

Double Portals; Icehauler; Brighthome

The ink ran out again.

Portals was sure something was wrong with her pen, it didn't seem to hold as much ink as when she'd started.

She leaned back and examined the cramped script on the page.

She rolled the pen with her tongue. Pushing it to the side of her mouth while she contemplated her work.

It was written in a cipher, she had no idea what any of it meant, which was part of the reason the curse wouldn't touch her for copying it, but this meant she had to take extra care that every single character was copied correctly.

When she was satisfied with this page she bent forward and moved the end of the pen back to the center of her mouth. Then carefully dipped the other end into the inkwell and let it draw the ink in.

She then resumed painstakingly copying the document one character at a time.

As she worked she began to feel uneasy. But it wasn't until she stopped again that she realized why.

There were sounds, distant.

Cries of pain?

Portals bent all the way over and put the pen down on the low table. Then focused her whole attention on the sounds.

It sounded like fighting.

Footsteps running down the hall in her direction.

In a moment she took stock of her options. It was a small room, the nearest hiding place was in the corner of the room behind a shelf, but it would take her far too long to get to it.

She was warm, that meant she could use some of her magic, her beads were tucked away inside a pouch around her neck. If it came to it she could get them to her mouth.

The door burst open.

It was a man wearing a hazard suit, the waxed cloth and black leather glistened wetly. Even though his face was hidden she recognized Pine.

The door open she could now hear the combat more clearly, though still it was distant. Portals could hear someone was sobbing in pain. The sobs cut off with a wet gurgle.

Pine shut the door and tore off his breathing mask. He was gasping for air. Those masks were not meant for exerting yourself.

On his forehead his birthmark stood out, a pale image of a leaning tree.

"W...What's going on?" She asked.

"The killed Gullgate." Pine stifled a sob, and looked like he was about to wretch up his breakfast. "They killed him. They just..."

Portals trembled.

"Who did? What's going on?"

Pine met her eyes, and after taking a breath straightened himself.

"We've got to leave." He came over and quickly began putting her things away. "They're the unmarked, they had already killed the guards and gotten in before..." He touched the papers

she had been copying and withdrew his hand with a hiss. The curse swirled around his fingers as a black mist for a moment before settling back into his body.

He left the originals but was able to pack up the copies she'd made.

Someone shouted something in the hall, there was a reply in an unfamiliar language.

She was bursting with questions, but dared not delay him by asking.

In moments he'd packed what little they had away and then he drew out her hazard suit. It was broader around the shoulders than his, and had the arms and legs tied off so as not to get in the way. He helped her into it and, after pouring water into the mask, it didn't work when dry, he placed it over her head. Her vision was limited by the dark goggles. Then Pine lifted her up and put her in her basket.

She bit her lip. She was heavy, having received maximum density bones had been nothing but a liability in her life. He'd never be able to run from anyone while carrying her.

As she settled on his back she asked "What's the plan?"

"Heartfeather insisted on trying to wake the manticores. And most of the others followed him." Pine double checked the straps to make sure the basket was secure.

Portals blinked "But they aren't mature. They can't fight yet. You said they wouldn't even be ready to have restraints placed in them for another two weeks. How do they plan to control them?"

"They don't. They aren't planning to fight back. They just want to bag as many as possible and run." He jogged to the door and stopped, cracking it open and peering through.

"So how are we getting out..."

Jerking back Pines pulled the door closed and started looking around. "Oh crap, he saw me."

A cold sweat broke out on Portal's face.

She prepared herself. Drawing her heat to her skin.

"Describe him." Her voice trembled.

Pines found a broom, and prepared to swing it at the door.

"Unmarked, heightened stature, enhanced muscul..."

The door was kicked off its hinges.

Pine had no strength, he was unenhanced. He swung his broom handle with all his might but even though it struck the brute in the chin, it didn't even slow him.

He was a foot taller than Pine, the knotted muscles showing that he'd received hasty enhancement, the work was sloppy and ugly as well.

The man also had enlarged eyes.

Professional fighters never had those.

The brute raised his spear, but Portals had already struck. She pulled all the heat she could together into a lance of light, so intense it likely still carried warmth with it, and fired it straight into his eyes.

Her goggles somewhat ruined the attack, turning what should have been permanent blindness into something more temporary.

Pine didn't hesitate. He rushed forward and, unstopping a small bladder he splattered the contents, unrefined shaping fluid, over the man's face.

At first the man didn't react, continuing to rub his eyes after the blinding light. Then he began howling in pain and stumbled flailing wildly.

Pine slipped out the door.

The hall was clear for the moment.

Portals was shivering uncontrollably, but said nothing as Pine slunk down the hall.

"What are we looking for" She whispered.

"Rope." He whispered back. "The we're going to the roof. It's the only exit I can be sure isn't guarded."

As he peered into one of the room Portals saw men throwing books, documents, anything written into a heap. One man was pouring oil on them.

They moved on.

He screams of what sounded like cats joined with shattering glass and the cries of men.

Finally he found the storeroom he was looking for. It held various tools for hoisting heavy objects, including ropes. He pulled the door shut and took the basket off, setting her down in a corner while he began examining the ropes. Many were badly fraying. Looking around she realized everything in the room was damaged or in need of repair.

Which must have been why this room hadn't been Pines' first choice.

"Pines. I'm going to need the beads."

Pines nodded and came over. He helped her mask off and then found the pouch around her neck. There were ten small pink beads inside, the entirety of their wealth.

He drew one out and put it in her mouth. It was warm.

She swallowed it and the warmth immediately spread through her body chasing away the chill of her earlier magic.

"Two more." She said before he could put them away.

He froze.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded.

Reluctantly he drew out two more beads and placed them in her mouth. She tucked them into her cheek.

He put the pouch away and then moved to replace the mask.

"Leave it off. I can't use..." She started.

"Absolutely not." Pine pushed the mask over her head and locked it in place.

"But they're not wearin..." She began.

"They'll be dead in a few hours." He went back to examining the ropes. "Not that that does us any good. Whole place'll be burned to the ground well before then."

Portals fell silent.

After a moment she had to ask. "Is it... Really that bad? I thought the miasma would just make you sick."

"Normally, but that's just what leaks out of the tanks." He shook his head "These fools are smashing everything."

"I don't understand." The heat building up from the beads in her cheek hurt, so she shifted them to the other side of her mouth. Then created a tiny trickle of light to cool her mouth.

He slumped. "I don't either."

He held a frayed rope in his hands and twisted it absently.

"They just seem to be here to destroy everything. So whoever sent them has to know something about this place. And yet they weren't warned about the miasma. It's like they're supposed to die here."

He looked over at her.

"I... Don't suppose you finally learned how to make shadows?"

It was her turn to slump.

"No. Lightshaping is just a legend." She'd tried. Oh how she'd tried. "I can only make light, same as everyone from Brighthome."

"It's more than a legend." Pines insisted. He took the coil of rope he'd been fiddling with and pushed it into the basket behind her. Then hoisted the basket onto his back.

"From here we're going to have to pass through the breeding chamber to get to the roof access." He cracked the door and peered out.

Portals moved one the beads between her molars, where she could crack it in an emergency.

The dark goggles were still a problem, but with all the added heat from a cracked bead she should be able to overcome it. Maybe even make stable illusions despite their interference.

Even as he moved she focused her heat, and began preparing to shape it.

The noise of combat grew closer.

He peeked his head around a corner, ahead was the breeding chamber. Now a mess of broken glass with several soldiers hunting manticore among the broken tanks. The fluids those tanks had held were everywhere. She thought she could smell the miasma.

That had to be in her head. Miasma didn't have a smell. That's what made it so deadly. Even so the imaginary stink filled her with fear. She wanted the suffocating mask torn off...

"We're going to need a distraction."

Pine's voice brought her back to the present danger.

Even though he had whispered the fear was present in his voice.

There were at least five spears in that room. And those were just the ones she could see. Most of them had enlarged or normal eyes. She didn't see anyone with shielded eyes.

She shut her eyes and crunched down on the bead.

Heat exploded from it as she swallowed the broken pieces. She had meant to only crack the thing but instead had to cope with the fiery shards which seared even her fortified stomach.

Holding in a scream she drew the heat, light exploding out of her face and out into the room. She shaped that light, hundreds of manticore kittens. Dozens of men in hazard suits. A small force of security armed with crossbows and long knives.

Pines dashed for the stairs.

The figures blurred and broke apart into light at random moments. But it seemed to confuse the spearmen. Every one that looked her way she lanced in the eyes with a spear of intense light.

By the time Pine had reached the second floor she was drenched in sweat, and cold. The shattered bead was already gone and she was gathering heat as fast as the uncracked bead gave it to her.

A particularly ugly unmarked had apparently ignored the confusion below and was fumbling in the ruins of a tank for one of the manticore. It sprang up the man's arm and as it

paused to leap from his shoulder she saw another man pull back to impale the kitten on his spear.

She blasted the man in the eyes.

He missed.

Pines dashed through a doorway and the rest was lost to her sight.

She moved her last bead between her molars.

She hoped this one would crack properly.

No, she hoped she wouldn't have to use it at all today. She still had plenty of warmth coursing through her body. In fact she was rather uncomfortable sitting in so much of her own sweat.

Pines pulled up short. Three of the invaders were just leaving a room, smoke was pouring from the doorway behind them.

Two held spears and looked much like the others.

But the third had a shief of papers tucked under one arm. And he had a birthmark on his forehead.

Three intersecting lines. With a hook.

She wasn't certain which guardian made birthmarks like that one. So she couldn't know what magic he had.

The man was wearing a small mask, just enough to cover his nose and mouth. He had shielded eyes, and looked no taller or stronger than an unmodified man.

But looks could be deceiving. And this man felt dangerous.

"Are there still some of you alive then?" His voice was muffled by the mask. "Just what were you planning on doing up here?"

Pines bent low. Did he think she could blind them while he ran? Didn't he see that man's eyes?

"Pulling the masks off of people like you." Pines managed to sound confident.

Doubt crossed the man's face.

"Kill them." He shouted to his men. They had normal eyes.

But the man with the mark didn't make a move himself.

Portals cracked her bead, it also shattered, but this time she wanted that.

She wanted all the light possible.

As Pines moves she speared light at all three of their assailants.

The two spearmen took the full force of the light and dropped their spears grabbing at their faces.

The light stopped and vanished before the third. Who only scowled at it.

"The unfolding steppes." She said it out loud. This man was from the unfolding steppes. With the magic of nullification.

The obvious hit her. He was carrying the research papers and the curse wasn't touching him. Of course he had to be a nullifier.

The man stared at pines, then put a hand to his mask as if checking to make sure that it was still there.

He looked Pines over and his eyes settled on her.

"Tell me boy. How fast can you run carrying all that on your back?" His eyes twinkled. Then He spun on his heels and dashed away. Running faster than anyone she'd ever seen.

One of the blinded men attempted to tackle Pines, he narrowly avoided it and kicked the other man's spear out of reach as he was clearly feeling around for it.

Then he dashed in the direction the man had fled.

Thankfully he turned into the second doorway. It had been kicked open and two men in hazard suits lay dead on the floor.

One of them groaned. Startling Pines so bad he fell over backwards slamming Portals into the wall.

She hardly noticed.

The man stirred. The broken haft of a spear protruded from his chest and he lay in a pool of blood.

There was series of rungs making a ladder to the ceiling where there was a hatch.

Pines paused for a moment to examine the groaning man. But he'd gone still again.

He sighed and began to climb the ladder.

It was a struggle. An unenhanced man trying to climb with such a burden.

He couldn't do it.

He didn't even make it halfway before he climbed back down and took off the basket.

He pointed up at the hatch.

"It's too small, we don't both fit through."

She nodded.

She couldn't see his expression with his mask on. But he stared at her for a long moment.

"I'm not leaving you. I swear it." He said as he pulled the rope out from behind her.

"If..." She struggled to tell him to do what he had to, but somehow she just couldn't find the words.

"Don't worry. I'm not leaving you here." He looped the rope around and around this way and that about the basket before tying a knot in it.

Then he climbed up the ladder alone, holding one end of the rope. Pulled the bolt and opened the hatch and climbed onto the roof.

Cold air poured down from the roof. She'd been shedding heat as light since shattering her last bead, now she stopped.

The next minute stretched into eternity.

Footsteps outside.

Her heart stopped.

She couldn't see the door from where she was, but she heard it open.

The rope went tight. A moment later her basket left the ground.

A voice in an unfamiliar language said something. And the door closed again.

The basket rotated and was facing the corner now. Had the man seen something? She craned her neck but was afraid to move too much lest she shift the balance.

She rose another half foot.

She didn't hear anyone in the room, but every moment imagined a spear from below plunging into her.

Eventually she forgot that fear and her heart raced from the height. The frayed rope seemed solid enough but what if...

Finally she could see him.

Her heart was racing and she took deep breaths trying to calm herself. They needed to stay calm. They needed to think.

Pines shut the hatch.

They were on the roof. Once the hatch was shut there was no light.

"Take the mask off." Having difficulty breathing had not helped with her fears any.

Pines removed their masks. He was creating a small amount of light, but he was inefficient, he'd never been any good with light.

She took over, creating a very small amount of light just so they could get their bearings. The intense cold was made all the worse by being drenched in sweat. She was glad she still had an unbroken bead in her.

"Pines, swallow a bead." She had seen his sweat. He couldn't be any better off then she was after all that running and climbing.

"We can't afford that." He said carrying her towards the edge of the roof.

"What? How can you think of money now of all..."

She saw the look in his eyes and understood.

She hadn't been thinking things through.

"Only seen beads left... That's not enough to last." She started.

"It is." He cut in. "But only if we don't stop for anything. And we save each bead as long as we can."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Then we're going back?"

It was so stupid. So obvious. She should've known this the moment he said they were leaving.

He said nothing.

At the edge of the roof he lowered her. He had chosen a spot far from any doors, still she was terrified they'd be spotted.

Or at least, she should have been terrified. Instead all she could think about was that she had to go back.

Soon she reached the icy stone at the bottom. There had been lights all around the structure, but the invaders had seen fit to shatter them for some reason.

Pines climbed down after her, having secured the rope to something on the roof. He took a couple minutes to untie and remove the rope, then he pulled her out of the basket. Found their blanket she had been sitting on and wrapped it around them. Holding her tight to his chest to share warmth.

He marched into the dark, in the direction of the stalagmite forest. And beyond that, brighthouse.

Portals wept silently. She couldn't help it.

"Don't worry, they've taken enough. They won't get your eyes."