

Ihmunat

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Words drifted from the other side of the wall. The phrases spoken probably made sense, but I didn't care to assemble meaning out of them. I was content to stare into the greenish semi-darkness on the other side of the hallway, to leave my body in the soft bed formed my hands, folded in front, and the stone wall, warmed by my back. It was a little like a bed, for a girl barely awake in the tired hours of the early morning. But I didn't fall asleep. I was not tired. It was mid-afternoon.

Out of the drifting voices, one, male and deep, took charge. The others were silenced.

“I think we need to get started. Dalmer is late, but I don't think we can make do without him, at least for now. So, as promised, this afternoon you may all speak freely about the Nexus and the Nexus users, without any fear of economic repercussions from the Ganzend family.”

Quiet for a moment.

“Might I first ask why this topic was banned in the first place? Not all of us were Lords two years ago.”

“Fair enough. The answer is simple--after Vermillion destroyed part of Ihmunat's school, this Council could talk about nothing except the Nexus she'd destroyed it with. The same conversation always ended in the same place, and I got tired of hearing about it while the Council had more important things to talk about.”

“I still don't understand how you can say that--that we've had more important things to talk about. Those two artificial humans of yours showed that they could knock over a building with their minds! Even a simple mistake by them could kill dozens of people. Why do the Ganzends have the right to put the whole of Ihmunat in danger?”

“There are many ways to accidentally kill dozens of people.” said the Ganzend Kurios. “The truth is that Carnelian and Vermillion have excellent control over their powers, and they have no wish to alienate themselves by causing harm. I think time has shown that any risks were outweighed by the

benefits.”

“Benefits to the Ganzends, maybe...”

It was always like this.

“Hmm? What's that supposed to mean?”

“What I meant was that you've been using the Nexus users to gather wealth and power for your family.”

They were talking about me like I was an object. I had never asked for these powers...never wanted them.

The head of my family, our kurios, responded irritably. “Wealth, yes--and I think that in any fair world we would profit from them, since we were the ones who spent years of work building them...” Years of work *building* them.

“But I thought,” retorted some lord whose voice I didn't recognize, “that Lord Dalmer hadn't even realized that the artificial humans had this Nexus power until two years ago...”

“How do you expect me to answer everyone's questions if nobody lets me finish speaking?”

Another silence. They'd been *building* me. Like a house, or a statue. I'd always wondered whether the head of my family saw me the same way he saw the humans. I'd tried so hard not to stand out, to act normal, to be friendly and capable....After I'd switched to my third body, I'd never met a person who could realize I wasn't human without being told....Why couldn't they just pretend I was human and let me live my life?

My Kurios at last decided to continue. “Your last question would be one better posed to Lord Dalmer when he arrives. Now, as for power, I believe I have kept the promise I made two years ago--I have never threatened anyone with the Nexus for political gain.” That didn't mean he hadn't wanted to.

“But I don't think anyone would deny that you *have* gained politically from it.” The voice was one I recognized--it belonged to the Kurios of the Scizemar family, arguably the second most powerful family in Ihmunat, a family with many allies. Even the Ganzend Kurios wouldn't trifle with them.

“You tell the Lords of this Council to do things which you wouldn't have dared tell them two years ago.”

“You refer to how I now keep the Council meetings from degrading into a childish shouting matches?” My Kurios answered calmly.

“He who controls the debate controls the debate's outcome. Two years ago, we were able to find the solutions that were best for everyone because all Lords had an equal voice here. But now I see that disintegrating--you have almost become a King, just like the Kings of Reimersage.” These voices...weren't coming from inside my head. They came from the other side of a wall. A real wall...

“The difference is that I realize fully--” Could this possibly be the Council house...!? “--how much of Ihmunat's prosperity is due to the Council--” On the other side of this wall was the Council--the most powerful men and women in all of Ihmunat... “--and to the way the Council meetings allow every family to look out for its own interests.” If I was discovered here eavesdropping, there's no telling what punishment I would receive, or how much further it would divide the Lords....I needed to get out of here, I needed-- “I have absolutely no desire to change that.”

“If you really care for this council then you will get rid of the power imbalance that the Nexus has caused. Destroy the Nexus users, or make sure that their power belongs to the Council and not to the Ganzend family.”

“I think you're overestimating the command I have over Carnelian and Vermillion. If you believe I could just order them to topple other families for the sake of expanding my power, you are mistaken. The power imbalance is not as great as you imagine.”

“Oh, this is a surprise--so you admit that you don't actually have command over them? Shouldn't that worry you a little bit? I'm not sure I would even trust a real ten-year-old with that kind of power.”

“Hold on--you're not quite accurate saying they're ten years old, because, in terms of mental development, they mature much faster than humans. They have the minds of seventeen-year-olds--at

least, so Lord Dalmer says, and I'm inclined to agree. But to answer your actual question, perhaps it should worry us a little. This is about the time that Lord Dalmer would be jumping in to defend the freedom of the Nexus users. I have actually asked Lord Dalmer this question myself a few times, and he has more than a few words to say about it. The main point is that Vermillion and Carnelian have been raised to desire acceptance from the Ganzends and from the people of Ihmunat. I believe that they would not be happy fighting against us.

“And if any of you think that I'm just being soft on Lord Dalmer, just wait until you see him arriving late. It has been a very long time since he has done this much to provoke me.”

“So then you won't reconsider checks of any sort on their power.”

“Not of the sort that have been proposed. As I have said, they would require my family to give up what is rightfully ours, and would be of no great use to our city.”

“Uhhm, might I mention something a bit more positive about the Nexus?”

“Ah, good, Lord Hefftleere--I see you're finally ready to say something.”

“Well...I...didn't...have any opportunity....I'm sorry. The point is, two months ago, when one of my family's buildings caught fire, Carnelian showed up out of nowhere. If she hadn't been there, I'm sure a number of my kin would have died, and the fire might have even spread to other buildings. We really do owe them a bit of thanks for that.”

“And I might add that we never asked for any payment for this, since it was for the good of the entire city that the fire was stopped.”

“I would also like to add something.”

“Of course.”

“A similar story, really.” A new voice, it was familiar somehow. “Just yesterday, my son was in terrible pain, to the point where he couldn't walk. And, well, even the most experienced doctor in my family didn't know enough to perform the surgery he needed...and, to make matters worse, this summer my family lost two of its fishing boats in a storm, and so we're running short on the funds to pay for a

surgery.” It was Lord Hydershik! I had seen him yesterday. “But it hurt just to look at him--he just...wouldn't stop screaming--we were...really at a loss for what to do. So we finally took her over to the Ganzend's infirmary and, well, we tried to explain our financial situation, but Vermillion wouldn't even hear it--she just walked by me and started treating my son.” I remembered the boy. He'd had a kidney stone. There hadn't been anything difficult about my decision to simply treat him. “Ten seconds with her Nexus and my son was completely healed. In the end, she even convinced the other doctors not to even charge for it--apparently the procedure had been that easy for her.” It really had been--I'd merely found the stone with my Nexus, and crushed into powder. “I think her medical skills alone are enough to justify keeping her alive and free.”

“Are these stories having any effect on you, Lord Scizemar?”

“Yes, I can see that the artificial humans have gained some popular support, but that's not my point.” It stung. He still wasn't convinced, even after all the good Carnelian and I had done. “They could still have done these things even if they weren't completely controlled by the Ganzend family.”

But...the Ganzend family was my home...

“I believe I have already explained why this will not happen.” If my Kurios could defend me and Carnelian...even if it was for the wrong reasons...it was better than nothing. I didn't want to listen anymore.

I examined the hallway, the dull stones that I'd been staring at for a long time. The words kept coming. “At the very least, then--” Rectangular stones lay in an interlocking expanse that stretched into the darkness, with a regularity broken only by the photophore that illuminated them, and by the body that lay beneath the photophore at the base of the wall. “--lay out some rules as to when the Nexus can and cannot be used,” There was a dead guard across from me. His blank eyes stared eerily at my feet, reflecting the dull glow of the photophore. This was bad...how he had gotten there...? Why I couldn't remember how I had gotten there...!? “and create a body which can decide whether these rules have been broken.” This hallway was...somewhere inside the Council house, and Ihmunat's council

was discussing right on the other side of the wall. And there was a dead guard on the floor beside me. I didn't even want to think what would happen if I were discovered, I needed to get-- "As it stands, we have no way of even clearly understanding the promises you've made, much less holding you to them."

"Yes...rules. We should talk about them. However, I think Lord Dalmer should be here when we do so, so if you'll excuse me for a moment. Fushanyan!"

A door opened. "Yes, master?"

"Please find Lord Dalmer. He's probably in his laboratory."

"Understood."

The door closed. Something changed.

I wanted the light now. The darkness in the hallway was suppressive; the light on the other side of the wall was energy. There was no door, so I reached into the wall with my Nexus and opened it instead. Light filled my vision, washing over me, as I let the section of the stone wall fall over, and through the opening I saw dozens of people sitting above me in semicircles. The wall made a loud, smacking thud as it reached the floor. One person, a man, sat alone in the center, below the semicircles, just a few meters away. Everyone stared at me. I stepped into the room and stopped. It was comfortable here.

There were a few minutes of calm, quiet, silence. Then I heard whispers. Someone near the bottom of the semicircles spoke loud enough for others to hear. "Come now, Ganzends, is this some sort of joke?"

The one in the center, the Ganzend Kurios, spoke with his of intimidation. "If it is, then I am no more a party to it than you are. Vermillion, you had better start explaining." After another few moments silence, the man in the center stood up.

Something changed. A new vision filled my consciousness--frightening, exciting, pleasant....It was art, of the strongest sort imaginable. I yearned for it to be real. Like any human would yearn, upon seeing the naked body of her lover. In that vision...this man's chest was open, his heart, lungs,

and everything beneath were on the floor....He had fallen over them. And I was the one that had made it happen. It needed to be made real. I unfurled my Nexus, expanded it across the gap between us, felt the chest, heart, and lungs...they were were all there, all still speaking in my direction. I lodged my Nexus into the bones in his chest, and pulled lightly apart. The bones splintered; the skin tore; blood splashed. Some of the warm liquid landed on my face. It was beautiful, and it matched my vision perfectly. The scene filled my senses, gave me more pleasure than any work of art I had ever seen before. People above were screaming, running. They, too, needed to become a part of the vision. I reached through the walls and encircled the chamber with my Nexus, barricading the doors and reinforcing the walls. This made the task easy--take what was on the inside, and bring it to the outside, at my own pace. I perfected each body in turn, by the end taking less than a second on each one. Soon, no intact bodies remained. All was still. All was beautiful. I was comfortable again.

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The sun shone brightly in the clear, cold sky above the streets of Ihmunat, onto the cobblestone street and the bustling people that occupied it. Cold as it was, today's walk to the Pichenneu bank was quite pleasant in my warmer cloak. Early autumn could be far worse.

The walk was less than half a kilometer, but the streets had become more crowded as Tuvalent and I approached the marketplace. We were less than a quarter kilometer from its center now, passing, on our right, the Alguace family vicus, with its artificial streams that cascaded down transparent rocks of Scizemar plastic, like melted ice flowing across a glacier. When the wind was right, they sprayed mist into the street. Across from the fountains, two young women--most likely servants, I couldn't tell which family--unloaded potatoes from a cart into a dark shed, where massive pans of water on the floor kept the potatoes from drying out while they cured. Men and women carried baskets, pushed carts; a group of children ran toward the cascades, laughing; half a dozen sheep were herded away from the city center.

“See that, Artellith? I've never seen the curing houses this full before,” commented my cousin

Tuvalent. “The Gods must have been pleased with us this year. What do you think the price is going to be when we get to the market?”

Tuvalent and I had discovered through our idle musings what an odd and fickle thing gold amounted to--completely useless on its own, but valued above any other substance. Today it had called a young Lord and his cousin over to the Pichenneu vicus, so that, with the lord's permission, the useless substance could be released to some other family and trigger the construction of a building. We edged our way around the a cartful of pottery as I searched for something insightful to say.

“Less than its weight in fish, I can only assume,” I said finally.

“You say it like it's a bad thing.”

“If the fishermen can't sell their fish, then they'll leave the business, and there won't be any fish to sustain us the year when the harvest is bad.” I was teasing him.

“So the Gods are conspiring to kill us all through this happiness, then.” said Tuvalent with mock-seriousness echoing my own.

I recognized a face bobbing rapidly through the crowd ahead of us: tall, old, balding Woniceng Fushanyan. He was one of my father's best servants, and the servant who had tended him at the Council of Lords for several years now, thus the white and gold robes he wore. He was traveling in the opposite direction, pushing carefully past those who were in less of a hurry than he was. I pointed him out to Tuvalent, and we stepped through the crowd to intercept him. Fushanyan changed course when noticed us, and when we met he bowed deeply.

“Hey, what's this?” I asked. “Why aren't you with the Council?”

Fushanyan replied quickly. “Lord Dalmer hasn't arrived yet, master. Your father asked me to find him.”

“Oh...” how frustrating. “Well--less than half an hour ago, Lord Dalmer took Vermillion to his lab...I would assume that he's just lost track of time there.” I hadn't even thought to remind him of the Council meeting, though I had long known of his absent-mindedness.

“Thank you, master. I'll be sure to check there first.” Fushanyan departed with another bow.

Fushanyan's story was worrying...perhaps even alarming...as Lord Dalmer and I were probably the only Lords truly sympathetic to Vermillion and Carnelian's situation. It was little secret that many of the Lords believed Vermillion and Carnelian dangerous, especially recently, with the odd, baseless rumors going around about the Nexus having thoughts of its own. Most of them, at least, believed that the Nexus made the Ganzend family too powerful. Some even wanted the pair killed. As Vermillion's friend since her first day at school, I wasn't about to let that happen; as Lord Dalmer had built and raised them both, I could only assume he shared the sentiment. I would have been there right now were it not the rule of the city council that the Ganzends were only allowed three Lords at each meeting. My father, Tuvalent's father, and Lord Dalmer took precedence. With Lord Dalmer gone, only Ganzend Femurly, the first director of Ihmunat Institute, remained at the Council as a faithful representative of Carnelian and Vermillion. She had been the closest thing to a mother that Vermillian and Carnelian had, and I knew she cared deeply for them. She couldn't really be counted, though, since she had only been invited to explain Carnelian's and Vermillion's upbringings, and she lacked the courage to argue a decision from the Council.

I made my decision and turned to Tuvalent. “I think we better check on the Council meeting....I really doubt my father would concede anything important, but who knows.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” said Tuvalent, and so we pushed our way rapidly through the throng.

We took side streets to avoid going through the town center, but still spent most of the time threading our way through crowds of people. I only half-paid attention to where I was going; I was too preoccupied imagining what I would say to the Council. Less than two minutes later we were beneath the two-story tall, white stone columns of the Council house that towered over the restless street. Hurrying between them, I couldn't help but notice again their smooth, shiny surface, which remained even after decades without polishing, a tribute to the incredible resilience of the Scizemar plastic that

encased the entire building. It must have cost a fortune.

We entered through the wide main doorway into the expansive, brightly-lit lobby, with its roof of alternating opaque and clear plastic beams. It was empty and quiet, except for a single, short man in the robes of a Council servant, who stood near one of the entrance hallways to the Council Chamber. Upon seeing us, he called out nervously.

“Ah, your highness--” He broke off, uncertain of what to say.

“What?” I said as I crossed the lobby toward him, allowing my tone to show the lack of time.

“Well, about a minute ago,” he said hurriedly, “I heard this loud thud and a great deal of shouting and--screaming--from inside the Chamber. It only lasted for a few seconds, and since then nobody has made another sound.”

I slowed, unsure what to make of the statement. “What do you mean, 'nobody has made another sound'?”

“Well, normally I can hear when someone's talking in the Chamber, but...I haven't heard anything since...then.” He finished on a high, pitiful note, “I...think something terrible might have happened to them...”

Of course, without permission from a Lord, he wasn't allowed to enter the chamber and check. It sounded to me more like an overactive and superstitious imagination than anything truly dangerous--it seemed more likely that something like a mouse had found its way into the Council chamber, sending some of the Lords into a shouting panic, and ultimately prompting my father to silence the lot of them.

Yet perhaps something was terribly wrong, as the servant said. Either way, the servant would stand there staring his face of blood unless I told him to do something.

“I suppose it's better to be safe.” I said to nobody in particular, before turning to the servant. “Go down the road, away from the town center, until you reach the Hefftleere houses. You'll find one of my kinsmen there, and he'll have a Golem.” The servant tensed slightly at the word. Most people outside of the Ganzend family were afraid of Golems. I ignored the movement. “Tell him to bring the

Golem here, and tell him the message came from Ganzend Artellith.”

“Yes, master.” The servant hesitated a moment, then left hurriedly.

After a moment watching him, I turned to Tuvalent. “Well, shall we see what they're up to?”

“Yeah...” Tuvalent's answer was quiet and timid.

“Look, I'm sure there's nothing wrong in there...” Although, Tuvalent's hesitation was making me re-think. There were no other entrances to the Council chamber besides through walls of stone and plastic, and essentially nowhere to hide inside; yet as the echoes my voice died away, the silence that replaced them was complete, no matter how hard I strained my ears. Tuvalent looked questioningly.

“All right. If you want to, we can wait outside for the Golem.”

“Eh?--” Tuvalent seemed startled. “--No, I'll go.”

“All right then.” In a way, the silence made me even more curious. I led the way through the short hallway to the Chamber, and quietly eased open the door at its end.

Then I was staring at the Council. The pieces that were left. Blood, splashed on the walls, now running away in rivulets down the stairs. I could smell iron from blood, vomit from the burst stomachs, and dozens of other body fluids. It made me sick. My mind searched for a reaction, for a way to make sense of it all, but nothing came. For several moments, I simply stared, adrenaline pulsing, searching for a way to believe that this wasn't real.

Tuvalent stared beside me.

I couldn't be doing this--Tuvalent needed me. The Ganzends, the whole city, needed me to face the situation and react. What would my father have done? I wanted to run, to distance myself, but quickly suppressed the thought. We were still alive, and the whole room was still; nothing was trying to kill us. My father would have thought first of the safety of those still alive...tried to figure out what had happened, tried to understand what it meant for the state. I also briefly imagined him looking into the carnage and saying something sarcastic. Death had never bothered him very much.

“Not quite what I expected.” I tried to sound calm, but I couldn't quite space the syllables right.

I shut my eyes, trying to think. "I think we better figure out what happened here," I said, placing the emphasis on 'we.' Tuvalent, understanding my meaning, closed the door behind him. The truth was that I did know of a power that could kill this many in seconds, while leaving the rest of the room intact. If a Nexus had caused this, then I was no safer on the streets than in here, or with a dozen guards protecting me. The fact that I remained alive meant no Nexus user wanted to kill me. It didn't make any sense at all, and the sickening smell overwhelmed my reasoning.

I carefully stepped through the room, towards the nearest piece of any considerable size. It was the lower half of a torso with its legs still attached, which lay behind the back row of the Chamber. By the time I reached it I had forgotten what I was looking for; in those steps a dozen half-thoughts had rushed through my head, of Vermillion, the Nexus, the Lords, my family....My family...was in terrible danger now. We would be blamed for this, whether we had caused it or not. There would be war.

The Nexus. I wanted to confirm whether the damage had been done by a Nexus.

It was a torso and legs. The arms and head were gone. So were its insides. The breastbone's split surface was smooth like glass and perfectly flat; the ribcage had been roughly torn apart, removing the lungs and heart altogether, while shredding the muscles and spinal column that had held the chest together.

I couldn't look anymore. I was staring into the torso of a man--a Lord I had doubtless known. The smell attacked me again, and so I closed my eyes and held my breath. A Nexus had done this--no knife-wielder could have cut a breastbone like that. The horrible violence...and worse, the conclusion I was slowly drawing about its cause...I my mind wouldn't let me make meaning about it. I had spent so many years...convincing everyone that the Nexus wasn't dangerous...that Carnelian and Vermillion...my best friend...could be trusted with their power. It couldn't have been them...they had no reason to do something like this. Their whole lives, the distrust and contempt this city had shown them had made them more gentle and caring than anyone. It wasn't right...it wasn't right...that they should be the most obvious culprits.

Which was why I needed to think now...to prevent a panic that would point all fingers needlessly at them. If my father was dead now, I was the Ganzend Kurios, the most powerful man in the city. I was barely seventeen, with little more than a year of experience as a Lord. I wasn't sure I was quite ready for this yet.

"I'm going to look for my father," I said to Tuvalent. Tuvalent seemed to be in something of a trance, staring at the wall beside him, but I still heard a quiet, affirmative "Mm." I started to edge my way down the stairs, until near the bottom, both my father and Tuvalent's father, my uncle, were in view. The two of them were almost always together, far more than my father and I were together. They were allies even though my uncle criticized my father constantly, whether it made sense to criticize or not. Had been...had criticized. I wasn't going to hear their voices ever again.

Then something moved above me, near the middle of the chamber. I whipped around to stare at the movement, and recognized her instantly. Vermillion. She had been lying across two chairs, and now rose lazily to a sitting position, as if we had woken her. Her tunic was deep green with the triangle of the Ganzend family: a silvery gray strip sewn over the right shoulder, tapering to a point ended at her breastbone. Light brown hair spilled over her shoulder, hampered slightly by the dried blood that clung to it. The deep green of the tunic was stained in most places with an even darker color. There were a few red flecks on her otherwise perfect face. Once properly seated, she stopped moving entirely, staring with unfocused eyes into a piece of somebody's torso.

I watched her for a long time, unable to move or think or speak or do anything except urge myself to wake up...this couldn't possibly be real. Vermillion would never do this. Half-thoughts again spilled through my consciousness. Explanations for this situation that explained nothing, words I should say which could say nothing of someone who could have done this. Ways to protect myself from a force than nothing could defend against. I was so terribly vulnerable here.

A tiny grin appeared on her face. I felt a pressure on my neck, as if a dozen ropes had been wrapped around it and tightened with the weight a dozen men. The crushing pain and futile lung

convulsions were soon replaced by a terrifying need for air. I groped my neck, but only empty space was forcing it into its constricted shape. Vermillion had made no motion. I wouldn't have believed it was her had it not been for that tiny, lifeless smile that disfigured her face.

My vision dimmed. My head felt like it was exploding. I lost focus on everything around me. And suddenly, my vision was filled with bluish light so bright that even my faded vision overwhelmed. My neck was free and I fell onto the steps. I tried to look but my body shook with irrepressible coughs. When I finally forced myself to look, I saw what could only be described as enormous cloud filling almost the entire room. Yet it wasn't a cloud--its outline was too fuzzy and graded, and bright, blueish light seemed to be coming from inside it. Rather, the cloud seemed to be made of light, light that was warm like the sun. The whole body undulated and squirmed like it was alive, and filaments emanated from its brightest bits like bolts of lightning.

Vermillion stood poised and alert then, facing toward the cloud, shielding her face with her arm. The cloud seemed to reach toward her, and she fought it back. Then she was hit--apparently not by the cloud, but by something invisible--and she fell through several rows of chairs into the center of the Chamber. The cloud halved in size as she fell, and then returned to its full volume the moment she had stopped. Now it was closer to her. Vermillion righted herself swiftly and backpedaled the last few feet to the front wall of the chamber. With a twitch of her shoulder, she smashed the entire wall--its columns 20 centimeters thick, made of plastic a hundred times stronger than any wood or stone--bringing it crashing down in pieces. The ceiling and the two stories above the chamber followed. Vermillion disappeared into the dust and falling debris.

It became clear that I was being protected by another Nexus; the beams and jagged rubble from the stories above the ceiling were bouncing a few meters above me, as if hitting an invisible roof, and rolling away in the direction of the collapsed wall. The cloud of light had vanished. When I dared to look up, I saw a figure standing at the Chamber's entrance, beside Tuvalent. It was Carnelian, her volumes of blond hair shimmering in the sun, and her face and body, every bit as beautiful as

Vermillion's, filled with fear and alertness. She was panting as if she had run a long way.

When all the rubble had stopped moving, Carnelian demanded, “Artellith--should I go after her?”

I was supposed to answer...but...how the hell should I know? I didn't want them to fight again...If Vermillion was running away, then Carnelian following her would just lead to more destruction.

“Artellith?” she demanded.

“...Can you tell what she's doing right now?”

Carnelian paused for a moment. “She's running West, through the alleyways--I don't think she's damaging anything or...anyone.”

I didn't want them to fight. At last I said simply, “...Just keep track of her then...as long as you can,”

Lord Dalmer had appeared behind Carnelian, panting as if he had been struggling to keep up with her. Lord Dalmer--he was now the second most powerful Ganzend. He was old, with silver hair and a wrinkled face that now scanned the Council Chamber, mouth hanging slightly open. The rest of us--even Carnelian--watched him. Carnelian seemed not to want to look at the pieces of people that lay among the rubble.

It took several seconds before I had organized my thoughts enough to ask what needed asking.

“Lord Dalmer--what happened to her?” I assumed Carnelian had told him enough that the reference of 'her' was clear.

“I have no idea!” he exclaimed in his gravelly voice. “When she was in my lab--she said she was feeling extremely tired, and so I told her to get some rest! I don't know what happened then.”

Lord Dalmer had an unusual way of talking--he sounded a bit like he was from Reimersage, a city state to the southeast that was just slightly larger than Ihmunat--but the accent wasn't an exact match. It was said that his mouth had been injured when he had been small.

I tried to calm myself--panic was a state of mind entirely unfit for a Lord. Everyone was

waiting for me to tell them what to do next, and it seemed even Lord Dalmer didn't have any more answers than I did. And I didn't know yet what to tell them...too much was unknown. Clearly every family needed to be notified soon--awkward questions would follow if they weren't. But what to tell them? Did I dare try to hide Vermillion's involvement? It seemed unjust. There was something dangerous inside Vermillion, and the rest of Ihumnat would want a say in how the danger was handled. It also seemed like a terrible risk, because a lie, if discovered later, would receive even worse retribution from the Council. Yet my life--and the lives of all Ganzends, and even the peace and prosperity of everyone else--would be in far worse danger if Ihmunat held our family responsible for this...the other families would not forgive easily.

"I'm not sure I want people to know that Vermillion did this," I said slowly and quietly, testing whether they would agree.

"This is a very wise observation." said Lord Dalmer. "I think," he continued, "That we shouldn't tell anyone the details of what happened here until the Council has stabilized. Come up here so that we're not overheard." I realized that we were now out in the open, that anyone could arrive through one of the alleyways.

When I arrived, Lord Dalmer continued in a hushed voice. "None of us saw Vermillion here. You three weren't even in the Chamber when it collapsed. I say that you should form an investigation committee, and you should make me a member. I can keep everyone's attention away from Vermillion."

Lord Dalmer seemed too confident. I wondered how thoroughly he had considered the risks. It sounded like he was advocating the plan most likely to protect Vermillion, rather than the one most likely to benefit Ihmunat. We stood in a room of corpses; certainly their spirits surrounded us now, condemning our plans, plotting their subtle revenge. Ahead loomed the approaching weight of an uncertain future, where I would face the other Lords, without the help of my father or my closest friend, as the city slowly picked apart our lie. It impossible. There was no way through. My father,

unshakable, invincible, was dead. It felt like my mind would simply stop working if I couldn't find a way to escape the utter impossibility of what was happening around me, but no escape offered itself.

“All right,” I said. I was agreeing too. It felt horrible--I had become a fraud, a tyrant. But I didn't want anyone blaming Vermillion. The Vermillion I knew didn't deserve anyone's blame.

So it was decided. “Tuvalent, could you try to find some servants...send out a message that family members of anyone who had been here should come here...that there's been a disaster. Don't give more details than you must.” Lack of details would raise suspicions, but I had no energy left to solve that problem.

“Yes.” he replied intently, trying but failing to hide his lack of faith.

“Carnelian--are you still tracking Vermillion?” I asked.

“Ehh...yeah...she's near the outskirts of Ihmunat now. She's been blocking my Nexus with hers, so I'm not sure...where she is exactly...”

“No more damage?” I asked.

“Not that I can feel. I think she's just running at this point. I can't get that many details from so far away, though.”

“All right. Do what you can to keep track of her...bud don't forget to look busy when people start showing up. We should start re-assembling the bodies--so families can bring them to their tombs.”

“And so that it looks like we're looking for survivors.” Lord Dalmer growled. “you should help, Carnelian--the more we disturb the site, the less evidence there will be of what actually happened.”

Carnelian shuddered. “I hope you know it isn't any more pleasant to move them with a Nexus than with a hand.”

<3>

I was walking.

And I was terrified.

I was...walking away from something that terrified me....I wanted to run but something terrible would happen if I ran.

But what was it? I tried to think back...fought against the stupefying fear. I was beyond the outskirts of Ihmunat now...there was just grass on either side of the dirt road, no buildings....The only person I could see ahead was a man with a cart. He was probably a hundred meters ahead.

Before this...I must have been in Ihmunat...I vaguely remembered running through city alleyways. I felt behind me with my Nexus. There was nothing...the closest people were near the buildings at the outskirts of Ihmunat...far behind me.

A breeze washed over me, removing all the warmth from my clothing. I was incredibly cold. I didn't have anything on over my tunic...why wasn't I wearing anything more than that? I had pulled my hands inside my tunic...probably because it was warmer that way, but I couldn't remember. My hair had fallen over my face so my left eye was obscured...I couldn't imagine why I had hadn't fixed it yet.

Inside Ihmunat...something had happened. Something I still wanted to get away from. Where had I come from?

A huge, pale-blue cloud flashed through my memory. The cloud was dangerous. It had tried to hurt me, and so I had fought against it. The cloud had felt like Carnelian's Nexus.

I had been fighting with Carnelian? ...Why? I didn't know. I had never seen a Nexus glow like that, either--the Nexus was usually invisible. Then again, I had fought her Nexus with my full strength--I had never done that before.

But why had I been fighting Carnelian? I didn't know. I was too cold. My tunic was wet, too. I pulled an arm out to examine the wetness. ...It was deep red and sticky. I stared at it in horror...obviously blood...and struggled to remember where it had come from.

The thought of blood triggered vague images. A room full of shredded bodies. I had wanted...longed...to tear a man's chest apart. I had done it. I had felt his chest, the fragile bones and sinews...then broken them, a horrid sensation which I still felt as clearly as the cold around my

body...but which had brought me intense pleasure at the time. It seemed impossible. It didn't make any sense at all. That I had the capacity to feel like that...that reasoning had done nothing to fight against the feeling. The person I had been up until that moment would have done everything in her power to show mercy, would have placed the feelings of others before her own. She wouldn't have even been able to watch it...would have given her own life to prevent it from happening. But the memories were there...the blood was there...I was running from my home city. Nothing of what I thought I was had made any difference.

There were still people nearby. I needed to get away from them...far away. I was putting them in danger. I pulled my arm back inside my tunic and started running. It was the only rational choice. That's what I told myself...and I told myself that other feelings could wait. But it didn't matter...all I could think of was the city, the family, the friends I had known and loved, as it all shrank into the distance behind me.

Twenty minutes later, I entered the Yellow Forest and slowed to a walk. I could hear only the wind rustling through the leaves behind my own heavy breathing and footsteps. The Yellow Forest, which supposedly stretched many kilometers to the north, was filled with clumps of birch trees, tall grasses, shrubs, rocky ridges, bumps, and hills. Here I was unlikely to encounter anyone--not even loggers would enter this forest for fear of the magical creatures that, according to legend, made their homes here. Thanks to Artellith, though, I had visited the forest many times, and in all those times, I had never encountered any creatures I considered dangerous, even before I could use my Nexus. Now that I was practiced with my Nexus, even the legendary descriptions didn't really seem that frightening. Being in the forest still felt unnerving, though, probably because most of the land I had ever known outside of the city was rocky grassland, where I could see for kilometers around me wherever I went.

Yet another uncontrollable shiver passed from my neck to my extremities. The heat from running had already vanished, and my body was reminding me that heat was the most important goal at

the moment. I could see my breath. It was going to be bitterly cold tonight, and I was wearing only indoor clothing. Without shelter, I was in serious danger of freezing to death after sundown. It would be less windy inside the forest...and hopefully, the fort my friends and I had built years ago would be there as well. Artellith and Tuvalent had found the overhanging rock before I had even met them--even as 10-year-olds, they liked to sneak out of Ihmunat whenever Artellith could find a free Golem to protect them. By the time I had known them for a year, we were coming here regularly, improving it when we could--making chairs and cushions, building a fire pit, improving drainage in the overhanging part...we even found a huge piece of bright red plastic cloth and stretched it over some logs we had leaned against the rock, to form a sort of tent. That cloth had been a valuable find; we could have sold it for the price of ten sheep...except if we'd sold it, our elders in the Ganzend family would have gotten involved and the money would have gone to the family. After I discovered the power of my Nexus, we did a few more things, like burrowing cubbyholes into the rock to store things. One of the things we stored was the fabric. It was my hope that the fabric was still there. But many years of memories also resided at the site...I could still remember showing the fort to Cerulean for the first time...and then, years later, carving a stone memorial there to mourn his death. The memories were old, though...a year ago Artellith had become a lord, and since then we never seemed to find the time to come here anymore.

And so I fought against the memories--the nostalgia ached like an open wound. Artellith and Tuvalent seemed so far away right now. But I couldn't let myself seize up with self pity until I was sure I could survive out here.

At last, I reached the overhanging rock and gazed up at it, still breathing hard. The logs still lay against it, somewhat rotten but still enough to make a fort. I felt the rock with my Nexus, found the cavity with the fabric in it, and pried its stone covering off. Bright red, shining fabric flowed out into my hands, which I noticed were stiffening with cold...and flaking with dried blood. I examined the fabric for a moment and, unable to find any defects or even any differences with the fabric in my

memory, my heart was filled with a momentary relief. Then I quickly set about fastening it to the logs, as we had done many times before. It was hard to manipulate the fabric with my Nexus--one false thought and the fabric would be torn--so I did the job with my hands. I was still breathing hard, even though I wasn't working that hard anymore. This was surprising. Unlike humans, I didn't get energy from the air. My energy came from water, or rather, something in the water. According to Lord Dalmer, the reason I breathed was--well, first off, so I could speak; I didn't need Lord Dalmer to tell me that--but more importantly because I needed to evaporate off water after I had taken the energy out of it. Apparently urinary systems were difficult to build. I had been designed to breathe hard after physical activity like running, but that was just to make me seem more humanlike. Running hardly took any water at all. On the other hand, I must have used up a great deal of water fighting with Carnelian. I was thirsty, yet my body was still trying to lose water. I needed to drink. There was a stream not far from the fort--one of the reasons we had located the fort here--so as I finished with the fabric I headed for it.

As I walked, I found the sun through the trees and estimated that I had four hours of daylight left. I still needed to find a way to stay warm.... We hadn't built the fort intending to spend the night, and so there was hardly any insulation. I couldn't keep moving all night--my joints were already sore with the running I had done. Perhaps it would be enough to bury myself in a pile of leaves. Maybe I could keep a fire going all night. I wasn't sure yet. The leaves around me looked wet.

We had talked about spending the night in the fort a number of times, but there were two problems. First, our elders would have been angry; we had been keeping our fort a secret, so sleeping there would have meant disappearing for an entire night without telling anyone. Artellith might have gotten us around that one, but we still were never completely certain about the forest creatures. We had relied on the Golem and then my Nexus to protect us from whatever we might encounter, but neither I nor Artellith's Golem couldn't do anything while we slept. I truly hoped nothing would come attack me while I slept.

I reached the stream--a shallow, winding trench with water flowing rapidly over dark, jagged rocks and sand--and found a part of the bank where the sun reached the ground. There I dipped my hands in the water. It was painfully cold; my hands ached as I vigorously washed them, and I tried to finish quickly. Then I cupped my hands and withdrew them; I nearly dropped the handful of water as my entire body shivered uncontrollably. I forced myself to drink until my thirst was satisfied, and then I sat and hugged my freezing cold, aching hands. I couldn't bear the thought of washing myself in the stream, but I couldn't live with myself covered in blood any longer. At last, after my hands had stopped aching, I forced myself to rise. I started with my sheepskin shoes, carefully washing their outsides. Then I removed my still-damp tunic, shivering again as the cold air swept across my hairless skin, and submerged the garment. A cloud of crimson water seeped downstream for a moment as I worked the fabric back and forth; when the cloud had dissipated, I pulled my aching fingers out of the water and hung the tunic on a branch. My pants followed; thankfully my socks and loincloth were clean, but after hanging my pants I removed them as well, so that they would stay dry while I washed my skin. This was the worst part. I shivered again, just from the touch of the air. I then dipped my hand in again, and forced myself to spread the painfully cold water over my body, in any place where the blood had splashed my skin or seeped through my clothes. It seemed to repeat endlessly--holding each handful of water in my sore hand, choosing the next place to wash...knowing beforehand what it would feel like. After a few dozen handfuls, and a great deal of shivering, I felt I couldn't stand another handful and decided I was as clean as I could be. I wiped off as much dampness as I could before slipping my clothes--the pants and tunic still wet--back on. They offered no warmth, but they would dry faster if I wore them.

It occurred to me that, a long time ago, I had heated water with my Nexus. I felt stupid for not thinking of it sooner...although there was no guarantee that I would have been able to do it again, since I hadn't really intended to heat the water at the time, nor had I ever wanted to so since then.

I wondered, then, if I could use the technique to start a fire. With this my new goal, I started

quickly back to the fort.

After just a few paces, though, I caught motion out of the corner of my eye, making me freeze in my tracks. I stared between the trees, but eventually decided it had been my imagination. I was just being nervous. The legends about the forest usually involved somebody encountering a strange creature; there was one story about witches, another involving ghosts, and even one about a 'runaway' Golem, which anyone in the Ganzend family would have known was impossible. But one creature showed up in dozens of stories about the forest: the wolf. Wolf stories weren't restricted to the Yellow Forest, but wolves supposedly made their homes in forests. In the legends, they were immortal monsters--twice the size a human--and liked to kill humans with their sharp teeth and claws whenever they could manage it. And for some reason, they killed only humans, never sheep or minks or birds or even mice. It was said that wolves could sense whether or not a human could fight back, and would reveal themselves to a human only when certain that the killing wouldn't result in injury. Almost no one who saw a wolf lived to tell about it.

I arrived back at the fort with a handful of sticks I had picked up on the way. Now, to make a fire. I needed to heat something with my Nexus. I could probably just heat air, the same way I had heated the water years ago. Using the Nexus wasn't all that different from using a hand--except that, instead of grasping the surface of an object, I would grasp the inside. Thread the Nexus into the fabric of the object. In this case, I was just threading my Nexus into an arbitrary region of air, but that didn't matter; I just needed to imagine the shape. Object boundaries were just a guide.

But to heat the air...what had I done that time? Two years ago, when my powers were newly discovered and I--and just about everyone else in the world, for that matter--were trying to understand what it was, I had set myself to the task of lifting water out of a cup and changing its shape into a ball. Rather, Artellith had set me to it. *You really ought to try to understand your Nexus*, he would say. I hadn't been fond of the idea; I'd already been an outcast for most of my life for being artificial, and accidentally destroying part of the school a few days before hadn't helped that situation at all. I'd

wanted my Nexus gone. *But you can't get rid of it, he'd said, Lord Dalmer says you'll die if he just takes the device out of your brain. You need to accept it for what it is.* He was trying to cheer me up. I'd spent the next hour trying over and over, slowly realizing that I needed to visualize every shape in between the cup shape and the ball shape before the transformation would work. It had taken fifteen minutes for one transformation--Artellith must have been bored out of his mind--but in the end, I remember he had reached out to touch the now perfect sphere, and I had playfully dropped it on his hand. The water had been boiling hot. He had shouted in pain.

I couldn't see a good reason why the same wouldn't work with air. I had a feeling it would--Carnelian and I had done something to the air back in Council chamber. In my vague memories of it, that blueish cloud had formed by Carnelian and I forcing out Nexuses into the same air, and the cloud had been warm.

Thus, I sat down, and began threading my Nexus into a small space in front of me. I stretched the air. Nothing happened. The air had no real texture to my Nexus, so I wasn't even sure I had moved it. My eyes were of no use whatsoever.

That was okay. I could spend a little while figuring this out. A fire was most important right now.

<4>

“You'll be fine, Artellith--if anyone asks what you think happened, what you should say is that such matters are for the investigative committee to determine.” Lord Dalmer whispered something I already knew as we waited among dozens of murmuring Lords. There were only be a few minutes left before the city's bell would strike eight, which would signal the beginning of what was bound to be a wearisome Council meeting.

The sun had settled behind the building adjacent to the ruined Council house, turning the sky above the building's lobby a dim, wispy orange. Even though half of the ceiling was made of clear plastic beams, even with the lobby's eight photophores emitting their feeble, greenish glow, it still

wasn't enough light to hold a proper Council meeting. However, the room was already packed with fifty noisy Lords, all waiting to see whether I, their new leader, could fill my father's shoes. This meeting couldn't be postponed.

All of these Lords had buried close kinsmen today, and as a result now filled far larger roles in their families and in the Council. I seen many of them Lords over the last few hours as they visited what remained of the council chamber to identify and remove their brothers and sisters. I had traveled back and forth between the Ganzend family's vicus and the Council house a number of times, while Lord Dalmer had remained most of the day at the Council house pretending to gather information. Thus far it seemed, through some miracle, that no one had seen Vermillion after the Council house collapsed, though many had heard the building break apart. This seemed quite nearly impossible. Even if she had taken back alleyways to the edge of Ihmunat, beyond there anyone would have noticed the blood on her arms. How well could she possibly have hidden them?

Of course, Lord Dalmer hadn't been gathering information at all; he'd been formulating a story that explained where Tuvalent, Carnelian, Vermillion, himself and myself had been during the collapse. All afternoon I had memorized new details with each visit to the ruins. *Vermillion is extremely ill and not taking visitors--she's been that way since early afternoon*, he had said; *The Council Chamber had already started crumbling when you and Tuvalent arrived, and the Council heard it happening*. Thus we could explain the shouting and silence that the Council servant had heard. *Carnelian also noticed the signs of problems with the building--that's why she went bounding up into the lobby*. Apparently a number of people had noticed her doing this. *We'll say she went exploring above the Council Chamber to get a better look at the damage, which is why she couldn't help when it started collapsing*. The fact that the Nexus became much less accurate when the user's body moved unpredictably was a technicality that few outside the Ganzend family understood. That explanation would be hard to sell. The whole damn story would be hard to sell. I felt like I was walking on a tightrope, after watching my father and friend fall off.

The bell in the city center started rang eight. I stood on a chair so that at least a few people could see me.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming to this.” I began almost shouting, and the voices quickly died away. “I know you all want to get back to your families, so let's try to get through everything as quickly as we can. The first thing we need to talk about is that--we still don't know what happened this afternoon, and I think we need to remedy that as soon as possible. Lord Dalmer has been investigating since this afternoon--he was one of the first to arrive after the building collapsed. So...please, Lord Dalmer, if you have any information, I think we'd all like to hear it.”

I stepped down from the chair so Lord Dalmer could use it. “Thank you,” he began, stepping carefully onto the chair. “Unfortunately, I must say that I've learned very little at this point. I've asked hundreds of people, but it seems nobody can recall seeing anything unusual before or after the incident. Therefore, the most likely conclusion at this point is that the deaths of the council members were due to the collapse of the building...”

“Buildings reinforced with Scizemar plastic do not simply collapse,” came a harsh voice from the center of the crowd. I recognized it instantly as Scizemar Luxranaw, a Lord of the Scizemar family...actually, probably the Scizemar Kurios family after today. The Scizemar family was the largest in Ihmunat, and the only family that matched the Ganzends in wealth and power. Their exceptional wealth came from their plastic, which was used everywhere from the hulls of fishing boats, to farm equipment, to the waterproof shell and fuzzy insulation of my own cloak. Lord Luxranaw made a frustratingly good kurios for his family, since his short-tempered, proud, somewhat intractable nature, plus a several-centimeter advantage in height over myself and an additional year in age, never made arguing with him any easier.

“Maybe not,” Lord Dalmer continued calmly. “However, I think it is unwise to rule out any possibilities at this point. Of course, I could certainly use any information you might have about the Council Chamber's construction--”

“The Chamber” Lord Luxranaw cut in, “was built to withstand any natural force short of a volcano--”

“Yes, I'm sure that the Scizemars designed this building to withstand incredible forces.” there was an edge in Lord Dalmer's voice now. “But there is certainly a possibility--”

“But I do know of a force that *can* destroy plastic.” Lord Dalmer stopped trying to cut into Lord Luxranaw's speech, and all was quiet for a short moment. “The Nexus. Where were your Nexus users this afternoon?” It's the King's duty to stop conversations when they stray too far off topic--I felt like some of the Lords were waiting for me to say something--but I couldn't let that be the last word of this conversation. I hoped Lord Dalmer would recover soon.

“Ah, so that's what you were trying to say,” Lord Dalmer said, feigning calmness. “Indeed those two possess this sort of strength--and actually, I feel I should say that their physical location at the time is somewhat irrelevant given their powers. What *is* relevant is that neither Vermillion nor Carnelian had any motive for this--”

“No motive? One of the Nexus users' best friends now leads the Ganzend family and you say there was no motive?” Apparently Lord Luxranaw now trusted me about as much as he had before his father's death.

“This is preposterous. So I take it Vermillion went out of her way to draw attention to this little coup by causing as much collateral damage as she could?”

“Possibilities, Lord Dalmer. It sounds to me like your word alone is assuring the Council of the intentions of artificial humans, but my word isn't enough to fend against your accusations.”

“Accusations?” Lord Dalmer blinked, apparently confused, but he was likely feigning.

“You accused my family of constructing a building that collapsed!”

“Ohhh--if that's the impression you had, then my humblest apologies. I was actually considering the possibility of sabotage...I had never meant to imply that the Scizemar family was at fault in any way.” There was a hint of humor in Lord Dalmer's voice now. “I had honestly never

suspected workmanship of the Scizemars...at least...not until you were so quick to defend it....”

This comment invited an end the conversation. Lord Dalmer had probably done more harm than good by inciting Lord Luxranaw so much, but it was better to end this on a note that didn't involve Vermillion. Lord Luxranaw hadn't yet responded. I spoke quickly, as firmly as I could, careful to direct my scorn toward Lord Dalmer so that I wouldn't sound biased.

“Dalmer, you can theorize all you want when we're not all waiting for you.”

“Right.” Lord Dalmer continued quickly. “Well, I don't have any more clear evidence to present at this point, so perhaps it would be best to elect those who will continue the investigation?”

“Certainly,” I said. It would be my job to oversee such an election, so I returned to the chair as Lord Dalmer stepped down. “I make a motion to elect three Lords to carry on with the investigation. My hope is that we can prevent bias towards any single family, so that we can avoid any more misunderstandings like the one we just witnessed. Once the Lords are nominated, each will have a few moments to speak, and then we will have a single vote and the three with the largest percentage will become the investigators. If anyone is opposed to this, please speak now.” I waited a moment, and nobody spoke. I was a little bit surprised at how confidently I had spoken--even though I had heard my father do it a hundred times, this was still my first time calling a vote. “All right then, consider the nominations open. I would like to begin by nominating Lord Ganzend Dalmer.”

Within a few moments, a number of other Lords had been nominated, including Lord Luxranaw. Each nominee introduced him or herself. There was little doubt that Lord Luxranaw and Lord Dalmer would win, since both the Ganzends and the Scizemars had many allies among the families represented here. The main question was how long it would take. As far as I was concerned, this meeting had already lasted too long--this whole afternoon, I'd barely had time to think of Vermillion, even though she was the one who likely needed the most help out of anyone in Ihmunat. Yet here I remained, unable to escape from a simple meeting...much less able to decide what I would even do if I could get away.

<5>

It was impossible to get warm enough. There was no choice but to accept that. The leaves were wet from yesterday's rain, and so they made terrible insulation. With just my body heat I couldn't keep the entire space that the logs enclosed warm, and I couldn't bring the fire inside because even the slightest concentration of smoke made my throat catch and my lungs seize up. It was so ironic--I couldn't smell in the slightest, but once the air was thick enough with anything, pleasant or putrid, it would start to hurt me. And usually only me--my friends seemed much more resilient to things like smoke.

After shivering for a while, I had finally removed the plastic-fabric from the logs and wrapped it around myself. I was sitting as close as I could to the fire I had built...but the fire only heated one side of me, and occasionally the wind blew smoke in my direction. I could hold my breath indefinitely, but eventually I would forget to keep it held. Even though the fabric was windproof, it was thin. I got a chill every time the wind blew, and the wind had hardly stopped all night. It made the trees rustle and creak eerily. It was okay that I was uncomfortable--I didn't really want to sleep. I shouldn't be sleeping anyway.

I had been thinking. I was trying to remember where I been when I had stopped being me. Lunch with Artellith and Tuvalent...then, as per my role as Healer Ganzend Stakovsu's apprentice, I had helped him treat a patient...I could hardly remember anything about the patient, though. From there, I might have gone to Lord Dalmer's lab...I remembered Carnelian telling me in the morning that Lord Dalmer had wanted to do some routine checks on both of us...and I thought I vaguely remembered being in the lab. I wasn't sure when that had been, or what had happened. I tried also to make sense of what happened afterward. It hurt to think about it. I had turned these memories over many times in my head, trying to figure out what I had done...sometimes I could think rationally about it, but other times I just couldn't bring myself to start recalling. I was afraid of what I might remember. Even after all the hours, I was no closer to understanding, and I eventually gave up.

But I needed something else to think about while I waited for the sun to rise...and for my joints to stop being so sore. The legends of the Yellow forest came back to me occasionally, tormenting me with visions of witches and wolves and formless monsters. I wasn't deep in the forest at all, but darkness had made my surroundings a hundred times creepier. I kept checking around me with my Nexus, but found nothing.

I wondered if anyone would come searching for me. It only seemed likely if anyone could figure out what was wrong with me. Perhaps more so, it depended on politics. In my memories from the morning, Artellith had been silently furious about the fact that his father hadn't allowed him to attend the council meeting, that he had instead chosen Tuvalent's father Enseres and Lord Dalmer as representatives. Artellith's father was most likely dead, and so Artellith was probably Ganzend Kurios now. That didn't mean he had real power, though, either in the Council or in the Ganzend family. After all, he had told all of them, many times, to trust me. But in the end I didn't deserve anyone's trust. Artellith became another thing I didn't want to imagine anymore...it was all my fault...he was probably suffering even more than me right now. I had to fight back tears whenever I even thought his name.

The other thing I needed to think about was what I would do with myself in the morning. I needed blankets. I needed better shelter. The overhanging rock could serve as shelter--there was no reason I couldn't burrow a hole large enough for sleeping, and then fashion a door to keep the forest creatures out, but the rock was cold. Everything out here was too wet to make good insulation.

Part of me felt like I should get started now. I could carve the rock in the dark. I just couldn't make myself get started. For some reason that I couldn't explain, I couldn't motivate myself. It made no sense--I'd never had trouble starting on homework assignments or getting out of bed, or starting any other chore. Part of me said that it didn't really matter when I finished on the rock. I needed insulation before I could sleep there, and I couldn't get that until tomorrow. If I was going to visit Ihmunat at all, I should do it in daylight. So I put it off.

And that brought me back to the question of what to do with myself. Maybe that was the

problem anyway...my mind was telling me that this question bore the weight of all the other questions. Even if I survived out here, was there a point to my existence? Now, after I knew what I was? I thought about spending my days out here, by myself, without anyone to talk to, or to share in whatever small victories I might have out here, as the seasons passed and everyone I knew grew old kilometers away. I couldn't stand thinking about it. I tried to push that out of my mind, too.

I suddenly recalled what we had done the night after Cerulean had died, probably the saddest evening of my life before tonight. I remembered the aurora that had shone that night. Tuvalent, Artellith and I had watched the aurora for hours, hardly saying a word...reminding ourselves that Cerulean's soul had probably been up there, a part of the beautiful light show. I looked upward. There was no aurora, only the pale pinpricks of countless stars. They were beautiful in their own way, shining even though this dark, moonless night.

The Nexus had made light while I was starting the fire. It suddenly struck me how the aurora and the Nexus were at some times complex bodies of light, and other times invisible. Tonight it was invisible, but I wondered whether I might call it into view by using my own Nexus. It was worth a try. I extended my Nexus a few meters in the direction of the stars and excited it until it glowed, and then wondered whether the Nexus might be made of the souls like the aurora was.

There were two star-like points in the darkness beneath one of the trees, spaced horizontally, down where stars shouldn't be. They moved together slightly. Eyes in the distance, reflecting the light of the fire--that was the only thing they could be. I tried to turn, but I was wrapped too tightly in the fabric. The eyes had vanished by the time I thought to search with my Nexus, and I wasn't sure exactly where they had been; I searched for a moment before realizing that there might be others elsewhere, closer. I spread my Nexus around me in every direction, and searched for several seconds, but found nothing besides earth and vegetation closer than a dozen meters. Following again the direction where I had seen the eyes, I was startled to find something moving in the distance, something warm, moving rapidly away with bounding steps. From such a distance, though, the body could have been anything--

it was about the right size for a deer, or maybe even a person hunched over, though people couldn't move that fast. I eventually gave up following it, turning my attention instead to my more immediate surroundings. I kept my Nexus spread wide around me for a very long time.

Tomorrow afternoon, I decided, would be my final visit to Ihmunat, in which I would get warm clothes and blankets. I would spend the morning tunneling deep into the rock, so that tomorrow night, with some insulation, I could be safe there.

I then prayed Peony to that I wouldn't harm anyone during my visit.