

# Phantasia

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## Volume Four

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### Disclaimer

This isn't a finished work, so you might spot some errors!

For printer/e-reader friendliness, all illustrations have been removed.

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## Phoenie's Army

This was war. Her friends had been kidnapped, her teachers were refusing to act, and her town sat on the brink of takeover from a cult of zealots – Phoenie Rogan was the only person left who could save the day. With her friends assembled in their make-shift office, she tapped her bamboo cane against the bird's eye image tacked to the whiteboard.

"*This* is our destination," she announced, "A mansion – no, *fortress* – on the northern outskirts of town. Thanks to satellite imagery and information provided from inside the fortress by Amanda, we should be able to penetrate Godhand's defences and rescue our comrades!"

Theseus was fiddling with the solitary leather glove that he wore when he wanted to break someone's face in. "You sure it's okay to keep Amanda in there?" he asked.

It was sweet that Theseus was worried about his sometimes-girlfriend, but letting his emotional attachments get in the way of the mission was unacceptable! There was no room for relationship issues in tactical infiltration!

"Amanda will be fine," Phoenie reassured him, (she couldn't admit that, sometimes even she worried about her meek friend infiltrating the belly-of-the-beast – it'd been her idea after all). "She's kept her cover this long, she can hold out for just a few more hours,"

*Just a few more hours...* The thought that the malignant growth that was Godhand could be expelled from the town in just a few hours – and that they would be responsible for it – made Phoenie shiver a little inside. She didn't want to be this excited – she *shouldn't* be this excited! One of her best friends was in mortal danger! *Emotional attachments are unacceptable!*

Phoenie tapped her cane to return attention to her plan before she lost track of the situation – time was everything, after all. She was about to elaborate on the security surrounding the manor when she felt a gentle vibration on her wrist. Theseus was the first to read the cell message and breathed a sigh of relief. The other three looked at their cell-phones in unison.

*'Girls safe. No interrogations yet. Wotan wants them unharmed. A. xxx'*

"Well everyone, that's some good news, at least!" said Phoenie.

Theseus slumped back in his chair but his gloved fingers tapped on the table to an irregular, nervous beat. "I'd have thought they would've dragged them into an interrogation room right off the bat," he mused.

"I think they're being cautious," said Andromeda. Phoenie idolised her friend's calm in a situation like this. Her dark, wavy hair hung down the sides of her face as she squinted at her palm computer, no doubt analysing the intricacies of social politics and cult mindsets. She added, "There's something bigger going on. It's almost like this is a public display of their power,"

Phoenie chewed on her lip and tapped her cane against the board again, trying to draw attention to the plans. The last thing they needed was a debate about hypothetical motives! How could the three of them be so calm? Time was running out and they needed to act fast! Didn't they care about their team mate?! The cane smacked against the board and snapped.

"Phoe, calm down,"

"But, Kat..."

Andromeda, Cultural Studies ace and PR queen, settled her dark eyes on her friend. "Phoe, if we'd left you to it, you'd have stormed over to Godhand and got yourself thrown in with her. You know as well as we all do that we need to take our time,"

Phoenie slumped, and gripped the remainder of the cane tight in her hand. The descent of serenity stung, but she knew Andromeda was right. Diving into the rapids to save her friends was the worst thing she could do. She focused on her breathing, as PE

teacher Master Khandro expected his students to at the beginning of every lesson, counting to four, two, four, two...

*Knock!*

*Knock-knock!*

*Knock!*

*Knock-knock-knock-knock!*

There was an uncomfortable silence before the eight knocks repeated themselves, and then Theseus pushed himself up and crept towards the door. This time the *Veritas* code was followed by a muffled voice.

"Dudes, open the door already!"

Satisfied, Theseus unlatched the locks and inched the door open. Phoenie noticed his look of surprise and twisted through the maze of tables to see what had caught the stalwart boy off guard but as she arrived, the door swung open. Joel shuffled into the room, clutching his injured ribs, and was followed by a unlikely menagerie of fellow students: there was Doyle Kennedy, the laid-back stoner who was more interested in fulfilling his libido than studying (no doubt here to impress the girls); Lyra Byrne, the angry pro-environmentalist and surrealist artist (probably wanting to beat someone up); Elone Kent, the Hawk with dyed crimson hair and far too much money (Phoenie had no idea why she was here); and Dante Orpheus (*Dante?* Did he think saving Katrina would make her fall in love with him and fulfil his delusions of grandeur?!)

"We're come to save Kaori and the others," Joel announced.

Theseus slammed the door shut behind them, exchanged a nod with fellow leather-clad warrior Doyle, then returned to his perch.

"Figured you dudes would be up to something," continued Joel as his motley crew dispersed through the room, "This lot tagged along to help."

"No 'effing way are we leaving those four to Wotan," said Lyra, "I'll break in there myself if you ain't got a plan,"

"Please, calm down Ms Byrne," said Phoenie, raising her hands in case the irate girl decided to disagree with her, "We have been discussing a complex scheme of tactical infiltration that will allow us to release our friends whilst subverting Godhand in the process,"

"Go on, then..."

Phoenie returned to her map. "Well, originally the plan was to infiltrate in pairs with the help of technological resources supplied by Mr Smith. That is, John, not his father: we require the staff her to remain unaware of our activities."

"Just get to the point already,"

"If you would stop being rude, Ms Byrne, This is an important expla---"

"Basically," said Theseus, drowning out Phoenie, "We break in, get the girls out, and leave some special explosive packages lying around."

Everyone looked at him. Phoenie was still struggling to find the words Theseus had stolen from her.

"Dude, you're gonna *blow them up?*" said Joel, with perhaps a little too much excitement creeping into his voice.

"Not quite," said John, "They'd just label us as terrorists if we did that. The explosives were in case we needed to break anyone out. Even if we wanted to, we wouldn't have enough to affect their infrastructure,"

Theseus grumbled.

"Exactly!" continued Phoenie, making the most of the opportunity before he could butt in again, "We rescue the captives and, while we're there, obtain secret Godhand documents to destroy their popular standing in the town council, and among the general population!"

"What secret documents?" asked Doyle.

"They have secret documents?" asked Joel.

"Of course they have secret documents!" said Phoenixie, smirking.

John coughed to return attention to his logical explanations. "Well, to be more accurate, they have *secrets* per se, according to Amanda. Phoenixie asked her to infiltrate the group and she's had a run around of the manor. Seems the whole organisation has a tiered membership structure that you don't find out about until they've ensnared you. Pretty nasty stuff,"

"All we need to do is expose their corrupt practises to the public and they'll be finished!" said Phoenixie, refusing to let John have all the credit.

"And you think they'll just let us go ahead and do this?" asked Doyle, arms crossing (as the depth of the mission began to ensnare his shallow mind, no doubt).

"They're extremely paranoid of technology," said John, "That's our main advantage. Their security is terribly primitive: no cameras, detectors, scanners or even computer locks. On the other hand, we have access to a whole range of equipment and supplies. Infiltrating that place should be easy,"

"Too easy," muttered the ever-pessimistic Dante.

"Yeah, I thought so too," said Theseus, "Thought 'Hey, it's that easy, why ain't someone done it already?' But these guys say it's not as simple as that,"

"Godhand doesn't need physical security," explained Andromeda, "It already has fear on its side: fear of the Inquisition and the Patriarchs. There are stories of entire family trees being wiped out, and of whole towns being razed, just because someone or another attempted to cross them. And even if those are just exaggerated rumours, they're still enough to install fear in the general populace,"

"Yeah, I mean, there're enough people out there who believe in *demons!*" said Theseus, casting his eyes towards Phoenixie (but one day she'd prove him wrong!).

Doyle was looking pensive, his brow furrowed (was he thinking about how best to impress Andromeda? Didn't he realise she was chaste by choice?!) "So, you say we gotta march across town like an army?" he said, "Don't you think they'll notice us before we get there?"

*It would have worked better with just the four of us,* thought Phoenixie.

"We could always ask Chris Shaw if he'd drive some of us over?" suggested Doyle, "Could use his car to carry equipment too..."

"Yeah, like Chris is ever going to agree to this!" said Theseus (talking sense for once! Shaw would *never* agree to help them..."

Elone Kent, who had remained a silent mystery to Phoenixie up until this point, stepped forward, caressing a strand of her over-dyed hair with bony fingers.

"I can make him agree..."

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The extended lunch break was a godsend to Chris Shaw. Sure, it had come at the cost of having to deal with those creepy Inquisitors and some pretty (if thoroughly freaky) girls being arrested, but so long as those things stayed away from him, it was all good. He lazed back on the bonnet of his car and scowled at the storm clouds creeping their way towards him from the south, no doubt angered by the technological gods of Malkuth. He missed the bright lights of the city, but being able to stare up at the vast heavens and dream of flying among the clouds almost made up for the sacrifice, and he was getting the easiest education of his life into the bargain! They didn't even have proper exams! He heard a shuffle and Lance popped his head out from inside the car, his neat blond braid dangling like an annoying rope. Chris imagined it connected to a diminutive bell hanging in the vast emptiness of Lance's head, and wished he could give it a good yank.

“Man, it's a good job they didn't arrest Deneb or Elone, or else hot-blooded lads like us would be doomed!” said the lecherous air-head.

Chris glanced back at him from over the tops of his shades. “That's 'cause the hot chicks don't need magic to make 'em hot. That Shelley and Kaori, they needed all the help they could get,”

“I dunno man, Shelley can be pretty cute sometimes,” said Lance, a familiar haze coming over his eyes as his imagination wandered to its usual habitat.

“Well she's also a bit of a psychopath, remember,”

Lance snapped out of his daydream. “That's true, man. Dude, you think we'll ever see them again?”

Chris returned his attention to the skies. “Who knows? Who cares? Sooner those freaks are out, the less we have to deal with those Inquisition lot,”

“Dude, Astrid's pretty hot,”

Chris rolled over again, and this time he removed his shades in the hopes Lance could see his horrific visions reflected in his eyes. “Lance, she's psychotic. She heard you say that and you'd get arrested, and don't you dare think of kinky shit with handcuffs and chains!”

Lance looked offended, but Chris knew his imagination all-too well. “Aw, man, it's good to think about though, isn't it?” he said, grinning like the sort of mutated monkey they kept in big city zoos to help educate kids on the dangers of environmental pollution, “I mean, imagine if you could see Astrid's other side? I bet she's a right minx with all that sexual repression going on,”

Chris sighed and thought about smacking him over the head with some form of heavy implement, but much to his disappointment there wasn't anything within arms reach. Letting the image of Lance begging for mercy linger in his mind, he replaced his shades and watched the clouds march onwards.

“Are you boys busy?”

A female voice?! *Elone Kent's* voice?! Chris shot up in a flash, hands scrambling to make sure his hair was in its proper place.

“Eh, just chilling. You?” he said, instinct telling him he looked gorgeous.

“Just sorting some business out,” replied the busty redhead. Even in this greying weather, when the winds picked up and the temperature dropped, she couldn't help but wear the skimpiest of tops. At least the shades meant she couldn't see his eyes...

As expected, it didn't take long for Lance to ruin everything. “Would you like to sort my business out?” he asked.

Chris knew, sadly, that he was serious. “Shut up, Lance!” he shot back, annoyed that his moment had been desecrated.

Elone ignored the blond idiot, giggled like morning birds, and ran her soft hand along the polished red surface of the bonnet. “You boys never change,”

“I like to think of myself as a consistent bloke,” said Chris.

“Like, conCHRISant,” said Lance, before bursting into a fit of giggles.

“Anyway...” said Chris, wishing his shades could hide his grimace, and that a blunt object would magically appear in his hand.

Elone bent over the car and played with her luxurious red hair. She was only seventeen, but she had a cleavage to die for. Chris tried not to think of what she'd have in a few years' time.

“I was wondering,” she said, in long, drawn-out words that teased Chris almost as much as her equally long fingers, “Could you help me out?”

“S-sure!”

“I need your car,”

There was a familiar chug and the passenger door rose upwards. Lance made an awkward attempt to look cool by leaning one arm on the roof, but looked more like a sleazy teenage boy with hormone issues. "I'll take you for a ride," he said with a wink.

"Lance," said Chris.

"Dude?"

"Let the man deal with this,"

That frown! That look of utter rejection in his eyes! Chris couldn't help but smile as he returned his attention to the luscious fruit awaiting his answer.

"Well, Elone," he began, "I'm afraid we have a bit of problem then. See, I'm the only one who has tamed this beast, and no one else can handle her."

He made eye contact over the top of his shades, just to drive the point home. It was a contact that lasted a lifetime.

"Oh, you can drive, silly!"

"Oh, where to then?"

"Godhand's manor,"

It took all of his effort not to splutter all over his beautiful car and the precious princess bent over it, but Chris retained his dignity in the face of utter implausibility.

"W-what? Why there?"

"Rescue mission," she replied, utterly casual. Too casual, in fact. Was this just some kind of sick joke at the expense of those poor girls? But Elone...looking so frail, looking up at him with such large eyes...her red-glossed lips a frown...But *Godhand*?!

"O-okay, no way am I getting involved with that! They'll have my head! They'll impound my car!"

"Please?"

"It's suicide!"

Chris winced as he realised the extent of his flailing gestures. He'd lost his cool, and worse still it wasn't just in the presence of Lance, but Elone too. She pushed herself off of his car and turned away. If only he could go back in time, just a few seconds...

"I guess you're right," she began, taking tentative steps away from the car, "There was me thinking it was heroic, but now I think about it, it is pretty dangerous,"

Chris scrambled for the opportunity – and off of the bonnet. He appeared behind Elone and struggled to resist placing comforting hands on her shoulders.

"You could get hurt," he said.

He caught a glimpse of a sad eye from behind the mass of hair. "If something bad happened, I'd have nowhere to run,"

"You'd need a fast getaway!"

She sighed and took a few more steps away. "Yeah. Guess I should give up,"

Chris knew this was his chance. He danced in front of her, his long, velvet coat almost wrapping itself around her like a protective blanket.

"Hey, so long as I'm around, there's nothing that can catch you!" he said, flashing his perfect teeth, "This beauty of mine is the fastest machine in all Torsten!"

Elone shied behind her hair, obviously afraid to face the majesty of her benefactor head-on. "I wouldn't want to put you in danger,"

"I laugh in the face of danger!"

"Are you sure?"

"Positive!"

She looked at him with those big eyes again, and the world was saved.

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When Chris Shaw's gleaming red monster rolled around the corner, Phoenie told herself it was a coincidence. When it screeched into a breaking slide, throwing up stone

from the cracked ground, she told herself he was there to show off or gloat. When the doors lifted and Chris, Elone and John stepped out, she told herself it was a dream brought on by stress. And then she realised just how amazing the army she'd brought together was, and couldn't help herself from flinging her arms around the egotistical city-boy. He almost revelled in the attention, but then pushed her away and dusted down his fancy coat.

"Your knight has arrived," he announced, taking a long look around the assembled students, then grunted disappointment and turned his attention to Elone. Phoenie decided it would be best to ignore him for the time being – this operation was all about *teamwork*, after all.

"Godhand's territory is just a hundred metres away," she announced, surveying the strange group she'd amassed with proud eyes. They were standing in the shade of a mutated tree that had once attempted, it seemed, to devour the collapsed masonry nearby. Now it sat like a stone obelisk, creating a natural shelter with the rubble around it, protecting them both from the light drizzle and the eyes of Godhand: protection they couldn't rely on for much longer.

John began to hand out equipment. Those without one were given a cell-phone connected to the *Veritas* network, allowing them to stay in constant communication and giving them access to various databases (they were lucky to get such an experience!). The second device wasn't so common – a pair of glasses just like the ones John wore. He passed them on to Doyle, his Sapphire classmate, and it appeared little explanation was needed.

"Never thought I'd get myself a pair of these beauties!" he exclaimed. Phoenie hoped he wouldn't put the technology to girl-impressing use (though at least Chris Shaw wasn't in charge of them – he'd just use the camera and zoom to take perverted images!).

"These are tranquillizer guns," explained John as he handed out palm-sized weapons to Theseus, Doyle, Lyra and Phoenie. She'd only ever used them in lessons and Phoenie found the ergonomic weapon, made from a smooth artificial alloy somewhere in Malkuth, to be quite disturbing. A single dart could knock a human out in seconds, and holding that kind of power, knowing it was just a reflex away, made her nervous. She pocketed the weapon and accepted the final of John's gifts: the plastic explosives.

"Obviously you'll need to set the detonator," he explained, "There's enough explosive power in one pellet to break through a heavy wooden door with ease. A bit more and you should be able to blast open your own door."

Joel was turned the package over in his hands, a stern look on his skeletal face. "What'll it do to a person?"

There was an awkward silence, punctuated only by the gentle tapping of drizzle on the roof of Chris Shaw's car. John went to snatch the explosives from Joel, but Theseus stopped him.

"Don't even try it," said Theseus to Joel, "Not that it'd even be workable. Geez, you expect to just sneak up behind someone and stick a bomb to his back?"

Joel looked up, malice in his eyes. "Yeah, well what if I *can*?"

Lyra kicked him in the back of the leg. "Well don't bitch at me 'cause they found you in a pool of your own vomit and your head's screwed over 'cause you can't forget the sight of a bloke's guts painting the walls,"

Joel muttered something under his breath and Phoenie, judging the atmosphere to be too self-destructive, interrupted the mood with a clap.

"Team! We haven't got time for this nonsense! Mr Gibson, please try not to get too intense: I've assigned you to the backup team along with Ms Kent, Mr Shaw and Mr Orpheus. The four of you will remain here and only act should you be ordered to, or if we others fail in our mission,"

"The hell I'm staying here!" snapped Joel, "I'm rescuing Kaori!"

“And I'm rescuing Shelley!” added Elone. From the look on his face, Phoenie assumed Dante had mouthed something about Katrina too. Perfect.

“You're all too emotionally involved,” she said, “And Mr Shaw needs to look after the escape vehicle. Please understand this is for your own safety as well as the success of the mission!”

Joel wanted to start something, but the pain in his side must have reminded him that Phoenie Rogan wasn't the sort of girl you messed with, and it wouldn't be long before Godhand learned that lesson themselves...

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Phantasia had resigned herself for the time being. The ethereal shackles that bound her to the spot drained her energy if she tried to escape and their enchantment made it impossible for her to breathe and recuperate. For the most part, she had been left alone in the chamber as Wotan moved back and forth around the manor, preparing the final pieces of his master plan and keeping her ignorant of it. Whatever his motives and goals, Phantasia was only concerned with one thing: the safety of her friends. When they were brought into the chamber to suffer the Bishop's judgement, she wished more than anything that she could reach out and touch them, or at even just see their auras.

Kaori, Shelley and Katrina looked sluggish as they were escorted towards the throne. They shuffled forward with small steps, the Inquisitors behind always prodding them to move faster, and it looked as if they'd just woken from a long, disturbed sleep. At the base of Wotan's dais, the red-robed Inquisitors bowed in adoration of their master, while the three girls stood like shackled slaves.

“These are the heretics you requested,” said the lead Inquisitor.

Wotan stared them down, his thin lips curling into a smile. Phantasia tried to shout out, but her restraints pulled her back. Wotan didn't even acknowledge her weak cries, but the girls glanced across at her with tear-stained eyes. More pain swept through Phantasia's body as she struggled to escape and she fell to her knees.

“Ignore her,” ordered Wotan as an Inquisitor began to move, “These three girls demand our attention at present,”

The Bishop hiked his robes up and marched down the stairs to come within inches of his victims, none of whom dared make eye contact. With a rough hand, Wotan lifted Kaori's face up and stared her into trembling submission.

“Kaori Shimomura.” he began, “Daughter of Yuki Shimomura, a teacher at that heretic school, and Li Shimomura, a vagrant suspected of multiple felonies against dogma. Suspected of involvement with demonic activities surrounding the 'Raven' tribe.

“Your mother is quite the talented musician,” he continued, “I would even say she was *enchanting*. Perhaps a little *too* enchanting. Unfortunately I've not had the pleasure of meeting your father, but our records of his activity make for interesting reading,

“These 'Ravens', too, are rather interesting. We've been observing them for some time now, but their base of operations is quite the little fortress, so I've heard.”

He dropped Kaori face, looked at his subordinates and threw Phantasia a smug grin. This was all for her sake, she thought; a show to prove his 'superior ideology'. This man, scheming like a demon, standing before her friends who had suffered and endured darkness, and helped Phantasia find herself in the process – her perception of humanity had never been so conflicted.

One of the Inquisitors moved before Kaori and spoke with a gruff voice, “Should we have her family arrested and tried for heresy?”

“I think rehabilitation is a better prospect for Ms Shimomura here,” said Wotan, head held high, “She could be an effective agent against those Ravens, and we still lack credible evidence to support her family's heresy. On the other hand...”

He moved in front of Shelley and once again forced submission. "Shelley Edwards. Daughter of suspected witch and terrorist Endora Edwards. Father unknown, presumed deceased. She has been known to associate with the 'Raven' tribe, but in recent months has apparently defected to the 'Hawks', an arrogant bunch, though they at least refrain from involvement with anything heretical."

He let Shelley's face down with more care than he had Kaori's, and then tried to brush the hair out of her eyes. Shelley attempted to resist and growled, but Wotan was unfazed.

"Really, I approve of your change of heart when it comes to your social circles, however..." he paused for a moment and frowned, "Your mother is a different matter, and one I'm afraid even I can't ignore."

"Execution?" asked an Inquisitor. Phantasia cried out, only to be silenced by pain, while the other girls mouthed denial. Shelley tried to move, but the Inquisitor's heavy grip kept her under control.

"No," said Wotan, "Ms Edwards will be convinced to testify against her mother. They will not be executed; I think deporting them would be a more effective punishment. Throw them out into the wastelands of Hell and see how long their heretic ways keep them alive,"

Shelley struggled again and managed to say, in a hoarse whisper. "I'll drag you down to Hell with me..."

Wotan just smiled and moved on to Katrina. Of the three girls, she appeared to be putting on the bravest face, though her clothes were battered and there was a bruise developing under her eye. Wotan noticed and looked concerned.

"She was a feisty one," explained the Inquisitor guarding her, "She was also the one found with this devilish device."

He removed Katrina's auragraphic camera out from beneath his robes and handed it to the Bishop, "We believe this was responsible for the images that helped bring these girls to justice,"

"So this would be Katrina Ritches then," said Wotan, "A skilled amateur photographer, I heard. Her family runs an orphanage that is sympathetic towards Rembrandt Payne,"

Katrina did her best to stare Wotan down. Phoenie would be proud of her, thought Phantasia. Wotan maintained his look for a moment longer, then stepped back and gestured the Inquisitors away.

"Take those two girls to a cell and leave Ms Ritches with me,"

"Her punishment?" asked the Inquisitor.

"I will deal with her myself,"

The three Inquisitors left without questioning their superior's odd decision, taking the struggling girls with them. Phantasia wanted to reassure Kaori and Shelley that they would be all right, but what could she possibly promise them? That she would come and save them? She could barely speak, and it was her fault they were in this mess in the first place!

"They won't be harmed," said Wotan, once he was alone with Phantasia and Katrina, "Not that I expect you two to trust me. At any rate..." he settled down in his throne and looked at the auragraphic camera, "This is an interesting device you've developed, Ms Ritches."

Katrina remained silent.

"Of course, I have no real reason to have you rehabilitated, interrogated or extricated, Ms Ritches," said Wotan, "Taking photographs isn't a crime, no matter what they show."

"Then why did you kidnap her?" snapped Phantasia, ignoring the pain.

"Because this device intrigues me." replied Wotan.

"Then let her go, if that's what you want!"

Wotan chuckled. "Well, that wouldn't sit to well with my order now, would it? Arresting a girl on charges of heresy, only to change my mind? No, she will remain here for the time being. I have a use for her abilities,"

Katrina looked towards Phantasia, who nodded her towards the door. Wotan was the only one there, and Katrina was surely faster than a middle-aged man in robes? All she had to do was escape the chamber and find a place to hide...

"I wouldn't try to run if I were you, Ms Ritches," said Wotan, noticing the silent conversation, "We have two of your friends at our mercy, and Ms Celeste here is in a rather difficult position herself. You wouldn't want any harm to come to your friends, would you?"

"You're a monster," growled Phantasia, "You're no better than a demon,"

"And you're only children." replied Wotan, "And ignorance will get you nowhere,"

## Chapter 17

# A Beginner's Guide to Tactical Infiltration

The wall surrounding Godhand's manor dwarfed the students, but it was no match for their resources. John Smith sat crossed legged at its base with his laptop pressed as close to the brick as possible while Phoenie and the others watched. His fingers tapped out a staccato tune as he worked the array of scanners and sensors packed into the computer's dark shell.

"Theseus, I'll need visual confirmation of the patrol routes," he said, "Use some projector tape to disguise yourself,"

"Roger that," replied Theseus. He took out a grappling hook from the equipment rucksack and accepted several rolls of projector tape from John. "Never thought I'd be using this stuff for a break in," he remarked.

John pushed his glasses up and grinned mischievously. "You'd be amazed what you can do with household items,"

Theseus scaled the wall and steadied himself on Doyle's shoulders while he set up the holographic projector. Thanks to the image projected from the tape, anyone looking in his direction from the other side of the wall would see a hologram of the grey sky, rather than a quiffed teenager in a leather jacket spying on them. Once he'd set up the hologram, Theseus hoisted himself up further.

"Two of 'em guarding the back door," he called down, "Two groups of two patrolling the gardens. It's a bloody maze of crap, just like the satellite pictures showed,"

"Affirmative, everything fits with what I've got here," said John. He glanced up from his laptop and looked at the assembled group. "I've uploaded the patrol routes to the network. They'll be displayed on the map function on your cells, which will be updated with information from the motion detector," he said, "Although there's always a chance the guards might divert from their routes, so don't be one-hundred-percent reliant on your cell,"

"Anything else we should know?" asked Doyle.

"Don't get caught," said John, "Theseus is installing a holographic projector down the other side of the wall, so they shouldn't see us climbing in, but after that you're on your own. I'd give you projector tape, but you'd need a laptop to use it. I'm sure you guys can find your own methods,"

Theseus pulled himself back over the wall. "Everything's set up over here. Just need you to adjust the angle and turn the bloody things on,"

John fiddled around on his laptop. "How'd that?" he asked.

Theseus looked behind him. "There's a tunnel of bricks," he said, "So it must be working,"

There were few things that confused Phoenie more than the technological miracles of the cynical duo. John's idea to use projector tape – common in the city for displaying pictures but a rarity outside its neon walls – was another ingenious idea that most would shoot down, but Phoenie was more than willing to support.

One by one, the group were hoisted up and wall and lowered into the garden beyond down the triangular 'tunnel of bricks' Theseus had mentioned. It looked surreal to them, like someone had painted two sheets of cardboard with a brick pattern, but to the guards it would just look like part of the wall. Theseus was the last to drop, landing on his feet with the grace of a wild cat.

"This is where we part ways," said John, "Theseus, Andromeda and myself will head in first and make our in through one of the windows. We'll cover ourselves with the holograms again, so pay attention to the window we use, or you'll get yourselves caught!"

"Good luck," said Phoenie, hugging the three of them, much to John's discomfort and Theseus's confusion. Doyle enveloped Andromeda with his bulk, then shared a 'manly' handshake with the John and an elaborate one with Theseus (Phoenie often wondered why boys couldn't just shake hands like normal people). Lyra also resorted to the 'manly' handshake, even with Andromeda, though at least she didn't bother with extraneous gestures.

Theseus led his partners through the labyrinth, hunched over like soldiers fighting monsters in those centuries-old films he was so fond of. They moved from hedge to hedge, stopping only when waiting for an opening. From her vantage point under cover of the hologram, Phoenie whispered sharp warnings into their ears whenever it looked like they might be in trouble. When the patrolling guards disappeared around a corner, the trio dashed towards the mansion wall. The last Phoenie saw of them was Theseus was cutting through a window, and John was setting up more projectors to cover them.

"You'd think they'd rehearsed this a hundred times," whispered Doyle in awe as the second group watched from behind a low brick wall, "To think there're people who still assume John's some quiet geek; the dude's quality, there's no way I could pull off something like this,"

He wasn't the only one, Phoenie also wasn't sure how they could match the professional display they'd just witnessed, but didn't want to dent her team's confidence by voicing her concerns. "Let's just follow their example," she said, "If we lose faith in ourselves, we're bound to get caught!"

Using a combination of the motion detector and satellite map on their cells, and their own observations, the second group made their way through the garden. At first Phoenie wondered why an organisation like Godhand would put some much time and effort into environmental conservation, but Lyra was quick to point out the reality.

"Almost everything here's a bloody fake," she sneered, "Not that most people can tell the difference. Make it look like you care about the environment and the idiots who don't know what a real flower smells like will fall for it." As if to demonstrate, she swiped a rose off a nearby bush and jabbed its stem with a pale finger. "See, you can't even prick yourself on it!"

"I never knew you liked roses," Doyle whispered over her shoulder, "I'll buy you some real ones when we're finished here,"

She shot him an uninterested glare and tossed the fake flower away. "I grow my own," she retorted, and Doyle receded in defeat.

Phoenie ignored the bickering and led them onwards. They were halfway towards the manor when they had to hide behind a bush to avoid being spotted by an upcoming patrol. The robed guards meandered along, their staves clanking in perfect rhythm on the concrete slabs, oblivious to who was hiding metres away. Phoenie could see Lyra's knuckles whitening as she fought the urge to step out and attack, while Doyle's fingers were twitching over the tranquilizer gun he'd holstered on his belt. Just like her, both of

them were beginning to sweat as the gravity of their situation and the danger they were in began to dawn on them.

And then the worst thing possible happened.

At first it was just a tickle, as if someone were teasing her arm with the tip of a pencil, but then it jabbed into her, a claw securing its ground. One tentative glance down confirmed the last thing Phoenie wanted to know: it was a leg; a long, hairy leg that could belong to one creature. Phoenie held the scream in her throat, her body trembling as a second leg unfurled from the hedge and dug another claw into her arm. Any sudden move and the guards would be onto them, if she stayed still, *it* would come after her! Of all the possible situations to be in...

*Clank. Clank. Clank.*

The guards would soon be passing by on the other side of the hedge, their crimson robes visible through the wall of leaves. Then a third and fourth leg emerged, and between the foliage Phoenie could see its body shifting, rustling leaves as its bulk pushed them out of its way. Why now? Why couldn't it go away? Why her? *Why?*

*Its* eyes caught the dull light of the grey sky and she was certain it was looking at her. It knew how she felt, it understood her fear! It was coming to get her! It slipped out of the hedge and scrambled for her throat.

Lyra's hand covered Phoenie's mouth before the scream could escape, and it was only then that she realised the creature was nowhere near her. Doyle swatted it with the back of his hand and was about to deliver a killing blow with his boot when Lyra pushed Phoenie out of the way and punched him in the arm.

"Leave it alone," she hissed.

Phoenie took a deep breath and watched as the creature scuttled away. It was no bigger than the palm of her hand, but the mere sight of such a thing brought back too many painful memories.

And then the clunking of the guards stopped.

"What was that noise?" asked a startled voice.

*Clank. Clank. Clank.* All the guards had to do was look around the other side of the hedge. The students couldn't even chance a run. They were trapped and defeated before they'd even infiltrated the base.

*Clank. Clank. CLANK.*

"Just a damned mutant," said another voice over the sound of his stave grinding on the concrete. The rhythmic sound began again, and the guards continued along their way.

Lyra was trembling, her teeth grinding as if they were crushing the guards just as casually as the guards had crushed the mutant. Phoenie took her arm and pulled her away, as Doyle began the final race towards the manor, and the secret entrance concealed by holograms.

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Chris was really starting to regret his decision now. *Really.* He'd had visions of storming an impenetrable fortress single-handed, while the other students languished in fear of the danger that awaited them. Except Elone, who would follow her new hero, only to be captured by the enemy and sentenced to inhumane torture Chris would save her from at the last possible moment. And then he'd rescue all the other girls that evil mastermind Wotan had captured, before delivering a witty put-down when the bishop's own evil schemes doomed him to destruction. That was how it happened in the movies!

But, instead, Chris had been relegated to back-up duty by that annoying, do-gooding Little-Miss-Perfect-Student (freak student) Phoenix Rogan. And not only was it back-up duty, it was back-up duty with two of the most annoying boys he knew: spotty Joel Gibson and his perma-PMT (solid proof that guys suffered it just as much as girls!) and

that creepy freak Dante Orpheus. Even having Elone around wasn't enough to make up for that disastrous pairing, though at least she shared his frustrations.

"Who does that bitch think she is?" she sneered as she paced around in front of Chris's car, hips swaggering from side-to-side in a seductive manner.

"Tell me about it," he agreed, "What makes a bunch of geeks like that think they can break into a heavily guarded fortress? Let 'em get caught, I say. Serves them right,"

"Dude, you didn't just say that! You better take that back!" said Joel, still limping like a wounded dog, "Theseus is, like, top of our year for Survival class!"

Chris tossed back his hair and tried not to laugh. "Like that's going to do them any good in the real world." And he was right – it wouldn't. All those childish lessons did was give people like Theseus and Joel the impression they could do daring stunts as if they were heroes in a video game. At least Chris understood reality, but then, unlike those idiots, he'd been raised in the big city. He *knew* the difference between reality and fantasy!

"Gibson's right," said Elone before adding "As much as I hate to admit it." She stopped her pacing, flicked her hair over her shoulder and glared at Chris. "What could you do, Shaw? Flash your 'disarming' smile to distract the guards?"

Chris tried – but failed – not to sneer (sneering at a girl was an unforgivable crime!). "Sarcasm's not really productive at a time like this," he said.

"Neither is sitting on your car trying to look like a playboy," Elone shot back.

These were the moments Chris hated most: arguments with 'self-assertive' girls. If there was one thing that could put him off any girl, no matter how gorgeous, it was arrogance. He had to think of a witty rebuttal and disarm her, so she'd whimper in defeat and return to her lustrous former self!

"Will you guys stop bickering!" snapped Joel, interrupting Chris's delicate thought process, "I can't deal with this shit any more! I'm gonna help Kaori on my own!"

And without further fanfare, Joel limped off to his inevitable death.

"It's your funeral," mumbled Chris.

Elone looked at him as if he'd just insulted her entire family; a horrible, screwed-up expression that aged her twenty years and dispelled any ideals Chris had about dating her. She turned her back on his with a flash of fake-red hair and too-low jeans and ran after the pathetic figure staggering away.

"Gibson, wait! I'm coming with,"

Joel stopped and glared. "What the hell you want to follow me for?"

"Who said I was following?" she said (*You did*, thought Chris) "I'm gonna save Shelley, not your Raven wrench."

As if fuelled by his own rage, his own boiling hatred for the dominant Hawk offending his submissive girlfriend, Joel lurched onwards with Elone jogging to catch up. It was a surreal sight, and one Chris never expected to witness again.

"They're shooting themselves in the foot," he said aloud, wishing Lance was there to agree with him, "Why are these freaks all the same? Doesn't matter what they call themselves, 'Ravens' or 'Hawks' or 'Vultures' or whatever, they're all as bad as each other, believing they can 'change the world'. When will they ever learn they *can't*?"

"Technically, Ravens don't actually think that,"

Chris had forgotten all about that chameleonic nobody Dante, hiding in the shadows watching everything unfold. The way he tried to hide his face behind his hair and scarf was downright creepy.

"When was the last time you heard one of them talking about trying to change the world?" he continued, "Half the reason they don't get on with the Hawks is because Ravens accept the world as it is, while the Hawks are convinced they can change it,"

Debating the ins and outs of subculture politics with Dante wasn't how Chris wanted to spend the rest of his Friday afternoon (not that what he was doing was much better). Ignoring the psychopath's wandering eyes, he lifted the door to his car and climbed inside,

where the familiar smell of leather and the feel of the sleek dashboard underneath his fingers helped soothe his nerves. Godhand wouldn't track him down, would they? Why should they? He just gave some people a lift somewhere, ignorant of their true motives! He was innocent!

A white blur forced him out of his self-reflection. Dante had tossed his coat over a gnawed arm of a branch and slipped away without saying a word. Idiots, all of them. He pushed his chair back and placed the headphone in his ear: at the very least he could listen in on what was going on, and he placed a mental bet on Joel being the first to get caught.

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The holographic projectors were coming in rather useful for such a limited piece of technology. Like so many advances, the original projectors had been designed for warfare, where they displayed false images to trick enemy soldiers and provide camouflage. They were quickly made obsolete once their weakness to EMP weapons and inability to fool electronic scanners became common knowledge, but the technology filtered down to the general populace in the form of advanced computing monitors and HUDs. John found a great deal of wry amusement at using basic picture projectors to emulate the original, bulky projectors, but not as much as he found from fooling Godhand with such an archaic technique.

"Two more coming round the corner any second now," whispered Andromeda.

John secured the projector to the underside of the stairs and activated it with his laptop. To the hiding trio, it displayed an awkward floating image of the dark space underneath the stairs, but anyone who saw the image from the other side would be fooling into thinking that was what was really there. The only way to break the illusion would be for something to pass through the immaterial image, or for someone to give it a closer look – then they might notice the slight flickering of colour, or how the image looked wrong at certain angles, or the minute distortions caused by the atmosphere. In the case of the two robed cultists who passed down the corridor and ascended the stairs, however, no suspicions were raised. When the corridor was clear, John deactivated the projector and the trio made a break for their next hiding place.

They found themselves in a storage room, its tiny space filled with old cabinets and broken chairs, while the lack of windows gave the air a stuffy feeling as if the room hadn't see the light of day for decades. John was reminded of the countless cupboards and closets at home, which were also stocked full of archaic goods.

"What's up, Theseus?" asked Andromeda once the door was locked behind them. John hadn't noticed his friend's agitated look, but then he was always lacklustre when it came to social interaction.

"We've not heard from Amanda since before we left," he said, "I sent her a message earlier asking if she was okay, but I've not heard a thing,"

Andromeda placed a soothing hand on his arm. "Don't worry; it'll be over soon,"

Theseus shrugged her off and ambled over to a set of shelves covered in cobwebs. "We're stuck in a ruddy closet!" he said, his voice strained as he tried to shout without making any noise, "How the hell're we supposed to do anything? All we've done is sneak around the corridors! We don't even know where the girls are. We don't even have any *clues!*"

"Actually," began John, "I might have found something,"

When people had emotional problems, John always turned his attention to technology. There was something soothing about circuits and wires, about nanochips and exabytes. He knew how they worked, and he knew how to fix them – quite the contrary to people, who weren't fixed with a solder here or an extra line of coding there. While

Theseus was dealing with his internal problems, John had been scanning the nearby surroundings with every sensor available to him, and the findings were most interesting indeed! Theseus and Andromeda gathered round to await his shocking revelation.

"There's an electronic signal close by, one of several in the area," he said, pointing at the blueprints on the laptop's screen, "It's not a signal I'd have expected to find around here. It's, well..." He took his glasses off for ultimate dramatic effect. "It's a hologram. And no, before you say it, not one of ours."

"A hologram?" asked Theseus, "But Godhand hates that sort of high-technology stuff, right?"

"Indeed," nodded John, placing his glasses back on and observing the data on screen. There was no doubting what he was looking at: Godhand had employed use of industrial-level holographic projectors, far superior to the household devices they'd been using to cover their covert actions.

"Judging by the sensor readings – I won't bore you with the specifics – it looks like they're using a model from the past fifty years or so."

"But why would they want something like that?" asked Andromeda, "What are they hiding?"

"I don't know," said John, "But there's only one way to find out."

Everyone always assumed John was an orderly, well behaved teenager; the sort of boy whose bedroom was always tidy and who kept his books in alphabetical order. Though a lot of those assumptions were true (except most of his books were scattered over his bedroom floor!), sometimes John liked nothing more than to flick a switch and trigger a thunderstorm. Technology had this wonderful capacity for allowing him to do just that, and now was a perfect example. With a flurry of keystrokes, he'd transmitted a signal capable of disrupting any holographic projection in a ten metre radius.

"Have a look outside," he said.

Theseus crept up and carefully unlocked the door, then opened it a crack.

"There's no one around," said John, trying not to laugh at Theseus's exceptional, but unneeded, caution. With an embarrassed grunt, he swung the door open and bathed the room in light.

"That certainly wasn't there before," he said. John and Andromeda joined him at the doorway and saw for themselves: five metres down the corridor, a whole section of wall had changed from red-and-white striped wallpaper to the cold grey metal of elevator doors.

"Looks like they have them located at points all over the manor," said John, "I'm guessing there must be a lower level that only authorised members are allowed to access. The hologram is designed to switch off when it detects a certain signal,"

"Clever stuff," said Theseus, eyeing up the corridor both ways, "Guess this is what Phoenie was on about with that whole 'secret documents' rubbish,"

"Certainly wasn't what I was expecting," said John, "We should get moving."

The two boys ducked out of the door and scampered towards the elevator. Moments later, they were inside, with Andromeda slipping in just before the doors closed.

"I don't like this," she said.

Again, John was at a loss and busied himself with the elevator controls.

"What don't you like?" asked Theseus.

"We don't know what's down there," said Andromeda.

John admired the design on the cool buttons and wondered which one would be best to push: would it be the one marked B1, or maybe B2? What about B3? He knew the one marked with a bell icon was best avoided, unless they *wanted* to alert Godhand to their presence.

"If you were going to kidnap some innocent girls, wouldn't you keep them in the secret dungeon?" said Theseus.

"To be honest, no I wouldn't," said Andromeda, "That's not how Godhand works. They--"

John pressed B3 and hoped for the best.

"--don't work like that," continued Andromeda as the lift shuddered to life, "This is a bad idea,"

Theseus took out his tranquillizer gun and checked to see if was ready for action. John would have done the same, but his hands were too busy working the sensors on his laptop. Just before the lift juddered to a halt, his screen fizzled and cracked as every sensor was overloaded by a jamming device.

Just as John's dizzying nausea of falling was replaced with the incapacitating nausea of fearful realisation, the elevator doors slid open. Had Theseus not been practising his aim when it happened, and had his reactions not been as sharp as they were, the man waiting for them with a rifle would have surely fired first.

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Phoenie tugged at the crimson robe and wondered if this was really that good an idea. The cloth was heavy and making her sweat, and the sleeves were too long for her arms. Walking was a struggle too, as the robes kept trying to trip her, and she dreaded the thought of trying to run from the Inquisition if they were found out.

Doyle slipped out of the cupboard and clicked the door shut behind him. His robes clung tight to his muscled body, and his cowl looked more like a balaclava than the ominous hood it was meant to be.

"They should be safe in there," he said, "Well, for the time being,"

"For the time being'?" asked Lyra, arms crossed in her oversized robes.

"Let's just say that no one will find them unless they look,"

"Where did you hide them?" asked Phoenie, curious as to how Doyle sized up to Theseus when it came to stealth ability.

"They're under the desk,"

"Under the desk?" asked Lyra.

Doyle grimaced and rubbed the adolescent stubble on the side of his face. "Their feet might be sticking out a bit,"

"A bit?" asked Lyra, her voice bordering on a banshee's scream.

"You can see their shins,"

Phoenie rolled her eyes and began to walk away. She was starting to regret putting Lyra and Doyle together on her team. "Please, we don't have time for sexual tension!" she said.

Doyle grinned and wriggled his eyebrows at Lyra, who looked disgusted at whatever thought was running through his masculine brain and stormed off ahead.

"Don't worry, no one will find them. We're cool," said Doyle as he passed Phoenie. She didn't believe that for a second and wished she could just lock the door to the cupboard. If Doyle wasn't a physical asset, she'd have been tempted to lock him in there with them.

Phoenie and Doyle caught up with Lyra, who had slowed down. "There're people around the corner," she stated, "Now we find out if Doyle's bollocked up or not,"

The three of them rounded the corner into another identical corridor. Phoenie took a deep breath and put on the best serious face she could and kept her eyes focused on the far wall. The cultists walking towards them were tall, bulky men who bore the markings of the Inquisition on their chests. Phoenie kept her sight focused...focused...*focused*...

"Robes shrunk in the wash?" one asked Doyle as they approached.

"Always happens," said Doyle, putting on a deep voice.

"Must be from the cheap batch," laughed the other, "Don't worry, kid, you'll get a better one when your rank's higher,"

The Inquisitors passed without further incident, laughing between themselves once they were around the corner.

"I thought this was gonna be more dangerous than this," said Doyle once they were out of earshot, "We could've thrown some bedsheets over us and walked in the front door!"

"I always imagined this place would have guards at every door," said Phoenie.

"Shouldn't have overestimated them," said Lyra, "They're just fascist sheep following an obscure cult, not a secret military organisation hiding weapons of mass destruction,"

After all the build-up, all the investigation, all the fear and anticipation and planning, the anticlimactic truth that lay behind Godhand's walls left Phoenie as disappointed as a child finding out elephants didn't exist any more. Her imaginings of an impenetrable order being brought to its knees through the power of truth and journalism were shot. Her friends had been kidnapped, not by a dangerous group rounding up and exterminating their adversaries, but by a paranoid sect that preyed on low self-esteem and ruled through fear of reprisals they couldn't even back up. It felt like the adults around her were mocking her. Phoenie was disappointed, but she was more determined than ever to do *something*.

## Chapter 18

### Rising Tension

Shelley deserved the darkness. In the end, it didn't matter what Phantasia had said or done, because the world had made its opinion known. She pulled her knees closer to her chest and tried to stifle the sobs gathering in her throat. If she were alone in the black prison, she would've let her emotions free, but Shelley wasn't alone. *She* was there with her.

Shelley couldn't see Kaori, just as she couldn't see her own arms clutched around her legs, but she knew she was there. Sometimes she could hear Kaori's muffled crying, or the sound of her bangles, belts and straps clinking as she shuffled around in her corner. Assuming it was a corner, of course: Shelley had no idea where they were, only that it was pitch black, there was something wooden behind her, and she could sometimes feel things crawling up her leg or landing on her face. Part of her was glad she couldn't see a thing.

"Joel, where are you?" Kaori asked herself for what must have been the hundredth time – Shelley wasn't counting any more.

"He's not going to show up, you know," she replied.

"Of course he is," Kaori shot back, and Shelley could feel the glare from her dark eyes, but she wasn't convinced. She had enough experience of her own with the ginger-haired musician.

"He just runs away when things get difficult," she said, "He'll just abandon you for someone easier,"

*After all, that's what he did to me.*

"Joel's not like that!" Kaori protested, "He only dumped you because you're too clingy,"

"And you're not? 'Oh, Joel, when will you come to save me?' You're always like that. Like he's some kind of knight in shining armour," It wasn't like Shelley to be bitter or talk back to others, but the confinement was doing something to her, bringing out a repressed side she would have rather not acknowledged.

Kaori was quick to retort. "Just because you weren't good enough for him. I heard what you were like. Too clingy and too frigid."

Shelley felt her lips curl up into a sneer and she felt an uncharacteristic urge to lash out at the darkness and hope to claw Kaori's face. "*Frigid?*" she spat, "Because I'm not a slut who'll sleep with a guy behind his girlfriend's back?"

"Give it up, it was practically over by the time I slept with him,"

And then the brief explosion of anger receded, and the thoughts in Shelley's head were replaced with familiar self-loathing. "So, you really did..."

"Six months ago,"

It was an old wound, but one Shelley had never healed, and the confirmation of her fears just opened it wider, allowing a plethora of negative thoughts to seep in and infect it. "He'll do it to you as well, you know," she mumbled, "He likes submissive girls."

It was obvious, however, that Kaori wasn't swayed by the acceptance of defeat in Shelley's voice. "It's only because you treated him like shit," she continued to argue, "All you ever cared about was yourself! Joel's told me all about it,"

That hurt Shelley more than anything else. She'd done everything for Joel, she'd always put him first and never cared about her own happiness, but he just thought she was *selfish*? "Yeah," she said, her voice muffled as she buried her head into her arms, "cause he's gonna tell the truth, isn't he?"

"I believe him more than I do you!"

It was no good. Kaori wasn't listening to a word Shelley said. All she wanted to do now was help her, *warn* her of the inevitable. After all they'd been through in the past... "I thought we were meant to be best friends?" she said.

"Well...that's all in the past, isn't it?" said Kaori. Shelley could imagine the Raven towering over her, self-righteous and self-assured. "Maybe you should stop living there and *get over it*. Joel's mine now, got it?"

Shelley slipped further into her comforting little ball and rocked back and forth, as she struggled to think of something to say. She wished she could make things right again, like when they were best friends; to have things how they used to be before that grinning guitarist with the facial piercings and cool tattoos came along and tore them apart. What possible thing could she say to make things right? Was there anything she could do to save her ex-best-friend from making the same mistake she'd made? Or was it really all over? Was Shelley really just clinging to the past like a sad, deluded loser with no hope for the future?

The door crashed open and threw the room into blazing light. Shelley shielded her eyes and begged the darkness to return. In her temporary blindness she could hear a scuffle and Kaori's protests. When the door slammed shut and the cold darkness returned to comfort her, she was all alone.

*Just like my life.* She chuckled at the irony.

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"Gibson, stay away from the..."

"Those bastards! Man, I'm gonna kill them!"

Joel tore his robes off and flung his bag down on the nearest table and swept off the lampshade and assorted ornaments, which clattered to the floor. Elone winced, but what did she know? She was just standing by the third storey window, watching as Kaori was dragged across the courtyard below by two monstrous Inquisitors. Joel looked around the window frame for a latch and made sure the tranquillizer gun was ready to fire.

"There's nothing you can do," said Elone, "We're three floors up, you'll break your legs if you--"

"Shut up!" he snapped back, "I'm not that stupid. I'm gonna knock those bastards out and save Kaori,"

Elone shook her head and walked away from the window. Joel wished he could trade her for Kaori. All she'd done since following him into the manor was moan. Frustrated at her attitude, and the lack of an obvious latch to open the window, he looked for the nearest heavy object – a hardback copy of a Godhand 'Testament' – and lobbed it at the glass.

“You twat!” screamed Elone over the sound of shattering glass, “You total, utter twat!”

Joel ignored her and swept the remaining glass away with the velvet curtains. The Inquisitors stopped and looked in his direction, but Kaori had her back to him. Knowing he only had this one chance, he aimed the gun and fired.

In his imagination, Joel would have fired two perfect shots, the Inquisitors would have collapsed, and he would have rappelled down the wall to rescue Kaori.

In reality, his nerves destroyed his aim and he wasted his remaining ammo trying to hit just one of the red-robed cultists. Cursing his luck, he reached for his bag and the explosives contained within. He could just turn them into a makeshift grenade and toss it into the courtyard, couldn't he? The explosion would cause enough commotion and distraction to...

He noticed Kaori being dragged towards the nearest door. Then came the shouting and the barking of orders as Godhand reacted to his rescue attempt. Realising his opening was lost, he tried to tip the contents of the table next to him outside the window, but he was overwhelmed from his previous injuries and staggered backwards, cursing.

“I've had it with you,” said Elone as she backed away towards the door, “I always thought you were crazy, but you're a bigger psychopath than I thought! You can stay here and die!”

“THEN GET OUT OF MY FUCKING WAY!” shouted Joel.

“I WILL!” Elone slammed the door behind her and Joel could hear the beat of desperate flight as she fled down the corridor.

*I can't save anyone, he thought to himself. First Shelley, now Kaori. Some boyfriend I turned out to be. Maybe it's better if I just die here...*

He pulled the bag of equipment towards him and fumbled around for the plastic explosives. They'd warned him about using it on people, said it'd be impossible for him to even set it on someone without them noticing. They'd not anticipated him setting it on *himself* though. All he had to do was let himself be captured, and when he was dragged before their leaders...

He pulled his shirt open, intending to place the small package on his stomach, but stopped when he noticed the pendants dangling from his neck. One, the face of a horned demon hanging from a chain, was of his own design, representing the mascot of the band he'd always dreamed of fronting. The other was a simple round gem, tied on with a piece of flayed string. A memento from Kaori, passed down from her father, Li Shimomura, an amazing guitarist Joel had always looked up to. Kaori had given the gem to him recently, as thanks for his efforts in saving her from the leansídhe.

*Hope, she'd called it, and a promise that we'll always protect one another.*

He looked at the explosives in his hand, trying in earnest not to let the tears welling up in the corners of his eyes free. It was times like this that music was his strength, and lyrics he'd written days before flooded back to him:

*You thought you were suffering. You were only wallowing. Clinging onto Fear, because it was easier than hope. You thought you lost everything. You hadn't learned a single thing. Now stand against the Dark, and struggle up the slope.*

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Andromeda winced as Theseus and John sidled closer to the corner. "I hate to sound repetitive, boys, but I *really* don't like this,"

Theseus gave her a contemptuous look. "C'mon, An, aren't you even a little bit excited?"

"Excited?" she hissed, "Theseus, don't you realise the danger we're in?"

"I know. Nothing we can do about it now though, is there?"

Contrary to his words, though, he really didn't appreciate the tense situation they'd found themselves in, she thought. The grey tunnels of the underground complex was patrolled by more guards than they'd seen in the entirety of the manor above, and every one was armed with loaded weaponry. It would only be a matter of time before someone noticed the guards they'd already knocked out, and they were hunted through the claustrophobic maze like wild animals. Andromeda wanted to escape, but instead the two boys had been drawn to this place. Four guards in tight, trimmed uniforms stood guarding a single set of double doors, weapons ready to fire at first sight of hostility.

"What d'ya think they need that sorta security for?" asked Theseus, after glancing around the corner under cover of the archaic holograms.

"That's far more than they'd need for the girls," said John.

"This could be the heart of it all, don't ya think?"

"Affirmative. It may be the key to defeating Godhand for good,"

Andromeda shook her head. "Are you boys insane? You can't seriously be thinking..."

"Think we stand a chance?" asked Theseus, checking the remaining ammo of his tranquillizer. Andromeda couldn't believe what she was hearing, but at the same time, looking at the two of them prepare, it was all too predictable.

"Let's just get out of here," she suggested.

"We'll never get another chance like this..." said Theseus.

"We're not soldiers!" she said, hands flailing as she struggled to find an argument, "We're just students! This isn't our business!"

"Eh, An, in case you hadn't noticed, we've been doing this for half an hour now," he replied. Defeated, Andromeda chewed on her lip, knowing there was no dissuading them, and no turning back either.

"Theseus, we've got to act soon," said John, "Under cover of hologram, we ought to be able to knock them out before they notice. You'll have to make every shot count. At the same time, I'll hack and disengage the lock. Once we're in, I'll secure it behind us, which should give us a few minutes at least."

Theseus was trembling with an anticipation Andromeda only saw in him before a martial arts tournament. "And once we're in, we use whatever guilty secret they're hiding to secure our escape and the girls' freedom,"

"My thoughts exactly," said John, as he slid projector tape down the edge of the wall, "We'll need to get in there before the next patrol passes, which will be in seventy-three seconds."

"You boys..."

Theseus clicked the tranquillizer to life. "Phoenie'll love it!" he smirked.

*If we're ever alive to tell her,* thought Andromeda.

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"How many of them are there?"

"Nine, plus one on standby outside the grounds, and they show surprising skill for teenagers. Three have even penetrated into the complex,"

Wotan smiled, as if recalling old memories. "They were taught at Payne's school; I'd expect nothing less from them,"

The three figures kneeling before him glanced at each other from beneath their overhung hoods.

“Bishop Wotan, if we may be so bold,” said one, a small figure who couldn't have been much older than a teenager, “Isn't this all the evidence we need?”

“I agree,” said a large man with a deep voice, “Your plot to lower security and trap these students in the act of infiltration and sabotage has been a resounding success. Should we not round them up and proceed with eradicating that blasphemous school now we have infallible proof of its heresy?”

“Not yet,” said Wotan, “Such a manoeuvre would be too brash,”

“Bishop, although I understand your intrigue and desire to gather data on Rembrandt Payne's activities, time is quickly running out!” said the young man.

“The entourage will arrive soon, if we don't act now...” said the third figure, a middle-aged woman judging by her voice.

Wotan looked pensive as he sat, statue-like, in the cathedra. “You are correct,” he said, after a short pause, “However, I am willing to chance the dice, as it were. It will be my head that rolls if things don't go to plan,”

His subordinates exchanged worried looks again. “Bishop, we are... concerned by your attitudes,” said the woman.

“Doctrine tells us to eradicate all heresy at any cost, and yet you continue to give heretics a reprieve,” said the older man, “This whole operation shouldn't have even been needed. Your judgement is final; you don't need so much evidence to bring down Rembrandt Payne,”

“Are you questioning my faith?” asked Wotan with a raised eyebrow, though everything else about him was still rigid.

The man cast his head down further, so the hood covered what little of his face anyone could see. “No. No, of course not! We just think...”

The young man looked up. “We think you are being too cautious. There are others who suggest you are not even worthy of your position. They say that's why we're being investigated...”

A grim smile spread across Wotan's face. “I'm more than aware of what some people have been suggesting.” He leaned forward on the edge of his seat and made sure to catch the trio's eyes, “I have been careful in whom I place my trust, and even more so in those I assign power. If I did not have faith in the three of you, I would not have you as advisors. I only ask that you maintain your faith in me,”

The three of them bowed their heads in unison. “Always, Bishop,”

Wotan slunk back in his throne, a statue once more. “Give the order to arrest any deviants caught on the grounds,”

The three figures stood with a start, bowed once more and then left the audience chamber. Once they were gone, Wotan turned to his two female prisoners. Katrina sat at the side of the podium, while Phantasia was no longer confined to a magic circle – Wotan knew she wouldn't attempt escape while Katrina was still in his custody.

“I often wonder what would happen to those three if I were 'removed',” he said, trying to put on the appearance of a kindly father with a faux-warm smile, “Their faith in the doctrine comes more from fear than anything. If they were at any other cathedral, they wouldn't have progressed beyond the bottom ranks,”

Phantasia was still confused by this strange man. His methods and beliefs went against everything she stood for, but there was something about him, just a tiny shard in the grey stone, that caught her attention. She couldn't read emotions like Fire faeries could, so she couldn't tell if it was real concern or even guilt over his actions, but what she could tell was that there was no malice. She remembered what Queen Thetis had told her, and what had occurred to her the very first time she met the Bishop:

*The world only tells you what the world wants you to know.*

And Wotan didn't want anyone to know anything.

"So, you're even using your closest aides? Is there anyone who isn't a pawn to you?" she goaded, hoping to lure out just a slither of emotion or body language that might provide a clue to his motives.

"Everyone is just another piece to those above them," he said with a matter-of-fact tone, "That is simply the nature of the world. I would have thought someone like you might understand that. I am a tool of the Patriarchs, just as you are a tool of your elders,"

"I'm nobody's tool," she said, "And I won't let my friends be used either!"

Wotan chuckled to himself. "You're more a tool than you realise," he said, "The best pawn is the piece that doesn't realise it. That applies to your friends, too. How many of them realise what the training they've been given is really for? That they have infiltrated this place should prove to you enough that they are being used!"

"They're here because they want to save their friends," snapped Phantasia, proud their actions.

"And that just helps things to work in my favour," said Wotan, as if to challenge her pride, "It's because of those bonds that these children are pushing themselves so hard to succeed. If I'd just done what doctrine suggests and eradicated anyone suspected of heresy, we wouldn't be in this position. Those girls would be dead, as would all those who attempted to stand against us."

This was what puzzled Phantasia the most. Everywhere around her she could feel the lingering anger of Godhand and its hateful doctrine – which was built around punishing those with beliefs that threatened Godhand's authority – and yet Bishop Wotan, leader of Godhand in Torsten, was prepared to defy his own teachings. But to what ends? What could he possibly have to gain from manipulating teenagers? By taking advantage of and abusing their threads of friendship?

"You're sickening," she growled.

Wotan dismissed her sentiment with a wave of his hand. "Aren't you tired of talking like that yet? You'll understand what all this is about soon enough,"

Katrina, who had remained silent since her capture, stood up and took a few nervous steps towards the throne. "You keep saying we'll find out soon," she said, "But why can't you just tell us now? Maybe...maybe we can even help you, if it means helping our friends?"

Phantasia, still frustrated by human politics, was taken aback by Katrina's innocence, as too was Wotan, judging from his wide-eyed expression.

"Oh, I intend for you to help me, Ms Ritches," he said, once he'd recovered from his momentary shock, "Though you have already done more than you realise. Were it not for the two of you, and those pictures you acquired, this convenient situation would never have occurred,"

Katrina scratched her head. "You mean the auragraphs? But why? They're just pictures of electromagnetic fields,"

"You know that's not true," said Wotan, his eyes narrowing.

A look of realisation and giddiness flashed across Katrina's face. "You mean they really *do* show auras?"

Wotan nodded.

"But...surely that isn't enough to accuse anyone of heresy? Especially Kaori and Shelley! I never even took images of them, or of Phantasia!"

Wotan furrowed his brow and looked at Katrina as if she'd just announced that she was a middle-aged man. "You took some rather clear images of them," he said, "Certainly not the sort of pictures one would easily forget,"

Before Katrina could look even more confused, Phantasia chimed in. "Someone changed your memory," she said, "And everyone else's!"

Katrina looked as if all the pieces to a puzzle were clicking into place. “So, Dante was right? I knew it!”

“That’s interesting,” said Wotan, resting into his throne again and rubbing the stubble on his chin, “So, someone has been changing memories you say?”

“It’s...” Phantasia paused and glanced at Katrina – her memory of Phantasia’s true identity would still be suppressed by the magic – then continued “It’s Wind faerie magic, I think.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Wotan, confirming he was as knowledgeable on such matters as Phantasia had hoped, “Even humans are capable of memory alteration. Sometimes they don’t even need magic to do it,”

“But on this scale...”

“Yes,” agreed Wotan, “On this scale, magic is definitely the cause, but I wouldn’t rule out a human source. Who knows what methods Payne and his staff will use to keep their students under lock and key,”

“They’re only so secretive because of you!” retorted Phantasia, before realising they’d had this debate before. Then they both noticed Katrina, standing to the side with a scrunched up face, pondering something.

“*Faeries?*” she asked.

“Ethereal spirits born from the elemental planes,” said Wotan, before Phantasia could explain, “They’re self-assigned ‘guardians of the planet’. Usually either extremely xenophobic, or entirely too naïve,” he looked at Phantasia, “I believe your friend falls into the latter category,”

Katrina followed his gaze, looked Phantasia up and down, and shook her head, as if trying to discard an unwanted memory. “I... I had this weird dream that Phantasia was a faerie... Was it really a dream?”

“A suppressed memory,” said Wotan, “Now you’ve begun to remember it, your full memory ought to return soon. Most humans will never remember unless something triggers the latent memory, or if they have strong spiritual power to override the magic naturally,”

Phantasia crossed her arms, a theory about Wotan beginning to form in her head. “You know a lot for someone opposed to these things,” she said.

“You’d be surprised at the alliances someone in my position can acquire,” he replied casually, “Apeliotes; you can come out now,”

A short figure walked through the wall behind the throne, eliciting a surprised yelp from Katrina. Beneath the hood, Phantasia could make out curly turquoise hair and bright eyes: signs of a faerie of storms and sky, a faerie born of both Water and Wind.

“Apeliotes Sigillum here was responsible for that marvellous circle you were trapped in.” explained Wotan.

Phantasia couldn’t believe another faerie was here. He was only second-stage, making him the equivalent of a ten-year-old human, and his aura lacked even the slightest hint of darkness she assumed would be rampant in any of her kind wanting to side with Godhand.

“Why? What are you doing helping these people?!” she asked.

“Why are you trying to help the people you do?” replied the faerie boy.

“But this man is evil!” said Phantasia, wanting desperately to understand Apeliotes’s motives, “He’s manipulating everything for his own selfish goals!”

“And what are these selfish goals of mine?” asked Wotan, his voice crashing into the conversation with authority.

“You...” Phantasia paused and tried to reconcile the all the conflicted thoughts and theories about Wotan that were spinning around her head like a maelstrom, “It doesn’t matter! You’re using people!”

“You can tell she's a Seelie from Thetis's court,” said Apeliotes, “The other Queens are nowhere near as simpering,”

Wotan chuckled. “Apeliotes, if we could ignore the politics of your people for the time being, I have a message I'd like to send Yokai. Please tell her that the Patriarch will be arriving shortly, and she can now take matters into her own hands now,”

“She'll enjoy that,” replied Apeliotes.

Wotan smiled. “I know. I expect fireworks,”

## Chapter 19

### The True Face of Godhand

Elone dashed down another corridor, praying to whatever gods or idols were watching that there wasn't another patrol of Inquisitors lurking around the corner: she was lucky not to have been caught by the ones chasing after her already! Why they were so aggressive all of a sudden, she didn't know. It'd been a breeze slipping over the wall and into the manor, even for someone like Joel! Elone threw herself into an empty room – she'd leave the paranoid stuff to those geeks in the newspaper team.

The room – one of the manor's many lounges – was a brief reprieve. From its third-storey windows, Elone could see the escalating commotion in the courtyard outside and shied away before anyone could notice her. Even if she'd kept Godhand's robes on, her dyed hair was a dead give-away: none of these religious nobodies had her fashion sense!

To think she was going to all this trouble for Shelley Edwards, the weak point in their tight-knit gang of Hawks, a girl who'd come to them from the Ravens after being dumped by her boyfriend and betrayed by her best-friend. Even Elone – who was no expert at reading motives in other people – could tell Shelley was only there because she wanted approval! Vincent was the first one who noticed that – and he was an expert at reading people – and had always kept Shelley at arms length, as she lowered the group's kudos among the other Hawks whenever she was around. Some questioned why they continued to let her loiter with them. The truth was it was Elone's fault because, for all of Shelley's mistakes and faults, Elone couldn't help but think of her as a little sister. If Vincent ever found out, he'd disown both of them. It was risky stuff for a would-be idol and up-coming fashion designer to get involved with.

There was a banging at the door, followed by shouts of “Is anyone in there?” Elone looked around for an escape, but the only non-door options were the windows. With a burst of inspiration, she dived for some of the velvet curtains and slipped herself behind them. Her trim figure would surely go unnoticed?

“It won't work. They're quite thorough, you know?”

Elone froze at the sound of the girl's voice. No one was in the room – a quick glance at the motion detector told her that – and the door hadn't been opened...

The door clicked as its handle turned, followed by a gentle creek that turned into a sudden crash as the door swung open at speed and smashed into the wall.

“Who's in here?” asked a gruff voice.

“Hey!” replied the mysterious female voice, “Do you mind? I was trying to study!”

“I'm sorry, Miss,” said the guard, “You should be careful, there are dangerous terrorists loose in the cathedral.”

“Then you're obviously not doing your job, are you?”

There was a moment's silence, and Elone imagined a strong-willed girl like herself staring down a giant brute of a man with steely determination. A moment later, she heard the voice again.

“They've gone; you can come out now,”

Elone checked the motion detector again – still nothing – and decided the geeks' gear was just faulty. Again, she'd leave the paranoid delusions to them. Before she could pull the curtains aside, though, small figures with perfect red nails of the like Elone had only seen in magazines wrapped around the velvet and pulled it away.

The girl was shorter than Elone, but shared her bright red hair. In fact – and Elone was loathe to admit it – it was much nicer than hers, glowing with an almost ethereal shine as if someone had spun thread from rubies, and tied back into six (Elone couldn't believe it was possible) ponytails. The same fiery glow sparkled in the girl's eyes, coloured red by (Elone assumed since red eyes weren't natural) contact lenses. Though she wore the cult's crimson robes, there was something important about this girl that Elone liked: she had style.

“Who're you?” she asked the wide-eyed stranger.

“Just some girl lookin' for a party,” the girl replied with a mischievous grin.

Elone danced away from the window and looked around the stuffy room. “A party? Here? Like these freaks know how to throw a party,”

“I know, I'm a very sad Yokai,” said the girl, “Maybe you could help me liven things up? I was thinking of blowing something up,”

That caught Elone off-guard. “Blowing something up?” she asked, realising too late that, not long ago, she'd also been in Godhand robes and planning to do the same thing.

“Like this,” said the girl. She clicked her fingers and the far wall began to dance with crackling energy. Elone could sense what was coming and dived under the nearest table just before the wall exploded in a shower of debris. Shards of plaster, brick and wood fell around her, while behind the windows shattered in a rain of glass, and Elone was glad her instincts were up to scratch. The strange girl, however, was still standing still as debris slashed at her robes and Elone almost let lose a yelp when she saw the heavy cloth fall into a tattered pile. Then the six ponytails dangled over the edge of the table, followed by face split by a brilliant white grin.

“Explosions make a happy Yokai,”

“What the hell's a Yokai?” grunted Elone, brushing dust out of her hair.

“I'm a Yokai,” the girl replied, “Yokai Kitsune. Please to meet you. Would you like to blow more things up?”

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Theseus had maybe three seconds at most to shoot the four guards before they raised their defences – and the alarm. In the first second, he scored a direct hit on two guards, and in the second he caught the third just as he realised what was going on. In the moment between the tranquillizer dart piercing the final guard's neck and his body collapsing, Theseus, John and Andromeda broke from their cover behind the holographic projection of a grey wall and scrambled for the imposing double doors. John didn't stop to pause and was already hacking into the electronic lock while Theseus and Andromeda covered the corridor with their guns.

“Almost there,” said John. A second later, alarms started to ring and every one of the circular lights embedded in the ceiling began to pulsate with a disorientating red light.

“Must've found one of the other guards,” said Theseus through grit teeth. He knew that, any second now, a platoon would come charging down the corridor, rifles at the ready, to protect their most prized secret from the infiltrators.

“Got it,” said John and the three of them were through the doors before they'd even hissed their way fully open. The rhythmic sound of boots on cold metal told them they were cutting it fine. The doors closed behind them with a satisfying clank, which echoed down the long, narrow passageway that delved into the cool earth.

"I put a new password on the door," said John, "But it shouldn't take them long to decipher it,"

"How long have we got?" asked Theseus as he began his descent into the darkness, pulling a flash light out of his coat pocket to illuminate the way.

"If we're lucky, we'll have five minutes tops," replied John.

As usual, Andromeda looked anxious. "If we're not lucky?"

Theseus huffed and began descending three steps at a time. "Then this secret better be worth bargaining with,"

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A blade was levelled at Kaori's throat, its cold steel tickling her skin and coercing her not to breathe. From the shadows, a bear-like Inquisitor sat admiring archaic torture devices in his giant paws, giving her the occasional knowing look. Kaori closed her eyes and prayed, once again, that it was all a bad dream and she'd wake up next to Joel any moment now.

"I'll repeat my question," said Bear through clenched teeth, "Does Rembrandt Payne have connections with the Seven Sisters?"

Kaori struggled to make a sound. Even a sob was too much of a risk with the blade so close. Behind her, the Knife-Inquisitor increased his grip on her naked, bruised shoulder.

"Maybe she's been put under a spell," said one, who stalked the shadows with beady eyes, like a rat, "I wouldn't put it past those heretics to curse their own soldiers,"

"We checked her out already," said Bear, "She's clean. Only thing we picked up on was a familiar following her around. Just one of their witches keeping track of her, no doubt. We dealt with it already,"

"This girl seems too innocent," said Knife with a sneer, "Why'd the Bishop drag in a nobody to present the Patriarch? It'll be an embarrassment!"

The fourth Inquisitor, the hyena of the group, popped up in Kaori's face, startling her. "Maybe he just wanted the meat?" he said, his wide eyes like twin moons staring into her soul.

Rat grunted. "If the Bishop has any sense, he'll offer *himself* up as a sacrifice,"

"Now, now. Not in front of the child," said Bear, glancing over at the Rat with narrow eyes.

"She'll be dead within an hour, what does it matter?" he replied.

"Unless the Patriarch somehow agrees to offer her 'rehabilitation', though I very much doubt it," said Knife, his blade threatening to peel off a slice of Kaori's flesh, "Bishop Wotan has already let enough heretics walk away without punishment,"

"I'm sure the Patriarch will spare us any more indignity," said Bear, "I'm as tired of the Bishop's lenience as the rest of you, but we have a job to do. The Patriarch will want answers, not a dead body,"

"If this girl is an agent of Payne, she must know about his alliances!" spat Hyena, "Even if that knowledge is buried deep inside her brain and we have to cut it out!" He traced a finger along Kaori's forehead, salivating at the prospect until Knife shooed him away.

Bear rose up to his full, monstrous height. Kaori wished she had the answers they wanted – at least then they might let her go! "I-I don't know anything," she sobbed, "I don't know. I just want Joel,"

Rat came scampering out of the shadows. "Joel? Who's Joel? Is he one of your teachers?"

"A wizard sent to rescue her, perhaps?" said Hyena.

Kaori was trembling, her hair irritating her eyes as it clung to her sweat-soaked forehead and her heart beating faster with each question asked. If only he were here to hold her hand. If only he were here to whisk her away, up a tower no other could climb where they could live the rest of their lives peacefully, away from all the hate and suffering.

"Who is Joel?" asked Bear.

"M-my boyfriend,"

There was a sniggering sound, like a group of pre-teens laughing at their friend when they discovered she'd kissed a boy, or the time Kaori tripped over her dress in front of a group of Hawks.

"Just another slab of meat after all," sighed Bear.

"Let's gut her!" said Hyena, but Bear ignored him. A smile had crept across his rugged, scared face. As he moved forwards, his hand reached out towards her.

"I have a better idea," he said.

Kaori closed her eyes as tight as they would go and, body shaking with cold fear, tried her best to focus her mind on images of a certain lanky, ginger-haired musician, the only thing she had left between her and oblivion.

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Joel tossed aside the tranquillizer gun, its ammo now spent, and attempted to charge at the remaining Inquisitors. He'd managed to fell one – out of five – but he was sure his fists could take out the rest. An uppercut here, a right-hook th—

Joel cried out in agony as his ribs burst into pain once more, then lost his footing and crashed into the red carpet that adorned every single bloody corridor of the accursed mansion. As he lay prone, he wondered who was paid to vacuum it all, but was dragged out of his irrelevant, pain-induced daydreaming when an Inquisitor grabbed him by the back of his neck and hoisted him off the ground.

"*This* is the pride of Payne's academy?" the Inquisitor sneered, while his companions laughed.

"I'm gonna kill every last fucking one of you!" cried Joel, flinging a rogue fist towards the Inquisitor's face. The robed man absorbed it with his free hand, which began to crush Joel's bony fingers like some kind of waste disposal machine. Joel screamed again.

"Not much of a man, is he?" laughed one of the Inquisitors.

"He's all bones," said another, who then stepped forward and ripped Joel's shirt off, "Just take a look at—"

There was a shocked silence and Joel was thrown against a wall. Before he could move, the Inquisitors hoarded around him like vultures and, for a brief moment, he wondered if they were going to tear him apart. Then once snatched at his chest and waltzed away with a fist held high, clutching his prize tight. Then he took a look at the soft clay and its tiny digital detonator and separated the two. Joel's last hope had just been shattered.

"Payne's sending in suicide bombers?" said one Inquisitor.

"Truly he is a monster," said another.

"Surely the Bishop can't refuse to act now?" said a third, "We must strike out before Payne becomes even more desperate to destroy us!"

Joel struggled for breath, his chest screaming out with every tiny gasp of air he took. As the Inquisitors returned their attention to him, and in the moments before he passed out, he wondered why every choice he made, no matter how noble, always led to ruin.

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Phoenie recoiled at the explosion, which was soon followed by a flurry of red robes pushing past them to escape the sound of collapsing masonry.

"Sweet!" said Doyle after whistling his approval, "Gotta give some credit to whoever pulled that one off."

"There's absolutely no way any of us had the explosives necessary for that kind of destruction," said Phoenie, "And John sent a text about being underground before he was disconnected from the network."

Lyra crossed her arms. "You don't suppose Joel's been fecking around up there, do you?"

"Why, Mr Gibson was asked to remain as backup..."

"And you expected any of them to follow orders?"

Phoenie paced back and forth as she tried to work out the logic of her backups and their decision to disobey her direct orders. Oh, how she would lecture them if the mission failed because of their irresponsibility! She knew it was a bad idea to put any faith in people like that in the first place. Why hadn't she listened to her own reasoning?!

"This isn't good. We came here to rescue and investigate, not destroy!" she said. She pressed a finger to the tiny device attached to her earlobe and waited for the dull vibration to confirm she was connected to the network.

"Hello? Hello everyone? This is Phoenie Rogan speaking, is everyone there? Mr Gibson? Ms Kent? Are you still outside?"

There was silence. The explosions were bad, but the disappearance of John, Theseus and Andromeda was worse. Phoenie was hoping it was just a technical malfunction, and John had warned them there was a small chance the signal could be blocked unintentionally.

"Please, do come in, anybody?" Phoenie pleaded. A moment later, a crackling signified an incoming response, but it wasn't the monotone voice she'd been hoping to hear.

"Hey, you know they all buggered off inside, don't you?" said Chris Shaw, who sounded like he was stuck watching a film he didn't enjoy, "I'm the only one left out here. You done yet?"

"We've lost track of the first group, and I believe Mr Gibson and Ms Kent are attempting to destroy the building!"

"Awesome! Never realised they had it in them,"

"Not possible," said John's familiar voice, "I didn't bring enough explosives, even if we combined them together. Someone's got a hold of their own."

"You're alive!" cried Phoenie, ignoring for the moment she was meant to be incognito.

"They jammed us," explained John, "Underground facilities. Technology you wouldn't believe. Definitely not standard Godha-- oh. Oh, this isn't good..."

There was a pause. Too long a pause. "John, what's going on?" Phoenie whispered.

"Phoenie, I'm—I'm thinking we might have gotten in over our heads." replied his breathless voice.

"John, what is it?"

"This isn't good,"

Before he could explain, the communication was replaced with an incessant buzzing that hurt Phoenie's ear – and Doyle and Lyra's too, judging from their pained reactions. A second later, the earphones automatically shut down.

"I don't like the sound of this," said Doyle.

"Yer bloody right you don't like the sound of it," snapped Lyra, "Now what the feck're we supposed to do?"

Phoenie shook her head and rested herself against a wall. She chewed her lip as she tried to work out a new strategy, but without the rest of her team there for guidance she couldn't even think straight. The sound of distant rumbling – another part of the manor collapsing in on itself – and the sight of panicked cultists running around the courtyard like scared ants brought the severity of the situation into even starker focus. *Everything was going wrong.*

Lyra and Doyle stood waiting for an answer, for a clever Phoenie strategy to forge victory from the embers of defeat, but this was *reality*. She wasn't sitting in her office, daydreaming about teenager heroics: she was in the middle of chaos. Phoenie Rogan couldn't handle chaos. She didn't want to improvise. She couldn't. Not alone.

And then a pack of Inquisitors rounded a corner and bore down upon them.

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"Where the hell does this place go?" asked Theseus as they continued their descent. Two minutes had passed since John had locked the door, and Godhand wouldn't be long in pursuing them.

Andromeda paused a little way down the tunnel and leaned against the damp wall. "Did you hear that?" she asked.

Theseus raised an eyebrow. "I'm not hearing anything 'cept the wind, An. You think someone's down here?"

Andromeda shook his head. "No, it wasn't a person. More like something in my head.

"We don't have time to think" said John, "Let's just get down there,"

Theseus steadied himself on the stone wall – the metallic underground lair had dissolved into a tunnel whose irregular steps were covered in slime. "Just ignore it; it was probably the wind – or Godhand. Let's just get this over with before they catch up,"

"Kill everything, that's what it said," said Andromeda.

Theseus shrugged. "Probably just Godhand,"

"I'm not sure," said Andromeda, "It sounded...almost demonic..."

There was a burst of static in their ears, followed by Phoenie's wavering voice. "I believe Mr Gibson and Ms Kent are attempting to destroy the building!"

"Awesome! Never realised they had it in them," replied Chris.

"See, must've been the comms," said Theseus with a smug grin, pleased once again that logic had dismissed the girls' lust for supernatural explanations.

"Destroying the building?" said John with a confused look on his face, as if faced with a calculation that read  $1+1=3$ . He pressed his earpiece. "Not possible," he replied, "I didn't bring anything of that capacity,"

"You're alive!" Phoenie's voice shrieked in their ears. Theseus winced.

"They jammed us," explained John, "Underground facilities. Technology you wouldn't believe. Definitely not standard Godha—" – the distant sound of a door hissing open and footsteps marching on metal interrupted the conversation – "oh. Oh, this isn't good..."

"Run," said Theseus. Ignoring the potential danger, he flung himself down the rest of the steps, followed by his two companions. John almost slipped over, but Andromeda managed to catch him and their momentum sent them crashing into Theseus. He would have fallen had he not been so physically strong and not rooted to the spot like petrified tree.

"This is impossible," he said, throwing his light around the cavern.

"Completely inconceivable," added John.

"John, what's going on?" Phoenie whispered.

"Phoenie, I'm—I'm thinking we might have gotten in over our heads."

“John, what is it?”

“This isn’t good,”

Before he could explain further, the signal exploded in their ears, stunning them. John winced. “They’re jamming us for real this time,”

“Dammit,” said Theseus, his hand shaking as he swept the light over the rows and rows of boxes in front of them. Boxes marked 'ammunition' and 'explosives' sat next to racks of guns of every type, from the smallest of pistols to the most deadly of rocket launchers, rail guns and plasma cannons. Enough weaponry to take over the town – hell, enough weaponry to *level* the town.

“They’re not just a cult,” whispered John.

They could hear the crash of boots draw nearer, the clicking of rifles readying to fire.

Theseus shivered. “They’re an army,”

In seconds, with more efficiency than they’d thought possible from the formally bumbling security, they were surrounded. They weren’t ace students or heroes of justice: they were just idiots who’d walked into a blatant trap. There had been times when Theseus had received a beating in a martial arts tournament or street fight that felt better than this, the feeling that they had been totally played like fools.

Defeated, Theseus dropped his torch and raised his hands, joining John and Andromeda in surrender.

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Phoenie and Lyra threw themselves through another set of double doors and crashed through a thong of Godhand's underlings before they’d realised what was happening. In a heroic bid to save them, Doyle had put himself between the girls and the Inquisition, though Lyra had been forced to drag Phoenie away. Phoenie hated the idea of leaving any one else behind, especially now John, Theseus and Amanda were...

“Oh, look who we have here,”

Blocking their escape were three figures Phoenie had been hoping to avoid. Astrid sauntered forwards, wagging a patronising finger at them.

“You girls have really gone and done it this time,” she said, mocking them like a mother chastising her miscreant children, “Now we’ve going to have to round you all up and punish you for misbehaving,”

“Get outta our fecking way,” growled Lyra.

Astrid placed her hands on her hips and looked down her nose at them. “I’d rather not, you piece of vagrant trash.”

Phoenie grabbed Lyra's arm before she could launch an attack. The smaller girl put up a small struggle, but thankfully relented before she threw their chances of escape away.

“I should be thanking you for all this, Rogan,” said Astrid, “After all, it’s thanks to you that this all happened.”

“It’s your fault,” Phoenie snapped back, “You arrested my friends on false charges!”

Astrid stifled a guffaw, while Elizabeth and Vespa giggled among themselves. “I think you’ll find it really is all *your* fault,” said the blonde leader of the trio, “You’re the one who sent your friend here to ‘investigate’ us. If it wasn’t for her, we wouldn’t have those weird photographs to prove anything – and I believe those photographs were your idea anyway? So it comes back to you *again!*”

Phoenie thought for a moment, even though Lyra was tugging at her arm to warn her about the Inquisitors that were coming up behind them – Phoenie knew about all that, but *this* was more important! There were too many questions that needed answering – *immediately*.

“What've you done to Amanda?” she asked.

“Inducted her,” said a nonchalant Astrid.

“*Inducted?*”

“She's one of us now,”

“That's what you think!”

Astrid tossed her hair back and waltzed back towards her companions. “How else would we have gotten those photographs?” she asked, “She sold her friends out because we're giving her what they never could. Glorious, isn't it?”

Lyra slipped out of her oversized robes like a snake shedding its skin, then dived towards Astrid with her fist pulling back to strike hard at the prissy girl's face. It would have knocked her flat out had Vespa not stepped in to tackle Lyra to the ground. With a twist of her subtle body, Lyra managed to throw out a leg and trip Astrid, knocking her backwards and into a startled Elizabeth.

“Get the feck outta here!” she shouted towards Phoenie, just as the Inquisitors behind her began to move to intervene.

“I can't believe...” she said to herself, “It's not true. IT'S NOT TRUE!”

Phoenie stumbled forwards, throwing her robes back to try and distract the Inquisitors for even the briefest of seconds as she jumped over the twisted pile of fighting girls and through another set of doors.

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Chris couldn't believe what he was hearing. “Awesome! Never realised they had it in them,” he replied, still trying to imagine the ineffective duo of Joel and Elone blowing shit up. He almost wished he'd gone with them. Even the boring attempt by John Smith to try and justify why they *couldn't* be destroying the building wasn't enough to deter Chris's daydream of a hot red-head shooting up bad guys with dual pistols while everything exploded around her. Joel wasn't even part of the equation any more.

“Phoenie, I'm—I'm thinking we might have gotten in over our heads.” said John, breaking Chris out of his fantasy. For once, the bespectacled little know-it-all didn't sound like, well, he knew it all. In fact, he sounded *scared*.

“John, what is it?” asked Phoenie. Chris leaned forward in his seat, ready for the juicy revelations.

“This isn't good,” said John.

And then the earpiece began screaming in Chris's ear, before shutting down a moment later. Frustrated at its ineffectiveness, and the total anticlimax, he ripped the small device out of his ear and tossed it into the shrivelled foliage.

For the next five minutes or so, he returned to his fantasy of an Elone with attitude (but not an attitude that grated against his, as was the case with the real Elone) and wondered how long it would be before plumes of smoke rose from the behind the tall walls. If they were blowing the place up, they'd better do it with style! Chris expected nothing less than to see the half-finished clock tower come tumbling down, bell tolling the death of Godhand as it did.

It wasn't a plume of destructive smoke that caught his attention, though. He noticed it in his wing mirror and turned on the car's HUD. With a few swift inputs, he had a rear-view display spread across the windscreen like a movie. The airship was of grandiose design, shaped like the intimidating clawed cross that Godhand used to install fear and obedience in countless weak countries and settlements – much like Torsten. Coloured red and white, with advanced engines and propulsion systems Chris was used to seeing back home in Malkuth, it lowered itself into the manor grounds.

This was too much of an opportunity to miss – Chris loved airships more than he loved cars, and dreamed of flying one of the technological marvels. They were the ultimate

in transportation, able to go anywhere at any time, restricted only by the whims of the pilot and crew. Fuelled by renewable energy, it was even possible for an airship to never land and there were rumours of great ships that had been sailing the high skies for centuries.

But Godhand were the last group he'd expected to use such a vessel, given their alleged dislike for modern technology. Chris had imagined them travelling around in run-down vans, or using archaic helicopters and aeroplanes. He certainly hadn't imagined them owning their own custom-designed airship with flowing decals and state-of-the-art engines! It was a sight worth the effort of scaling the wall, using the same rope those idiots had used for their break in.

From his uncomfortable vantage point, Chris could see the airship settle down at the front of the mansion and watched as a hatch opened on its underside. For a moment he wondered what could possibly be hiding in the bowels of a ship with such elegant, sweeping curves – surely an ageing church leader hobbling on a cane? – but once again Godhand surprised him.

He could hear the marching before he saw the troops. Clad in red-and-white metallic armour and carrying swords at their sides, they looked like the knights he'd only ever heard stories of as a child: Crusaders who spread across the wastelands like a plague, destroying anything they couldn't convert. Those fictional warriors were said to be like giants, with faces of demonic metal and voices that echoed like ghosts. From atop the wall, Chris couldn't tell if those descriptions were less fictional than he'd believed, but for the sake of his fellow students, he hoped they were exaggerations.

Then, after the knights had formed an orderly corridor down the ramp, a figure descended from the airship that caused Chris to gasp in quiet fear. Taller than the knights and dressed in garish robes and a large hat, the figure took purposeful strides towards the manor, a large staff clanking alongside him. For a moment he paused and Chris was sure he looked directly at him, but it had to be paranoia: Chris was hiding behind that hologram thing, right? He could see it still working! The figure disappeared into the manor – Chris breathed again – and was followed by the knights. There was a brief pause at the entrance, but soon they were gone. Chris contemplated warning the others, but as he reached for his ear piece, he realised it was somewhere in the dirt.

“Ah well, live and let die,” he sighed.

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Phoenie, ignoring the stitch burning at her side, barged through the doors and, in a moment of unexpected desperation, jumped down the first flight of stairs. Momentum carried her into the table at the bottom but she didn't stop to nurse the pain spreading across her thigh and stumbled her way down the next flight of stairs. She was in the main lobby now, with crimson robes flooding out of every door around her except one: tall, wooden doors through whose cracks Phoenie could see the dull grey light of the evening sky. As Godhand rushed down the stairs and across the lobby to greet her, she made one last push for those foreboding doors, knowing freedom was within her grasp. Freedom and reinforcements. She would...

*CRASH.*

The doors exploded open and the light was obscured by a new wave of figures. Phoenie lost her balance and tumbled to her knees, landing at the foot of a giant.

He looked down at her with tiny eyes, hidden in a wizened face scrunched up in disgust. “Certainly not the welcome a Patriarch expects,” he said, before he spat in her face.

## Chapter 20

# Patriarch

Elone watched as the jagged trails zigzagged their way around another corridor until it was covered in cracks of glowing energy. Then, with a simple click of her fingers, Yokai Kitsune caused it all to erupt in fire. Another corridor incinerated, another incision into Godhand's heart. The two girls fled as the hallway collapsed in on itself, a cloud of black soot chasing after them. Elone had never felt such a rush!

They reached a quiet section of the manor and Yokai closed her eyes, as she always seemed to do after creating an explosion, taking in deep breaths that reminded Elone of meditation lessons. She still had no idea how the strange girl managed to cause so much destruction with just a gesture, but she put it down to some kind of advanced technology from the big city. Glancing outside the window, she noticed the chaos their aggressive behaviour was having: people were running around the courtyard in a panic, either fleeing from the devastation or trying to contain it. If only they realised it was the fault of a couple of teenage red-heads! As she watched the drama with a delighted grin on her face, Elone's attention was caught by the sight of the towering structure jutting out the back of the manor, like some kind of sick phallic representation of power.

"We should totally destroy that thing," she said, jabbing her finger against the window. Yokai looked at it with wide eyes and cooed her approval.

"Torsten Tower," she said, "That's what they call it. Say it's gonna be the biggest tower in the who—ole town. Said they're gonna put a weapon in it to shoot down attackers,"

Elone looked bemused. "Why'd they want to do that? Why'd anyone want to attack Torsten?"

Yokai wasn't paying any attention, though. In the instant Elone had taken her eyes off her, the shorter girl had gone from looking like an absent-minded teenage girl with a cruel smile that betrayed her psychotic tendencies to a defensive figure with narrowed eyes and a serious frown. She reminded Elone less of herself now, and more of those boring girls who studied all day and night to get the best grades. The girls Elone hated.

"It's him, isn't it?" she asked thin air. Moments later, a hazy image shimmered to life in front of her. Elone tried her best not to scream at the sight of the ghostly feathered spider, its mandibles twitching as it spoke with the voice of – Elone couldn't believe it – what sounded like a pubescent boy.

"Indeed, he has arrived on schedule,"

Yokai sighed and shook her head, her multitude of ponytails whipping the air. "Guess this means the fun is over?"

"Affirmative," said the spider/boy.

Elone had seen too much. First crazy nanobot controlled explosions and now holographic spider-children? This was way over her head. "What the hell is going on?!" she asked.

The spider/boy looked in her direction, and she could swear its multiple eyes narrowed in contempt. "That girl would be safer away from here, if you even care,"

"I like her," said Yokai, "She has potential. She can live for the time being,"

Elone took a few steps back from the crazy couple and, for once in her life, wished she was back in the company of Joel Gibson. Even emotionally unstable Ravens were better than this! And to think a few moments ago she'd been enjoying Yokai's company...

"I assume you will be making a dramatic entrance?" said the spider/boy, his attention returned to Yokai. She nodded.

"I'm a Fire faerie, so naturally,"

"I hope not to be disappointed,"

"It'll be a blast,"

“Naturally,”

The spider/boy dissolved into the wind like a bad dream, leaving Elone alone with Yokai. Yokai the 'fire faerie'. Those words kept repeating themselves over in Elone's head: *Fire. Faerie*. The fire part made sense, sure, but *faerie*? It had to be a code name, right? Loads of people had code names and nicknames – especially the vagrants, idols, freedom fighters and criminals – Elone had even tried coming up with one of her own, for when she was famous!

“Oh, you didn't know Yokai was a faerie?” asked Yokai, who must have somehow noticed the confusion etched into Elone's face.

Elone shook her head. “What's a faerie?” she asked, “Is it, like, some kind of rank or job or something?”

“No, silly!” Yokai grinned, and for the first time Elone noticed she had *fangs*. “A faerie is a faerie! You know, from the centre of the planet?”

Elone took a few more steps away. Maybe Yokai was just delusional?

“There's no time to explain the details,” she said with a frown, “Yokai can't let you follow her any more. Yokai has to go deal with someone,”

Elone was lost for words. What else could she say that didn't sound stupid? If Vincent or, worse, Sir Leonardo ever found out she went to save Shelley, invaded Godhand's base with Joel Gibson, and hung around with a pyromaniac schizophrenic who called herself a 'faerie', she'd never be allowed to call herself a Hawk again! Yokai giggled.

“Yokai can feel your heart,” she said, “You're filled with anxiety.” She raised a hand and clicked her fingers. Once again, the zigzag pattern began to spread across a wall. “I'll make you a tunnel to the outside.”

Then she clicked her fingers again and, instead of an explosion, the wall melted, as did the one behind it, and the one behind that. It was as if a blast of energy were sweeping across the building, disintegrating everything in its path and only stopping once it had carved a hole in the brick wall surrounding the manor.

Yokai looked at her and she was serious once again. “Run, Elone Kent. Run far away. This place will fall soon,”

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Even in the inhospitable atmosphere of the manor, where her senses were dimmed by the undercurrents of darkness, Phantasia could sense the new arrival. The leylines had a habit of distorting around powerful forces, like rubber under a heavy weight. This aura in particular was a thoroughly unpleasant one Phantasia wished she could shut out, and she hoped it wouldn't be a permanent addition to the town: something like this would drag in darkness and demons like a light would moths.

Phantasia wondered if, somehow, Bishop Wotan could also feel the dread presence moving ever closer, as the statue of a man she had been studying up until this point was now brushing the creases out of his outfit and breathing with quick, shallow gasps. As always, his thoughts and feelings were well guarded, his own aura as enshrouded as the body under those heavy robes.

Katrina was still hiding at the side of the podium, sitting curled up on the polished steps and playing with the settings on her camera, which Wotan had returned to her without explanation. Her memories were beginning to return, but it would be at least several days until she could piece them together. If it weren't for the constant presence of Wotan, Phantasia would have sat down and told her everything.

The presence reached the doors at the far end of the audience chamber and Phantasia held her breath. She could feel the imposing figures standing beyond the wooden barriers, each one radiating the same malice that seeped through the walls of the manor, as if the true faith of Godhand had been condensed and made manifest. Even

Wotan refrained from breathing, his lips pursed tight as his eyes narrowed on the doors, waiting.

At first a crack of light appeared in the wooden face, then the doors swung open to reveal the entourage standing before the balcony overlooking the courtyard. Four knights suited in breast plates that bore the scythed cross of Godhand marched into the chamber, followed by a figure in garish robes designed to make him resemble a giant. His staff clanked on red carpet like a third leg as he walked with long strides towards the throne and Wotan.

“Bishop Wotan, I find your lack of courtesy extremely disappointing,” he said, his voice booming around the large chamber, “I arrive here expecting a favourable welcome and instead I find scoundrels loose in the corridors, smoke billowing from terrorist attacks, and you, *Bishop*, residing in the bowels of your fortress accompanied by...” he glanced between Phantasia and Katrina with unfavourable eyes, “These two *girls*.”

“I was distracted, Patriarch Vates,” said Wotan, not betraying a thing with his statue-like expression. For a moment the two men stared one another down, until the Patriarch broke and strode up the steps to depose Wotan from this position of power.

“It is fortunate for our people that I have arrived to save them,” said the Patriarch, “Explain these girls. They are not ours. Why are they here?”

“They are guests,” said Wotan, refusing to back down the stairs and cower before his superior, “I was discussing town politics with them.”

The Patriarch sat down in the throne, his robes covering it like a blanket, and glanced at the two girls with distrustful eyes rimmed by deep lines. “They are children, Bishop,” he said, “I do not think they understand politics. And the white-haired one looks dubious. Tell me, girl, what is your name?”

Phantasia took inspiration from Wotan and stared the Patriarch down, but his eyes were filled with stinging malice. The longer she tried to fight him, the more he focused his emotions into those eyes, and the more pain stabbed at her body.

“Her name is Gwen,” said Wotan, taking the pressure off of Phantasia, “She comes from one of the wandering tribes, hence the physical mutations. She was chosen by her people to be an ambassador to Godhand...”

The malice swept away from her and the Patriarch returned his attention to Wotan. “Godhand does not do 'diplomacy', Bishop,” he said, “Is this a part of your dubious schemes to pander to the uninitiated?”

“I have no such scheme, my Lord,” said Wotan, almost – but not quite – edging forward as if to bow, “I merely believe that—“

“What you believe in is the Doctrine!” snapped the Patriarch, “Nothing else. Obedience is everything. There are only three types of people in this world: the faithful, the uninitiated and the heretics. Those who do not know the grace of God shall either understand and accept it, or be destroyed. *That* is what we believe.”

“Then,” began Wotan, watching his superior with a faint smile forming on his lips, “What would my Lord suggest we do?”

“These heretics you have – finally – managed to subdue, what are your plans for them?”

“I was thinking of perhaps rehabilitating them,”

“Not good enough,”

“Then what would my Lord suggest?”

“They will be executed immediately.”

The Patriarch rose from the throne, strode down the steps, swept Wotan aside and rejoined his entourage of knights. With a pause for contemplation he continued onwards, the knights forming a wall, as if to protect him from Wotan, who stood watching with twitching fingers. Once the Patriarch reached the balcony at the far side of the chamber, he stamped his staff on the stone and raised his arms high.

“Followers of the Almighty God, listen to his voice speak. I am the Holy Patriarch Hierodula Vates, sent here to bring order to this devilish chaos. Heresy has been allowed to seep into your peaceful lives through cracks obscured by negligence. I myself shall smoothen these fractures and remove the poison that threatens to destroy your faith.”

Katrina moved forward, as if the reality of the situation had only just dawned on her and she thought she could somehow stop it, but Wotan swept out a long arm, blocking her with his robes. In the distance, the bass-heavy voice of the Patriarch continued.

“Bring to me those accused of heresy. Bring them out into the twilight upon stakes and prepare the pyres. They will burn.”

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Phoenie' felt like she'd been tossed down a mountain. Her legs were bruised, her muscles ached and her head spun. Opening her eyes was a bad idea – the light stung them – and she retreated to the comfort of darkness. How long had she been unconscious? She couldn't even remember *why* she'd been unconscious! She went to rub her head, only to realise her hands were tied. Some uncomfortable shuffling later and she realised it wasn't just her hands – *she* was tied! To a hard pole grinding against her spine, none-the-less! Had Godhand captured her? In a flash the memory returned to her: a memory of a giant towering over her, of knights and gauntlets and heavy blows. She shivered as everything played back in her mind and wondered if she would have been happier to remain ignorant.

The light didn't hurt so much when she opened her eyes next. The sky was dull and grey and she could feel the odd drip of water catch her dirty cheeks. She was in the courtyard of Godhand's manor, facing the church-like structure that dominated the far end, behind which grew a half-finished tower, its skeletal structure showing through gaps in its stone skin. The courtyard itself was a sea of crimson robes as the crowds gathered to watch her. Watch her what? Some of them were whooping and hollering, while others gathered together in scared packs, their eyes darting around as imposing knights stomped around the perimeter.

Then Phoenie noticed she wasn't alone: she was one of many. Kaori was tied to her left and Phoenie realised she'd been the lucky one: the young Raven was naked, her body raked with dry blood and dirt, bruises blossoming across her pale flesh and her hair matted with sweat and tears. Joel wasn't much better, his skeletal figure also covered in cuts and bruises, and Shelley held her head low, her hair covering any expression she might have had. Lyra's arms looked as if she'd been set upon by wild cats, while even Doyle – a fighter – looked limp and defeated. Next to the knights, the oldest, tallest boy in the second year looked like a mouse.

And still Phoenie didn't understand what was going on. Was this some kind of judgement? High up the face of the church, a familiar giant stood overlooking the preparations, whatever they were.

Then some robed men arrived with buckets. Before Phoenie could wonder what was going on, she was drenched in a foul liquid. Whatever it was, it had a strong smell of alcohol and burnt her throat when she swallowed some by accident. Even Doyle was choking from it.

*Clank-clank-clank.* Suddenly there was silence, as if the crowds had been frozen in time.

“I have come to you in your hour of need,” said the booming voice from the balcony, “For too long have the people of Torsten suffered while heresy spreads its foul stench across their land, but that suffering ends today!

“Before us we see proof that a man among your population has been stealing your children and corrupting them for his own purpose. With his co-conspirators, he has plotted

to rise against your beliefs and tear them apart. But he has underestimated the resolve of our Faith. So desperate is he to destroy us, that he would send children primed with explosives to force us into submission!

“But his machinations are at an end. Tonight we gather his corrupted spawn before us and cleanse their spirits with Holy Fire. Let these innocent souls be freed from their pain as the fire burns away their sin. And then, before the fires are extinguished, we shall march upon the heretics and send them into Hell!”

The crowds broke their time-freeze and cheered, like revellers at a music festival about to see their favourite band take the stage. Phoenie finally understood what was going on and why they'd all been covered in such a foul, flammable substance. As the panic rose up inside her she struggled to break free from the chafing ropes, but the more she tried the more the crowd cheered. She wanted to scream at them, at the Patriarch, but she held it back, not wanting to give them the satisfaction. Joel, however, was not so inclined and shouted a stream of profanities at any one who looked his way. Doyle and Lyra were quick to join, though Lyra soon realised what Phoenie had already and quietened down.

But with each passing moment, it became increasingly difficult for Phoenie to restrain her emotions. She felt like a trapped animal and needed to strike out, even if it was just verbally. Then she realised something. Something that filled her with hope: Theseus, John and Andromeda hadn't been captured; Amanda was still incognito in the ranks of Godhand; Katrina and Phantasia were nowhere to be seen; and even Elone, Dante and Chris were around somewhere! There was still hope!

*Clank-clank-clank.*

Phoenie felt hope begin to drift away as the overconfident tones of the Patriarch continued.

“Tonight, you shall finally be rid of that corrupting thorn in your side, and it is all thanks to the efforts of one young girl. One who saw through the charade of her school, the lies of her teachers, and the false friends she thought she had made. She has embraced our teaching and stands with us now as an equal!”

The knights parted the crowd to reveal a hooded girl standing alone before the captives. Was this the girl who'd brought this entire calamity down upon them? The one who, somehow, convinced Godhand that Phantasia and the others were guilty of 'heresy'? She was too short to be Astrid – who was cowering under the glare of the knights alongside her similarly petrified companions, Elizabeth and Vespa – but who else *could* it be?

“Come, Amanda Hartell, show us the glory of redemption!”

No.

Just the same name.

A coincidence.

It *couldn't* be possible.

“Show your friends your true face!”

The hood came down.

Short, dark hair held back with a simple pin.

The pin Theseus has given Amanda.

*Her* Amanda.

*Their* Amanda.

Phoenie cried out. She couldn't hold it back. Her self-control was shattered. All those lessons from Mr Haan about resisting pain now void. All those meditation techniques and emotion control exercises wasted. Phoenie screamed loud. It didn't matter what the crowd thought.

“Listen to the cries of a demon! Listen to her scream words of deception!”

*It can't be. She wouldn't do it. She couldn't do it. We're friends! We're all friends!  
We're best friends!*

She heard Joel struggle. "I'm gonna...fucking...kill you..." he cried, though who it was directed at she didn't know.

"Shut the feck up, Gibson!"

"Why don't YOU shut it?"

"Stop fucking arguing, you two!"

"Joel...I-I can't get free...I don't wanna die..."

"I guess I was a demon after all..."

*Amanda...why?*

"Now, Amanda, show your worth as a child of Godhand. Cleanse them."

A knight passed her a flaming torch and she stepped forward, the power of death held in her trembling, treacherous hands.