

The Toys of Balthus.

Foreword.

I spent roughly three weeks on this piece as part of the Baraka Art Residency program. Originally I had come into their residency with an idea in mind, a story already worked out. Yet after establishing the emphasis put on community in the residency pieces, I knew that my story wouldn't work with the mindset of this experience I found myself in. After some time spent in the local wilderness and villages in Stanfordville, New York, certain images and objects stood out. Old rustic buildings, ticks, old toys, and rusty tools, spiders, small-town beauty, livestock, and so on. As one can imagine these various objects and images all began to insert themselves slowly, one by one into the piece like books onto a creaky bookshelf.

With any other written work I've done, the idea came first and the images and themes second. Because of the emphasis placed on me about channeling the surrounding community into my work, the reverse had to happen for this piece. For once a story didn't come creeping from the dark recesses of my unconsciousness, but rather from the surrounding landscape. It was a different approach but I felt it helped give the piece some grounding, or three-dimensionality. It's a piece that looks outward at the effects of the surrounding environment rather than inwards at ourselves.

Playroom.

The Boy had no family, he had toys. He lived in a red-brick mansion, high above the village at the top of the valley. You could see the mansion easily from the squat village below as it stuck out from the surrounding hills and valley slopes like a nasty sore. If one were to hike up and take a closer look they would see that the mansion wasn't ancient, yet had seen better days. The iron gate sat crooked, a rusted lock separated the grounds from the outside world. Inside was a spiraling walkway filled with flagstones, weeds reaching from between the cracks. In front of the mansion was once an ornate fountain, the work of some foreign sculptor. Time and rot turned the fountain into a tiny swamp, and the marble turned green with it.

The interior of the mansion fared no better. Countless dining rooms, kitchens, sitting rooms, libraries, parlors, cellars, and many other rooms all sat unused, covered in dust, rot, and shredded wallpaper. The Boy's room was built above the rest, up in a brick tower in the corner of the mansion. If one were to walk up the steps of this tower, they'd hear childish giggling about halfway up before continuing. Or if one was weak of sense, they'd walk halfway up the tower, hear the giggling, think the tower was haunted, and run out of the place shaking so much they'd forget their boots.

Making it all the way, one is rewarded with an iron door. It's the only iron door in the mansion of elegantly carved doors, stairs, and richly decorated furniture. A small window of iron bars allows the curious to see inside, yet rather than seeing an empty, rat-filled, stone-walled room that this door would signify, instead they'd see a room sprawling with playthings. Inside, stacked upon one another are chests. There were many, many, chests stuffed full of toys of all sorts. There were big toys, stuffed animals of beasts from afar, large wooden mannequins, and fake wooden houses. There were also small toys. Wooden armies which stood at the ready for the whims of a child, and building blocks stacked into elaborate positions waiting to get knocked over by the smallest thud. There were toys one would expect to see, piles of jacks littered the floor, and stuffed bears prowling forests of cards and dice. There were even dollies which sat above on shelves, looking down upon the room with their sewn gaze.

The only thing which moved in this room, one which didn't require to be wound up first, was a small, pale, hunched, and bamboo-thin boy. The boy was dressed for bed, wearing a pale blue nightshirt, slippers, and nightcap, which hid a mess of greasy black hair. His pale skin remained uncalloused, the only red which showed came from marks on his knees from kneeling, and on his hands from clamping down on his little toys. The only signs of discomfort in the boy's life were the occasional wince that he gave whenever he went to stand up, or when he went to sit down. His back remained crooked as he did so. If you looked past the boy and his playtime you'd notice the unkempt bed he used for sleeping. Carved into the footboard was the name, *Balthus*.

The people of the village all knew about the mansion and its sole occupant. Some families made annual climbs to the gates of the mansion to leave food, water, clothes, and oil for Balthus out of pity. No

one knew what happened to Balthus's parents, or even where the servants or maids had gone off to. The village elders remember the owners of the mansion being a rich couple who had built the structure so high up for want of a grand view of all the surrounding lands. No one quite knew much else aside from that, the mansion lay outside the village's borders so the mayor had no records of the family itself. All anyone knew was that they came from some far off land, with hoards of cash and servants in tow.

There were rumors about the family's fate. Some said that the parents died of illness, thus the servants grabbed all their valuables and ran off into the night. Some say the mansion was raided by brigands, wolves, or some unknown mountain beast, who ate all the adults within. Some have darker stories of the mansion, saying that the boy had something to do with it. Perhaps the boy poisoned everyone inside, so he could have his playtime forever. Or perhaps the Devil made itself at home within him, and through the Boy's hands he did away with all the good people within. All of these were nothing but rumors, and the village people took them with as much salt as they do in their eggs. Despite the rumors, no one could deny that there was a child left with no parents to care for him. This prompted a meeting in the village to discuss what to do with the boy, and who might be the one to raise him.

The Miller said, "I won't take him, he is rich. To be rich means to have clean hands, hands that aren't used to handling grain. What good is a child for me if they cannot grind grain?"

The Blacksmith said, "I won't take him, he is rich. To be rich means to have soft muscles, muscles that couldn't lift a hammer much less a pair of tongs. What good is a child for me if they can't even bring down a hammer to help forge the steel?"

The Fisherman said, "I won't take him, he is rich. To be rich means to have a clean nose, one not used to the stink of fish. I'd wager the moment he smells a net full of anchovies, his nose would fall right off into the water with a PLUNK. What good is a child to me if they can't handle the stink of fish?"

Even the town's Ne'er-do-wells wouldn't take him. "We won't take him," they said, "he's rich, and to be rich means that he'll have a large appetite. He probably eats about three peahens in the morning, four in the afternoon, and five in the evening. That's one too many peahens that we're willing to share. What good is a child to us if we can't fill that void of a belly of his?"

The village passed the responsibility of Balthus from one person to the next, yet no one held onto it. It was decided that they'd merely leave food, water, and clothes for him, and let time and the old mansion take him. The town expected that Balthus would follow his family's fate, and vanish shortly thereafter yet he remained. When delivering him food they still heard the peals of laughter coming from his room, and farmers sometimes heard banging noises coming down into the valley whilst they worked in the fields. The village agreed that Balthus was best left to himself.

The mayor merely sighed, "I suppose all villages have their kook. Don't know why my fair settlement should be any different." The village moved on, going back to their work and putting the mystery of the mansion behind them. The mansion continued to glare down upon the village and the surrounding valley like a bloodshot eye. As for Balthus, one might consign him to the fate of a drifter or loon sequestered in an old home. It's easy to think he merely remained in his room playing with his toys, trapped in his little world till the day his heart gave in. Yet fate seems to enjoy taking what we thread in our minds and sewing a new path, one which ends up more tangled than we expected it to be. For one day, as Balthus played as usual he heard a loud THUMP come from below.

### Army Men.

THUMP, The toy lieutenant fell from Balthus's hand. THUMP, the toy captain popped from his grasp next. THUMP, the toy colonel trembled loose from between his fingers. THUMP, down went the toy general. With Balthus's hands empty of an army he tiptoed over towards the door and listened. THUMP, THUMP, THUMP. Something was moving around the mansion, something large, something he didn't recognize.

"Maybe one of the villagers got in?" Balthus thought to himself as he moved quietly towards the window. He peered out, down towards the gate. It was still locked up tight, the rusty lock swaying listlessly in the wind. Balthus scratched his head, he might've been idle yet he wasn't without basic sense. If the gate was still locked then no one could've gotten in. The iron gates were too tall to climb, and the pointed spikes at the top of each meant no one would've been able to scale it without injury. He looked all

across the grounds yet there weren't any signs of ladders, holes, or any other signs that someone had gotten in. What's more, it was nearly midnight, and Balthus knew from all the books he read that villagers despised moving about in the dark. He could even see the lights of the village down below, a candle amidst the dark valley.

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, Balthus nearly fell from the windowsill as the thumping grew louder.

Balthus shuddered, "If, if it's not the villagers then what could it be? Did rats get into the kitchen? Is it a ghost!" He listed endless possibilities till he realized, "Wait! Maybe Mom and Dad are back!" Without pause, Balthus flung himself across the toy-strewn room and ran down the tower. "They must be back, they must be!" He nearly fell down the stairs as he ran down, shouting "Mom! Dad!" Balthus reached the bottom, the halls remained dark and empty. "Mom! Dad!" Balthus ran towards the foyer, only stopping to light a candle. The rug was still moth-eaten and the doors had a fine layer of dust on the handles. "Mom! Dad!" Balthus ran to his parent's bedroom. When the door opened and candlelight washed in there was nothing. The room was empty, Balthus was alone. The layer of dust that pooled across the bed was still untouched, save for the occasional footprints and tail markings of rats.

CREAK. Balthus shook, for once the familiar walls, floors, and ceiling felt more eerie and tight for him. He felt as though he were in the cave of some unknown beast, rather than the confines of his house. His feelings were confirmed when he turned and saw the eight hairy legs disappear around the corner at the end of the hall. Something was in his house, and it certainly didn't look human.

Balthus stood there, still, quiet, unmoving. He just stared at the corner expecting those hairy legs, or whatever horrible head they belonged to reappear. Shuddering, his mind racing, Balthus crept back from his parent's bedroom towards the foyer. He peered around the corner, down the stairs. Nothing, the foyer was empty, the suits of armor remained shrouded with webs. Down he went, left, right, left, right. He didn't run down the stairs like most children, yet continued to creep down slowly. Silence was his shield. The front door to the mansion was right there, and no sooner did he turn the knob he realized his stealth was only rewarded with a locked door.

“Where’d I put the key?” Balthus thought to himself, huddling in the corner of the room. His eyes darted about the room, fixating on every sign of movement in the dark. “Oh, when did I last lock the door? I always lock it when I come back in, just like Dad told me to. The last time I went outside I was getting food, and that was... yesterday? No, it couldn’t be, I would’ve remembered it were it yesterday. Maybe I put it in the kitchen? No, I didn’t want to lose the key among the forks and knives. Was it in the cellar? No, hiding the key wasn’t worth waking the boogeyman.” From a room on the bottom floor, Balthus heard a SMASH, followed by the tinkling of broken china. This got him to remember. “The library!” He nearly yelled out loud, “the key’s in the library, right underneath the fake book! Right where father told me to hide it!” The realization yet mostly the smash sent Balthus up the stairs again towards the tower. He made sure the iron latch was securely fashioned before approaching the toy general.

“General Greg. We have an emergency!” The general laid at attention on the floor. “The mansion has been infiltrated and our route of retreat has been blocked!” The rest of the army listened too, yet Balthus couldn’t tell if any of them heard because their expressions were wooden. “You are all hereby enlisted on scouting duty, I shall accompany you and scout ahead whilst you cover me from all danger. Is that understood?” The impossibility of their speech was taken as a yes. Down the stairs the army marched, crashing into one another as they jostled around in the small leather pouch Balthus carried. Before the hall was in sight Balthus put his ear to the wall. He heard no thumping, no crashing. All was silent. The coast was clear.

He reached the door, “Okay,” Balthus whispered, scooping out the lieutenant and his men. “You men guard the door, make sure our route out is secure.” One by one he lined up the soldiers, making sure to aim their tiny wooden guns towards the dark corridors. “As for the rest of us, we march on.” He turned towards the rest of the mansion, yet one look at the darkness made him tremble. As he looked down those dark and dusty halls he called home he began to realize how unfamiliar they all looked. He couldn’t remember the last time he ran down these passages. It seemed like an era when he last saw servants bustle up and down these halls with trays full of hot steamy food, cool drinks, and other pleasant things. Yet while he remembered those halls, and all the paintings, pottery, and wallpaper that lined them, now they

seemed as familiar to him as a new country. Just the thought of continuing his search almost made him aware he only held pieces of painted wood in his pouch.

That thought scared him more than the dark hallways. “No,” he said to himself firmly, “I must carry on! I told myself that I’d look over the house like Mom and the maids used to, so I shall.” He turned to the nearest hallway and continued his march. Faded doors appeared, then disappeared just as quickly. Pieces of foreign art became a blur as the hallway grew longer. Only halfway down did Balthus realize he was going the wrong direction. The library was on the second floor rather than the main one.

“Uh, men,” Balthus stammered, “it seems like I led us in the wrong direction. We have to fall back to the foyer now.” He looked down at his regiment, their carved faces gleaming their disapproval. “It was an honest mistake,” said Balthus as he walked back to the foyer, “I can assure you it won’t happen again.”

“Of that, you can be sure,” said a soft, hungry voice from above. There, perched on the ceiling staring down at Balthus was an eight-legged man. His body stood not straight yet flat like a tick’s. His eight-legs emerged from the sides of his rubbery, yet swollen body. He was a bright, crimson color, the sort of color that comes from freshly bled blood. The crimson crept throughout his body and into his face. His face! What a horrible sight it was, for he had a thick hairy face, one with hair growing spewing from the top, the bottom, and out the sides of his ears. He had the nose and mouth of a man, yet his eyes were a bright yellow color, and far too wide to be human. As those eyes stared down at little Balthus, the red rushed into its sockets. Its mouth watered.

The Tick-Man rasped, “so far it’s been a fruitful day, a sweet spoiled child for breakfast, a rude bitter one for lunch, a platter of disrespectful brats for dinner, and now a nice greasy, idle child for dessert.” Balthus tried to speak, to ask the man what sort of creature it was, and why it was here. Yet he knew full well it’s gluttonous intent. The Tick-Man didn’t wait for Balthus to finish, “my name and my nature are unimportant,” it said, bits of slimy, unpleasant muck falling from his mouth as he spoke. “All you need to know is that I’m drawn to the scent of the young, like sharks towards blood. I’m no monster, no. See, I don’t eat children. I eat little brats like you. I eat the ungrateful, the spoiled, the fussy, and those

that heed not good advice. Good children taste like dirt to me, yet bad children are so much more flavorful. There's more complexity in their taste. From your scent little one, I'd say that the fat on your bones gives you a nice, buttery taste. Those muscles of yours are quite soft, and that brain in your head must have a greasy sensation for the palate. Yes, you'll make a delightful pud this evening."

Balthus had no words, for how does one respond to someone you know will eat you? All Balthus had was his toys, which he scooped out, stammering, "you better get out of here, or else my army will blow you up!"

The Tick-Man looked down and with a smirk rasped, "and you come with toothpicks as well! Ah, I knew this mansion had fine dining." In an instant, the Tick-Man threw himself from the ceiling. Without a thought, Balthus took off down the darkened hallways. The Tick-Man barked after him, "there's no need to run. I can run faster!" Balthus didn't look behind to see if the boast was true, he merely ran and ran, as fast as his slippers could take him. The hallways began to branch every which way, up, down, to the left, and the right. Balthus never stopped to consider which way he ran. It's been years since he last ran these corridors, past the servants, and butlers, and maids, the stain-glass windows he used to gaze out for hours were merely a means to light his way. The stacked furniture he used to climb all over and hide in now served as a barricade against his pursuer. The solid oak door at the end of the hall wasn't some imaginary portal to another realm, now for Balthus it was his escape hatch.

He threw open the old oak door and slammed it just as suddenly, his hands fighting with the latch, defying the years of rust. Balthus was now outside in the middle of the mansion. Another rotten fountain stood amidst the clearing, gnarled brambles where hedges once were stretched across the ground and up into the surrounding walls. Balthus reached into his bag and placed the captain and his men down on the latch of the door. "Stay here men, guard the door and see that nothing gets through. I'll come back to get you after we find the key."

The only green left in the garden was rot and filth, "Mom and Dad would faint if they saw this," he said as he rushed through the brambles. "Everything here looks like some sort of dark fortress. Yet don't worry boys, I've got a shortcut. Let's just hope it's still here" As he ran the brambles cut his skin



and tore at his clothes. He didn't like it one bit, grunting and struggling through the pricking pain. As he tore himself loose a strong gust of cold, clear, wind blew off the boy's cap, carrying it away over the iron gates. "Wait!" Balthus turned back, "my nightcap!" He watched his nightcap vanish into the night, its fuzzy white tip waving goodbye in the wind. He had no time to mourn, as the oak door burst open with a CRACK. The latch flew from the door and the toy soldiers went with it. Each snapping like dried twigs as the metal pieces broke them one by one. Out crawled the Tick-Man.

The nightcap meant nothing to Balthus now. His heart sank for his broken toys yet upon seeing himself again in the Tick-Man's eyes, his entire form reflected in red, his heart back into his neck. The brambles tore at him again as he bolted through. They cut him deeper than before but that didn't slow him. All he had to do was reach the corner of the garden, towards his secret hidey-hole. He heard the Tick-Man scuttling after, its hairy legs pounding and pounding into the dirt. They kicked up the brambles as they slammed down towards him. The pounding gave Balthus such a fright that he nearly jumped out of the rest of his nightclothes. Yet it was strong enough to make him drop the rest of his soldiers. The bag fell open and the toys spilled out.

Balthus didn't realize he'd dropped his toys till he slid towards the corner. He heard a horrible shriek, one forced from pain and saw the Tick-Man hopping back and forth from one leg to the next. Those hairy legs stamped down on the toy soldiers, their sharp angles piercing the horrible fiend. Each toy soldier he stepped on broke into pieces with a CRACK, and soon all were but pieces of wood scattered about the dirt. The Tick-Man shook his head in a frenzy, his eyes clamped shut in pain. When he opened them again Balthus had vanished.

Balthus was curled inside the wall. He shoved the loose bricks back into place as he heard the Tick-Man hiss, "you aren't the first naughty brat to run boy. I'll find you, I'll tear this mansion apart!" CRASH! Bits of dust trickled from the ceiling as Balthus heard part of a wall outside crumble.

"I need to get out of here soon." Balthus thought as he began crawling further into the mansion. "Even if that monster doesn't eat me, he'll bring down the mansion on me and I'll get squashed flat like a bug. But wait. Where does my hidey-hole lead again?"

Stick and Hoop.

Balthus hadn't used this hidey-hole in years. It's where he hid whenever his parents had argued, when bees swarmed the garden, or whenever he wanted to feel alone and safe. Crooked cats, oblong dogs, disjointed men and fairies, and crude mockeries of his family all stared at Balthus as he shimmied along through the old tunnel. Their faded crayon-colored eyes followed Balthus, each piece reminding him of the days when he liked to draw.

He looked towards a drawing he made of himself. "Excuse me, me. Do you remember which way the library is?" The drawing's stick-like fingers pointed further down the tunnel, just as they had for years. "Thanks," said Balthus carrying on, "I guess I'm better at remembering things as a drawing than as a person." The crawlspace grew darker as Balthus crawled, and the walls grew ever more humid and strewn with webs the deeper he went. Already his back and shoulders were beginning to ache and crack as he dragged himself along with his arms folded. "How much have I grown?" Balthus thought as he shimmed his crooked back around a corner, "I remember when I could crawl through my hidey-hole on my hands and knees, now I can barely fit my back." He began to worry that the Tick-Man might hear the creaking of his back, yet he soon forgot his fears when he noticed beads of light sticking through the wall ahead.

A bent saw with crooked teeth met Balthus as he shoved the loose bricks away from the wall. The rusty red hue of its blade gave Balthus a jump, especially seeing how distorted and frightened he looked in the blade's reflection. He quickly snapped out of it, "yeah, yeah, you don't need to remind me how scared I am," he grunted to the rusty saw, as he pulled himself out of the wall. With his joints creaking and cracking he emerged into the rust-covered room. The walls were lined with axes, picks, hammers, saws, shears, and other old tools once used against wood, brick, and dirt.

"It's the tool room!" Balthus said to himself as he tiptoed further into the dark. The rusty tools hung about him, a pair of rusty shears caught his eye. The shears were as rusted as the other tools, each blade bent in a different direction. Yet Balthus recognized the shears immediately by the word **Valenta**

written across one of the handles. “Valenta’s shears,” he pulled them off the wall. “I remember these! Valenta was always out in the garden early in the morning, cutting and carving away those rotten, dead plants.” Balthus had asked her, “Why do you wake up so early?””

Valenta had said to him, “with gardening, you always need to be one step ahead, child. The garden always changes, plants bloom, while others die. New ones need to be planted. You have to be on top of all that, know which plants need tending to and which need uprooting. Always out there early in the morning fore’ breakfast, that way the sun doesn’t rise up and its heat doesn’t slow me down. Sun don’t like it when others interfere with its work, it’s the job of sunning. That’s why I’m out there fore’ the sun comes up, so I do my job before the sun has to do its work. If I was out there when the sun was up I wouldn’t be as quick with the snip and the snap. I wouldn’t have no control of the garden, none at all. If you can’t control your garden, then it becomes a forest. This house don’t have no room for no forest.”

“I guess that’s what she meant.” Balthus hung the shears back on the wall. “The garden grew out of control, and the brambles were all like trees. Maybe that’s where that Tick-Man came from? Maybe he was like a normal bug, yet he grew all big, mean, and monstrous after living off those brambles.”

As he pondered he continued through the tool room. Pondering, yet not paying attention he bumped into a shelf. The tools on the shelf rattled as something leapt from the top and grabbed at his face! “Ah!” Balthus screamed. He fumbled about the room, pulling and pulling till he managed to pry free something wet, cold, and covered in sickly-white fur from his face. It was a dirty rag.

“Oh,” Balthus said, blushing at how scared he was over the dirty thing. “Guess I’m just a bit on edge.” He stared at the rag, turning it over in his hands. Like the shears, there was something familiar about the rag. It was a small, white, piece of cloth, now moldy and dampened with webs crisscrossing it like lace. A hairy brown spider scuttled away from Balthus in fear, yet Balthus was too transfixed by the words scrawled on the back of the rag to notice. Scrawled there on the back were the words, *latat shemora, quin vera tos sol vie so line*. When he read those words, he remembered. “This is Luis’s Rag!” Balthus said, turning the rag over again and again in his hands.

*Good show, fair one, come back and play again.* That's what the family's musician Luis told Balthus the scrawl meant, "it's a foreign thing kid," he said.

Balthus had asked him, "So did someone ask you to come and play for them?"

"Indeed they did little man," Luis said with a grin as white as ivory keys, "indeed they did. Twas about five years ago that I met that pretty little damsel, her hair all a golden, and her eyes all a sparklin'. I thought myself far too low for her tastes, yet when I started strumming my strings, pounding my keys, and banging the drums, whoo, did she fall for me. I spent myself the best week o' my life with that pretty dame, never one second did I feel the pangs of discomfort or the weight of the world on my shoulders. With her, at my side, I could've stared the Devil right in the face and it wouldn't have meant a thing. Eventually, my troupe had to split the local village we was staying at, and I wagered that I'd go with 'em and return one day to my dame. Before I departed she wrote this here message on my handkerchief, never departed with it since."

"Wait," thought Balthus, his mind back in the tool room. He kept looking down at Luis's handkerchief, turning it over, and shaking out the webs. "If you've never departed with this then why is it here when you're gone?" Balthus thought on this for a second but couldn't reason why Luis would leave such a precious thing. "I'll take it with me then," Balthus said, tucking the handkerchief into his nightshirt, "if I ever see him again I'll just give it back. Simple." Soon after reached the door to the tool room, but not before spying one last piece amidst the rusted sea of memories. Against the wall in the corner was a big wooden hoop, carved from birch. Resting near it on the counter of a nearby table was a smaller stick. Like the hoop, it was carved from the same birch.

"My hoop and stick!" Balthus eagerly grabbed the stick and slid the hoop from the wall. Unlike most of the tools which hung listlessly from the walls like hung corpses, the hoop and stick both remained in good shape. "I thought I'd seen the last of you two, after running you into the pond that one time," Balthus spoke to the hoop as if it would respond. It responded just as well as the toy soldiers had. "Yeah, you were as damp Valenta's brow in the sun when the servants pulled you out. Mom said you were ruined, yet Dad insisted that with some drying and some carving you'd be as good as new. I guess he

must've carved you before he, Mom, and the others left huh?" Before the hoop couldn't make a response, a rumbling shook the tool room from the hall. It was enough to make Balthus drop his old toys and hide under the counter.

The door to the room slammed open. The Tick-Man's hairy head emerged from the hall. Those crimson eyes darted around the room, along the walls, floor, and ceiling. It must've been the darkness of the room, or perhaps it was the hastiness of the Tick-Man that he slammed the door with a growl not long after and continued storming down the hall.

Balthus didn't move from underneath the table, yet waited for the rumbling to stop down the hall. Even when it did stop, he waited some more. After about ten minutes the rumbling returned, tools began to fall from the walls, some dug into the floor whilst others became stuck in the tables. Balthus didn't dare move, he prayed that no tools fell on him as he lay curled up on the floor. The Tick-Man's head emerged into the room again, like clockwork he looked around, growled, and slammed the door.

"I must be in one of the square corridors of the house," Balthus thought, daring himself enough to crawl over to the side of the room. "He'll keep coming around and around again if I wait, yet how am I supposed to get out without him seeing, hearing, or smelling me for that matter?" He thought on this for a while, tapping the stick against his thigh and slightly swinging the hoop back and forth. When the Tick-Man came around a third time, Balthus waited for five minutes then quickly poked his head out into the hall to look for exits. There was one far to his right, yet not one to his left. A powerful breeze blew northwards from open windows.

"Rats! If it was to the left I could've waited till he went up the hall on the right side, then crept out thataway. Because he goes to the right each time, he'll hear me coming along the east wall. Likely smell me in the north because that's the way the wind blows. Even if he comes creeping down the west, by the time I reach the door he'll see me enter. I dare not outrun him again." He looked at all the tools, knowing full well one of them had to be used to get out of this. "Which do I use though? All are so rusted that I could carve my way out of here. They're far too rusty and blunt to make good weapons, not that I

can fight anyways. If I use them to block the door he'll know I'm here." His eyes passed over each rusty tool until he turned back to his old hoop and stick. A plan began to take shape.

The Tick-Man stormed around the halls again, grunting to himself, "he's here someplace, I can smell it. One of these rooms holds my treat and I'll keep going round and round until I eat him up, or both of us are dead! But wait! What's that I hear?" He turned to see a wooden hoop rolling towards him down the hall. Tied to the hoop, with a bit of rusty wire was a handkerchief with scrawls. "What's this then?" said the Tick-Man leaning down to read the scrawl. "La... la... lat... lata... latata... no, latat."

The Tick-Man was so preoccupied with the scrawl that he didn't notice his quarry creeping down the hall towards the right exit. With a grin, Balthus slowly shut the door behind him and carried on. "I'm sorry I had to use your handkerchief Luis. I swear to you that once I get rid of that monster, I'll get that handkerchief back. Just you wait!"

### Building Blocks.

Unlike the rest of the house which looked dilapidated, the next hall Balthus found himself in looked unfinished. The walls stood bare and gray, lurching inwards. Bricks were missing from the floor, leaving holes for the unwary foot to get caught in. What Balthus noticed immediately were the cobwebs. They were larger than any webs he had ever seen before. They hung along the walls like tapestries and covered the floors like carpets. Balthus was not one to be spooked by the average spider or its web, yet the size of these webs was enough to make him linger near the door.

"I don't remember this part of the mansion!" Balthus thought, his eyes transfixed on the giant webs swinging in the wind. "Maybe this area was being rebuilt before Mom and Dad left? But that can't be, I don't remember seeing any builders here before." As he pondered he heard the scuttling of the Tick-Man from the other side of the door. He would've liked to think the sound wasn't getting closer, yet Balthus knew better. He gulped, "I don't like this, but I have to move forward." With as much courage and gall as he could muster, Balthus took his first step forward into the web-strewn hall.

It was hard to move quickly here, for at times the floor would creak and shift, making the act of running more of a balancing act. Despite the uneven floors, it was mostly the webs that proved a challenge to young Balthus. While he could balance fine, he knew that one step on the webs would be his undoing. He thought back to all the times he'd seen webs strung up in corners of dark rooms. He remembered all the flies, wasps, ants, and other small things which were caught in those webs, just waiting for their prison sentence to end through a pair of fangs. Some had fought against the webs, buzzing and screeching loudly, thrashing from side to side to pull themselves free. Yet the webs held still, they always did. Balthus knew his strength. He doubted he could even free a toe from those webs.

“Well, I guess I know why I don't see many animals around here,” thought Balthus when he saw the large bumps which stuck out from the webs. He stuck to the sides of the hall, not too close to the walls themselves yet not directly in the middle of the hall either. That's where most of the webs were. He slowly made his way, down, down, down, the hall, ever more careful of where he stepped. It was the one time in his life where countless hours of pretending the floor was made of lava were of use to him. Holes in the crooked walls spilled moonlight around the hall, so Balthus could see where he stepped. Yet it didn't help him when his foot landed on a loose brick. He stumbled for a second, trying to shift his weight towards the center of where he stood. It was no use, this brick was looser than the others. As soon as Balthus put his weight down upon it the brick bent back, and up Balthus went on one leg. He waved his arms about yet it didn't stop him from sprawling face-first towards the floor, right into the webs.

He screamed, shouted, squirmed, pounded, yet the webs held still, they always did. Balthus laid face down in the webs, his left arm raised high and his right arm raised low. He felt a terrible pain coming from his two feet as they scraped along with the brick when he fell, he could only imagine the scars he got.

“This can't be happening!” He silently screamed as he kept trying to squirm free. “I can't be stuck, I can't be! If I'm stuck, that means I'll die! I'll be done for! I can't be dead yet, I can't be! I'm too young!” Balthus felt the tears begin to form as he realized what fate had in store for him. He thought of the countless hours he'd have to lay here waiting. He thought of the tiny bodies that would clamber over

him. He thought of the fangs that would pierce into his skin. As he sobbed his eyes burned, the tears became stuck to his eyes to the point where he couldn't see the white silky prison he was trapped in. He sobbed, and sobbed, and continued to do so for what felt like hours. Exhaustion began to take Balthus, and he thought long and hard about falling asleep, yet the thought irked him. "I can't sleep. If I sleep, then as soon as I close my eyes I'll likely never open them again. I'll be dead before I could even wake! But I'm so tired. What's the point of trying to stay awake if I'm going to die anyway?"

His question made the webs feel tighter. "When I'm dead, will it be like I'm sleeping?" Balthus asked to no one but the webs. "Will I go to heaven as Mom and Dad said? Will I close my eyes and see light? Or is it like what that butler said? Will I close my eyes and will it be all dark, as if I were sleeping, forever?" Balthus squirmed some more, "I don't like sleeping, I don't want to sleep, I want to be awake! Yet," he stammered, "If I'm awake, then how long will I have to lay here, how long will it be before the spiders come to eat me? What will it feel like when they do? If I go to sleep, maybe it'll be all over quickly, I won't have to be sad before I die. But I'm already sad, I'm going to die!" He wanted to cry some more yet there was no room in his eyes. They were sealed tight already from the tears that had come.

He shuddered as if hit with a great chill in the webs. Despite the breeze of the cold night air drifting through the hallway like a gentle spirit, Balthus didn't feel cold. No, he felt hot. A great warmth surged into his cheeks, then into his forehead, and then finally into his brain. The warmth hurt his face. It left his tears welling up to the point where he felt they were boiling. It left his face in a great scowl, his muscles straining against the webs. Then there was the pain of his teeth, and a horrible pain it was as he gnashed them down, grinding his molars. He didn't squirm as he had before yet he quivered, his muscles feeling as if they would burst.

Balthus knew this feeling, it came about whenever his parents refused to buy him a new toy. It came about whenever he was forced to eat whatever he didn't like. It came about whenever he was sent to bed early. It was a feeling he hadn't felt since last he saw his parents. Rage.



He thrashed his body against the webs, with all the might he could muster he swung himself back and forth. He tensed his muscles as tight as he could, trying to pull himself free by sheer force alone. When his muscles couldn't free him he tried his teeth, clamping down on the webs like a wolf into a deer. He raked his hands about, scratching at the webs with his nails as if they were claws. He kicked and kicked with his legs, pulling them every which way to try and loosen the webs. When he did he felt the pain return to his feet, something oozed out of the scrapes. He didn't care about the pain, all his attention was focused on his battle with these webs, his vehement revenge against that which snared him. Yet the webs held still, they always did.

Balthus's screams echoed throughout the hallway, spilled out into the courtyard, and even trickled slightly down into the valley below. As soon as Balthus had begun his battle, it had ended. His screams made his throat ache and his breathing feel like fire. His muscles all throbbed with the promise of soreness in due time. His feet felt raw and now damp from the blood that spilled out of him. Any sorrow or fury that was left in him was quickly swept out by fatigue. The world began to grow black for young Balthus. He felt himself sink deeper into the webs, his body seemingly accepting it as a cushion. Sleep would've come to Balthus, yet a hairy leg that stamped down right next to his head snapped him awake.

He heard the Tick-Man's raspy voice, "ah, here you are! I was beginning to worry you had managed to sneak out of this place and into the night. I should've known better, to think a little spoiled morsel such as yourself would be able to find their way out of this place. Hah!" Balthus felt two hairy legs press down on his back, and with all his rage gone he could only let out a tiny whimper. "It's a shame you had to be caught in this web, I much prefer to see the look on all the naughty children's faces when I feed. But alas, I suppose this will have to do. There's no getting you out of these webs now!"

Balthus tried to gulp, yet the webs kept the lump in his throat right in the middle of his throat. As the hairy legs pressed down harder, and the raspy voice got closer, Balthus went to shut his eyes. "No!" He thought to himself, forcing them open again. "I need to stay awake, I don't want to go to sleep, I want to stay awake as long as I can." He could feel the breathing right behind him now, each breath coating the back of his neck in sweltering heat. His heart began to pound, "be brave Balthus, face this like a knight."

He thought about all the pictures and paintings he'd seen of knights, soldiers, and cavalymen who charged headlong into danger. The look of grim determination on their faces. Balthus tried to mimic that look, despite the webs tugging his face in separate directions. Soon he felt a coldness wash over him. It was relieving chill which seemed to wash away the fear that gripped him. He thought it was the night air, not realizing until he heard the raspy voice that the Tick-Man had pulled away from Balthus.

“No! They're coming!” The sounds of scuttling began to fill the hallway, and Balthus could feel the webs begin to jerk and bounce. “Argh. By the dark of night and the light of day, they had to come to take my meal from me! Bah. I'll just eat whatever is leftover then.” The pressure came off of his back as Balthus heard the Tick-Man scuttling away. Balthus had no time for relief. Soon he noticed more pairs of hairy legs surrounding him. These legs were shorter than the Tick-Man's, yet they were much darker and far hairier.

“What's this?” Chittered a soft yet shrill voice.

“Ah, maybe some sort of grub?” Another voice clacked, this one higher than the last.

“Nah, it's far too big for a grub, I'd say it's a fly,” A third voice cooed.

“A fly, have you ever seen a fly without wings?”

“Maybe they fell off when it got stuck in the web?”

“Nonsense, it would be bleedin' like a pig if its wings had come off.”

“Well, maybe it's a pig then?”

“Nah, don't have no totters. It's got hands and feet, just like a monkey's.”

“Where would you find a monkey round' here though? I don't see any palm trees or bananas.”

“Well regardless of what it is, it's still food. I'm sure she'll find a way to cook 'em regardless.”

Balthus felt something spindly grab him and severed him from the webs. The shock of being hoisted, and the horrible sight of the three giant spiders which now grabbed him was enough to invite a faint.

Unconsciousness soon followed.

Balthus awoke cold, hungry, and shoeless. His muscles ached from the webs and how tense his muscles were. As he raised his head he saw he was in a makeshift cell. Before the mansion fell to ruin it

would've been a pantry, Balthus could smell the pungency of the old herbs, fresh garlic, and other produce which was once stored here. After sitting up and looking around did Balthus realize that the room still served as a pantry! Hung from the walls were more bundles of webs, similar to what he had seen before in the hall. Limbs, hair, and snouts of all sorts stuck out from the webs. The door to the pantry had been ripped off, in its place were pillars of webs like iron bars. On the other side watching him was the largest spider Balthus ever saw. While not as big as the Tick-Man, it was still bigger than a breeding boar. It stood on eight spindly, hairy legs which arched upwards and then shot straight down into its thorax like the shafts of arrows. Its four glassy eyes stared at Balthus, while its fangs clicked together.

“Good, you're awake.” the Spider chittered. “Afraid you died of fright last night. Would have been a shame, live meat cooks better.” The Spider's comment got Balthus to scamper back toward the edge of the room. He had to stop himself from pressing up against the wall, or else he'd be stuck once again. “Here,” the Spider slid a bowl into the room, “eat this food to gain some fat. Here,” it slid a box which clacked together as it slid, “play with these to keep quiet. She'll have a look at you later, for now just stay where you are.” The Spider scuttled up the wall and down the hall.

“This was here this whole time?” Balthus said looking around at all the poor creatures ensnared in the webs. “All this time I thought I was alone in the mansion, yet these horrible creatures have been in my house. Catching people, cooking people, eating people! How hadn't I noticed this before?” He tried to stand yet his head began to spin from hunger and fatigue. Instead, he slid himself over towards the bowl and box. Inside the bowl was some sort of orange goo, with chunks of meat and bits of bread coated in it. The sight disgusted Balthus. He could only imagine what sort of animal the spiders had caught and cooked into this dish. The smell of the dish reached his nostrils, and he breathed deeply of the scent of chopped onions, smoked peppers, and finely ground paprika. His disgust meant nothing to his hunger, and when he tasted the food couldn't stop eating. He liked it so much that Balthus made sure to wipe up all the orange sauce left in the bowl with his bread. The herbs made his mouth buzz, and the meat and bread which now filled his stomach gave him some renewed strength. It was enough for him to stand up, stretch his sore muscles, and look around the pantry some more.

“This doesn’t look like the pantry in the main kitchen,” Balthus said as he gazed around. “I’ve been there many times before on my own, and I never saw any webs this big. Maybe this is the pantry in the servant’s quarters. WAIT! If it is the servant’s pantry, then that means...” he looked up towards the ceiling, and sure enough, there was the wooden panel with a large V, carved into it. “Aha! Victoria’s board!”

Balthus thought back to a conversation he had overheard two maids having while playing in another room. One maid had said, “have you heard of rumors between Antonio and Victoria?”

“As much as anyone else,” said a second maid, her voice as soft as the brush she had dusted with.

“Do you think it's true then? That the two of them are lovers?”

“I don’t think so, I know it. I’ve been to the pantry, I’ve seen the board with the V carved on it.”

The one maid had gasped, “oh Etta, it’s true then. Antonio’s been sneaking through the pantry to Victoria’s room at night?”

“Either that or someone put it there as some sort of joke. I swear if this is all a prank then it's not in good humor.”

Balthus didn’t remember much after that, yet the rumor of this secret passage always fascinated him. His hidey-hole was useful for getting inside and outside unseen. Yet the prospect of moving between rooms completely unnoticed always fascinated him. Now it seemed his prospects would come to his aid. “If I can get up there, then I can sneak into Victoria’s room. But this isn’t like my hidey-hole which I could reach. How am I to get up there?” With one glance he could tell there weren’t any ladders or ropes he could use. There were no crates or barrels he could stack to climb. There was only that one box left.

Inside the box were wooden blocks of all sizes. Big blocks, small blocks, blocks tilted at an angle, others which stood straight up. “Where did these come from?” Balthus asked, pulling out each block and setting them on the ground. There had to be thousands of the blocks within. All of them were carved in different shapes and painted with different colors. “I’ve never seen a set of blocks like this before! Not even I had this many and as nicely carved as these.” Out of habit he organized the blocks together, putting the big ones with the big ones, the red ones with the red ones, and putting together the arch blocks, flat

blocks, and all other blocks into separate piles. Soon Balthus had sorted fifty different piles of different kinds of blocks, each a different shape and color.

“The things I could build with these blocks.” Balthus thought, looking upon the hoard of carved wood. “If I got these blocks to my room I could finish the castle I was building. Or I could even build a tower out of all of these, big enough that I could fit inside! Or I could, ... I could, ... build a staircase. He looked up at Victoria’s board.

SPLICK, SPLICK, SPLICK, went the wooden blocks as Balthus pressed them against the webs. He laid layer after layer of wooden blocks down, putting the larger and flatter blocks down first, then making each new layer on top of that smaller as he built upwards. Soon his makeshift staircase grew and grew until at last, he placed the last block into place. “Aha,” Balthus said admiring his handiwork. “Freedom again! What would I do without my toys?” He stepped down on the first block.

The wood block staircase shook. Blocks spilled from the side as the whole creation fell apart. Balthus waved his arms about again, trying to maintain balance amidst the shower of wood that fell upon him. Before he could stumble and fall into the web-strewn wall a wooden block hit him in the face and knocked him to the ground. The pantry spun around in a spiral, as the ground below Balthus turned red. His nose felt sore and runny, and as he went to stand he noticed the amount of blood that oozed from it. His staircase was now but a pile of the ground, only the blocks directly attached to the wall remained.

Balthus felt the urge to cry, to weep at how his staircase fell apart, at how much blood he got on his clothes, how his freedom eluded him. Yet all Balthus could mumble was, “huh, guess that didn’t work out so well, huh?” He stumbled over towards the wall, pinching his nose as he went. He gave the blocks stuck to the wall a tug, yet webs held still, they always did. “Guess I should’ve made a tower instead.” He would’ve laughed at himself, yet the world spun so rapidly for him he couldn’t see his sense of humor. The room grew blurrier, and blurrier every second. The blood continued to gush from his nose, dripping in-between his fingers. He felt his ears begin to ring. Suddenly the entire world fell around him, the walls and floor vanishing beneath a veil of hazy light. The ringing grew louder, and lighter. The last thing Balthus could hear was the scrape of wood. Looking up the last thing he saw was the carved V slide to the

left, and a pale face peering out at him. Soon Balthus's world went from light into darkness, there was only the ringing left.

### Chalk.

After the ringing came the scraping of a spoon. One sore eye opened to see a pale shape illuminated by candlelight sitting at the end of a bed. In its lap was a bowl, something green and steamy sloshed around as a spoon sank beneath broth. It reached forward, a hot and steamy spoon in hand. Balthus heard a voice, yet his head pounded like a drum played by a toddler. The only words he could make out were, "open up."

"Wha?" Balthus began to say as the spoon slammed against his cheek. He went scream, yet the cry that flew up from his throat was quickly washed back down his throat by a stream of garlic, basil, and pea. The broth bubbled in his neck until a cold hand clamped his mouth shut and forced it down. It now fizzled in his chest. He had questions, oh so many questions. Yet the bed was so comfortable, and the broth so warm and pleasing, he just opened his mouth and allowed the spoon to tip more and more in his weary body. After the bowl was empty the world began to ring again. It jostled Balthus's brain to the point where all he could let out was a small "tee, hee, hee." Then like a whale after spewing water, he sunk back down into the bed.

Two eyes opened. The ringing was gone, the soreness was gone, his hat and shoes were gone. Balthus still felt his heartbeat, his lungs still pumped air, he was still alive. He sat himself up, raising both hands into the air. "Yes!" he said aloud, shaking about in victory. "I did it! I'm still alive! I escaped after all!" He paused, "But wait, where am I?" The room around him was smaller than the pantry, more like a closet. He laid on a small, faded cot, just sturdy enough to hold him up. A small blue wax candle set on the ground illuminated the sparse chamber and caused an iron handle against a door opposite the bed to glint.

From the other side of the door, Balthus heard a soft voice. Not a menacing one like that of the Tick-Man, or scratchy like those of the Spiders. The voice was high and hyper, and through it Balthus

heard the worst singing he ever heard in his life. “What sort of creature could sing so horribly?” Balthus wondered. Climbing out of bed he wished the door had a knob instead of a latch so that he might have a keyhole to peek through. “So far I’ve encountered two different types of insect-like creatures, and one with a man’s head no less. Maybe the singing comes from some sort of large cicada? Or maybe it’s something even more gross like an ant or a fly.” The thought shook him. The giant insects and arachnids he encountered so far only made his reception towards the normal ones worse. That didn’t deter him from daring to crack the door, to peer outside.

Rather than seeing a large cicada, or ant, or yet another giant spider, he saw a messy kitchen. Pots, pans, plates, cups, forks, spoons, and knives lay piled about the room, each covered in a different shade of filth. Standing near a stove, her back facing Balthus was a small pale figure, stirring paste in a pot and singing the horrible tune. Her hair and skin were starkly pale, even more so in comparison to the plainclothes and apron she wore. While her body was pale her clothes were spattered with bits of dried red, blue, orange, pink, green, purple, and other odd colors such as lilac, and cinnabar. Balthus couldn’t tell if her shirt, skirt, apron, and other garments were made to look messy, or if they’ve been through countless assaults of stains.

“That can’t be Mom or Dad, they were never that pale,” Balthus thought to himself as he peered at the mysterious woman. “Maybe it’s one of the servants? But I thought they’d all vanished when Mom and Dad did? Did I just miss this one? Is this one of the maids, who is now so old and grey she’s as white as a ghost? If she is a maid why hasn’t she tended to me earlier?” As Balthus tried answering his questions, he leaned closer to see if she was as pale as she looked. CREAK, his shoulder hit the door, and a horrible creaking, even worse sounding than the pale figure’s singing entered the kitchen. The figure stopped its stirring and song and turned around, a red-coated ladle in hand. Balthus quickly threw himself behind the door, yet what he saw startled him, and convinced him thoroughly she wasn’t a maid.

The woman he saw wasn’t a giant critter, a combination of man and insect, an old crone, or even a woman at all! What Balthus saw was a young girl, her hair was tied up in a bun. Her front was smeared in the same red steaming paste as her ladle. It was her eyes that shocked Balthus most of all. Her eyes

were a bright purple hue, the same sort of purple one sees in the sky during a sunset. Balthus had never seen eyes in such a color, yet they looked around the room frantically when the door creaked. He couldn't tell if she had seen him.

"Hello?" the girl called out. Balthus heard the floor panels of the kitchen creak and could tell by her shadow beneath the door that she was patrolling the kitchen. "Spindle, Spiker, Spiral? Is that you?" She said the three names the same way a mother might address a silly child. "I thought I told you piggies that dinner will be ready when it's ready. You can't rush culinary genius, you know!"

Balthus gulped, web-free this time at her statement. "By dinner, she must mean me!" He thought, beads of sweat dripping from his brow as if he stood over her stove already. "She probably found me trying to escape and brought me here to cook me! Then I guess that means she's whom those spiders were referring to, but a girl? Why would they have a young girl cook their meals for them? Maybe she's not a girl, and it's all some sort of trick! Maybe she's a witch or sorceress in disguise! Those spiders then must be her servants, Aha! I've got it all figured out. The question is then, how do I escape her?"

Balthus peered out into the kitchen again. He didn't see the girl, yet he saw a trail of red paste she left as she left the kitchen through a door to the left. The kitchen was messy to be sure, yet it still looked in finer shape than many of the other rooms in the mansion. It had a pleasant yet overpowering aroma as well, strong whiffs of garlic, rosemary, paprika, and spices Balthus had never smelled before greeted him. He shuffled out as quietly as he could into the room, a harder task for him with bare feet. Aside from all the dirty cutlery, and crockery, and a pot of boiling red paste, there wasn't much to be found directly in the room. He quickly checked the shelves, the drawers, the cupboards, but all were filled with more dirty crockery and various herbs and seasonings. It left him with not much but disappointment, he was half expecting to find yet another toy he might use. All he took was the sharpest knife he could find. He couldn't imagine himself using it, yet he felt it best he didn't leave the kitchen without some form of protection. There were two doors out. One on the left, one on the right, one opened, and one closed.

"She went out the left one," Balthus thought as he crept around the kitchen, "so I ought to go out the right." Knife in hand, he quickly threw open the right door, and quietly shut it behind him. The room



was completely black, even what little light came through the door did little to help Balthus see. “Thank goodness I thought to bring this,” said Balthus, looking down at the small blue candle he took from the room with the cot. The flame sputtered, telling Balthus that its light was limited, so he wasted no time in creeping about the room. At first, he thought the room was merely sparse and empty, yet he couldn’t imagine a room like that would exist in the mansion. His parents had a fine eye for decoration, they wouldn’t dare leave a room empty no matter how small or needless a purpose it functioned as. The floor was rough, and when Balthus held the candle lower he realized why. Strew across the floor was chalk, all sorts of chalk. The chalk splayed across the floor as grime did in the kitchen. Balthus made out vague shapes of animals, people, random places, yet nothing was clear because the drawings overlapped one another. Dogs would be shadowed by donkeys, snails shielded by sailing ships, mermaids towered by, well, towers. He stared down at the heaps of chalk drawings, and soon he realized that it wasn’t just the floor that was covered.

All along the walls, faintly across chairs and carpets, etched into paintings, the chalk covered the entire room. The amount of chalk Balthus found was absurd. He felt that were the room not so dark it would’ve felt that he was but an ant walking across the girl’s clothes. It baffled him so much that he soon forgot looking for a way out, yet kept looking down and up at the amalgamation of doodles and scribbles. Hours passed, yet Balthus didn’t seem to care as he gazed about the room in awe. The chalk and the vibrancy of the colors almost seemed to hypnotize the boy.

“Did the girl draw all these? No, she couldn’t have. These drawings stretch towards the ceiling, and there’s no way she would have reached up there unless she had a ladder large enough. But if she did, it must’ve taken her years to draw all this. Years of her and her spiders being here and I didn’t notice them? How long have I spent alone in my room?” Of all the questions Balthus had asked himself, this is one he didn’t want to think about. The answer might’ve scared him more than his current predicament. Looking around he noticed one thing in the room spared from the chalk scribbles. It was a long piece of solid white wood leaned up against the wall. The wood shielded an entire corner of the room.

“Guess this must be the way out, why else would this corner be covered up?” Balthus moved to the side of the wood, ready to squeeze himself down under it. Before he had the chance, light poured into the room. The colors along the walls, floor, ceiling, and furniture seemingly lighting up as the light hit them. The bright light after hours in the dark blinded poor Balthus, sending him sprawling to the ground again. As his eyes took in the light he realized that the only door to the room was thrown open. Standing in the doorway, her clothes now covered in a muddy brown paste was the pale girl.

“Spindle, Spiker, Spiral? Were you in here the whole time?” As she said this the girl shuffled into the room, sliding her feet ever so slowly across the ground. Balthus pressed himself against the wall, he felt his heartbeat against his chest like a drum struck by an army man as the chalk stuck to his back. He stood there, staring directly at the girl as she continued to shuffle in. Waiting for her to cry out in fear, anger, or call upon some magic that’d be his doom. He waited, and waited, yet all the girl did was shuffle forward some more, her arm pressed against the wall. She said, “If you three clowns have been messing with my chalk again, I’m gonna sneak spinach into your desert!”

“What’s this?” thought Balthus, never taking his eyes off the girl. “She hasn’t seen me? Am I blending in with the chalk? No, that can’t be it, she thinks I’m one of the three Spiders. Wait a second,” he peered carefully at the girl, not at her appearance yet at the way she moved. She continued shuffling slowly forwards, one arm pressed against the wall, the other outstretched as if groping for something. “Oh, that’s it! She can’t see! Ah, she must truly be a witch then, they can barely see anything. Bet she couldn’t tell the difference between a finger and a chicken bone!”

The girl continued to shuffle in, “guys, c'mon this isn't funny. If you guys are on the ceiling or something don't think I won't catch you running!” As she moved along the wall she knelt and began groping for something. Soon she hoisted a long, chalk-covered stick, so covered was it that it seemed to blend into the wall. THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, the stick went as it struck the ceiling. Balthus's heartbeat was as loud as African drums. He was amazed a girl like her could hoist such a large stick, much less hit the ceiling with the amount of force she had. The girl banged the ceiling some more, each

THUMP shook chalk from the walls like dirt in a crumbling cave. She paused for a second, cocking her head to the side in wait. Balthus threw a hand over his mouth. He was breathing loudly, much too loudly.

A few seconds passed before the girl said, “huh, I guess you three aren’t in here.” Balthus let out the longest sigh of relief he’d ever felt. His heart was now beating like eggs caught in a whisk. No sooner had the sigh escaped his lips did the long, chalk stick slam into his chest, nearly knocking the wind out of him. His heart beat like a cracked egg. “Ha, caught you,” the girl cried triumphantly, hoisting the stick like a spear. Balthus scrambled, he went to whimper yet all that escaped his lips sounded more like an annoyed huff than a cry of despair. “You thought you were safe after that huh? Hah, you idiots always underestimate my hearing.”

“Please,” Balthus wheezed, the stick biting deeply into his chest. “Please, don’t turn me into a newt.”

“A newt?” The girl said confused, “Spindle, if that’s you then the only thing I’m turning you into is a vegetarian for making jokes like that. Now c’mon, get up.” The stick drew back as Balthus’s lungs grabbed desperately at the air around him. The girl took a step back, as much in shock as Balthus was. “Wait a second, that’s not you breathing Spindle. Not even Spiker or Spiral breathes like that! Who are you?”

“Balthus,” he stammered. There was a different sort of pain in his chest as he said his name to her. It wasn’t like the tightness that he felt when he couldn’t breathe. Instead, it felt like burning, as if revealing his name to her was equivalent to selling away his soul.

“Balthus?” The girl said. She repeated the name, “Balthus, Balthus, Balthus,” as if she already knew fifty Balthus’s already. “Hold on,” she stepped forward and reached for Balthus’s shoulder. Her touch was hail to him, his neck lurched inward from the shock. She held on tight, sliding her hand over his back. When she felt his hunch she gasped, “Oh, It’s you!”

“It’s you?” Balthus repeated, more confused than before. “You act as if you’ve seen me before.”

“I have, I have,” said the girl, “I found you sprawled out in the pantry, and I nursed you back to health.” She squatted down and reached out towards Balthus. He drew back, lest she grabbed his throat

with those icy fingers. She grabbed his hand and shook it, “Hi, I’m Abigail.” It felt like her hand froze to Balthus’s as she hoisted him off the ground and began to lead him across the room. “Come on buddy, let’s get some more grub into you. I’ve never seen anyone in need of good food as you.” She thought for a second before saying, “or anyone who can eat my food for that matter.”

In the kitchen, a table was strewn with plates and bowls full of dark brown paste, large steaming pastries, and all sorts of fruits sloppily chopped. Abigail sat Balthus down on one end, and then dragged a stool over for herself to sit in. “So, how’d you like my cooking so far, huh? Well, I guess that must be a hard question for you to answer, given you were unconscious for one of the two meals of mine you ate. You had quite a big spill in the pantry you know? I never saw anyone bleed that much, especially not out of their nose. I’ve never had nose bleeds before myself, yet my nose drips like crazy every single time I have to pull out the pepper. Not that I hate pepper, I love it, you should know that given the paprika mendl you ate in the pantry. Oh, that’s right, You got locked up in there, weren’t you? I’m sorry you had to go through all that, I swear Spindle, Spiker, Spiral just look at anything that moves and thinks they’re food. When Spiral came up saying they’d caught some mysterious new game for me to cook, I was excited to try out some new recipe. Yet when he described what you looked like and I realized you were a person, I had them high tail it to the pantry to let you free. Of course, after I sent him I found you on the floor bleeding and those three fools aren’t back yet, but I guess it all worked out in the e...”

Abigail kept talking, yet Balthus sat silent. His eyes were as wide as the number of deserts. She seemed friendly enough, yet when he looked down at all the sweets before him, all he saw was death gazing back at him. “How do I know if any of these sweets are poisoned,” thought Balthus. “For all I know, one bite might turn me into another spider, or at worse a corpse!” The icing dripped sweetly over puffy cakes, pudding glistened like spring water, and the fruits glimmered like diamonds. As much as Balthus wanted to take a bite, to gorge himself at the spread before him, his fear held him like a straightjacket.

Abigail continued with her talk, the topic now shifting to fruits. She went from which fruits were easier to acquire, which fruits she liked better, and how difficult it was to get spiders to eat fresh produce.

Soon after the mention of spiders, Balthus heard the familiar scuttling of three giant arachnids, all piling into the kitchen atop the other.

Spindle spoke first, “Abigail! The little guy’s gone, somethin’ took him!”

Spiker followed with, “We went to the pantry like you told us to, and all we found were blocks and blood. Something must’ve dragged him out from between the webs somehow!”

Spiral finally got in, shouting, “We searched all over the place, through the pantry webs, down the halls, in the big rooms. Nearly tore all the webs down looking for him!”

“It’s all Spiker’s fault,” shouted Spindle, “I told him to make the pantry webs extra tight, but no he had to go and do a rush job to get up here in time for dinner last night.”

“Rush Job!” Spiker turned towards Spindle with four glassy glares. “Don’t you accuse me of no rush job! My webs are the strongest out of all three of us, and that’s a fact. Remember how we snared that charging moose that one time? Remind me, who spun those webs?”

“Yeah sure, your webs are strong,” retorted Spindle, “but when food is involved, your spinning is on par with Spiral’s.”

“What are you saying about my webs!” Spiral shouted, throwing himself in between the other two. “I’ll have you know my webs are nothing to sneeze at!”

“Yeah you got that right,” Spiker chuckled, “cause’ if you sneeze at them, then your webs just fall apart!” Balthus watched as the three Spiders laid into one another, some with words, some with shoves. He still feared the creatures, their hairy bodies, their four glassy eyes, their grotesque size. Yet there was something about watching the three tussle like clowns. He couldn’t explain it but watching the absurdity befall those creatures he feared made his worry drip away like the icing off of the cakes. As the spiders all squabbled, Abigail approached them from behind with a green-coated ladle. WHACK, WHACK, WHACK, the ladle came down three times on the spiders, smearing green over their thoraxes as it fell.

Each yelling “Ack”, the three spiders stumbled back. “All right, enough of that you lot,” Abigail yelled, waving around her ladle. Bits of green paste flew about the room, smearing the walls, the plates, and the right side of Balthus’s face. “It’s bad enough knowing all of you can’t do the teeniest of things

without babbling with one another like schoolchildren. Now you come in here blaming one another for losing the prey you just caught! Pathetic, all of you deserve to eat nothing but veggies for a month!” The three spiders shook at her suggestion, each skittering off towards a corner. “Just so you know,” Abigail said, ladle held towards the spiders like a sword, “all of you are at fault for the prey getting away. If none of you gave him the wooden blocks, he wouldn’t have tried to make a staircase out and then fallen and hurt himself. Then I wouldn’t have found him and nursed him back to health. See!” She turned and pointed at Balthus. He shot up with a jolt when the twelve glassy eyes turned to look at him.

“Oh, there he is,” Spindle said, “Look at that guys. I found him!”

“No! I saw him first,” Spiker shrieked.

“No way, I’ve got the sharpest eyes,” Spiral hissed.

Balthus watched as the squabbling ignited yet again. Watched as the corner of the room quickly turned to a wrestling match as the Spiders kept shoving one another down to the floor. As he watched he didn’t notice that he instinctively reached towards his face, got himself a fingerful of paste, and licked his fingers dry as he watched the foolish Spider's sport. The paste was quite good, clearly some sort of mint icing for a cake. When he cleared the right side of his face he began to wish his entire face had gotten smeared with the stuff.

Abigail wasted no time, as they argued she reached into a cupboard and retrieved a head of broccoli, prepared for situations such as this. “All right, that’s it, open wide,” she yelled, holding the broccoli aloft and stamping towards the three. One sight of the leafy green made the three quit the fisticuffs and prepare for the marathon. Like a vampire or strigoi fleeing from garlic, the three giant Spiders piled out of the kitchen at the sight of the broccoli, faster than they had entered. With a sigh, Abigail locked the door.

“Sorry about that,” said Abigail as she went about the kitchen, turning off lamps that hung about the room. “Honestly when I met those three I promised that I’d be a cook for them. Yet I constantly feel like I have to be a mother for all of them.” She shook her head, “you know it's pathetic when a girl has to mother you, you know? I’m about to turn twelve yet I keep having to act twenty-five around those idiots.”

“Twelve?” Balthus thought to himself as he licked the last of the paste from his fingers. “If she is twelve, then maybe she isn’t a witch. I never heard of a witch that young before. But if she’s not a witch, then what is she?” Before Balthus could solve his question the room turned a sharp black as all but one of the lamps still held light. Abigail grabbed the last lamp off its hook and grabbed Balthus with the other hand. Before he could resist, or ask where she was taking him, Abigail dragged Balthus into the chalk room.

“Do you draw?” Abigail asked as she ran about lighting the room’s lamps. Clearly she wasn’t as blind as Balthus had thought

“Uh...” Balthus stammered. He had many answers to this question. He wanted to say “yes,” and continue with the strange girl’s eccentricities. Yet he had many questions, “who are you, how did you get into my house, how did you come to care for three abnormally large and sentient spiders?” He didn’t know which response would save him. As far as he was concerned, anyone who can horrify three spiders larger than himself could still be a potential threat.

Abigail answered for him, “don’t worry, I’ll help you,” she grabbed Balthus and sat him down in the middle of the room. With a rag, she cleared away a large portion of the chalk and then placed between them a purple silk bag with golden lace. Inside were pieces of chalk, each a different color. She handed Balthus a plain white stick while she grabbed a red and blue one, holding both in each hand. “Right, now I need to think of something to draw. Oh, I know, why don’t you tell me about yourself? Then I’ll draw it out!”

“Okay,” Balthus said, this was getting stranger than he’d thought, but at least he could now tell Abigail of his plight. “So, I came here through my Mother and Father. This was their mansion and they lived here with their servants and wealth until they disappeared around.... Actually, it’s hard to remember when I realized they were gone. I just assumed for the longest time that they were on some trip and they’d be back eventually.” As he said this, he saw Abigail begin to draw the mansion into the floor in red. She then drew a small blue boy standing before the mansion, he seemed confused.

Balthus continued, scratching his own piece of chalk across the ground as he spoke. “Rather than leave, I decided to stay here, expecting them to return someday. I spent all my time up in my room in the tower. I had many....” He went to mention his collection of toys, yet felt that mentioning his building blocks, dolls, and other playthings would’ve been an embarrassment to himself of great proportions. “I had many amusements to keep me occupied. Luckily I didn’t need to worry about food or water, people from the village below would bring me what I needed. All things considered I had it good with or without my parents. Yet that all changed when I heard a thumping noise downstairs.” As he thought back to his moment his voice tightened. “At first, I thought my parents were home. Instead, there was this horrible man. His body was like that of a tick, yet his head was that of a madman. So I gathered my....” He went to say, “toy soldiers,” but quickly switched it to, “courage and began traveling throughout my now ruined home. Until I can find a key which I can use to unlock the front door, I’m trapped in here.”

He looked over and realized that Abigail had finished drawing the mansion. Before she made it look clean and polished, yet now she drew it in its current state, old and dilapidated. The little blue boy no longer looked confused. Instead, it looked up at a large monstrous tick, its head an exaggerated snarl. Yet Abigail didn’t draw the blue boy running away or cowering. Instead, she drew him facing the monster with his hands raised, ready for a fight. “I don’t think that looks like me at all,” Balthus thought. He looked down at what he drew. He couldn’t give it a name.

Abigail shook her hands free of the chalk and sat up straight. “Well,” she said, “I can’t say I was expecting that. I honestly thought you were some poor kid Spindle, Spiker, and Spiral accidentally kidnapped. I was wondering how I was gonna help you get home, yet I guess that problem is solved already huh,” she said, gesturing around.

“Yeah sure,” Balthus murmured, “but until that horrible Tick-Man is driven out of this place, I don’t think I can consider this place home anymore.” There was a silence that fell upon the two of them. Balthus didn’t know what to say to Abigail, and Abigail didn’t know how to respond to the boy whose house she was technically squatting in. Balthus broke the silence, asking, “so, I told you where I came from, can you tell me how you got into my house?”



Abigail thought for a moment before saying “Yeah that’s fair.” She rose herself off of the ground. “I don’t need to make a drawing for my story, I already finished it.” She walked over towards the white piece of wood which leaned against the corner. With a grunt she tipped it over and down and it went with a THUD. Rather than there being a door or other exit as Balthus had thought, there were more chalk drawings. Unlike the rest of the room, where Balthus could see that it's been drawn over, again and again, this corner was surprisingly clean. The drawings were undisturbed by smears of red, blue, or green. Balthus approached the corner, there he saw many drawings, all mostly drawn in royal purple. At the top of the corner Balthus saw a castle, with what looked like a king, queen, and small girl living inside. Bright curves on the faces showed how happy the family was, and the amount of bags spilling with purple Os (coins) indicated the family was very wealthy. The next drawing down showed the purple queen holding a baby in her arms. He saw that his baby wasn’t purple like the others, it was a bright white color like a ghost. The next drawing was the same as the first, there was the purple castle, the royal family, and their wealth of purple Os. The only difference was that the white girl was there, standing next to the family as the purple girl did. Then there was the purple girl. She didn’t smile. She glared at the white girl.

The next drawing showed an opulent bedroom, or as opulent a bedroom smears of chalk could depict. Sitting near a mirror was the white girl, brushing her hair and adjusting a tiara upon her head. The drawing after that was a close-up of the mirror, behind the reflection of the white girl was a purple figure. The next drawing seemed more scattered, as if whoever drew it pressed down quite hard on the chalk. The drawings were of the white and purple girls wrestling with one another, the purple girl using her tiara as a makeshift club. Scrapes of red emerged from the white girl as she stumbled back from the purple girl, it coated the tiara as well. The next picture showed the white girl falling from a window, with the purple girl waving goodbye from the windowsill. The white girl fell into a river, drifting downstream, till she washed up in the middle of the forest. There were a few drawings after that depicting the white girl in the forest, stumbling about, searching for food, cowering from large animals. There was one where she was seen tending a fish over a fire. The next one showed three giant spiders emerging from the bush, devouring the meal. This was followed by a drawing of the white girl riding on the back of the spiders. The last picture

was the same as the first, yet the white girl was gone, and the king and queen were frowning. The only one smiling was the purple girl.

### Air Gun

“You were a princess?” Balthus said, looking at Abigail wide-eyed. Abigail sat with her knees on the ground. She wasn’t looking at Balthus, instead, she was looking towards the corner. Some of the original fear Balthus had for her crept back, she was so quiet. He noticed both her hands, balled into fists at her side, the uncut nails digging into her skin. Her face was emotionless. Despite having met Abigail for only one or two hours, even he could tell this wasn’t like her. He walked over towards the white piece of wood hefting it back into place with a grunt.

Abigail sighed, “I’m sorry.” She stood, “I still have trouble processing what happened that day, why my sister would do something like that.” She stood there silent, her eyes turned towards the floor.

“Listen, I…” he began to speak, yet he knew not what to say. He thought of the purple girl, how mercilessly Abigail drew her attacking her. He couldn’t begin to imagine what drove someone to lash out like she had. “I don’t know what would cause someone to do something that horrible,” he said. “Yet I do know how it feels to be threatened in my own home. It’s horrifying. I thought I was safe here, yet now this place feels more like a dark fortress where I’m the prisoner rather than as a refuge for me.” Abigail remained silent, yet her eyes were turned towards him now. “I don’t know what else to say, to be honest. I guess what I’m trying to say is, I know how it feels?” One second went by, then another, then another. On the fourth, Abigail sighed again.

“Yeah,” she said, shaking her head, “I guess we both do.” She stretched her back, cracked her knuckles, shook her body. Balthus didn’t know if she was sore or merely shrugging off the moment. “I think I’m much happier here anyways. I get to cook new and exciting meals. I get to travel around with Spindle, Spiker, and Spiral to new faraway places. Plus I can draw wherever I want now,” she said, arms held aloft around the room.

“There is one thing I want to know,” said Balthus, “how did you and the three Spiders get into my house?”

“Through the cellar door,” Abigail said, “we broke it open and took refuge in here. Decided to stay for a while since the house was empty and there were plenty of animals around to eat. I hope you don’t mind us squatting this long.”

“I guess it’s fine,” Balthus said, “I wasn’t using this part of the house anyways.” As he finished his sentence his eyes lit up, he thought back to what Abigail had said. “Wait! You said you all broke through the cellar door?”

“Yeah, sorry,” said Abigail. “Don’t worry, we’ll seal it back up when we leave.”

He rushed over and grabbed Abigail’s shoulders, for once she was the one who looked shocked. “You all saved me! That’s how I can get out!”

“Get out?” Abigail said confused, “why do you want to? Oh, that’s right, you have that Tick-Man after you.”

“That’s right,” Balthus said, “now all I need to do is get to the cellar, and run out the back.”

“Well,” said Abigail, “if that’s all it’ll take then why don’t I and the Spiders go with you? We’ll get you there in no time.” The two rushed out of the chalk room with Balthus grinning ear to ear. Abigail led them down the hall to a ruined ballroom. There, hiding underneath a rotten banquet table were the three bulky forms of Spindle, Spiker, and Spiral. “All right,” Abigail said, tugging on the spider’s legs, “get out from there.”

The three spiders poked their hairy heads out. “We ain’t leaving for a month, Abbie.” said Spiral.

“Why is that?” Abigail said, looking at the three with her hands on her hips, her eyebrows raised with suspicion.

“Because you’ll feed us veggies, that’s why,” Spiker hissed, his mandibles clamped on the ground as he gulped down a fly crawling by.

“Yeah, we’ll just live off of flies for a month,” Spindle said. The three began to back away from Abigail. The two children watched the banquet table slide across the room away from them.

“Tell you what,” said Abigail, “if you help me and make up for your roughhousing earlier, I’ll forgive you and feed you normally. How does that sound?”

The three heads poked back out from under the table, “you... you mean it,” all three asked in unison.

“Yes,” said Abigail, patting each of them on the head. “You all took pity and cared for me in the forest. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t take pity on all of you.” The three Spiders scuttled out, cheering as they rubbed against Abigail like a cat or dog. Abigail smiled and patted them back while Balthus shuddered at the thought of being that close to those creatures. His fears were well-founded, as Abigail threw herself onto Spindle and motioned Balthus to join her.

“Wait, we’re riding them,” Balthus uttered breathlessly.

“Yeah, we’ll get to the cellar in no time on their backs,” Abigail said, reaching down for Balthus. “Come on, you want to get out right?” Balthus swallowed deeply and grabbed Abigail’s hand. He shuddered when he felt the spider’s hair rub against his legs, yet he had little time to focus on his fear when the Spiders ran down the hall. Spiker and Spiral clambered onto the walls, whereas Spindle went straight up towards the ceiling. Suspended upside down and clinging as hard as he could made Balthus care little for the size of the Spiders or how hairy their thoraxes were. The spiders crawled through the dusty halls, into dilapidated bedrooms, past a withered conservatory, down a set of rotten stairs. They crawled all while avoiding pieces of fractured furniture and wrecked art pieces. As he traveled upside down Balthus could feel everything he ate travel upwards to his throat. Luckily Spindle swerved down from the ceiling towards the floor to avoid what was left of a chandelier. Balthus could feel his stomach shift back into place.

“How do you keep it together through this?” Balthus whispered to Abigail, yet as he whispered quite loud it came out as more of a hiss.

“I’ve had plenty of time to get used to it,” Abigail said back. “When you live with spiders this long you get used to hanging upside down.

“Then how do spiders get used to it?” Balthus asked, looking down at Spindle.

Spindle clattered, “we’re born to be accustomed to it, otherwise we couldn’t hang on surfaces very well. To be honest, we’ve had a harder time learning to speak than learning to climb.”

“Yeah, how did you all learn to speak?” Balthus asked, making sure his grip was tight on Spindle’s back.

“It all started back when I was a normal spider, not the towering beast I am today. I was crawling about through the forest, making my webs to snare my prey, when all of a sudden I smelled some pheromones in the air. I realized there was a lady spider close by, and I nearly jumped for joy. Courtship doesn't come easy for us you know? So I went and followed the scent of pheromones, and it led me right to her, a large lady spider with eyes as clear as diamonds, and a back as black as night. I went to strum at the web, singling my intent to court this fine lady, when all of a sudden I went and saw two other spiders appear from the brush. We charged at one another, each of us knowing only one of us would mate that day. We bit, scratched, had ourselves quite the battle, till we noticed the lady spider begin to glow. We looked and rather than seeing the lady spider we expected, we saw a tiny human-like figure. She had arms, legs, hair, and eyes that looked just like one of you humans, save for the fact that she was glowing this bright green color and she had eight arms instead of two. We've been duped, she wasn't a lady spider after all. She was some sort of spirit or fairy!”

“She went and said some magic whatnot I or the other two couldn’t understand and suddenly the three of us began to twitch as we fell off of her web. We twitched, and twitched, and twitched some more till each of us felt our bodies begin to grow. Soon all of us were as large as you see us now. Not only that but we felt much smarter too. We felt like we could speak if we wanted to, yet we didn’t know any words so at that point all we could do was just hiss and clatter.”

“So, you were all cursed then?” Balthus asked.

“Yeah, either that or blessed,” Spiker called out from the left wall. “I think she just wanted to get us out of her hair, so she made us bigger and smarter to confuse us so she could slip away.”

“Well regardless of the reason,” Spindle said, “we grew much larger and smarter like you humans. Needless to say, we were confused as to our new situation till we all came upon Abigail there.”

“So, she taught you to speak then?” Balthus asked.

“Yeah after they ate my fish that is,” Abigail murmured. She turned around and began shaking Spindle. “You guys! You just ran past the cellar door, it's back there, see!” The three spiders skidded to a stop, paintings flew from the walls as they did. Behind them was a crooked door made of cedar wood. The door was open, hanging ajar on its hinges like a signpost, beckoning travelers towards its path. When Balthus saw the door and the dark passageway which accompanied it, he thought back to all the times he went up and down these halls. Whenever he had traveled through these halls, he always ran, never walked or sped walk, but ran. The door was his least favorite to pass.

Balthus went to gulp, yet all the moisture had left his mouth. He went to scratch himself, yet no part of his body was itchy. He went to take a deep breath, yet something heavy in his chest made it hard to breathe. He didn't like the thought of going down there, yet he knew it was the surest exit.

“You all wouldn't happen to know where the library is by chance?” Balthus asked, trying to fight back the perspiration that began seeping from his hands and head.

“What? Oh, that room with all the books?” Spiral said. “Yeah, that room collapsed in on itself a while ago.”

Balthus let the perspiration come, now he focused on fighting back his heart from stopping. “All right,” Balthus said with great difficulty, “I'm ready, let's go.”

“Okie Dokie,” Abigail said as she and Balthus jumped off of Spindle. They walked down the creaking steps into the cellar, with the three Spiders scuttling after. As soon as Balthus heard the first creaking of the steps and the darkness wash over his face he felt the urge to stop. He wanted so desperately to run back towards the light, towards comfort, towards safety.

“My house is no longer safe,” Balthus said to himself as he marched onward. Like a needle inserted into an arm, he hoped that his trip through this room would be over quick. He had never been in a room as dark as the cellar before. Despite what little light came from the upstairs hall, Balthus couldn't see his own hands in front of his face. The worst part of it was that because his eyes had nothing to focus on, his ears perked up at the slightest noise. Every rumble, crack, creak, and squeak within this cellar

Balthus heard, and it left him wondering what sorts of things lived down here. A good portion of his mind didn't want to know the answer.

"Hey Balthus," Abigail said, nearly making Balthus leap out of what was left of his nightshirt.

"Do you remember which way the door to the outside is?"

"I don't know," Balthus whispered, "I've never been down here."

"Never been down here? Isn't this your house," asked Abigail.

"Yeah, but I haven't been in every crag and corner of the place," Balthus said, his tone nearly turning it into a retort. "Besides, I thought you had broken in through here."

"That was a while ago," said Abigail, "we weren't exactly taking our time breaking into this place. Spindle, Spiker, Spiral, can any of you see where the door is?"

"No," said all three in unison. "Remember Abbey, we don't see too good in the dark either," one of the Spiders clacked.

"We'll need a light," Balthus said, "anyone got candles?"

"Yeah, here's one," Spiral said, dropping a candlestick on the ground with a thud.

"Now where'd you go and get that?"

"Found it in the hall as we were traveling, though it looked pretty, and thought Abbey might like it so I kept it."

"Yeah, I do like it," Abbey said as she lit the wick with a piece of flint. "Just what we needed right now. The candlestick was red, with a golden handle studded with gems. The flame flickered in the dark yet was enough for the party to see a path ahead to follow. The cellar was a labyrinth of shelves. Rather than running parallel to one another, or being pressed against the wall, the shelves were all pressed side by side and curved along. The shelves were stacked with boxes stamped with dates since long gone by, crooked toys and marionettes with mouths hung slack, along with other knick-knacks Balthus remembers seeing when his parents were around.

"This is strange," Abigail said as they slowly walked along the paths in-between the shelves.

"You're telling me," Balthus said, "I wasn't expecting for us to have to deal with a maze."

“That’s not what I meant. It wasn’t like this before, the shelves weren’t where they are now.”

“The shelves weren’t here!”

“They were here when we broke in, but they were pressed against the wall. They weren’t positioned like a maze!”

“Then,” Balthus stammered, “what moved them?” The party stopped at his comment, everyone looking around. The candle continued to flicker, the wax dripped from the wick like blood.

It was Abigail’s turn to gulp, “I think I can see why you never came down here, Balthus.” As she spoke there was a THUD. Balthus screamed.

“Sorry,” Spiker said, “I just bumped into a shelf, knocked over a box is all.” Abigail held out the candle, its light shone upon a thin box lying on the floor. The box wasn’t spectacular in appearance, it was just a pale white box with smears of old dirt lying across it. What caught everyone’s attention was the note written on the lid. *Only to be opened on Balthus’s thirteenth birthday.*

“A birthday present,” said Balthus, he picked up the box and began to shake it. It felt as if something big was inside.

“How old are you?” Abigail asked.

“Oh, I’m about...” Balthus thought. “How old am I?”

“Well, you look about thirteen, if not a little older. Go ahead, open it up.”

Balthus threw open the box, nearly dropping it when a handful of crickets leaped out. The three Spiders quickly chomped down on the lot.

“Well, what is it?” Abigail asked, trying to peer in.

Inside the box was a gun. At first, Balthus thought it was a real firearm, yet after realizing the pack of pellets that rested beside it he realized it was nothing more than an air gun. A note rested under the pellets.

*My Son, I always imagined you’d be enthusiastic about hunting and hiking as I am. Yet after realizing how much time you spend indoors, playing with toys rather than mud my hopes were dashed. I hope this new toy for your collection encourages you to explore a new world, one that lies just outside the*



*door, one filled with many amazing things and interesting people. I can only hope this gift drives you to it. I hate to think that you'll go your entire life without wading in a stream, seeing wolves, bears, and deer or dirtying those hands.*

*Love, Dad.*

*P.S: Don't tell your mother I gave you this. She'd be quite cross if she figured it out. Let's keep this a man's secret, just between the two of us, okay?*

Balthus read the letter, once, twice, thrice. Every time he finished the tears began to well in his eyes. Abigail looked over his shoulder as he read, and as he began to weep her face turned to a scowl as she read.

“Your Mom sounds like a chicken if I’m being honest,” she said, This only made the tears pour faster from Balthus. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize how rude I was...”

“It’s not that,” Balthus sobbed, “I just haven’t heard anything from my father in so long.” He sniffled, “all this time, and all he wanted was for me to go outside. Why didn’t he tell me?” He fell to his knees, clutching the air gun like he was embracing his father yet again.

Abigail and the spiders all looked at one another. They all felt bad for Balthus, yet none of them knew what to say. Spindle, Spiker, and Spiral all gave Abigail that glassy-eyed look which seemed to say, “he’s your species, you talk to him.”

Abigail leaned down, putting a hand on Balthus. It was an odd gesture to be sure, yet she felt it was the most appropriate one. A hug would’ve been too much. “Listen Balthus,” she said. “I don’t know what relationship you had with your father, yet like you said it seems all he wanted was for you to get outside some more, see the world. What are we doing right now? Trying to get outside of course.”

Balthus sniffled some more, shaking off his tears “you’re right, we should keep going.” He stood up and began loading the gun. “I’m taking this. My father thought it’d encourage me to get outdoors and he was right. I’m getting out of this house, no matter what.”

“Don’t keep promises you can’t keep naughty boy.” Balthus froze, he remembered that raspy voice. There was a horrible creaking sound as the shelves began to topple, one after the other. Like dominoes, the shelves all collapsed, and soon the ones near the party began to topple.

“Abbey look out!” Balthus threw himself at Abigail, throwing both of them to the side as a shelf collapsed to the right of them.

“Guys we need to get....” Spindle began, but he never completed his sentence. A shelf came down on the three of them, a horrible SPLAT echoed throughout the room.

“Spindle, Spiker, Spiral, No!” Abigail picked herself from the ground where she and Balthus lay. She ran over to the three of them, their bodies pinned underneath the shelf. When Balthus turned over himself and looked towards the three Spiders, he could see none of them were moving. A slight gurgling noise came from Spindle, but that was all. Abigail threw herself over her poor friends, hugging them and weeping. Balthus stood, holding the gun aloft. Never having held one before he held it out in front of him like a spear rather than at the shoulder. He didn’t notice or seemed to care as his eyes darted about the room, trying to find where the tick-man was. It didn’t take long for him to find him, as he came scuttling out of the corner, grinning ear to ear.

“Naughty, naughty,” said the Tick-Man, “first you spend your time being idle and lazy, and now you’re being reckless with your toys. My, you don’t learn anything do you?”

“Naughty,” Abigail screamed looking up at the Tick-Man. Tears rolled down her face. “You call him naughty, and yet you killed my friends!”

The Tick-Man glared at Abigail, his nose arched upwards as if he were sniffing the air. “Bah, you smell clear of guilt. A shame, if you were as naughty as him I would’ve had a second course.”

Balthus didn’t waste another second. As the Tick-Man was distracted he aimed the air gun up and fired. He wasn’t prepared for the force of the toy, for as soon as he pulled the trigger he collapsed to the ground. The Tick-Man watched the pellet whizz past, he let go of the ceiling and crashed to the floor. Balthus hastily slammed another pellet into the toy, Abigail shouted, “fire from the shoulder, fire from the shoulder!” Balthus aimed as the Tick-Man crawled towards him. He pulled the trigger and POOF, the

pellet grazed across his side. The Tick-Man threw himself on top of Balthus, pinning his arms and legs to the ground. Balthus tried to raise his limbs, to take another shot, to move out of the way, to escape, to do anything.

The Tick-Man chuckled, “naughty Balthus, you do realize your faults never escape you. No matter what you do, where you go, or how you might try to hide, your own little Boogeyman will always be peeking from around the corner.” He whispered into Balthus’s ear, “naughty children like you never getaway.”

THUMP, the Tick-Man cried out as a plank of wood came down upon the back of his head. Abigail stood behind him, wheezing heavily. “You’re right,” Abigail said fuming, “we have our boogeymen, and I’m yours.” She didn’t get another swing. As if he prepared for this, the Tick-Man threw himself from Balthus onto Abigail, his mouth now in an even larger grin.

“Ah, so you are naughty yourself my little lady. You like to roughhouse and make threats eh? My, I think you’ll be much leaner than the boy.” He went to bite.

Balthus looked around, for something, anything that might be able to stop him. Yes, he had an air gun, but he didn’t trust himself to aim quick enough. He debated hitting the Tick-Man over the head with the butt of the toy yet he figured it would hurt it less than the plank of wood. There were no blades, or axes, or bows, or fire, or any real weapons he had to combat it. The situation seemed hopeless. Balthus felt a familiar feeling again, it was similar to what he felt ensnared in the webs. His anger boiled within his gut yet it didn’t rise to his head like before. His heart and stomach were heated, yet his head remained cool. He looked at the Tick-Man with a scowl. This whole situation was completely ridiculous.

He got up and walked over to the Tick-Man, grabbing it around the neck and heaving it off of Abigail. The creature riled, snapping and hissing at Balthus. Before he would’ve cowered, screamed, and cried, yet now all he did was look down at the miserable creature. “Get out,” said Balthus.

“What?” the Tick-Man said, “what did you just say you naughty ....”

“I said, get out,” Balthus bellowed. “This is my house, you aren’t welcome here.”

The Tick-Man rolled over and glared up at Balthus. “You might be braver than you were before, little boy but...”

“I’m not a little boy anymore, I’m a grown man. Get Out!”

The Tick-Man took another sniff. He was right, The Tick-Man no longer smelled the pungency of a toddler on Balthus. Yet he didn’t smell the grime of adulthood either. Yet the scent was mature enough for the Tick-Man to lose his appetite. “Not an adult quite yet,” said the Tick-Man, but still old enough. Bah!” The Tick-Man crawled across the room, towards a set of stairs that led outside. He threw open the door, glaring at Balthus one last time before scampering out. Balthus watched him go. He never saw the Tick-Man again.

He turned back towards Abigail, who slumped over the three Spiders yet again. He put his hand over her shoulder, stroking each spider’s head with the other. Abigail sniffed, “why did you let that thing go?”

“I don’t think we could’ve killed it,” Balthus said. “The situation was ridiculous, and the only way we were going to get out of it was if I stood up to him.”

Abigail sobbed some more and buried her face into the shelf. Balthus didn’t say anything, he merely sat next to her, mourning his own for the three spiders who aided them. It seemed like an hour had passed before she lifted her head from the shelf, saying, “I don’t know what to do now. They were my only friends, now they’re gone.”

Balthus looked around at the cellar, at his house. He thought back to the time he spent here, the mornings where he woke up from a comfy bed, the smiles and warm food that greeted him at breakfast. He thought about all the toys he played with, the big ones, the little ones, the ones that whizzed and burred, and the ones that squeaked like a mouse. He thought about his father and mother, scooping him up into their arms when he ran over to them squealing. Their soft touch, their warm skin, their smiles. He thought again to his comfy bed. Only when he thought of these things did he realize how totaled the house was. All these years when he thought he was living in a mansion on good days and a dark fortress on bad ones, he was truly living in a ruin. His furniture, broken. His food, rotten. His toys, oh his toys.

“Abigail,” Balthus said, “I think I’m done with this place. I think I’m going to travel towards the village now. You’re welcome to come if you like.”

Abigail wiped the tears from her face and stared up at Balthus. Even he could tell through her puffy red eyes she was weighing her options. “If we go to the village, what then?” She asked.

“I don’t know,” said Balthus, “like I said there were villagers that brought me food and water, maybe they would shelter us for some time until we decide how to live?”

Abigail looked down at the bodies of Spindle, Spiker, and Spiral. She closed her eyes and petted each one over the head. “I think it’s our only choice isn’t it?”

The two threw the shelf off of the spiders and dragged the three outside. With shovels from the cellar, they dug three graves for their friends. They had no headstones, so Abigail marked the ground with three large S’s. Before leaving, Balthus looked around the cellar and grabbed a few ornate items. Utensils, ornaments, and other knick-knacks made of gold and silver. He only went once more into the house to retrieve Luis’s handkerchief. He doubted he’d see the handsome bard again yet he kept to his promise. He shut everything he gathered into the box with the air gun and slung it under his arm. He took one last look at the cellar and with a deep breath ran up the stairs into the light.

“Ready?” Balthus asked Abigail,

“Ready,” She answered.

The path leading down to the village was as old and cracked as the mansion was. Yet as they descended the path slowly grew more and more smooth and well-looked after. It was sometime in the afternoon when they descended, and now the sun was beginning to set. The lights flickered on in the village. The valley below, after being illuminated by the village lights, was more beautiful than any of the riches hoarded in the mansion.

### Shepherd’s Cane.

Mark and Arya had no toys, nor any wealth either. What the two did have was a direction, a path they hadn’t followed in years. It was a path towards the valley, and their bones rattled beneath their

tattered furs and they climbed it. The climb wasn't merciful for their tired muscles and weary minds, yet their absence had given them a great strength that pushed them forward. After hours of climbing and resting the two reached the top of the path. From up on high the old couple looked down upon the valley they left so long ago. The village was still there, its fields were as green and bountiful as ever. They saw the stream still trickling its pristine waters, its reflection promising coolness and an abundance of fish. Fine layers of mist still hugged the sides of the valley like soft blankets. The view was harmony, yet nostalgia didn't hide how different the village was to the old couple. They could see different buildings had been demolished or destroyed, and new ones built in their stead. Some of the buildings were bigger, some smaller, others odd curves and shapes like a set of building blocks. They looked up towards the old mansion on the hill. The mansion was still there, yet they could easily see its opulence had long since faded.

After resting for a time the old couple descended down to the village. Before they reached the village proper they saw a shepherd leading his flock deeper into the valley, goats bleating as they passed. After tipping hats Mark said to the Shepherd, "pardon me sir, who lives in this village?"

The Shepherd scratched his head at the question, responding, "we do sir. I live here, our Mayor lives here, pretty much everyone native to the valley lives here."

"Let me be more specific," Mark said, "Is there anyone of note who lives here?"

"Well," the Shepherd seemed deep in thought, chewing on his reed pipe as mind worked through everyone we knew. "Only two people come to mind, sir. There's our mayor Thomas Briggins. He just recently took over as mayor after our last mayor Lord Briggins kicked the bucket not too long ago. A fine young fellow that he is."

"Who's the other person?" Arya asked.

"That would be this fellow named Balthus. He's got an odd reputation around these parts ma'am. He was the child of a wealthy couple who used to live in the old mansion up in the valley over yonder."

"That ruined building on the other side of the valley?"

“Yep, the very same. What’s puzzling though is that one day, the couple and all their servants went and vanished from the estate. Apparently that young boy was the only one left.”

“What happened to him?” Mark asked, the two leaned in, each listening as intently as their old ears could manage.

“Well, we didn’t know what to do with him at first. We just heard his giggles and laughter from inside the place. No one here wanted to have anything to do with him, so some of us more charitable folk just brought him some food, water, clothes, and oil now and again and left it at that. Went like that for a few years then one day we saw him come down to the village with an albino girl. We were all quite surprised as none of us had ever seen him in person before, and when he asked him what had gone on up there he just told us the mansion was practically a ruin and he wanted to live among people again.”

“So, he still lives here now?” Mark asked.

“Yep. For a time he and the girl traveled around a whole bunch. I believe Balthus told people he went to deliver something to somebody named Luis. I don’t know much about their travels except for that, they returned after about a year. They both work in the village now” replied the Shepherd.

“What of this albino girl? Did he ever say where she came from?” Arya asked.

The Shepherd scratched his head some more. “I believe he said that he just found her squatting in the mansion. Didn’t say much after that. I think some of the other villagers asked them some more about her and what happened in the mansion in particular, but the two always seemed to go and brush off all questions. It’s suspicious if you ask me. Or it could just be nothing, but who am I to say? I stick to my flock, and that’s all I need to worry about.”

“Indeed,” said Mark, “well we thank you for your time, good sir, we’ll be on our way now.”

“Hold up,” said the Shepherd standing in front of their path. “Tell me, where are all you from?”

“Didn’t you say you only needed to worry about your flock?” Arya asked. “Why are you so curious about us all of a sudden?”

“Well,” the Shepherd thought more on this, nearly whittling his pipe to a pen as he clamped down on it with his yellowed canines. “I suppose I’m just curious,” he stammered. “I mean, yes I worry mainly about my flock. But that doesn’t mean I have no right to curiosity, don’t I?”

The old couple stood silent for a second, their faces not ones of joy or sorrow, confusion or anger, rather a weathered look hung on their face. The Shepherd squirmed, he wished now that he had just let the two elders pass.

“I suppose you have the right,” Anya said, breathing a soft sigh. “We hail from far away, from a rich land that has succumbed to madness and strife.”

“We’ve been traveling for a long time,” Mark said, “we used to reside near these lands in our youth. However a letter came for us one day, it told us of the ailments our homeland had succumbed to.”

“Oh,” said the Shepherd, glancing back and forth between the two elders. “So, have the problems in your home subsided then?”

“No they haven’t,” Anya said sadly, “things were worse there than we had hoped. So terrible in fact that we were trapped there for a good portion of our lives. Our time there is done now. We’ve seen to it that the younger folk continue the battles we could not finish.”

“Ah, I see, escaping turmoil for greener pastures eh?”

“No,” Mark said, with slight anger in his voice, “we would’ve stayed there if we could but we had to return here. We.... Left something here to be looked after by some trusted servants in our absence. Yet from the state of things currently it seems the servants failed in their task.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that,” the Shepherd stammered. He looked between the couple and his bleating flock, wondering how to move quickly from one to the other. He never spoke to folks like this in his life and began to worry they might be more like poison ivy rather than a pile of old twigs. “I, er, uh, well I do hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for here. Good day.”

“Just a moment sir,” Mark said, holding a hand out to halt the Shepherd. The Shepherd stopped like a sheep after a blow from a stick. He watched the old man reach into a pocket. His mind raced with thoughts of all the sharp blades, guns, or other deadly things that might come from that pocket. He wanted



to flee as he had from danger so many times before. Yet he stayed, if this was to be his time then so be it. The old man pulled a key from his pocket. The key was once bright gold, yet years have tarnished its color. The tarnish failed to hide the emblem engraved into its bow. “Here,” he said, “I forgot to give this to you when I left.”

The Shepherd took the old key in his hand, handling it like it was a china doll. While the key didn’t glint against the sun, he could still see the faint sparkling of the emblem. It was an emblem he knew all too well. “So, it is you then,” said Balthus. He looked up at his parents and noticed the weathered looks on their faces sharpened into smiles.

“My boy,” Mark said, embracing his son. “Sixteen years since I last saw you, and you’re still easy to startle?”

“It’s a habit,” Balthus said, patting his father’s back. As his father patted him back he felt a smile begin to carve across his face.

His mother Anya embraced him soon after. “Why did you keep yourself a secret to us?” She asked. “Why not just tell us who you are?”

“I’ve been duped many times ever since I left the mansion,” Balthus said, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s another habit of mine. I tend to keep parts of myself secret until I can truly trust a person.”

“Oh my son,” his mother said, burying herself in his breast. “So many years and so many habits you picked up.”

“Yeah,” Balthus said, embracing his mother.

“Well, it’s good to see you outside for a change,” his father piped up. “Never saw my son becoming a shepherd, but after all this time I’d be happy to see you a berry picker rather than still living in that desolate ruin we called a house.”

“It’s been honest work,” Balthus said. “I hope you two don’t mind, but I used some of our treasures to buy myself a cottage and enough goats and sheep to get by.”

“Least of our concerns,” his father said, wrapping an arm around his son’s shoulders.

His mother clutched his side. "I'm so sorry my dear," she said, "I'm so sorry we've been gone for so long. I'm so sorry we never told you."

"It's okay," Balthus said warily. He was quite happy, the last thing he wanted was tears.

"It's not," said his father, holding him close. "We left our servants behind to look after you. But after what you said it seems like they left you to die. Oh, how wrong we were to abandon you like that."

"I mean, it all worked out in the end," Balthus said, holding back his tears. "We're together again, you know?" His father looked up at him. He could see in his wary eyes the sorrow of many years. Balthus tried not to think of the fear he felt when his parents went missing. When he ran about the mansion calling for his parents. How much he wished they were there when the Tick-Man appeared. Balthus allowed himself to cry into his father's shoulder. His father patted him on the head as he did so. His eyes hurt afterward, yet he felt better than he had in years.

When the tears were all shed his father clasped him hard about the shoulders. "Now," he said with a joy that had escaped him for far too long. "Why don't you introduce us to this albino girl, eh?"

"Dad," Balthus began to blush.

"Is she good to you?" His mother asked as they walked back towards his cottage, the goats all in tow.

"Yes she is," said Balthus, grinning ear to ear. "She keeps everything in the house as well as a spider weaving its web. Just don't let her sing to you."