

Once again the curse, like a black mist, bubbled up from the paper Portals was copying and tried to find her.

She ignored it and painstakingly copied each character, then she leaned back and double, then triple checked her work against the original. She couldn't read the cypher and it added odd marks to the characters at seemingly random intervals, so this diligence was necessary.

The curse continued its hunt for a target. Forming into a claw and grasping at empty air. It got between her and her work, interfering with her ability to see.

She rolled the pen to the corner of her mouth. "Give it up already."

The curse continued its mindless probings.

"Haven't you run out of warmth yet?"

As if on cue, the curse began to disperse.

Portals sighed and rolled the pen back to the center of her mouth. Then leaned forward and made a small correction to her work.

There was a distant scream.

She stopped to listen.

More screams, they sounded like they were coming from upstairs.

She bent all the way over and put the pen down on the low table, careful that it couldn't fall off the edge. Then focused her whole attention on the sounds.

Shouts, cries, and the crash of wood being smashed.

Her eyes darted around the empty storeroom that served as her 'office'. A few brooms in one corner and some empty shelves. And of course the table and her own belongings. No place to hide.

Another crash, then another. They were coming down the hall in her direction.

Portals inhaled sharply.

Doors!

Her gaze turned to the light wooden door.

Someone's kicking in the doors!

Even as she thought it she heard another door across the hall give way.

She began pulling her body heat together, it wasn't much.

I need the beads!

They were in a firenewt bladder hanging from her neck. With her teeth she found the cord and began jerking it up to where she could...

It wasn't a heavy door, and it stood no chance against the intruder's kick. It split down the middle, part of it tumbled into the room and struck her in the face. It broke her skin, but could do no real damage to her. The enhancements she'd received in childhood had made her durable at least.

The other half of the door slammed into the wall and slumped, hanging by a single remaining hinge at the bottom.

A man's face peered into the room. His forehead was unmarked. So he had no birthright, no magic. He was bald, save for a couple patches of silver/gray fur.

The man had heightened stature, he had to duck his head to enter through the doorway. He had enlarged eyes that bulged from of the sockets. His chest and arms rippled with added muscles that his body hadn't had the time to properly absorb.

No shirt, no pants, he wore nothing but a few pouches tied around his waist.

And he was holding a titan spear.

"Ah, an easy one." His voice was shockingly conversational. The man stepped casually into the room and drew the spear back to run Portals through.

She threw all the warmth in her body into a lance of light and blasted the man in those huge eyes.

The man screamed and staggered back, protecting his eyes with one hand.

Portals couldn't have created more light if she tried. Her whole body was wracked with chills and she was shuddering.

She needed to get the beads.

Frantically she bit down on the cord.

She bit right through it.

The pouch fell to the floor.

She dove to get it in her mouth, but the man effortlessly pulled it away from her with one hand.

"Well well, I should've recognized your birthmark." He was still rubbing his left eye. "For some reason I thought you were from Doveflight. But that eccentric guardian you've got draws all sorts of things doesn't he?"

Portals sat up, her blond hair was in her face. She tried to put together another lance of light, but only managed a few small sparks.

The man opened the pouch and let the beads fall into his hand.

"Only three? Pity." He tossed the empty pouch. "I better find someone who isn't poor today." He glanced away from her to drop the beads into his own money pouch.

Portals seized the moment to go for the documents.

"Oh no you don't." The man seized her by her long hair and hauled her into the air.

She managed to get the entire page into her mouth before he could see.

He squeezed the sides of her jaw forcing her mouth open.

"What the?"

She spat the paper onto his hand.

The curse bubbled out of the paper.

It immediately found a valid target.

His eyes bulged so much it seemed they would pop out.

The curse found his heart and squeezed.

He dropped Portals and swatted the wad of paper away.

The curse slackened its grip and began to release him.

Portals lifted another page from the pile with her teeth. The man was on his knees gasping in pain.

Before the curse had time to relent she had crawled the distance and pressed the cursed document against the man's bare leg. She then bit through the document into his calf, holding it against him.

Each document in the pile held the same curse to protect it from unauthorized persons touching or reading it.

He kicked, and slammed her into the floor hard enough to crack a floorboard. He slammed her into the ground again and again, each time with less force. He tried to grab her and push her away, but his strength quickly drained as the curse pulled all the heat from his core.

The man stilled.

Blood was running into her eyes and her heart was beating in her ears, but she continued to keep her teeth clamped tightly on the man. Even well after the curse had dispersed.

“Portals!”

She let the man go and turned to the new person who’d just entered the room.

It was Pine.

He was wearing a full hazard suit, every inch of his body covered in waxed cloth and leather, all black. With a full mask and a pair of smokestone goggles.

But she didn’t need to see his face to recognise the man.

He took in the scene and seemed to understand what had happened. He ran over and lifted her off the ground, placing her on the table. “You’re bleeding... Are you going to be all right?”

“It’s just blood.” She couldn’t see herself, but was sure she must look awful. There were still screams, now with the added percussion of shattering glass, coming from inside the facility.

He undid several straps and pulled off his mask. He was sucking in deep breaths, the masks had not been meant for physical exertion and he had clearly been running. His face was so red that his pale birthmark, a leaning pine tree, stood out like a lightsphere in the blackness. “What’s happening out there?” Her voice quavered, betraying her fear. “How many are there?” He wiped her face with a small white cloth. “Gullgate is dead. He was offering them money and they just...” He pulled the cloth back, it was red. It took him a moment to find words again. “I don’t know, lots. They’re running around taking whatever they please and breaking everything else.”

Someone was sobbing in pain in a room alarmingly nearby. The sobs cut off with a wet gurgle.

“Who are they?” She took another look at the man. “Are they all unmarked?”

“I think so.” Pine began grabbing her belongings and packing them away in the side pockets of her basket. “Heartfeather insisted on trying to wake the manticores. And most of the others followed her to the breeding chamber.”

Portals was still shivering from her use of magic.

Or perhaps the fear and revulsion had something to do with it.

“The manticores? But they’re still kittens. 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.” In his haste to pack her things he spilled her inkwell and groaned.

He hissed and dropped something.

Portals turned and saw that in his haste to collect her things he'd accidentally picked up one of the cursed documents. It released him and he didn't touch the thing again. Instead he gathered up the copies she had made and folded them twice, then tucked them away.

He drew her hazard suit out of the basket. It was wide and stout, meant for a laborer's body, like hers. The arms and legs had been tied off of course, as they'd only get in the way.

"Could you get his bead pouch first?" She asked.

Pine paused.

"Oh..." He glanced at her, then seemed to notice her discarded pouch on the floor. "Oh yes of course."

"I used a lot of warmth." She said.

He came over and drew one of the beads out of the pouch and placed it in her mouth.

She swallowed it immediately and felt relief as the heat spread through her body.

"Give me a couple more." She asked before he could tuck it away into her basket.

Pine drew out two more and placed them in her mouth. They were warm, and became even warmer in reaction to her saliva. She tucked them into a cheek. "What's the plan?"

He wasted no time and was already helping her into her hazard suit. "We're going to grab a rope and get on the roof. It's the only exit I can be certain they aren't guarding."

"Guarding?" Then she noticed he was pouring water into her mask. It wouldn't seal properly unless wet. "Wait no, I can't wear that. The smokestone eats too much of my light, I..."

Pine's voice was iron. "We have to. The miasma will kill you if you don't."

Portals shook her head. "No it's fine. I'll just get sick. But I need..."

"Not sick. Dead." he knelt and met her eyes. "Any other time it wouldn't be so bad. But they're breaking all the tanks. The water of life is everywhere. There must be so much miasma out there."

"But..." She looked at the bare head of the man she'd killed.

"They'll all be dead in a few days. Not that that'll do us much good." He pulled her golden hair into a quick bun and then got the mask on her head and tightened it in place. It was hard to breath, and the goggles restricted her vision, it also made the room appear significantly darker.

"Why would they... Why would they want to steal from us if they're just going to die?" Her voice was muffled, even to her own ears.

"They must not know." He was synching his own mask in place. "Though they knew Gullgate on sight..."

He lifted Portals and placed her into her basket. It was wickerwork bamboo, and had a wool blanket folded at the bottom.

"So..." He continued his thought while securing the straps over his shoulders. "Whoever sent them purposefully didn't tell them."

"You'd think they'd figure it out on their own from seeing everyone here wearing these." She shifted the beads to her other cheek and created a tiny amount of light to bleed off some of the heat.

"Well if you want to try and sit down and have a discussion with them..." He double checked the straps, then moved to the broken door.

"No thanks." Portals felt the difference in his stride. He moved so easily normally. But when carrying her he couldn't move nearly as gracefully. Or more importantly as quickly.

Maximum density bones and muscles, they had rarely been an asset in her life. Rather they were almost always a liability.

Pine ran down the hall despite his burden, and the mask.

Every door they passed had been kicked in.

Most hadn't been looted yet. A few had. And a few had men who let their spears rest against walls while they filled sacks.

None of them noticed, or more likely cared to notice, the two of them rushing past.

Then he ducked into a storeroom full of broken and damaged items. He immediately moved to a shelf where several ropes were coiled. As well as parts for hoists, pulleys, and a couple small winches.

She took in how frayed the ropes looked. "Are you sure these will support our weight?"

"Of course." But he sounded uncertain. He grabbed one, then put it back and grabbed another one, then put that one on the floor.

"Look. These ropes were used for lifting heavy loads, they could probably support hundreds of people." He sounded like he was convincing himself.

She let it go.

"Yeah." He was staring at the rope he'd set on the ground. "This one's still plenty strong"

He picked up the coiled rope. He had to use two hands to carry it. "We're going to have to pass through the breeding room to get upstairs."

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

She slumped.

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

"It's more than a legend." Pines insisted. He was already jogging again. "But we'll get through without it."

Portals rolled the beads around her mouth. She had gathered a great deal of warmth and was sweating profusely. But half of the light she made wouldn't get through the dark goggles. Actually, maybe much less than half would get through.

Pine stopped at a corner. Ahead they could hear breaking glass and feline cries of pain. "You'll have to make a distraction."

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

With difficulty Portals drew a deep breath. Then she placed one of the beads between her molars and tried to crack it.

She shattered it instead.

She swallowed the burning shards and the inferno slid down into her stomach where it caused her considerable pain.

"Go" She said. And Pine rounded the corner and started running.

Ahead she could see the broken tanks and bodies. The water of life was 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...

The pain from all the heat in her stomach was becoming unbearable. Holding in a scream she drew the heat together, light exploded out of her face and out into the room. She

shaped that light, spinning out illusions. She gave each one far more light than normal, knowing so much would be lost passing through the goggles.

Two dozen guards, armed with crossbows and long knives appeared flanking them. Then a dozen identical copies of Pine, complete with a coil of rope in their arms and her in a basket strapped to their backs. And as many manticores as she could spin out.

She did nothing to try and maintain them, she simply scattered her illusions in all directions. The illusions blurred, split apart, or broke into cascades of colored light. They ran through each other and into solid objects.

She focused the whole of her being into making spears of light so intense that even dampened by the smokestone they must have still carried heat with them. She fired these into the eyes of any who so much as glanced in their direction.

Pine took the stairs two at a time. He stumbled twice but reached the second floor unopposed and turned for the door.

Portals saw one of the men up to his armpit in a broken tank. A manticore somehow scrambled up to the man's shoulder and prepared to leap.

There was another spearman drawing back for the strike. Before he could impale the creature she fired a spear of light into the man's eyes. Throwing off his aim.

And then they were through a doorway and out of the breeding chamber.

Pine was gasping for breath and stopped to lean on the wall just around the corner.

Ahead the doors were kicked in just like on the ground floor. The head research office had smoke pouring out of it.

Three men emerged from that doorway.

Two were like the others they had seen. Large men with enhanced muscles carrying spears.

But the third man was very different.

He wore a silk robe and had long silver hair. He was holding a sheaf of papers and had two books tucked under one arm. And he was wearing a mask.

It was a small mask, just large enough to cover his nose and mouth. But it had larger intakes than the ones she and Pine were wearing.

He also had a birthmark. Three intersecting lines and a hook.

Portals couldn't place that style of birthmark. So she couldn't tell what magic he might wield. He looked no taller or stronger than an unmodified man.

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

"Well well, some of you people are still alive?" He shook his head. "And why ever would you think to come up here? And carrying a rope? Just what are you up to?" His voice was even more silky than his robe.

Pine straightened his posture. Portals moved the bead in her mouth between her molars. This time she shattered it on purpose. It was like an explosion of fire in her mouth which she swallowed immediately.

The spearmen were already edging closer.

He tossed the rope down.

"How about I pull off that mask and see who you are." Pine actually managed to make his voice threatening.

The man laughed derisively and made a curt gesture.

She'd already drawn more heat than she could throw.  
First lance flew at the masked man. Then the two spearmen.  
Despite the loss from the goggles she was certain that these men would never see again.

The spearmen screamed and grabbed their eyes. The masked man looked mildly surprised.

She threw another lance of light at him.  
It dispersed perhaps half a foot before his face. Though the line had been so bright that he still had to shield his eyes.

"The unfolding steppes. Of course." The obvious struck her.  
Of course the man was a nullifier. He was carrying an entire sheaf of papers and the curse wasn't touching him.

She began throwing out illusory duplicates of Pine. Who'd already set her down and was drawing out a small bladder.

It contained unrefined shaper fluid.  
He projected confidence. Though she could still hear him breathing heavily.  
The masked man looked uncertain.  
"Well." He took a step back and put a hand to his mask.  
Then his eyes fell on her and he laughed.

"Tell me boy. Are you just going to leave your friend with my men here?" He turned back to meet Pine's eyes. "No. I do not believe you'll pursue me."

Pine said nothing.  
"Well, I've already got everything I came for." He had a twinkle in his eye. "So toodahoo."  
And he ran.

He ran far faster than any unenhanced person could, vanishing around the far corner after mere moments.

Pine jumped to the side, narrowly dodging a tackle by one of the blinded men. He then kicked the spear away from the other who was feeling around on the floor for it.

He tossed the coil of rope over Portals and lifted her, basket and all, and began running in the direction the masked man had fled.

He then turned into a doorway halfway down the hall.  
It had once been the master experiment room. It still contained three tanks, the ones that had been used by the Fallen Mage to prove and later refine his process. Most of the equipment had been moved out and it was now little more than a storeroom for jars and cans of the chemicals used in the water of life. Even the tanks themselves had been stripped of all vital components. Only the large glass jars left here, being too bulky to move out without cutting a hole in the wall.

The door had been heavier than the others, but that hadn't saved it from being smashed in.

In the corner a series of rungs lead to a hatch in the ceiling.  
She looked at the ladder, would it even be possible for an unenhanced person to climb such a thing while carrying...  
While carrying me...  
She knew it couldn't be done.

Pines took the basket off and set her on the floor.  
Damn these unbreakable bones. What good are they?  
Tears had joined the sweat inside her mask.  
He pointed up at the hatch.  
“It’s too small, we don’t both fit through if you’re on my back.”  
She just nodded.

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

A pair of manticores loudly scrambled down the wood floors in the hall and passed by the doorway.

Someone shouted something downstairs.

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

“I’m so thick. Why didn’t I think to grab one of the portable winches?” He tightened his hands into fists.

A bang out in the hall caused him to jump.

“No time to think.” He ran over to the shelf and started taking cans of chemicals by their handles and lifting them, as if judging their weight. He took one of the heavier looking ones and ran over to the ladder. He stopped and put an hand on Portal’s shoulder.

“I’m not abandoning you.”

Then he sprang up the first few rungs of the ladder and struggled up to the top with the can held in one hand.

He pulled out the bolt and lifted the hatch. It was a square leading to absolute blackness.

He shoved the can onto the roof and slid down, took another one off the shelf and repeated this process until he’d moved three cans up onto the roof

Then he returned to her and began to wind the rope around and around her basket, He lifted the basket several times running the rope under.

“What are you doing?” She asked. Thoroughly bewildered.

“Shhh...” Pine glanced nervously towards the broken door.

Finally he tied off two knots over her shoulders, and a third knot just above her head. The old rope was so badly frayed that it looked like it had grown coarse hair.

He took the end of the rope and ascended the ladder, vanishing into the blackness outside.

Icy cold air fell from the open hatch.

“They ran that way.”

The voice came from down the hall, where they’d left the two blinded spearmen.

“You’re pointing at a wall.”

“They went down the hall. I heard them running.”

Portals bit her lower lip.

The rope creaked softly, nearly making her jump out of her skin.

She lifted off the ground.

The basket slowly turned in the air.

Sounds came from down the hall, footsteps, objects being pushed or thrown in nearby rooms.



"There's nowhere to hide. Come out now and we'll make it painless."

One arm length at a time, she rose into the air. The basket was trembling.

She realized it was because she was trembling.

Stop it. Still, be still.

She couldn't stop.

Her breathing sounded impossibly loud to her own ears.

She was gasping inside the mask.

Footsteps behind and her. Someone was in the room now.

She was high in the air and the rope was pulling faster now.

She tried to hold her breath.

Something crashed.

A man laughed and there was another crash. It was the heavy glass breaking.

"What are you doing?"

"Look." There was a third crash of breaking glass.

"Quit wasting time and come help."

She was nearing the hatch.

"I ain't wasting time. Boss said to break every one of these things."

"The ones with cats in 'em idiot."

"He said break 'em all. I don't remember him ever saying anything about whether something was in 'em or not."

The basket bumped the side of the hatch. And made a soft scraping noise as it was pulled through.

"Good gods, why's it so blasted cold in here?"

Pine had removed his helmet and was panting. His black hair plastered to his face by sweat. He'd made a small ball of light to see by. It flickered badly, he had always been terrible with their birthright.

There was no sign of the can's he'd brought to the roof. Then she realized that the rope trailed off behind him and over the side of the building.

"What's that? A hole in the ceiling?"

Pine's hand had been about to shut the hatch, but now he froze.

He turned and threw the light he'd made, the roof was flat and made of tiles that, like all the materials on the exterior of the building, had been scavenged from titan ruins. They held heat inside a building like nothing in the natural world, and was all but impossible to burn or damage, but was also all but impossible to work with and the results were uneven, making for treacherous footing.

Quickly Pine grabbed the basket in his arms and began quietly moving away from the open hatch in the direction he'd strung the rope.

Portals threw a soft light, almost a mist, she didn't let it touch either of them but had it reveal just enough so Pine might see where it was safe to step.

She kept her head craned around to watch the open hatch.

The moment a head appeared she cut off the light and nudged Pine.

He crouched.

The man looked around. He had expanded eyes, she'd been told that wasn't enough to see in the blackness, there was a reason people replaced an eye with a mantichore's eye if they wanted darkvision. But they weren't far from the hatch, and it had a lot of light spilling from it. She tried to gather her warmth, she still had the uncracked bead in her stomach. But she was drenched in sweat, and the hazard suit was no wool coat, she was shivering in the freezing air.

Pine was shivering as well.

She wanted to ask him for another bead, but didn't dare to make a sound.

"Well?" Came a surly voice.

"I ain't got no light with me." Complained the man squinting in their direction.

The man's eyes met hers.

His eyes kept moving, sweeping right past them and continuing to circle around the whole roof.

"Well?"

"I don't see nothing." The man vanished back down the ladder.

Pine lifted her and she made more light to guide his feet.

He moved so slowly. Again she bit her lip and thought about how easily he could have gotten away if he hadn't stayed to haul her up here.

"I shouldn't have let you go up. Outta the way."

Pine jerked to a stop.

He turned and looked behind him.

She moved the light and found the rope had caught on a corner sticking up from the roof.

With a flick he freed the rope and got another half dozen steps before another face appeared in the hatch.

This man had light gray fur, and shielded eyes. Even if she could have gotten a lance of light together it would do nothing to this man.

Portals made the light vanish again, but Pine didn't crouch down. He didn't stop moving either. He stumbled and barely recovered, so against her better judgement she made her light again. She tried her hardest to keep it as dim as possible, through the smokestone goggles she couldn't see it at all.

Was it enough?

Pine's steps felt more sure, so it had to be.

The man had brought his spear with him. He climbed out onto the roof and he drew out a flare. He was mumbling something as he used a striker to make sparks, but it took him several tries before the wick caught.

The flare was brighter than any normal fire, even with the goggles Portals had to avert her eyes.

Still it wasn't enough to illuminate the whole ro...

"Hey. There they are right there." He shouted. "Call the others, they got no way down."

Pine ran hard, his feet slapping loudly against the roof tiles.

Portals threw everything she had into illusions, but she didn't have enough to put into them, not with the goggles. She managed a few dim ghostly shapes that flickered and then were gone.

And then Pine threw her off the roof.

Her heart leapt into her throat.

He grabbed the rope and she slammed into the side of the building. Then slid halfway down and jerked to a stop, then slid nearly to the ground and stopped again.

Then she was on the ground.

She could see Pine's silhouette on the roof. He was hauling on the rope pulling the other end back up to the roof. It had the three cans tied to it. He then took that end and moved around a chimney, then he jumped.

The friction from the chimney slowed his descent, the cans hit the ground, then a moment later so did he.

The man with the flare reached the edge of the roof and peered down at them.

"How in all the hells did you get down there?" He moved as if he would jump, thought better of it, and stepped back. Then considered the rope.

"Well, you said they were up here. Where are they?"

"They're..." He touched the badly frayed rope dubiously.

"I was mistaken. No-one's up here at all." He said walking away.

"Damnit Blades. Now you're the one wasting time."

Pine fell to his knees and let out a huge breath.

He was shivering worse than ever.

"You need to swallow a bead." She had trouble getting the words out, and when they did come it was in a whisper.

Pine shook his head and began untying the knot over her head.

"Now's not the time to worry about money. If you freeze..."

"We've only got eleven beads left.." He unsnatched her mask. It was a huge relief to breath freely again, but it didn't help with the cold any.

"Eleven?" It struck her that they'd used eighteen on the journey to this place, and they'd had proper clothing then. "W...What about the ones we took from that man. The one I..."

Pine shook his head again.

"I'm counting those."

He worked at on the other knots he had made.

Portals broke the silence. "We can't get to warm sea then."

He said nothing.

--Clarify heading to brighthome

"We can't.... We can't..." Hot tears streamed down her cold cheeks.

Pine pulled the rope down, and tossed it aside.

"There's nowhere else to go." He knelt in front of the basket and put a hand on her shoulder. "We can make it, if we don't stop for anything."

"We can't..."

He lifted her out of the basket and held her close.

"We have to." He squeezed her tight.

He drew her blanket, the one she'd been sitting on from the basket and wrapped it around them.

He turned to face the direction of the stalagmite forest. And beyond that, brighthome.

Portals wept silently. She couldn't help it.

"They've taken enough from you. I won't let them take any more." He kissed her forehead.

"I won't let them take your eyes."