Nine

When traveling, you get lost in your thoughts. And they’re not the thoughts that plague you daily; no, I was not concerned about King Malliser and his cursed Phystalite at that moment. Nor was I overly concerned about Lucius, Myst factories or Lieutenant Bosleigh for that matter. I simply pondered, like I do often, about seemingly everything. But as opposed to now, where I write out of necessity, and in the daylight (for it is far too dark when the sun fades), in an attempt to understand everything that has come before and why what is done is done, I was yet still innocent of the truly vile this world was capable of creating.

Nature and the trees consumed me. We had skirted eastward around Daely; from a distance, certainly, we could make out the construct of the factory, the skeleton, but we wished to remain out of sight of Lucius. And in doing so, we immersed ourselves in a thickly forested path. Lieutenant Erhard knew the way, as he had often ranged out in these parts for me, and the three of us followed his steed. But, oh, the trees. How I long to see them again! Their green foliage blocked out all but speckles of sunlight, dotting the muddy pathway with gold. The constant breeze brushed through them, composing an ever-present symphony sounding like a whispering caress from a lover.

I took in the fresh air in gulps. The scent – oh, but how difficult it is to explain – was liberating. It smelled of summer, when I was a child, before a rain storm. When I would play in our yard whilst my father worked to feed us. After my mother had passed away, I spent a lot of time outdoors; my father worked his hands to the bone to keep her far enough out of mind.

And this smell, the smell of the world, of trees swaying overhead and grass crunching beneath the hooves of our mounts, brought with it strong nostalgia. I closed my eyes and let the breeze perpetually tug my hair, scratching my face and constantly swirling about me.

We were still only about a day into the journey, nearing sundown, when Lieutenant Erhard called us to a rest. “We all had an early morning,” Dean said, sliding off his saddle, tugging on his pack, “so we’ll rest tonight. Don’t expect an easy pace the rest of the way.”

“Right, boss,” I muttered, sardonically. We unsettled, unpacked our mounts and tied them safely to trees overlooking a fresh patch of greens. I unrolled a pack to sleep upon, laid it flat across the dusty path that Dean had picked out for us, and lie down on it. The breeze had picked up now, pushing the rhythm of the branches to a faster tempo. From where I lay, I could catch glimpses of the stars above through the quick parting of the treetops.

The freedom of traveling, of living out of doors, upon the tough, gritty natural road is something to cherish. It is something I (and I’m sure we, as people) took so much for granted. On my back, arms tucked behind my head, I was free; sure, I was constricted in King Malliser’s plot, but I was *free*. To be able to roll again upon the dirt beneath a thick patch of foliage would be worth my life, I think.

And yet, now I know not whether those same trees are still standing. But such thoughts imprison my mind; and that, at least, I need free.

Thayer, perched up on his side using one of his elbows, breathed heavily. He observed each of us carefully, from Dean, to Thorradin, and lingering on me. “General Warson,” he said, voice suspiciously quiet (for a man like Leilani), “there were some pretty unsettling rumors when I was in Kroy’wen.”

I swore. “It has nothing to do with any sort of spectacular stone, does it, Thayer?”

He chuckled and flopped onto his back. “No, sir. Not quite on that level of unsettling. No,” he said again. “As you know, Kroy’wen sits almost directly in the middle of the Kingdom of Torryn. To the northwest lie Draper, the southwest Polad, and south by southeast Midtown.”

“Yeah, Thayer,” Thorradin snorted, “we’re aware. Thanks for the cartography lesson.”

Leilani paused, considering. “Is cartography what I’m doing?”

“Technically?” Thorradin asked.

“Yeah, technically?”

I grunted. “It doesn’t matter if you’re cartographers or farmers. Continue with your story, Thayer.”

“Right, sir,” he said, and I could hear a smile in his voice. “Being one of the wealthiest and most well known cities in Torryn, Kroy’wen receives a lot of ‘runners,’ if you will, with news from all over. Even Trinton and Lyette, on occasion, send runners to Kroy’wen, based on the significance of the information.

“Anyway, Kroy’wen usually averages about no more than ten runners per month, carrying information of varying significance. Usually the prosperity of the towns they’re from, any sort of troubles they may be having, but nothing incredible. Well, being stationed in any particular place for a very long time, you start to distance yourself from these runners. The information was essentially the same; instead of two thieves this month, Draper put away just one. You know?

“Well, not too long ago, the numbers of runners doubled to twenty, and then increased to thirty. At first, the reports were pretty much the same; a runner or two would slip away to speak with someone in private, but this was not unusual (shady dealings were fairly commonplace). Before I left to venture back to Garden Palace, the number had increased to about forty-five.

“So, noting such a drastic increase, I happened to peek in with the constabularies and find out why Kroy’wen was bustling with runners.” He stopped to catch his breath. Dean had kindled a fire with the help of Thorradin, and the flames sketched outlines of our faces. “So hear this. Apparently, farmers’ livestock were being slaughtered overnight. You have ten cows when you go to bed, and three carcasses when you awaken, nearly skinned raw.

“At first, they thought it was an increase of predators, and that with watchdogs, the numbers would slim. They soon discovered the next day that they would find another three cow carcasses with a couple of dead dogs. Or missing dogs, which was strange.” He inhaled smoke and coughed, glaring at the Destroyer. “Smoke is blowing in my face, man.”

Dean shrugged, sitting up against a stump. “Blame the wind. Or your own positioning.”

“Fah. Fine. Anyway, the slaughtering continued, without ceasing. So more runners were sent to Kroy’wen to ask for assistance. None came. As time continued, the situation spiraled downwards. Nearly all livestock was killed by whatever was coming in the nights. Farmers claimed demons were mauling their animals, but that didn’t explain the missing dogs.

“Eventually, I imagine, there was no more livestock to slaughter. So whatever it was doing the killing got hungry. Farmers stopped showing up to complain about their murdered animals, so the towns began to assume the situation was correcting itself. They were wrong, so said the runners. Within weeks, small towns were being massacred, and stragglers were making their way towards Polad, Draper, and Midtown, who, in turn, sent runners to Kroy’wen, hoping for soldiers.

“Confused as to the massive amounts of bleeding inhabitants lying around town, the city officials began to call together the councils. You know politics gentlemen,” Thayer said, and I grumbled in agreement, “so you know how they play. Nothing was taken care of. Not until the first attack upon Polad. Well, screams were heard throughout the town, but by the time anyone (and I know, Polad’s a large town, where was everyone?) reached the screams, all they found were trails of blood. So, they stocked up on defense, waited, and watched. Nights went by, they claimed, without any sort of activity. But they kept on. They sent runners to report the happenings and continued the watch they had set up. Manmade barricades were stationed around the city (and, from what I heard in Kroy’wen, Draper and Midtown were responding similarly), but still nothing was coming.

“Frustrated and, well, normal (you see, many had to rise early to work, so they were anxious to end their long nights on watch) people do what frustrated and, well, normal people do. They got tired of watching for nothing, so they set a few snares between the barricades and went to sleep. Two nights later, something struck again; the town responded equally as slowly as it had the previous time, following the trails of blood outside the city.

“However, their snares had proven useful. Caught in only one of the many snares was some sort of twisted, vile, dog. Or what was left of a dog. They said the jaws were completely rotted, revealing decayed but sharp canines. The skin was pockmarked and bloody, but the horrific part was the leg caught in the snare. It had snapped, and was twisting in every direction as the civilians got closer. It continued to snap its jaws at them, howling and snarling. One overly terrified man killed the beastie, took his hand axe and cut its head clean off. No sooner had the life drained out of the beast than it completely dissolved.”

I yawned and blinked. “What?”

“Dissolved, sir. Like… snow in the sun. Just melted away,” Thayer said, scratching at the stubble on his jaw. “Anyway, that’s when the excess numbers were sent to Kroy’wen. They were scared shitless, and I can’t blame them one bit, if even a portion of their stories were true. And that, my friends, is pretty twisted.” He shook his head and looked around. “Not even a, ‘da-a-amn?”

“No,” I replied, “Winslow isn’t here to stutter for you.” I rolled onto my side, tucking my right arm beneath my head and looked out into the darkness. It took a moment for my eyes to focus from staring at the light off the fire, but eventually they grew accompanied to the dark. It is strange, now, that I see so well in the dark, for I spend most my days in it. Even during the light, when I write this, I barely receive enough to see what I am putting on paper. But when I looked out, I caught a glimpse of a fluffy tailed squirrel, scurrying about, an acorn in mouth.

“Damn,” Erhard said, poking at the fire.

“A-ha!” Thayer nearly shouted, grin spread across his face, as he sat up.

“Damn fire is going out,” Erhard said, throwing down his stick in futility. Thayer mumbled to himself about no respect for a good story, but I was caught up in my thoughts. Seeing the squirrel fumble around with an acorn had me thinking about the poor folks in Daely, Lyette and Trinton. What would happen to this squirrel if I were to take away his home, this forest? He would die, I thought. And so, then, in my theory, the citizens of these towns would die.

Granted, that’s a poor theory, but in essence, they lost their lives. How many years had they labored over that land? How many generations were born and grew old and died there? How many children were killed or removed from homes? How many people were out of jobs? How many people lost all their belongings? King Malliser, I thought, cared nothing about these people.

The light outside fades away now, and my handwriting is poor enough as it is. But as the night fell out there, on that first night from Garden Palace, I felt for the first time true fear; for not only myself, but for the people of Torryn; no, the people of Westhaven.

Ambition is a deadly thing. Poisonous influence is even worse. Encouragement, however, can kill thousands upon thousands.

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I awoke the next morning to the sound of Lieutenant Erhard shuffling about camp, packing up his belongings and half-heartedly cooking breakfast for the four of us. Thayer and Thorradin were both still fast asleep, so I bothered not to speak up and lie atop my bedroll. The morning air was cooler than that of the previous one, nipping at my cheeks. I realized then that I had fallen asleep without covering myself, and shivered for lack of warmth.

The sun was not yet stretched out over the trees, so I was unable to feel its warm rays across my body. Well, I thought, the only way to keep warm now is to get a-moving. I spent one extra second lying there, staring at the foliage above, wishing that the sun would peek through at me, before rolling onto my belly and pushing myself up to my knees. I stood and rolled up the bedroll, lifted it onto my right shoulder, and carried it to where my mount was tethered. I replaced it back upon the mount and stretched, feeling the cracks of my elbows as I extended my arms.

I was, at least, refreshed. But what Thayer had spoken of the night before bothered me still. Diseased predators that only struck at night. That dissolved when you killed them, as well. Shaking my head, I cursed, tugged once more at the bedroll to make sure it was snugly in place, and turned.

Dean was behind me, eying me curiously. “Cussing,” he said, a hint of amusement in his rough voice. “From what Leilani said last night, is it?”

I nodded. “You have a way of understanding, Dean,” I said, sarcastically, heading back towards the tired fire pit. The Destroyer followed closely behind me, muttering about the breakfast he was cooking and the rough sleep he had the night before. I sniffed. “What are you making?”

“Meat. I happened to take some from the kitchen.”

I chuckled, “You stole from the Garden Palace?”

“They don’t feed us enough. Anyway, they’ve lied to us. What’s to stop us from taking a little back?”

Shrugging, I said, “Fair enough. Well, is it finished yet?”

“Wake up the other two. You’ll find out then.”

I set out, toeing Thorradin and Leilani, earning grunts and mumbles of disdain. When I was satisfied with their level of awareness, I made my way back to the Destroyer, placing myself across the flames from him, and eyed the few sticks he was roasting. I sniffed. “Well?”

Dean shrugged. “Pork. It was lying around, waiting to be stolen.”

As Leilani and Thorradin dragged themselves over, I saw Thayer’s eyes brighten at the recognition of a meal. A tired grin spread across his face, replaced by a stifled yawn. “Oh, thank the gods,” he said behind his fist. “Erhard, you crafty son-of-a-bitch, where did you get that?”

“Stole it,” I said.

“Stole it?” Thayer repeated.

“Indeed,” Dean answered.

“Someone’s going to be pissed,” Thayer muttered, lifting his shoulder in a shrug. “I certainly am not.”

We ate the morning’s meal with idle conversation, savoring the sweet taste of the pork. As the morning sun began to pierce the foliage above, we began to pack our bedrolls and layer them upon our horses. I un-tethered the mounts, tossing the reins to each rider in turn, and, after re-saddling the steed, swung myself up onto the beast. I patted his neck soothingly, and he whinnied in return.

Stretching, I examined the other three soldiers as they mounted. As Thayer was carefully swinging himself over the side of his horse, Dean tugged on the reins of his own and turned in to the direction we were heading. “Let’s go,” he said, over his shoulder.

Cursing, Thayer half-hopped onto his saddle, glaring at the back of the Destroyer. He turned to me and said, “I still don’t know – after all these years, and that one time I saved his life, remember? – why that man hates me so. I mean,” he said, allowing a smile to split his lips, “who wouldn’t like me?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the struggling lieutenant. “Perhaps your way with words. You’re so charming that the Destroyer feels threatened by your wit. Hell, I almost feel threatened by your wit, and I’m Emory Warson.”

“Your dry as a desert sense of humor isn’t wit, Warson, and I feel like I’ve just been rubbed with sand paper.” He grumbled more after that, but it was inaudible, and, by then, I had already turned my attention back to the path ahead.

The pace we set that morning was much quicker than that of the day before. Still, we were only just beginning day two of our journey, and we were all fully aware that there were still a number of days left to come before we reached Tourmaline City. My mind wandered, then, to that city of decadence, our destination. I had been there on occasion, as was fit to my station as General of the Freshwater Guard. And, based upon those few visits, I kept the Destroyer stationed there often, even with its close proximity to Garden Palace.

Tourmaline City was a grandiose place, streets littered with the bodies of intoxicated pedestrians. The homeless lined the streets; there was not so much a wealthy class living in Tourmaline City; if there was, I imagined, they were most likely to have been overthrown and torn to pieces.

Brothels could be found at every corner, sometimes two to a street. They weren’t so much brothels as shacks, a series of one-room buildings next to each other. Strange music could be heard around these prostitution shacks, unfamiliar music. Instruments that no orchestra normally maintained were key in its production. I hadn’t heard this music (for I am not one to indulge in prostitution, therefore limiting my time near these brothels), but was told it was dangerous. The relaxed progression and improvisation employed in its creation was unusual, and, I supposed, was what was viewed as anarchic.

The music was insultingly named after a method in which the prostitutes cleaned themselves, probably in an effort for the political leaders to dissuade those from its practice. From where I sit now, writing in the ever-fleeting light, it almost makes sense for them to feel threatened by a new music, created in the slums of Tourmaline City, in use by brothels.

But then, as I rode on towards Tourmaline City, I was unaware of the reasons behind the political hatred towards this music. I simply followed orders, like a soldier is made to do, and questioned not. Oh, but how foolish I had been. At times when I write, when I reminisce this, I come to hold a small, if fleeing, sensation of gratitude for the discovery of the Phystalite. Because if it wasn’t for that stone, I would never have had my eyes forced open. I was living the life of a blind man, using his senses to guide himself through life. But when the power of that stone was impressed upon King Malliser, my eyes opened, I faltered from that one dimensional path, and asked a question: Why?

“Why?” led me onwards, pushed me forward. It was followed by: How? How could King Malliser, regardless of the ends, justify his means? My ignorance of that time, in retrospect, pains me. It embarrasses me. I’m sure you, as the reader, have seen what I did not, when I should have. But please, remember, King Malliser gave me the opportunity to serve for him, and was a kind and gentle ruler. When I was fourteen, I joined his household staff, befriending Prince Ellyas in the process; as we aged, I was given the chance to become a member of the Freshwater Guard. And from there, I served to maintain peace throughout Torryn, protect the Garden family, and keep myself (and, in my nobility, all of Torryn) virtuous.

How could I argue with that? How could I turn my back upon the man who had given me everything? When Ellyas first began questioning his father, I suggested meeting with the king to discuss our concerns. And Ellyas trusted me. Where has this led me?

Traveling to Tourmaline City had me thinking, just as the memory of travel has me remembering. But we pushed on, the days feeling only slightly quicker than the ones before. On the fifth day of our travels, the city of Tourmaline rising before us, we came across a small band of travelers. They looked bedraggled, cuts and bruises colorfully disfiguring them; their clothes – more like rags – were torn about their bodies. As we approached, I realized they weren’t travelers but refugees.

But from where?

I called out to Dean to head towards the refugees, but when they saw us coming, they began to run. I kicked my horse into a fast trot, so as to be unthreatening but the people were terrified. One, overly large man spun around with a fairly long walking stick and made to swipe me from my saddle. Lucky for me, he swung high, and I just managed to duck beneath the blow.

“Stop!” I shouted, reining up my horse slowly, so as not to injure it or unhorse myself. “Stop! Why are you running?” And to the man with the stick, I said, “And why in the name of the gods are you swinging that thing at me?”

Warily, not lowering his stick, the large man stepped a few feet closer. I had over run the group when I trotted past, and they were cautiously, if slowly, making their way towards my mount. They looked at me in hesitant recognition, then, at the lowering of the large man’s stick, sorrowful expectation. “You serve in King Malliser’s guard, right?” It was my assailant.

“Aye,” I said, wiping sweat from my brow. “And you are? And why are you swinging at my face?”

The big man scratched his neck sheepishly. “You’re a good man. I remember you when that lieutenant killed m’mother.” Recognition dawned upon me, and I cursed. “Was he put to death?”

I bit my lower lip. “No, good sir. I took him to the king in order to try him for treason and was dismissed. I had imagined he was put to death, but I was just informed by my lieutenant that he was relocated in Tourmaline City.”

“Damn me. That’s where we’re headed,” the large man said. “If I see that murdering son-o-bitch, I’m goin’ to kill him.”

Shaking my head, I muttered, “Not if I get to him first.” Louder, so the people of Daely (I assumed they were all from there) could hear me, I asked, “Why are you all so savagely beaten?”

“That man came to our village,” a small child, who I saw was hiding behind the large man, said, his blond hair falling into his eyes. “And he hit us…” I looked more carefully at the child, seeing one eye swelling shut, swollen lips, and yellow bruises on his arms.

The large man spoke again, “Lucius. If we didn’t want to move, he moved us anyway.”

“I was told he procured the town. I assumed he paid for it.”

“Oh, he procured the place, that’s fer sure.” He spat, and, having reached me, extended his hand, “I’m Madison. He torched the pub an’ everyone in it. Some of us escaped. This is all that’s left of Daely.”

I counted about fifteen. “What?”

Madison spat again, wiping his mouth with his arm, struggling to keep his composure. “He murdered us all. Even those who willingly gave over their property, he butchered. Them first.” He looked up at me before continuing. “We all held out in my tavern, watching through cracked windows, when that man had his soldiers light the place aflame. Them bastards took my own alcohol, stuffed rags in it, and lit it on fire, then tossed it around my place. Alcohol is everywhere in there, and it went up in flames as soon as the first bottle exploded.

“Those of us near the front were burned to death. The fire spread too quickly for us all, and we clustered at the rear entrance. About twenty of us made it out. Three were too injured to walk, two stayed to help them. As we took off,” he said, stamping his stick in the ground, “them soldiers slaughtered them like cows.”