fear for your safety. I also fear for the safety of the family itself right now. You saw what your mother's reaction was. Your father, in such ill health, may react worse. Please go to him and attend his last breaths, but now is not the time for the sort of discussion you need to have. When the grief and the danger has passed, things may be different."

Nora felt the weight of the strange bag she carried and Johnny's radio deep in her pockets. She did not have the time or the energy to spare to maintain such a complicated facade for long. She was only bound to return Ritsa to her family now, but to accept Alma's words would be to take on another set of promises that she had to keep. Instead of seeing Ritsa home and then leaving as intended, she would have to deal with the situation until Ritsa could renew her relationship with what remained of her family. Her contact at Fall's Garden would already be anxious for her arrival; Mole would never approve of such a diversion from her intended route. There were spells that could split a person's soul in two, allowing them to be in two different places at once, but those were best reserved for Craftsmen with more power than a mere Weaver.

She would simply have to use the radio to contact Mole and inform her of the change in plans. To do anything more would be inhuman, to say nothing of harming her intended journey toward the Right-hand Path. If time was truly of the essence, Mole could always decide to find another Weaver and have them pick up the bag from Nora. It seemed unlikely, given that Nora herself had been Mole's first choice. If that were still true, it meant that Mole was as much at Nora's mercy as anyone. She would have to wait. And Nora would do her best to keep her waiting as little as possible. She didn't like late people herself.

Nora looked Alma in the eye. "I accept your terms, and thank you for this chance to prove myself. I will not fail you." She put a hand on Ritsa's shoulder, half expecting to be shaken off, but the girl was too numb to even bother. "Cloaking spells of the kind you require will take me some time to manage. If we stay here any longer,

we are likely to arouse further suspicion and cause more trouble for anyone who is coming to aid you. We can travel back past the floodwaters and do what we must there, and then return later this evening once we are prepared. Do you think that her father will last that long?”

Alma frowned. “He has been fading in and out all day. That is not the first time Madam Redgrave has come to fetch Arram under these circumstances. My guess is that he will last that long, but understand that he may not. Whatever haste you can spare is needed.”

Nora shook her head. “Let us not bother, then. If you have clothes available, that will be faster than anything I may do, though perhaps more of a risk to our discovery. It is most important that Ritsa get to her father now, before the worst befalls him.”

Alma nodded, and her sharp eyes softened just a touch as she too reached out to Ritsa. “Come, my dear. Your attire is questionable even by normal standards; we must make you into the mirror of what you once were. Too close and they will see you for who you are; too far and they will see you as a danger. I pray I may handle this right.”

As Nora followed the heartbroken Ritsa and the guard back into a nearby guardroom, she marveled at the woman’s choice of words. She could not possibly have prayed to the Duality, so who did she pray to? If Nora had to guess, the very spirit of humanism had become something of a rival God against the Duality. That had to be the work of those who sought unrest between the two; those who enjoyed widening the rift. It had no bearing on her current situation, but it was one more nail in the coffin for Weavers and Craftsmen in the end. Would the world ever truly accept the truth?

If it did, even that might not be enough to save them.

When Nora and Ritsa stood again before the wide-mouthed cavern entrance to Ashmouth, it was as strangers to themselves and each other. Alma had filled her role well. Nora’s long black coat and black boots were gone; in their place she wore a rough, brown, woolen

short cloak that covered her head and hung down to the middle of her back for protection. Beneath it, simple traveler's gear completed the ensemble; a gunmetal-gray cloth shirt and close-fitted black slacks disappeared into simple, soft leather boots. She carried a pack not unlike Ritsa's, filled with her spellcasting supplies. The hood of her jacket would have to be left up, to hide her ash-pale skin and unnatural beauty from view; Nora was beginning to think that a simple spell to alter that aspect of her transformation might still be a good idea, just in case. The legends of pale-skinned, symmetrically-featured Weavers were too common, and in their despair, Mutes might be willing to jump at any chance to blame someone else for their suffering. It would not have been the first time. Besides, most Right-hand Craftsmen were rugged, spending their lifetimes in service to others as well as their chosen faith. Nora was too untouched by life, and too aloof, to pass easily for such a creature by sight, to say nothing of behavior.

She had managed to spell her gun into invisibility before Alma had had an opportunity to see it. She had no question in her mind that if the weapon were discovered, it would undo all the trust she had gained and then some, just as it had for Ritsa. She could not simply leave it, or even trust in an open admission of its presence; dishonesty would have to succeed. That, of course, was a Left-hand spell, and she grimaced to herself, marveling at her defiant use of such a thing at the exact same moment she was attempting to pass herself off as a Craftsman of the Right! She could only pray that the Duality understood her need, and would not take such a conflict of intent as an offense. Her masquerade was part of the same intent she had already promised Them in regard to Ritsa's protection; without that need, she would never have needed or wanted to pretend to be someone she was not. With any luck, even Ritsa herself would not know that Nora still carried the weapon.

As for Ritsa, she too had changed significantly. Nora wondered if she herself looked as strange to Ritsa as Ritsa did to her. The formerly harsh, provocatively-dressed Mute was bound into a tightly-laced long white leather corset and a handful of gray layered skirts that bunched up in places along its length to expose the layers

beneath. Her boots were even more well-made than Nora's. Alma had taken the time to braid the girl's long red hair into tight plaits that wrapped around her head in an intricate weave. Her speed at such a task had to come from extended practice with her own hair. The emphasis on white-and-gray was a notable one; not only were they the colors of Ashmouth, but white was the Mute color for mourning. It had once been black, before the Terminus; when everything in the world was afflicted by darkness, the shadow of death no longer meant anything. It was more visible and more meaningful to appear as a ghost, or a photograph, than a shadow. The majority of the city knew of their mayor's condition, and would be wearing similar shades of grief.

Alma glanced over the two one last time, and nodded. "Your service will be a blessing to our people, Lady Delaney." The honorifics "Lord" and "Lady" were always used for Craftsmen, whichever persuasion they chose to follow, and Nora had opted to use her surname as her given name for the purposes of maintaining her secret identity. "Please take care that you are not yourself injured by the effort." Nora did not need to read the veiled threat in her face; Nora's and Ritsa's life would be forfeit if anything went wrong, to say nothing of Alma's. Nora did her best not to let her mind dwell on the sets of circumstances that might result in her being forced to wield the Left on short notice; there were far too many of them for comfort.

"As for you, Jezze," Alma added, turning to face Ritsa - who had, of course, opted to use the first false name that came to her mind - "caution is of the utmost importance. Your friend will be able to protect you, but danger still lurks everywhere. The deeper you go, the more destruction you will find. Do what you have come for and then go, lest you find your eternal rest within Ashmouth's walls."

Ritsa looked as though she might prefer that fate, but wisely said nothing. Rather than allow more time to pass, Nora nodded to Alma. "We are prepared to pass, when you are ready, Shieldmaid Alma."

The guard waved them onward, and Nora and Ritsa stepped forth into the destroyed city of Ashmouth. The status of the city was clear from their first steps; the steps that led down into the first three

residential tunnels were still flooded to the brim, and Craftsmen had erected shining barriers of light around them to prevent access. There were countless other tunnels still possible to traverse, but as Alma had claimed, it would be dangerous to do so, particularly with a Mute in tow; Nora would have to come back without Ritsa to attempt any kind of a rescue mission - and she would have to. The Left-hand spell she had used to conceal her gun demanded it.

A handwritten sign directed them down a twisting network of dry passages in search of the medical bases that were servicing the sick and injured. Nora wondered if perhaps they would have taken the city's mayor to a different location than the general population, but decided against it; such a man should have been treated at home rather than anywhere else, but from what Alma and her brother Arram had said, the Redgrave home was badly damaged and continued to be unsafe harbor for the family. As poor as his prognosis apparently was, they would have taken him to the closest available medical bed and left him there.

Ritsa murmured quietly as she walked, apparently coming to the same realization. "Our home was at the top of the cavern, not the bottom. My father always... he wanted to protect those below him, so that was the way he wanted it. So many people below us must have drowned, but... all that water got there by passing by him first. There was nothing he could do." Her hands were shaking almost as much as her voice. "My father always wanted to protect everyone. He was - is - the perfect man to lead a city. My mother fell in love with him for that kindness, and has loved him every day of his life. Everyone here loves him."

"You must have left for a reason." Nora wanted to keep her talking - it was good for her, and educational for Nora. The more she understood about the inner workings of the unfamiliar Mute city, the more she might be able to assist in its recovery.

"I don't know what your parents were like, Weaver, but I'm the only child of the Redgraves. My father is the mayor of Ashmouth. My mother, as his wife, is one of the most influential and powerful women in this city. If anything should happen to them, well... you can guess who stands to inherit all of that. They never let me forget

it.” Ritsa’s face was tense with anger. “They loved me, that much I know. But they asked so much! I just wanted to be a normal girl, to spend time with my friends, to be stupid and silly and do what I wanted, instead of learning what it meant to lead a city. It was all about me, I thought, and I wasn’t going to let them tell me what I could and couldn’t do.”

Nora couldn’t tell her, but she understood all too well.

“They said the Terminus had changed everything, and that people needed a strong hand to guide them through the new dangers and storms that arose. Every day of my father’s life was spent in service to his people. I was so young... I didn’t want any part of it! And every time I tried to tell them, they looked at me like I was a disappointment, or a failure.” Ritsa spoke through gritted teeth. “They never yelled at me, and they never punished me, but I knew how much I was letting them down. I couldn’t live with myself. Then I met Jezza.” She sighed roughly. “I snuck out one night to the local bar. You know, there’s no legal drinking age anymore, the Alliance can’t enforce it for shit. She was dancing for money. I thought she was the prettiest, wildest thing I’d ever seen. She felt sorry for me.”

Nora and Ritsa paused to navigate through a crumbling section of tunnel before Ritsa continued her story. “She said I didn’t have to do anything I didn’t want to. She said they’d find someone else to take my place if I just refused. They’d have to. But I couldn’t face my parents and actually tell them that. So we ran away together. She promised she’d teach me how to live - really live, not being told what to do by everyone I knew. She taught me so much. We were stupid, but we didn’t know how stupid - it was all fun and games and nights spent laughing at the stuff we’d done. I can’t even tell you what happened some of those nights. They’re all a blur in my mind. I’m sure they are for her too. I don’t know why she didn’t just keep them all for herself.”

“Maybe she was lonely.”

Ritsa laughed dryly. “Jezza? Lonely? She could just look into your eyes, and she’d have you. She’s just that kind of girl. I wanted to be like her so bad.” She shook her head. “She has the power to get

anything she ever wanted. I did too, but I had to have money to back it up. Jezze knew how to get others to pay to make her happy, though she sure helped me to use all my money up first. It was that way when we met Johnny too. She had him eating out of her hand the first night. Took him a day or two to even notice she wasn't alone." Bitterness crept back into her voice. "If that doesn't sound like Johnny to you, then that should tell you how good Jezze really is. I thought he'd jump at the chance to have both of us at once, but he didn't even think of that at first. Jezze was all he needed."

Nora found herself frowning, not at the obvious absurdity of the story, but at Jezze's unique power over Johnny. Though Ritsa had written it off as "just Jezze," Nora found that to be even stranger than Ritsa had. Given how eager Johnny was to find his way into her own pants, it made no sense that he would overlook Ritsa. It was true that Ritsa was much more of a true Mute, with a simple beauty rather than a powerful one - Nora's Weaver face would always attract unwanted attention - but Jezze was also a Mute. She understood the male attraction to wild party girls well enough, but to truly overlook another girl in the room because of one made no sense. Could Johnny truly have fallen in love with Jezze at first glance, or had something more happened? Might Mole's conspiracy have been in place even then, and Ritsa had never been told? And if that were the case, why bring Ritsa at all?

Her wandering thoughts were pushed aside as the two arrived in a wider section of the tunnel that branched off in two different directions. Both of these were labeled "Medical - Danger" by more handwritten signs crafted from driftwood, no doubt brought in from the ocean's flood. Nora glanced down into her shirt's pocket and nodded; she had placed her spirit compass there, attuned to the location of Ritsa's father, to be safe and visible without having to fuss with her overlarge pack.

"Where is he?" Ritsa didn't even need to wonder if Nora knew.

"Left." Nora closed her eyes, trying to follow down the path with her mind's eye. "I think... left is where they keep the most critical patients. Right is for the people they think they can still save."

Ritsa immediately began to move toward the passage to her left, but Nora reached out and grabbed the cords of her pack to stop her. “Wait. I will not keep you long.”

Ritsa turned, obviously frustrated by the delay, but Nora dropped her bag to the ground and began to fight her way through it. In the end, she managed to unearth a loop of long golden necklace chain, plus her athame and another vial of liquid unlike either of the two she had used during their encounter with the Radiants. She placed the necklace and the vial overlapping each other in the wet dirt, then knelt before them.

“Father of Fire, I call to Thee. I require a forging this day. Blend metal with glass; fuse them together so that they are as one. I ask You to heal hearts and minds this day. Bring the searing heat of Your light to their eyes and burn away their suffering. Though my companion does not see Your face, I bear witness for her in her hour of need. Be with her where I may not. Bring peace to those she loves with Your might.”

Nora thrust her athame into the dirt, directly at the point where glass vial and golden necklace met. Instead of the expected shattering of both, a brilliant warmth seemed to flare up around the blade and engulf Nora’s entire body, traveling up her arm and then spreading throughout the rest of her. Though sweat began to pour from her brow, and the force of the fire threw her hood back from her face, she did not have time to panic; she let the heat flow through her, using her strength for its ends. When it had finished, it died away, leaving Nora unsinged and unharmed, but still covered in sweat and shivering. Before her, the vial was attached to the necklace chain, as solid as if it had always been that way.

“What... what did you just do?” Ritsa had looked terrified when the fire began to envelop Nora, but once she realized that the fire was not harming the Weaver, she stopped and simply watched instead of running for help. “I can’t imagine your God cares about me. Nobody else does.”

Nora shook her head as she stood, cradling the new necklace she had made in her hands. “He, and the Goddess, are everywhere and see everything. You do not have to believe in something for it to

survive beyond your sight.” She held the necklace out to Ritsa, who reached for it with hesitant fingers. “This tragedy, He may yet find a reason to affect. I can do no more than ask.”

She pressed the necklace into Ritsa’s hands, just as Johnny, not so long ago, had pressed the black bag that had started her journey into her own hands. “This serves two purposes. One is to protect you from harm as you make your way to your father. It will not protect you from detection, so you will still need to be cautious. The other purpose is to aid your father, once you find him.”

“You mean, he’ll...”

The hope on Ritsa’s face nearly broke Nora’s heart when she had to shake her head. “If he is called to perish, I cannot interfere. If Craftsmen of the Right have looked at him and seen his death, then my lesser skill will not save him either. I am sorry.” She sighed, and Ritsa looked sad, but seemed to accept the answer with grace. “What it will do is remove any pain he may be feeling, and allow him to see and think clearly for what time he has remaining to him. I am sure that he has been given similar prayers by others far stronger than me, but I must try anyway.”

“And you did that... for me? Or is this just another way to pay off your debt?” Ritsa’s voice wavered, touched by Nora’s kindness, but unwilling to trust it still. “Don’t help me just because of that. If you help me, do it because you want to, not because somebody else told you to, God or not.”

“That, I will not tell you. You will have to decide for yourself.” Nora let go of Ritsa’s hands and turned her back on the girl in one smooth motion, detecting approaching footsteps in the back of her mind. She had barely enough time to restore her hood to its rightful position before two powerful Craftsmen approached from the direction that Ritsa had been headed - left. They both wore grim expressions, and ignored Ritsa and Nora as they talked amongst themselves. They did not stop to question the two before they disappeared on their way to the opposite - right - corridor; Nora guessed they were serving as nurses, checking on all the patients in order. Their words echoed heavy on Ritsa’s heart.

“...doesn’t have much longer. What will we do?”

“...no heir. I guess they’ll have to find someone else. But who could take his place?”

Ritsa looked nervously back at Nora, before setting her jaw and nodding once, crisply. “You have my thanks, Weaver. Let’s go see my father.”

Nora kept her back to the girl when she spoke. “That is where I have to refuse.” She shifted her heavy spellcasting pack to her opposite arm. “The other reason I gave you that necklace is because I cannot follow you here. It would be dangerous for both of us.”

“What? Why?” Nora had expected Ritsa to be angry, but instead of anger, her voice shook with a mixture of fear and grief. “You said you had to see me back to my family, right? We’re not there yet, and... if he...” She couldn’t finish the thought, but skipped over it instead. “How will I ever find my mother and tell her the truth?”

Nora shook her head. “I realize what I said. I said it again to Alma back at the gate. But things have changed. The spirit compass tells me where your father is. He has not moved since I set it to watch him; you will be able to find him without a doubt. The real threat now is not that you will fail to return home, but that I will be detected and shown for what I really am. If that happens, your life, the lives of your family, and my own life are all at risk. Think as the woman you will become, not the girl you are. What do you think the public would do if they thought your father was in league with a Weaver? And what do you think they would do to me if they found out the truth? I must give my aid quickly and quietly, and then move on from this place. It is the only way to ensure that all of us get to where we need to be.”

She sighed, and turned to face Ritsa one last time. “As for your mother, I will not help you there. I understand how hard this must be for you, but this situation is one of your own making. If I were to use magic to assist you out of it, it would go poorly for both of us. I might succeed, but could you live with knowing you hadn’t apologized with your own lips and for your own reasons? And do you truly want to rely on magic? The last I heard, you were still a Mute, and distrusted all of my spells.”

Ritsa studied the ground, a flush of color in her cheeks. “I

didn't really want the magic, although..." She too sighed. "I have to admit, having the power to change things, for good or for evil, is tempting. You walk the line between the two, but if I only believed, I could pledge myself to good. I could save my family and the city myself, instead of risking all these people that have come so far to help us." A frown settled in on her face. "I just wanted... someone to be there. In case I fail. In case they won't take me back. In case my dad..."

"You are afraid." Nora laid a hand on the Mute's shoulder. "You have always had someone to hold your hand in life. First it was your parents. Then it was Jezza and Johnny. Then it was me." Slowly she let her hand rise from Ritsa's shoulder to the girl's chin, and pulled her head up to face Nora. "The truth is that all of us have scars to bear and demons we fear. When we are lucky enough to have someone that cares for us, it makes the battle easier. But some battles, we must fight alone. That strength has to come from yourself, not from anyone else. Either it is there, or it is not. Most people find that, when they need it most, it will be there."

"You don't." Ritsa trembled under the Weaver's direct gaze, but didn't look away. "You're not afraid of anything. And you have no one that cares, do you? I've never heard you say anything about a family, or friends, or anything. You're strong because you have to be, aren't you?"

"If you can see all that, Mute, then you know enough that I do not need to tell you the rest." Nora dropped her hand back to her side. "But there are things I am afraid of. You're wrong about that. And the Duality is not the only thing I fear. But my fears will not stop me from doing what must be done. Yours should not stop you, either."

Nora began to walk away, but Ritsa stopped her again. "Don't you even know how to say goodbye? Damn it, Weaver. You can't stay with someone this long and then pretend like you don't even know them." Before Nora could object, she found Ritsa's arms around her from behind. The girl's voice was, for once, anything but harsh. "You helped me. You didn't have to. I was so hateful and you just kept on helping me. I wouldn't have made it back here without

you. Thank... thank you.” The words sounded awkward at best, but she had said them, and Nora almost couldn’t believe her ears.

Ritsa let go of Nora at last. “I can’t ask you to stay. What you said makes sense, and I know you have places of your own to be. But if I have anything to say about it, this city won’t stay closed to you. Just... be careful, when the time comes that you have to go back to hurting people. Don’t forget that you have friends waiting for you when it’s over.”

Then, before Nora could try to walk away again, Ritsa herself thrust her head high in the air, clutched Nora’s necklace tight in her fist, and marched down the leftmost path without another word, on toward her father and her fate. Nora watched her go until she disappeared around a corner and out of sight. There were first times for everything in life, she’d found, but she had never expected to see a Mute thanking a Weaver for anything, let alone calling one a friend. Even if she had, she would never have expected it to be Ritsa, and her! She wanted to smile; the urge pulled at the corners of her mouth, but she pressed it back reluctantly. She still had a job to do, and one that would bring her too much work for joy to factor into things.

Nora made her way down the path to the right - the opposite of the one that Ritsa had chosen. There was no point in her following Ritsa to the realm of the dying. As she had told the Mute, her power was not nearly what a true Craftsman would have been able to wield. If any miracles would happen, they would not be at her hands. Instead, she could aid and assist those who still had a chance at life. Bolstering spells already in effect by other Craftsmen, adding her own to the mix, and then leaving before detection could become a true threat was her only option. Her strength was beginning to fade after her speedy rush through the Litter, and then the stress and complication of everything that had happened since; she had not slept well, when she had at all.

On top of this, there was another reason she had not followed Ritsa, that she felt she couldn’t admit. Since her acceptance of Mole’s

job in Axel Grove, she had been doing a great many kind deeds for other people. Her intent had been to begin the long and arduous process of atoning for the sin of the lives she had taken during her previous job, and she had expected that doing so would take far longer than most. Taking the life of a murderer might have been faster; taking the lives of innocents had to carry a heavier cost! She had to believe that to still believe in the Duality at all. And yet, she was beginning to feel the strange burning rage in the back of her mind that always indicated the switch between Paths. The Duality, at least, had the grace to inform her of what They wanted at all times; she did not have to simply guess at which phase she was in at any given time.

Ritsa's words hung heavy in her thoughts. "Don't forget that you have friends waiting for you when it's over." They were spoken kindly, but Nora could not accept them as truth without a second thought. Things would be different indeed if Nora's intent shifted within the confines of her family's city, or worse, found herself forced to take jobs within the city. She might even be tasked with the death of Ritsa herself, if anyone managed to perceive the truth beneath Ritsa's disguise and take it as fact. There was only one thing to do; complete her promised task to aid the citizens, and then flee in all haste before the change could demand her attention. She was still bound to Mole's job, and would have no choice but to make her way toward Fall's Garden as instructed, but on the road, she would have to find ways to balance her kindness with darkness. The thought was not a pleasant one, but it could not be ignored.

Thinking of Mole reminded Nora that she had yet to contact the woman. Ducking into a quiet side tunnel, she managed to find a handful of storage rooms, one of which she slipped into for use. Pulling the radio out of her spellcasting bag, she carefully checked to make sure that the black bag was still unharmed and unmolested before she dialed the usual 0.42 on the radio. It didn't take long at all for Mole to answer; she had clearly been waiting, and she was clearly not happy.

"What the hell are you doing, Weaver? I've been trying to contact you for hours. My tracker says you're in Ashmouth, and I know I told you that plans have changed. Did you forget about me?"

I hope you have a good explanation.”

Nora sighed. “I agreed to see my traveling companion this far before I changed route to Fall’s Garden. I did not anticipate the revelation that she was the long lost daughter of this city’s mayor.”

“Shit.” Mole sounded impressed this time, not angry. “You sure have a magnet for trouble, don’t you? That guy’s dead like the other hundred or so from what I hear. She’s not gonna be happy.”

“Close enough. She has gone to pay her last respects. I can only pray for the best for her now. The guards at the gate have forced me into hiding and have demanded that I assist the injured before I may leave, as payment for allowing me inside to see her off. Once I do that, I will head straight for Fall’s Garden as instructed. I regret the delay, but much of it was impossible to avoid while still maintaining the balance in my soul.”

“Right. I know you Weavers have shit to deal with. I can’t ask too much of you, and I have it on good faith you’re one of the best in the biz. If you say you’re doing your best, then I’ll buy it.” Mole seemed reluctant, but satisfied. “How long do you figure on staying to wipe asses?”

“My power reserves are low, so my options are limited. My hope was to do what I can with what power I have, and then leave the city immediately. I will need to camp overnight to be ready to make my way to Fall’s Garden. With spells, I can be in Fall’s Garden by mid-afternoon tomorrow. Without them, I would expect another day’s delay. I do not have to cross the Litter to get there, but that does not make the journey a quick one.” Nora paused. “There is another matter. I fear I may have overextended my kindness. After I fulfill my promises here, I will need to seek out jobs from the Left in order to continue helping you.”

Mole did not sound amused. “Soft spot for Mutes, huh Weaver? You recall I told you how important this job is. I wasn’t pulling that out of my ass. I hope you haven’t looked at anything I told you not to look at?”

“The bag is untouched. I have not had time to even think about the nature of its contents since I arrived here, rest assured.”

Nora, hearing footsteps in the corridor, slid herself back behind some

large storage boxes for further cover. “If you will permit me to avoid the use of my spells, I will attempt to do what I must in the name of balance en route to Fall’s Garden. That will save us both time and frustration in the long run.”

“You can do that? What kind of job would balance all that good in one day? Never mind, I probably don’t want to know.” Mole sounded amused. “If you say you can do it, I’ll take that. Just don’t screw around any longer than you have to. I’m being patient for now, but that bag needs to get where it’s going. The more I have to worry about it, the less happy I’m going to be.”

Nora’s first thought was a rebellious one; what made a Mute think that her displeasure could harm a Weaver any more than leaving a black mork on her reputation? Then she pushed it to the back of her mind. Mole was mysterious enough that Nora didn’t want to risk finding out that her assumptions were wrong. After all, the woman did know Nora in some capacity that she had yet to unravel. “I thank you for your understanding. I will begin my aid now, and contact you as soon as I make camp this evening.”

“Yep. Mole out.”

The radio went silent, leaving Nora alone with her thoughts. At the same moment, the two Craftsmen who had passed Nora and Ritsa in the corridor arrived in the storage room. Her cover did not stop them from detecting her voice, of course, and she stood, turning to face them, rather than arouse any further suspicion.

“Hail, traveler. This storage facility is off-limits to visitors, and if you are ill, then you ought to be resting.” The taller, wider Craftsman spoke in a low but friendly voice. “If I might ask you to return to where you came from...”

Nora set her jaw, thinking fast and relying on her hood to mask her intentions. If things had gone according to plan, it would not be difficult in the least to show them some Right-hand spells and convince them of her status as a Craftsman-in-training. Instead, the more power she had to expend before leaving the city, the more likely she was to find herself requiring immediate penance for her kindness. She couldn’t afford that! “Forgive me, Lord Craftsman. I am of your profession, and only wished a quiet place to rest my head before

returning to the medical chambers. I am still in training, and my master wished me to report on my status before I continued.” It was the simplest excuse, and might well jive with anything that the Craftsmen had heard of her discussion with Mole.

“What Craftsman in his right mind would send a novice on such an errand?” The other Craftsman, a slender, willowy woman with a voice like tinkling bells, frowned. “Ashmouth is a deadly place for the untrained right now. I am all for hands-on learning, but...”

“Now, Sahra, don’t give the Lady more trouble. Doubtless she’s seen the weight of what she has been called here to do by now. It is not difficult to see.” The man shook his head at the woman, but the smile he gave her was entirely too friendly. It took Nora only a moment to realize that he had not referred to Sahra with her proper title. That made them lovers or husband and wife. And that likely meant they had intended to borrow this little storeroom for more... personal use.

The man continued. “Perhaps she is stronger than we give her credit for. Lady Craftsman, might you put our minds at ease by refreshing our tired bodies? We have not slept, and the work required of us has been long and difficult. Our hearts and souls need nourishment.” Sahra nearly giggled, but a firm look from the man silenced her. Now Nora was certain they only intended to strengthen themselves for their own pleasure, not for the city’s best interest. It was common for Craftsmen to test each other in this fashion when they did not know each other, in order to gauge each other’s strength and make certain that they were not being fooled by a Craftsman of the enemy Path; it was one of the many reasons Nora had been keen on escaping without further notice!

Nora said a quiet mental apology to Alma before nodding briskly to the two Craftsmen in front of her. “Of course. Give me a moment to ready myself. I was not anticipating a need to use my skill here, so my things are a bit... disorganized.”

She watched out of the corner of her eye as the man sat down on the edge of one of the many storage boxes to wait, and pulled Sahra into his lap. At first she protested, still giggling in a manner that made Nora want to slap her to achieve silence, but then she gave

in to her lover, melting against his chest like snow on a hot summer day. Disgusted, Nora turned her full attention back to her pack. With any luck, they would be too engrossed in each other to notice Nora's gambit until too late. She would have difficulty feeling regret in the end.

Instead of the correct implements for a healing or strengthening spell, Nora retrieved a handful of silver powder that glittered in her palm. With her other hand, she removed another glass vial of pale blue liquid from her pack. Adding two drops of liquid to the ashlike powder, she then breathed carefully into it, scattering it into the air. That was all it took; the man leapt to his feet, dislodging his paramour, who began to complain - at least, until she noticed the same thing he had. The power swirled around Nora's body, and she began to fade from their view into nothingness.

In silence, Nora mouthed the words of the spell. "Goddess bless me in my time of need. I must leave this place if I am to keep my promises. Make me as Water; swift and strong. Make me as Air; to the shadows I belong. Let my path be clear and my exit sure."

"Stop! Lady Craftsman, you must stop!" The man shouted after her as she disappeared, frustration in his voice, and then paused, his anger rising. "That spell... that is a Left spell. What do you here, Leftist witch? I demand an explanation!"

"If you require an explanation," Nora said from the nothingness wrapped around her, "then you might seek it from yourselves. I have avoided detection by two Rightists who have borrowed the prayers of the Duality for their own use. I would fear for your own souls, and cease concerning yourselves with mine. How dare you pretend to help these people and then sneak away to help yourselves instead of them?"

"You don't sound like a Leftist either," Sahra whined into the air. "That must mean..."

"Weaver."

Her husband spat the word between his teeth. "You'll pay for this. If you don't come back this instant and do what we demanded of you, we'll raise an alarm. You won't get out of Ashmouth alive."

Nora bit her lip, unknown to any of them. She could not

afford to be caught! And yet, she could not allow these selfish creatures to make demands of her. They were more of a threat to Ashmouth than she could ever be.

“The time for words has ended. I doubt you wish to be seen speaking with nothing more than empty air. Carry out your threat. It will do you no good against someone that cannot be seen. Or did you intend to tell the local guards to be on the lookout for air?”

The man blustered, and his companion put a gentle hand on his arm. “Stop barking and let her go, Brutis. The sooner she’s gone, the sooner we can...”

He frowned, his eyes narrowing. “Lady Sahra, are you truly suggesting that we disobey the Duality, as the damn Weaver says? We are on break, after all, and have abandoned no one. Her words were untrue when she spoke them, but... what you are suggesting is exactly the kind of breach of faith she alleged. I cannot leave a traitor to the faith unchallenged.”

“I had not realized you were so... pious.” The look on Sahra’s face was ugly. As she continued to argue with her lover, Nora slipped out of the room in the widening space between them, leaving them to each other. As she made her way down the corridor in silence, a twisting sensation in her gut made her pause, leaning against the wall for support. Quiet disappointment and anger blistered in the back of her mind; they were emotions that she shared, but they were not completely her own. They were on a much larger scale, and directed at one person alone; Sahra, it seemed, had mishandled her faith for the last time. Nora did not stay to bear witness to her screams. Her Brutis would have to attend her, if he dared. She had no desire to stand in the path of the Duality’s divine judgment. It had, after all, touched her father in her youth. She knew all she cared to of the process. She could not feel pity for the woman, but remorse for her failure was unavoidable. There were many Rightists like her who pretended to be saviors just to save only themselves. The fewer, the better, though it left the world in need of more true Craftsmen.

With a bitter smile on her lips, Nora made her way to the medical facility that she had previously located; the holding area for patients that yet retained some hope of survival. Thanks to her

encounter with Brutis, her time was more limited than ever. She could not rely on his silence in the face of his lover's destruction; he might blame Nora, or continue to carry out the mission that she had naively assumed he cared about as little as Sahra. She had to do what she came for, and quickly.

Entering the massive medical room was an experience that Nora wished she had never needed to have. The stench of blood and decay was overwhelming. Craftsmen numbered double the amount she could count on her hands, but at least a quarter of them were suffering from overexertion. The patients, numbering at least a hundred, were in a state of madness; those who were not panicking openly did so in private, their souls struggling for purchase on the brink of disaster. Mutes were not accustomed to things they could not touch or shape with their bare hands; this was a demon they could not defeat themselves. Someone had attempted to spell the room with calming, healing light; that spell was fading along with the strength of its caster. A noble and intelligent idea, but it was not serving its purpose at all.

Nora's eyes fell upon a familiar face; Arram, Alma's brother, sat by the side of a trembling man, his glasses sliding down his nose bathed in a sheen of sweat that stained his angular face and soaked his long hair. His eyes were closed and he rocked back and forth in his chair, the motion imperceptible to anyone but a fellow Pattern-wielder. That was unusual; Nora had seen him attend Ritsa's mother and heard his intent to return to bear witness to her father's death. What was he doing here? Had Ritsa's father already passed? She glanced down at her spirit compass, realizing that she had not recalibrated it; the arrow was spinning wildly out of control. She had to assume that was the result of all the conflicting magic in the room; it was irrelevant anyway. The real problem lay in avoiding his detection. Of all the people to potentially see her, Arram was the last one she wanted!

Nora hefted her bag down onto the floor. She worked quickly; her muscles were sore from the use of the bag itself, and her own strength was fading. Use of Left-hand spells had the perverse pleasure of giving the user a rush of energy after their use, almost like

a burst of adrenaline, but that rush didn't last long, and she would need it for a complex casting of the kind she was about to perform. Wielding one or two Threads of the Pattern at once was commonplace; even the most junior of Weavers could handle such affairs. More than that, and a Weaver would begin to weaken; even a Craftsman rarely handled more than three. Nora, seeing the desperate need before her, prepared to attempt what was known as a Stitch; a blending of all five Threads. Most said it was impossible for a Weaver to even attempt such a thing; she had done it before, and took pride in it. She did have to admit to herself that if not for the other magic in the room feeding into it, she would have put herself at terrible risk of detection, if not death. Such spells did not go unnoticed due to their rarity. Eventually, everyone would be seeking out the origin of the spell, and she wanted to be long gone by the time they figured it out.

Her first task involved dipping the tip of her index finger in a tub of golden paint. The base of the spell, drawn in gold, would invoke the Thread of Spirit; Spirit was one of her specialties, and included spells that affected time, space and distance, as well as anything strange or divine in nature. The base would ensure that her spell lasted as long as it could before it faded, and would allow it to better reflect the magics already in existence around it. She drew the complex pointed pattern upon the wall nearest her, anchoring it firmly to the room. The floor was too risky; if the diseased water touched it, she could not guarantee its operation from then on.

Wiping her hands on her pack, Nora next went for smaller tubs of paint representative of the colors associated with each other Thread; red for Godfire, midnight blue for Goddessrain, green for Godland, and white with a tinge of pale blue for Goddessbreath. They were the fancier terms of what most Craftsmen and weavers just deemed fire, water, earth and air for simplicity; she preferred their true given names, and hoped that the use of their ancient, elemental appellations would grant them more power. She began with the red paint, drawing a flame symbol at the apex of her gold design; fire and earth were her other strengths. She had always wondered at her affinity with what were perceived as male strengths due to their

alignment with the God. It was unusual to find a woman of any Path who did not specialize in the Goddess elements, or a man that did not specialize in the God elements. Still, it happened, despite the ridicule that normally accompanied it.

Next came the green paint, and with this she added a tree symbol to the base of her golden design. Next to this, a swirl of midnight blue paint joined the design. Last but not least, a cloud-shaped design made of white paint hovered in the center, suspended above the tree and swirl, but away from and beneath the searing flame. Satisfied, Nora wiped her hands again and reached for her beloved athame; she had seen so much of it on this journey already that it felt more like an extension of her body than ever. She could feel her hands shaking just from the application of such a complicated design; precision only mattered as far as the overall placement of the symbols, but even the artist's rendition carried power of its own. She was no Craftsman, but her steady attention to detail earned her much greater levels of effect than others of her kind, and always had. That too, was her specialty.

A spell of this magnitude would require further commitment to the Duality than a simple prayer. Nora grit her teeth and sliced the soft upper part of her palm with the blade of her athame, drawing blood from her pale flesh. Sometimes those that followed the Duality were referred to crudely as blue-bloods, but her blood was just as red as any human's. By offering her own lifeblood as a promise to the Duality of her commitment and desperation, They might be more inclined to grant such a favor. It had been years since They had ever denied her; most times, assuming the caster's intentions were pure, spells just worked. The guesswork came during times when a person's heart or mind was troubled by outside influences, and doing something they did not wish to do or fully understand the need for; to cast a spell without truly desiring its effect was dangerous at best, and deadly at worst.

That was what had killed her father; he had wanted to be with her mother, but he had not wanted to sell his soul badly enough to keep her. The Duality had judged him unworthy of his request, and perhaps they guessed at his unspoken fear; that if he could not

change, his beloved would fade along with his child. He could not live with the loss, so They did not ask him to. She could not blame Them for what could only be a mercy killing.

Nora traced the lines of her Spirit base in her own blood. By the time she finished that final step of her preparations, enough time had passed that the room had changed around her. The exhausted Craftsmen had been replaced with fresher looking ones, and the patients were beginning to calm a bit at being placed in kinder, cleaner hands. Arram, however, still frowned down at his patient, unchanged. Nora briefly wondered if she might have made a mistake and ended up in the wrong chamber; could his patient be Ritsa's father? Then she shook her head; she had no time to worry about such things. The only thing she had left to do was complete the spell and get out of Ashmouth. Ritsa almost seemed like a distant memory after the complication she had had since leaving her side! She had to trust the girl to follow her own path, just as Nora herself did. Nothing else would benefit either of them in any way.

At last she sat down in the dirt, her legs crossed and her hands upon her knees in the traditional prayer pose of her kind. The Duality did not truly care how the faithful sat, of course; it was more a position of submission and respect, offered by those who wanted a more personal bond with the divine. Nora used it often when she was not working, in order to make up for the often rushed and demanding nature of her needs the rest of the time. She was lucky, luckier than most Weavers, and the Duality deserved her thanks. Once she was seated and had relaxed her breathing into a calm, rhythmic trance, she began to mouth the words of her spell, taking care not to betray her location to those around her. Only as an afterthought did she remember to wrap her bloody hand with her cloak; bloodstains in the dirt would give a nice indication of where she sat!

“Duality, I call upon Thee to guide this work. I am but one Weaver, and have asked much of Thee in past days. You know my heart, and know why I ask these things. May You find my cause righteous in Your eyes.” She paused to take a deep breath. “This spell I cast is of You and of myself, and together we may bring blessings to

these Mutes who have suffered so greatly. They are not of You, but they struggle as we all do. Ease their burdens; my strength is Yours to command.”

At last she swallowed hard, bracing herself. “Thread of Godfire, burn bright. Thread of Godland, strengthen might. Thread of Goddessbreath, lengthen sight. Thread of Goddessrain, flow right. Thread of Spirit, give Your Light!”

With the final word, Nora felt as if the entire world turned upside down around her. She swayed, falling backwards against the wall on which her symbol, now glowing, seemed to pulsate with eldritch power. She had been a fool to push herself so far, so fast; she should have rested first! She had not counted on aiding Ritsa more than the proper protection she had intended, and she had not counted on having to conceal herself for so long. She could feel her hold on her illusory wall flickering; would the Craftsmen notice? She couldn’t afford for them to notice her, but she couldn’t afford for the spell to fail, either. Even after she was gone from Ashmouth, the spell would continue to sap her strength until she chose to end it or allow it to lapse; that much at least had been in her plans. It would not have been hard to stumble free of Ashmouth and get to safety in time to rest. Now, even that plan seemed like a dangerous one. Her foolish ego had gotten the better of her.

Then, suddenly, the tenuous hold on her invisibility spell snapped. It was not the gradual fade of a spell she carried failing, but the abrupt cease of distance between her and others in the room. And yet... she frowned, realizing that nobody had seen her. There were Craftsmen staring right at her, and they looked through her still, seeing nothing but an empty corridor. She almost panicked, before realizing that Arram’s head was up, and he was the only person in the room to meet her direct gaze.

He mouthed words that only she could detect. “Alma told me. You have done enough, Weaver. Go in peace.” He was not smiling, but the looks of hatred and suspicion he had given her while at the gate had faded entirely from sight. She had to assume he knew nothing of her recent involvement in Sahra’s destruction, or the various small concealment spells she had been forced to use; he had to

have known the origin of the spell that kept her hidden from view. And yet... he was maintaining it for her. He was a Right-hand Craftsman; how could he break her spell and yet replace it with a similar effect?

Then she realized. One of the particular curiosities of the Duality was that they honored spells written in all forms and for all purposes. The way one Craftsman of the Right asked for healing differed completely from the next, and differed again from how a Weaver would request the same thing. Her first thought, poised on the brink of being forced to accept the Left, was to use it to hide herself; a negative action, concealing her presence from others intentionally. Whatever Arram had done, it was likely in a different light; for her protection, perhaps, or to expedite the exit of an untrusted stranger from his city. Both spells gave the same effect, but were handled differently by the Duality, and achieved through different means. She knew it, but seeing it still gave her shivers. Mutes often claimed that only they yet possessed the ability to wield the power of true humanity, but what could be more human than speaking with one's heart and achieving results? It was at moments like these that she most believed in her faith.

Giving a very deliberate nod of thanks to Arram, Nora struggled to her feet. With slow, heavy steps, she began to make her way back down the corridor, in the direction of Ashmouth's gate. Arram had not spared any further power to aid her apart from the invisibility, and she did not blame him; he had patients to save and would continue to do so long after she was gone. Her strength would only augment his; he would be able to work longer, faster and harder without ill effect. He owed her, and without that, Nora sincerely doubted she would have been able to leave Ashmouth successfully.

She did not stop at the gate to recover her things, or to bid farewell to Alma, who did not even seem to see the Weaver at all as she passed. Black coats and boots were a dime a dozen. Still, she missed the freedom of pockets. How Ritsa had carried her gigantic pack for so long, Nora could not fathom. She could only hope that its contents served to bring peace and wellness to the girl, her family and her city. What happened now was of their own making, and

someday, when she completed her task for Mole, she vowed to return and see what Ritsa had made of herself. Though Nora did not want to trust in her promise of safe harbor and friendship, the part of her that was still vulnerable and human wanted nothing more than to do exactly that.

Perhaps she would even be able to thank Arram and Alma in person, next time, without having to resort to disguises and trickery. It was a long shot, but it was one she was willing to take. As she made her way back down the Stretch and then off road to a safe camping site directed by her spirit compass, she decided that she would make every effort to dream about it. Being in someone's debt had never appealed to her, but tonight, she would have to accept it with grace.

Nora slept like the dead that night, and woke at noon refreshed and ready to travel. The tempest of requirements and duties in her mind never allowed her to sleep for long periods of time, and thus whatever time she was able to take for herself seemed all the more rare and special. She had gazed up at the moon, the symbol of the Goddess' beauty and grace, for only a few moments before falling asleep; on other nights, it had taken her an hour or more. She had spoken truth when she asked the Duality's forgiveness for making so many demands on her; it was rare for her to pursue a job with the kind of longevity that Mole required. More often than not, her jobs were not on a set timeframe, and so long as she completed the task in a reasonable timeframe, her employers were glad to consider her worthy of the cost. Since meeting Mole, however, it seemed as if one job after another snapped at her heels and complicated the rest, and both her mind and her body felt the overload in the form of weariness. She did not want to continue juggling responsibilities; now she could focus on Mole's needs, and her own along the way. That was all the complication she needed.

Nora's radio lit up as she began her journey; Nora had managed to contact her only as long as it took to tell her of her successful arrival at the camp, before asking her to call back in the

morning. In the state Nora was in, there was no way she would even remember any commands given from the previous night!

“Wakey wakey, Weaver. I hope you don’t expect me to do this every day.” Mole’s voice seemed quiet, and she mumbled more than usual. The sound of a distant yawn seemed to aid the suggestion that Mole had just woken up herself. This would not have been unusual for a Weaver or Craftsman, who slept when they needed to and often maintained strange hours, but for a Mute to keep such hours was unthinkable. Most of them rushed out of bed at first daylight, as if the sun reaching their beds might burn them where they slept. It was necessary for some to maintain their ways of life, but for others, it was little more than an instinct left over from long past days of hustle and bustle amid the grand cities of the world. Archaic, but it was almost like a ritual for remembering the lost times.

“You sound as if you’ve had a rough day yourself.”

Mole snorted on the other end of the radio. “I didn’t know Weavers were psychic on top of talented. Aren’t you just perfect?” It wasn’t so much a question as it was a drawled statement. “Never mind me. I was up last night working on some stuff that doesn’t concern you yet. Are you heading for Fall’s Garden?”

Yet? Nora didn’t like the sound of that. “I am. Unless unforeseen circumstances arise, I should make it there in six, maybe seven hours. Is my contact able to meet me, or would you prefer to give me direct orders now?”

Nora had the impression that Mole was rubbing her temples from her silence. Nora was not altogether certain that the woman had been drinking alongside whatever work she’d been doing. Finally she responded. “He’s there. He’s sick of waiting, but he knows what I’ll do to him if he leaves. Keeping a pet Blackthorn is kind of fun, once you get used to it.”

Nora froze. Blackthorn was a somewhat derogatory term used to denote a follower of the Left-hand Path. More often than not, the term stayed between Craftsmen and Weavers, but it was beginning to slip into common vernacular day by day. “You did not tell me that I would be meeting with a Craftsman of the Left. That will likely enable me to withhold my need for balance until I arrive. I assume he

cannot ask anything good of me. It would undermine his very soul to do so.” How such a man could find himself beholden to a common Mute, however, was impossible to conceive. Whoever Mole was, it was plain to see that she was nothing ordinary.

“Doesn’t matter to me, so long as you get there, and get there fast.” Mole almost seemed as if she were sulking. “Up to you. I’ve got other things that need my attention, so if you’re awake, I don’t want to hear from you until you’ve met...”

Before Nora could remind her that Mole herself had been the one to call in the first place, the radio fell silent, leaving her alone with her thoughts and the midday sun’s light. She no longer had a reason to delay her trip, but she also hesitated to use magic to hasten it without genuine need. If she was going to be in the presence of a true Leftist, she needed all the protection and mental stability she could keep in reserve. They were, after all, just as dangerous as rumor painted them.

Those who followed the way of the Left were the kind of people that Nora liked least in life. In order to maintain their abilities, they had to hand over their entire soul to darkness. Most of them held no love for kindness and respect, and would stop at nothing to achieve their own ends. They might help another person, for a price, but you could be certain that the cost would be more than it would be for anyone else. Granted, they had reason to be hated; most of them were humans who had already been dealt a hand in life that defied belief in the beauty of the world. They were broken, twisted beings that dealt only in the shadows because they believed they had no choice. Belief in their own hate for others was what fueled their spells, and mistrust radiated from them like heat from the sun. Nora had had years to learn what bitter shards made up the heart of a Leftist “witch,” as Brutis the Craftsman had so succinctly put it back at Ashmouth; her mother had been one.

Theresa Delaney had been a proud, beautiful woman. Nora had never learned her reasons for becoming a Leftist; there were a great many things she would not talk about with her growing daughter. When she met Jack Delaney, a kind soul of a Rightist, it was during Beltane, a festival night in honor to the Duality that all

Craftsmen and Weavers celebrated. There were parties, and there was feasting, and there was music, but above all else, there was time and space for honoring the beauty of life by joining human bodies together in love and ecstasy. She had tempted him, and he had gladly answered her call. The child, neither of them anticipated. Jack had intended to give his all to his young daughter, but Theresa had no use for him once her pleasure was sated. As an Heiress, she kept him at arm's length, and so Nora had known him only as a shadow on the periphery of her life.

Nora knew only a small fraction about the Craftsman sect known as the Heiresses, but the key thing she did understand was that they worshipped only the Goddess, and dealt only with women as much as possible. They believed that the God was unnecessary; a creation born of man's imagination to make himself relevant in a world where birth and life had become something truly sacred again. They needed no balance, no masculine match for their power, and as such, they found men to be an unnecessary burden on society. For many such women, they avoided men with every step; however, some still found pleasure in the act of laying with a man. It was all for their own benefit, of course; Nora's mother had been no different. Jack had not known what a poor choice he made when his eyes and his heart fell upon Theresa that night; by the time he learned, it was far too late.

Nora thought of her mother as she traveled, doing her best to maintain a respectable speed as she did so. There was a time in her life where all she had ever wanted was to be like her mother. However, on those rare occasions when she was allowed to be in the presence of her father, his words spoke volumes to fill her soul in ways her mother had never intended to. He taught her wisdom, thought and courage; her mother taught her pride, beauty and power. In the end, only his lessons in regard to wisdom could ease her soul at his death. She had never hated her mother until that moment; the moment she realized exactly how little Theresa cared for anyone or anything on Earth. Her power was hers, and she would carve out her fate at the cost of anything, or anyone, including perhaps her own child, someday. Nora had wanted to save her, and to show her the kindness her father

had known. And yet the same wisdom her father taught her could not deny the times when kindness could not provide justice. Justice required punishment, and to dole out that punishment would mean the end of a Rightist's life. Neither side was right. Neither side could win. Her mother would never pay for what she had done to her father. She would never even know it was wrong. Her father, even on his deathbed, would never have wanted her to suffer.

The way to combine the two, of course, was to become a Weaver. The Duality cared little for the restrictions of men, but They did care greatly about dishonesty and intent. Promises made to the Duality, in any form, were punishable by death if broken, and that was the only constant in life. It kept most Craftsmen honest, at least, which was something of a comfort. What you heard and saw before your eyes had to be genuine, because if it weren't, it would not have been permitted to exist. Weavers only suffered the ambiguity of making promises both ways, and being forced to commit to those promises. It was not that they lied; it was that their intent changed too often for the masses to accept. Once, such behavior might have been considered only human; that was a long time ago.

Nora reached down to check the holster of her gun; it still held the offending weapon tight against the side of her leg. She might have need of it, if her contact harbored ill feelings toward her. She could not believe that Mole would have sent her a contact that wished her dead; it didn't make sense, but then, life rarely did. Leftists were what they were, and even Mole's threats could not possibly put an end to that. Nora would have to be careful what she promised, even more so than usual. Weavers were, after all, anathema to both Right and Left. To the Right, they were just as corrupt as the Left. To the Left, they were weak and refused to take hold of true power. Both would want her dead, but differ in their reasons. The Right would wish her dead so that her soul might change its mind in the Centermain; the Left would wish her dead so that she might not be a nuisance to them. Weavers truly were a force of their own making, and reliant on no one. They had to be.

Growing frustrated by the thoughts that she always had, and yet never managed to find closure to, Nora focused instead on

walking. The sun began to fall away from her as she traveled east, and the temperature dropped exponentially with its departure. By the time she began to see the small town of Fall's Garden on the horizon, she was shivering in her inadequate travel gear. Yet another gasp from an injured world gone mad, she knew, but it didn't make it any easier to handle. The scientists said it was healing, but it was taking so very long that a few people were starting to joke that it never would. With a sigh, Nora stuffed her hands into her armpits for warmth and trudged on, never letting the town out of her vision for a moment. The sooner she reached it, the sooner she could find her contact and head for what she hoped had to be warmer climates!

Her arrival came quicker than she anticipated in her haste. There were no guards and no gate to speak of; the town was too small for such luxuries. Instead, an old man and a large wolfhound sat on the town's far edge, both of them watching her with eyes that might have been blind with age. They nodded to her as she passed, however, likely assuming from the disguise that she was just a traveling Craftsman. She did not like the unintentional untruth, but she had no time to stop and explain the truth, even if it would have done any good. The Mutes did not need to concern themselves with her presence, not with such tragedy not far from their location. If word of her presence were linked with Sahra's death back in Ashmouth, news might travel quickly enough to pose a problem. She, of course, had done nothing wrong and had not been the cause of the woman's death, but Mutes wouldn't understand that long enough to withhold calling the authorities for an investigation first.

In the fading light, Nora managed to locate the inn and made her way inside. The wooden cabin was warm and heavy with the smoke that billowed from a nearby fireplace; Nora's first thought was for how unsafe that was, but she kept her mouth shut and said a silent, unadorned prayer to the God to keep His fire safe and pure. Several of the inn's patrons sat at wide tables, playing dice and cards of various persuasions, all of which involved the transfer of various sums of money to the winners. The barkeeper was busy handing out warm flagons of alcohol to anyone who paid for them; Nora could not afford the luxury. It was not money she lacked, but freedom; even a

single drink might impair her judgment and cause her to be unable to maintain the balance that was so critical to her life. She had thought often about trying one, alone and unable to cause any mayhem to anyone, but the desire just wasn't strong enough. She ordered coffee instead.

The bartender frowned, but accepted the order with an ill grace. Since the Terminus, coffee was different than it used to be; it was still made from roasted beans, but the beans themselves were aged beyond comfort and burned by unskilled hands that no longer remembered how to care for them. On top of that, of course, the water used to make it was just as fetid as it was in the rest of the world. It was twice as effective at ending any alcoholic fit that a Mute found himself in, however, due to the foul taste. Nora found that the same applied to her; she could think more clearly when her mind was preoccupied with a single subject, such as coffee that stung her tongue worse than a great majority of the water she had ever come in contact with.

Almost immediately, she caught the eye of a man across the room; he was the only patron looking at her, and his gaze was anything but friendly. He was a big man beneath his thick and moth-eaten brown coat; three times as wide as Nora and head and shoulders above her. A simple woven hat was pulled down over his head, holding in heat. Beneath it, his crooked nose jutted out from his face like broken stone from a mountain, and his lips parted in a cruel smile. Nora did not need to even think twice about it; this was her contact. There could be no man who radiated evil the way he did. She had to breathe deeply to calm herself, even though he was far from her; she did not like him, and yet duty demanded that she meet him. Her human instincts wanted to flee; her Weaver instincts brought her forward, crossing the respectable distance between them. The sooner she dealt with the man, the sooner she could get away from him. If not for Mole's need, she might well have refused.

She arrived before him, and opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand. His voice, when it came, fit him like a glove; deep, dangerous and as black as the coffee in the cup she still held.

"You're late."

Nora nodded and tried to apologize, but he held up his hand again.

“Don’t waste any more of my time. I have your orders. Do as I say and there will be no problems. Understand?”

Nora said nothing, this time, and the big man sighed. “That, Weaver, was a question. Questions are meant to be answered. Nothing else. Understand?”

“I understand.”

“Good.”

The big man rose from the wall he leaned against and walked forward without another pause. Nora had to jump out of his way to avoid being crushed in his wake. She had no choice but to leave her coffee, mostly untouched and growing cold, abandoned on the table. Whoever this man was, he would tolerate no further complication. She had expected her contact to be frustrated with her delay, but this was something else entirely; she had never found herself so thoroughly hated before upon first meeting someone. She had yet to even learn his name. Her mind, in her silence, wandered to Mole. Now she was certain without a doubt that Mole could not be just a simple Mute. A simple Mute would never be able to contain such a man. His violence and danger were like open scars on his face, and she wasn’t at all sure that she would have the power to stop him, if he truly wanted to hurt her. The thought was not a pleasant one at all. How was it that he did Mole’s bidding?

Less than an hour after her arrival at Fall’s Garden, Nora found herself leaving it again, having to conduct a minor spell in silence to be able to keep up with him. However, this time, the old man at the gate rose from his chair upon seeing the stranger with Nora. His dog snarled at the man, its teeth bared in a display of solidarity that might have been either brave or stupid.

She heard the old man speak. “I don’t remember seeing you, stranger.”

The big man did not move or respond for a handful of moments. Then, he raised his head to look straight into the old man’s film-covered eyes. Whatever the old man saw there unhinged his mind; he began to babble in a language Nora had never heard before,

and fell to his knees in the giant's shadow. He reached out for the giant's cloak; Nora flinched long before the kick that sent him flying backward against his own chair, toppling it over. Nora wanted to stop, to help the poor old man, and to ask her companion what on Earth he was doing, but the giant did not even seem to notice what he had done.

He did, however, notice when the dog's teeth sank into his ankle. That too, was a mistake. The giant picked up the dog with a hand that could have wrapped around the beast's neck twice, and threw it into a nearby trash heap. It did not rise from the impact, though Nora could feel its heart racing and hear its frightened whimpering as she followed the giant forward, away from the obstructions and toward the north again.

Two thoughts followed her in the silence that reigned afterward. The first was that she was in the company of an incredibly dangerous man, more dangerous than she had even guessed at when she spoke with Mole.

The second was of how much she hated him.

Nora followed the man until her exhaustion began to catch up with her late into the early morning hours of the following day. They had traveled north without exception into the wilds of the Dead Forest, with no pause or alteration in speed. Nora was accustomed to harsh travel styles when necessity called for them, but even so, she preferred to handle things efficiently rather than quickly. A mad rush did a soul no good; a pace that allowed for maximizing distance while maintaining peace and tranquility in the body would manage the same end with less painful means. The giant she followed had never heard of this routine, if she had to guess, nor did he have any use for it. He still had not spoken to her or given his name since they left Fall's Garden.

She tripped over her own boots, landing hard on her knees in the brambles and dead branches that made up the forest's floor covering. Above her, dead trees barren of leaves stretched onward into

the skies for what seemed like forever. The part of her that still retained a child's curiosity and imagination viewed them as hands, reaching for a God that had yet to bless them with regrowth and strength; if He ever found the strength to spare, perhaps this land would yet prosper again. Not many, if any, of the casualties of the Terminus were so fortunate.

The giant stopped without turning around, his hunched frame threatening at least two feet in front of her. When he spoke, the sudden thunder in the silence that had stretched between them for so long made the Weaver jump in spite of herself. "Get up. We don't have time to waste."

"Your forgiveness, Lord Craftsman, but I have traveled a long way, and I have not had time to rest..."

He laughed. It was not a kind laugh. "I said, get up. Any Craftsman could keep up with me. Why should a Weaver have to slow me down?"

Nora narrowed her eyes. As she had feared, the giant was one of those Leftists who took inordinate pride in his strength and power over others. Not only did he believe he was better than everyone, he believed he was far and away better than any Weaver, who sacrificed raw strength in favor of balance. Her temper flashed red behind her eyes, but she forced it down; such a man would only turn her rage against her if she allowed it to show. "Surely our contact informed you of my faith when she hired you. You did not seem surprised to see me."

He spat into a pile of nearby branches. "That woman is not here right now. Even if she was, she might be able to pay me for a job well done, but she doesn't get to tell me how to do it. I decide how things will be done. And as the strongest one here, I lead. You follow, or fail. I won't be held back. What you do about it is your choice."

Nora did not rise. "And if you fail to deliver me to my next destination? What will she do to you then? I understood that my task was too important to risk."

He turned at last to face her, and it took all of Nora's strength not to tremble beneath his smoldering glare. "Don't try that with me, Weaver bitch. You took twice as long as you should have to even get

here. Blame yourself for our pace.” He closed the distance between them in three long strides and reached down, grabbing Nora by the collar of her borrowed shirt and hauling her roughly to her feet. It took as much effort as it would have taken a mother cat to lift a troublemaking kitten. Once she was at eye level, he brought his face in close to hers. “If you prove to be too slow, I can finish the job for you.” His meaning and intent were unmistakable.

He let go of Nora, who managed to recover just fast enough to stay on her feet from the sudden return to gravity. Rubbing her sore neck around the collar where he’d pulled her, she matched his glare with her own. “Do you even know what our task is? I followed you without question, but I have not even had a chance to check in with our contact as she requested. I have no idea what you know, or where we are going.”

He turned his back to her again and began to walk, heedless of Nora’s lack of motion. “She sent you to me. I told you to follow. That is all you need to know. Where you end up is where you’re supposed to be, unless you decide to disobey us both.” He did pause for just a moment to add, “You can call her if you must, but she won’t be there. Haven’t you noticed that when she really wants to know what’s going on, she’ll call you?”

It was the truth. Nora sighed and nodded, ignoring the sweat that ran in lines down the sides of her face like tears. “Fine. But I warn you, I will need to stop. You have had days of rest, thanks to my unforeseen delay. I have not. Mole understood my reasons, so I believe she would agree with my argument. She did not ask you to complete this task, she asked me, so I must believe there is some reason for her to wish me alive and well. Destroy me and you may find that things are not as simple as you believe.”

“Is that what she’s calling herself now? Mole?” The giant snorted, but the sheer fact that he did not continue to walk away without her suggested that her guess had contained at least some truth. “Fits her. That scrawny body belongs underground.” He crossed his massive arms over his chest. “She wants this job done fast. The longer you take, the worse it looks for me. I’ll give you one hour to rest. Do what you must and be ready to go. I won’t wait for you

again.”

“But... I can't possibly... it will take far longer than that to restore...”

He sat down with his back to a dead tree. Nora expected it to bow or snap just from being in proximity to him. He pulled his hat down over his eyes. “One hour. Deal with it, Weaver. None of us so far have gotten what we want.”

Nora tried to reason with him, but the giant was suddenly made of silent black stone, immovable and unrelenting, and dead to the world. She had to assume he was sleeping, or perhaps in some kind of trance. One thing was clear enough: he did not wish to hear any more of her so-called excuses. There was no dealing with a man like him; she would have to take what she was given and like it, or risk jeopardizing her entire mission. Without further delay, she chose the opposite side of the tree from the giant and stretched herself out to rest. Sleeping for one hour was almost worse than not sleeping at all, but the giant had been right about one thing - she would have to deal with it.

She woke later to find the moon slightly off of the position that it should have been, if she had slept for an hour. In a panic, Nora scrambled to her feet to find the giant gone, his gigantic footprints nowhere to be seen against the forest floor. She had overslept, naively assuming that her companion would have woken her, or that her body would detect his movements and bring her attention to any need to move. Cursing aloud, she grabbed her spirit compass and re-activated the spell to follow the giant. As Ritsa's father had proved, she did not need to know his name for the magic to work; merely have an idea of the person in her head. An arrow appeared, directing her north - the arrow head was not far from her, but far enough that the giant couldn't be seen. He had gone ahead without her, though at least he hadn't tried to kill her. She was thankful for that favor at least!

Only when the echoing bellow of a Radiant filled the darkness did she recall the extent of the danger she was in. The giant did not intend to spend his nights camped in silent secrecy, avoiding contact with the fearsome creatures that walked within them. This forest was a good location for them to prey upon travelers, just as the

Litter was, and yet he took no precautions to hide his advance from them. Either he was a complete fool, or he was far more powerful and far more serious than Nora had given him credit for. She could not deny the possibility of both options being true at the same time.

The Radiant was ahead of her, by the sound of it; perhaps nearer to the giant than to her own position. She frowned, realizing that he would not try to defend the creature or keep it from harm, as she and Ritsa had done in the Litter. If he was attacked, he would kill without question or hesitation. Furthermore, there was very little she could do to stop him. Her Weaver protections would do little to stop the full onslaught of a Leftist's rage, if he truly wished to harm his target - and he would have to, for his spells to succeed.

Then she remembered herself. She had reached the point of no return in regard to practicing kindness; her new goal had to be one that dedicated itself to evil. Suddenly her own willingness to wait until she met up with the giant before harnessing that need seemed like a fool's errand. In the company of anyone else, she might have found smaller ways to do it; ways that would harm only those who deserved it, or those who were soon to suffer anyway. She always did her best to limit the longevity of her actions, however awful they were. Now that she was in the giant's company, she would be forced to assist him in his actions - or worse, by refusing to join him, allow him to commit evil at will. That too would leave its mark on her, though not nearly enough to bring her balance back in order.

His words from an hour ago echoed in her head, making her temples throb with anger. "Deal with it, Weaver." This was the hardest part of her job, as it was for most Weavers. It was the main reason so many people refused to become Weavers. Why be forced to balance the kindness one chose to show in the world with an equal dose of cruelty, when one could just do good by becoming a Craftsman? But Nora truly believed in the balance with all her heart. If all the world did nothing but good, there would be no challenge; no need for personal advancement or growth. If all the world did evil, then the lights of hope and love would disappear forever. The very nature of the two made them necessary to each other's survival, locked in an eternal, un-winnable struggle. It was sad, perhaps, but it was

truth, and Nora did her best to follow truth at all costs.

With a sigh, Nora set her jaw and began to run, in a hurry to catch up with her repulsive contact. He might not wish to be aided by a weak, helpless Weaver, but she would have to do so anyway for the sake of the sins of kindness she had committed. She did not waste her power to augment her speed; if he was locked in combat, then he would be busy with that, not continuing to move further away from her. She did not have far to run before her eyes fell upon two figures in the distance. One was the giant, encased in a protective orb of blazing flames. The other was a Radiant, as she had expected.

She had to get closer before the full extent of the situation became apparent. The giant was laughing, a cruel, sinister smile painted across his face. The Radiant, bearing a wildcat's ears, whiskers and fur-coated body, howled in rage, circling and stalking him like the prey he was. From the singe marks on the Radiant's fur, it had clearly attempted to breach the flaming shield a half dozen times with limited success. She shook her head at the complexity of the giant's spell; he was protecting himself, but at the cost of another's wellbeing. That shield was as much for damaging his enemy as it was for protection. As she watched the Radiant charge the shield again and recoil in agony, it became even clearer: he knew the creature would continue to ram itself against him until it was dead. He was enjoying the slow, painful death he was giving it!

Nora closed her eyes for a moment, still unnoticed by the undeterred and helpless Radiant. She could put an end to its pain, as her first order of business. She would have to want to kill it, and that was the hardest part of all; any stray thought in regard to protecting it or ending its life for mercy's sake would see her to an early grave. Bitterly she began to speak the words of a Leftist curse; the spell would be weak due to the lack of components used, but in situations such as these, she did not have time for the elaborate rituals that accompanied more serious and powerful spells.

"Be gone from this world, twisted soul. You are long past saving. The damage has already been done. With the hands of the Duality, I end your..."

She froze, choking on the words. How easy it would have

been to say “suffering!”

As if in response to her moment of panic, the giant turned her way and laid his foul smile upon her. In a heartbeat, the fire shield leapt from his body to hers. In the next, he was behind her, throwing rocks and branches at the Radiant to goad it into attacking. The human-shaped cat rounded on Nora, clearly injured by the hail of sharp objects and the previous burns it had invited from the shield. It paused to take in her new scent before baring its fangs and diving for her instead of the giant. She could not stop it from burning itself yet again, and this time it hissed in pain, staggering back to try to lick in vain at its wounds with a human tongue.

Nora let one last stray thought flash through her mind, and it was a thought very similar to the one that she had every single time it came time to switch between following the Right to the Left. If she had to commit herself to violence and destruction, she prayed to any God, Goddess or being that might have ever existed that she would not turn out like this man - or her mother. Theresa’s name on her lips, she spat out the rest of the spell.

“With the hands of the Duality, I end your useless life. Die.”

The words, though they seemed to echo for miles, were soft spoken. The wildcat Radiant barely had time to register the strange sounds coming from Nora’s mouth as she stepped forward and reached through the orb of fire that surrounded her. Her arm burning from the contact, Nora let the tips of her fingers rest upon the furry hide of the beast. That one motion was all it took. The creature gasped and writhed, twisting away from Nora, but it could not flee the pain it felt any more than it could become human again. Before it could fall to its human knees, it clutched at its heart, leaving gashes from its own claws across its flesh. Then it was gone; Radiant blood leaking from its nose and eyes and the corners of its mouth - destroyed from the inside outward.

Nora retracted her arm, gritting her teeth at the pain of her burns, while the giant scowled at her. “That was my fight, woman. You almost ruined it, but I had it fixed. And now? It’s dead. Thanks to you.”

Nora’s face, when she looked up at him, was twisted with rage

and pain. She hated him more than anyone she had ever known, with the exception of her own mother. "Silence, Leftist scum. I will not suffer another word from you. You speak to me of wasting time, and then sit here and play this kind of sadistic game of cat-and-mouse with our enemies? Now you waste my time, and believe me when I say I like it as little as you do. Let us be on our way. The sooner we get where we are going, the better."

He laughed at first, but when her expression shifted back into a dead blankness and silence, he gave up and shook his head. "Maybe you're right. Remind me next time not to wait for you at all. You're too much of a pain in the ass."

They walked in silence for hours.

Nora took mental notes of their progress as they passed further north. Her knowledge of the earth limited itself to the southern half; she preferred the temperate climates and even balance of noise and peace amid the steamy jungles and busy streets. Though Axel Grove did not bear such trappings, she had learned to love it for its own charm. The Dark Forest had changed from a dead, silent wood into a crystalline fantasy with the addition of snow; they were too high above sea level to ward off the chilling powder. Nora had seen snow in books, and knew how to survive in it when pressed, but she did not welcome the bitter cold that soaked through her clothing and made her shiver. Suddenly, the giant's heavy clothing and close-fitting cap made more sense than she had realized until that point.

It suited her mood, she had to admit. Her silent anger had not waned since the death of the wildcat Radiant; it lay dormant, waiting for a chance to strike again. If she had not needed to follow the man - if he had not been her sole method by which to complete Mole's infernal task - she would have ended his life and paid her balance in one single moment. Instead, he found new ways for her to sully herself in darkness, and seemed to take great pleasure in doing so. Perhaps he intended to corrupt her, as so many Leftists did; they thought that by showing others their awesome power, they might

someday bring new Leftists into the fold. They would welcome new Leftists for the interest and curiosity they provided, of course, not the power itself; if there was a hierarchy among Weavers, the rivalry between Leftists was far more violent and far more deadly. So many arguments over whose power reigned supreme ended in death; it was a waste for the Duality as much as it was for the world. Nora's mother alone had wasted the lives of at least a hundred in such fashion.

She ignored the cold, doing her best not to shiver and betray her weakness to the man in front of her. The clothes that Alma had given her back in Ashmouth were not suitable for such weather. On top of that, they bore the blood and viscera of half a dozen Radiants, two of which this time had been fully human. She stank of blood and her own sweat. Nora had begun to think that she and the giant man were alone apart from the monsters; it was rare to see fully human Radiants outside of public commons or the outskirts of towns. She could only hope that meant they were drawing closer to their goal, but there was no way to know. She had tried, once, to align her spirit compass with her intended destination; the Duality had cleverly pointed her arrow to the giant man and not to her specific destination. That, at least, had ended her immediate scheming to slay him at her first opportunity. If the Duality had a use for him, then she would be forced to obey, against her better judgment! She had been a fool to ask for an answer she had already known.

It took them another three hours to reach occupied lands. The Radiants were thicker than Nora had ever seen them; the howls and shrieks on the horizon were louder and more frequent than she had ever heard anywhere in the south. Perhaps, with their often thick fur and rugged hides, they preferred the cold. That didn't explain the human Radiants, who often wandered naked with no further care for decency or shame. Rather than try to fabricate an impossible answer, Nora focused on the town they approached. It was small, almost as small as Fall's Garden, but with buildings of sturdy stone. They even had a stone wall around their perimeter - Nora guessed it was to ward off the Radiants. In the center of the town, a large bonfire blazed, and as they drew closer, Nora could see the townsfolk clustered around it in a bid for warmth. It might have been any town she knew of; there

was nothing to set it apart from any other place in her memory.

There were no guards posted; only a single Craftsman stepped into their path upon their arrival. The woman's face was shrouded in mystery beneath a thick white cowled hood that protected her from the snow. The rest of her body was similarly swathed in white, making her difficult to distinguish from the field of snow that surrounded her.

"Travelers, you must be weary. And look at you!" Her eyes fell upon Nora and one of her delicate hands flew to her mouth. "Are you injured? So much blood, and..."

The giant brushed off her concern with a grunt. "We need no assistance, woman. Let us be about our business. It is no concern of yours."

"But your lady, she's..."

"Weak." The giant shook his head and passed into the city without a further word. Nora guiltily looked away from the Craftsman's eyes and down into the snow as she followed. There was no question of what she would appear to be; she looked like the plaything of a very wicked man. One guess out of two, at least, would be correct. The Craftsman - she had to be a Rightist - watched them go with a stern yet hesitant gaze. Nora knew what she would be thinking. Was it better to interfere and risk injury or death for herself as well as Nora, or was it better to allow the wickedness to continue? The woman had no concept of Nora's status as a Weaver or the giant's status as a Leftist yet, of course; it would be impossible for her to know precisely where meddling in their affairs would get her. Nora said a silent prayer for her silence; the last thing any of them needed was another round of chaos. She still remembered the old man and the dog from Fall's Garden.

At the same moment, a warm feeling settled over Nora and spread like gentle fire across her skin. She glanced back into the smile the Craftswoman gave her; a protection spell, silently whispered after her passing. It was the prudent thing to do, and perhaps the kindest one she might have cast. Due to her full Craftsman status, the spell didn't even consider bouncing; Nora was thankful for small favors. She tried on a hesitant smile of her own, thanking the woman, but

when she turned back to face the giant, it died on her lips. If the woman had any concept of what a monster she protected, she would regret that spell for the rest of her life.

The giant lumbered his way to the local inn, denoted by a weathered wooden sign etched with a tankard of ale. Ale hadn't been consumed for years, and the antiquity of it made Nora smile again in spite of herself. Yet again it didn't last long; the giant stormed up to the innkeeper's desk and thundered something about a room. All eyes in the establishment turned to him. There would be no secret of their arrival. The balding gentleman who ran the desk had to dab the sweat from his forehead in the chill of the building while he obeyed the giant's instructions. In the end, the giant paid half what he might have for a room just to be placated. It was, in a word, disgusting to Nora, who did her best to disassociate herself with him in any way possible.

It only occurred to Nora as they were climbing the too-narrow staircase toward their room that the giant had only paid for one room. "Surely you don't expect me..."

He didn't even turn around to look at her. "I will sleep on the bed. Where you sleep is your decision, Weaver."

Of course. "So we're to take a break, then? What irony. You shouldn't have wasted so much of your time on that Radiant."

This time he spun to face her, the look in his eyes murderous. "I am following orders. Nothing more. If you wish to hear the rest of the plan, that won't happen unless you shut your damn mouth here and now. Understood?"

She followed him wordlessly past a shocked maid and into their room. He locked the door almost immediately behind them. All too suddenly, Nora found herself aware of the single hour's worth of sleep that had brought her so far. With a sigh of exhaustion, she sank into one of the room's chairs, her head in one hand and her other hand tracing the outline of Mole's black bag through the leather of her spell-casting bag. She couldn't wait to be rid of the monster she followed. With each moment that passed in his company, she felt as if she would never be able to wash the filth from her soul. Believing that the death of an innocent was a greater sin than the death of a

murderer or criminal was not the only assumption she carried in regard to the Duality; she also had to believe that each sin he placed on her shoulders weighed twice as heavy. He was evil incarnate; she was merely seeking to do her job in the most expedient manner possible. Her hands could never be clean, but he had the potential to leave them black as pitch.

She startled out of her reverie in time to realize that he had opened the door again and was demanding something of the maid outside. The maid was little more than a girl, perhaps half Nora's age, and the look of terror in her eyes served to answer Nora's question before she ever needed to ask it. The giant grabbed her shoulder and hauled her into the room, slamming and locking the door once again. Tears of fear and humiliation began to spill from her cheeks; she knew what was coming. It might not even have been the first time.

"Really? I'd have thought you'd try your luck with me." Nora's voice was flat. "I thought it would make you feel better."

He ignored Nora and threw the girl down onto the bed, but instead of removing his pants as both Nora and the girl had expected, he climbed over her, fully dressed, and stared at her with eyes that carried the weight and power of a thunderstorm behind them. Nora realized in an instant that it was the same thing he had done to the old man in Fall's Garden. Rather than being flung to the side like a sack of meal, however, the girl blinked once, and then giggled softly to herself, as a girl might in the company of her boyfriend. When he let her up, her cheeks were flushed with pleasure.

"I'll do anything for you, Master. It will be as you say."

Then, as if nothing else had happened, the giant strode over to the door, let the girl return to her duties, and relocked it against further intrusion.

Nora opened her mouth to object, against his orders, but he stopped her with a glare. "She will set the first step of our plan in motion for us, without attracting unwanted attention from that Rightist fool. She will finish by tonight. Get whatever rest you need before then. It's going to be a long night."

Nora did not bother to ask him what his intent was; he would never answer. Instead, she turned her back to him and laid down on

the hard but carpeted floor. As an afterthought, she pulled her athame free of her spell-sack and clutched it tightly to her breast. She muttered a handful of whispered simple prayers for alertness and alarm - she would never again be forced to chase after the wicked man - before closing her eyes. For the second time since meeting him, she found herself asleep in an instant, suffering from sickening nightmares about the creatures she had slain with her own hands. These haunted her more than any other; they indicated regret for her actions, and regret was something a Weaver could not afford. Failure to do what was required of her would see her slain, just as her father had been. She did not want to die; she had too much left to live for and too much left to see. Somewhere in her heart, she had to find justification for what she had done in order to survive.

It was true that the Radiants attacked without mercy or provocation in the vast majority of cases. They had even less choice in their own actions than Nora did in hers. Their former humanity had no bearing on the situation; they had reverted to the beast-like nature of animals and would continue to behave as such. Their attacks dwindled the number of remaining humans in the world by fifteen to twenty souls a day. Something had to be done, and yet... perhaps a cure could be found. With so many Mutes each day dedicating themselves to the pursuits of science, technology and medicine not borne from spell-casting, was it not conceivable that help might come, or that the Duality might apply Their hands? If it didn't, then death was the kindest option. If it did, then all the creatures she had killed were now murder rather than self-defense.

One thing, though she detested it, gave her the answer she needed. She had killed because she had to in order to preserve her life. In that, she was as much animal as the Radiants were. Killing was one of the most expedient ways to balance the system; there was no denying that. She might have spent her whole life doing minor acts of evil instead, but that could not be called true balance; the Duality would have something to say about it. Her only saving grace was that with the lives of so many forfeit by her hands since leaving Fall's Garden, her debt had to be on its last legs. Soon she could return to Mole's task - and if the woman intended her to finish that

task, she would send someone other than the giant to lead her. The moment she could leave his side couldn't come soon enough.

She awoke to full darkness. Standing up and looking out the window, she could make out the pale light of the moon shining its brilliance across the town. It had to be past midnight, but only just, judging from the position of the moon and her complete recovery from the previous day's horrors and expenditure of power. Being empty of magic was like being void of a soul, or rather, void of the countless voices in her head that resided as part of her soul. Being alone was one thing, but being without those fragments of her own past lives was a bit like being a child again; she had no memory of things that came before her, or thoughts from people far older and wiser than she. Alone did not begin to describe that. She had never understood those Craftsmen and Weavers who cast out their past lives, as if frightened or haunted by the ghosts of things they could and would never be again.

The giant sat up in bed as she turned to face him; he was fully alert already, and had been biding his time by resting rather than running off to abandon Nora again. "Are you ready, Sleeping Beauty?" The titular princess's name from an ancient fairy tale sounded like something vile and dirty on his lips. "The girl has performed her role faster than I anticipated." He was smiling. Nora didn't like that at all.

"What did you do to her? And to the old man back in Fall's Garden?"

He laughed, but there was no mirth in it. "I thought it was obvious. I witched her. She'll obey my orders and then wake up, as if she'd been sleepwalking. Even if she's caught, she won't remember me or what I did to her. All she'll remember is darkness." He stood up. "The old man, too. I didn't give him orders, I just wanted him out of the way. The Black Look is enough." Nora didn't need to ask about the name; all those who followed the Duality, including herself, had their own personal names for the spells they cast. They might have used the same implements as another person's spell, or even the same ones that were used in another of their own spells, but the intent and name were always different for each person. The Black Look was as

close to his heart as Nora's Pyramid Prison and spirit compass were to hers. What other vile tricks could he employ? She shuddered, not wanting to know.

Taking her silence as an answer, the giant headed for the door, leaving Nora to follow behind. The inn was dark and silent; the town was too small for guards, and none of the patrons were interested in traversing the bitter chill of the snowy, barren forest full of Radiants in the dead of night. Their passage was utterly unnoticed; only their footsteps in the snow began to mark the trail they left behind as they moved out into the town's center. A single raven, perched high in the branches of an ancient tree, cawed once to mark the hour. The giant, of all things, nodded to it, as if he could understand its speech.

"Ravens are a symbol of power for Leftists, as I'm sure you're aware. I could not have picked a better catalyst." Nora knew that, of course, having lived with a Leftist mother for over a decade, but somehow the bird had always symbolized her mother first in her mind, not the entirety of the Leftist population. She checked the urge to hurl a stone at it.

"And now, we finish our task." The smile left the giant's face; he snapped back to his former gruff silence, deep in concentration within his mind. Nora was about to ask what role she was to play in his undoubtedly fiendish plot, when he agreed to tell her; his harsh hands grabbed for her in the moonlit night, grabbing places and things that he had no right to grab. She had been right to fear his advance on her; for only a split second, she wished for Johnny, who might have been kinder.

She cast a silent, weak protective spell by instinct against him, but he laughed, his true Leftist power snapping her shields as if they were little more than shattered glass. On impulse, she grabbed her athame from her shirt and stabbed hard into his massive chest; this connected and drew blood, which only made him angrier. Then he stopped, his hands no longer demanding and forceful, and Nora realized she had made one fatal mistake; her eyes were locked with his, and if she had been able to channel the full force of her rage then and there, she might well have slain him and paid the Duality's price for disobedience without a second thought. Instead, she had given him

precisely what he had wanted all along.

The voices of memories in her past gave way to a single, unified entity that spoke in a voice that both attracted and repulsed her; she wanted to sing and to scream all at once. Instead she listened, because it wanted her to, and because she had no desire to oppose the master of that voice; at least, not while that master held her in his power. Her mind, will and soul were no longer hers to command.

“Burn them all to ashes.”

This command, issued from the man’s foul lips, was too much of an anomaly for Nora’s mind to accept without question; she hesitated, clutching at her head and closing her eyes, caught confused and helpless between the distant memory of “no” and the overwhelming, all-encompassing knowledge of “yes.” The small part of her that resisted screamed for the Duality, screamed for her father, even screamed for her mother to save her; none of them would, or could. This was the bitter way the world worked; Leftists and Rightists were more powerful than Weavers, and always would be. No matter how she wanted to fight, or how she detested the source of the order, she could not win out against his indomitable will.

Closing her eyes did not break the connection once it had been established. He spoke, again, and this command sealed Nora’s fate, shoving the small part of her that resisted out into the fallen snow. “Do as your master commands.”

Though her body obeyed without question, her mind shrieked with fury as she calmly retrieved a match from her spell-sack. She could see his plan now that she was infused with his dark power; clear lines of liquid radiated out from the snow and blinded her with hatred and disgust. He had witched the maid to do this work; she had spent all night weaving threads of flammable liquid throughout the town without notice. The locals probably thought it was water, and thought the girl had gone mad; such a girl would not have family or friends to protect her or give a helping hand to her insanity. It was no water, though; it didn’t even melt the snow, it just lay on top of it, unbroken and undetectable save for her own power operating through the giant - the filthy Blackthorn!

Nora knelt down and lit the match. It blazed with righteous

duty, a single radiant beam in a field of dim light. She could hear the Blackthorn laughing behind her mental screams, but delay or disobedience were as much an impossibility as ceasing her own breathing. The raven cawed, one final time, and then fell silent, awaiting its master's call. One last thought filled her mind as she carried out his infernal task, touching the match to the thread - it was infused with Godfire, one of her personal talents - and stepping back as the flame spread beyond belief in less than a heartbeat.

Why?

Why would Mole, supposedly a good Mute with good intentions, demand such a thing be done? Why would she have sent this insane, horrific man to lead Nora to such an end? What was the sack she carried, and what was its role in the plot? What benefit could possibly come from destroying an entire village of innocent lives? Had she been fooled all along into a job that was anything but Right? And if so, how was she yet alive to witness the result of her folly? Where were the God and Goddess this night? Did they hear the screams? Did they smell the smoke? Did they see the destruction and smile?

Destruction was the kindest word for what happened. Buildings caught fire and burned to ashes within minutes. The fire was far hotter than anything Nora had done before; it was as if her power had combined with the Blackthorn's to create something twice as horrendous as either of them might have managed on their own. The raven had perished as its tree burned; the fact of its death seemed to make the fire even more rabid and dangerous. Nora could hear Radiants outside the perimeter of the village walls; they shuffled in silence, unnerved by the strange heat of the glowing, burning Mute village and unwilling to meddle in its affairs. They would recover what remained of the bodies, once Nora and the Blackthorn had gone. That much, she knew without question.

Still moving at the Blackthorn's command, Nora lit a second match and tossed it into the village circle, adding fuel to a fire that didn't need it. He was determined to truly burn every last man, woman and child to the ground in pursuit of his - Mole's - plan. Nora watched villagers flee in vain, trying to escape the all-consuming

flames, but none of them survived the attempt. They were all just as helpless as Nora herself was. But the thing that stuck with her most was the looks in their eyes; the terror and hatred that they directed - to her, not to the Blackthorn. She was, to all appearances, the one in control. She was the bringer of their death. She was the witch. She had done it all herself.

It took thirty minutes for the flames to die out, once the Blackthorn had convinced himself that there could no longer be any survivors. It took him another minute to realize he was incorrect. Before Nora and the Blackthorn, one woman stood, her hands clenched in anger and pain. It was the woman in white they had met upon their arrival; her hood was still up in an unsuccessful attempt to hide the tears that spilled from her eyes.

She spoke, and Nora heard her voice as if it were some fragment of a misremembered dream, rather than fact. "You monster. I knew all was not well with you. I tried to protect the girl..."

Behind her, the Blackthorn laughed. "I know. You protected her from my harm - physically. What fools you Rightists are. You never see the truth until it's too late. Your assumptions will be the death of you."

"Perhaps you are right. But know this, monster." The woman paused, and then lowered her hood, revealing a middle-aged woman with silver streaks in her otherwise blonde hair. "In the name of the Goddess, I must do battle with you. The end of your life is worth far more to me than the end of my own. If I must die, let me take you with me."

Nora wanted to scream. The woman's hatred and anger at the Blackthorn would drive her to suicide - the Duality had no respect for such deals. Murder was murder, and...

Then she stopped. She herself was still alive, after the death of countless others. If that was not enough to stretch her sins to a breaking point, then what could be?

"Don't worry, girl." Nora wanted to laugh - she was no longer a girl to anyone! - but the woman smiled in her direction. "You are not yourself. I know it, even if the dead do not. What drives me this day is not hatred. It is protection for you, and the

absolution for those souls I could not save in time. The only one to die here, tonight, is this man.” She fixed her gaze again on the Blackthorn. “Your name, monster. I will have it, so that I may tell others of your demise.”

He bared his teeth at her, as a wolf might. “I am Lord Remnant. Lord Marcus Remnant. And the work I do here tonight may surprise you. If you intend to throw your life away, then do it, but again I tell you that you assume too much.”

She shook her head. “Enough of your lies. There is not a reason on this Earth why more catastrophe should take place on our planet. Enough lives have been lost. Enough tears have been shed. My name is Amarah Trial, and I will make sure you cannot bring any more of either to this world.”

Before Nora could object, or try to stop her, she launched an attack so powerful that the Blackthorn - Marcus - was forced to remove his presence from Nora’s mind in order to strike back. The sudden loss of support, combined with the utter exhaustion of all of Nora’s strength, brought her from a brief grasp of lucid terror into the black of unconsciousness without warning. Never before had she been so drained; if she survived, it would be a long time before she recovered.

If she didn’t survive, it would be justice. There could never be enough good in the world to restore such an act. Though it had not been her own decision, he had used her hands for evil, and that was enough to damn her to the Duality forever.

Nora returned to consciousness and sanity, wrapped in warm blankets and atop a spartan yet comfortable bed. She opened her eyes and sat up, trying to take it all in and determine her location; then remembrance and reality set in, and she shut her eyes again, trying to forget it all. The voices of memories had returned, but among them dwelt the distant shadows of men, women and children she had never known. Their anger echoed louder than all her past lives put together as they burned in unending, merciless fire. The Blackthorn and the

woman - Amarah - were nowhere to be seen, in her head or in the flesh. Only the distant sound of footsteps beyond the door of her room suggested that she was not alone in her misery.

She reached for her spell-sack and found it to hand; a quick inspection revealed everything to be as she had left it. Someone had restored her athame to the sack for her, though the residual stains of Marcus Remnant's blood still marred the blade; she would have to clean it at her earliest convenience to avoid rust and decay. The black bag was still where she had hidden it for safekeeping. The urge to look inside, if only to determine the continued well-being of its contents, was overwhelming, but Nora shut it out of her mind. Thinking about the bag made her think of Mole. The radio in her spell-sack lay silent and cold; she dreaded the next conversation she would have with the woman. There had to be another, of course; though her heart and soul wanted more than anything to run far from the scene and the cause of her wickedness, she could not do so. The task was still unfinished. She yet lived for some purpose, it seemed.

Nora swung her legs over the edge of the bed and looked out into the rest of the room. It was a simple bedroom in what appeared to be a simple house. The cold floors were bare and the walls unpainted. The lone window, shaded by thick, heavy curtains cast light on the snow outside; she couldn't have ended up far from the scene of her crimes. What had befallen her after her collapse? She was almost certain that Amarah and Marcus had perished for their defiance; if that were the case, who could have rescued her? She knew of only three people who might have missed her, and two of which had continued reason to keep her alive; Mole or Johnny might well have orchestrated something to keep their courier alive. Ritsa, on the other hand... Nora couldn't face her, not after such a tragedy. The greatest gift she could offer the girl was the absence of her presence.

The footsteps beyond her room grew louder, and Nora felt each muscle in her body tense as the doorknob twisted; could the damned Blackthorn have survived to demand more evil from her after all? She couldn't fathom his reasons for staying in such a place, much less long enough for her to recover, but perhaps he had no choice.

The person that entered the room was a stranger, not an

enemy or a friend. He was old, or at least as old as any human could expect to be following the Terminus; perhaps fifty or greater, though still muscular and in good shape. She did not have to wonder whether he remembered the world before that event. His pale blue eyes were small and curious behind silver spectacles, and his white hair hung to his shoulders, mixing with a well-kept short beard and mustache. Between the streaks of white, Nora could make out thin streaks of copper and red. He was dressed in plain but well-made and warm clothing; double layers of shirt covered in a wool-lined leather vest and woolen trousers, all tucked into thick leather boots that made his feet look twice as wide as they were. The effect was that of some strange and alien winter species of human, just come out of hibernation.

He focused on Nora, taking in her sitting position with a smile, and then spoke, his voice as warm as his clothing. “Welcome back, Miss Weaver. I thought we’d lost you.”

Nora clenched her fists in the blankets at his casual use of her title. “You know what I am. What else do you know?”

He sighed, and walked over to pat the edge of her bed in a comforting gesture. “I know enough. In this world, sometimes enough truly is good enough.” His smile never faltered. “Take this house, for example. What you see is not luxury, but these old bones drink in every last drop of heat it provides. Without it, I would not be what I am.”

Nora listened to him in silence, trying to focus on his words, but he was far too kind; far too trusting of her. If he had seen what she did...

“You look like a Radiant, lass. Sniffing for meat on the northern wind.” The old man put a hand on his hip. “You won’t find any of those here, not now. They’ve all gone on their way now that the feasting is over.”

Nora’s hand flew to her mouth as multiple thoughts joined together in her mind at once and coalesced into something approaching sense. The streaks of red in his hair, the hand on his hip, the free flow of his speech; she had seen them all before, though in a much younger and much more impertinent form. And yet, if all

those indications could be believed, she was looking at the soul of a dead man.

“You... are you... Master Redgrave?”

He smiled bigger, scrunching up the corners of his eyes.

“How kind of you to remember me, when we haven’t even met. My daughter will be pleased.”

“But... but you...” Nora was completely at a loss for words. Not only was Ritsa’s father as alive and well as any man she had ever seen, he had called Ritsa his daughter. That had to mean they had patched up years worth of pain and misery since she left Ashmouth! And if that could be believed, then her current location could be none other than the supposedly damaged Redgrave Manor. Upon further consideration, those things seemed to make anything but sense! It didn’t explain the snow, either. Nora was certain of at least that fact; it was impossible for snow to fall inside of an underground cavern.

“I was injured for a time. Gravely ill, in fact. You brought my daughter to me with a gift, and that gift restored me in ways that you will never know.” Master Redgrave’s smile faltered as he tried to impart the seriousness of what he was saying. “I was dead, Miss Weaver. I stopped breathing. Do you understand? My life ended. And then there she was, like an angel. I didn’t want to believe my eyes.” He bowed his head. “If not for you, that day, I wouldn’t be here. I don’t know how your spells succeeded where some of the world’s best Craftsmen failed, but I couldn’t let you die. Not here. Not now.”

Nora shook her head. Something wasn’t adding up. “How did you get here, if you were so gravely ill? Isn’t this Ashmouth? Isn’t this your home? But there’s snow outside. I am so very confused.”

The old man leaned forward conspiratorially and placed his hands on each side of Nora’s head, looking deep into her eyes. Nora instinctively closed her eyes, all too aware of what had transpired mere hours before. At that moment, a cackle escaped the old man’s mouth - a high-pitched shrieking that could not have come from any man, living or dead. Nora tore herself away from him and his bed, putting her back to the wall and her bag between them with as much agility as she could master. Her head throbbed with pain and misery; she was

sick from everything that had happened, and no amount of sleep could restore that. Still, her power reserves were strong enough...

She listened as his laughing crept slowly into words. "She said you were too smart for this. Still, I had to try." The pitch of his voice wavered between high and low extremes, making Nora's ears hurt. "You have something I want, Weaver. Something very... precious." His hands seized Nora's spell-sack and began to tear through it roughly, tossing aside anything that proved not to be what he wanted.

"Stop." Nora cast a shield of protection around the bag, trying to end his frantic rampage, but he ignored the spell and kept digging in every nook and cranny he could find. That had to mean one thing; he was a Leftist, just like Marcus Remnant. In fact, once she thought of it...

"How dare you use Master Redgrave as a puppet?" Nora grit her teeth. "You're alive, you son of a bitch!"

He looked at her with blank eyes. "That's a good guess, Weaver, but you're wrong. That fool of a Blackthorn is dead, as is the woman who fought him. It was a fun duel to watch, but they both got cocky. Would you believe he actually wanted to die? And that woman... who would have guessed she'd show up and decide to meddle in his affairs? What a waste. They did what they were supposed to do, though. They all did. The guards, even good old Johnny."

"Wait." Nora stared at Master Redgrave, or at least, the shape of his body. The only person who could have known about all of those people, and arranged for their roles in her mission... there were two. One was Mole. The other...

"Jezze." The minute Nora said the name, she knew it had to be true. Ritsa had talked for so long about how Jezze had cleverly severed her ties to her family and pulled her out into the world, seeking pleasure and wisdom. She had used the girl up and then fallen in with Johnny under suspicious circumstances. Nora had wondered how Johnny could overlook Ritsa in front of Jezze; black magic could do all that and more. She hadn't even needed to control Ritsa the way Marcus had controlled Nora; she just needed words.

How simple it had been! How she had kept herself hidden for so long, biding her time, and to what end, Nora could only begin to guess.

“I do hate to wear the mask of an old man, but it couldn’t be helped.” The voice coming from Master Redgrave’s lips seemed almost sulky. “I wasn’t kidding about your little spell, Weaver. Whatever Ritsa gave him was strong - too strong for the likes of you. I almost believed you’d tricked us and you were a Craftsman all along. How did you do it?”

“I... don’t know.” It was the truth. Nora had never expected to revive him! And then another sickening thought crossed her mind. Jezze had known what it would have taken to rescue him. That meant she was responsible for the flood as well.

“Fine, don’t tell me. It’ll be your little secret.” At last, Master Redgrave - Jezze - found what she was looking for and tore it free; the black bag given to Nora by Johnny at the beginning of her journey. “Here we are. I should never have let it get so far, but I thought those stupid guards would keep it, at least. They’re too useful to kill, of course, but I’ll make sure they pay for it somehow.” She laughed; Master Redgrave laughed with her. “The boss - Mole, I think she called herself? - won’t be happy, but that’s her problem. I think I want to see what’s in this bag that’s so important. If I don’t like what I see, I’ll give it back. Finders, keepers.”

Nora launched her strongest silent Pyramid Prison spell around Jezze, but her anger and desire to hold the girl against her will proved to be her undoing, and the spell bounced, useless and ineffective. Laughing still, the body of Master Redgrave walked out of the door, shutting it behind him and leaving Nora alone in the room. “See you later, Miss Weaver. That is, if you can find me.”

Then, reality returned. The warm, comfortable bedroom twisted around Nora, spinning and swerving. By the time she caught her breath, it was gone completely. She stood ankle-deep in the chilling snow, blood staining her clothing, and burn marks riddling the hem of her cloak. She was still in the snowy field, gazing out over the remains of her own destruction. Propped up together, back to back, were the bodies of Marcus Remnant and Amarah Trial; they

were the only bodies that had not burned to ash. Jezze's illusion had been an impressive one, even for a Leftist witch.

Nora only realized that tears were running down her cheeks when they began to crystallize into tiny drops of ice in the air's chill. Uncertain of what to do, the only link to her task with Mole gone, and her only friend miles away, she would have to begin the bitter task of paying for her crimes on her own. What Mole would do with her, she had no idea, but she had a fair guess that she would be seeking out Jezze and the bag all too soon. One thing was for certain; Jezze had played everyone she'd met during her journey for fools, including Nora herself. Perhaps she was even playing Mole for a fool, unless this was all just another part of Mole's sadistic plan.

Her heart heavy with guilt and regret, Nora used her newfound return to the Right-hand Path to augment her speed and stamina, and decided to make her way to one of the southern towns that she loved best. To stay in the north would be to court word of her exploits and further malign her name. She had to stop, get her bearings, and then talk to Mole to plan her next steps. From the agony that haunted her, she had the grave feeling indeed that her journey to balance the scales this time would be longer than she would ever know.

Glossary

Air: One of the five Threads of the Pattern, and the basic name for Goddessbreath.

Alma: A young Mute woman serving as a Shieldmaid in the city of Ashmouth, alongside her brother Arram. She and her brother are also personal guards for Mayor Redgrave and his family. She is steadfast and loyal to the Grand Alliance that employs her, but she is known for having a kind heart. She would do anything for the people she protects, even if it means sacrificing her own life for theirs.

Amarah Trial: A middle-aged Right-Hand Craftsman, who makes her home in one of the small, unnamed villages in the far north of the world. She uses her power to protect and fortify travelers in the area. Most of the villagers call her Mother Amarah; she is a beloved figure to them and they trust her with their lives.

Arram: A young Right-Hand Craftsman serving as a Shieldsire and doctor in the city of Ashmouth, along with his sister Alma. He and his sister are also personal guards for Mayor Redgrave and his family. Arram is suspicious by nature because of his lifetime of hiding his power from the Mutes he protects, in order to maintain their trust. He claims that he has only basic medical skill that any Mute could possess with enough training. He considers Ashmouth his home, and has no intention of letting any harm come to its people. He has a deep dislike for Weavers in general because they possess the greatest chance of exposing his secret.

Ashmouth: A large city to the far north of Axel Grove. The Litter spans a great deal of the distance between the two. Ashmouth was built underground, inside the mouth of a grand cave near the ocean. Robert Redgrave, the Mute serving as mayor, is well-regarded and trusted by the population, as is his family. Though it has its share of complications, as any big city does, it is one of the strongest cities left in the world. However, its proximity to the ocean is a daily threat to its welfare. Ashmouth is notable for its strict policy against Weavers; a bias that many of the larger cities are starting to emulate.

Athame: A dagger with a straight blade and a simple hilt, used in the ritual execution of spells. Each believer carries their own athame; most blades have decorations or patterns suitable for distinguishing one blade from another. An athame is considered a personal tool that should never be touched or held by another person. It is not intended to serve as a weapon, though many believers will use it to cut themselves when blood is needed for a spell. The one exception to this is the slaying of Radiants. Many believers allow this sole use of an athame as a weapon, believing that they are sending the Radiant's soul onward toward peace. Craftsmen and Weavers who die are buried with their athame by tradition.

Axel Grove: A Mute town of moderate size, located far enough south to be close to the equator line, but far enough north to achieve the perfect balance of heat and humidity for most people's comfort zones. It is named after the grove of trees that once surrounded it; the Litter is all that remains of that former glory. The name also reflects the town's centerpiece; a giant wagon wheel that spins in the breeze. The town is big enough to boast some tall buildings and a Junkyard Express depot, but otherwise maintains a smaller town's charm. If the Litter spreads too much further, there is a very real concern that Axel Grove will be one of the first casualties.

Beltane: A festival held by the Duality's believers to celebrate the coming of Summer and the end of Spring, usually around the first of May. This is a hold-over from past traditions in the world before the Terminus, when people believed that this time brought the souls of the departed nearer to life, and celebrated the return of the summer heat, bringing life and comfort to the world. Feasting, drinking, bonfires and dancing are typical parts of the festival. Many single men and women use the night to find themselves a partner with which to spend the coming year, and married men and women either rekindle the flames of their relationship or give in to adultery and pleasure with someone else.

Blackthorn: A derogatory term used by Right-Hand Craftsmen, Weavers and Mutes to refer to a Left-Hand Craftsman.

Blue-blood: A derogatory term mainly used by Mutes to refer to anyone who follows the Duality.

Brutis: A newlywed Right-Hand Craftsman. He and his bride Sahra are called to aid the people of Ashmouth following the flood, but the fire of their new relationship often presents something of a struggle in maintaining their attention to duty. Brutis does not approve of this distraction, even when he strays into it himself, and he fears that Sahra's demands on his time and his heart will see them both dead at the hands of the Duality. His love for her is second only to his love for the Duality.

Centermain: The place where the souls of deceased Craftsmen and Weavers go for rest and reflection on the most recent life they have led, before moving on to a new host. Many remain here for years, while some others require only months, weeks or days. It is said to be a paradise, filled with ethereal beauty, living nature and light. Some souls have attempted to remain here for eternity rather than be reborn into a new host; these souls have lost their will to live, and inhabit the Centermain as if they had always lived there. They consider it a grand utopian city where everything is as it should be, and life, love and truth are without end.

Craftsman: A term used to refer to a human of either gender who believes in the Duality, and as such, possesses the ability to cast magic via the Pattern. Craftsmen are required to choose which Path to follow when they commit to their faith. By virtue of their single-minded devotion to a Path, they are always more powerful than Weavers. Craftsmen of one Path or another make up approximately 50% of the world's population. It is possible for a Craftsman to switch Paths, but the process almost always fails, resulting in the Craftsman's death. It is accepted that the radical change of heart required for a successful change of Path would destroy anyone attempting to make it, which accounts for the failure rate. However, a Craftsman can never become a Mute. Craftsmen are given the honorific of Lord or Lady when being addressed. The absence of a title is either an offense or an indication of familiarity between two Craftsmen.

Dead Forest: A vast plateau dotted with the dead remnants of what was once a thriving forest. The jagged, dead trees reach up toward the sky in all directions. The climates of the world still respect the equator line, and the odds of the far-north Forest area seeing snow are quite high. Those who travel this way often require special gear, warmer clothing and extra provisions to make the journey. There are, however, clear traveling paths created by those who have cut down dead trees for use as firewood in their homes.

Duality: The term used to refer to the combined presence of the God and Goddess. Influence from both God and Goddess must be present to utilize the Thread of Spirit during spell-casting. Heiresses are the exception to this rule.

Earth: One of the five Threads of the Pattern, and the basic name for Godland.

Fall's Garden: A small village populated mostly by Mutes, located to the east of Ashmouth. They have a busy inn, as many travelers heading west to Ashmouth, or north toward colder climates, have to spend the night there. They live in relative peace from Radiants as well; the Radiants have better luck attacking to the north and west and skipping Fall's Garden itself. Because of this, they do not keep regular guards. Townsfolk with too much time on their hands greet visitors instead.

Fire: One of the five Threads of the Pattern, and the basic name for Godfire.

Food: Food is a prized commodity following the Terminus. Fresh food is almost unheard of, and where it exists, it is worth a fortune. Vegetables and fruit are difficult if not impossible to produce in the tainted soil and water of the new world. Meat must be hunted from those beasts that survive; most of it is not safe to eat. Non-perishable canned food from the old world is one of the last sources of safe food left, and is rationed out to each household via the Grand Alliance. It is very common for households to trade amongst themselves to acquire particular favorites. There are a handful of fast food establishments still trying to eke out a living with processed foods, but suppliers and safe products are growing difficult to find. In short, post-Terminus folk eat a lot less than they used to, but they have grown accustomed to this rationing and bear it with dignity.

God: The male half of the Duality. He holds power over the Threads of Godfire (Fire) and Godland (Earth). Heiresses do not acknowledge the God in their faith, and instead call upon the Goddess exclusively. Craftsmen and Weaver males almost always excel when using these elements in particular.

Goddess: The female half of the Duality. She holds power over the Threads of Goddessbreath (Air) and Goddessrain (Water). Craftsmen and Weaver females almost always excel when using these elements in particular.

Goddessbreath: The archaic, true name of the Thread of Air. It is used in spells that involve breathing, communication, life (different from healing), flight, and music. It is associated with sound and speech as well.

Goddessrain: The archaic, true name of the Thread of Water. It is used in spells that involve dreams and emotions as well as extreme changes from one thought, action or decision to another. It is associated with change, restlessness, dreams, and all emotions except for passion or love, which Godfire controls.

Godfire: The archaic, true name of the Thread of Fire. It is used in spells that invoke light, warmth, purity and healing. It is associated with strength, determination, passion, love, youth and violence.

Godland: The archaic, true name of the Thread of Earth. Unlike past associations with this element, Godland has become the source of spells that invoke darkness, decay, disease and curses, just as the land itself has. It is associated with growth, birth and death, stability and raw power.

Grand Alliance: The current world government, cobbled together from what remained of the world's top minds and loudest voices after the Terminus. In this rapidly changing and dangerous world, they are not as influential as they might have been in previous years, but they do attempt to maintain control and order in a world gone mad. They have numerous branches, each dedicated to a specific task. They lack a formal military, but have funded a police force that is responsible for bringing criminals to justice and destroying Radiants. Most humans view them as ineffective, but they do respect their authority on matters of global importance.

Gun: Guns, bombs and other mechanical and technological weapons were some of the direct causes of the Terminus. Nuclear strikes, chemical weapons and other such widespread calamities all took these forms. Because of this, the majority of the world has shifted its mindset to believe that such things are harbingers of evil, from which no good can come. No one is quite certain whether the Terminus itself or enraged humans after the fall destroyed more of the weapons that existed in the old world. The sight of one now is enough to send a person into fits of terror or rage. Those that still exist must be kept concealed at all times.

Heiress: A unique sect of Craftsmen comprised of only women. A woman cannot become an Heiress unless she can prove that none of her previous lives were lived as a male. Heiresses believe that the presence of the God in the Duality is an unnecessary hold-over from past Earth aeons where males were assumed to be more powerful than females. They tend to stick to spells that command Goddess elements (air and water), but are able to cast fire, earth and spirit spells with some difficulty. Heiresses believe in the female species as separate and complete creatures from males, and associate with them only for personal pleasure or necessity. Marriage between an Heiress and a man is forbidden; Heiresses are expected to provide all the same benefits for each other. Lesbianism or celibacy are common options for an Heiress dedicated to her faith. Outside of this, their powers and restrictions are the same as a Craftsman's.

Humanism: A belief system claiming that those who follow the Duality, God and/or Goddess have stolen control of the world from those who still believe in the power of human will and desire (Mutes). Those who believe in humanism seek to rid the world of its focus on magic. Some Mutes adopt this as a kind of religion, and seek to undermine the faithful at any cost and any opportunity. Others agree with the premise, but attempt to maintain their distance from the faithful, doing their best to live their lives without the magical influence of Craftsmen or Weavers. Nora has alluded to a particular sect of humanists that take great pride in making public demonstrations, protests and boycotts against the faithful, but they have not yet been mentioned by name in the book.

Jack Delaney: A Right-Hand Craftsman, lover of Theresa and father of Nora. Jack was a good man from the day he was born. He was a high-ranking soldier in the wars that led to the Terminus. Afterward, the horrors he witnessed on the battlefield, and the sheer miracle of his own survival brought him to serve the only faith that allowed him to seek penance for the sins he committed. He fell in love with Theresa at first sight, without knowing of her status as a Leftist or an Heiress; by the time he learned the truth, Theresa was already pregnant with Nora. Though Theresa tried her best to shelter young Nora from her father's "nonsense," Jack was able to visit his beloved daughter once or twice a month during times when she was unwatched. In the end, Jack realized that the only way to be a real father and a more important part of his lover's life was to give up his life as a good man and become a Leftist. Blinded by love, he attempted to switch Paths, but the Duality found his sincerity wanting, and put him to death for his dishonesty to himself. He died not knowing how much of an impact his death would make on Nora, long before the events of the story.

Jeze: A hedonistic, beautiful and smart young Mute woman who seems to live only for the purpose of enjoying life to the fullest. There are many Mute children who still grow up believing in a beautiful world where nothing has changed and no Terminus ever happened, but Jeze is old enough to be aware of reality. Nonetheless, she spends her time traveling the world in pursuit of the next great thing, instead of focusing on survival. She is the closest thing to a socialite that still exists in the world. She was responsible for convincing Ritsa to leave Ashmouth and travel with her to Axel Grove. She has now, for some unexplained reason, become enamored of Johnny Jones and spends as much time as she can with him, even to the point of ignoring Ritsa and anyone else she has ever known. Their relationship is presumed to be a sexual one, but both she and Johnny are well known for their inability to settle down, so the longevity of their relationship would seem to suggest that something more complicated is going on between them.

Johnny Jones: A Mute with an impressive talent for building technological creations out of junk. Though many Mutes feel called to tinker with the lost art of technology, none can match his ability to make things work. He claims that his plans were used to build the impressive marvel that is the Junkyard Express, but this might just be one of his many drunken boasts. His talent, and the prodigious income from it, have made him the local playboy billionaire of Axel Grove. His handsome face and eternal readiness to throw down money on alcohol, sex, clothes and toys only adds to his reputation. Beneath it all, Johnny is a geek; he doesn't bathe as often as he should, his mood swings are legendary and his sense of humor never gets far from the fly of his expensive jeans. If he didn't have so much money to throw around, he wouldn't have half the following that he does, and he is well aware of - and amused by - the fact.

Junkyard Express: One of the few technological marvels of the post-Terminus world. Rumored to have been built on plans drawn up by the legendary Johnny Jones, the Grand Alliance produced this functioning train comprised of 90% reclaimed junk from the Litter, and 10% fresh materials. It is still somewhat new, and train depots are few and far between, but it does make travel across the world easier for those places where it is available. The Grand Alliance is still working to convince citizens that the contraption is safe and is not contributing to the further destruction of the planet; the stench, billowing black smoke and frequent required repairs do not assist them in this endeavor at all.

Left-Hand: One of the two Paths of the Pattern. Left-Hand spells are always cast with the intent to harm, hinder or otherwise affect one's self or others without the target's consent. 30% of Craftsmen choose this path, most often after tragedy pushes their hearts beyond empathy for their fellow man. Craftsmen who choose to follow the Left-Hand Path are viewed by the general population as dangerous criminals to be avoided at all costs, though they are not considered true criminals by the Grand Alliance. Many keep their identities and powers concealed to avoid unwanted attention. Left-Hand Craftsmen view Right-Hand Craftsmen as sanctimonious fools, Weavers as too weak to wield "true" power, and Mutes as tools to be used.

Litter: The heaping expanse of trash and other detritus that surrounds the area around Axel Grove and the other cities near it. It was formed from a need to do something with the trash that humanity piled up after the Terminus, and when burning it proved to be more hazardous to their health than leaving it to rot outside the confines of their cities, they stopped trying. It grows and spreads in magnitude each day, and if left unchecked, will overtake the towns in proximity to it within a year or two. Traveling across the Litter is dangerous due to toxic fumes, sickness from rotting garbage and the corpses of those who died in crossing, and the presence of Radiants. Victims of murder or suicide are often found in the Litter as well. Mutes cannot make the journey without assistance from a Craftsman or Weaver; the faithful can call upon the Duality for protection. Criminals serving life sentences or wishing to work off their prison time can take government-sponsored jobs sifting through the Litter in search of recyclable junk for use in filling human needs, but must shave their heads and bodies and wear thick suits in the field to prevent the spread of decay beyond the boundaries of the Litter.

Marcus Remnant: A gigantic brute of a Left-Hand Craftsman, and an overall unpleasant person to be around. He is one of Mole's many eyes and ears, and serves as a powerful reminder of everything that Nora hates about the Left-Hand Path. Like Theresa Delaney, he has no qualms about using anyone and everyone he comes across to serve his own ends, and those who get in his way are struck down without hesitation. He has a talent for controlling the minds of others, particularly Mutes, and takes great pleasure in doing so.

Mute: A human who does not believe in the Duality, God or Goddess, and does not practice magic as a result. Due to their lack of a complicated relationship with these deities, Mutes are often gifted in the realms of technology and medicine. Mutes make up approximately 40% of the world's remaining population.

Mole: A mysterious woman who only speaks to Nora via radio transmission, and through other contacts that she sends to meet Nora. Her real name, intentions and location are unknown. She is a gruff, no-nonsense woman who swears often, sleeps at strange hours and rarely involves herself with Nora unless it is to give a new order. Nora assumes her to be a Mute, but there is no proof of this. She seems to know Nora, though Nora cannot recall ever knowing such a person in any of her past or current lives. Mole's voice, however, seems familiar to her.

Nora Delaney: A Weaver, the only daughter of Jack and Theresa, and the main character of the story. Nora is one of the top twenty-five Weavers registered in the world, and takes great pride in a job well done. Due to the ever-changing requirements of her faith and a need for money to support herself, she has become a mercenary, taking jobs from other people that are specific to her current Path. Her name is not known to everyone, but her reputation is very good and there are always people in any town that would recognize her on sight. Caught in childhood between a Leftist mother and a Rightist father, Nora found herself able to view the strengths and weaknesses of both as she grew up. Her father's death at last showed her the ultimate selfishness and cruelty of the Left-Hand Path; she chose to become a Weaver instead of following her mother's demands, hoping to one day show her mother the wrongness of what she had done. However, Theresa died before Nora could accomplish this; it is one of her only failures, and she still intends to live her life as proof of her belief. She has her father's heart, and though she will obey any order given to her in the name of her faith, she does not do so without grief at the evil acts she is often required to perform in the name of balance. She seems to be able to handle stronger and more complex spells than most Weavers, and has an affinity for elements that are not traditional to women.

Pattern: The general accepted term for magic in the world. It is perceived as a blanket that envelops the world, crafted together from smaller elemental pieces called Threads. The Pattern has two different weaves within it, called the Left-Hand Path and the Right-Hand Path; Craftsmen must choose which weave they wish to specialize in, and forgo all spells that are associated with the other Path. Weavers are the exception to this rule.

Radiants: Radiants are powerful humanoid monsters, mutated from long-term exposure to the same nuclear fallout and chemical warfare that caused the Terminus. The vast majority have animal bodies and minds, but the greatest and most powerful terrors in the world are those Radiants that still retain human intellect. Most have become little more than instinctual creatures, seeking food, clean water and shelter at any cost, up to and including the lives of humans who rob them of these necessities. They often lurk around human cities and areas thick with travelers, preying on whatever they can find to ensure their survival. Some Craftsmen and Weavers seek to avoid them, believing that someday the Duality might take pity on them and heal them; others use their power to destroy them out of mercy or to protect other people from their attacks. Radiants are the number one cause of Mute deaths in the world, outclassing even the Litter.

Radio: After the Terminus, most advanced methods of communication in the world were lost. For a time, people had to resort to old-fashioned handwritten letters and messengers to get their messages to their targets. However, Craftsmen and Weavers soon learned to overcome this limitation with their spells, and the Mutes managed to re-establish basic radio and walkie-talkie technology. Television and the Internet no longer exist, though a great many Mutes are hard at work attempting to rectify these grievous injuries to the general population's ability to waste time.

Raven: One of the few animals to survive the Terminus. Many birds were able to escape its ravages by remaining in flight. Left-Hand Craftsmen consider ravens to be a symbol of their power, owing to the bird's ancient ties to the occult and evil.

Rebirth: Craftsmen and Weavers believe that when they die, their souls are reborn into new bodies. They do not always retain the same gender. Upon death, their souls are ferried to a place called the Centermain for rest, reflection and recuperation. When they are prepared to begin life again, they must decide whether or not to retain the memories of the previous lives they have led. This is considered a very personal decision and all faithful will have their own answers and reasons for their choice. For those that do retain their memories, they return to life feeling as though their countless other lives are voices in their heads, passing on knowledge and wisdom lived before to their current host. Some of the most powerful and influential faithful can attest to having lived over a hundred past lives.

Right-Hand: One of the two Paths of the Pattern. Right-Hand spells are always cast with the intent to aid, heal or otherwise benefit one's self or others upon request or great need. 70% of Craftsmen choose this Path, hoping to bring the blessing of the Duality to people's troubled lives and assist in the restoration of the planet. Right-Hand Craftsmen view Left-Hand Craftsmen as sinful and cruel, Weavers as tainted by their acceptance and use of Left-Hand spells, and Mutes as good but innocent people who might someday be brought to see the "truth" of the Duality.

Ritsa (Maritsa) Redgrave: A Mute, and the only daughter of Robert Redgrave, making her the heir to the Redgrave name and position as mayor of Ashmouth. Raised to be a leader and a strong woman from birth, Ritsa chafed under the weight of her parents' demands, believing that she deserved a chance to grow up with normal Mute children and have fun instead of being responsible. A chance encounter with Jezze convinced her to leave behind her duties in favor of a life of hedonism and freedom. However, Jezze spent all her money, and then led her to a place called Axel Grove, where she fell in with Johnny Jones and his strange lifestyle. Though Ritsa had feelings for the man, she found herself pushed aside in favor of Jezze every time. Frustrated at last by the dead end she'd come to, and after spending enough time thinking about how to make amends, Ritsa makes a final decision to return home and throw herself on the mercy of her parents. She wants nothing more than to return to their wisdom and truth.

Robert Redgrave: The mayor of Ashmouth, Ritsa's father and a staunch Mute. He is deeply respected and admired by the people of Ashmouth, who view him as a natural-born leader with a strong head and a strong heart. Despite his firm belief in humanism, he does see the benefit in what Craftsmen can do with their faith, and welcomes them in his city. Weavers, however, are a source of difficulty for him. While he does not see the ban against Weavers in the city as a necessity, the public opinion against them has forced his hand over time. He hopes that someday he can repeal the decision, but there are far more important things like survival and protection of his people to concern himself with than one unfair law. His only daughter Ritsa is his pride and joy, and her absence for the last several years has been a constant weight on his soul.

Sahra: A newlywed Right-Hand Craftsman, married to Brutis. The strength of her love for her husband knows no bounds, and she is beginning to find it difficult to choose between spending time with Brutis and performing her duties as a Craftsman. Her childhood dream of wanting to save lives is fading; if given the chance, she would renounce her vows to the Duality and live out a happy life as a Mute beside her beloved. She knows that he has stronger feelings about the Duality than she does, but hopes in secret that she might be able to turn some of that passion toward her instead, with time.

Shieldsire/Shieldmaid: The proper title for a city guard. Most often, these are Mutes, but some cities do have Craftsmen and Weavers in their service.

Spells: There are multiple kinds of spells in the world, and all of them are as different as the words spoken by their casters. The words that work for one person may not work for another; a symbol meaning one thing to one person will mean something entirely different to another. The Duality places intent first and detail second; if the desire to cast the spell is worthy according to the caster's chosen Path, it will succeed. A spell may be cast in a quicker but weaker form without words, or a stronger version if the caster stops to perform a complex ritual to prove his or her dedication to their goal.

Spirit: The strongest and most complex Thread in the Pattern. Spirit has no archaic name; it retains its basic name out of respect to its power. Rumor has it that only humans themselves are made up of all five Threads, including Spirit - animals, plants and other living things are said to lack Spirit's presence. It is used in spells that involve distance, time, and space. It is also used in spells that allow the Craftsman or Weaver to view past or future events, or current events at a distance. It is extraordinarily unusual to find a Craftsman or Weaver who excels when using Spirit; most adhere instead to the Threads associated with their gender.

Stitch: A complicated and powerful spell that represents the pinnacle of what a Craftsman or Weaver can accomplish with their faith. Unlike most spells, it utilizes all five Threads of the Pattern at once, and requires a complicated ritual by necessity. Because of the complexity and strength needed to handle such an undertaking, Craftsmen are often the only ones capable of a successful Stitch; Weavers have been known to succeed, but it is generally assumed that they only did so by the grace of another, more powerful Craftsman lending unnoticed aid to their task. A successful Stitch drains almost all of a believer's strength and stamina, requiring a great deal of rest afterward to recover. Many Weavers who have attempted such a feat have died outright from exhaustion.

Stretch: A series of broken highway fragments, suspended above the ground by tall steel supports. At one time cities, other roads and people passed beneath it; now it is just a landmark that most people view on their way toward Ashmouth. From Ashmouth, it extends all the way to the southern half of the world, though it has suffered a great deal of weather damage and is broken and unusable in places. Repairing it across the Litter is one of the Grand Alliance's highest priority tasks, but the list grows and changes every day.

Swords: Swords, daggers and other bladed weapons have taken the place of guns and bombs as the weapons most often carried by military and civilians alike. The medieval codes of honor, duels and fashionable swordplay have made a resurgence; most young men and women bearing swords possess more talent in flashing their blades for fun and to attract attention than they do in defending others or taking lives. Even the guards of many cities suffer from this careless approach to battle. In a world where Craftsmen are so prevalent, most have never taken the need for good weapon training seriously. Some Craftsmen and Weavers, however, have adopted their blades as spell implements. This is different from an athame, which has a more specific place of honor in a believer's toolkit.

Technology: A vast majority of the advanced technology that humans possessed came to an end during the Terminus, as humanity scrambled to survive rather than flourish. Many of these were destroyed for their parts, and far more were destroyed by angry humans who believed that technology had led to the planet's destruction by allowing things like guns and bombs to exist. There are still people, most often Mutes, who seek to begin the restoration of technology, but they do so at their own risk; they must build everything from scrap parts and junk, and there are a great many humans who would seek to destroy their work if they were discovered. Nothing that is built is beautiful; most creations belch smoke or oil, smell terrible and make tons of noise, if they work at all.

Terminus: The cataclysmic event that took place twenty-five years ago, and destroyed the world that humanity had grown accustomed to. Scientists and scholars have not been able to determine the exact cause of the Terminus, but they believe it to be a combined effect of the wars, violence and chaos that humans waged over religion, money and power. The impact of several nuclear warheads combined with half a dozen chemical weapons in pursuit of ending all wars in the world instead destroyed the very world they were trying to save. The scientists claim that the planet is slowly healing from its wounds, but in the meantime, the scars still run long and deep. Both land and water are tainted with sickness and death; technology has reverted to a primitive state. Those who continue to live do so out of desperation, and they do not live comfortably.

Theresa Delaney: A Left-Hand Heiress, lover of Jack and mother of Nora. Theresa was a powerful and dangerous woman when she was alive. She was one of the strongest and most vocal Leftists of the post-Terminus world. She met Jack during a Beltane festival; their union that night produced a child, and entwined her fate with his forever. Though he was just what she needed on that Beltane night, he was a Right-Hand Craftsman and the antithesis of everything she believed in; she chose to lock herself and Nora away from him whenever possible, despite his desire to remain in both of their lives. Theresa raised her daughter with expectations that she would follow in her footsteps and choose the Left-Hand Path, but Jack's influence, no matter how small, had made its mark on Nora. Nora's decision to become a Weaver instead of a Craftsman was the end of Theresa's association with her. She died, ill and alone, from sickness acquired from post-Terminus fallout, before the events of the story.

Threads: The tangible form of magic that all believers use when they cast spells. There are five different types of Thread, each corresponding to an element: Godfire (fire), Godland (earth), Goddessbreath (air), Goddessrain (water), and Spirit. It is common for most spells to require the use of one or two different Threads; using more is often too complex for Weavers. More than three is often too complex for anyone. However, on those rare occasions when all five Threads are used at once, the spell is known as a Stitch.

Water: One of the five Threads of the Pattern, and the basic name for Goddessrain. On a wider scale, water has been tainted by the Terminus to the point where it is no longer safe without special treatment. It is no longer blue, but a foul, muddy shade of red not unlike rust. Oceans, rivers, lakes, streams and ponds are silent and still, not teeming with life as they used to be. Humans must purify their water before they drink it or mix it with food; special filters in their homes make quick showers and toilets safe. Long-term exposure to water, however, is deadly to Mutes and can cause even Craftsmen and Weavers to fall ill without adequate protection.

Weaver: Weavers are believers in the Duality that have chosen to pursue an eternal balance between the two Paths, rather than specialize in a single one. However, this lifestyle is a difficult one, as they are forced to repay their every act of kindness with an evil act, and vice versa. They are also weaker than their dedicated Craftsman cousins; there are some spells beyond their capacity at all, and the ones they do cast tire them quicker. On top of this, they are feared and mistrusted by Craftsmen and Mutes alike for their apparent dual nature, making them enemies of the world in ways that even Left-Hand Craftsmen do not often appreciate. Weavers are almost always beautiful, with symmetrical features and pale skin. Weavers view Right-Hand and Left-Hand Craftsmen as simple-minded nuisances that make life harder to live, and Mutes as nothing at all; they are not good or bad unless they go out of their way to impact a Weaver's goals. Weavers are a small minority in the world and make up 10% of its population.

Witch: A derogatory term used specifically to refer to a Left-Hand Craftsman.