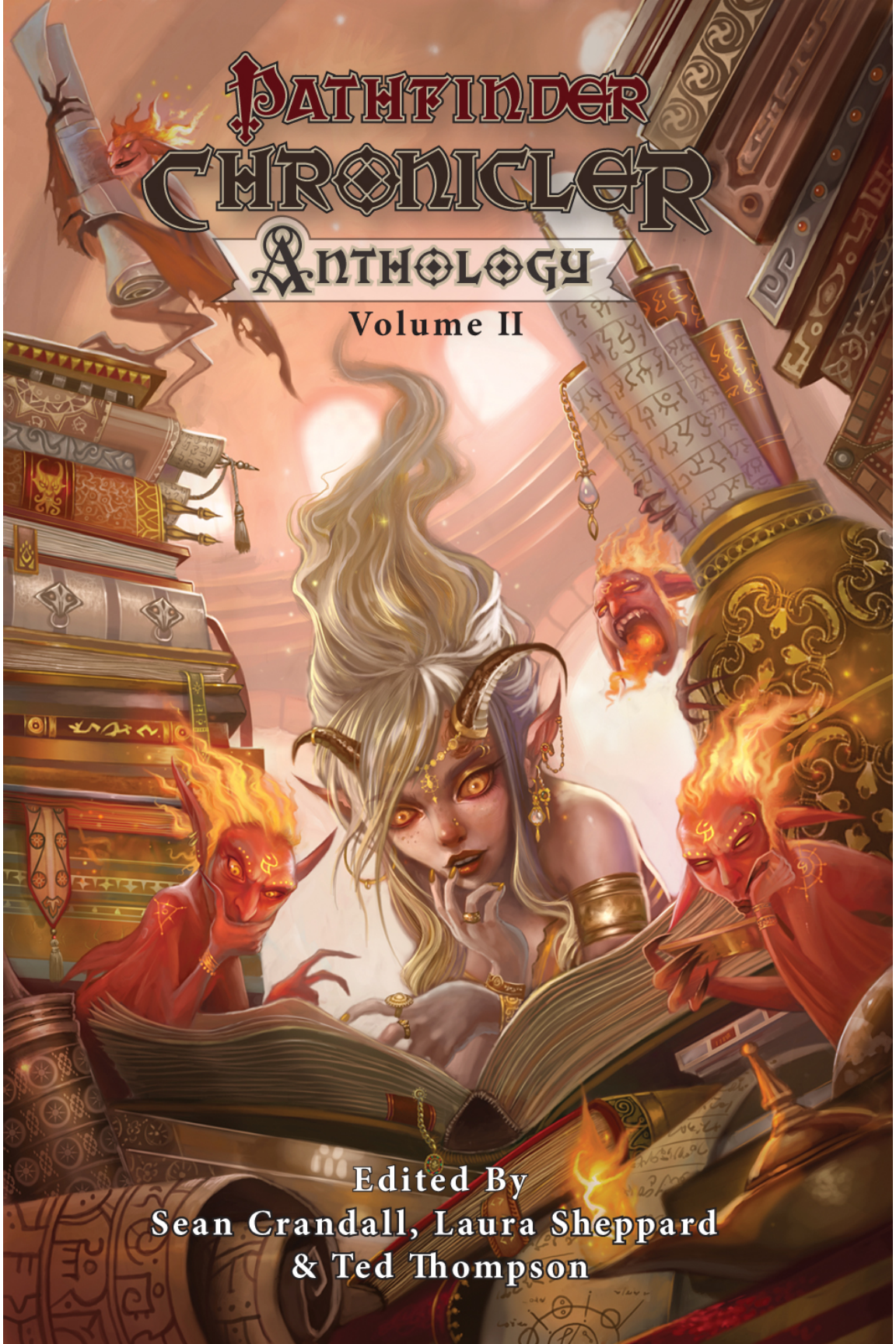


The cover art is a vibrant, detailed illustration. In the center, a woman with long, flowing white hair and small, curved horns looks down at an open, thick book. She has a thoughtful expression, with her hand near her chin. She is surrounded by three red-skinned, devil-like creatures with horns and pointed ears. One is on the left, looking at the book; another is on the right, also looking at the book; and a third is floating in the air above the book, looking angry. The background is a warm, orange-hued sky with stylized, ornate structures that look like ancient Egyptian or Mesopotamian architecture. There are also floating scrolls and a large, ornate golden vessel on the right. The overall style is a mix of fantasy and ancient mythology.

PATHFINDER CHRONICLER

ANTHOLOGY

Volume II

Edited By
Sean Crandall, Laura Sheppard
& Ted Thompson

PATHFINDER CHRONICLER ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME II



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Sean Crandall, Laura Sheppard
& Ted Thompson

To my family, Ziggi, Patrick &
Sadie for their encouragement
– *T.T.*

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Foreword: Skip This Page / James Sutter -- Introduction / Laura Sheppard -- By the Letter / By Jess Carson -- Best Served Cold / By Robert Drouin -- Bottles and Boxes / By Andrew Crossett -- A Lieto Fine / By Maggie Hoyt -- The Selection / By Kalyna Conrad -- The Deal Breaker / By B.R. Bearden -- Demons on the Inner Sea / By Andrew B. Chaban -- White Shadows / By Ernesto Ramirez -- The Coin / By Jesse Benner -- A Journal of Eternal Revolution / By Robert Beasley -- Lady Anne / By Dain Nielsen -- The Reluctant Gardener / By Patrick Napier -- Staying the Blades / By Thomas Horth -- For a Short Time / By Derek M. Johnson -- Battle-Banners of Lesser West Podunk / By Clinton J. Boomer -- Engl and Inga / By Elaine Betts -- The Gray Tern / By Andrew Crossett -- The Change / By Crystle Stevenson -- The Crowtop Murders / By Elaine Betts -- The Mohrg with the Golden Tongue / By Robert Gresham -- Hunger / By Todd Stewart -- Blood in the Water / By Alex Lindsay -- The Dance / By Ted Thompson -- A Final Toll / By W. David Wood -- Witchlights / By William Dodds -- Along the Final Path / By Laura Sheppard -- Stirring Shadows / By Arthur Boyd -- The Ritual / By Ted Thompson -- Last Victim / By M.C. Shelby -- A Life For a Life / By Bjørn Evensen -- Gods and Monsters / Michael Wallace

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Skip This Page

In *Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology: Volume I*, I told you all about how proud I am of the Pathfinder Chronicler website; how exciting it is as one of the world's designers to see people playing in and expanding upon what we've built; and how thankful I am that the fan community has such quality folks leading them, tirelessly pouring time and money into creating free fan books that look better than half the anthologies I see on bookstore shelves. I could spend this page going over those points again, or gushing about the books' covers, or talking about how high-quality the entries for the Pathfinder Fan Fiction Contest were.

I could tell you about all of this, but I won't. I don't need to. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding, and you already hold in your hands the result of all that creative collaboration. All I'm doing is slowing you down.

So turn the page, and enjoy.

James Sutter
Fiction Editor
Paizo Publishing, LLC

Introduction

Well, ladies and gentlemen, it's finally here.

The second volume of the Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology has arrived!

I first became involved with Pathfinder Chronicler as a contestant in the 2011 Pathfinder Fiction Contest. Until that point, writing had been something I had done for the enjoyment and benefit of a group of semi-regular Pathfinder gamers in my role as their Game Master (GM). As we explored Golarion together, my players' enthusiasm rekindled my creative spark. Each month my imagination broadened, and I was inspired to delve ever deeper into our shared world, creating journal entries, letters and even short stories to feed my troupe's growing appetite. When I came across the call for contest entries on the Paizo message boards, I decided to take one of the works I had written and adapt it for submission. I am proud to say that the end result of that effort is published within this volume, along with the compositions of twenty-seven of my fellow Chroniclers.

I enjoy immersing myself in the creative writing process immensely. So, how then did I make the leap from author to editor? I have wondered the same thing many times over the past few months, but the truth is that editing is a huge part of being a writer. At Pathfinder Chronicler, we pride ourselves on helping dedicated authors hone their skills and their stories within our ranks. Whenever a writer submits a work for review, many of their peers stand ready and willing to provide critiques, comments and suggestions on their work. Each writer is encouraged to edit at least as many words as they submit, but many do substantially more. This is one of the great strengths of our community.

This book is the result of countless hours of hard work, devotion, collaboration and perseverance by dozens of our members. I could not be more proud. We are a diverse group, coming from various generations, occupations, cultural backgrounds, and geographical locations. We have fostered our talents at the gaming table, in the GMing trenches and through involvement in our sister project, Wayfinder fanzine. But through it all, the two things that unite us are our passion for writing, and our love of Pathfinder and the world of Golarion.

We hope you enjoy our efforts.

Laura Sheppard
aka 'LauraBow'
Pathfinder Chronicler Editor

BY THE LETTER

By Jess Carson

MOLTEN METAL beat against the hull of the *Duskflower* as it sliced into the magma waves, its rising and falling ever increasing to the point that a drunken camel ride would have been smoother. Twice, Sekhet felt her stomach lurch as the stern cut the crimson pall. Steady motes of light illuminated red panels from behind, glaring off every surface. Sekhet exhaled and dug her nails into her arm to drive away her queasy stomach.

At least I can keep my seat, she thought, watching the others cling to theirs when the *Duskflower* suddenly veered left. She'd always considered these trade ships a cruel efreeti trick. The cabins were finely appointed with polished benches covered in bright orange satin cushions that slithered left and right when the vessel moved. Often, passengers fell to the floor or were made just uncomfortable enough by the jostling that their senses were clouded long after they disembarked...and the efreet never waited at the bargaining tables.

Underhanded, but I can respect them for wanting an advantage, she mused.

The *Duskflower* slowed as a sound like thunder echoed from deep within the ship.

She knew that sound well.

As others tensed and looked around the cabin in panic, Sekhet braced against

a pillow and relaxed her neck. A deafening boom was followed by a sudden jolt, throwing half the cabin's occupants forward to the floor. Once more, she had survived another arduous docking.

She pulled the hood of her silk cloak as far over her head as it would go. Sweat trickled down her back, but prudence kept her from uncovering. Twice, the other two men in the compartment had stared at the faint glow of her yellow eyes. Normally she wouldn't have cared, but today she wasn't willing to push her luck. Desna could only smile so often on her, and risking a confrontation before reaching the city was unnecessary. At best they would ignore her; at worst they might recognize her—or the book she carried. As the final throes of the voyage subsided, her pulse quickened.

Instinctively, her fingers traced the hinge on the bottom of the compass she wore around her neck. The locket-style instrument was a simple but elegant design. Made of smooth adamantine—it was cool even in the heat of the cabin. It held a sapphire centered in a raised band running in all cardinal directions. It mirrored the one clasped around the cover of the book on her lap. She remembered the day Syed had given it to her. He had melted their father's original compass down and created two new ones as symbols of their special connection. He wanted it to remind Sekhet that they were two parts of the same whole. Musing over them, she had said it would lead them to their true purpose.

She hoped it would guide her now. Her plans were made, her resolve firm, her luck...

This will work, it has to.

She moved the compass—his compass—aside and traced the entwined serpents carved into the obsidian cover of the book it held shut.

Just a little longer. Sekhet cleared her mind as she stood, waiting among the crowd of passengers. The heat's full weight fell upon her. She exhaled and ran her right hand over a series of marks on her left arm. Whispering, the opalescent symbols darkened. Ice flowed into her veins, cooling her body from within. She repeated the process with other marks inside her right arm, and the cascading sensation cleansed and refreshed her. No longer bothered by the heat, she still couldn't reconcile the feeling of oppression that still lingered. She brushed off the hood of her cloak and then inhaled deeply.

This place had as many names as there were spoken languages, "*Fommok Madinah*" to those who lived here, "*Almakhzan*" to those in the Nine Hells, the *City of Brass* to most, but it held one constant. No matter how many times she visited, this city always stole her breath.

The phrase "*terrible beauty*" could never be appreciated until laying eyes on its gilded streets. Much like the succubus—beautiful to behold, but deadly in its intent—Almakhzan spread out before her in all its glory. Spires of brass, each more ornate and intricate than the one it eclipsed rose impossibly into the sky. No two structures were the same. Tall onion-shaped domes adorned with petal-like rims, jutted out alongside squat square buildings. Thick elaborate molding, embossed with gold or gems, edged doorways and windows. Smooth towers shooting straight from the ground contrasted with twisted brass turrets catching and reflecting different shades of orange light; an architect could spend years

here before seeing the same style twice. Polished to a mirror sheen, the buildings reflected the perpetual twilight created by the churning fiery sea, casting a glow on all who walked the streets. Brass was worked into shapes that would take mortals decades to achieve, and sprung up practically overnight, giving the city a new and ever-changing skyline.

From the corner of her eye, Sekhet caught her reflection in a wall, and froze. Turning to the building, the face she saw wasn't her own. She reached her hand out, but as her finger lightly rested on the image, it was gone. This was one of the dark secrets of this city, why the metal seemed to breathe and beat with its own life force. It actually did—living brass was not *just* a moniker, it described the fate that awaited many who trafficked with the efreet. Few understood the ramifications of the phrase “I would give my soul for...” Those who came to the City of Brass knew too well. Goosebumps covered Sekhet's arm. Her hand sought her compass, her guiding star, and clutched it tight. The haunting reflection of a soul caught within the living brass ignited her deepest fears.

“Smile on me a little longer, Desna,” she whispered. “While I don't mind staying a while, I'll be damned if I end up a permanent fixture here.”

Daring to peer back into the metal, she was relieved to see that her reflection was her own, once more.

Throwing back her cloak, she examined herself in the polished brass. Few had called her beautiful, so few that she was seen more as a monster. Sweat glistened on her skin, which ranged in tone from the dark brownish-copper of her face to a brighter orange on her hands. Long black bangs hung in front of her curved gold-tinged horns, neatly separating themselves from the rest of her tied-back black hair. Her horns flowed up and back from her temples, curving around like a goat's, adding an unwanted air of menace.

She pulled at what little fabric her outfit provided. The cactus-colored halter dress barely covered her bosom. Silk crossed over then disappeared around the back of her waist, forming a small band of fabric supporting a pleat both in front and behind. Her navel and most of her thighs were exposed, as were her pale blue arcane tattoos. Copper disks and ruby spheres comprised her belt and graced the tops of her sandals.

Sekhet scowled at her reflection. *If he wanted to make sure I didn't smuggle anything in, there were less expensive ways.*

A murmur from the crowd drew her attention; someone was shouting from the end of a nearby plinth. Sekhet's breath caught in her throat as she clutched her cloak. Bringing her eyes up through the crowd, she spotted the source of the commotion, a large snake-like tail with spiky protrusions coiled underneath, rising up to the torso of a man, poised just a small distance in front of her. Its ruddy scales emanated heat, adding an air of oppressive warmth, which assaulted a circle of onlookers. The tips of its spiked tail were tinted gold, but most striking was the image painted upon the thing's chest: a fire-red square centered in the middle of an orange diamond.

She knew him and the crest he bore. Alamgeer had sent her an escort.

He spoke with a sulfurous breath that carried the sounds of a crackling fire, “Sekhet Zashid, your presence is requested by my master.” He scanned the

motionless crowd. "I can wait here as long as you like, though Alamgeer might not be so patient."

"I suppose it would be rude to refuse," Sekhet answered.

The reptilian creature pushed through the crowds while waves of heat rolled off him, scattering all those around. His jaws parted, the red-orange glinting from his jagged teeth accentuating the foreboding tone of his laughter. He rested his hand on her shoulder.

"You still sound like a tiny campfire when you speak."

"And you smell like a furnace, Bakr. He didn't trust me to come on my own?"

"Should he?" Bakr sneered.

Sekhet ran her tongue over the front of her teeth. "We do have business to conclude, and I would never break my word."

He scoffed. "Forgive the precautions, then." His eyes traveled the length of her dark cloak as he struggled to feign concern. "Aren't you a little warm in that? I'd hate to report that you died from the heat."

"Your concern is touching, but I'm fine."

Bakr shook his head. "I would think you'd want to greet Alamgeer wearing the gift he sent you. You wouldn't want him to think you are ungrateful."

He reached for the clasp of her cloak and undid the hook, letting it fall to the floor. Rage wound around her heart, and the edges of her vision tinged with dark shadows as she smacked her open palm across his face. A growl rose in her throat.

"Never touch me!"

In a flash of red and gold, the snake-like man spun her around and pushed her against the wall.

"My Master will be thrilled to see you haven't lost your spirit. He was worried Keresa's stunt had broken you." Brimstone trickled into her nostrils as his tongue flicked the tip of her ear. "I'm pleased to see it didn't. But someday your luck will run out, half-breed, and I'll enjoy that day very much."

Icy fingers picked at the base of her skull and her pulse quickened. The wall seemed to rise and fall with her breathing. She set her jaw and raised a glowing gaze to meet Bakr's. "I'm not one of his pretty toys and I don't easily break. He knows my worth, and we wouldn't want to get you into trouble, would we?"

With a flick of his tail, Bakr tossed her cloak over his arm. He peeled back from Sekhet and gestured toward the endless boulevard. She rubbed her back before following, clutching the tome to her side as they went.



Hours of slinking among throngs of creatures—human, demonic, elemental, and genie—made Sekhet unable to keep track of the direction they traveled. Every step she took, the swallow-tailed butterfly tattooed on her foot flitted into view, then quickly faded. A thousand flutters later, they arrived at a four-story building rising into the ashen fog. Chevron stripes of gems in every color climbed heavenward, but paled in comparison to the interior. Though palatial, Sekhet knew this was only Alamgeer's office, not his far more luxurious home. Her past visits here had taught her much about this place. It was beyond what mortals

could ever dream about, and the riches needed to amass such splendor would take several human lifetimes to achieve—such a tempting display and an easy place to lose one’s soul.

In a rare breach of decorum, Alamgeer stood outside his office, scowling at another snake-like servant. He brightened at Sekhet and Bakr’s approach, but held his hand up, forcing the pair to stop where they stood. Alamgeer motioned for Bakr to come closer, and even though he whispered his commands, the tenor of his voice was unmistakable. The efreeti was angry.

Bakr’s abrupt return confirmed Sekhet’s impression.

“Master Alamgeer regretfully begs your indulgence. A pressing and unexpected matter has to be dealt with before he can meet you. This way, please.” He motioned for her to follow him.

As he slinked away, Sekhet feigned a yawn and turned around. A slight green shimmer caught the corner of her eye. She was very familiar with the room Alamgeer stood in before. It had the soft satin cushions and bright silks found in Katapesh—resembling all too closely an inn Sekhet had stayed at once, which she’d mentioned in passing during her last visit—but suddenly the glow of candles was replaced by blood red lights playing off the darkened ebony surfaces, with hard edges replacing the softer ones. Even Alamgeer’s clothing and bearing altered to fit this new scheme. He smirked as he welcomed his unexpected guest: a stout human wearing black robes with blue whorls embroidered up the sides. Sekhet always speculated that there were no coincidences in this place, and this unforeseen glimpse into Alamgeer’s dealing with others showed her how calculated it all was.

Bakr lead her into the cavernous sitting room. Silk draperies and delicate cushioned seats lined the walls. Tables with ancient tomes and delicate scrolls stood within each arm’s reach, and the long alabaster slab that dominated the center of the room teemed with fruits, drinks, and bowls of clear, crisp water.

“The Master hopes you find this room to your liking,” Bakr said, with an edge rising in his voice. “He won’t be a moment longer than is necessary.”

Bakr bowed slightly and left her alone. She played with a cluster of grapes before taking them and settling into a corner seat with a particularly large tome.



It was the suddenness with which the scream came that awoke her. Sekhet shook her head, trying to clear the sleep that clouded her vision.

The book...

Her hand found the tome before her eyes could focus on it. She licked her lips and tapped the center of the compass hanging from her neck, and rose to rush to the window. The soft red glow from outside gave little indication of how much time had passed.

How long was I out? Minutes...hours...longer... Damn it all. No sun rise, no sun set. How does anyone know when to rise or sleep here?

Glaring into the reflective wall, she began smoothing her hair.

“My Master is ready for you now.” Bakr slinked around the edge of the door,

his forked tongue flicked back and forth.

She turned to face him before she picked up her book and pointed to a larger arcane text beside it on the couch. "Your Master should be careful leaving such magnificent reading material lying around. A less scrupulous person might try to steal a page or two."

"A less scrupulous person would be leaving in pieces. You'd be surprised at the thought he puts into everything. Now, right this way." He swept low, escorting her out of the room.

Sekhet's breath stopped in her throat as they stepped into the hall. Passing inches from her were two serpentine creatures carrying a litter. Partially covering the lower half of the stretcher, a blanket was drawn back just far enough for Sekhet to take in the full view of the body lying on it. Desiccated and charred, she recognized the slightly unburned scrap of black and blue cloth, all that remained of the corpse's clothes. It was the man who entered before her. He had failed in his negotiations, and his perceived advantage disappeared like the wisps of smoke from his body. Undoubtedly, his exit was timed for her entrance.

Bakr nodded towards the corpse. "Another guest, he sadly overestimated his worth. A shame, he offered Alamgeer many interesting artifacts."

Sekhet pulled at the chain around her neck and grinned. "Yes, a pity—though hardly my concern. A person should never come to this city without knowing what they can lose."

"And what of you, tiny flame?" Bakr coiled around her in a wide loop as he spoke. "Do you know your worth to Alamgeer? Do you know how much you stand to lose?"

Her jaw tightened as she stepped to confront Bakr in his circling. "I know exactly what I stand to gain. A foolish man rushes ahead when even a blind man plots each step. Mark me, one way or another; I plan to get what I want."

"Funny, the last guest was just as confident."

"But I'm far more charming," she replied. "Now, I'd hate to deprive your Master of my company a moment longer."

Bakr bowed and slithered ahead once more, down the gilded hallway. Sekhet held tight to her pendent and followed.

Jasmine, sandalwood, and amber mixed in the air, pleasant and inviting. Arches fifteen feet high, garlanded with vines and floral patterns in lapis, ruby, and jade opened into the hallways beyond. A hand-woven rug lined the floor, intertwined silk strands of orange and red formed diamonds and stars against the dark brown wool. Within the room itself, a rich mahogany desk sat along the right wall, adjacent to the marbled fireplace. Pens fashioned from the horns of various creatures, old parchments, and leather-bound books lay scattered across its top. A long ivory table spanned the center of the room and separated two chairs of soft black suede. Symbols of wealth and power adorned all aspects of the room. Two stunningly beautiful elven women, chained with golden manacles around their ankles, flapped fans of peacock feathers to cool the lounging figure. Alamgeer covered the entire ten-foot length of a black sofa. His jubilant smile reached from ear to ear as she entered.

"Bakr, thank you for seeing my guest here safely," he said in the harsh Infernal

language.

Rising, he shrank in height and width until he was only mere inches taller than Sekhet. He approached with open arms and embraced her, his body warm against her skin—his fiery touch lessened by the heritage of devilish blood flowing through Sekhet's veins. His grip was firm yet inviting, and he lingered in her arms longer than mere politeness allowed. They took a moment to look each other over. Face to face, Sekhet had to grudgingly acknowledge how striking he was. A genie, born into a city of fire countless millennia ago, who possessed the ability to bend reality on a whim. Unlike many of his kin, who only presented a pretense of culture and refinement to mask their lust for power and wealth, Alamgeer displayed his desires openly.

Most deep red-skinned efreet wore clothes that muted their color, but showed their wealth. Alamgeer went against such traditions. He wore pants of deep royal blue, embroidered with cascading flames sewn by golden threads. Instead of a formal tunic, he wore a simple vest of the same material open with nothing underneath. His pointed ears were pierced multiple times and sported gold hoops which glimmered behind his hair—black as night—hanging straight down past his chin. The tips of his horns, flowing straight back like Sekhet's, were tinted gold, symbolizing his vigor. Even his goatee was trimmed to accentuate his pearlite teeth and draw attention to his sinister fangs, all painstakingly put together to craft his image.

"Pardon the escort, but you know how dangerous these streets can be. In this last week, three humans disappeared right in front of my office. I'd never forgive myself if the same happened to you."

"Almakhzan is one of the few places where a tiefling is held in slightly higher regard than a human," she replied, "so your concern is touching, but unnecessary."

"You compare a stallion to a mule, but both serve their unique, if manual, purpose." His hands rested on her shoulders, letting the weight of his words linger. Alamgeer knew how to set a stage.

"My calling is rarely manual, even when it requires one," she countered, stroking the book's spine. Mischief danced in Alamgeer's red eyes as he surveyed her exposed form. She shifted under his scrutiny, which seemed to excite him even more.

"You've enhanced yourself since we last met. On others it might appear... gaudy, but it plays to your *exotic* nature. Many women here would pay a great deal to achieve this look. But, what a poor host I am, standing here talking to you when you must be exhausted. I can see it in your eyes. Come, sit. Bakr, take these girls home."

He motioned Sekhet to the chair, then grabbed the gold chain connecting the elven women together and pulled it hard. The two flung forward, barely keeping their footing before Bakr dragged them away. Sekhet stared as they passed. Both were covered in burns resembling hand prints, and both kept their eyes down, hardly looking to see where they were going. Sekhet swallowed hard to hide the fear clawing at her stomach.

"You need to be more careful with your toys, Alamgeer," she said, "those two won't last much longer if you don't give them a rest."

"They are beautiful but fragile. Yes, you're right, those two won't last the night." He took his seat across from her. "Thankfully, there are more where they came from."

Sekhet placed the book on the table and slid it across while sitting down. She settled into her chair, crossed her legs, and smiled sweetly. "Though I enjoy your company, I'm eager to get our business concluded."

A touch of sadness crossed his brow, but quickly faded. "Business as always—but first I want to hear how your last expedition went. Give me at least some time to enjoy your company."

He clapped his hands, and another of his reptilian guards, Keresa, glided through the right archway, clutching a silver leash. Normally, Sekhet had difficulty telling the guards apart, as there was little to distinguish females from their male counterparts, but this one had a newly-healed scar that cut through her left eye. The serpent's forced cheerful smile faded into a sadistic and toothy sneer as she tugged on the leash.

Alamgeer frowned. "Please do forgive me. I'm training a new slave, and he needs to learn *his* manners, so bear with him."

Dreadful anticipation turned Sekhet's stomach, but she forced herself to look.

Behind Alamgeer, Keresa pulled a chained Keleshite man. His bronze skin was scored by the lash from a whip, but still, he walked tall with his shoulders back and his head held high.

"*Syed!*" She screamed his name in the most hidden corners of her mind, but she dared not dwell on him long or show any emotion.

He was the picture of health, except for the gash down the left side of his face—leaving a milky orb in place of his blue eye—identical to Keresa's wound. He carried a golden service tray and was dressed in black pants with a platinum collar around his neck. He silently set to work unloading the tray, setting down a teapot made of bone, then porcelain cups and plates with delicate pastries, and lastly a cedar box hinged in copper. The slave's hand brushed Sekhet's, delaying a moment before Keresa jerked his leash. He bowed his head and returned to her side. The serpentine jailer flicked her forked tongue, then ran her hands over his exposed chest. The smell of singed flesh overpowered the other scents of the room.

Every fiber in Sekhet tensed as she curled her fingers around the edge of her chair. Hate coiled around her heart like barbed chains—she wanted desperately to wind the silver leash around Keresa's neck until the creature's last breath rattled from its throat. Instead, she licked the fronts of her teeth and poured a cup of tea.

"I don't mean to appear ungrateful; I just know you're a busy man." Every word was measured, and controlled. This was not the time, nor the place to let emotions reign. She extended the cup across the table.

Alamgeer sneered. "For you, I have all eternity." He accepted the cup and raised it high. "A toast: may your life be long and grant you all that you desire."

She raised her glass and drank deeply. Warm cardamom, cinnamon, and ginger washed over her, soothing the tension building in her head. Her brain felt as though millions of icy ants crawled onto its surface, so she imagined the blinding Katapesh sun searing them away. Alamgeer was nothing, if not a gracious host.

Her eyes focused on the figure across from her, but her peripheral vision caught every slight gesture the slave made. While she and Alamgeer chatted about artifacts he'd recently acquired, the slave's mouth twitched in a smile. Sekhet brushed strands of hair from her eyes, the slave adjusted his footing. She barely raised her shoulder, reaching for a biscuit, while the slave moved his head left at a snail's pace. Syed's motions had told her all she needed to know. There were two guards stationed at each of the exits to the room, so using force was not an option, and Syed was alright. Though efreet could communicate telepathically, twins had a language all of their own. She savored each sip of tea, drawing the conversation out as long as she could, while her mind raced, focusing on no single thought for too long, just in case Alamgeer's vow that he would never invade her thoughts was just a ruse.

"Enough of this," Keresa bellowed. "How can you sit there playing nice to this...creature? Sipping tea! Pretending to care! She mocks us with every breath. Let me end her life, my Lord. She's responsible for my minions' deaths. She cheated you, and you sit there smiling. You promised me she'd suffer, but she doesn't care about this human. Are you even sure this *is* her brother? They look nothing alike..." Smoke trickled from Keresa's pores as she raged. She flung Syed like a child's doll, landing him in front of Sekhet, his tether hanging slack.

Runes along the underside of Sekhet's arm shimmered and pulsed as she pitched her hand towards Keresa. Wintry air surrounded the stunned guard, drastically cooling the temperature in the room. Syed seized the opportunity to attack Keresa. He rolled behind the coiled snake woman and leapt onto her back. Using the leash as a garrote, he flung himself backwards, hoping to choke his captor. Keresa's tail wrapped around Syed, pulling him free and flinging him to the floor, but not before he dug his heels into her ribcage. Keresa howled in pain, then shifted her weight forward, catapulting herself towards her rising foe, but was caught midair by Alamgeer. Moving with a speed Sekhet had never seen him display, the efreeti leapt from his chair and held both Keresa and Syed by their throats. Sekhet felt her windpipe clamp as Alamgeer's grip kept her brother from taking in air.

"Remember your place, Keresa." He turned to Syed. "And you don't forget that it's only by my whim that you still exist." Warm fingers pushed further into Syed's soft flesh.

Darkness crept in from the edges of Sekhet's sight, framing her brother. Drums pounded in her ears. Her vision blurred as flashes of light pulsed in the corners of her eyes. Thinking became impossible; her only responses were drowning gurgles...

Sweet air seared her lungs as she fell to the floor. Coughing, gagging, but breathing, she struggled to quiet the hollow feeling building inside her. A hand rested on hers, drawing her attention. Syed had reached out and panted in rhythm with her own breaths. She grabbed him and pulled him close to her. He winced as her arms closed around him, but didn't resist. Kissing his forehead and smoothing his hair, she traced the charred flesh on his arms.

"Your wife's going to kill me," she said, choking back the emotion thrashing in her chest. "She wanted you back no worse for the wear."

"She'll just be happy to have me back. She's..." He started to speak, but fell into a fit of coughing.

"I know. She looked as if she were hiding a baby camel hump in her dress when I left her."

"You actually saw Marwa? And left intact? Pregnancy must have mellowed her," he said with light playing in his one good eye.

"I wouldn't go that far. I can't repeat half of what she called me in any company. Don't be surprised if your daughter's first words are something about anatomical impossibilities with a jackal. And my head still aches from where your compass hit me. She's got incredible aim."

Her heart fluttered; she had to hold on to this feeling for as long as she could. For in this moment, no one else in the room mattered.

Syed's scream broke her trance. Alamgeer grabbed him and held him aloft. Pain bored into Sekhet and she couldn't hide the agony sweeping across her face as laughter roared above her.

"So what they say about twins holds true. You feel each other's pain in moments of great stress, don't you?" Alamgeer slowly lowered Syed to the floor and motioned to Sekhet to sit. "I wish I could allow your touching moment to last longer, but he is my *slave* and you are my *guest*—each must know their place. I enjoy your company, but it's time to discuss business."

Taking a small key from his pocket, he unlocked the cedar box. Inside, sitting on the black velvet lining, was a yellow parchment scroll and a few crumpled and torn pieces of paper. With a flourish, he pulled the document out, cracked the wax seal, and unfurled it. Again, the corners of his lips stretched back, revealing his fangs.

She knew this look too well. He was toying with her.

She untied her hair and let it fall loosely on either side of her horns to cascade down her back, noticing Alamgeer's slight pause as he studied her figure. Inside, everything trembled. Outside, she softened her eyes and relaxed her shoulders. A lifetime of pain had taught her the value of a good façade.

"My contract?" Her voice edged.

"Indeed, the one you violated," he responded.

"I didn't violate a thing—well, at least not the contract." She reached for the cup in front of her.

"Are you sure you understand the word *violate*?"

She let the words hang between them while she sipped her tea. "I understand the word; do you understand how to read?"

Keresa began to seethe, but a glance from Alamgeer silenced her.

Sekhet smiled. "If you look closely at our agreement, I followed it *to the letter*. Our deal was simple. I needed a book from your collection—a book you didn't even know you had—to lead me to Tumen and the Pharaoh of Numbers' library. I told you my goal was the Book of the Jade Serpent and its technique of inking a spell onto the body, which I would present to you as a gift, in lieu of your favored payment." She unclasped the compass encircling the tome, then pushed the book across the table. "Which I've now done. I would've tied a silk bow around it, but your associate interrupted me."

“You were supposed to return the book to me immediately.”

“Where in the contract does it say that?” She put her cup down.

Alamgeer blinked. He stared at the paper in his hand and his brow creased. “It was implied.”

“Implication doesn’t supersede fact. When I signed it, I was very specific about the wording. The third section, I believe, states that I’ll return the book to you as soon as I ascertain it was the right book, and not a moment before.”

“Perhaps I was too indulgent of your requests. I’ve been waiting three years.”

She twisted her wrist in the air. “It took me longer than I anticipated to decipher the writing. If I’m not mistaken, those are the missing pages Keresa ripped from the book right after her attack.” She pointed to the papers in the box. “You’ve had them for months now. How far have you come in mastering the techniques? Your impatience cost you. If anyone violated the contract, it’s you.”

He leaned back in his chair with the book, allowing his vest to fall further open. “Interesting, please continue.”

“I’m the one who signed the contract. I’m the party responsible for payment of debts, which I have now paid, and yet my brother’s here. My family wasn’t part of our deal.”

Alamgeer smirked. “I can’t seem to find the clause in our arrangement that expressly forbids me from extracting payment from you in any way I see fit. Nor can I find the part that expressly prohibits the inclusion of your kin or using them in any way I wish. Besides, Syed’s blade took Keresa’s eye, not your magic. Therefore, he pays.” He leaned forward, book open in his hand. “This is a fascinating book. Thanks for your generous gift. You’re free to leave whenever you want; your end of the bargain is upheld.”

Sekhet watched as Syed’s eyes widened. She knew what he was thinking, having her words thrown back stung, but Alamgeer was right in that regard.

“To be fair, your servant’s attack left us little choice. I’m sorry for your losses, but we had to defend ourselves. They shouldn’t have underestimated Syed and me.” She felt the heat rising beside her as Keresa snarled.

“True, but they’ll be expensive to replace. They were, after all, sent to collect what was mine. And I had to indulge Keresa’s *“eye for an eye”* request. It was an unexpected bonus that you felt the knife slice into your brother’s face.” He flipped through the pages, skimming the words, tapping at sections while scanning Sekhet’s body. “Be grateful I’m allowing you to leave, after you attacked my sentry. Unless you have a reason to stay longer...”

He moved again, allowing the corner of his vest to raise so that Sekhet could spot arcane scriptures painted in black ink on his torso. The writing was lifeless and dull compared to the ones adorning Sekhet. Nothing Alamgeer did was ever an accident. Her eyes narrowed as Syed cleared his throat and flared his nose. She raised an eyebrow and he winced in return.

The matter was settled.

She rose slightly, moving to the edge of her seat. “My dear Alamgeer, you break my heart. I hadn’t meant that outburst to anger...consider it a demonstration.”

His attention finally returned from the book as he closed the cover and steepled his fingers. “Why would I need a demonstration? I know your strengths and

weaknesses. What did you hope to accomplish by that?"

Sekhet stood and slowly spun, displaying her body art with pride.

Alamgeer sat back, forgetting the offense as he marveled at the site of her magic-infused flesh. He was not one to be easily awed, and prided himself on hiding his true intention—but even he couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from spreading upward. He held his breath as they locked eyes.

"The book speaks of a technique to inscribe a spell onto your body, like a scroll. Sadly, like a scroll, it disappears and you need to replace it after every use. But the Pharaoh was brilliant—mad of course, but brilliant. The notes he left elsewhere in the book took time to translate. They spoke of a way to achieve something I never dreamed of, to transcend the inherent problem and permanently place *certain* spells." Sekhet stopped and waited. Alamgeer's face took on an impatient look of expectation.

"Well? Continue."

For once, Sekhet felt a connection with the man before her, and toying with him felt somewhat pleasurable.

"I continued his experiments, surpassing anything he had imagined." She leaned forward, arm outstretched, exposing the full detail of her marks. Instead of solid lettering, this tattoo was comprised from a smaller script folded into itself, forming the larger image. "One spell could take an entire arm or leg. I found a way to transcribe more complex spells and have them take even less space. It was time consuming and painful, but worth every sting."

Alamgeer rose to meet her and inspected the markings. His hand traveled her arm, fingers tracing the lines of the spell. He inhaled deeply, fighting his excitement, but Sekhet could see it building in his eyes.

"A feat worthy of admiration, but what stops me from skinning you, taking your flesh and studying it on my own?" He held her hand tightly. She returned the grip.

"You could. And I have no doubt you would figure it out, but what I'm offering will save you time. In exchange for my brother's freedom, I'll stay here and teach you the technique."

The sound of roaring flames reverberated in the room as Alamgeer laughed. "An amusing proposition, but that's not a fair exchange. This will take you what, a few weeks to teach me? My slaves are worth more than that."

He let go of her hand and threw himself back into his chair, motioning for Keresa. She handed him the leash. He tugged it hard, sending Syed to his knees. Sekhet glanced at the butterfly on her foot once more and continued.

"He's my brother. Don't you think I know the value of his life? One technique wouldn't cover half his worth. Luckily, I learned more in that library than one technique. Even those wouldn't cover his life, but I wasn't offering just help. You lost several slaves pursuing us, so I offer you something more valuable: myself. I'll take his place and become your servant for the next twenty years."

"Master, you can't entertain this," Keresa interrupted. "She's weak. She won't last a day as one of your slaves. Take her soul instead; it will be my honor to help you."

"My soul is not part of *any* bargain," Sekhet said. "If I haven't given it to

the black voices screaming in my head, what makes you think I'd give it away now? And I said *servant*, not slave. I choose my words carefully. I've seen what happens to his slaves. I offer my magic, my body, my knack for survival, but never my soul."

Keresa coiled around herself preparing to strike, but Sekhet didn't move. Only Alamgeer's hand stayed Keresa's venom, sparing Sekhet death at the hands of the angry snake. Alamgeer glowered, but warmed again as he faced Sekhet.

"My servant, tempting—you would become my right hand then, my advisor in magical matters, a face for my negotiations with humans and devils alike. You would do what I ask when I ask it, without fail." He circled her, his lips inches above her ear. "How do I know you'd be honest with me?"

"Because I value my freedom," she answered. "After my service is over, I'd be set free. I'd be able to choose where I go and what I do without your meddling. You and yours do nothing that would result in my death, and I will become your loyal servant."

He faced her now, his head tilted to the side. "Twenty years...hmm...do you feel that balances?"

Behind him Syed picked up his head, fear washing over his face. While Sekhet knew negotiations took time, her brother grew more and more pale. Some things, she knew, were matters handled better in private, and if it was in her power now to spare him undue suffering, what choice was there? She steadied herself and locked eyes on Alamgeer.

"That tea was delicious, but it seems I'm all out. Would it be possible to get more?" Her gaze never wavered. "I don't think I can survive another second without some."

Understanding crossed Alamgeer's face. "Syed, slave, you know how to make this tea, don't you? Keresa, escort him to the kitchen."

A noise of protest escaped from both, but neither tiefling nor efreeti moved. A shiver ran through Sekhet's heart as her brother reluctantly left the room, but her face remained stolid until he was out of sight...and then she exhaled. Her weariness showed, but resolve echoed in her voice.

"Your kind condone this 'suffer as I suffer' philosophy. I will offer more than just balance."

Alamgeer leaned against his chair and raised an eyebrow. "Proceed."

"A life for a life."

"If you mean your death, it serves me nothing."

"Not my death, but my life: my past, my present, my future. Erase me from the world above. Take my life. But in exchange, neither you, any who work for you, nor any who come after you can touch my kin ever again. Is that balance enough for you?"

The shock on Alamgeer's face almost made her smile. It was nice to know she'd stunned him.

"An unexpected offer; you continue to astound me. But the conditions you attach would mean more years of service to set the scales equal. I could accept your offer, but twenty years? I would require much, much more."

"How much?"

"A thousand times more."

She chuckled. "I'd never live that long. Did you forget my first part of this proposal? I'd like to be alive and young enough to enjoy my freedom."

"You think in mortal terms," he said. "We'll have to change that. Accept my offer and I'll freeze time for you. You won't age. Sickness won't touch your body. You will not die while in my service or by my side. And when you finish, if you still desire to leave, time will resume. But all things that tie you to your world will be long past. You'll return as if you never existed."

"And after I've served my time, when I choose to leave..."

"If you choose to leave," he corrected.

"If I choose to leave, you'll let me go. And my brother, his family...his descendants are off limits. They'll be free and safe?"

"You have my solemn word." He bowed.

"Forgive me if I don't trust you until this is written down. Call it the fiend in me, but as you know, the devil is in the details and I don't trust verbal contracts. Too much wiggle room."

"I'd be disappointed with anything less." He crossed over to his desk, pulled out a clean parchment, and started writing.

Sekhet collapsed into her chair, her head in her hands. She heard the scratching of the quill as Alamgeer wrote. Looking up at the table, Syed's compass shined. She snatched it and held it in her hands, as if it would make a difference somehow in what was to come. She stared at it, reliving the memories attached to it, her life with Syed and all they'd accomplished—all she hoped he'd accomplish. Her stomach tightened as a thought clawed its way to the front of her mind. There was a small spark of excitement building in her. This bargain would give her more than she asked for, a chance to see a world few would glimpse. A shudder ran through her as she doubted her own motives.

A warm hand softly rubbed her back, breaking the reverie. Alamgeer slid the scroll in front of her. She scrutinized every sentence, every word, but it was exactly as promised and more.

"This passage here," she said, pointing to the parchment, "I didn't ask for this."

"Consider it a gift," Alamgeer began.

"Your gifts come with a price. If I read this correctly, you are giving me reign to wander Almakhan without escort so long as I wear your symbol. I'd be allowed in the Grand Library. Why would you risk that? What would stop me from researching a loophole or way to regain my freedom?"

Alamgeer smiled. "Consider it a show of faith, then. If you are to trust me, I must be willing to show trust in you."

Her mouth went dry. Salvation for both her and Syed lay within her grasp. All she had to do...was sign.

"Let me have my goodbye before you do anything."

A twinge passed through Alamgeer as he laid a quill, dagger, and a small vial of ink in front of her. "You'll learn in our time together that I may be shrewd, but I do have a heart. Compassion is but one of the passions I possess."

She placed Syed's compass in her lap, and stuck the dagger's tip into her hand. Blood pooled on its edge, and she let it drop into the ink. She dipped the quill

and signed her name as her brother emerged through the archway. He stumbled, spilling the tray as he hit the floor. Before Keresa could react, Alamgeer waved her away.

Sekhet ran to her brother and kneeled before him, grabbing his arm and trying to smile. Uncertainties vanished as she looked into his face. He noticed her hand, grabbed a cloth napkin from the floor, and wound it around the small wound.

"So it's done. You've signed the contract? He agreed to your terms?" His voice filled with hope.

"Yes! We reached an understanding. I'll be his servant for a time, then I'm free. And he can't touch you, Marwa, or any of your grandchildren. You're all safe." She ran her good hand through his hair.

"I told Marwa you'd protect me. I shouted it as they dragged me away, not to worry. She only knew your pride, but I never doubted you, sister. I know you, your heart's in the right place, even when your ego gets in the way."

Emotion swelled in her, choking her. She pulled his face forward until their foreheads touched.

"I'm sorry, brother...for everything. I wasn't thinking. Dealing with genies was the only thing father warned us against. You didn't deserve this. You didn't deserve a selfish monster for a twin. You'll be better off without me."

Syed shook his head, "No, we balance each other; it's why you need me and I need you. Remember when we were kids. Father's pottery collection, the one he'd gathered for years. The one everyone assumed you'd broken. It was me. When they asked, I said I didn't know who did it. You took the blame for me. You didn't hold it against me. And who kept me from running away on my wedding day? Who reassures me I'll be a wonderful father? Let others call you what they may, I know the truth. You *are* my better half, you're my secret strength."

Tears rolled down Sekhet's cheeks as she held her brother, trembling. "I always knew you did it. But I didn't care. I'll always protect you." Her chest shook with each breath.

"Tears, it's alright, sister. Twenty years is a long time, true, but not a lifetime. Your sacrifice—even Marwa will appreciate..."

"Of course she'll appreciate my absence." Sekhet laughed.

Syed smiled, but then became serious, "I swear to you, I'll be the best father for my little girl. She will know you, and what you mean to me. I promise you will not be forgotten. She and I will mark the day you return and keep count. Twenty years from now there'll be a feast on my table and a blazing bonfire outside our house. We'll eat, drink, and dance until we pass out. Not an hour will go by that I won't think of you."

She pushed her forehead into his again and tried to focus her vision, taking in one last view of him, one moment.

"I wish to the heavens that were true."

Before he could respond she tore herself away and held up his compass. "*This* is his, Alamgeer; make it his reason for being here. No matter what, he gets this," she hissed through her tears.

"As you wish." He raised his hands to the side. The room crackled with energy as blue light encircled them all. When it dissipated, Sekhet still knelt, facing Syed.

He struggled to focus, and for a split second, she thought Alamgeer's spell had failed. Fear quickly replaced confusion as Syed screamed. He reeled backwards, falling to the floor.

"Devil! Get away!" He scrambled backward, his hand resting on the heavy tray. Without hesitation he swung it, connecting with Sekhet's side, sending her to the floor. Face down, she let the smoothness of the floor soothe her pain. Behind her Keresa laughed until Sekhet heard the tray resonate against the salamander's lower half. Alamgeer's foot touched her hand and she rose slightly. The efreeti then looked to the terrified man and spoke, charming and low.

"Please, please Syed. Calm down. You're confused, I'm sure, but attacking my people won't get you home."

"What? Where am I? Who are you?" Syed tried to make sense of his surroundings.

Alamgeer swept his arms open in formal obeisance. "My name is Alamgeer, and you are currently on the Plane of Fire, in the fabled City of Brass. You came in search of a trinket that held deep sentimental value to you. One that was lost to thieves. You tracked the men here and my servant helped you retrieve it. She was about to return it to you." Alamgeer strolled behind Sekhet. She squared her shoulders and faked a smile.

"I beg your pardon, Master Syed, if I frightened you. It was not my intent. I was trying to place this around your neck." She held the adamantine chain loosely in her hand before her brother. Syed seized it and held it at arm's length.

"Why don't I remember any of this? Did I make a deal with you?"

"Have no fear, you never entered into any contract with me," Alamgeer said. He shook his head. "I was afraid of this. Being in this place can take a toll on the mortal mind. Come, you are my guest here. Sit and refresh yourself, and after I've explained what happened, I'll have my favorite servant lead you to a ship that can take you home." He motioned Syed to one of the chairs at the ivory table, and took the other. Then Alamgeer looked at Sekhet and tapped the pillows by his side.

"As you wish, *Master*."



An hour later, Sekhet led Syed to the docks. Though he followed close behind her, Syed kept his distance. Only when they crossed to the gantry way did the ship come into view. The sight of it seemed to make Syed relax. She stared at him, waiting for something, anything. He brought his hands to his temples and strained. Sekhet felt pressure building behind her eyes as she watched.

He glanced at her, then the ground. "This whole thing seems incredible. And the gold he gave me...for nothing. Alamgeer, your master, can I trust him? Is he a man of his word?"

"Alamgeer is...fair. He must have felt you deserved compensation for something." The words left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"You don't seem to like him very much. Why work for him?"

"Sometimes we're bound to do a thing, no matter how unsavory, for a greater good. And no, I don't like him very much, but he's honest at least."

He sighed and stared at Sekhet. "Why do I feel like I'm missing something? Like part of me is gone? And you, one second I feel terrified of you and the next you seem oddly familiar, like someone I can't place. What happened to me here?"

"It's this place. They call it the "Devouring City." It takes something each time you visit. It devours a piece of everyone who sets foot here. You must be very lucky; it seems to have only taken your memories of this place."

"So what did it take from you?" he asked.

Sekhet thought a moment. "It took my pride, a bit of my ego, and selfishness."

"But that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, but the price the city demands always outweighs whatever good it might do."

A man shouted from the ship. They were leaving. As Syed turned, he grabbed his side and winced. Sekhet moved instinctively to touch him.

"Are you alright? Are you hurt?" Color drained from her face as he stepped away, his jaw tight.

He shook his head. "No, it's nothing. There's no bruising, but my side feels like something slammed into me hard. And my hand, I'd swear I cut myself on something, but there's no wound. It feels different from the sting of the burns on my arm. I can see the marks, feel the pain that I know should be there, but the other aches there's nothing there, they just feel...odd."

Sekhet shivered in spite of the heat. Her hand sought the tender spot on her own side, the place Syed bashed just an hour ago.

He rubbed his hand as a tear slipped down his face. Looking at the ship, Syed spoke softly. "Perhaps it's better I don't remember." He held his breath. "I...feel like I should thank you, but I don't even know your name."

"My name isn't important. I only ensured your safety while you were here. Live a happy life and you will have made it worth the trouble." Sekhet quickly wiped a tear away.

"Still, thank you."

He extended his hand and she clasped it, smiling. He turned and pulled it away, drifting towards the *Duskflower*. Sekhet stared at her hand. She closed her eyes, brought it to her lips and kissed it.

A sudden scratching sensation near her wrist forced her eyes open and the pain repeated.

She turned see Syed digging his nails into his hand before crossing the threshold. He never glanced in her direction, but walked through the door and disappeared from her sight.

Sekhet faced the city once more and exhaled. She flipped her compass in her hands and traced the engraved words on the back.

Syed and Sekhet.

"Desna's still smiling," she said, and made her way through the glittering streets.

BEST SERVED GOLD

By Robert Drouin

S *O THIS WAS where the dreams of noble efreet turned to ash, Sole thought to himself.*

Losing wealth and servants, crossing the Grand Vizier had not been the smartest of moves by the House of Bayt al-Bazan's last rulers, but such were the ambitions of the efreet. From great heights and towering ambitions, there were only equally great falls, and this House had fallen far, indeed.

Even so, the gaudy palaces of the poorest minor efreet nobles of the City of Brass displayed decadent opulence that might shame a mortal king.

Passing the estates of the noble irrelevant, the magma-skinned courier continued on his course, flowing speedily over gilded streets, here inlaid with emerald jade, there in blocks of turquoise; here in burning red marble, and there in chalcedony and alabaster. Sole shook his head as he tallied the worth of this display of wealth and ego, marveling at buildings edged in silver, gold, platinum, and copper; and glittering with cut crystals or faceted gemstones, some of a size that could not be found on the mortal plane. The magical energies and auras swirled so thick in the air it sometimes made it hard to think.

With a shake of his head, he put the show of opulent excess out of his mind, and swung up a low rise and down a side street that seemed strangely abandoned,

coming up on a domed edifice that looked like a castle carved from solid brass. It was built right up against the wall of the Inner City, and rose above it to look out across the burning river beyond, while the central tower took in the glittering lights of the City of Brass in all their splendor.

A lump of cast, ensorcelled bronze nearly three hundred feet tall. Sole sighed as his progress slowed to something approaching a walk. Genies.

The area nearby seemed suddenly abandoned, and it took only a cursory examination of his surroundings to confirm that nothing living seemed to linger around the manor he was approaching. No messengers were flitting overhead, no servants were passing by, and no watchers seemed posted to keep an eye on the palace or who was employing it. He couldn't even feel curious eyes on him, and that was suspicious and most telling.

Sole thumbed the dagger at his side, and approached the great central doors to the manor without fear. Something was at work here, and doubtless it was linked directly to his mission. He checked the sealed scroll case that hung on his belt, examining the wayfinder that formed its cap. The turquoise upon the compass needle pointed unerringly to the door; the intended recipient of the case's contents was within.

The forty-foot doors stood slightly ajar, an open invitation to thieves and the curious. He felt no tingle of active magic at work, and paused outside the doors as he listened for signs of intruders.

Nothing but silence, to tempt those without to enter.

He mentally reviewed the detailed layout that had been shown him prior to his mission; he had to reach the treasure level of the al-Bazan, find the fountain and determine the status of what had been imprisoned there.

His entry was a bit unorthodox, swarming up the great doors like a four-limbed spider, reaching the top, sliding over them and under the arch of the entryway and so entering the chamber beyond via the ceiling instead of the floor. He had found out long ago that even the tall and mighty don't look up much, and there were a great number of traps that you could circumvent simply by not being on the ground. As deftly as a shadow, he slid onto the ceiling of the entry foyer, and paused to assess the situation, squatting upside down there on his wall-crawling boots.

There were signs of combat on everything that was not formed of brass. Marble tiles were cracked by flame and great weight, destroying the intricate mosaics upon the floor. The walls had been shorn of tapestries or sculptures, and furniture had been rent and reduced to ash and scrap as if ruined by a burning, spiteful hand.

He doubted that treasure-hunting adventurers would have destroyed things so thoroughly. Looted, yes, but the damage here bespoke an unhinged mind bent on destruction.

A rather tall unhinged mind.

Charred parallel scars formed ravaging scour marks fifteen feet off the ground on one of the marble pillars, which also had had a large chunk hewn out of it ten feet up.

The work of a giant of some kind, Sole thought. So, there could well be more inhabitants.

Upside down, he slid across the ceiling forty feet off the floor, keeping watch for sentries and moving from cover to cover. He knew his route, and would stick to it if possible, but there were several courses he could take if he ran into trouble, which he was grimly certain of as he pressed deeper, inwards and onwards.



He felt the presence before he saw or heard it.

Still treading the ceiling, Sole moved smoothly into shadow and then went absolutely still. There was a chilly quality to the aura that was unmistakable to someone that had ever fought the undead, and if fire was infused into a dead spirit, it would match this feeling of burning cold exactly.

The ghost came right through the wall, moving with speed and purpose. Sole observed the size of the horns—a double set, with bands upon them that marked the efreet of the al-Bazan bloodline—and the heavy-yet-handsome features that had been displayed for him via illusion during the briefing with his employer.

Jhavul al-Marvsah, the efreeti that had tried to rouse the ruinous Spawn of Rovagug known as Xotani the Firebleeder, had returned to the halls of his forebears. He hadn't survived the Spawn's destruction, and yet had come home all the same.

That couldn't bode well, Sole considered calmly.

Doubtless the ghost was attuned to this dwelling, and had sensed an intruder, even if it couldn't nail down exactly where that intruder was. Sole watched from shadow as the ghost advanced the length of the hall, its spectral form shifting with fleshless ease as it attempted to look into every crevice.

Sole's crimson skin was much darker now that it wasn't exposed to the heat outside. Alchemical magic flowed across his body and blurred his outline with the interplay of light and dark around, the white-hot cracks in his skin dimming to a sullen gray. He moved along the wall with skill and silence, staying off the floor, working the angles, and waited until the ghost of the dead efreeti moved its head behind a pillar before he swung himself under the arch of the doorway, onto the wall above it, stepped back up to the ceiling, and glided across the dome of the next room.

He had no doubt that Jhavul's shade would follow him rapidly. While he had no fears of taking the ghost on, there was a small problem: this ghost was weaponless, and certainly didn't look to be engaged in willful destruction. That meant that something else was inside the manor. He didn't want to be engaging two foes at once.

But perhaps two foes engaging one another might not be a bad plan.

He veered off his direct path towards the treasury of the al-Bazan, moving to explore and find out if any other denizens were about. He would likely have to find out if there were any others in here regardless, so he might as well get part of the job out of the way and keep his back-trail clear.

He could feel the ghost move into the second chamber just seconds after he vacated it. Smiling to himself, he made for the upper stories, and whatever might be above.



A burning undead creature, looking mostly skeletal, its bones wrapped in flames and molten rock, was beating at a wall of living brass, tearing out great gouges and hunks. The detritus was melting into the exposed floors and the scars sealed themselves after each of its attacks as it tore at the walls in continuing futility. Sole noted the creature's height and build, the way the flames seemed to gather to form a kilt and headband, and made an educated guess that this entity was the former nephilim wizard called Ezer Hazzebaim. It had apparently gained a more personal punishment than just being slain by a dragon's jaws. *Another arrogant soul, inheriting an ironic doom*, he mused. The efreets were nothing if not consistent in how they treated their enemies.

The trail of destruction it had left was quite clear, and quite thorough. Anything and everything that could be destroyed in this manor house had been obliterated, from the plants in the gardens to the pillows in the old harem. This burning creature had engaged in an orgy of destruction, seeking to reduce this place down to nothingness, and succeeding quite well until it had to deal with the self-healing brass of the building itself.

The ghost was only a couple of rooms behind. Sole thoughtfully dug a simple marble out of his belt pouch, and tossed it into the room he had just vacated.

It was only a clink on the stone, but it snapped that burning head around instantly. With a bellow of a predator finding a new victim, the flaming corpse drove towards what might once have been a dining hall, just as the ghost of Jhavul burst into the chamber through the brazen walls.

The two undead beings locked eyes instantly, and one spectral face contorted with hatred for the despoiler of his abode, while the other roared an empty howl that had no other motive than destruction.

Sole watched them charge together, ethereal limbs lashing out to score the burning bones, which were then seized in great black claws and set to burning despite Jhavul's spectral condition. The first exchange was a pretty good indication of how the fight was going to go, as the former efreets' fire seemed to be healing the burning thing, and its flames seemed to be searing the ghost somehow.

Hopefully these two were all that were left in the place. Sole circumvented the combat as the lavawight grappled with the bodiless phantom and both went crashing down upon the shattered tiles. He was now headed for the treasure chamber, and the secret door to his destination wasn't far.



The witchfires were probably supposed to be a surprise.

How an efreets managed to collect a harem while dead and bodiless had Sole shaking his head in amused appreciation. Wreathed in green flame, the burning ghost-hags awaited their master's pleasure in guard chambers to the side of the vaults, one-way windows giving them a clear view of the hallway between their rooms. The undead concubines assumed their immateriality would protect them,

but Sole's talonblade, *Estrel* slew the first in one slicing cut, and sheared the second in half when she came ghosting in through the wall to investigate.

The guardians in the next chamber were four brass men, possibly repurposed from the other vaults. The skirmish lasted a whole three breaths, as *Estrel* sheared metal and molten cores clean through and Sole watched them crumple back into the essence of the living brass floor, leaving no trace behind. They hadn't even marred the vest of black dragon wing-leather he wore, and his calf-high boots didn't even have scraps to kick aside.

His path now cleared, he took another glance at the wayfinder's turquoise shard, pointing directly ahead to the chamber at the far side of this last guardroom. Through the doorway, he could see that the fountain was intact.

He had been specifically informed that it had been destroyed in the releasing of its prisoner. Sole's eyes narrowed to white slits as he entered the room, humidity replacing the dry sterility common to the atmosphere of this fiery realm. Alien sounds permeated the air, the slow and steady rhythm of condensation dripping from the ceiling and walls, and the gentle murmur of continuously cycling water in the fountain itself.

His arrival did not go unnoticed.

The water began to stir and ripple in the ornate white clay basin, flowing upwards into a female form of a giant's proportions. Her skin was like pearl and her hair like ocean foam, a rare combination of marid lineage found only among the ancient royal bloodline of the former padishahs of that great genie race. That she was beautiful was beyond question; clad in apparel reminiscent of a Qadiran entertainer, her raiment glittered with precious stones and metals, and wispy silks more vapor than cloth barely concealed her modesty. She gazed down at him with a great deal of long-suffering forbearance, sparkling with sudden interest as she found herself looking upon an unexpected guest.

He felt pressure on his mind, and the marid's brow furrowed in consternation. He fell to one knee in response and supplicated himself properly; genies were big on manners. She smiled in answer, and gestured for him to rise.

Sole unclipped the scroll case from his belt, deliberately and obviously double-checking the wayfinder on the cap. Its inset turquoise was pointing directly at her; he had found the intended recipient of his missive. He stepped closer to the edge of her fountain pool, broke the seal with a pop, and pulled it open and overhead for her to read with a flourish of both hands.

Her ocean-jade eyes widened in definite interest, and she bent over to peer at the ornate, fluid script that swam across the lofted scroll. She finished quickly, and he hastened to roll it back up as she straightened to consider her response.

With a wave of her hand, words in the Common tongue rippled upon the surface of the waters beside her. Sole read them over and considered the implications as they started to scroll past like a moving story inscribed upon the current. He smiled despite himself, for Shazathared the Storyteller was indeed living up to her name. The tale of how she had come to be trapped in the fountain yet again, and the reason the ghost of the efreeti Jhavul al-Marvsah had returned to his ancestral home played out before him. It seemed that she could not be freed until her captor had heard the stories due him, and Jhavul could not truly die until he had heard

them all.

Sole's lips pursed as he considered a solution to her dilemma, and as an idea came to mind he warbled, trilled, clicked and tweeted in quick, precise series. She tilted her head to listen to him, clearly intrigued, and her lips parted in a delighted smile at his cleverness.

A creak on the stairs, a crackle of flames about bones and the protest of living brass being rent by inhuman strength turned him around. Motion at the corner of his eye made him glance back down at new letters dancing upon the waters of the fountain.

He comes to kill the ghost of the last al-Bazan when the spirit rejuvenates here. It is difficult to tell a story when they are fighting, and the ghost flees if he can, the words read.

Sole turned back around as his crimson skin, cracked by molten white lines that resembled cooling lava, blurred and was replaced by pale blue skin cut by bands of cold blackness. The air temperature around him dropped by forty degrees, and his eyes went dark as pitch. The speed and ease of the transformation earned him a startled look from the lady marid, who had thought him possessed of the blood of the azer, or perhaps a fire giant.

The lavawight came tromping into the room, pausing as it saw the imprisoned genie already risen from the fountain, the great black claws of its hands halting their brass-rending fury, talons wreathed in ebon-tinged flames. Twelve feet of heavy bones were clad in red-hot stone, and an unholy fire burned within its chest, driving it on with agony and power.

Sole glided forward, hand upon the dagger at his waist, each skating step covering twice the space it should as he raced to the attack with preternatural speed.

The creature surged to meet him with inhuman power, seeking to pull him into its flames, to consume his very soul in its fires, and to perhaps, for a brief instant, sate its own unending pain.

He swayed aside, drawing his blade in the same motion. *Estrel* erupted from the too-short sheath and grew in length, swirling frost driving down the length of crystalline steel as its yard-long blade cut across and into burning stone.

Pulsing lava froze to instant brittleness, shattering at the touch of the blade, and the bone supporting it broke and splintered. Without a sound, the great lavawight toppled sideways as the real stroke came ripping back. Sole leapt off the ground to meet its fall, *Estrel* coming across to remove the great skull from its shoulders in a slicing scythe of cold that sent liquid air coursing across the room and froze swathes of the water condensed upon the walls into sheets of sparkling ice.

The headless corpse hit the ground heavily, and without pause Sole drove *Estrel's* ice-wreathed length into the fire inside its chest. There was a moment of protest, and then rimefire, exploding along the inside of the creature's ribs, raged coldly down the length of it, snuffing out the blaze and freezing molten stone in an instant.

Whatever—or whoever—this creature had once been, its time is now done again, he thought grimly.

He hewed off and stowed away the thing's skull as a matter of course, as

powerful anti-undead magic could be made from the remnants of one this strong, and left the rest of the corpse where it lay.

Its remains would prove a great focus of attention when the ghost returned.



One second it wasn't there, the next it was rising out of the fountain chamber floor, flowing together out of nothingness as the spirit of the efreeti was restored by the power of its home and wishcraft spun long ago.

A breath later, Shazathared rose behind it, even as the ghost turned and tensed, awaiting another attack from its waiting slayer...and froze at the sight of the defeated corpse shattered on the stone.

"Master of Bayt al-Bazan, shall I tell you a story?" The marid's clear voice made the entire chamber resound with every word, now that his presence freed her captive tongue. He had wished to hear her stories, after all.

The efreeti spirit's four-horned head turned to her hastily, and the ghost winced and started to shift towards the exit. The Storyteller smiled, and began to ply her craft.

Thunder rumbled in overlapping waves as two thousand sets of a single voice sang out their stories all together...and at one hundred times the normal speed.

The very air convulsed and shook with the power of the stories unleashed there; the water condensed upon the walls bounced free and hung in the air in quivering droplets; the walls of living brass wobbled as if made of liquid. Streaks shot through the substance of the efreeti's ghost, and more and more of its insubstantial form was consumed every second as each of Shazathared's accelerated tales began to finish.

It opened its sepulchral mouth to scream, but its cry was lost in the cumulative force of the triumphant crescendos, key moments, wry twists of fate, words of wisdom, timeless parables, and observations of fools that converged upon it. A look of pain, of desire forever lost, and perhaps a moment of final peace crossed the face of the efreeti ghost, and then all that it was tore apart in a convergence of sound, fury, and stories ended.



From outside the fountain room, Sole heard the waters suddenly dripping onto the floor in the abrupt silence, and stepped back around the archway. He saw the Lady of Stories stepping free of her prison once more, a globe of fire held carefully in her long-fingered hands.

She smiled sweetly down at him as he re-entered the chamber. "An inspired wish, Master Sole! To speak my remaining stories all at once, and at a great rate of speed, allowing him no chance to escape them. His wish that he not die until he had heard the stories he demanded was satisfied, as was my binding obligation."

Sole bowed flamboyantly to the freed marid, and whistled promptly, "Doubt not the power of the spoken word," to her distinct approval. With genies, it was always best to overdo things. They loved the emotional.

He also unfastened the scroll case again, popped off the wayfinder cap, and pulled out a rolled sheet of thin brass from within, stepping forward to present it to her. Very curious, the marid princess set down her glowing sphere and took the somehow familiar sheet from the courier and unfurled it. Her sea-green eyes grew very wide as she read.

“Master Sole, this is the deed to Bayt al-Bazan! Whosoever controls this deed controls this palace, and a place in the heart of the City of Brass!” she informed him with surprise. She had thought the deed long gone, with the adventurers who had once freed her.

Sole shrugged as he shook out the last of the scroll case’s contents, a pale aquamarine, and held that out as well, and she took it in a graceful hand that dwarfed his own.

At her touch, the stone brightened with flickering waves of light, and the illusory likeness of a powerfully-muscled marid sprang to life. His hair was black as the deeps, teeth white as a coral beach, and he was dressed in the fine, shimmery scale-silk that the marid preferred in their watery domains, along with a sparkling deepgem or nine.

Sole watched as the image launched into a rambling speech in Aquan, complete with extravagant gestures, bowing, kneeling, beseeching, complimenting, and wooing, all with accompanying florid displays of grandiose emotion. The marid princess took it all in good grace and great amusement, glancing occasionally at the deed she held in her other hand.

When the marid double was finished and the illusion faded away, Shazathared looked down at him. “Do you know what was asked of me, Master Sole?” she inquired, seeing the bored look on his face.

He whistled back, “No,” shortly, lifting and drawing out the note.

Shazathared smiled again, delighted to hear something so musical. “Your whistling in Auran is most clever, Master Sole!” She considered her next words, looking down at him thoughtfully. He looked back up at her without fear and with knowing patience.

“I have been propositioned by one of the mighty shahs of my people, the lord of House Orizzashal, your employer. He is requesting my hand in troth, and has gifted me with this deed he acquired through various channels from the mortals who once freed me. He hopes that I will see fit to claim a noble house in the City of Brass, and expand my fame and the power of our combined clans together with this holding. For you see, never has a non-efreeti held a palace in the Noble Quarter of this wretched city.”

Sole’s tweet was non-committal, but her eyes danced like sunlit waves with the chance to make history.

“I would have to bring this deed before the Grand Sultan himself in order to claim this property. There might well be challengers who would seek the right to take Bayt al-Bazan from me. You are a skilled warrior. May I know if you will aid me in this endeavor?”

“My Lady,” he whistled back in the swooping language of the elementals of air and genuflecting with the ease of recent practice, “I am sworn to free you from your binding, and see you home. If you seek to make this place your home, then

I will remain until the clan of the Shah Orizzashal sends you sufficient forces to render it secure against rash intruders. I have no opinion on whether it is best for you to do this or not...but a storyteller claiming a palace will not be seen as the threat a merchant prince would...and it would certainly prove a fine ending to the fall of the House of al-Bazan. It is now your turn to decide the true ending to that family's tale."

She eyed him with approval, plainly enjoying the oddly musical whistling rendition of the language of air-dwellers, her eyes lingering a moment on the scars crossing his throat which denied him normal speech. "Indeed. Is there aught else dwelling within this place, or was the undead thing made of the nephilim by the wrath of the Grand Vizier the last?"

"I did not scout the entire manse, but I believe it to be clear of anything else. The place has been reduced to ash and dust by that creature," he waved back at the crumbling remains of the undead giant, "and nothing of value or history remains intact."

"That is not true." She held forth the deed and stone for him to re-enter in his case, then retrieved her crystalline sphere again, which held a flame of incredible clarity and purity within it. "There is a secret chamber inside this palace, a retreat for the lords of the manor. I was gifted this orb—the key to opening it—by those who first freed me, once they had no other use for it. I had just transferred the library of the manor within, along with what historical objects I could salvage, when I was abruptly torn away and imprisoned once more. The ghost of the last of Bayt al-Bazan's lords arose to haunt this place even as the curse upon it was lifted, becoming a curse of his own. From afar, the Grand Vizier divined Jhavul's return, and worked his will upon the corpse of the nephilim that had so offended him, turning it into something that would destroy the last of the al-Bazan, and everything he held to be important." She inclined her head at the burning undead he had slain.

"A vindictive soul free with his curses. Perhaps the Vizier will be pleased to have this estate now flow to a marid princess, a truly ignominious ending to the House that offended him," Sole warbled with even artistry.

"If I can but tell the proper story, I believe I can gain the permission of both the Vizier and the Grand Sultan, but I have little doubt there will be challengers. Even the most distant cousin can attempt a claim to this place, and physical combat is not my gift." She adopted an artfully pensive expression which both of them knew to be unneeded to get his aid, but a Storyteller had to play to her audience, regardless.

"I will be proud to serve as your champion if required, my lady," he whistled, injecting a note of merriment as the blue of his skin sank back into the fiery crimson of their first meeting and cold, dark veins flared to white-hot cracks. "I believe I will...surprise them."

"I believe you shall, Master Sole." She gestured to the doorway, chin rising with new command and confidence. "If you would escort me upwards, I believe we might be getting a visitor shortly who can escort us to the Grand Vizier and the Court."

He bowed and turned to lead the way, stepping past the shattered corpse of the

lavawight, the stone and bones crumbling to pebbles and ash at last.



It wasn't the largest red dragon that Sole had seen, but it was impressive enough. He stayed between it and the marid princess, having no fear of its fiery breath or its burning gaze. No doubt it could smell his complete lack of concern, and was considering what that might portend. That a marid would use a far smaller being as a bodyguard was an intriguing puzzle.

"Dragon of the Fireheart, you serve the Grand Vizier, do you not?" Shazathared asked calmly, chin held proudly as she met its gaze eye-to-eye. She was not merely a marid, she was a noble, and the dragon reacted instantly to her poise and the power she radiated.

"I am Aberzjerax, the Burning Scourge of Abdul-Qawi!" *And so the lapdog of the Grand Vizier*, thought Sole behind his impassive stare. "Who addresses me?" the dragon demanded loftily, yet carefully courteous in his demeanor.

"I am Shazathared, princess of the House of al-Mellizuar, and now owner of the Bayt al-Bazan, by the final words of the last of that line!" She displayed the deed to the palace to the dragon's disbelieving gaze. "I seek audience with your master to confirm my title as Emira of my holding, and instruct you to convey us to him with all speed!" she ordered him crisply, tone and voice leaving him precious little option to refuse.

The burning orbs of the dragon blinked once, surprised by both the claim and the extremely illustrious lineage of the marid before him.

"I must first know the dispensation of the al-Bazan and the...servant His Illustrious Wisdom placed here, great lady," the dragon replied, bowing his scaled head, taking no chances with the standing of this genie. The Scourge did not serve the Vizier of the greatest of the genie cities by being a fool.

Shazathared gifted him with an approving nod. "Both souls have left this place; the one was slain by my servant, and the other gone to his end as he heard his final story." There was no questioning her tone. "You have my leave to explore my holding to confirm my words, noble dragon," she indicated, graciously gesturing toward the palace and allowing him to insult her word mightily if he so chose.

"My lady, the word of one as august as yourself will be enough for myself and His Unending Sagacity, I am sure." He turned, and his great wings rose and poised in the air, preparing to beat. "If you would care to mount, I will bear you to the presence of the All-Knowing Abdul-Qawi!"

Shazathared inclined her head regally and stepped forwards, shrinking to slightly larger than human size even as she swung aboard to spare the dragon her full weight, while Sole scrambled up the dragon's side and stood between the massive wings behind her.

With a roar, the Scourge launched himself into the air, the weight of his passengers nothing to his strength. Looking back, Shazathared saw Sole standing as easily upon the dragon's back as if it were level floor, not a nearly vertical climb with mighty pinions beating to either hand. The burning updraft from the molten river which Bayt al-Bazan overlooked caught the dragon's wings, sending them

higher into the air as the creature turned and made for the great mountain-sized palace that was the Grand Sultan's abode: the center of the great courts of the efreet, and likely the most dangerous location on the entire plane.



Sole considered that it was probably a good thing that he didn't speak Ignan, if the effect Shazathared's words were having on the natives was any indication of the power of her voice.

The Storyteller had charmed her way through the ranks of the Vizier's toadies, and flattered His Preeminent Learnedness so effectively that the cunning bastard had virtually handed her his approval, drinking in her words with the thirst of a truly political beast who knew he was being manipulated, and enjoyed it for what it was. Genies being the connoisseurs of excess that they were, the whole process had taken nearly twenty hours, and had included two major feasts, a spontaneous recounting of tales that had not been told in hundreds of years, and had been attended by every genie who could cram into the arena-sized hall where Shazathared spoke.

As her final tale finished to a roar of sublime and sudden understanding of some inscrutable point of fate, Sole stifled a silent yawn. Whatever she had said had drawn the Vizier's favor from the efreeti as subtly as moonlight stealing across a mountain lake. It only remained to follow her to the Grand Sultan's court to seal the deal.

Word spread rapidly of Shazathared's coming; the idea that so famous a personage would come to the Grand Palace and not attend its master was so naturally unthinkable that an invitation arrived before she could even request it. Thus, they entered the Court of a Million Wishes as honored guests instead of supplicants.

The Court was a small and intimate space the size of a large human town. The floor was made of polished onyx tiles center-set with rubies and mortared in mithral, and the ceiling portrayed an illusionary view of the boiling skies above the city. Beings of at least forty different races hurried here and there attending the huge, opulent and grandly attired efreeti seated upon a floating throne of adamantine and burning carnelians. The Grand Sultan was the focus of a whirl of mephit messengers, fawning courtiers, armored efreeti soldiers, and supplicants of more than two score worlds.

None could compare to the presence of Shazathared the Storyteller, however. Her pearly skin and foaming rush of hair stood out in beautiful contrast in this place of darkness and fire. The greetings she spoke to the Grand Sultan Hakim Khalid Suleiman XXIII, Lord of Burning Dreams, Kha-Khan of the Eternal Fire, Most Puissant Burning Death of the Pyroclasm and so forth and so on, were long and involved, probably matters of recognition of favors and lineage from many, many generations ago, if Sole remembered his genie etiquette properly. Her soaring introduction segued effortlessly into a performance that held the entire court enraptured as she danced through a tale from a thousand years past, plucking out names, images and sub-stories from many of those in attendance

with a keen eye and even keener tongue. He marveled at her skill; she had taken the measure of the entire court with breathtaking speed, and was playing upon their pride, vanity, arrogance, and discipline like a musical instrument, her voice a swirl of ancient glories, honors, debts and obligations wielded with the power of a greataxe, the deftness of a courtier's fan, and the subtlety of a silken veil.

Sole shifted his eyes to the court. Most were gaping as the great marid danced with unparalleled grace and control; every motion refined, every twitch of muscle and arc of hand measured and directed to accentuate whatever epic she was relating to them. He gathered storytelling wasn't an art form the efreet witnessed or bothered with much. Especially not with this level of ability.

His concentration focused on an efreeti to the right of the Grand Sultan's dais, marked by the two large horns all efreet bore, and the two smaller gold-ringed ones arcing forwards from his temples in a telling family pattern. This particular efreeti was not engrossed in the performance of the Storyteller, and indeed seemed infuriated at her mere presence. He was discoursing most insultingly in the middle of her tale with a black-robed, white-turbaned human who was nodding in commiseration.

The bloodline of al-Bazan was not yet extinct, it seemed. Shazathared could not have failed to notice her challenger-in-waiting, no doubt immediately arranged by the Grand Sultan once he heard the Grand Vizier had supported her claim.

The Storyteller's performance took a trivial six hours, a deed of endurance and skill that would have reduced a mortal to a quivering wreck, but a typical thing among immortals. Sole waited patiently and smirked at the suspicious eye of a great devil that stood surrounded by efreeti courtiers, gazing at Sole narrowly and wondering who he was.

The Storyteller's grand saga ended with a bow of sublime grace profoundly stirring for a being of her stature, and the entire Court seemed to let out a sigh as she finished, released from the power of her tale and tongue, and yet still subject to it.

"The beauty of your stories and their speaker remains as true this day as they did centuries ago, Princess," the Sultan lauded her. Naturally enough, anyone in the Grand Sultan's court could understand his words if he desired it, regardless of distance or other noise, Sole observed wryly. "However...there is a matter of inheritance that I cannot disregard." A dark smile crept across the Sultan's face—the whole-heartedly fiendish expression of someone creating a difficult situation for another that promised great amusement for himself. "Hamal al-Bazan," he gestured languidly at the efreeti warrior who glared at the upstart marid from beside his dais, "is a distant cousin of the last prince of the al-Bazan line, and lays claim to his ancestral home. What say you to this, Lady Shazathared?"

"I call him liar, coward, and fool, Your Majesty," she replied sweetly, and the entire court sucked in a breath of anticipation, as the burning eyes of the Sultan opened wide in wicked delight. "Liar, for if he was of the blood, he would have come long ago to claim his home. Coward, for if he was of the blood, he dared not test his claim for fear of what dwelt therein. And fool, to think that after he has demonstrated his weakness for centuries, I would fear *him*?"

Hamal twisted as if her disdain had stabbed him like a knife, and Sole had to

hide a smirk. "My lord! I beg this matter be settled in blood!" the efreeti snarled, drawing a great golden scimitar eight feet long from the sheath at his side.

At least it isn't burning, mused Sole, managing not to roll his eyes.

The faux-apologetic look the Grand Sultan sent Shazathared was quite convincing. "My lady?" he asked politely. "Will you accept his challenge, or forfeit your claim?"

Her chin rose defiantly. "A ruler is known by the value of their servants. My champion will accept on my behalf."

Sole stepped forward at his cue, and nasty smiles broke out all over the court. Hamal seemed especially amused at this.

"And has this servant a name?" the Sultan asked, peering with interest at the lava-skinned, seeming near-human.

"His name is Master Sole, your Omnipotence," Shazathared supplied serenely. There was a ripple of murmurs through the Court, largely amounting to "I've never heard of him, have you?" followed by an undertow of instant and energetic wagering.

"I will dispose of this insignificant mote, and then deal with your lies," promised the efreeti warrior, striding forward proudly, his golden scimitar raising crackling sparks as it struck the preciously-tiled floor.

Sole lifted an eyebrow as he entered his stance, noted the alert and waiting expression of the white-turbaned man at the Sultan's side, and considered why a mortal would be at the right hand of the Grand Sultan.

He unhooked his scabbard from his belt, holding it out and away as the offended genie closed in, set his feet, and exploded forward as Hamal started to draw back his blade.

In a swift heartbeat, Sole's crimson skin faded to pale blue; white-hot cracks plummeted into inky darkness. He skated across the floor as if it were ice, moving with eye-blurring speed up and under the scimitar the shocked efreeti had not yet managed to raise. Then he was inside Hamal's guard and cutting.

Estrel came hissing out like a bar of solid ice, slicing across and up through Hamal's defense. The efreeti's armor super-cooled and burning flesh evaporated at her touch. Hamal screamed as he stumbled back, a foot of ice across his chest from hip to shoulder. He staggered, and started to fall, head snapping around to the watching human.

"I wish Hamal to be healed of all his injuries," the turbaned man said under his breath, and the wounded efreeti coughed up his agreement.

Ice steamed and boiled away, and the crowd jeered at the use of wishcraft, both in derision and appreciation for the tactic. Forty feet past the efreeti, Sole took a bead from his belt and threw it calmly at the man now standing a mere ten paces away from him on the Sultan's dais. The bead burst against his target's startled forehead in an explosion of clinging dust, and the advisor doubled over instantly into a fit of enthusiastic sneezing.

Burning rays of flame shot from Hamal's hands as he rose into the air, and Sole waited for them to hit. Where they struck, his skin flared crimson, and then rapidly cooled back to icy blue. A second salvo had no more effect than the first, and when the burning wall of black-red flames rose to surround him, he simply

stepped through it, seared back to a fiery hue for a moment before fading again to shades of frost.

He remained in his crouch for a moment, shrugging off some other form-altering magic of the airborne efreeti, and then straightened up, crossed his arms, and waited, tapping his toe as he watched his foe flying out of his reach.

The crowd jeered at the efreeti's timid tactics, and Hamal's face writhed in humiliation. Judging his reach carefully, he swooped down, his great scimitar poised for a devastating blow.

Sole skated to one side as the blade drove past him, lightning crackling and ornate onyx tiles exploding as it carved a deep gouge into the floor. The crowd whooped again as Hamal circled around, teeth gnashing in frustration, and came in more warily, setting up a scything pattern of swings to cut down the icy creature that dared to oppose him.

Sole's feet left the ground as if gravity was half what it should be. The cutting scimitar passed under his feet, and Hamal gaped as his smaller adversary spun at the apex of his leap and cut.

Estrel's icy edge ripped down Hamal's side, raising another frozen line of terrible pain. Hamal lashed out with his fist, backhanding Sole away, which did little more than get him beyond the reach of Hamal's huge blade. Sole rolled with the blow, turning a complete flip before falling to the ground with his feet under him, sliding away as the staggered genie turned to face him one time more, Hamal's burning skin blackening around the chill of the wound Sole had left him.

The efreeti gestured again, and another screaming wall of flame twenty feet tall and sixty feet wide rose to shield him from Sole's view. Sole slid to the side and waited, glancing at the sneezing, frustrated advisor who could not manage a coherent word, and when the fire elemental manifested amidst the flames, he was ready.

He was cutting before the creature was fully aware of its surroundings, *Estrel's* icy cold plunging deep into its burning form. Then he was inside its reach and leaping up as tentacles of solid flame lashed for him, bouncing off the rounded orb of its octopoid head, and jumping out the far side of the wall of flame as the elemental flailed after him.

Hamal, waiting to charge through the flames after him, instead turned and lunged beside his conjured pet after his prey.

Sole moved like water, seeming to flow around the flickering blows while *Estrel* turned aside burning appendages and the crackling, spark-spitting strikes of the great sword, before suddenly digging in his heels and lashing out.

He slipped between his foes like melting ice from grasping fingers, a glittering snowflake that bisected the pillar of fiery tentacles and sliced deep into Hamal's side, swirling in his wake.

The elemental writhed in soundless agony and collapsed into black ash as the chill ripped through it, and Hamal stumbled, trying to turn and raise his blade in time as Sole reversed course again. He came in as low as an eel, rising into the strike as he left the ground, and a jagged icicle seemed to flare and erupt from the floor as he cut up through Hamal's middle and completed the arc of his blow.

The efreeti quivered for just a second, hanging there on a narrow column

of ice that clove into his chest and split his face into halves. Then burning skin blackened and went dark as the overwhelming cold shot through him. His great golden blade fell with a tiny crackle of protest as the last of the al-Bazan sagged against the ice, snapping and melting it with the residual heat of his body, as it, in turn, took the fire from him, and he crashed, wet and steaming, upon the uncaring tiles of the floor.



“It would seem the matter is settled!” the Grand Sultan boomed out royally, glancing to his side. The turbaned human scrambled forwards, wiping his nose hastily, not daring to disappoint his lord.

“I wish that the damage to the chamber and its furnishings be repaired,” he stated aloud to no one in particular, in a deep and formal voice spoiled somewhat by the abrupt sneeze at the end.

“Granted!” one of the noble efreeti shouted back with a deep laugh. The gouges in the floor were unmade and returned to pristine condition in a ripple of passing wishcraft.

Bowing, the Wishing Hand of the Grand Sultan returned to his place beside the throne, throwing an irritated look at Sole.

“My Lady Shazathared, Princess of al-Mellizuar, Voice of the Oceans, Weaver of Tales, it is my pleasure to add to your titles that of Emira of Bayt al-Mellizuar! Long may you hold it in honor, and delight our fair city with your tales!” the Grand Sultan proclaimed magnanimously. He spared not a glance for the fallen challenger, whose corpse was being lifted away by scuttling azer servants, and his smile grew wider as his Wishing Hand tried to stifle another sneeze.

There was polite acclaim from those watching, and great brazen horns blew long and low in tribute as a new noble was added to the rolls of the City of Brass. Shazathared bowed low to accept the honor bestowed upon her, glancing at Master Sole’s expressionless face as he simply resumed his place and kept a wary eye upon the crowd.

The al-Orizzashal had chosen her protector wisely. She wondered at the cost of his services, and then smiled as she considered that it was not a cost that she was paying.



Word spreads in genie circles with the speed of wishcraft.

It took little time before Shazathared’s distant kinsmen, friends, allies and suitors from long ago were attending her, showering her with gifts of joy for her safe return, and congratulating her on her momentous and daring coup at becoming a noble of the City of Brass.

House al-Orizzashal was here in rather more numbers, and she received them and their smiling lord graciously. Imprisoned for centuries, her status and bloodline still made her his social superior, and the tale of her release was only raising her stature higher. The Shah of the Orizzashal was eager to improve his

standing...and the aid he had given her was reason enough to allow him use of her newest holding as a place to bargain and negotiate in the finest traditions of geniekind. Whether his wooing would be successful...well, that would be another tale of its own.

Many factions sought dealings with the newest noble of the city, one who was not entrenched in existing intrigues, nor aware of the full scope and deadly web of politics played here. While poisoned smiles were not her specialty, it was they who were forgetting who was the mistress of honeyed words, and just how many stories one called The Storyteller might know. Already she had new tales to spin and set forth, new words that conveyed ancient wisdom, new deeds to ponder and praise and mock and laugh at.

Her mephit servants were hard at work, eager to please their mistress as they flitted about the tomes and scrolls of her re-established library. Books were arriving by the score, as the wisest of her suitors knew that the tales that had passed while she was imprisoned would be far more appreciated than any amount of living furniture from Arcadia, sunsilk from Nirvana, or glittering jewels from the depths of the shaitan's realms, and they added nicely to the ancient tomes she had sequestered within the secret chamber of the former palace lords.

She smiled as her thoughts turned back to the volume she was scribing and the events that had led her here: to her champion, the silent mortal warrior, and to the mystery of what magic he held to stand as a creature of both fire and ice. Most especially of ice.

Of course, she thought, her angel-feather quill moving across moonflax paper, as she considered the moral to the final tale of the al-Bazan and bent to finish her story with a knowing smile,

Revenge is best served cold.

NATIONS
OF
TREACHERY
~
GHELIA

“Ignore the sword at a man’s side; watch for the
dagger concealed in his sleeve.”

-Maralictor Darkus Hasting

BOTTLES AND BOXES

By Andrew Crossett

“... **B**UT FLED the night, and came the light,
He vanished from the glade,
And left no sound but wind and stream,
And I, a weeping maid.”

Her song finished, Lish folded her hands and stood silently.

Renza carefully placed the stopper back into the neck of the little metal bottle she'd been singing into, and fished a silver coin out of his vest pocket.

“That was lovely, my lass,” he told her. “Don’t flash this about, or pickpockets will have it from you.”

Lish smiled gratefully at the payment, displaying as many rotten teeth as missing ones, and ran off down the lane in a swirl of dirty red-blond hair and a short, tattered dress that should have been thrown away about six repairs ago.

Renza shook his head, then indulged in the coughing fit he'd been holding back all through the girl's song.

She had the most beautiful singing voice he'd ever heard in all his long years and far travels. But she wasn't pretty or clean or cultured enough to have any future as a professional entertainer. It would be a shame for such a lovely voice to be lost in obscurity.

Renza had to stop for breath three times as he climbed the stairs to his apartment

ANDREW CROSSETT

in the tower of what was once a nobleman's townhouse. It was tough going for an old and sick man, but his room offered a stirring view of Westcrown, and kept him high above the shadow beasts who roamed these streets after dark.

When he reached his room he opened the window for air. Then he took up his pen, dipped it in the inkwell, and wrote on the label on the side of the bottle:

*Lish, maiden of Westcrown
Song, "I Walked a Mile by Clary Stream."*

He blew on the ink to dry it, then carefully set the small metal bottle on a shelf with many others of its kind, all of them inked with notes of their own.

Renza remembered when he had first discovered these magic bottles that could capture sounds and hold them forever, allowing them to be heard again whenever the stopper was removed.

He had been a much younger man then, and second-in-command of the Dire Lads, one of the mightiest and least principled mercenary bands ever to trouble the lands of the Inner Sea.

He remembered the house full of gnome corpses, though he couldn't recall precisely why the Dire Lads had seen fit to slaughter them. No doubt it was some pretext to make off with their treasure: some gems of middling value, and a collection of these sound-bottles, all filled with curious things... strange songs; wind blowing in trees that might have stood upon this world or another; gnomes making loud, passionate love to each other; and many other far-less-identifiable sounds.

Renza had taken his fair share of the spoils, but his fellows had not seen fit to look beyond what lay in front of them. Only he saw the potential value in these odd bottles, and so a day later he returned alone to the gnome-house. He searched until he found a trapdoor leading to a hidden basement, and in it he found what he had been looking for.

There were dozens of unfilled bottles stored down there, along with other containers: metal boxes of many sizes, fist-sized cubes made from solid glass, and one cabinet made of glass and brass that was large enough for a man to stand in. All of these he had carefully loaded into his cart and carried off.

It had been his intention to sell all the magic containers, but soon his fascination got the better of him, and he began using them to build his own collection.

His earliest specimens matched the man he had been then: the sounds of vanquished enemies pleading for life, then dying anyway...a string of filthy jokes told by a dwarven comrade of his, along with the deadly bar brawl that followed... the captured drow high priestess who had been forced to sing at Queen Abrogail's coronation, then been sacrificed to Asmodeus the moment she finished her final verse. She'd had a beautiful voice—even the scream at the end had been music.

The glass cubes, of which he had only a few, recorded sights rather than sounds. One of them recorded the moment he slit his captain's throat and became leader of the Dire Lads.

He hadn't listened to or looked at any of these old relics in many years. It did him no good to feel shame over them, and he saw no reason to dispose of them.

When he died, those who rooted through his things would make of them what they would.

Renza had simply walked away from the Dire Lads one day. They'd sent an assassin after him, who became the last man he'd ever killed.

The booty he'd hidden away allowed him to retire in relative comfort, if not opulence. He'd travelled to various lands, filling his remaining bottles and cubes with things of beauty rather than horror. Now, the bottles filled with pleasure outnumbered those filled with pain. And yet...

The man-sized glass cabinet stood in a corner of his apartment, a blanket thrown over it. With a sigh, he pulled off the blanket to gaze once again at the life-sized moving image it contained.

Sekhith was her name, but Renza had nicknamed her Beauty, because that's what she was. Her perfect skin was brown as a nut, her hair as black as the pit, and her eyes as blue as diamonds held up against the summer sky. She was a succubus, and he'd often hired her to deal with those enemies he wanted to murder with style.

He recalled that on this occasion, he had hired her to seduce, drain, and kill the captain of a rival mercenary band. The man had thought their rivalry a friendly one, and had died without ever knowing that Renza was his enemy.

Renza himself was too smart to avail himself of Beauty's beauty, of course, but he found her a delight to look upon. As she'd assumed her human form and made to leave for her mission, he had stopped her, knowing at last what he wanted to immortalize within the glass cabinet.

Smiling at his request (though demanding extra payment), Beauty had shrugged off the wispy pretense of clothing she'd been wearing, stepped into the booth, and danced the Agony for him.

This dance, she said, was a tradition among succubi, and often used as a tool of seduction. It commemorated the painful writhing of some of the First Harem of her kind, who had had their feet nailed to the floor for the perverse pleasure of their demon-goddess creator.

The image of Beauty's graceful, muscular body danced forever now within that glass booth, feet planted together firmly on the ground, ankles together, but every other inch of her body wriggling and writhing to a music only she could hear. Such a lovely killer.

"I've led a bad life," Renza said to himself as he watched, then doubled over in a fit of coughing.

"My lady will be the judge of that," came a feminine voice from behind him.

He looked around to observe a young girl, barefoot in a simple white dress, standing in the room with her eyes closed.

"I am to midwife your final journey," she told him.

Renza nodded. This, he knew, was the matured spirit of a child who had died in her cradle without ever opening her eyes, sent by the goddess Pharasma to collect the souls of the dead and take them to her for judgment.

"You're in for a bitter task: looking upon the days of my life."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me—only to my lady."

Renza's eyes fell upon a certain metal box on a shelf, one he'd found already

filled among the gnomes' treasure. He knew what his last act in life would be.

He picked up the box, set it upon the windowsill, and opened it for the first time.

The sound of singing angels rang out over the rooftops of devil-haunted Westcrown.

Angels singing in chorus on the hilltops of Paradise, according to the runes written on the lid.

Renza threw the lid of the box down into the street below. People all over this part of the city were already looking up, wondering at the source of the glorious sound.

It would be a while before the Dottari guards traced the sound to this window, minutes more before they broke into the apartment, and longer still until they discovered how to stop the angelic singing and retrieved the lid from below. Renza would be of no help to them.

As the midwife took him by the hand, he smiled. He knew it might be the last smile he or his soul ever indulged in, but he smiled nonetheless.

A LIETO FINE

By Maggie Hoyt



YOU TRY MY patience with your flimsy evasions!” the interrogator barked as he paced in front of the assembled theater troupe. His heavy boots resounded on the wooden floor like the ominous beating of a great timpani drum.

“I would hate to report to the Lord Mayor that your company refused to cooperate with my investigation.”

Isidora scowled. Intimidation was a favorite tactic of the Hellknight’s cruel order of enforcers. The officer’s appearance was designed to make a frightening impression; his grisly scarred breastplate and horned helm gleamed menacingly in the theater lights. Even his pace was deliberate, chosen for its slow, nerve-shattering tempo.

“Now, describe your association with Lady Carmindia Veridius. Omit no details.”

Isidora observed the interrogation from the shadows of an upper tier box. Just an hour before, the Hellknight and his junior officers had burst through the doors, marching in lockstep unison down the aisles. Actors, crew members, and musicians rushed out of every corner of the theater, knotting themselves in a panicked tangle as they assembled in the orchestra-level seats. Then the Hellknight had initiated

his harsh questioning with the troupe's leaders, the principal members of the Bombasts, seated in the front rows of the Lyric Thorn opera house.

Isidora had seen the Bombasts rehearse for weeks now, and she knew every member by name. Stunned and horrified by the night's events, some of them sat in near-hysteria. Remei sobbed quietly, lip quivering, while Nereida fanned the grieving girl faithfully. In her eagerness to obey the Hellknights, Nereida had never changed and still wore her ridiculous, oversized Varisian wig, which blocked the view of the flautists seated behind her. Fulgentius, the company's leading male *enamored*, wiped a tear from his eye as he comforted several young sopranos leaning against his chest. Isidora shook her head at their theatrics.

The Hellknight's harassment was merely a nuisance compared to the reason for his visit: the mysterious disappearance of the company's principal actress on the eve of opening night! This was no time for hysterics. The Bombasts needed all their wits about them.

The actors weren't keen on divulging the full nature of their problem, especially to the brutally strict officers standing before them. At first, Apolinar Francilius and his wife, Leandra, the founders of the Bombasts, attempted to use the hysteria to distract the Hellknight and his armigers, hoping the grim investigators would give up in frustration. But the Bombasts had never dealt with enforcers like these before, and the officer could not be dissuaded. Apolinar and Leandra sat in tense, stony silence, well aware they'd been backed into a corner. Isidora prayed they would think of something, *anything*, to throw the Hellknight off the scent.

The officer stood over Apolinar, awaiting an answer, while the director massaged the bridge of his long, hooked nose and breathed raggedly. Apolinar glanced up at Leandra. She gently rested one hand on his shoulder, while her other soothed the swell of her very pregnant stomach. She nodded her head at him slightly. Then cautiously, he began to speak.

"The Bombasts, as you undoubtedly know, travel throughout Her Majesty's empire to perform. When we arrived in Egorian and were requested to perform *Two Chelaxians* by his Lord Mayor, I—it...became necessary to audition a performer to play the role of Daphne. Lady Veridius auditioned." Apolinar carefully avoided the Hellknight's gaze as his company members shifted uneasily.

"I thought your sort were self-contained."

"Normally, yes. But our usual female *enamored* was unable to perform."

"*Enamored*?"

"A lover. *Lieto fine* comic opera relies on stock characters: the lovers, the lecherous old man, the Varisian servant..."

Lieto fine opera was by far Isidora's favorite. Not quite comedy or tragedy, *lieto fine* presented a perfectly thorny and horrendous situation—right up until the happy ending. The Bombasts were famous for it.

"And who is your '*enamored*' customarily?" the Hellknight sneered, disdain dripping from his pronunciation.

"My wife," Apolinar sighed deeply.

Isidora drew her hand to her heart in sympathy. At this point in the rehearsal schedule, Apolinar's nerves were nearly broken. Carmindia Veridius was the third Daphne cast in this production, and all three had vanished. Had Leandra not been

pregnant, she would have been the first victim.

The Bombasts initially assumed that the actresses had run off; it happened on occasion. Now, however, their suspicions were aroused, and they were in a predicament. How could they possibly find another actress before tomorrow's opening? Only Leandra was talented enough, but her husband would never agree to endanger her.

Apolinar was unable to continue as he struggled to keep his emotions in check, but the Hellknight loomed over him, anxious for a reply.

Leandra leaned forward, removed her hand from her husband's shoulder, and gestured to the Hellknight that his attention ought to focus on her. "He told Lady Veridius—"

"Silence! I have not permitted you to speak. Your husband can tell the story."

Leandra raised one eyebrow and bit her lip, barely choking back a defiant reply. Apolinar took her hand, interlocking his fingers in hers, and found his voice again.

"I told Lady Veridius that I did not think her involvement in *Two Chelaxians* was wise. We comedic actors have a...reputation not befitting a nobleman's daughter. But she threatened me with the weight of her father's disapproval, and I had to admit her audition was outstanding, so she joined our cast."

The Hellknight eyed Apolinar suspiciously as he took notes. Apolinar hurriedly continued to speak.

"Tonight was our final dress rehearsal. Before intermission, Car—Lady Veridius exited through the trapdoor. She should have then joined the rest of the cast in the green room to receive her notes. When she did not come, we waited about ten minutes before sending someone to the trap-cellar to fetch her. All we found was her costume, ripped nearly to shreds. We informed the house manager and he called for your services."

"Where is this item of clothing? And who discovered it?" the Hellknight demanded.

As the obsequious house manager hustled forward with the tattered gown, Apolinar sighed, and with perfect timing, tilted his head and replied, "Remei."

All attention turned to the girl sprawled across her seat in the front row. On cue, she began to wail and threaten to faint yet again. Her tightly curled and coiffed hair had been mussed just enough to frame her face; her pouting bottom lip quivered between every sentence. The wardrobe mistress, two violinists, and Nereida all hovered nearby, making insipid, soothing noises. Isidora snorted in disgust as she watched the spectacle. One needed actual talent to get away with this sort of behavior.

"It was dreadful!" the girl said with a violent shudder as she made her lip bob up and down. "To walk down the stairs and see...the dress, shredded by.... What vile creature could contemplate such a deed? Perhaps a man-eating griffin, with its terrible claws! Oh, how could I even put it into words? The white-hot anguish as the claws raked—alas!" She interrupted herself with a breathy sob, putting a finger to her lips. "No lady should have to experience such terror!"

"It's all right, dear," said Nereida, a contralto cast as the Varisian servant, as she offered Remei a sip of tea.

"But you found no other signs of violence?" the Hellknight pressed, turning his attention back to Apolinar.

"You saw the site yourself. We found only the costume. But the cellar can be accessed from backstage. In the chaos of the rehearsal, we might not have noticed an intruder slipping through the back and into the cellar."

To Isidora's surprise, the Hellknight nodded, as though he bought Apolinar's excuse. Perhaps he had seen enough to realize that chaos was an understatement. For a moment, the investigation reached a lull—even the cast members had ceased their whispering. Apolinar seemed to have gained the upper hand.

"It was the ghost!" Remei burst out, her lip quivering. A wave of shocked murmurs and grunts of skepticism rippled through the crowd of performers as all attention snapped back to Remei. Isidora rolled her eyes.

"Oh, *that's* a marvelous idea," a voice interrupted sarcastically from the back of the theater. "It's only the most overused plot cliché in dramatic history. Let me guess, was the butler an accomplice?" Isidora smiled and leaned forward in her seat to watch as the new arrival strode down the aisle.

"Who is this?" At an imperious wave of the Hellknight's hand, the armigers moved to block the man's approach.

"Our composer, officer," Apolinar replied quickly.

"Pietro Cristanor, at your service, officer." The newcomer bowed and attempted to slip past the armigers, who seized him by the arms.

"Easy now!"

"Why were you not with the company? Was he present at the rehearsal?" the Hellknight bellowed, shifting his focus back and forth from Pietro to Apolinar.

"Yes, he had been at the rehearsal...."

"I went looking for Lady Veridius."

"A noblewoman vanishes while in your care, and you allow a member of your company to leave the theater? I see I had good reason to be suspicious of this company!"

"No! Officer, I can explain!"

"I was searching for Lady Veridius!" Pietro repeated. The Hellknight walked over to where Pietro struggled in the armigers' grasps and fixed him with a pitiless glare. Isidora stifled a gasp, but Pietro only stared back defiantly.

"We thought she might have been kidnapped. I hoped I could catch them," Pietro said in a low, even voice.

"And did you?"

"No, sir."

The Hellknight nodded at the armigers, and they tossed Pietro down. He stumbled to his feet and stalked across the front of the theater, taking his seat next to Leandra.

Isidora exhaled in relief that the Hellknight hadn't punished Pietro. She had been so impressed with his modification of the flawed arias and duets in *Two Chelaxians*, and his wit was as keen as his musical talent. She couldn't bear the thought that his work wouldn't be heard.

Pietro's near-arrest left the performers in shocked silence, and none dared supply the Hellknight with further details. Except, of course, Remei.

"It has to be a ghost!" she shrieked into the lull. "This opera house is probably haunted by some old diva. Oh, she may have started by hiding props or shattering glass, but you know she plans to eliminate any woman she deems her competition. Why, I'm probably next!"

Isidora chuckled. Admittedly, if the ear-splitting pitch of that last speech was any indication, the girl did have an impressive vocal range. But Isidora was a consummate judge of talent, and despite the girl's pretensions, poor Remei would never reach principal *enamored* status.

The Hellknight appeared to have similar suspicions of Remei's talent, sanity—or both, and moved to wrap up his investigation by clearing his throat loudly.

"Sir, just a minor question, if you'd indulge me," the house manager interrupted, blinking his bug-eyes at the Hellknight. "Would you prefer our show not open tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow night would be difficult..." Apolinar admitted.

"*Two Chelaxians in Jalmeray*—" the Hellknight started but was interrupted as a gasp rippled through the theater. Actors and musicians alike turned and spat over their shoulders.

"Let us not offend the starry shades who keep our midnight revels," Isidora muttered, reciting a line from a different opera. The Hellknight had to know the opera was cursed. No one ever said the full name.

The enforcer clenched his jaw and looked Apolinar in the eyes. "Your *show* will open tomorrow night because the Lord Mayor wishes it. You will find an actress to replace Lady Veridius, even if it must be your wife. And I will station armigers throughout the building, who will escort you and your actors to and from the theater." The officer stared pointedly at Pietro. "*Nothing* will escape our notice." At a slight nod of the Hellknight's head, his contingent of officers snapped to attention, then turned in perfect unison and followed their superior officer as he stormed out.

When the theater doors slammed, Apolinar finally released the breath he had held all through the Hellknight's final instructions. He rose to his feet and began to pace.

"Sweet, merciful gods. We're ruined. The mayor will learn about the others eventually, and then.... Oh, gods!"

"Now, Apolinar," began Fulgentius, his fingers combing his goatee.

"That Hellknight knew I was hiding something, especially when Pietro burst in."

"My apologies."

"If it weren't for Remei's ridiculous diversion about a ghost, he'd never have left the theater!"

"But I was serious," Remei whined softly. Once more she forced her lip to tremble.

"And how exactly does a ghost shred a costume, hmm?" Pietro muttered.

"This is wrong! How can we, in good conscience, continue to put actresses in this role?" Apolinar fumed.

"Do we have a choice?" Pietro snapped. "Even if we told the truth—how valuable is the life of one actress to the Lord Mayor?"

“And if we can’t keep a Daphne through intermission?”

Pietro jumped up from his seat. “But if we perform, couldn’t we catch the culprit? Set a trap for him? We must find those other girls before the Hellknights learn that they vanished too. This is our chance!”

“Then we need a Daphne,” Apolinar moaned.

“Pol, I should sing the role,” Leandra said, a hand still supporting her full stomach. Reluctantly, Isidora had to agree. The company had to perform, and despite the danger, only Leandra had the skill.

“Under no circumstances! There is something sinister at work here. How else could three girls vanish at exactly the same moment of the play? We have been in and out of the trap-cellar, yet when Daphne goes through that trapdoor, the actress vanishes! I will not expose you and our child to such danger!”

“But you need a Daphne. I know the role. Who else do you have?”

There was a rustling in the third row, followed by several furious whispers and a pitiful whimper. All eyes gradually turned to a wide-eyed girl, no more than eighteen, tentatively raising her hand. Leandra’s incredulous gaze snapped back to Apolinar.

“We hired an understudy when we cast Carmindia. You were not there when....”

“I cannot allow this child to take the risk!” Leandra said, just as Isidora stifled her own exclamation. One could never trust an understudy at a time like this. Ambitious understudies were exactly how this opera’s curse began.

“And I cannot let *you*!” Apolinar shouted.

“Apolinar!” Leandra warned, struggling out of her seat and drawing a breath only an opera singer’s lungs could house.

“I will do it,” the understudy cried out.

Apolinar relaxed, although Leandra’s lips pursed tightly.

Isidora sighed. Silence fell in the theater as the actors considered their impossible position.

“Do we continue rehearsing?” Nereida asked.

“No, the Hellknights want us gone. Sleep. Call time will be two hours earlier than usual tomorrow. Someone find the understudy a costume.”

The actors trudged out of the theater, removing their wigs and costume pieces. When the last company member had left, Isidora drifted down from one of the boxes in the upper tier, her incorporeal body passing through the wall of the proscenium until she emerged in the wings stage right.

Isidora had been dead some fifty years. She had once been hailed as the most talented diva of her age, which made Remei’s pretensions even more difficult to endure. How she would have liked to show up that shrieking child! Old diva, indeed! One of Isidora’s reviewers had dubbed her a “bright gem in the dark aftermath of the Thrune conquest.”

He had disappeared shortly thereafter.

Another reviewer had said that her voice had “the clarity of a fount holy to Iomedae, the warmth of Sarenrae’s flaming scimitar, and the keen edge of an Asmodean pentacle.” That had always been her favorite review.

Isidora hummed a few bars, and a spectral accompaniment began to play Pietro’s revised music. She ran onto the stage for Daphne’s first entrance, singing

softly as she reviewed the blocking. Isidora was to have been the first Daphne in *Two Chelaxians* when the opera debuted in the Lyric Thorn itself, but her understudy, overcome with jealousy and ambition, poisoned Isidora's breakfast before opening night.

At first, her spirit had been angry. And vengeful. But the murderess—Isidora stopped singing. What was the woman's name? She could not recall. Shrugging, she continued her lyrics. The murderess had disappeared at the end of the first show and was never seen again.

Robbed of her revenge, Isidora exercised her rage on various companies, but as she was not really devious enough for large-scale haunting, she mostly continued what she had always done: flipping over the prop trays, breaking mirrors, and verbally abusing the wardrobe crew.

Then one day, as she watched a rehearsal of *The Evenhanded Judgment*—Isidora looked up at a spot on the balcony; yes, she had been sitting right there—she simply burst into tears. Her pent-up emotions spilled forth: anger at her undead entrapment, frustration at the pressure of constant rage, and disappointment at her lost career.

The actors had evacuated immediately at the sound of her frightful moans, but when the tears dried, Isidora finally felt free. She had expected to progress to her eternal rest at that point, but for whatever reason, she was stuck in the opera house.

Isidora now practiced Daphne's first recitative. Pietro's innovative interpretation of the music called for rapid shifts in pace, and the roulades required considerable vocal control—more than Remei would ever have. As difficult as it was, it was a brilliant adjustment. At least the audience would hear it, since it came before intermission.

Isidora sighed.

Despite all Pietro's hard work, this production would suffer the same fate all the others had.

Every time a company performed *Two Chelaxians*, Isidora grew excited, but her enthusiasm always turned to disappointment. Every production was fraught with disaster. The actress playing Daphne never stayed with the show more than a few rehearsals. Some were said to have quit, others allegedly ran away. All companies kept the circumstances to themselves, and though the opera had been plenty successful elsewhere in Cheliex, it had not been performed without incident in the Lyric Thorn since its opening night. After so many years, Isidora agreed with Apolinar: something sinister was at work here. But there was nothing *she* could do.

She skipped singing the duet and began her first aria, which had also been reimagined by Pietro. Closing her eyes, she visualized a packed house and began singing a little louder.

When she finished, Isidora opened her eyes to see Pietro gaping in the aisle. She blushed and curtsied demurely; she was usually so careful about being seen. After all, most people were so frightened of ghosts that they would call for a priest of Asmodeus before they ever realized she was harmless. Suddenly a thought came to her and she gasped in horror, hands covering her mouth. Surely Pietro

hadn't believed Remei?

She flew a few steps toward him, but he cautiously backed away. Isidora halted—she hadn't meant to threaten him. All mortals were frightened of her, even Pietro. Somehow, she had thought he would be different. She retreated back to the stage, dejectedly expecting him to run.

Instead, he continued to stare, brow furrowed. He struggled to comprehend her presence, but something kept him from fleeing for help. Perhaps he recognized her! Isidora was always terrified that as years passed, fewer and fewer people would remember her name, but undoubtedly Pietro knew his musical history. She waved at him, and he waved shyly back.

But how to help him trust her? He had to believe it wasn't she who had captured all those actresses. As she thought furiously, she realized that the accompaniment was still playing. Smiling, she continued singing the aria. While some of her other memories had faded over the years, this opera never left her; it was music that had always been meant for her. As she sang, Pietro boldly approached the edge of the stage, fears forgotten. She hit the final note, and suddenly a flash of inspiration hit her like the floodlights conjured by the stage magician.

She could right this wrong. She would rescue the entire company! All she needed was opening night. It was time to prepare. Isidora laughed with all her charm and blew Pietro a traditional diva's kiss. Then she floated through the backstage wall and out of sight, leaving Pietro standing, astonished, in the empty theater.



The cheery preshow music played. Egorian's upper crust filled the private boxes, while the pretentious, less affluent milled about on the floor. The Lord Mayor Alazario's box was still empty, but there was time yet for his grand entrance. Actors flitted about backstage in nervous anticipation, applying the finishing touches to hair and make-up. A few of the younger actresses, more readily influenced by Remei, had sewn silver pins into their costumes, an old superstition followed by operatic companies in haunted theaters. Leandra, stage manager for the production, gave orders to the backstage crew from the armchair she'd placed in the wings.

Isidora waited impatiently in the rafters.

Last night, Isidora had decided that Remei's ghost theory had been almost prophetic. It had been an epiphany, really. Isidora herself was the cause of the curse. She realized that her death had created a transcendent imbalance. She was supposed to have given that first performance, and when her role was usurped, the forces of justice prevented the opera from ever being performed in the Lyric Thorn again. If she could just complete a performance, the wrong would be righted and balance restored to the cosmos.

A strident fanfare of trumpets signified the arrival of Mayor Alazario and his retinue. There was a loud rustling as the audience members stood, waiting for the mayor to take his seat. He gestured magnanimously to the theater at large, and the crowd sat quickly in a shuffle. Only the mayor's contingent of Hellknights still

stood, watching the stage ominously from the royal box. Then the lights dimmed. The preshow music gave way to the overture, and Isidora felt giddily nervous.

The performance began. Apolinar, as a buffoonish, lecherous thakur of Jalmeray opened the show, pompously lecturing Remei, who played the thakur's rejected, overly-dramatic wife. Then Nereida, the tricky Varisian servant, entered and listened patiently to her mistress' woes—and proposed all manner of ridiculous plots as solutions. Isidora could hear the audience's laughter; they were chuckling already, a good sign.

Isidora focused herself. She heard the scenery change and the beginning of the pirates' operatic sea shanty and knew her entrance was at hand. Looking down, she could see the understudy waiting quietly in the wings below her. The girl's knees quivered slightly, and she fought to keep from biting her fingernails.

At precisely four measures before her cue, Isidora descended at full speed directly in front of the understudy. The girl stifled a scream, and Isidora heard the rustle of silks and the pounding of the girl's feet as she ran in the opposite direction. Fleetinglly, Isidora felt sorry for the girl, since the understudy hadn't actually done anything wrong this time, but she quickly abandoned that line of thinking. It served her right anyway, the scheming upstart.

The audience gasped collectively as Isidora's translucent specter emerged onto the stage in her old-fashioned costume. The opera seemed to grind to a halt. The pirates froze, and the orchestra petered out slowly as the conductor stared slack-jawed at the stage. Hushed conversation spread throughout the theater; a few noblewomen screamed and fainted. Some audience members even dared to rise from their seats and creep toward the exits. They stopped when Isidora began to sing.

The moment she stepped into the lights and heard her rich voice carrying throughout the theater, she knew the stage belonged to her. She had worried that the bright lights would wash out her pale form, but instead they seemed to make her more real, bringing back her former color: her deep brown hair and her pale rose gown. Her epiphany had been correct. If she weren't meant to save this company, how else could she feel so alive?

At a look from Isidora, the conductor snapped back into action, and the orchestra resumed the opera. Desperate to please the mayor, the actors playing the pirates warily picked up their cue, but their fear dissipated as the strength of Isidora's lyrical voice filled the theatre. A hush descended over the crowd as they realized they were listening to Isidora Velonnica, and she could hear her name whispered throughout the crowd. They were spellbound, held captive by the brilliant richness of her voice.

The pirates carefully avoided touching her as they pretended to capture Daphne and sell her into slavery in Jalmeray. Isidora then pulled a ghostly cloak and bonnet from the folds of her costume, which had been disembodied with her at the moment she died. She applied Daphne's disguise as best she could and prepared to begin her duet with Fulgentius, who would play Cebrian, Daphne's love in disguise.

"Cruel fortune! Ah, what fate is mine? No refuge! No comfort! No haven from the storms," she sang. A quick glance at the wing told her that Fulgentius was

approaching, and she added a little of her signature ornamentation. When his musical cue came, however, she was greeted not by his voice, but with a thump.

Isidora attempted to cover the commotion with her song, but this unexpected turn had broken her concentration, and she lost her hold over the audience. Once again, the entertained began to get restless. Wondering when Fulgentius would appear, Isidora dared a look offstage and saw that the fool had fainted dead away. *How dare he ruin her performance!* She stretched her last note even longer, wondering if she would need to start ad-libbing. Orchestras never liked that.

"The lark with his song so bright and free, the wind with his whispering tone, all of nature calls to me, bids me to come home," a man's voice sang—but it was not Fulgentius'.

Isidora wheeled around, her expression changing to surprise as Pietro emerged, adorned in Fulgentius' hat and vest. Ever the professional, Isidora snapped quickly back into character and the two continued their duet, the actors just as wary as their characters.

Their duet was more effortless than any Isidora had ever sung. Pietro's voice was not nearly as grand as Fulgentius', but his scratchy, trembling tenor seemed the perfect counterpoint to the warmth of her mezzo. Together, they lured the audience back into the performance. Pietro's humor was so well-timed and subtle that he quickly put the audience at ease, and they soon surrendered themselves to enjoyment once more. Isidora even momentarily forgot she was a ghost. She almost reached out to touch Pietro, but stopped herself just in time; she had touched a living person only once by accident, and the damage had not been pretty.

When it came time for them to exit, Isidora saw no reason to return to the rafters. So she ignored the stares of her fellow actors and remained in character. She paced back and forth, over-enunciating her lyrics to keep her mouth limber.

Pietro exited opposite Isidora and made his way to her side of the stage, ready for his next entrance. As soon as he appeared in the wings, Isidora saw Leandra beckon him over to her chair.

"That's Isidora Velonnica!" Leandra hissed.

"I know," he whispered. "She's singing my libretto! With me!"

"Is she...responsible?"

Pietro hesitated. "I don't know. I don't think so. If we disappear at intermission, keep the show going. Start a different opera, a play within a play, anything."

"*We?* Are you mad? You can't follow her! Pietro, you saw what happened to Carmindia's costume."

"And the Hellknights think I did it. I'm not missing our best chance to find those girls. Promise me—"

"I've been improvising since you were drinking your mother's milk! Be careful. She may be a legend, but she's a cursed apparition who ought to be in the afterlife." Leandra snapped her fingers at a group of stagehands. "You—find wardrobe and bring me the biggest costume we've got. I'll need Remei and Nereida as soon as they get off stage. If Fulgentius is awake, bring him to me. If not, slap him first, then bring him." The crew members scurried away to do Leandra's bidding. "Oh, and tell the orchestra to get ready for the second act of

The Lamentable Comedy of the Diabolical Twins,” she called after them.

“Leandra, you’re not going to—” Pietro frowned.

“If your ghost disappears, we’ll need a female *enamored*. It’s high time for me to be on stage.” Leandra pushed herself out of her chair and marched away with Pietro in tow. “I hope we’ve got enough material to let that dress out a few inches,” she said to the approaching wardrobe mistress.

“Shouldn’t we tell your husband, madam?” a stagehand asked.

“No, the longer it takes him to find out, the less time he has to argue with me.”

The company sprang into action, and the backstage became a whirlwind of activity. A crew member rushed by with an armful of stage weapons. Pietro returned with a sword buckled at his waist, then stood and tapped his foot nervously. Isidora watched the bustle with amusement.

She was not worried. All their preparations would be in vain, for she felt certain they would return after intermission. Smiling, she took the stage for the final scene; Remei’s character promised to hide Daphne from the thakur, and Nereida opened the trap door.

Inside the trap-cellar, Isidora was tremendously pleased with herself. She had not vanished as the others had, so her assessment of the situation had been correct, and this little opera’s problems would soon be over. When she finally looked around the trap cellar, however, she realized how wrong she was. The bodies of two Hellknight enforcers lay slumped on the floor, raked by large claws, shredded as easily as Carmindia’s gown. Revulsion filled Isidora and panic began to overtake her. Another trapdoor opened beneath her as Pietro burst through the trap-cellar’s backstage entrance. He met her eyes with shared terror as a clawed hand wrapped itself around Isidora’s incorporeal feet and pulled her into its fiery lair.



Before the Thrune conquest, there were actors who had jokingly referred to a theater’s trap-cellar as “hell.” Here, the nickname proved particularly apt. The walls of the large cellar seemed to be created from charred, mangled flesh. All sorts of theatrical memorabilia hung on spikes driven into the oozing walls: grotesque masks, decades of tattered programs, and rotting gowns that had once been costumes for the Lyric Thorn’s Daphnes, all meticulously categorized by show and year.

At one end of the high-ceilinged room stood a crudely erected stage decorated only with a central throne. Occupying the seat was a grinning monster, his lean, muscular body covered in finely honed spines. His costume dressing gown had once been richly embroidered, but now it hung in tatters, shredded by his barbs. Behind his large form gleamed some twenty gems inset in the throne’s back, the pinnacle of the room’s collection.

“Isidora Velonnica,” he taunted with a guttural rasp, “you’re late. The voice I had always intended to collect, finally in my domain. Such a pity. Octavia was so inferior.”

Octavia. That had been her name.

“You can’t even accept your jewel now,” he continued, running a finger along the fist-sized ruby set at the top of the throne. “One touch, my dear, and your soul would have been a permanent fixture in my collection. The duets we could have sung, lasting into eternity, while—” the fiend stopped abruptly, focusing his attention behind Isidora. “Who are you, and why are you interrupting my moment?”

Isidora turned to see Pietro running down a wrought-iron spiral staircase, sword drawn.

“A devil? Here in the bowels of the Lyric Thorn? What could you possibly want with our company?” Pietro demanded.

“Not just your company, boy. Your *breed*. You actors make easy targets. So willing to promise the future for a little bit of success here and now, never imagining the debt will ever come due. This payment is a long time in coming, but I will claim what is mine: finally, the soul of Isidora Velonnica!”

A stunned silence filled the room. The devil savored the dramatic pause until the audience in the theater above roared with laughter, waking Isidora from her stupor.

A devil. Isidora had little experience with them, but she remembered the stories of the Thrune conquest.

“But I have made no deals with you. *I* achieved my success without any need for the powers of Hell.”

The devil chuckled. “If only it were that simple. Do you remember your little composer? Belvus? Yes, I believe that strikes a chord.”

Isidora did remember the fawning composer. Short and stammering, he had come to rehearsal only once, to reassure the company with grandiose promises of overwhelming success.

“Well, he feared that *Two Chelaxians* would flop, even with your presence. As well he should have—the music has serious flaws. So late one night, in this very room, the fool summoned me to grant his greatest desire: success on opening night. In return, he offered me the soul of every actress who would ever play Daphne in his opera at the Lyric Thorn. An arrogant bargain, but valid and binding nonetheless. And now I have a shiny collection of divas worthy of only the most talented leading man!” As he tapped each gem in succession, anguished voices sang a tortured scale. When it was time for the highest note, the fiend pointed a crooked finger at Isidora. “You played Daphne. You are mine.”

“And you, mortal, are a waste of my time.” He pointed to Pietro, whose brow furrowed as he furiously contemplated their predicament.

Isidora required no time to think. “My soul was never his to offer! You have no claim over it.”

“*Statutes of the Infernus*, section 572: ‘Individuals may bargain with the souls of those over whom they exercise responsibility.’ Example: a father may offer me the soul of his first-born child. Do you see why I love actors? You’re a great lot of children, needing your composers and directors to keep you going. Belvus held the power to make the bargain. You, my dear, are just another actress who needs his music ‘to achieve your success.’”

“That’s ridiculous!” Isidora exclaimed, drawing herself up for an argument.

Then she paused. "Did you say 'just another actress?!'"

"How exactly was Belvus' end of the bargain worded?" Pietro interrupted, brightening suddenly.

"That he, Majorus E. Belvus, vowed to me the soul of every actress portraying the role of Daphne in *Two Chelaxians in Jalmeray*, composed by Majorus E. Belvus, at the Lyric Thorn opera house. Why?"

"You said his music had serious flaws. It does." Pietro smiled triumphantly. "So I fixed it. Our performance is an adaptation. It is no longer the opera composed by Majorus E. Belvus, and therefore is not covered in your contract!"

The devil's grin turned to a grimace. "You cannot prove that."

Pietro pressed his point relentlessly. "But you have surely listened to the first half of the opera. You cannot deny that I significantly altered the *enamoreds'* first duet and Daphne's first aria."

The devil fidgeted in his chair. "The criteria are too subjective. Who is to say at what point the opera is no longer Belvus'? Besides, your opera is incomplete. I cannot say that the second half is original at all."

"Then let us finish it. Let us sing the last half of the opera. Let us prove that my opera is better. If we succeed, you relinquish your right to this woman's soul."

"You must think me a fool! I have the two of you in my power! Why should I bargain with you? What stops me from ending your miserable existence right now?"

"What *does* stop you?" Pietro asked. "Isn't interring souls in gems an unusual pastime for a devil?" The fiend growled, refusing to look Pietro in the eye. "If you destroy Isidora Velonnica now, you will never, ever have any claim over her soul. Belvus' bargain was a fraud, but for years you've convinced actresses that they had no choice but to submit. Well, no longer!"

"Ha!" Isidora punctuated.

"You will obey me, or else—"

"Or else what?" Pietro continued. "You'll summon your infernal overlords? I'm sure they'll be happy to find that instead of collecting souls for the legions of the damned, you're indulging your operatic fantasies."

"You will pay for your insolence, mortal!" The devil rose threateningly from his chair, but Pietro held out a hand.

"You cannot force us to bargain for our souls. But we will offer a deal for our lives; a gentleman's agreement. Let us perform the second act."

Pietro and Isidora held their breath in anticipation as the devil paused to consider the deal. Slowly, the villain's furrowed scowl broadened back into his leering smirk.

"Very well. I accept your challenge," he said with a low chuckle. "I shall play the thakur." He snapped his fingers, and a crackling crimson rift opened, spitting out two tiny imps with leathery wings and coiled tails. They turned to Isidora and Pietro with mischievous grins. The devil assigned them the roles of the thakur's wife and the Varisian servant, and they gleefully dug out wigs and gowns from his ragged collection.

With a wave of the fiend's hand, the stage was hung with roughly worked scenery which glimmered in the pale light of the cellar lamps. In response, Isidora

hummed the first few measures of Pietro's music. The notes lingered in the air, gradually coalescing into a melody, as though a ghostly orchestra accompanied the makeshift performance.

"Places for act two!" an imp shouted.

Isidora's breath caught, and she glanced nervously at Pietro who smiled as he nodded, taking his place backstage. She inhaled slowly, willing her nerves away and summoning her vocal control.

The devil's stage lacked a trapdoor, so Isidora floated through the wood and stone floor, portraying Daphne emerging from her hiding place. Her voice quavered with anxiety, wary of her audience and the pressure of preserving both their lives. Then Pietro's voice chimed in, calming her fears with its lovely plainness. Their characters shed their disguises, and as Cebrian promised to help Daphne escape, Isidora knew that Pietro was not pretending.

As they sang the duet, Isidora watched the devil carefully. This duet involved some of Pietro's most radical changes. Belvus' music had been so comparatively stale, technically flawless but dispassionately unimaginative. Pietro's music, on the other hand, exquisitely evoked the thrilling romance of the scene.

When Isidora reached the end of her favorite phrase, her voice became soft, and as she trilled the final note, she noticed a single tear dropping down the devil's cheek. Then his eyes widened in horror, and his expression settled into a hateful scowl.

When the duet finished, the devil took the stage. Unused to Pietro's changes, he stumbled occasionally, which only intensified his rage. He more than made up for his fumbles with the force of his character, however. In a real theater, his voice would not have projected past the first row, but in this small setting, his throaty growl conveyed a hungry, menacing thakur, a far cry from the typical buffoonish portrayals Isidora had witnessed.

"He's furious," Pietro whispered to Isidora backstage. "I suppose I couldn't ask for a better review. Somehow I doubt this thakur will want to sort things out in the end. I don't think he'll want to admit we've won." Pietro tightened his grip on his sword. Their next entrance would mark the beginning of the chase scene, where the thakur attempts to catch Daphne and Cebrian.

"Please be careful," Isidora responded. She blushed—until now she had only spoken to him as Daphne. He smiled gratefully and nodded.

The final note of the devil's aria signaled the beginning of the chase. Isidora and Pietro crept on stage; their watchfulness was no act.

"Quiet."

"Silence."

"I cannot see, my love!"

"Perhaps her promise is forgot!"

"But hush—"

"No words."

"Quiet."

"Silence," they alternated, creating a syncopated pitter-patter that matched their pounding hearts—at least, how Isidora imagined her heart would pound.

"Ha!" the devil bellowed, and Isidora barely kept herself from screaming.

He pounced in between them, swinging his spiked tail. *"I smell two little rats, who think they can escape. Let them try! Oh, let them try!"* he sang, and his tail slammed into Pietro, knocking him off his feet. "Let us test your little opera in the Theater of the Real!"

Isidora gasped. Pietro had bargained that they would finish the opera, and if the devil had to admit that the music was no longer Belvus', he would surely kill Pietro before they completed the second act. Isidora watched in horror as the opera crumbled around her. Clearly, Pietro was wounded, and she knew the devil's last words were not in the script. The devil loomed over Pietro as the poet struggled to get to his feet. It was time for Isidora to take the stage.

"My love, we are discovered!" she sang, rising into the air, and as she hit her highest note, she swooped down upon the devil, inflicting the physical anguish of her ghostly presence upon him. She gasped in shock as his barbs stung her hands, the first time she had felt pain in nearly fifty years. The devil recoiled in far worse agony, allowing Pietro to crawl away.

The music hurried on at a frantic pace that reflected the chaos of the chase, but the devil left Isidora and Pietro little room for flight. His immensity filled the small stage, so Pietro vaulted off the front. The fiend pursued him relentlessly as Isidora trailed behind. Try as she might, she couldn't draw the devil's attention, and his barbs repeatedly found Pietro's flesh.

By the middle of the act, the devil had slowed a step, and his vicious tail swung with less vigor. But blood seeped through Pietro's costume, and Isidora could see that it pained him to take the deep breaths needed to sustain his higher notes. Only his song seemed to keep him on his feet. He drew strength from the lyrics as the melody shielded him from collapse and repelled the worst of the devil's barbs. Even so, his stamina was fading, and each time the devil's talons pierced Pietro's flesh, Isidora feared it would be the fatal blow.

"As constant as the Song of the Spheres, as sure as every rising sun, so to you I'll always be, my love," Pietro sang, rolling underneath the devil's swiping claw.

"Catch them, punish them, teach them to defy me!" the devil's bass pounded constantly underneath their song as he bounded after Pietro.

Isidora flew close on the devil's heels. *"I am a ship fixed on its course, my heart a compass pointing ever north to thee!"*

"But mistress, don't you think—" the imp gurgled as Isidora grasped it around the neck and tossed it to the side; the foul servant shriveled up and vanished. The Varisian servant's lyrics had never been that important, really. Yet again, the draining hunger of Isidora's spectral form interrupted the devil's attack against Pietro.

"Despair does creep into my heart, I fear he'll never let us leave—" Pietro paused as he impaled the imp playing the thakur's wife, which had attempted to block his path. *"But knowing as I do thy love is true, I'll never fear!"*

"Ah! But fear you should," the devil sang.

Isidora swooped in, descending with the force of a tragic opera's falling chandeliers, but this time the devil was waiting for her. As she touched his back, his spines slammed into her bosom, and she flew backward feeling as though pieces of her heart had been ripped out. Wispy tendrils of milky ether unraveled

around the hole in her chest.

Crying out, Pietro rushed the devil and was swatted away. His sword skittered across the floor. Pietro stood, wiping blood and sweat from his eyes, cornered and defenseless against the devil's next assault.

"Well, Madam Velonnica?" the fiend roared. "It is your line! Say the word, and the mortal walks away. You know my price. Yours is the soul I have always longed for."

Isidora stared, slack-jawed, her heart sinking. He had been playing with them all along. She had been convinced Pietro had outsmarted the monster, but the devil had realized her weakness: love. She wanted to sob, wanted to rage as vehemently as she had when she first materialized. But the devil was waiting, and she had little choice, for she would never outsmart him. Isidora hung her head humbly and drifted forward.

The devil laughed triumphantly. "I love performers!"

It was true. She was an actress. What else could she do?

"No!" Pietro shouted. She met his gaze, eyes brimming with ethereal tears.

"I will not let him kill you," she said softly and raised her hand, clearly a gesture of surrender.

The devil slowly turned, grinning malevolently, his attention focused on his newest acquisition. She smiled. With a sudden flick of her wrist, Pietro's sword hurtled through the air into his waiting hand. The devil wheeled around with a look of shock that justified every award Isidora had ever received, and Pietro swung wildly, ignoring the barbs that pierced his arms. Isidora filled her lungs with air.

"No power, not of death or hell can break the bonds of truest love!" she sang and descended upon the devil.

The villain grimaced in pain and stepped back, motioning for them to continue singing.

Daphne and Cebrian's final duet had always been Isidora's favorite part of the opera, and she sang it now with all her heart. With unbridled joy at their victory, fierce determination to make up for all the performances she had missed, and tenderness for the partner who had so gallantly defended her, she poured what was left of her soul into the performance.

She nearly missed the devil's approach.

As they reached the final notes of their duet, Isidora caught the fiend's lunge out of the corner of her eye. Without breaking her song, she reached out and seized the devil's face. He fought against her grasp, spines piercing her hand, but Isidora would not relent, and she willed her essence—her artistry—into his withering form.

The devil collapsed at their feet and crumbled into ash.

The room's disgusting décor faded, revealing an ordinary, damp, and dusty cellar occupied by an old rotting platform, the gem-encrusted throne, and the devil's theatrical collection. Pietro staggered to the throne.

"I believe if we break them..." He started prying out one of the stones from its setting.

"Allow me," Isidora replied, clearing her throat. She then took in a deep breath

and hit the highest note in her range. One by one, each gem cracked and the souls contained within were released.

The oldest souls continued on to Pharama's Boneyard, their material bodies having long since passed the bounds of mortal existence. They curtsied to Isidora and Pietro in thanks and drifted up toward eternal rest with expressions of tranquility—except for Octavia. She floated uneasily past her nemesis, her face stricken with fear. Isidora smiled beatifically and waved.

"I'm just repaying the favor, dear. You did, after all, save my soul from a devil."

The last three gems shattered into a small vortex of shimmering particles which coalesced into the forms of the Bombasts' three missing actresses. Souls reunited with bodies, Carmindia and the other girls woke dazedly. Pietro sighed in relief; their presence would surely clear himself and the Bombasts of any wrong-doing.

Isidora looked on wistfully as Pietro directed the whimpering actresses up the staircase. An odd tugging tried to draw her away, and try as she might to remain in the Lyric Thorn, she knew she could not resist.

Pietro paused on the middle of the stairs, waiting for her to follow. She shook her head.

"I have finished my part of the opera. I am...free," she said with a bittersweet smile.

Pietro's face fell; he swallowed hard and attempted to regain his composure. "Thank you, for..."

"No. Thank *you*." She choked back tears and surrendered to the tugging. Best to fade away quickly, before this became any more difficult.

"Wait!" Pietro cried. "You—you haven't taken your curtain call...."

Isidora grinned mischievously. He did have a point.



As soon as Pietro returned backstage, Leandra cornered him, her altered gown stretched tightly around her stomach.

"Sweet gods, you're bleeding!"

Pietro shook her off. "We need to finish the show."

"Where is she? The ghost—"

"Gone."

Leandra looked at him with a curious expression then nodded. "I'll go find Apolinar."

Pietro collapsed into Leandra's armchair. The thrill of the performance had worn off, and he could feel every puncture wound the devil's barbs had left in him. But despite his pain, his mind could only contemplate one thing: Isidora Velonnica had sung his music. With him. And now, she was gone.

He could hear Apolinar improvise an ending to their cobbled-together opera. The music struck, and the actors rushed back onstage for the curtain call. To his surprise, there was applause, and he heard the audience call for Daphne and Cebrian. Leandra wrapped a dressing gown around him to hide the blood and dragged him on stage, despite his protests. He bowed weakly, cringing as his wounds reopened.

MAGGIE HOYT

Then, as one, the audience rose to its feet.

The entire company turned to watch as Isidora floated up the middle of the stage, over the platform that had signified the thakur's palace and down its steps. The music of the violins soared as she took center stage, and she curtsied deeply to her standing ovation. Isidora held out her hands and beckoned the entire company to take a final bow.

Waving at the audience, she turned to Pietro and smiled shyly. She held his gaze for a moment as the inadequate words flooding through her head drowned out the clamor around her. She bowed, only and solely for him, and blew him a gentle kiss.

The strings performed a crescendo. Isidora looked up and drifted toward the lights in the ceiling as though borne upward by the music itself. Released from her entrapment, she shed her ghostly body, watching it dissipate in the air below. Her pure soul raced through the ceiling toward the open air, and finally, at a sharp blast from the horns, she was free.

THE SELECTION

By Kalyna Conrad



“LEEEASE?” Nethyn whined for the hundredth time in two days. “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and you owe me for helping you pass your navy exams.”

Cade drew a deep, calming breath and leaned back in his chair, fixing on the familiar beams of the Devil’s Crown’s ceiling. It’d been six months since he’d left Brastlework for the naval academy, and this pub was the only place in town he still recognized; the only place that felt like home since Uncle Ellippios died.

Cade had come here with Nethyn, hoping they could have a quiet pint together, but apparently he had other plans. Stupid plans. Cade drew a deep breath, struggling to be patient with his friend—but patience was proving elusive.

He leaned forward abruptly, grabbing his friend by the tunic and hauling Nethyn across the table until they were nose to nose. “Use your head, man. I’m an officer in the imperial navy now, my brother’s a Hellknight, and you’re inviting me to the secret apprenticeship ritual for one of the empire’s most wanted terrorists. Are you off your nut? I should probably arrest you for knowing about it.”

With a wary glance, Nethyn rolled his eyes, muttering, “I know. That’s why I need your help. After last month’s little...prank, I was put under restrictions to not leave the city, but no one will think twice if I’m with two of the empire’s most faithful young servants...” he winked.

Cade's jaw nearly hit the stained tabletop. "You convinced Juno to go? What'd you do, drug him?"

"Better," Nethyn grinned, "I called in a favor. He's even agreed to be on his, ah, least infernal behavior." He frowned, "Speaking of which, I never got the chance to ask before you scurried off to basic training, but why did you sell out to the empire anyway? You never seemed as keen on that whole 'enforcing the law' thing as your brother."

Instead of answering, Cade's hand went to his belt and untied a pouch tied there. He dropped the pouch on the table with the distinctly heavy clank of many gold coins.

Nethyn's eyes dropped to the purse and widened. "Nice. What's that, a signing bonus?"

"Better," Cade grinned, "that's two week's pay. You might be happy living off the charity of the town and performing parlor tricks for simpletons, but I wanted something more. Who knows," he shrugged, releasing his friend and reattaching his purse, "someday maybe I'll even settle down, find a wife..."

Nethyn looked genuinely disgusted. "Ugh. How...normal." But the look passed quickly and he brightened, "All the more reason to have one last adventure with your old friend Nethyn." He wagged his eyebrows, "Hmm? What'd you say? You owe me!"

"I don't know," Cade frowned. "Seems risky...and treasonous. I don't really want to jeopardize my new commission on one of your crazy whims."

"You're turning into Juno, you know?" Nethyn pouted. "All glory to the empire, blah, blah, blah." He shook his head, "Your Uncle Ellippios would have been so disappointed."

Cade shrugged, "I can deal with that."

"Please?" Nethyn begged again. "You know I've wanted this my whole life, and this is my only shot. Adronus Thistleclip only takes a new apprentice once every hundred years."

"I know," Cade muttered, wishing his friend would keep his voice down, "and he's never taken a human apprentice, remember?"

"Ah," his friend grinned, "but how many humans have the training I do? It's my destiny to be a great sorcerer, Cade; why else would I be named after the god of magic? Look, I've learned as much as I can in this backwater town. Apprenticing to the great Adronus is the next logical step."

Trying not to gag at the star-struck expression in his friend's dark eyes, Cade sighed, "Well, I suppose it is kind of a once-in-a-lifetime experience...and who's really going to find out, right?" He glanced uncertainly at Nethyn, who nodded emphatically, and scowled, "Fine, I'll go." He cut off Nethyn's triumphant grin with a gesture, "But I have one condition: if we get caught, you have to say you tricked me, or forced me, or..." he waved a hand, "whatever. Point is, you'll take the fall; I won't lose my commission over this. Understand?"

"Of course!" Nethyn breezed, patting Cade's cheek, "I promise you won't regret this! I'll meet you outside the North Gate at sundown." He stood to leave, paused and said, "Oh, and Cade? No weapons tonight...and ditch that shiny new uniform of yours, okay? Imperial officers aren't particularly welcome in Adronus'

Glade.”

Cade opened his mouth to deliver a snappy retort, but Nethyn had already vanished.



Cade was nervous. He'd managed to scrounge a nondescript outfit along with a hooded cloak that hid most of his features, but he still felt exposed—and vulnerable. In fact, he was certain that every member of the rebel crowd around him could read “unarmed property of her Imperial Majestrix” all across his face.

He scanned the sea of unfamiliar faces, searching for his brother. “I thought you said Juno was coming,” he growled through his teeth at Nethyn who stood beside him, practicing his magic.

His friend didn't even glance up from the tiny, impossibly-colored flame he'd coaxed into dancing on his palm. “Oh, get with it. That was a joke,” he smirked. “You know I couldn't tell him about this. He'd just want to crash the party with all his Hellknight friends.”

Cade clenched his fists and resisted the urge to strangle his cheeky best friend. That sort of violent outburst would surely draw unwanted attention. “But I only—”

“Shh,” Nethyn interrupted, holding up his now-empty hand, “Adronus is here.”

Cade grumbled, but fell obediently silent.

An awed hush settled over the crowd. Across the clearing, a white-gold light appeared from behind the trees, turning them into gnarled silhouettes. It grew and spread steadily, curving around the inner row of trees like water flowing against an invisible shield. In spite of himself, Cade was impressed by the show. In a heartbeat, the light had completely enclosed the glade and the small gathering of gnomes and humans within.

All eyes snapped to the far side of the clearing where an amethyst-haired gnome was stepping out from between two particularly misshapen trees. He was shorter than Cade expected, but that didn't diminish the air of otherworldly power and intelligence that pulsed around him. His keen amber eyes scanned the crowd, as though he were searching for someone he didn't quite recognize. When his gaze reached Cade, those eyes narrowed, their gem-like depths lighting up with the same look Uncle Ellippios' eyes had whenever something new caught his interest. Cade started to wonder if he'd been discovered for his loyalty to the Majestrix and tensed, ready for anything—but the moment ended abruptly and the gnome's eyes moved on, his gaze slipping over Nethyn and grazing across the rest.

Once he'd studied each of the seventy-or-so candidates, Adronus raised his twisted wooden staff high in the air, the gems and metal trinkets tied to it clinking ominously as he slammed the butt of the stick into the earth with a tooth-jarring rumble.

After a breath, he spoke with a voice too large for his size, “The Selection has been made. You may disperse.”

Cade was confused, and truth be told, a little disappointed. He glanced at Nethyn. “What just happened? Who did he pick?”

Nethyn tossed a glance up at Cade and wilfully thrust his hand into the golden

wall. Sighing miserably, he looked back at Cade with hurt in his black eyes, disappointed he could move his hand back and forth through the golden light just behind them. "It's simple. If you're able to leave the glade, you weren't chosen. Come on, I think it's gonna take an all-night visit at the Devil's Crown to get this taste of defeat out of my mouth."

All around them the clearing emptied, gnomes and humans slipping between the trees in every direction, passing through the lingering barrier of golden light and disappearing into the fading haze of lavender twilight beyond. Cade patted Nethyn on the shoulder, still not sure what just happened but eager to help his friend feel better. "All right let's go, I'll buy."

Flashing him a brief, half-hearted smile Nethyn turned and passed effortlessly through the golden light. Cade tossed a final wary glance at the mysterious amber-eyed gnome who stood, fixed and waiting, in the clearing, and turned to follow his friend.

He walked straight into a wall.

With a surprised yelp he bounced off the golden light, stumbling backwards and landing firmly on his rump. Panicking, he leapt back to his feet and rushed to the deceptively translucent wall of light, pushing desperately to find a way through. Something was very, very wrong. On the other side he could still just barely make out his friend's shadowy form as it moved through the woods, fading into the darkening night.

Breathless with fear he'd never felt before, Cade pounded the wall again and shouted, "Nethyn, wait!"

A small hand fell on his arm, calm emanating from the touch as a soft voice said, "He can't hear you."

Cade threw off his hood, fear taking hold as he rounded on the gnome. "What's the meaning of this? I should warn you, I'm a lieutenant in Her Infernal Majestrix's imperial navy. If you harm me, your punishment will be swift and merciless."

The gnome laughed, clearly surprised and delighted by Cade's outburst, "Oh yes, you're perfect...and such a sense of humor too!"

Doing his best to intimidate the giggling little man, Cade drew himself up to his full height, threw his shoulders back and boomed, "I command you to stop laughing and tell me what's going on here."

"You're my new apprentice, you blustering young braggart, that's what's going on," he said, all hint of mirth gone from his countenance, "and you're going to learn everything I have to teach— whether you like it or not. I will not sit by and watch your gifts go to waste."

"Your apprentice?" Cade frowned, "But... No. You must've made a mistake. Nethyn's the one who wanted this honor... I can understand the mistake, we were standing right next to each other. Look, I gave up sorcery a long time ago and haven't looked back since."

The gnome's eyes glinted with mischief, "I know—but you have such wonderful potential."

Cade groaned, "Oh...Nethyn'll be livid when he finds out."

Adronus grinned wickedly, "Of course he will... and won't that be fun!" He started tugging Cade back across the clearing, "Now come along."

“But—” Cade mumbled.

The gnome stopped and turned to look at him, understanding dawning within his golden eyes. “Oh, of course, where are my manners? My name is Adronus Thistleclip and you’re Cade, son of Armyn, student of my old friend, Ellippios, but you can call me master and I’ll call you apprentice. Yes, that has a nice ring to it...suitably official, I think... You humans like things official, don’t you? I can never remember...”

With a confused nod, Cade fell face first into a numb sense of acceptance as the gnome resumed walking, leading him down a path that would take him to his destiny.

THE DEAL BREAKER

By B.R. Bearden

“REVEL HASTING?”

The young man stood as his name was called. Of all the folk waiting in the summoning hall of the House of Inquisition, he alone showed no sign of fear. In appearance he was unlike any typical Chelaxian; he didn't adorn the humble and honest attire of a merchant or tradesman, but instead wore gray trousers and shirt, with a dark gray cloak, as if bound for the opera.

The man calling his name wore somber black robes and turned to lead the way down the hall. Revel followed, his soft boots sounding muffled in contrast to the sharp click of the official's polished boots.

Though this was his first visit, Revel presented an air of familiarity as he walked in the place. His dark eyes appeared unconcerned by the statues of fiends and devils displayed along the walls. But walking along the halls of the House of Inquisition, one had good reason to feel frightened. These statues did not resemble the typical ones that depicted greatness and benevolence throughout the city. These were of naked evil upon stone faces, *intended* to cause fear. Revel felt the itch of a burn scar on his left forearm as he passed the fearsome forms. Noticing the official ahead glancing back, he resisted the urge to rub it. Instead, he casually straightened the front of his shirt, feeling the comforting holy symbol of Iomedae

beneath the fabric.

The official stopped before an ornately carved door, spoke a word in the Infernal tongue before touching the handle, and swung the portal open. He stood aside, inclining his head slightly, bidding Revel entry, which he did without hesitation. Irritation at the young man's nonchalant attitude was evident on the official's thin face as he closed the door and walked away.

The chamber was large and well appointed, with dark-paneled walls, thick blood-red carpet, and expensive furniture. The black-and-red flag of Cheliox hung on the wall behind a granite-topped desk. At the desk, a bald man sat in a high-backed chair, a five-pointed star of Asmodeus carved into the wood above his head. Like the escort, he wore a black robe with elaborate red stitching worked into the collar and cuffs. Thin eyebrows arched above eyes that glinted like obsidian. He gestured to a smaller chair before the desk and the young man sat.

"Revel Hasting, I am Protectorate Narvelius Churel. Let me extend my regret at the loss of your father."

His voice was silky and devoid of any emotion, especially compassion.

"He was a fine officer, a model Hellknight. The Order of the God Claw is lessened by his passing. Perhaps you intend to follow in his footsteps?"

"Not likely," the young man spoke resolutely.

A flicker of surprise shone in Narvelius's eyes.

"You are blunt, as was your father. A useful trait, at the proper time. This is not that time."

"I apologize," Revel replied.

Narvelius waved it aside. "No need. It's a misstep, *not a deal-breaker*."

"Have you found my father's killer?"

"No, we have not. The Order of the Scar is investigating, as murder is their realm. You were informed Maralictor Darkus was attacked from behind while on his way home after his watch. What you were not told I will tell you now. The wounds were jagged, as if two serrated blades struck into his back. The Red Mantis is suspected."

Revel frowned. "A Red Mantis? Why would such expertise be employed against a mid-level Hellknight officer? Are they not expensive assassins?"

"Very. Duke Kotaros was killed by a Red Mantis during the civil wars following the death of Aroden, and, so goes the tale, the fee was a castle in Andoran."

"Such a fee for a duke, perhaps—but a Maralictor?"

"But...not all contracts with the Red Mantis demand such a fee. In point of fact, few do. If one has the right enemies, and they have the required gold, a bargain may be struck. Did your father have enemies?"

Revel shook his head. "He spoke little of his duties. In fact, he spoke little after my mother passed."

"Ah, yes. A priestess of Iomedae, was she not? She died in an accident?"

"A fire. She died trying to save folk during a fire that swept one of the Cheapside districts, when the houses were torn down to build the eastern Prospect." Revel felt the itch on his forearm return, an injury from the same fire.

Narvelius stared intently at the young man, to read accusation in his face. Many citizens were unhappy with the removal of those old buildings. In their place they

built broad avenues, calling them The Prospects, and they ran north to south and east to west of Thrune Square. Narvelius and others profited handsomely from the project, though it wasn't general knowledge. The Protectorate scrutinized Revel, waiting for something, but it never came. If the young man held resentment, he contained it well, he thought.

"The renovations of the city, alas, were not without cost. But as to your parents, Iomedae and Asmodeus have in common the Rule of Law. Your mother and father reflected that tradition of serving the greater need."

The man rose, went to a cabinet, and returned to the desk with a bundle of red velvet cloth. He spread the contents on the table; a leather belt pouch, a red sash, and a long sword in a worn scabbard.

"The assassin took whatever coin the pouch held. His armor was claimed by the Hellknights."

Revel stood and lifted the sword, sliding it a hand's-breadth from the scabbard. It had a silver basket hilt and a grip of black dragon hide. The blade was dull gray with a bright edge, etched with runes. It was an heirloom of his family for many generations.

"Why not take his sword?" Revel asked. "It is enchanted, the only treasure of the Hasting line."

Narvelius shrugged. "It is also very distinctive and would be easy to use as a focus for those who know the arts of divination, what some call 'scrying,' to discern information about the one who possesses it. It is your sword now, sad the circumstance that makes it so. If we learn more about your father's death, I will see that you are contacted."



Outside the House of Inquisition, Revel wrapped the red sash around his waist and belted the sword over it. It hung naturally from his hip. As a child at times, he had snatched the sword from where his father kept it when he slept. It had seemed heavy and cumbersome when he was a boy, but it felt light and balanced to the young man now. His father used to teach him sword play, and during those times they used ordinary swords. Only once had his father let him try the sword, fencing at shadows on a moonlit night, in the little garden behind their home.

"Why the silver basket?" he had asked.

"Silver harms devils," his father explained, running his fingers over the finely made basket hilt. "Though Cheliox is aligned with Hell, one might have to fight a devil, just as one might fight a Chelaxian that broke the law."

"Then why not a silver blade?"

"Silver doesn't hold an edge," his father winked. "Besides, there are things besides devils that require a sword. Many things."

"Is it magical?" Revel asked as he thrust at an imaginary foe.

His father laughed. He had an easy laugh, when his mood was light. "What is magic, Revel? Does your mother work magic, or does she channel the divine energy of Iomedae? I have seen you work the little spells she taught you. Do you *like* magic?"

The boy hesitated before speaking. "Sometimes I call on Iomedae to make a light or heal a small scrape or cut. And sometimes I do it without calling on anyone."

His father placed his hands on Revel's shoulders and stared into his eyes. "How is that, Revel? How do you work spells without calling on Iomedae?"

"I don't know. I still feel the energy move through me, my fingers tingle. I haven't told mother."

The boy's father shook his head. "No. No, you shouldn't. And Revel, you should only use the spells when calling on Iomedae. Understand?"

The boy had not, but he nodded anyway.

His father then tousled his hair and smiled. "And the sword is enchanted, yes."

The memory of his father made Revel smile, but it quickly faded as he strode across the wide expanse of Thrune Square. His father was dead. Someone had had him murdered and paid well to see it through, someone who would leave an enchanted weapon untouched, but steal a pittance of coins.

Who? He looked at the people hurrying through the square on a thousand errands: proud aristocrats in fine clothing, hurrying slaves on business for their masters, common folk doing whatever they did in a city. Most were Chelaxians, but a few were foreigners, and fewer still were short folks called halflings. "Slips," they were derisively named by Chelaxians, who recognized their value as being beneath notice, both in servant and as spy. But would any of them dare kill a Hellknight, the iron-handed soldiers of Law who modeled their various knightly orders on the Legions of Hell?



Two nights later, Revel sat alone at a back table in the Tempest Tossed, a tavern favored by his father in the Bridgeside District. Often foreign sailors came here to drink, men who plied their craft up the Adivian River from the Inner Sea to trade at the capital. Revel was intrigued at how easily they laughed and how loudly they talked. Chelaxians, as a rule, laughed less and spoke softer. The foreigners called Egorian "The closest place to Hell on Golarion," yet still they came to trade.

He knew there was a certain exaggeration in the phrase, but the ordinary citizen knew it to be true. More commonly the capital city was called The City of Thorns, and not so much for the black roses common to the gardens, but for the spires and spikes atop many a building, built after the god Aroden's death to signify the rise of Asmodeus and his worshippers. The gargoyles perched upon black-shingled roofs appeared to be made of stone, but the occasional devil hopping from roof to roof certainly wasn't.

"May I sit?"

Revel looked up, surprised at the man who stood at the table. He wore a heavy wool cloak pulled around him while the hood lay low, obscuring his face. Revel motioned the man to take a chair. Dutifully, a serving girl strode over and the stranger held up two fingers, pointing to Revel's ale mug. Nothing was said until she brought the drinks and departed.

"Do I know you?" Revel asked.

“No, but I know you. Or rather, I knew Darkus, your father.” The man made a gesture over the cups, whispering words too softly to understand, though the meter was familiar. “Do you know that orison?”

Revel nodded. His father had taught him that blessing which purified drink of ill intent.

“I would suggest using it before tasting anything you did not prepare yourself,” the man said.

“Who are you? And why should I fear poison?” Revel sipped his ale, slightly concerned about the other ales he had drank before.

“My name I will not give, as I have no wish to be found dead in an alley from *an informal introduction*, as we call it. Suffice to say, your father was my friend and I am here to warn you that this isn’t over.”

“You’re a Hellknight!”

The stranger ignored him. “I have a riddle for you. If one wanted to kill an officer of the Hellknights, an assassin from as far away as possible would be the instrument to use. Where is it that even the Inquisition cannot reach?”

Revel frowned. “Riddleport? Absalom? Wherever the Red Mantis assassins are from?”

“Who suggested the Red Mantis?” the man asked, but then laughed derisively as if he figured out the answer. “Not even the isle of Mediogalti is so far to ones who traffic with Hell. Think on that while I pose you a second question: what is the reason we have laws and a system of punishment for those who break them?”

Revel steepled his fingertips and thought. “To maintain an ordered society we need laws. To persuade people to obey those laws, we need punishments.”

The stranger laughed softly. “You quote Darkus well. But consider; the law cannot persuade where it cannot punish.”

“Where can it not punish?”

“Or who. A final riddle,” the man discreetly slid a small gray gemstone behind Revel’s cup. “The city guard was not the first to find Darkus. A slip loyal to the Order of the God Claw found him moments after he fell. This was in his hand.”

Revel palmed the gemstone and looked at it in his cupped hand. “What is it?”

“A shadow stone.”

“Is it valuable?”

“No.”

“What properties does it have?” It looked worthless to Revel; too dull for jewelry, too light for a sling stone.

“Only one,” the cloaked man replied as he rose from the table. “It is unique to Nidal.”



At home, Revel pondered the man’s words. He had no doubts he was a Hellknight, and had known his father well, but why the riddle game? Instead of answers he discovered riddles of his own; what did the Hellknight fear? Or who? On the streets within the cities of Cheliah, the Hellknights were respected and feared. In their black fluted armor, resplendent with spikes and horned helm, they

looked more devil than man. As a small child Revel was terrified of his father when he donned his armor. It protected him though, through most his life, and Revel wondered how his father missed the assassin's approach.

He remembered his father saying, "Ignore the sword at a man's side; watch for the dagger concealed in his sleeve."

What dagger had he failed to see?

Revel went to the secret compartment where his father kept his sword, and slid it open. Carefully, he searched until finding a false panel that hid a second compartment. Within was a small journal.

An hour later he closed the book as quiet anger built inside him. He knew now why his father was killed, if not by whom. He also knew his own life was in danger. The journal mentioned a halfling informer who served a cruel master, with a tale to tell and a score to settle. Was it the same slip who retrieved the shadow stone from his father's dead hand? The final entry in the journal concerned his father's intent to report the plot he'd uncovered. To whom it would not say, but Revel recalled the words of Protectorate Narvelius, "You are blunt, like your father." He took the shadow stone from his pouch and stared at it like a crystal ball, probing for answers.



Morning found Revel in the Temple of Iomedae cloistered with the high priestess.

"Nidal? Why do you ask of Nidal, Revel?" the old lady exclaimed. Despite her age, she still moved with the grace and surety of a warrior, as befit a priestess of Iomedae, a goddess who was once a mortal warrior and herald of Aroden. Her forearms beneath her white gown were thick and muscular, and the sword at her hip was not for show. She always reminded Revel of his mother.

"Varindia, I know Cheliox defeated Nidal in the Everwar over three centuries ago, but the Umbral Court helped put House Thrune on the throne of Cheliox when Aroden died. I can see across the sea to the other shore, but what lies beneath the waves?"

"Sea? There is no sea between Nidal and Cheliox, only the Menador Mou..." the woman let loose a hint of laughter. "Ah, you are using a metaphor. Your mother was like that. *The raven goes where the crows don't know*. I never understood that one, though she often called you her little raven."

"Varindia?"

"What? Oh, yes, what lies hidden between Nidal and Cheliox?" The smile left her face. "Hatred, Revel. A hatred flamed by the fires of Hell. Cheliox never forgets an old foe, never forgives a pact breaker. Do you think Nidal any different? Both may worship the Lord of Hell—but the same lord? Certainly, Asmodeus is worshipped in Nidal on the surface, but beneath the waves? Beneath is the Midnight Lord, Zon-Kuthon, ever whispering in the ear of the Umbral Court, reminding them of their defeat, reminding them that sometimes the slave becomes the master."

"They wish to renew war with Cheliox?"

The priestess laughed. “War? Oh no, they don’t want war. They’ve tried that road and found it bruising on the feet. What then? Abrogail II sits confident on the throne, but it is a throne her great-grandmother and namesake died upon at the hands of her son, Antoninus. In fact, no Thrune ruler has died peacefully in bed since the House took control of Cheliix. And still they fight for the Thrice-Damned Throne. The lesser houses skulk at their heels like jackals, but the hellhound fears them not. And therein lays their weakness, for the only thing that unites House Thrune is self-defense and the only thing they fear is each other. Should an outside faction incite a civil war *within* House Thrune, with their penchant for murdering each other, it is possible that another house could gain control.”

“How would that benefit Nidal?” Revel asked.

“If that house were bound to Asmodeus, not much, but if it were secretly bound to Zon-Kuthon and aligned with Nidal, the Church of Asmodeus might find itself cast down along with the Thrune dynasty. And a weaker house might become a servant of Nidal rather than master.”

“If someone discovered such a plot perpetrated by one of the lesser houses, they would not want him to live to tell the tale,” Revel said.

“Naturally not.” Varindia looked hard at the young man. “Are we talking about your father?”

Revel handed her the shadow stone. “Of what use would this be in such a plot?”

The priestess rolled the smooth stone between her strong old fingers. “These stones are found only in Nidal, and rarely. They would make an excellent token, a passage to a place or meeting. Where did you get it?”

“It was in my father’s hand when he died.”

Varindia nodded. “It is also rare enough to serve as a divination focus, Revel. If it was used to locate your father, it would likewise serve to betray you.”

“So I think as well.” He dropped the stone in his belt pouch.

The old priestess ran her hard fingers gently down the young man’s face. “I had hoped, once, to see you follow your mother in the service of Iomedae.”

“I wear my mother’s holy symbol in her honor. My father had his beliefs as well. But I follow my own path with open eyes. I sign no unread contracts, as the saying goes.”



Revel set aside his quill and reread his note:

I found my father’s journal. It details a plot against House Thrune and the lesser house behind it. I have no doubt this led to his murder. I also found a strange gemstone. I believe I may be watched so I dare not come to you, but I will meet you in the alley where my father was slain, an hour before midnight.

Revel Hasting

Revel sighed at the events the letter would set in motion. He was lying about

the knowledge he was hinting at, but he hoped it might draw his father's assassin out, at a time and place of his choosing. It was a dangerous game, but in Cheliah, games of high stakes were the only ones worth playing.

He found a halfling message runner a few blocks from his home and gave him the sealed message and a handful of silver. It was evident the messenger wasn't pleased with the destination, but he took message and coins in haste.

As he watched the small fellow hustle out of sight, he felt another puzzle piece drop into place. The assassin hadn't taken his father's coins—it had been the slip who gave the shadow stone to the Order of the God Claw. He felt no resentment towards the halfling; the message of a fallen Hellknight and a Nidal gem certainly justified whatever the sum in coin he pilfered.



In the alley where his father died, Revel put his back to the wall and waited. There was a shimmer in the air, a flickering rift in reality, and the brief smell of sulfur as a horrid creature materialized before him. It was tall as a man but thinner, with rope-like muscles working beneath a red, leathery hide, slick with acidic secretion. There was a single horn at the rear of its head and three-inch serrated claws on the ends of long, bony fingers. A thick tongue, rough as sandstone, flicked across sharp yellow teeth and a barbed tail swished in annoyance. Lacking surprise, it hesitated.

"Why do you hold back, spawn of the Abyss? Expected to be behind me?" Revel taunted as he slowly waved his sword before him. "Or have you seen this sword before? *Silver makes a devil cry, cold iron a demon weep...* a nursery rhyme, but bound in truth. The cold iron blade burns you, does it not? Like this!"

Revel leapt, thrusting swiftly. The demon was faster; it twisted aside and the blade missed. Then it vanished. Revel backed against the wall and waited. Aware of its ability to shift between the mortal world and the Abyss, he also knew it was bound to fulfill the command of the abyssal summoner that brought it into this world or perish in the attempt.

Thirty seconds later it appeared again, five feet from where it had been. Revel lunged and missed, but followed with a backhand slash. The blade struck the demon in the side, cutting deep. The thing screamed out in pain even as it disappeared once more. Revel again put his back to the wall and kicked away from it.

He then swung in a complete circle with all his strength, slicing the very air around him as he had once done on a moonlit night with his father watching. The assassin reappeared just as the blade rounded full swing, hitting solid into its leathery hide, causing the fiend to double over. Before it could shift away, Revel withdrew the sword, spun around, and came down upon its bowed neck with all his might, driving the blow. The demon's head leapt from its shoulders in a shower of black blood as the body fell thrashing to the paving stones. Even as its movements slowed, smoke rose from its carcass, giving off an acidic odor. Revel moved away from the stench as it dissolved, leaving a dark stain on the stones that would remain for years to come.



"The boy is dead by now," the noble said calmly as he held the glass of red wine up to the candle light and admired the color. The halfling who had filled the crystal stepped back into the shadows like a fading tapestry. "Stop worrying and enjoy your wine. It's a rare vintage, bottled before the accursed House Thrune usurped the throne. I shall be king and you shall have Abrogail for a play thing in your 'confession' chamber."

"You celebrate too easily, Lord Arinior," Protectorate Narvelius said sourly, looking again at the note from Revel Hasting, wondering how much the man had known. "Demons are unreliable. And the punishment for their summoning is swift and terrible."

"They are reliable enough when you have their name in a book of binding. Besides, I'd rather name-bind demons any day than sign contracts with devils. Calm yourself before the others arrive. We will be ruling Cheliix before long." Arinior drained his wine glass, took a silver bell from the table by his chair and rang for the halfling servant. A moment passed and no one responded. Lord Arinior snarled, "Where are you, you little imp? I'll have you beaten toothless for letting me wait with an empty glass."

"Perhaps the absence of drink will help you keep *your* senses before our guests. Nevermind my fears," Narvelius sighed.

"The least of your worries," a voice spoke from the landing. Both men spun about as Revel entered the chamber through the velvet curtain.

Lord Arinior leapt to his feet, ringing the silver bell frantically. "Guards! Guards! Your master is in peril!"

Revel laughed. "You may ring and shout till Aroden returns and be disappointed. The Hellknights have your estate surrounded and your servants confined. At this moment they collect your fellow conspirators as they arrive."

Narvelius' pale face went ashen. "How could you have found us so quickly?"

"The raven goes where the crows don't know," Revel said. He smiled faintly at the man's perplexed expression, then tossed the shadow stone onto the table. "Or more simply, a road that leads north will also lead south. The Temple of Iomedae easily located the demon's master through the stone. Had you used something mundane, say a common coin, for a pass token... but you didn't."

"And now? You believe the arrest of a Protectorate and the head of House Arinior will stand?" Lord Arinior slowly put distance between himself and Revel; neither had drawn sword.

Narvelius stood aside. He was no fighter and his bureaucratic specialty of coaxing confessions was useless here. Arinior, on the other hand, was an accomplished duelist.

"If arrests were the opera of the evening, it would be the Order of the Scar that were the players outside, rather than the God Claw," Revel replied.

"By what Right of Law do you act?" Narvelius demanded. "You are no Hellknight, and for Hell's sake, no Inquisitor. You have no authority!"

"And in that declaration you are wrong, Protectorate. 'My Right' is laid out in

the *Asmodean Disciplines*, as the son of a murdered victim. As to authority..." Revel pushed up the left sleeve of his shirt and bared the underside of his forearm. A five-pointed star was seared into Revel's flesh. "I was burned trying to save my mother, burned by an iron symbol of Asmodeus that someone nailed to the beam that fell upon her. I questioned everything that day, the day my mother died. I even asked Asmodeus if it had been his desire to tear down those homes and burn those temples of the faithful. He answered! You never bothered to ask for 'his will' did you? Your *Prospects* were paved in blood and you profited from it. He spoke to me, in my grief, of the need to punish those who place riches and ambition over faith."

Lord Arinior laughed. "You deem yourself chosen by Asmodeus, to teach those who stray from lessons of faith and law? You may find us difficult students, requiring more than one tutoring." He drew his sword.

Revel drew his as well. "Some lessons need only be taught once."

The men came at each other with no preamble, no show of dueling etiquette. Lord Arinior meant to take the young man at the first pass, using a complex move no ordinary swordsman would expect. To his surprise, Revel deftly countered, turning aside his blade and following with a thrust that ripped the rich fabric of his shirt.

"My father was a skilled swordsman and a gifted instructor. Your demon would have lost to him in an honorable fight, as it did to me."

Arinior made no reply other than another thrust intended to strike his opponent's right shoulder. It was parried and Revel feinted a mid-section line attack before he struck lower, taking the noble in the thigh. Arinior cried out and sank to one knee, grasping his wound. The blood welled up between his trembling fingers.

"Quarter!" he cried, lowering his sword.

"Judgment!" Revel returned as he drove his blade through the man's heart.

Narvelius had reached the door during the brief combat and snatched it open, only to find Revel had made good on his words. A Hellknight in spiked armor struck with a heavy gauntlet, smacking the Protectorate to the floor.

"I think he will find the chambers below the House of Inquisition less to his liking than in the past," the knight said behind his devilish helm.

Though muffled, Revel recognized the voice and smiled grimly, saying, "The law cannot persuade where it cannot punish."

Demons on the Inner

SEA

By Andrew B. Chaban



T'S RAINING, and dirty gray drops scatter down into Sorrowgate's narrow alleys. I press my shoulders against a wall, feeling the wet working through my boiled leather. I wish the weather was worse, a torrent that would wash Thrune's crimson away from this accursed city.

I strain to hear the sound of footsteps through the shower; I'm not entirely comfortable with what I'm planning. According to the laws, I'm about to *forestall*, a term wide enough to cover offenses from highway robbery on up. What I have in mind though, by any fair measure, is more an act of vengeance.

All this way to ambush, for assault and murder, a voice hisses in my mind.

The chorus in my head decides to weigh in, as they often do when I'm under pressure. This time they send Skulk as their representative. Her teeth and cheekbones gleam under her high scorpion head, while long, sharp fingers count sadistic pleasures. As a poet, I find it difficult to convey the demonic glee in her words and the tempestuous chord it awakens in me.

Memories of the unavoidable walk through Whipcrack Quarter stir, demanding a response for the suffering of one of my people. Elves do not take well to slavery; most of us wilt and wither, even without the lash, as drudgery drives spirit from flesh long before its season. I saw one of my brethren today, broken and petitioning

Pharasma either for rebirth or for admission to the salon of Our Lady in the Room. The bastards beat him down to his last breath; too tired, too far gone to scream. I didn't dare do anything with the rabble watching, and only narrowly managed to escape slavery myself.

I shake that ghost of the past from my mind and close my eyes, shutting out everything but the sound I'm listening for, and the memory of the stripes lashed into my own flesh. For weeks I have lived hand-to-mouth, flinching from every guard, diving for cover from every black-robed, steel-faced devil licker. The only houses that would take me in here are full of leering men or the drawn faces of women made gaunt by a terrible hunger.

I shall not suffer it again. I have a name, now.

Tonight, someone pays for everything they've done. Tonight, I don't need the chorus inside my head to make me go mad.

Tonight, I put Egorian behind me.

Finally, through the rain, I hear the tell-tale slouching gait of Merrintian, the flesh-merchant. *The murderer.* He's coming home alone, not wanting to be recognized.

From the noise, I guess his footsteps are twenty long paces away.

Revenge is sweeter than spiced red wine, I think giddily, as I contemplate what this no-account slaver—a suitable proxy for all Cheliax—deserves. Blood surely calls for blood, and there will be enough in this alley soon. I savor bitter irony as I consider that, by avenging my cousin, I will be disavowed as a wretched tiefling for my wild, savage bloodlust.

Seconds trickle by like the windblown rain down my neck, dripping through my pulled-back hair. Down the alleyway, a muffled oath answers to a tipsy, stumbling clatter.

Just a few steps more.

Raising the scabbard high so it doesn't strike against the wall, I slide my rapier smoothly from its embrace. The sound is gratifyingly soft, like the rasp of a lover's lips on skin. I brush a stray lock from my eyes with the guard, and the hair's dark flicker confirms that my face-changing enchantment still holds.

No one will call me "Beautiful," or "Nice Legs," or even "Red" tonight.

My eyes open wide as I catch my victim's wine-burdened breath. I whisper a phrase and the blade's base reverberates with power that runs down like a single note bowed fiercely on a fiddle. My toes curl, anticipating the battle-dance.

I swing into the street, riding high on the first chords of the skirmish. If the chorus wants to join the commotion in my head, let them! Time to strike; for elves, for tieflings, for tiefling elves, *for anything!*

Merrintian's reflexes are good; he's already got a hold of his accursed whip by the time my arcing path sets me before him. But before he recovers fully from my unexpected appearance, I thrust my sword's point over his arm and halfway through his chest until a rib gets in the way. He obliges me with a sputtering, pierced-lung scream as I twist clear, but my luck's spoiled; I've missed his heart. My "formal introduction" is over and the wretch before me is too deep in his cups for the viciousness of the wound to register. Instead, bleary-eyed, he swipes at me with his lash. I get my off-arm up in time, but the blow shreds my bracer.

This night's work will be tricky, after all.

My armor and my grandmothers' heritage spare me the worst, but stinging blood falls from where the leather wraps around my arm. Wincing, I discover the razors braided through the coil. I manage to cut through the pain and jerk the bladed lash from my opponent's weakened grasp. A measure of clarity finally breaks across Merrintian's features as he bleeds, breathless, realizing he's outclassed. I drop my rapier and give him time to stagger back while I flip his weapon into my hand and try it, snapping out a crack that fades into the alley as quickly as the raindrops pooling on the ground.

Interestingly, learning to avoid a whip gives one a sense of how they work.

"Fe fyddi'n marw, ai cas gelyn fy." I let him know he won't walk away from this duel, assuming he understands the tongue of those he's abused.

He lurches away from me as fast as the effects of vice and violence let him. At ten feet, I let loose his scourge again, dropping him to his knees with a deep gash across his face. Retching, he curls into a twitching mass on the cobbles.

I could get used to this.

But before I begin again, I decide to make things clear to the filth.

"You know, Merrintian, I've often wondered why tyrants like you think they can force obedience with toys like these. Wherever did you get that idea? If someone bows beneath the whip, is it because *you're* holding the other end? I don't think so. You see, it's what's behind the whip that counts. And if that motive is your unspeakable, vile *hunger* to enslave others, then people will fight you in any way they can. If there is good in that, then scum like you won't always be able to trample on them."

Agony chokes his answering curse, and as blood-tinged rain starts to pool about his body, I commend his spirit to whatever hellish power his degraded soul might implore. I have no patience for his last-breath profanities.

Just as I prepare to strike a final, finishing flourish, the chorus makes its belated appearance in force. Skulk is back, along with bird Soary, the cagey Sneak, and even Sippy, the best and cleverest of all my childhood friends. Their encouraging voices break into my head like the rain falling on the roofs above, demon hisses cutting through the heavens' lashing barbs. I can almost see their various claws and grins, their burning eyes, and all the blood they crave. They call to me now and part of me longs to answer. Merrintian moans at my feet, and that settles it.

I turn my back on him.

There has been enough red in this street after all. I can almost pity him as a man, after defeating him in his guise of monster. My blow to his face hit him like a thunderbolt, and if he doesn't taste death from the other wound I gave him, he'll never see his reflection the same. This is his warning and, if fate should spare him, perhaps he'll have the sense to heed it. I don't expect a sudden change of heart, but bitter seeds can sometimes bear sweet fruit.

As for me, I have acquired a new sting. I coil the slaver's lash and hang it on my hip, then turn my steps away, resolved to go south, to the sea.

I lift my face into the rain that somehow now feels clean. The falling drops hiss and clatter, but underneath, the beating of wings and scraping of angry claws echo on far-distant ground. The chorus seethes, but one by one they finally fade away as they always do.

Maybe this next day I'll have peace.

WHITE SHADOWS

By Ernesto Ramirez

M

IDNIGHT was almost upon them. In the silence of the night the sound of the clock's gears resounded like the heart of a monstrous god towering above them.

The chapel would have been pitch black if not for the red glow coming from the pillar-embedded torches where absolute darkness stretched beyond their light. At an altar stood a bishop and his acolyte, neither of which could see the others out in the congregation. All waited for the midnight bells that would begin the ceremony.

She was wearing a black-and-red dress, leaving too little for the imagination. He was wearing a dark tunic embroidered with the sigils of Hell.

Her hair was raven black with skin the perfect color of ivory, drawing all eyes to her elegant form. His hair was that of salt and pepper and his build was strong and maintained. Both their eyes were gray as iron, hers warmer, his colder. Only by looking into them could one see the heritage shared by their blood and notice the fatherly pride beaming at the girl.

Between them the altar had the form of a star, and upon it was a drugged naked girl, barely older than the acolyte herself. She had been a Taldan slave brought to the temple with promises of ascension years ago, and the girls became close as

they grew up. But the promises to the acolyte were lies to the other, just so this day one would become a sacrifice to Asmodeus, and the other a true cleric of her dark god's priesthood.

Just a few hours ago they had been celebrating the acolyte's nearing ascension. They talked about the other girl's hope for her own rise one day, but the acolyte evaded details of the upcoming ceremony. Their supper had been a lascivious one, as had been the wine. The doomed girl's glass was heavily drugged; the acolyte's was soured by the deed. The essence had been potent, confusing the girl and muddling her senses. She had barely registered when her friend had guided her from the acolyte's chambers into the darkness of the chapel. The place was hot, but the drug in the girl's veins made the heat unbearable. The acolyte suggested she take off her dress and undergarments and her words made perfect sense in the moment, and she did as instructed. Her supple white silhouette was bathed in the red light of the torches, as was her sweat-covered body.

The acolyte guided the Taldan girl to the altar. "Come, rest here."

Her friend smiled as the acolyte helped her up to lay on the black cool stone. The acolyte spread her out and set to tying her wrists and ankles to compliment the engraved star beneath her.

"Would you do anything for me?" The acolyte's cheery words belied the sweet poison they hid.

"Yes," answered the girl with a nod as she was being tied, and the acolyte rewarded her friend, caressing her long blond hair and kissing her forehead.

"Why am I tied?" she asked, feeling a little bit nervous for the first time as her mind failed to understand the situation.

"Shhh. I need a favor. Will you let Asmodeus take you, so I can ascend?" The words were a mere whisper, but spoken through trembling lips plagued with uncertainty.

The blond girl didn't understand, but wanted to comfort her distressed friend. She had no reason to deny her anything, so she answered joyfully.

"Yes, sure. Anything for you." The girl knew not what she said, but by those simple words she had damned herself and filled the acolyte with terrible turmoil.

The ritual continued and the acolyte's father appeared from beyond the shadows. While she bathed the victim's torso with seven unholy oils, her father looked proudly at her work. She had properly arranged the sacrifice in the form of the star, *Asmodeus' star*. She was also well bound and completely coated in the oils, but the girl remained blissfully unaware of her fate.

Around them, hidden by the darkness, dozens of mortal eyes followed the acolyte's every movement, as dozens of unbound spirits moved among them, watching as the virgin sacrifice lay bare before them. The acolyte had to ignore the buzz of sounds and the blur of movement as she maintained her concentration while performing the rites. She moved deliberately with precision, following every step as she had rehearsed. Her friend shifted on the altar, and her hazy eyes looked up with some concern. The drug was slowly losing its edge, and all the movement and noise around her had begun to get her attention.

Unseen hands of hellish specters, both monstrous and lustful, explored her bare skin, filling the girl with dread. Where the acolyte's hands were warm and soft,

the others were cold and rough, touching her as intimately as lovers. She looked desperately for her assailants—but there was nothing to see. In answer to her plight, whispered voices and throaty laughter mocked her.

“What’s going on?” she asked, beginning to feel scared. Her friend hovered above, smiling in reassurance to put her at ease, but with each passing moment her doubts grew as her confidence waned.

All preparations were set.

The time was right.

Daughter and father moved as one before the girl, who finally realized that her mentor was looking down at her bare body, which made her blush violently. But he was not looking at her with lust or desire; he was detached, a surgeon making sure the process was nothing but perfect. With his final assessment complete, he smiled proudly at his daughter and produced a dagger.

It was a hideous blade, bone and iron carved into the shape of a leaf, the edges still caked with the blood of the hundreds it had feasted on. Light receded from it, shunning its mere presence.

The bound girl screamed as the bishop offered the grim instrument to his daughter.

The bells began to chime. It was a chime so deep and penetrating that both sacrifice and acolyte could feel it in their bones. Asmodeus had come, and a gloom overshadowed the unholy chapel.

The Taldan girl cried silently, trying to free herself, but her efforts only bruised her skin as her bonds tightened more and more with each struggle. She had dutifully served the bishop, she had loved his daughter and trained hard to become one of them...but it all had been a lie so that she could become *this*.

The acolyte held the bloody knife over her friend’s naked torso, changing her grip with each new stroke of the bell. She had rehearsed for this moment—she was ready for it. She knew how and where to pierce the heart, and she knew what would come after. Biting her lip in hesitation, a grim expression crossed her face as childhood memories filled her mind, interfering with the task. She had expected her friend to plead for her life, but she cried silently. The Taldan girl had been her longest friend, her only friend, and after all that, she was about to repay her with eternal damnation.

The dagger waivered and tilted with uncertainty and she paused with a sigh.

Her eager father moved closer, waiting anxiously for it to finish. The strokes continued, and soon his pride turned to impatience. With only a few chimes left to strike, shame washed over him like a river turning into a tide of rage. Just before the last chime resounded, he swept behind his daughter and took a firm grip of her hand, sending the blade deep into the girl’s chest, over and over. A scream of pain and surprise overwhelmed the acolyte’s ears as her hand was crushed between the blade’s hilt and her father’s grip. She nearly lost her balance and fell as her arm was almost wrenched from its socket. Her father twisted and turned the blade inside the gasping girl as blood shot out of her mouth.

She tried to cry out but a gurgled scream made the acolyte close her eyes.

With blood-soaked hands, the acolyte’s father stood back, looking for a change in the chapel.

ERNESTO RAMIREZ

The sacrifice hadn't been perfect...but it was within the appointed time.

The torches flared deeply, their color suddenly turning green. The smell of brimstone filled the place. The bishop let go of her hand, but she still held the blade as her friend's life ebbed away before her.

Their eyes met one last time.

There was no hate in them.

Only a profound sadness for the betrayal, and something else the acolyte couldn't identify.

With her dying breath the girl silently exhaled a single phrase, but the acolyte read it on her friend's trembling lips.

She was speechless as she understood the words.

I forgive you.

The acolyte's shock turned to horror as she saw her friend's body stop moving and her eyes expressing sheer terror. She knew that her friend's soul had been ripped away and dragged to Hell.

"What's wrong with you?" the bishop snarled as he grabbed his daughter by the hair and dragged her from the chapel, leaving the lesser priests to dispose of the corpse. She was in shock, and it showed on her face. Anger got the best of him and he slapped her hard, leaving a red print on her cheek as she flew to the floor.

"You will do it better next time, or so help me I will sacrifice you myself, you hear me?" he whispered angrily at her, but she only scowled back at him, tears forming in her eyes.

"No," she cried, "I won't!"

"What?" The bishop's eye narrowed in astonishment; his daughter had never opposed his will before, and if anyone found out, it would mean death.

"You will do what I say!"

"Never! I'd rather die!"

The bishop understood his daughter was being hasty. By this sacrifice, she had sealed her fate to Asmodeus. Her life and soul now belonged to him. It would take time before she would understand that, but her insolence would lead to the downfall of them both. He considered his options.

She needed a lesson in humility. She needed to *want* what she had unrightfully earned.

"So be it, but you won't die. Everything you own, everything you have will be stripped from you. Until you serve Him, you will have *nothing*. When this is through, you will come back and beg for him to take you." The bishop called one of his priests, a tall, dark-haired man with purple eyes. Neither looked at her as he gave the order.

"She is no longer mine, take her away. Take her symbol, her jewels, her clothes—everything—and sell her to the slave market, naked as the day she was born. Do it now!" The priest bowed and went away to gather the necessary equipment to restrain her. The acolyte didn't even look up at him; she just sat, still and silent.

The sound of thunder rolled across the sky. Rain began to pour down, and the bishop shook his head. "I never want to see you again unless you have the courage and the conviction to stand before me. *For in this world where the strong rule, the*

weak can only serve or die. You understand me?"

The priest returned with chains and shackles. Without remorse, he ripped her clothes away and stripped her of her possessions and unholy symbol. The shock of killing her friend still lingered in her mind, but more than the deed were her last words and that look in her eyes. It was pity. In that moment when her life snuffed out, she pitied her friend, and the acolyte knew why.

The realization sank her below the cobblestones with guilt. She showed no resistance as the man chained her ankles and wrists, and only after a heavy iron collar was put around her neck did she look up at her father. She was prouder naked and in chains than she had ever been in the finest garbs adorned with Asmodeus' sigil. The priest then attached a leash to the collar and pulled her away.

Showing no emotion, he looked down at her, half hoping she would plead for herself, beg for forgiveness, but it was only the priest who spoke.

"What price should I ask for, my Lord?"

"Doesn't matter; take whatever they offer and give it to the temple."

The priest tugged on the leash and she followed.

The bishop watched her go.

His daughter shivered in the rain as they walked away. He wished for her to turn back, but she didn't. The bishop shrugged and his heart broke silently. He'd thrown her to the wolves and Asmodeus had harsh lessons in store for her.

If it is His will, she'll come back, ready to serve and tempered like new steel.



Captain Karessa checked the guard routes one more time. She had doubled the number of patrols and posts around the temple since Bishop Hedrin's arrival; still, she was not sure it was enough. His sudden presence was a double-edged sword. This was either her opportunity to impress the upper echelons of Asmodeus' church or fall from their graces.

Bishop Maxfel Hedrin, Inquisitor of Asmodeus, was one of the Church's favored agents, renowned for his conviction and zeal in the hunt for Cheliax's heretics. The Church provided the man its full support, and that made him both powerful and dangerous. It had earned him many enemies, too. And to keep his rivals in check, it wasn't unheard of that the inquisitor made surprise audits to both temple and regional authorities, which included her. But unlike his usual terrorizing, this visit coincided with a disturbing event.

Two days before the bishop's arrival, some of Karessa's men had overheard a woman asking questions about the temple and its residents. Her soldiers reported the incident, but her sergeant failed to bring the issue to her attention. When Karessa found out, she sent her men to apprehend the woman, but she was nowhere to be found.

The timing was too close to the bishop's arrival to be mere coincidence.

She chastised the men, but she herself shouldered the responsibility of their negligence. Temple security was her domain, especially during such circumstances.

Karessa had met the Inquisitor when he arrived. He rode in on a black stallion and was accompanied by two heavily armed Hellknights. Even as he entered

through the private entrance, his arrival produced the effect of shock that he surely intended. She could feel the fear and expectation in the air as the man dismounted his horse, saying nothing. He handed his reigns to his guards and went to the chapel to meet the archbishop.

Maxfel Hedrin was a tall and broad-shouldered man, with long raven-black hair and eyes the color of amethyst, a sign of true Azlanti blood. He was beautiful to behold, and Karessa was immediately impressed by the man's persona and zeal. Every movement was calculated as he strived to suppress his true potential. She could feel his soul burning with purpose; he was the calm that brought the storm. The moment their eyes met, Karessa swore to keep the man safe at all costs.

That had been two days ago, and the Inquisitor still conducted his hunt. Nothing alarming had happened and Karessa worried that the men had grown lax. She walked among her sentries, making sure they were still alert. None had disappointed her so far, and all that was left was to check one last post before returning to the chapel. As Karessa approached, she saw her guard standing, looking toward the city; the other sat, staring at the floor. Both failed to notice.

Usually, Karessa was nothing but fair to her men. Punishments were only given after great failures. Still, she liked to run a tight ship, and with the bishop under her protection, even the slightest oversight became a serious mistake. Their failing to acknowledge her presence was a disrespect, not to mention a breach to the whole temple's security.

She approached the men, ready to berate their negligence as her hand went for her riding crop. But even in her anger she noticed something was amiss. She stopped and observed carefully before stepping closer. The man standing had his neck twisted oddly, while the one sitting had a wet patch at his waist with blood pooling on the floor.

Karessa stepped closer, ready to raise the alarm with a whistle. She touched the standing soldier's arm and he lost his balance and collapsed. Only then did she see the shimmering bright blue rune hidden behind the body.

Eyes wide in horror, the Chelaxian captain raced away, trying to outrun what was to come. The mystic writing flashed ever faster, and a moment later exploded, tossing Karessa into the air. The blast hit her on the back, slamming the woman against the corridor wall. She tried to stay conscious, remembering her faith and duty—but the pain was too much. Darkness embraced her quickly as she cursed herself and the enemy who had bested her.



The tall, broad-shouldered man opened the chapel doors and strode through with his bodyguards. He walked down the aisle with an air of purpose, illuminated by two rows of hellish torches. The dark red light made lesser men advance with anxiety, even fear. That was the way Archbishop Fortuna liked it, but Bishop Maxfel Hedrin didn't pay it any attention. His mind was on the business at hand.

The inquisitor was unhappy.

His intelligence had never been inaccurate, but this time it was. The reports had called for immediate and harsh action to punish the heresy crimes committed

against Asmodeus, so he had made his way to Egorian and this temple to search out the truth.

But his information was wrong.

Everything was in order.

Of course he would find someone to take the fall. Someone who would, after a couple days of torture, confess the most heinous sins and treacheries against the faith. Maybe that pretty captain would be his scapegoat. The men she commanded had enough envy and resentment towards her, so surely he would find one willing to betray and testify against her. However, he also noticed how she looked at him and realized she might make a better asset...for the future.

Whichever he decided, it was the least of his worries.

His time had run out, and unless he could find something in the next few hours, he would have to go home without the prize he sought: Archbishop Fortuna's head.

His informants had discovered that Archbishop Fortuna had been consorting with a priestess of an enemy faith. But once in the temple, neither his investigations—nor his communion with his unholy masters—had revealed a single link.

If the man had held a lesser place in the Hierarchy of Hell, Hedrin would have already arrested him. Under torture, Fortuna would eventually reveal the name and location of his lover, even if she didn't exist, but he was an archbishop, and without proof, a false accusation would mean Hedrin's own head.

He stopped suddenly, turning instinctively toward the east.

An explosion?

"Sir Gallard, check what that was," Hedrin said without turning, but the only response he got was the sound of metal clashing against stone.

Hedrin turned to see his Hellknights crumbling to the floor. Long daggers had pierced the men's necks, and their life blood poured over the black stone floor. Gallard's helmet rolled toward Hedrin's feet, revealing his face. The Hellknight lay in the floor with open eyes, unaware of his own death.

Between both men, a white-dressed silhouette stood, coalescing into the fine form of a woman. She was wearing a tight, short dress tinted red in the light of the torches. Her strong arms and toned legs were free for ease of movement, but wrapped almost entirely in bandages, much like the arena fighters of Cheliox's gladiator pits. Her head was covered with a hood, shadowing the top half of her face. But it did nothing to hide the gleam of the metallic collar around her neck, identical to the shining gold chain around her waist, both symbols of her Order.

The bishop's eyes moved along her body, stopping on the collar. Hedrin licked his lips and smiled.

"So, you do exist. I thought you were...but a myth." Hedrin cautiously moved to the woman as she remained eerily still.

She had more daggers sheathed in a belt around her waist, and a fearsome rune-covered longsword ominously hung from her back. A sword which was the symbol of Hedrin's most hated faith.

Quickly she moved to draw it, but the bishop charged before she finished, hitting her squarely in the chest with his shoulder and shoving her to the floor.

He hoped he'd knocked the wind out of her, and moved to press his advantage

by pinning her to the ground, but she simply pulled her legs upward and rolled into a somersault to land with one foot and knee firmly poised, her sword drawn in one hand and her unwrapped chain-whip in the other. He saw her gray eyes, and they deeply set into his.

The inquisitor bit his lip and his eyes narrowed—*he knew those eyes*.

“By Asmodeus’ barbs, you’re a lively one. Well, not for long.” Hedrin extended both hands forward, forming a triangle with his fingers. He had intended to capture her, but he wasn’t up for any unnecessary risks. If she wouldn’t submit, he would kill her and question her soul at his leisure.

He began to chant, and a deep, cavernous voice filled the chapel. Hedrin’s eyes burned with hellish fire and the smell of brimstone permeated the air as flames, the color of blood and death, erupted from his hands toward his foe.

The bishop smiled as the fires engulfed the corridor, and when they subsided, he looked for his assassin’s corpse.

There was no trace.

No sign of her charred remains, no smell of burnt flesh—nothing. He reached for Gallard’s flail, and the black metal vibrated with Asmodeus’ dark blessing, but before he could grasp the unholy weapon, a golden chain curled around his arm, pulling him back.

She was behind him, staying his hand with her chain while poisoning her sword to strike. Her blade lit blue with celestial fire, awakened by Hedrin’s evil presence. He had scorched her right leg, but she was none for the worse.

The inquisitor reacted instinctively, cursing vile obscenities, while he drew upon his infernal powers. With unholy might he pulled the woman’s chain toward him. His left arm ignited in flames and he lashed out for the woman’s heart. Both collided into each other, and a massive black-and-blue wave exploded outward, shattering all of the chapel’s windows and extinguishing every torch.

Silence remained.



“Get up, Miranda,” the assassin whispered to herself.

She had fallen hard to the floor, gasping for air and contorting with pain.

Hedrin’s punch, reinforced with his god’s terrible might, shredded through her wards and divine protections. Her dress was torn and smoldering where the punch had landed, revealing her last defense: fine silver chainmail.

She tried to move, but a piercing pain inside her torso made her cry out in agony. She knew it meant broken ribs and possibly worse, but her strategy had paid off, and that was enough.

The bishop had expected to take her off-guard, but he miscalculated. As he pulled her over, she jumped forward, using the man’s unholy strength for momentum. Her sword sunk into his skull as his fist connected with her chest.

If not for the goddess’ blessings and her holy armor, Miranda would have died instantly. She stood with some difficulty and walked slowly toward the dead bishop. The sword remained in his head, the blue fire still lapping up the blade, illuminating her path to him. He had fallen to his knees, his head bent backwards.

There was no surprise on the dead man's expression, only hate. His dark spirit still watched her. The holy sword's blue flames attested to his lingering soul.

"I promised myself long ago I would kill you and not regret it," Miranda told the dead man. "I don't."

She ripped her sword free from the grasp of Hedrin's skull. Then, with a firm grip, she held the man's bloody and matted hair and pulled his body upright tautly. She slashed with her flaming sword, severing the man's neck. The body collapsed into a pitiful heap, and she stuffed the head into a bag. The flame went out and she sheathed the blade.

Her perfect form faltered as she rested her back against a pillar, gasping with effort. Her hand moved to her chest, and she sang a soft prayer. Warm silver light radiated from her hand as she sang the verses. The light filled her with strength and courage, and she could feel her body strengthening as the pain receded.

"*Thank you, goddess,*" she said before moving. She brushed her fingers against her collar, touching the engraving of a sword. Comforting celestial words wrapped around her body as she was embraced by angelic wings that hid her from danger.

Miranda retraced her steps, leaving the dark and silent chapel.



The temple woke to a frenzied state of alarm. Within minutes of the explosion all patrols converged around the area, finding a grim scene. The sergeants tried to decide a course of action as Karessa remained unconscious, dying at their feet.

Archbishop Fortuna emerged from his quarters to take charge.

He knew no other life than the test of fire, and with a quick glance he seized the situation.

"Secure the temple's perimeter; check the rest of the clergy." He barely raised his voice, yet his tone would have made a devil heed his words. As the men began to obey, the archbishop stopped a sergeant and whispered into his ear, "And you see to our *guest*." Fortuna's contempt was clear in his tone.

"What do we do with our Captain, Your Holiness?" one of the soldiers asked as everyone began dispersing.

"Throw her into a cage and send an acolyte to see to her wounds," Fortuna sneered in disgust. "If she survives I will *question* her myself."

The soldiers expected the archbishop to ask for protection, but instead he returned to his personal office to document the incident for his superiors. He didn't need the protection of mortals when he had the unholy blessing of Asmodeus himself. And besides, they would hardly be more competent than the dead ones lying beside their fallen captain. No, if there was any attacker coming for him, his soldiers would just be cannon fodder to buy time, which Fortuna didn't need. He had already taken precautions. The archbishop hadn't lived this long without being obsessive about his security, but it had served him well, and this paranoia, as it was regarded by those serving him, had kept him alive longer than any security detail or divine might ever could.

A few minutes later the sergeant he had commanded to check on Hedrin entered.

“Your Holiness, permission to speak!” the man saluted, sweat pooling on his brow.

Fortuna wasn’t interested in the subtleties of dutiful etiquette, and just nodded.

“Holiness, we found Inquisitor Hedrin and his men dead within the chapel. The Inquisitor’s head is missing and the chapel is in ruins.”

Fortuna’s eyebrows rose coldly, “And the assassin?”

The guard shook his head. “Nothing yet, Holiness, but we are confident we will find him. He won’t escape us.”

The archbishop eased back in his chair and nodded. “Look for a *she*, sergeant. Do not fail me.”

“Yes, Holiness!” and the sergeant left.

Fortuna sighed and moved toward his window. He didn’t tell the sergeant or any of the others, but he was sure the assassin had already escaped.

Let them worry for their failure.

He regretted not being able to catch this one. *The Sisters of the Sublime Sacrifice* were a serious threat—yet the high echelons within the Hierarchy of Hell discounted them with arrogance. To the Hierarchy, they were nothing more than runaway slaves turned renegade.

Not to Fortuna. Despite his hate for their mother faith, he secretly admired their dedication and skills. He also didn’t miss the irony that while they strived to free their goddess’ homeland, she disavowed them for their extreme tactics. Yes, he was rather fond of them.

What would it take to make one of my slaves into such an assassin? Maybe the new girl, Fortuna thought, toying with the idea.

The archbishop let out a satisfying exhale. *Inquisitor Hedrin is dead.* With his old apprentice and rival removed, the balance of power shifted in Fortuna’s favor. Yes, they would blame him, but he knew how to use this momentum to his benefit.

Now was the time—his time—to call for a crusade to root out this secret order. His political and religious adversaries would tremble as he brought swift vengeance to Asmodeus’ enemies, and in return, He, *Hell’s King*, would gift him with such honor and power that no one would be able to oppose him. This was the beginning of a new era, an era of terror: Fortuna’s Era.



Close to dawn, one of the sergeants assured the archbishop the temple was secure. Fortuna left his office and returned to his personal chambers, where his slave girl waited, terrified and chained to his bed. He had just acquired her, and with all the excitement, he hadn’t had the opportunity to taste her.

Distracted enough by dreams of glory and power, he relished his nightly promise of savoring a new and beautiful slave. As he closed the door, he was unaware of the white-dressed figure hiding behind it.

Miranda waited patiently, her hand on the hilt of her sword, ready for the kill. She had planned this for a long time and there would be no mistakes, no rushing this moment.

Her Order, as followers of Iomedae, prized valorous and honest combat, but

being assassins made them outcasts of Iomedae's true church. Miranda understood, though, that sometimes one needed to fight fire with fire, and that dishonor could achieve even greater good. The souls she had taken weighed heavily upon her, but none more than the first. She was tainted like no other in the Order, and Hell's fiery embrace waited for her still.

One more dark soul wouldn't matter, not even his.

With Hedrin's death, the hunt against innocents was curtailed, but Fortuna had always been Miranda's personal goal. The man was more dangerous than any other of his ilk, and it was only a matter of time before he eliminated his rivals and rallied the others to his side. He had learned too much about the Order, and she knew what this man would do if he rose any higher to power.

The high priestess wouldn't be pleased; she had advised all the sisters against confronting the man, deeming him too powerful, too influential.

But soon the man would begin hunting the Order itself like a rabid hound out for blood. Hedrin's death provided a unique opportunity; the man's defenses would be lowered because not even he would expect a second attack so soon.

Yes, it had to be now.

Miranda bit her lip in a moment's hesitation...and breathed deeply, stepping forward as her blade engulfed in blue fire, her muscles tensing as she closed for the kill. But as she neared, her body began to tremble...with pain.

Come on!

She was sure she'd disrupted every protective enchantment the archbishop had blessed upon the room. He was not wearing his armor, nor did she feel his dark god's unholy presence. And yet, her muscles burned with searing pain.

"Stupid girl, you thought I would be like Hedrin, the fool."

She bit her lip until it bled, anything to keep herself from crying out. He turned to face her; his deep gray eyes measuring her up like a serpent preparing to devour its prey. Then, he stopped. Miranda wasn't sure what she saw in his eyes. Was it surprise, joy, anger or a mixture of all?

He caressed her as she tried to resist his touch, her muscles burning almost to the point of passing out. She sweated and trembled in desperation, and still she glared daggers at her tormentor. The man only smiled at her plight.

"The harder you resist, the more it will hurt, my dear. Surrender and the pain will go."

Miranda would have none of it; she hadn't reached so far to give up here. Not to him. Not to Asmodeus. Her anguish increased tenfold and Fortuna just shook his head.

"You know, Miranda, I had lost hope of ever seeing you again. You are a sight." Fortuna walked around her, his hand inspecting her body before looking at her face. In defiance she looked into the deep pools that were his eyes, never flinching. He stared at her, smiling proudly. "You have reached far. I never expected you to become this. So you threw away everything you were because you couldn't make a sacrifice, but now you have come back intending to sacrifice your father to some petty goddess?"

For a moment, Miranda's pain receded. She wasn't sure if she felt joy or disgust at Fortuna's pride. She knew that without him she wouldn't be standing

there. He'd given her life, recognition and education. She had reciprocated by failing him at Asmodeus' altar. But he never told her the cost of their faith; she hadn't understood until she saw the pity in her friend's dying eyes. *Her friend* understood that real cost.

Her eyes had become cold and dead, not unlike his.

"You have changed. We will fix that, but first you are going to take me to your sisters, *daughter*."

"If that is what you wish, you only needed to ask, *father*." A slight smile crossed her lips despite the pain, and then her eyes closed as a bright light surged from her holy symbol. Surprised by the intensity of its brightness, Fortuna tried to extinguish it with his hand, but it suddenly exploded, blinding him.

Having one last trick up her sleeve, Miranda had inherited her father's preparedness. She too was always ready for anything. While the archbishop had been exerting his dark power to paralyze her body, the holy symbol of a sword on her collar had been channeling that energy into itself, becoming unstable until erupting in a powerful flash. The explosion broke Fortuna's dark hold over her and he reeled away with his hands reaching for his burning eyes.

Blind and disorientated, Fortuna feebly tried to withdraw, but Miranda grabbed her father's tunic and pushed forward with all her remaining might. The point of her flaming sword pierced the old man's chest as she fell into his arms. She called away the flame with a single word and twisted the blade inside him, making the man gasp blood.

For a moment they appeared as father and daughter, embracing.

Miranda pulled out her holy sword and her father's life spilled over her like a fountain of rubies. They both fell to ground, but immediately Miranda rose to sit up beside the bed, to watch her father die before her.

His expression seemed undeservedly serene after all the pain he had caused. Though he wasn't dead, the deep wound and the lost blood meant he had little time left. He raised his hand toward her, and she knelt beside to grab it.

She wanted to scream at him. She wanted to tell him this was his fault, that he had pushed her forward into becoming this person she barely recognized. She had only wanted to please him, but killing her best friend had been too much. It all went beyond becoming a slave and what she had suffered. Her heart had turned to stone that day, the day she left and cursed her father's name. That is until Iomedae came to save her—though not completely. And as she watched her father rise to power, she knew that one day they would meet.

"Well done, you've made me proud," whispered Fortuna.

Those words shocked her more than anything he could say, almost more than those of her murdered friend. Trembling, she bent over his body, her free hand reaching for the wound as if to stop the bleeding. The thought of healing him came unbidden, but she let it pass with a tear slipping along her cheek.

"Why did you force my hand?" she asked remorsefully.

"You were weak, and I needed you to be strong."

Fortuna's eyes stared away and his body stopped moving. Miranda remembered his words: *For in this world where the strong rule, the weak can only serve...or die.*

She hated him—she loved him—and those feelings ran deep as he died, and there was no joy, no sadness. She expected resolution after his passing, even happiness. Instead, she was drained and without purpose.

She would have stayed there until dawn or the guards discovered her, but she heard movement from behind. Turning to see, she found herself face-to-face with a wide-eyed girl, awakening from a troubled sleep. She wore nothing except black iron chains around her ankles and wrists, the same type Miranda had worn before she was sold to the slavers. She had blond hair and haunting blue eyes.

The girl stuttered something, but stopped as she noticed Miranda was bathed in her master's blood.

Sighing, Miranda considered what the guards would do to the girl when they discovered her with the archbishop's body. The mixture of fear and hope in the girl's eyes reminded Miranda of herself when she was in chains, and also of her sweet friend before she died by her and her father's hands.

The girl's name came to her memory; it was *Rose*.

"Please don't—" the girl tried to plead for her life, but Miranda put a finger on the girl's lips when her voice came out too loud.

"What is your name?" Miranda whispered softly.

"Ri...Risa," she said timidly, biting her lip at her too-vocal answer.

The girl looked at the body behind Miranda as if she had never seen a corpse before.

"Did you kill him?"

"Yes, but this isn't quite over. Turn around and don't look back." Miranda waited for the girl to obey, and then swung her sword, decapitating her father. The body fell on its side as she held the head aloft. Unable to bring herself to move, she remembered her father at his best, the man who had tenderly held her as a child, and not as the monster she had put down. Somehow the image reinvigorated her and she stuffed the head into the bag. Without turning, she knew the girl was watching.

For a moment she felt shame and anger rising inside her. This had been a moment she'd intended to keep private. But both feelings evaporated as she turned to meet the girl's eyes, looking upon her with reverence. Miranda studied her chains and moved closer to examine them, lifting the girl's hand to study the manacles.

"Risa, we need to take those off," she said, testing the girl's bonds. They were similar to the hundreds of shackles she had opened before. With well-placed drops of acid and the point of her dagger, the bonds released and fell to the ground. The girl caressed her sore wrists like so many slaves before her when the weight of their chains no longer pulled them down.



Risa was still in a shock, watching as her master's assassin hurriedly moved from one side of the room to the other. The white-robed woman broke into a desk's hidden drawer and recovered a heavy purse, which held dozens of documents. Satisfied, she looked around until her eyes fixed on a coat rack containing a thick

dark cloak. She took it and put it around Risa's shoulders, sliding the purse inside. The cloak was long enough that it covered her from head to toe. The woman then lifted the headless body over the bed and dampened it with lamp oil.

Dawn was coming. The assassin took her hand softly, but looked seriously into Risa's eyes. "We are both heading out of here while it is still dark. You will be safe with me, but you must do exactly as I say when I say it. Can you do that?"

Risa nodded nervously, and the killer gave her a hug. "It will be alright. You'll be alright."

Before they left, the woman turned around to give the man one last look, and blew him a kiss with her hand, a kiss that sparked into a bright flame that ignited him.

They both headed into the darkness as the sky was turning from black to blue. Dawn was upon them.

Whatever reason the woman had to kill Risa's master, it no longer mattered—she had saved her. No one else had cared enough to do so.

For once, Risa was unafraid of what the day would bring. She had hope and now understood that Cheliix was not only forged by powerful lords preying on the weak, but also by others, like this robed woman who fought to bring freedom back to their homeland. She had come from the darkness, a white shadow intent on slaying the oppressors of Cheliix.

Why this woman did what she did was a mystery, but in that moment Risa swore to become like her, to prove herself worthy of this chance.

As they raced from the interior of the temple and out into the world, she could hear the woman in white whisper to herself,

You were wrong, father. The strong's duty is to protect the weak...and I will show you.

THE GOIN

By Jesse Benner

LASSETTE'S CALVES ached before she was halfway up the tower. Each step was a struggle, but climbing the stairs again would be the least of her worries if she dropped the Count's dinner. Propping the tray against an open window, she breathed out, letting tension ebb from her exhausted body.

Standing all day wasn't new, but since Pira's departure, her duties had redoubled, taking her back and forth throughout the castle all day. *Even a Pathfinder's feet would be sore*, she thought.

Then she remembered poor Pira, and silenced her complaints.

Wind came through the window and tickled the veins of sweat in her hair. Lasette shivered. But looking out at the jagged spill of orange sunlight on Lake Sorrow, she thought she could still have loved the city of Egorian, were she not born a servant.

With a small sigh, she ended her reverie and continued to climb.

A few minutes later, she reached her destination. Lasette paused as she entered Count Varillius's study, her eyes adjusting to the muted glow of candlelight. The fire was dying down, and she saw Varillius's feet through the underside of his plush chair as she climbed the last steps into the room.

"Supper, milord," she murmured. Twisting in an uncomfortable pirouette, she

balanced the serving platter carefully and closed the trap door.

Varillius did not answer.

Hope of leaving his meal and running quickly disappeared; she needed to be dismissed. A fist-sized knot coiled in Lasette's belly and started to writhe. She looked at herself in the mirror by the door and the knot grew. Her face was sweat-streaked and her hair was a rat's nest. *And* she had forgotten to change. How could she have been so stupid? He'd made a point to admire her lower-cut bodice the last time he'd "doled out his favors," as he called it, always with a smug grin.

Quickly, Lasette ran her fingers through her hair, biting her lip as she pulled through tangles and spilling her dark curls across her shoulders in a fetching manner—or at least fetching enough to distract from her tattered clothes, she hoped.

"No" wasn't an option. They tried to tell Pira that, but she didn't listen. Her boy, Renton, now just two, made her appear more like a mother and less like a lass to the Count she'd said. She'd thought his appetite for her would wane.

It hadn't.

In his magnanimity, the Count had allowed Pira one refusal. When Pira didn't learn from her mistake, however, he accused her of theft. Lasette had held Renton to her chest, screaming, the night magistrates hauled his mother from the castle.

The house girls pooled together what coin they had for Pira's release, raising two golden sails by the time the news came, just one week after the arrest, because she had fallen en route to her cell and suffered a small but deep cut. Untreated in the filth of Egorian's dungeons, infection came quickly, followed by fever and death.

Renton asked, "Where's mommy?" at least three times a day. Lasette knew she would have to stop lying to him someday, but life under the Count would break his spirit long before the truth of his mother's fate would.

She pushed memories of Pira away and rounded the chair to where the Count hunched awkwardly.

Asleep, Lasette thought. She could still run. Setting the salver down, she turned to leave when she glimpsed the twisted angle of Count Varillius's neck. She drew closer cautiously, then smelled excrement and frowned. His body was slouched, thin limbs splayed like a scarecrow's, but his chin pointed over his shoulder as if looking at his back. The firelight reflected off something inside Varillius's slack-jawed mouth. She leaned in and saw a single golden sail.

Lasette looked around. Unsurprised that someone had finally murdered the Count, she felt no grief. Her eyes went to the coin again. *No one will know*, she thought, *and Renton will need to be provided for—after all, this bastard owes him*. As she reached for the gold piece, a hand streaked from the shadows by the fire, snaring her wrist.

Lasette screamed, but a thumb jammed into her forearm and numbness spread through her, killing her scream before it began.

A stranger emerged from the shadows, tall and lean, with faded gray clothing wrapped tight around his body. Firelight shadowed half his face, but Lasette saw sharp cheekbones, a long chin, and cobalt eyes. His black hair was tied back in a braid, revealing pointed ears.

“No,” he said with quiet insistence. “That stays.”

His speech seems labored, Lasette thought. He relaxed his thumb, letting motion and speech return to her. It was not an accent, but the voice of someone unaccustomed to speaking.

Then she recognized him.

“The drover!” she whispered hoarsely. “You came through with the Taldan horse merchants last week.” His features were striking enough to be memorable, despite the large straw hat and rough canvas clothes she recalled him wearing then.

“Yes. And you should do something about the rats in the wine cellar,” he added flatly.

Lasette recoiled, sensing danger. “Whatever he did, I had no part in it, I swear,” she stammered, tears welling.

“I know,” he said. “I’m here for him. Just him.” He looked toward the window.

“Because of Pira?” Lasette asked hopefully.

“No,” he responded, “but if Pira suffered like the others he ordered dead, or killed with his own hands, then maybe some justice comes her way as well.”

The knot in Lasette’s gut unraveled and went quiet—only to constrict again.

She’d heard stories as a girl growing up in Cheliax, a bastion of so much diabolic faith; tales of powerful magic so great it could conquer death itself, returning breath and vigor to a corpse as if the end of life had been little more than a brief sleep. Lasette’s own mother had often told her of the orphanage where she’d grown up, under the strict hand of Asmodeus’s church. Her mother had once dared to spy on one of the church’s sacred rituals from a shadow-shrouded beam above the temple’s central altar. She had watched the high-priest sprinkle a shining powder over what had looked like the dusty remnants of half a jawbone and in minutes the long-forgotten shard of life reformed into a person, alive and whole.

Lasette had asked, in childish innocence, if the high-priest did that for everyone who died before their time. She could still see her mother’s sad smile.

“Sweet girl,” she had said, “only those blessed with the strongest magic could perform such rites.” Then she had paused. “And that ‘dust’ I saw them scattering... it was *diamonds*, my little love. Crushed diamonds worth more than what ten servants would make in ten lifetimes. So you see, only the richest and the most powerful have the chance to undo death, I’m afraid.”

Only the richest. Her mother’s words echoed back into her ears as she thought of the count’s extravagant wealth and the ornate Asmodean robes that hung in his wardrobe. The respite from his gleeful sadism seemed to dissipate like smoke from the fire, and she had to swallow the sob that rose in her throat.

“Why bother?” she asked the assassin, her eyes glistening desperately. “He has so much money, the priests he retains will just bring him back. What’s the point?”

The man looked at her and Lasette felt frozen in place.

“That *is* the point,” he said with conviction. “Sometimes when someone sees the beyond, what is waiting, and then wakes to life again, it changes them.”

“But what if it doesn’t?” Lasette asked, looking back at the Count’s body, remembering how he ran his hands over her, how he kept his nails long enough to

gouge. "What if it doesn't?"

"Then he's one sail richer," the assassin said. "No matter how much gold he has, some little piece of his new life belongs to me. And I have a right to see how my money is being spent." He spoke the last words in a whisper that made her shudder, then reached into his tunic. Lasette tensed, but relaxed again as he produced a small, black bag, and dropped it, jingling, into her hand with a graceful turn.

"Here," he said. "I've heard enough during the week to know you and Renton could use this."

She felt the weight and her heart rose until she thought of what he was asking.

"I'm no good for lying," she said as he moved toward the open window. "If someone asks, they won't believe that I didn't see anything." He stopped, one foot on the ledge.

"Then don't lie," he said simply. "Tell them everything you saw. That bag is not to ensure your silence, but to ensure that my coin stays where it is."

She nodded.

"What's your name?" she asked, anticipating that she would need to tell the Count upon his return.

"It was the last word he heard," the assassin said. "He'll remember it."

He dropped from the window. Dashing to the sill, Lasette watched him slide down the tower, gripping stones and ledges one after another. Halfway down, he pushed off with both legs, soaring across one corner of the courtyard to land above the stables, rolling gracefully into a long shadow from which he did not emerge.

Lasette stowed the bag inside her skirt and waited a moment, then grabbed the bell pull with both hands to summon help.

It took less than a week for the Count's associates to sell some heirlooms and a stake in his vineyards near Ravenmoor, before he was alive again.

And things were different.

One month later, Renton had been sent with his "inheritance" to live with Pira's family in Westcrown, and as Lasette brought dinner to the study, she didn't worry about her hair or the cut of her bodice; the Count no longer doled out "favors" and had—she imagined—ceased other activities as well.

"Supper, milord," Lasette said, setting the tray down by the chair where she had found him that night. He looked at her distractedly, worrying at a golden coin pinched between his thumb and curled fingers.

"Thank you," he said, staring back into the firelight. His manners were still forced, but less so every day.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes," he whispered.

As Lasette turned to leave, a log snapped loudly in the fire and fell to the hearthstone in a thudding shower of sparks.

"*Thane!*" the Count shrieked, his eyes searching the shadows against the fireplace. He held his breath for a moment before settling stiffly back into his chair.

Lasette closed the door and padded quietly down the steps.

"So that was his name," she whispered to herself, cherishing it.

NATIONS
OF
TREACHERY
~
GALT

“For crimes against Galt and her People, the
Council has found you guilty. Your punishment
for these unlawful acts...is death!”

– *Gray Gardeners’ execution writ*

A JOURNAL OF ETERNAL REVOLUTION

By Robert Beasley



HE ENDLESS dripping of water amidst the dungeon floor would have driven me crazy were I free to act. The water pools beneath me and the cold seeps into my bones. My drenched clothes are the least of my worries. The uproar from the crowd outside signifies the end for me. I'm not sure what I did, but the bloodthirsty masses have spoken. In Galt, once sentenced, your fate is sealed. Morning, I will be dead. My death won't be as simple as drowning or burning at the stake. I will not be hung by the neck until dead. Come the light of dawn, I'll have no soul left to lay claim to. My head will be gone as well. I will be the latest victim of the *final blades*, guillotines of mystical steel kept tempered and cleaned by the Gray Gardeners, a reliable constant in this never-ending revolution. They are the solemn executioners in this tattered land.

I know not what awaits me in the afterlife. I've stopped praying to Desna for guidance. Her luck holds no sway in this scarred landscape. The *final blades* do not believe in luck, and at this point, neither do I. The screams of anguish from other prisoners being ushered to their graves provide no hope. Their abruptly-silenced protests join the gathering of a hundred headless corpses. I vaguely hear the thud of an impact, the blade into the block, the loud cheers and jeers of the crowd as another is punished for their presumed crime. I am innocent, but the

calls of dissidence have almost convinced me that I am a traitor.

The water continues to incessantly drip as the squeaking rats in the walls fill my ears. I look up at the fortified stone of the ceiling, close my eyes, and try to summon the images of better days. I cannot. All hopes and thoughts of a better life have fled. Grief and despair are all that remain. I have cried all the tears I had left. My wife and daughters will never see my face again. I pray they are not at my execution. I pray the masses won't do to me what they've done to so many undeserving others. I hope that a flag-draped heavy basket does not reach them. I know it will be the case, though.

The rats scurry across the floor toward me, ready to claim an early prize. They know I will feed their kin in a short time, but they want a taste. I feel nipping at my fingers, biting at my toes while their diseases begin to take hold in my bloodstream. Why fight back? I have no will to live, and they beckon for me to give in. If I must die, let it be rats. Maybe then I'll perish with some sort of peace, knowing my family will not suffer in my stead.

I hear the slide plate open as a tray of food is slid into my cell. The manacles placed around my arms leave just enough slack to reach it, but I no longer hunger, no longer care. Starvation, rats, disease—I prefer any of these over the *final blades*. I don't want to die in that manner, but wishes are never granted to condemned men, especially in Galt. The slide plate closes, and I no longer feel the nip of the rats at my feet. They have smelled fresh gruel and intend to feast on it. Even the vermin have chosen to leave me to my fate.

I hear the steel door of my cell open, and a guard unshackles my manacles and steps aside. A lone figure stands before me, his guise of gray silk fooling no one. His eyes are a compassionate blue with onyx-black hair falling down the side of his face. I can see into his eyes.

He knows of my innocence, but there is nothing he can do. The people have spoken and this Gray Gardener, who has seen so much blood, no longer questions the lust of the masses. He holds a hand out and I take it in response, mustering enough strength to stand on my own.

The simple act restores my vigor. He helps me to see what I couldn't less than a moment ago. I've lived a full life in service to Desna and the people of the Inner Sea. My music and tales inspired many to a life of so much more. I wrote stories and sought out the splendors of a world both dangerous, and at the same time, beautiful. I traveled to Tian Xia and back across the Crown of the World. Nothing can truly take that away.

We walk to the blade. It is to be my home for all eternity, but even though my soul will remain within, my heart will forever belong to my friends and family. I have felt love in my lifetime. The doors open and I squint at the piercing brightness of a thousand torch lights from the crowd.

So, they would not be made to wait until morning after all.

The mob roars again as they see yet another victim sentenced to death by the *final blades*. We emerge from the prison levels of the Monolith. The Gray Gardener at my lead keeps the crowd from tearing me apart before I reach the platform. I ascend the few wooden stairs of the block and come to rest before the grandiose blade known as Madame Margaery. Her elegance is as absolute as the death she

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brings. I kneel before her as my neck rests against her breadth. The charges are read and I am asked if I have any last words. I look to the Gray Gardener. "Protect my family," my eyes plead. Solemn, yet respectful is his response. His head nods and the blade falls, my fate is sealed.

Lady Anne

By Dain Nielsen



I am a Lady.

Despite what you might think—from the whispers in the streets, the warning on my chamber door, the harshness of my captivity—if there is one thing I am sure of, it is that.

I sit quietly in the shadows, reflecting on my life in solitude, my world for as long as I can remember.

Minutes pass. Perhaps hours. Time has little relevance to one in my circumstance, awaiting the inevitable. Then I hear the door open quietly and light creeps over me once more.

It is him.

He's come again for my bath, one of the few measures of contact I am allowed, other than my meals. I let my attention wander luxuriously as he begins his ministrations.

I am sure I am a mess.

When he finishes washing every inch, the young man gives me a smile and a wink. It has become his tradition. He packs up his silk towels, fine soaps, and other sundries into a small leather bag. Then, giving me a final look over, he leans in and whispers a farewell.

"You are a beauty, Lady Anne, a true beauty. Smooth as silk, with a face of pure

alabaster, the face of an angel.” I feel his hand linger on my cheek. “None can compare to your grace and allure.”

As his fingers slip away from my skin and he takes his leave, the reality of my situation comes back to me. The brief respites he brings with his visits are welcome, but all too fleeting.

Still, I hope I can keep him. After all, some measure of escape is better than none, even if it is only within my own mind.

I’ve had many attendants over the years, you see—a need dictated by my secure bondage within my quarters—but none were as considerate or pleasant as this fine boy. Most of those before him were rough and hurried, missing some spots while dallying inappropriately in others. They left me feeling raw and vulnerable. His touch is soft by contrast, more akin to a lover’s caress than that of a caretaker. He treats me like I deserve.

Like a Lady.

I welcome the thought that I will be in his gentle hands for years to come, but it seems unlikely, as new hands regularly take over this post. Perhaps he will have more staying power than those who came before him.

Unfortunately, it is not up to me. For all my years of service to this country and its citizens, I have been imprisoned and left to languish in isolation. I will never have a say in this matter—or *any* matter. This is my lot, my reward for all I have done; I have no voice, no way to make my desires known to my jailers, my custodians.

But *awareness*...yes, cruelly, I do have that. I know of all who come near me. I can sense the nature of their hearts; I feel their awe, their fear, their rage. But to ask a simple favor, that is out of—

You’re doing it again.

Burnalt. To the Hells with that man!

For almost forty years, he has been the annoying whisper heard only by me. He can always pick up what I...feel. Yes, I suppose that *is* the best term for it, though I cannot say with total certainty.

Empathic vibrations perhaps, but not feelings, my dear. I’ve never known you to show any sign of emotion at all, not that I expected any. In all honesty, I always saw you as the soulless abomination you are. But this boy, well, he has you giddy as a schoolgirl, ready to skip through the streets, though that would be the stuff of nightmares...

Always the rot in the wood, this one. The others usually keep to themselves, quietly tucked away in the corners of my mind. But not him. He is the wicked one; planting the barbs and giving them a twist is his nature. It always has been. And he is aware of the fact that my keepers direct me as they see fit; they command and I obey. It is not of my doing. I am what I am, just as he is, I suppose.

One cannot fight one’s nature.

Oh, you are anything but natural, ‘Lady Anne.’ You have spilled more blood than any killer I know, and I have known many killers in my time. But the company you keep is no better, regardless of how fleeting your acquaintance.

I concede the point, taking small consolation in knowing that I never seek out these people. They come to me, yet another thing outside the realm of my control.

You keep telling yourself that.... You leave blood in the streets and keep company with killers of all types.

He tries to make me feel guilty, to press me into an argument, but if one cannot fight one's nature, one should not feel guilty for it. And indeed, I feel no guilt.

Of course you don't! You would need a conscience to feel guilt. A monstrosity such as you has no conscience. But your deeds will catch up to you eventually. They will catch up to you as they caught up to me. And when they do, I will be there to witness your end.

Enough! Begone!

Then there is only me...

...and the deafening silence.

I wait several days, but there are no further insults from Burnalt. Each evening, my young courtier pays me a visit, but as each session passes he grows more and more distracted. Tonight he even forgets to observe his tradition, wiping the last of the soap from my cheek in a stupor. I can feel him wrestling with himself as the weights of doubt and nervous anticipation lie heavily on his mind. "No matter what happens, I'll see you soon, my Lady," he whispers softly as he collects his supplies and quickly shuts the door behind him.

His words puzzle me, but I catch something in the air as he leaves: a dangerous energy buzzing through the streets.

I have felt this before....

A mob is gathering and the time for justice is drawing near. This time, it seems a councilman and several members of his staff have been found responsible for murdering dozens of citizens and attempting to topple the current regime.

Suddenly, the door to my chamber bursts open and several gray-masked men grab me firmly and wrestle me out of my restraints. I cannot resist. They drag me out into a large square where a crowd gathers. The sea of people parts as we approach; I can feel their anger, their loathing, and their bloodlust. A chant begins as I am brought forth. They call my name, their voices dripping with the venom of their hatred.

"Lady Anne! Lady Anne!"

From behind me I hear the masses hissing and jeering as I am carried up onto the platform and tied down. Soon, more individuals are escorted up to stand beside me. I can feel their fear and panic, their hearts straining against the rhythm of the frenzied throng.

And then I hear his voice.

The young one, my caretaker.

He is struggling against another of the masked men. He is being brought beside me. I feel his pulse beating as if it were my own. And then everything—his nervousness and uncertainty, his last hurried message—makes sense.

A tall man in a gray hood walks forward in front of me, pulls out a scroll, and reads from it. The crowd is hushed into murmurs. "For crimes against Galt and her People, the Council has found you guilty. Your punishment for these unlawful acts...is death!"

The audience shrieks their approval, a sound of insane ecstasy. I feel my head pulled back, the rope tied taut. A single voice cries for mercy, drowned out by the

fervor of the masses.

Time seems to stretch for eternity as I await the inevitable.

There is a tug on the rope and my head falls quickly with a solid thud. Baron Herreln's head lands with a much softer echo in the basket below. I look down into his fading eyes; it is a small mercy that his last sight is the alabaster face of an angel.

He is the first of the four, and the roars resound throughout the square.

"Lady Anlace has fulfilled the will of the Council and brought judgment to the deserving!"

"Lady Anne! Lady Anne!"

Their voices no longer hold hatred, but a sense of joy, twisted as it is. My face—my *blade*—drips crimson, and the baron's blood pools on the wood by my supports. The executioner pulls the rope, raising my visage again to the cheer of the crowd. Soon it falls twice more, beheading two others to equal amounts of zeal.

But then I feel his presence, followed by his gentle caress upon my skin, and time seems to stop.

My young attendant wipes a few red droplets from my stone face as a few tears fall from his own. His hand trembles. I sense the torn emotions of my caretaker, feelings of betrayal, impending loss and...respect.

He swallows hard and then lies along my body in our most intimate embrace. He faces me, our gazes meet, and I realize: this is the first time anyone has laid willingly across my back, has not fought to escape, has not begged for mercy, nor pleaded for anything at all....

"They granted me a final request, my Lady: to clean your angelic face one last time and have your beauty be the last my eyes ever see. And now, we will be together forever."

My mind reels and I hear coarse laughter tinged with disgust.

You will even take this young one's life? This misguided boy who loves you so? Heartless demon.

I drown Burnalt out. The rope goes taut and I am sure the crowd is seething, *screaming*, but I can no longer hear anything but the boy's words reverberating within me.

Together forever.

I look upon him for a moment, feeling everything he does: fear and love, mixed with relief. Then my face rushes to meet his, and I taste a bitter sweetness as our first kiss becomes our last.

THE RELUCTANT GARDENER

By Patrick Napier



AMN, I HATE this work.

It was the first thought Pruner had when the morning sun stabbed through the curtains. With a groan he rolled over to avert his eyes, but it was too late. Another day was here, and he was awake.

He sat up on the edge of his cot, rubbing the last remnants of sleep from his eyes, and looked over at the empty bed against the opposite wall. A tattered stuffed toy that might have once been an owlbear lay on the bed, the only sign that someone else shared his quarters.

Heaving a sigh he stood, his joints cracking as he stretched. He shuffled toward the privy and relieved himself, then poured water into the washbasin. He scrubbed his face and forced himself to view his reflection in the small steel mirror, the room's only decoration. The man staring back at him was a haggard mess, his sallow cheeks becoming sunken. He stared past dark circles, deeply into his own eyes, trying to recognize himself. Trying to remember the last time he was happy.



It was her hair that first drew his gaze. He was pushing his way through the throng of onlookers who were gathering in the courtyard. It was All Kings Day, and the people of Halvon were anxious for blood; there was nothing like the execution of a traitor to celebrate one's freedom from tyranny. As he angled through the press of bodies, he glimpsed her out of the corner of his eye. Her hair was black as a raven, and fell down her back like a river rushing down a mountainside. She showed no interest in the fervent crowd, stopping instead to smell the flowers in a merchant's cart. After a moment, she straightened from the blooms and turned toward the noise with a look of disdain. Their eyes met. The onlookers pushed on, a jostling against him, but he managed to catch a nod of acknowledgement from the girl before he was swept up in the crowd.

He came to the market every day after that, seeking out the dark-haired beauty. A week later he found her at the flower vendor. The words he said to her were lost from memory, but they worked, and soon they were meeting regularly in the market. He felt ashamed he couldn't remember her face, but he did remember she was beautiful, and that he had been deeply in love.

They were wed the following summer, and she soon quickened with child. The pregnancy was difficult; she was bed-ridden for weeks leading up to the birth. He remembered that day in vivid clarity, but he wished dearly that he didn't. His son, Quintus, came early, and with him came the blood. It wouldn't stop, and as the infant squalled in his swaddling, the Pharasmin midwives rushed about, some bringing fresh bandages, while others took away sheets soaked crimson. His wife cried out in pain and fear in concert with their shouting and prayers beseeching the Lady of Graves for aid. The cacophony was overwhelming, and he left the room to clear his head. Just as he steeled himself to return, he realized all he could hear from the chamber was the sound of his son crying. He entered, all warmth gone from his body, and stood watching as the midwives prepared his wife for the grave. Her raven hair was the last thing he saw of her as they wrapped her for her journey, and outside the window, the haunting cries of whippoorwills lifted to the night sky.

The years after her death marched slowly on for the widower. Each day was longer than the last, and the nights were cold and lonely, filled with broken sleep. He longed to hear her laughter, to feel her skin and breathe in the scent of her hair. The only way to fulfill this longing would be to join her in death—but he had a son, and that fact gave him a reason to go on living.

As he watched Quintus grow, he provided as best he could, but the unrest in the nation seemed to grow as well. Galt was caught in the fervor of revolution; those who were once in control of the Revolutionary Council were overthrown and branded as traitors, and put to death under the very blades to which they thought themselves immune. Spies and secret informants spread throughout the populace, and one never knew when a trusted friend would one day point their finger and utter "traitor." The widower wanted more for his son. He looked to the day when Galt would once again be a nation of prosperity and individual freedom, but as long as the Revolutionary Council held the reins, his country would continue to descend into treachery and blood.

Determined to effect change and secure a better future for Quintus, he

THE RELUCTANT GARDENER

sought out cells of dissenters in Halvon's underground, joining those who spoke against the wanton executions and the brutality of the *final blades*. He knew he risked everything for himself and his son. Yet, becoming part of a freethinking movement gave him a new sense of purpose: a desire to live and work again.

He would have to be cautious.



Hilas Hewer did not pray, but it seemed clear to him now that the gods listened. Standing before him in shackles was the answer to his unspoken prayers. He stroked his beard in contemplation of this fortuitous event. Litran had not sent any new Gray Gardeners to Halvon for years, and Hewer was tired of acting as both judge and executioner for the town's criminals and conspirators.

The man before him was accused of dissension and spreading propaganda against the *final blades*. Not quite traitorous enough to warrant his head, but deserving punishment nonetheless. *Such cruel irony*, Hewer thought, as he dispensed the man's sentence. If Litran wouldn't send him his Gray Gardener, he would make his own. And he had the right tool to force the man's hand.

"Bring in the boy."

The bailiff nodded and after a moment a towheaded lad walked in, tears running down his freckled cheeks.

"Father!" His voice was raw from crying.

"It's alright, Quintus. You need to go with these men. They will take care of you, and I will see you, from time to time. Be strong, my son."

Tears threatened to spill from the prisoner's eyes, but he held them back as he encouraged his child.

"So, you understand the terms of your sentence? I would hate to see any harm come to the lad." The judge turned to the bailiff, motioning for the boy to be taken away, then gazed back to his captive. "You will serve no prison time, but you cannot speak of this to anyone. You will serve as my executioner first and foremost. You have shown yourself to be a traitor and the Revolutionary Council has provided me a writ that allows me to execute not only traitors but those who carry their traitorous blood as well." A malicious sneer crossed Hewer's face. "Should you betray me, the boy will meet the *final blade* as if by your very own hand."

Reluctantly, the prisoner agreed, but inside, hate blossomed in his heart, and he set his mind to freeing his son and escaping Galt. He had never before wanted to kill a man, but if Hewer were to get in his way, so much the better.

The man was released that afternoon, and returned home to a hollow and empty house. He trudged to the bedroom and stood staring at the walls for what felt like hours. His son was all he had, and now the boy was in Judge Hewer's clutches. The silence of the room mocked him. He let out a dismal moan, trying to release the pain inside him as he crumpled to the floor. Leaning his back against Quintus' cot, he started to cradle his head in his hands when he saw his son's stuffed owlbear sticking out from under the bed. He had given his son the toy for his last birthday, and Quintus cherished it, insisting to sleep with it at

night.

He crushed his hands against his eyes to smear away a blur of tears and reached for the toy. It had seen better days. Choking back a sob, he placed the owlbear on Quintus' pillow, propping it up so its button eyes stared at the door, as if waiting for his son's return. He turned his own eyes towards that door then started weeping openly, his frame trembling.

When the tears no longer came, he stood and drifted to the privy, his legs becoming heavier with each step. He looked into the mirror, peering deep into his bleary, blood-shot eyes; the honorable man who had taken a stand for an ideal now treaded on his dead wife's legacy by representing that which she detested.

He was a fool.

He had lost the one thing he had left in this world due to his selfish need to stand up for a lost cause, and the face that stared back at him now belonged to a broken, useless excuse for a man.



Freedom was worthless without his son. Pruner, as Hewan so fondly called him, set about his work without emotion. The roar of the implacable throngs meant nothing. The blood and the blank staring eyes of the heads removed by the *final blade* had no effect on him. He was numb.

Then he saw her at the edge of the crowd. For a moment he thought she was the shade of Quintus' dead mother come to mock what he had become. As the head of the latest traitor thumped into the basket, he watched her turn away in disgust and run toward a bakery on the far side of the town square. He didn't understand why, but he had to meet her, if only to see if she was real.

Her name was Myranniel.



When he had finally mustered the courage, he introduced himself at the bakery where she worked with her mother. As he came to know her, he began to feel emotions he thought he had buried with his wife. Part of him began to hope he might find happiness, but he knew better than to fool himself.

In the months that followed, he grew closer to Myranniel. He kept from her the fact that he operated the city's *final blade*, and he felt an incredible guilt for harboring such a gruesome secret from someone he was growing to care about. He never believed he would feel love again but every day she awakened a part of him he thought long dead.

One night over dinner, the topic of the latest executions came up. Pruner grew silent, listening to the passionate diatribes of Myranniel and her mother. He focused his attention on his meal, nodding in feigned approval.

"There is a resistance movement in Halvon, you know," Myranniel began.

"Myra, you mustn't speak of such things," her mother cautioned, shaking her head.

"I trust him, Mother. I know he would never betray us." Myranniel reached

across the table. “You should join us,” she said, squeezing the hand he used so many times to pull the lever of the *final blade*. “We are growing, and soon our voices will be heard. These brutal murders carried out in the name of false justice must stop!”

He pulled his hand away and stood from the table. “You are a fool to think anyone’s voice has meaning. Judge Hewer and his Gardener will carry out the will of the state regardless of anything that anyone does. To try and change it will only get you and those you love imprisoned, or worse.”

“I am no fool,” Myranniel countered. “Every person, every voice matters. This nation was once free, and prospered without the tyranny of the Revolutionary Council and the threat of execution. If we make a stand, they will fall.”

“Well, you will have to stand without me.”

Pruner pushed back his chair and stalked from the room, catching sight of himself in the mirror that hung in their hallway. The man looking back was a coward. He wanted to stand with them, but the risk was too great. And though he wanted nothing more than to see Hewer and his ilk brought down, he knew their organization of informers and spies was vast. Before long, it would be his own, his son’s and Myranniel’s heads thumping into the basket, and not those that deserved it the most.

No, it would be folly to help her—to gamble with his son’s life. Quintus didn’t deserve that, certainly not for some idealistic movement that stood no chance.

She had followed him from the dining room and put her arms around him. Gently, she placed her hand on his cheek and turned his head to look into his eyes.

“Please. We could use stubborn men like you.”

Pruner sighed. Then a dreadful thought came into his head. *What if they’ve been watching her and think I am turning from their cause?*

He shook his head, pulled from her embrace and rushed down the hallway out of their home and into the streets. Never once looking back, he hung his head low, ashamed of his cowardice and what he had to do.



The sun had barely begun to climb into the sky, but dozens of onlookers were already gathered around the *final blade*. Pruner took his place on the platform, his eyes the only feature not hidden by the Gray Gardener regalia.

His blood ran cold as he watched Hewer take his usual seat on the balcony with Quintus standing at his side as sunlight crept over the buildings. He could feel sweat beading on his forehead, and clenched his fists anxiously.

A clamor went up from the spectators in the town center. The bailiff escorted the dark-haired prisoner to the wooden ramp that led up to the *final blade*. As she arrived on the platform, she was pelted with rotting food and offal, but she held her head high as the crowd jeered.

Pruner averted his gaze, afraid she would recognize him. The bailiff forced her to kneel at the bascule, securing her neck in the lunette. The onlookers went quiet in anticipation.

PATRICK NAPIER

Pruner surveyed the crowd, looking to Hewan, his son, and finally to Myranniel, the woman he loved, bowed in the device before him. He turned his gaze back to Hewan. The magistrate nodded with a mocking smile and leaned forward in his chair, placing his hand on Quintus' shoulder.

Pruner's trembling hand reached for the lever, and pulled.

STAYING THE BLADES

By Thomas Horth



THREE HOODED figures in wide tricorn hats and full masks stood before the crowd. One strode forward to the edge of the wooden platform, holding a parchment. Overlooking the scene from a balcony of the courthouse was a man in black robes with a cowl covering his shoulders and cloak. He looked reverently upon the guillotine below with a contemptuous smile, and gave a slight snicker as his hatchet man unfurled the missive and bellowed the contents of the scroll across a sea of snarling citizens.

“You stand here today, good citizens, to bear witness to the execution of one Lucan Elthorp, for his crime of high treason against the glorious republic of Galt. There can be only one punishment for such a crime, and that punishment is death.”

The crowd screamed and yelled, and the man in the balcony breathed deeply and closed his eyes, savoring the moment as though it was for him. The scrawny frames, the haggard faces. They were all a bunch of criminals yet to be tried, but through their misery he could direct them and shape their discontent. Men, women and children alike shook fists and torches in the air and chanted for blood.

The executioner with the scroll raised his arm in the air for silence, and when all was quiet, he began again.

“Bring forward the prisoner. May the gods never know his soul.”

THOMAS HORTH

A man stepped forward, his hands bound behind him. He did not weep or wail, shout or scream. He wore the garb of a soldier, the emblem of the revolution. The rosette on his breast fluttered gently in the breeze.

"This man is a traitor to our cause; he plots against the rule of the free and protects tyrants. He aids foul Andoran, and bleeds the wealth and prosperity of our motherland. Any last words before your end, dog?" Two executioners escorted the soldier and pushed him down on his knees.

The condemned cleared his throat and began. "People of Freeford, citizens of Galt: once, we bled for a worthy cause fighting Cheliox and their diabolic pacts as well as the oppression of the great house Thrune. These were noble aims; the common people threw off their shackles and forged a republic that was the envy of the Inner Sea. But look now at your country, my friends! No food, no freedom, no government. Once again we must rise, once again we must..."

The two escorts moved to muffle his voice while their leader stepped forward.

"Listen to the treachery! Listen to the lies! It's men like these who plot with Andoran to steal your food, your livelihood, your very nation's sovereignty! Trust in the revolution; trust in Citizen Goss!" He tore off his hat and thrust it up into the sky, signifying the revolutionary salute of old.

The crowd cheered once more, some cursing Andoran, some cursing Lucan Elthorp, traitor to the people of Galt. The executioners, meanwhile, pressed the neck of the prisoner into the wooden block and bolted him in place. The two subordinates backed away as the presider prepared to loose the blade. The roar of the crowd continued to build, raising the tension and anticipation. The head executioner raised his left hand in salute to the judge in the balcony and he saluted in return with a smile. The man then turned to the crowd.

"In the name of the revolutionary council, and for the glory of Galt!"

His gloved hand reached out for the lever...



Lucan was getting nervous; his neck was wedged in the uncomfortable stocks with the sharpened steel poised above him. All around him he felt the presence of something terrible, and it wasn't the Gray Gardeners or the screaming crowd. The blade itself was more than it appeared: a *final blade* possessed by a hungry, soul-stealing entity lusting for the spirits of those caught in its clutches. Lucan pivoted his head, seeing the honed edge hanging in his periphery and the handle that held it in check.

It was time, he thought. Where in the hells was Tess? She had always had a knack for the dramatic, but this wasn't the time. He saw the executioner move to the lever at his side, and sensed the gloved hand reach out above him. Sweat dripped from his brow, his composure beginning to leave him.

Where was she...?



Tessele Morningdew crept slowly towards the edge of the roof, her body

obscured by the crumbling chimney of the town hall. She leveled her crossbow and glanced out over the street. On the roofs across the square, her men slid into place as quietly as cats. Already, two were making their way to the smug and egotistical Judge Renard. She held her left arm out with her hand splayed palm up and observed the scene below.

Unsurprisingly, Lucan's little speech had been swiftly curtailed; the Gray Gardeners had little time for dissent. Keeping order at all costs was their game, artfully manipulating the starving masses and ending the lives of those who opposed them. The man with the scroll moved back towards the guillotine and raised a hand to the lever. She waited, squinting as she took aim with the crossbow in her right hand. Then, as the executioner closed his palm on the lever, she abruptly clenched her open left hand into a fist.

Bolts streaked forward, striking the three Gardeners before they had a chance to utter a sound. All three dropped to the ground, lying still. For a moment, the mob milled in silent confusion...then divided instantly. Women and children ran terrified to their houses, their screams splitting the atmosphere. Judge Renard sneered from his balcony, livid with anger, then whirled only to find two men pointing swords at his belly.



Lucan sighed in relief as the last Gardener on stage dropped dead on the scaffold beside him, his tricorn hat blowing gently into the crowd. The spectators turned and glanced to each other, stunned, then looked to the rooftops. Most ran, their sense of self-preservation overriding any remaining bloodlust. Their jostling and stampeding shook the stage with vibration. Lucan closed his eyes tightly, hoping the tremors didn't jar the blade above him free. A presence beneath him surged and his energy drained as the malevolence sapped his strength. He looked up at the handle of the guillotine, and slowly he saw it twitch as if an invisible hand pulled upon it. It nudged up slightly, and then slowly began to fall of its own accord.

"No, no, no! Tess! Help!"

Panic rose in his belly, as the urge to flee pounded in his veins. Then he saw her, dropping lightly onto the scaffold before him in knee-high boots and a close-fitting military uniform. She winked at him and smiled her full-white teeth.

The lever creaked.

"Hurry!" Lucan begged, as all color drained from his face.

Tess swooped in and grabbed an auxiliary beam from the base of the frame, laying it as a guard on top of the neck restraint. The rope groaned and she flew across the platform and lunged for the slipping handle. Suddenly there was a rush of air and a wailing shriek as the blade plummeted loose...

...and bit hungrily into the dense wooden buffer.

"Aaaagghhh!" Lucan howled as he heard the solid thump.

Tess' fingers reached the lever, curled around it and shoved it back up, firmly returning the blade to its locked position. She shook her head and smirked. "Citizen Elthorpe, you stand accused of wetting your breeches in the course of

THOMAS HORTH

duty. How do you plead?" She brushed a lock of dark red hair across her face and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Almost guilty, no thanks to you," Lucan replied, trying to calm his pulse as his initial burst of anger faded into a nervous chuckle. "Now, get me out of this blasted thing!"

Tess removed the nearly-cloven wood beam, then slid the restraining bar back from Lucan's neck. He wiggled out and stood up straight as Tess unbound him, stretching his back and shoulders, causing them to crack audibly.

"By all the cursed gods, they could at least let a man lie down properly as they collect heads like apples," he said, flexing his hands, then rubbing his neck.

Tess threw him a sword from a dead Gardener. He caught it lightly, giving it a twirl a few times.

"Well, at least their taste in steel is superior to their choice in tailors," he quipped, nudging the dead Gardener with a booted toe.

Tess looked to their small band of allies and locked eyes with Judge Renard as he was brought before her.

"You will pay dearly for this outrage against the righteous!"

Lucan looked slyly to Tess and then to the guillotine.

"Strap him in. The crowd came for a show."

The judge raised his eyebrows in shock. "What, no ransom?"

Two men wrestled the judge onto the bed of the guillotine and locked the top piece of lunette wood over his neck.

Lucan then squatted next to the man and studied his face. Renard was visibly crying.

"Time to move," Tess commanded. "Get this godforsaken tool of evil covered in oil." She gestured to the guillotine at the center of the scaffolding, then looked scornfully at the man tied to it.

Lucan sat there watching the judge's tears puddle on the blood-stained wood beneath him as the smell of volatile oil wafted in the air. It poured over the instrument of death and drenched its prisoner, running down his legs, body, and finally, over his head to sting his eyes.

Lucan sneered, then stood and patted the man's shoulder, "Nice talking with you, Judge."

"Nooo!"

Men moved forward, torches lit, and set to work igniting the structure. Renard howled out as flames snaked up the oil pathways and everyone cleared the stage as a man rode into the square with fifteen roped horses in tow. He stopped a distance from the stage and everyone began to untie their horses and mount up. Then suddenly, the judge's pitch increased and he screamed in terror.

The *blade* broke loose and silenced him, sending his head toppling off the stage.

Lucan remembered the revolution as he watched the guillotine burn. He remembered the honorable Hosetter and the overthrowing of House Thrune. He remembered loving his country and the passion he had felt serving it.

It was gone now, the revolution sullied by power-grabbing manipulators such as Renard.

Five years ago he had fled to Andoran and returned with his small band of malcontents, Galtan exiles and Andoran idealists. They came because of their cousins, their marriage ties and, most of all, their own families, after so many letters that another relative had been struck down.

It was time for one final revolution; it was time to end the vicious cycle of death and fear.

“Gardeners, Judge and now you, Lady Axelle.”

The burning wood on the stage creaked, and the men behind Lucan began to rein in their horses and back up. Lucan looked to his left and then to his right.

“Some of you here have never seen one of these burn before. I will let you know now, put some wax in your ears.”

Tess rode up beside Lucan, and the two crammed the malleable stuff in each ear.

The *final blade* before them suddenly jumped in the air as if its legs could truly move. It twisted and groaned as a guttural howl began to amplify across the square. Lucan and Tess looked to each other and nodded. They turned their horses and started away from the town center. A random high-pitched shriek spooked the horses and their pace slightly quickened. Another scream pierced like a knife, shattering every surrounding window. They cleared the town and made for the open countryside as hundreds of moaning wails all came together in a hideous chorus. The final scream was that of Lady Axelle herself. Hers echoed across the landscape, and the horses winced and tossed their heads agitatedly at the sound.

Then, at last, her voice was silent.

Lucan turned and pointed to the white plume cloud rising above the town.

“Now the true voice of the people shall speak. No Gardeners, no Judge and no *blades*. Just people who know in their hearts what needs to be done.”

All the men and women tipped their hats and gave a salute to the town, then rode off.

FOR A SHORT TIME

By Derek M. Johnson



S THIS why you have summoned me?

“It is.”

Do not misunderstand me, I love coming to Isarn. This place exhibits the passage of time better than any other in the Inner Sea. Even better than Corentyn. The men who spilled sweat and blood to erect these structures believed they would stand for centuries. They failed to calculate their own flawed nature—theirs and their fellow men.

“Mm-hmm.”

But , the Blades...they are why you called me. I've seen them before—all of them. This one, Poor Padriana, is not even one of the more celebrated.

“No.”

The Blades are a frustration to me. You, know that, yes?

“Yes, M'lady.”

True, they bring an end to many, but those spirits should be mine to judge. Instead, they remain inside. They reside in the blade. It is not right.

“No.”

So you bring me here to watch this?

“Yes.”

Why?

DEREK M. JOHNSON

“Him.”

The man screaming? The man howling about his innocence? The man wailing vainly for reprieve?

“No.”

Then the one behind him? The one who solemnly marches forward? He pays the price for his son’s actions. He knows that his death is not just. Still, he refuses to fight, for he believes his son’s actions were righteous. He willingly accepts his sacrifice in the place of his son. I have seen many such sacrifices. Your summons is beginning to annoy me.

“No. Him.”

Him? The one whose body is limp? He knows he is guilty—he just refuses to accept it. He broods. He does not understand that this is the way of Galt. Surely, he knew the consequences when he did what he did.

“He is different from the others, M’lady. His sin is his own, at least as the Council might call it sin. His sin, however, is not pride. He did not strive to hold office to benefit himself. He believed in his heart that he could make Galt... better. He surrendered so much of himself and his life for that belief. Never did he undercut another to attain his position, nor did he defame those who opposed him in order to gain an advantage. His only crime was that when the winds of change blew, he remained steadfast. That he was pushed from his position is unfair. That his blood is demanded is worse yet.”

Yet you will sit here and silently observe his execution. Your purpose for summoning me to witness this event still eludes me.

“This man, M’lady, his name is Valwyn. He is strong, a fighter.”

But now he allows them to drag his body. He is a dead weight. He is no different than the other man, resigned to his fate.

“No.”

No?

“No, M’lady. Look deeper. He is not resigned to his fate, of course you see it.”

Sorrow. Sadness. Fear—no...not fear...anger...hatred.

“Yes.”

Loss. Loss can do that to a man.

“Yes, M’lady.”

It happens here in Galt.

“As always, you are right. Still, this man, he has lost everything. Rodrick Valwyn lost his position when the Council turned on him. He lost his home when they forced him to flee to Taldor. And when the Gray’s went to claim him from Taldor, he lost his wife and son.”

Family, fortune, even faith—all of it. Yes, many lose it all. Tragic, yes.

Tragic, but I’ve seen it. Death, destruction, they are part of man’s life, part of what man does to himself. Constantly do I witness these things. Men strive to avoid such horror. They pray...even to me...to watch over them. They pray that such things might pass over them. They pray to be spared from things that are part of their condition, part of being men. I have no interest in sparing them from themselves. Oh, I may delay the call. I may tarry, but I will come.

It is so foolish, so trite, that a man might believe that he has saved a life.

Perhaps he has prolonged life, but he has not saved it. Death will come. Life will end. "You saved my life." I laugh at such a silly saying. "You have put off my death," that is so much more accurate. Man might be much happier if he understood and accepted such things.

"Yes, M'lady."

So you have summoned me here to watch this sad, angry man die.

"Yes, M'lady, but..."

He approaches the Blade. You have brought me here to watch the Blade, this Poor Padriana, take his head from his body, to claim his soul and keep it from me.

Your purpose, then, is mockery?

"No, M'lady. No, certainly not."

The executioners do not even bother to clean the bascule or the lunette. They do not clean the blood of the previous victim from the cold steel. Perhaps some men do understand that death is a part of nature, something that cannot be wiped away and forgotten.

"Look, M'lady, he doesn't struggle even now. The Gray Cloaks do not even appear taxed by the effort."

Still, he does nothing to assist them. His eyes stare at a far off point. It is as if he were not even here, now.

"There is no fanfare or ceremony for Rodrick Valwyn, a former Council member. The Council has forbidden it. Oh, there...do you see it?"

Hush, man. Of course I see it. His body has tensed. His eyes and his mind are now in the present. He is here with us.

"He no longer despairs. He rages."

Yes, his is an unjust death.

"But you've seen such before."

Do not mock me.

"No, M'lady."

Man's justice is like the shifting Osiriani sands. You have sat here and watched so many of these deaths in the name of justice.

"His concept of justice has never shifted. He has remained true."

Indeed.

"And for that, he dies."

It is here. The Blade falls. Poor Padriana has claimed Rodrick Valwyn, former Council member. Yet another soul remains within the Blade, out of my grasp.

Now...what is that?

"Mm?"

The Blade, it shudders.

"Yes."

It shudders violently. It appears as if it might pull itself from the platform. That scream. So loud, so horrid—it will call back Aroden.

"I expected his death would not be easy. That is why I called. But this..."

The blade rises. That strap has the Gray Cloak by the wrist. It draws him in.

"It...it...the Blade...it has broken from its anchors. It's acting on its own. It seeks another; it seeks the Cloaks."

Indeed.

DEREK M. JOHNSON

“The screams are horrible.”

They are beautiful. With each Cloak it takes, a soul imprisoned in the Blade is freed. They are mine.

“It has one of the onlookers now, a woman felled in the stampede to escape. It intends to claim her as well. Why would the blade animate like that? What would compel Poor Padriana to suddenly claim Gray Cloak and onlooker alike?”

It is not Padriana who does this. As you said, Valwyn was a fighter, and his sense of justice never wavered.

“That is not justice.”

You were wise to call me, and I shall reward you. This is something I have long desired to witness.

“M’lady, the woman was merely a witness to the execution. Her death is not justice.”

There is culpability in idly standing by—doing nothing in response to iniquity.

“But...M’lady...but surely...there has to be...”

You are nervous. I understand. You have long bore witness to the Council’s justice and the fall of the Blades. You have silently sat by and watched, and now this Blade, formerly Poor Padriana, now Valwyn’s Vengeance, will claim you if it can. Flee. Go. You insult me not. I, however, shall sit and watch for a while.

...Oh, but do remember: you may go now, but it is only for a short time.

BATTLE-BANNERS OF LESSER WEST PODUNK

By Clinton J. Boomer

I



LD WISHTWISTER Shadibriri was having himself another truly lovely day.

It was a morning of smoke and screams and sweat and sobs, a morning of the dead and the damned and the doomed and the dying, a morning echoing with the clash of steel on wet-painted wood and the shrieks of tattooed flesh torn to ribbons by betrayers' blades. The woods were filled with young men chasing after hot, red glory; with old men weeping over festering, ancient grudges and ugly new wounds; and with fresh-made corpses growing fly-blown in the damp heat of a hazy summer dawn.

It was a morning filled, in short, with delight, reward...and opportunity.

As he strode down the muddy, bloody and night-soiled path between the warring camps, steam rising 'round his priestly-garbed glamer, the ageless demon called the Wishtwister began to fairly skip and sang out jubilantly with the little girl who pranced beside him:

"One and two! Black and blue!"

"Three and four! Gone to war!"

"Five and six! Bones and sticks!"

"Seven! Seven! Gone to heaven!"

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“Eight! Eight! Burn the gate!”

“Nine and ten, and ten-and-ten! ‘Round and ‘round and ‘round again!”

“Hai!”

With a shriek, both of them spun in place and jumped once. Then the girl gleefully dropped a glass vial over her shoulder. It landed in the middle of the trail with a dull plop.

The pair stopped and stooped for a moment to consider the tiny prize. A crystalline, bluish hue suffused through the liquid within and caught the sunlight, dim like a candle. The Wishtwister idly calculated its value at somewhere equal to the pay of nine years’ honest, back-breaking labor by any single member of the little girl’s family—perhaps, in fact, the very age of the child herself.

Shadibriri had not yet asked how old she was. Or her name, for that matter.

His little assistant looked to him. “What’s inside it, Bishop, sir?”

“Eh? Oh. Magic.”

The Wishtwister’s attention was drawn then, for an instant, by another bit of mischief. Some hundred yards back up the road, a wounded young man of perhaps fifteen summers staggered from the tree line toward a similar prize sparkling in the shifting shadows, only to be cut down a mere hair’s breadth from his salvation by arrow fire from some unseen sniper.

The demon chuckled.

“What magic?”

“Hmm—what? There? Distilled inside, a potion of aiding, for the shrugging off of wounds! It will make a man brave, and his arm strong; his fear will shrink to a tiny thing, far in the distance, and his pain will be forgotten. Even a fellow sunk deep upon his deathbed might spring to his feet with a drop of this, and fight like a bear in heat with it sparkling on his tongue.”

“A medicine, Bishop?”

“Oh, no, no-no. It is a compulsion of the mind only, and quite temporary, lasting merest moments.”

The girl nodded and reached unbidden into the clanking leather-bound satchel which hung from the Wishtwister’s arm. She pulled forth another vial.

“And in this one?”

“Whiskey, mixed with a kiss of cherry juice. Very similar stuff, though vastly cheaper.”

She tugged forth another from the seemingly endless contents of the bag, and he smiled with delighted pleasure at her rude presumption. This little lass was a wicked girl, careless and curious and more than a little selfish—though most children so often are.

“And this?”

“That? Ah, poison, and most dreadfully painful.”

The girl gasped, and then a sly smile spread across her face.

The Wishtwister did not bother to hide his grin at her reaction. This girl was cruel, and as capricious as he. “Ah, indeed! My thoughts exactly, and such fun! But before we set it down for someone to find, let us walk another few paces, shall we? Oh, for a.... One and two, black and blue!”

“Three and four! Gone to war!”

BATTLE-BANNERS OF LESSER WEST PODUNK

And away the kindred spirits danced.

Their merry, nonsensical song carried far before them along the path as the two wove further into the woods, wracked as it was with other, more brutal sounds this morrow—of struggle, suffering, and sorrow.

Yes, it was a deeply fine day to be walking to and fro on the earth.

II

The evening before had been less auspicious, of course, but there had been some mad and giggling promise in the storm clouds hunkered above as the Wishtwister, dressed as a cleric, arrived at the little town he had come to name “Lesser West Podunk.” The old fiend had learned to trust those little auguries and omens, even as the ages which had taught him those instincts slowly faded into a confusion of sharp fractures and slick half-memories.

His traveling companion last eve, the wandering, west-born sell-sword called Durnaur of the Legion-Serpent, had of course repeated the name of the town several times along the way, but since it was little more than a wide clearing where a few dirt roads met in the sparse wood, and a good nine days’ travel from anything approaching actual civilization, Wishtwister Shadibriri had staunchly refused to memorize it.

The town had lived up to its new nickname, at least. It was formed of only two permanent structures, neither rising beyond a single story. One of them doubled as both a low-rent tavern and the cheapest sort of brothel; the other, a sagging sheriff’s barracks marred by some obscene graffiti, poorly painted over, denoted the extent of law and order in the region.

These were near-feral borderlands on the far western edge of Galt, some one-hundred-and-eighty miles from either golden-paged Isarn or the gray-bladed gardens of Litran, and more than a hundred miles upstream from the dissident print shops of Woodsedge. This land was ruled by several feuding squatters: close-knit clans of backwoods hillfolk tracing their hot Kellid blood back to the age of Iobaria; a few impoverished lines of well-armed farmer-veterans late of Chairman Rane’s suicidal conscription-scheme; some marked men no longer welcome in even the most brackish of northerly Riverlands port-cities; and, in name only, by a few well-intentioned, ill-informed souls loyal to Local Governor Greythornne, Citizen in High Standing of the Revolutionary Council.

These squabbling, unwashed hillbillies were united only in a shared hatred of Chelaxians...and, admittedly, a certain seething jealousy of Andorans.

This was not any particularly important place in the world.

Far from it.

North, and not too far, were the River Kingdoms, and beyond that, Numeria, and beyond that...well, just Mendev, and then the icy end of the world. To the south were rolling fields, some fallow and some fruitful, all contested—many by marriage but most through murder—and further south, Taldor, and then the Inner Sea and a few isolated places where abject, sociopathic barbarism was, on occasion, the exception rather than the norm. And west, of course, across the surging Sellen, glimmered the gold-green glory of Kyonin, and the shining

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crystal towers therein that none born of the mud here would ever find any home or welcome among.

And here—here there were games to be had.

It was intended to be a peace festival, a foolish scheme set into motion by an arrogant, insufferably educated and willfully ignorant man, seeking to finally rectify grudges older than the Even-Tongued Conquest. By his edict, there was to be a general airing of grievances, a debate and some rounds of arbitration, and then a formal declaration of truce. After that, an honor duel or two would perhaps be needed to set a few stubborn things aright, and then the breaking of bread would ensue on these, the final Fireday and Starday of Desnus...followed by a lovely Sunday for trade and a merry feast.

It was going to be a disaster, of course. Then a horror show, and then, finally, a bloodbath.

And if the Wishtwister had anything to say about it, it would be a great and jagged blade into the very heart of reality, as well, with a few damnations thrown in to boot, as was his liking. That latter part all came down to the tome, of course. Shadibriri would be long gone by the time the real damage started breaking loose.

But such was the curse of Galt, it seemed: interference, and the imposition of experimental edicts by sagely and stalwart men upon illiterate and underfed masses, led forever to screams and terror and carnage.

Good intentions and all of that.

Word had gone out for weeks, twenty-odd miles in every direction, calling for a general holiday and brief freedom from indentured or bonded servitude. Musicians, poets and other men of letters, pious men of any virtuous and patriotic faith, and traders and craftsmen, tinkers and players were welcomed to attend.

The good governor (called Absentee-Master Short-Stride the Tax-Fat by some of his more hostile constituents, especially those most angrily aware that they were, in fact, technically governed) should have been exceptionally nervous when the only vendor to answer his call was a grim weaponsmith, loaded down with arms and armor as if for a war and the only preacher to arrive, a swaggering, smiling fellow in a wide-brimmed black hat sharing the road with a hired sword and carting clanking casks of sweet spirits and a few cheap curiosities.

Also in attendance were five-hundred-and-fifty-some hardened men and women, fifty or more of whom were actively practicing professional combatants; two dozen children from three summers to twelve in age; a host of scarred and superstitious camp followers; an unending abundance of horses, mules and the half-wolf dogs so favored by Northmen—bred for ferocity, all; and, most curiously, a single, lonesome lantern-light angel unseen by most, hovering high above it all.

A more hostile collection of unkempt savages was scarce imaginable

Durnaur, slightly more familiar with the region's history, did his best to make clear to his robed companion the complex lines of allegiances, marriages, feuds and vendettas which crisscrossed here, and how he himself might hope to spin

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some coin from them...but it was all something of a jumble to the old demon. In short, it seemed those under the banner of the bluish ravens bore great enmity towards those bearing the sigil of the orange-red fox, who hated families clothed in the mantles of the brown bear, who despised the folk marked by the ashen owl, whom they considered heretics for some reason or another, and who hated everyone else. And beyond these sigils, there were mercenaries under countless ostentatious colors hired by each cadre, some flying flags most recently seen upon privateer vessels of Lake Encarthan, some hired out of Pitax and even a crew claiming, illegitimately, to be Templars from the far-away Worldwound....

Indeed, keeping score of the seething contempt these disparate, desperate tribes claimed toward one another required keen and ever vigilant eyes, a sharp damn memory, and a dedication to task.

In this instance, the Wishtwister lacked primarily only the capacity to dedicate himself overmuch. Not that he did not care, but it just seemed such a waste of energy. He wasn't really the note-taking type—as had been said before, he was ever the artist, never the engineer, and an improviser always. A single second's spark of spontaneity, he liked to think, was worth well more than a dull decade's dusty design; a moment of madness, in his estimation, would always out-pace several centuries of contemplation.

And besides, memorizing names and faces was oh so very, very boring.

Shadibriri and his sell-sword had arrived with the coming of afternoon's highest heat, and since the demon was in the guise of an adherent to Cayden Cailean, he and his beer were warmly welcomed. They set their camp upon the village green, across the road from the inn and beside the wagon of the weaponsmith as the shadows grew longer, and watched as the unofficial festivities commenced in earnest—with the drinking.

Ever and forever, the drinking.

Then the event began formally, as such things always do, with a speech.

This, the Wishtwister safely ignored, although he did well note the nonsensical confidence betrayed in the knees and eyes of the stubby Governor as he spoke, behind an array of armed guards, of peace, prosperity and patriotism. The book, which the old demon bore among his robes, cried out for the man.

Hmm. Oh, yes. That.

Well, getting the blasphemous text into the fellow's hands—and in the right way—was going to be both a bother and a chore, that was for damnably well certain. For a time the fiend contemplated this, his chin tucked to his chest, idly pondering, pretending to sleep as he and his associate separately counted the blades toted by the growing horde.

Then came the swearing of oaths and the shouting of boasts, some general milling and mucking about and a brief fistfight or two, and then, as the sun lowered and the wine was refreshed yet again, things began to get interesting.

Darkness crept across the scattered camps, and bonfires and torches were lit, and the Governor retired to his little private tent with his patriot's-phalanx. The business of the inn grew more secret, sour and sweet, all at once, and cries could be heard in the shadowed woods. Somewhere, in the star-lit wilderness, a horn began to blow. Thunder rolled over the hills, and the heat rose and stank, but the

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clouds refused to begin spitting.

A slow boil seeped into the town.

Shadibriri redoubled his efforts at giving away alcohol and, in this, he was quite admirably successful.

And then the games began.

He witnessed the first murder of the weekend less than an hour after sunset, right in front of his own massive tent. By midnight, reports held that the camp of the bluish ravens, or whatever they were more rightly called, had been assaulted and burned...although none could agree upon who the aggressors were, precisely.

Shadibriri had his inflammatory opinions, of course, which he loudly shared, and his actual suspicions, which he kept to himself. He had given away a good amount of lamp oil, a half-dozen empty bottles, a tinderbox and some rags to a certain few individuals who had been quite interested in what directions the kindly, doddering old priest could provide into the woods...but the demon had no definite proof of their guilt.

If ordered into a court of law, he would have claimed ignorance of any malice and innocence of any wrongdoing, but beyond even those easy lies, he could scarcely in good conscience chalk any resultant deaths to his own killing score.

An hour later, the sheriff was dead, knifed in the back, open in the street. The demon had to do that one himself, though. He framed a deaf man for it, and paid Durnaur to act as witness. There was a swift lynching thereafter, once Shadibriri had reassumed his cleric's guise and roused the crowd to sufficient anger.

And then the descent into chaos began in earnest. Anarchy, confusion and rage continued into the night.

Two hours before dawn, the delighted Wishtwister had sat in the dark of the woods, hunched in his true, great and monstrous form, and observed a lame-legged, grossly inebriated man with a single eye and a bloodied shirt spend two full minutes screaming at his slowly twitching victim before he looted the corpse of gold, leather, steel and everything else worth having.

The victim was, it turned out later, the owner of the tavern, and there was much commotion and conjecture as to who his murderer might have been. What fun!

Then, at sunrise, the grinning old demon began to set about the next project of his greater work.

And the work was fine, indeed.

III

Old Wishtwister Shadibriri and the little girl were laughing and skipping, now, through a perfect early afternoon.

The demon was delighted to discover how much his young ward enjoyed leaving poisons and potions scattered through the woods; it was rare that he met a soul with quite his appreciation of mischief.

And the games were only just beginning.

He counted their combined body count at less than a dozen, after all.

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“One and two! Black and blue!”

“Three and four! Gone to war!”

“Five and six! Bones and sticks!”

“Seven! Seven! Gone to—oh, goodness, my fine lords!”

With that, the demon and the girl came around a gentle curve in the woodland path, smiles beaming upon their faces. Before them were fifteen-odd men, girded for battle and flying a blood-stained flag woven in the sunset-colors of the fox clan. Whatever their name or their particular grievances were, they were on the march; somewhere in the woods, someone was expecting them, and blood was soon to be shed.

The demon smiled wider. “...And may I offer to you, then, a draught, a dram, a sip, a sup?”

Their leader, a professionally-equipped man outfitted in a leather helm, its face-mask cunningly wrought to resemble a feral hunting cat, spoke for the group without putting his weapons away. “We have no coin, priest, nor any desire to buy your wares.”

The Wishtwister laughed. “Oh...oh, no—you mistake me, fine citizen and friend! I am not *selling* these trifles! They are a gift from my lordly master to you good patriots: elixirs and unguents to aid your cause, only! Young lady, grant each man here a vial!” Even he was surprised at how disarmingly innocent he could sound when he really, honestly wanted to.

A smile-like sunshine lit the girl’s face. “Indeed, Bishop!”

Chuckling, a tall and sunburned fellow clad in loose, improvised armor over rough-spun farm cloth shifted his crude polearm to his left hand and stepped forward to claim the offering, a parental grin upon his face. But the man in the mask stopped the farm-hand short with the tip of his blade...and quite rudely too, by the old demon’s estimation.

“Huh. Such things can be dangerous. I would not consume anything given so lightly.”

“Oh, by the heavens, no! Surely, my good man, you cannot suspect that I would distribute something...foul? No! No-no! I provide only a physic, a medicament, a curative, a panacea. In fact, young lady, take a drink of one!”

The little girl gleefully dug into the satchel at the demon’s side, popped a cork and quaffed down the contents of the thumb-sized bottle she’d retrieved... and as they all watched, the Wishtwister paused and idly wondered, with a wry chuckle, what would happen if she suddenly turned gray and cold and then dropped over dead.

He would probably have to kill everyone here, he mused after a moment, and while that would certainly be amusing, it would hardly serve his greater purpose.

Wouldn’t get rid of the book, anyway.

He’d been charged, by magics most foul, to deliver it, by hand—and all by powers far greater than himself. And so he would, like it or not. If it had been up to the Wishtwister, of course, he would have simply thrown the thing into the woods, where someone stupid would find it eventually...but such things were not to be, it seemed...and so this required subtlety.

Beyond all that, the presence of a lantern-light celestial somewhere here in

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the woods was more troubling still. While of no real danger to him, not even in a storm of their gestalts and the glare of their brightest, most stinging light...where there are lanterns, there are often harbingers—equally unworthy—and hounds.

Hm. Holy-hound spirits.

Yes, yes, of course—the Wishtwister knew himself the match for any dozen such creatures. The stalwart dogs of heaven would break against him and die. It would be hilarious, in fact.

But where there are hounds, well...there are often legions and shields.

Now, the Wishtwister could enjoy fighting a celestial legion-spirit or angelic shield-bearer. They hit hard and flew fast, for certain, but they were weak. Cracking open the little armored being's defenses and slowly breaking off parts of the self-righteous thing until golden blood rained out, its heavenly weapons faded into nothingness...yes. That was fun, and perhaps even something of a challenge for the half-minute or so it would take him to catch and best one.

Yet truly, the Wishtwister did not desire to face a mass of them. Certainly, not more than three to four. Not all at once. Not today. Not unless he had to.

And where there are shields and legions, unfortunately, there are often trumpets.

Ah, yes.

That.

Against an angelic trumpet spirit, well...it would be the flip of a coin, in honesty.

The celestial would be faster by a fair margin—more than twice his speed on wing—and he, unable even to get airborne, would be much the larger, stronger and better-armored, certainly, but likely not by enough to matter overmuch. In such a well-matched encounter, the creature would never allow itself to be cornered and confused by a horde of reflection figments, then caught up and torn apart by Shadibriri's many claws, fangs and pinchers. Not even to use its sword.

They weren't stupid, unfortunately.

Not like humans.

Thus, it was with some delight that the Wishtwister observed the girl fail to die.

Instead, her face flushed with a rosy and healthy glow as tears streamed silently down her cheeks, and her smile grew warm and sweet. She spoke quickly and forcefully as the men arrayed before them gaped in awe.

The demon's mind spun down from the dizzying heights of his calculation, and he beamed a broad grin at the fellows arranged before him on the woodland path. He gestured to the little girl, and resisted to the urge to say, "I told you so."

"Magic! Bishop, it's magic!"

She danced a small circle, between the beats of her heart, more graceful than a coiled cat, and her voice spun into the trees with a flutter and a twinkle, a lovely lyric, gifted by a transmutation of splendor.

The old demon couldn't help himself. "Yes, dear girl! Lovely magic! Why... have another!"

She did, and again failed to die...and so the company of foxes, satisfied with the cleric's intentions, took a handful of his brews and went upon their business,

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none the wiser.

Yes, it was a lovely day!



The afternoon wore on hot and wet, with whispers of warm wind sliding through the cool damp that slunk low in the shade of the trees, when the Wishtwister and his youthful ward came upon the quiet camp of the ashen-owl-marked families.

It had been a bad few hours for this little camp, it seemed, their numbers cut from one-hundred-some to roughly half that now. Wounded and weary men were propped next to weeping widows, and linen-draped corpses piled high in the thin shade of the clearing, prepared for a pauper's burial. And everywhere a fevered hush hung over the camp, so thick with grief that even the children and dogs had grown silent.

So the silly songs of the demon and the little girl echoed among the fallen owls in a jarring and most unwelcome way.

Shadibriri was undeterred.

He knew one thing, above all, as his grinning gaze fell across them: these grief-struck families wished to be quit of their sorrow. Most surely, he could help them in one way or another. After instructing the little girl—whatever her name was—to do cartwheels for the amusement of the ill and the injured, and briefly offering everyone present a drag of whiskey or an unmarked bottle from his clanking satchel, the demon swift-deduced that these people were decidedly abstemious...and further, most certainly not amused.

Teetotalers.

Ew.

Poking about at their dead, his welcome wearing thinner and more frayed with each passing second, the Wishtwister determined that they were, as a family and to a man, strict adherents to some obscure and unnaturally severe religion or another.

Not the Inheritor, sadly. The demon knew all too well that boring, mortal-born bitch and her clunky sword-cross symbols...and he truly delighted in the ruin of her faithful.

But this, the desecration and slaughter of a small, isolated backwoods faith, could be just as delightful. It merely called for sacrilege.

As to whom they worshipped, precisely, he didn't know and he didn't care. It could have been anyone from Razmir to Abadar to...whoever: the one god, with the monkey-face; or the burned one, what's-his-name. That wasn't the point. The point, the demon Shadibriri decided with a grin as he poked at a partially-dismembered body while dribbling holy whiskey on it, was to make them *mad*.

For it was much more comfortable, wasn't it, to be angry than sad? Oh, they would warmly welcome the shift he'd soon provide.

Yes. Now, to make them rage. To make them focus their uncomfortable aching outwards, upon an outsider. To make them hot and cruel with fury, and to make them threaten an unarmed priest and a little girl with violence, all in the

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name of their stupid god. To force their hidden hatreds and judgments out into the open.

In short, to make the world a worse place.

And when they had committed enough insults, spat enough invectives, perhaps shoved him once or twice and brandished weapons and told him to go away as he prayed in his mocking way to the Accidental God he pretended to worship...then he would kill them.

Butcher them like cattle, all, and fling their ruined pieces into the woods, and cheat their useless god in the process as their sin was ripe and boiling enough to burst, and their souls contaminated with such blind, lashing frustration as to go squirting through the Boneyard and down into the Abyss to take deeper root.

It was nearly a perfect plan, in honesty.

He glanced around, then, and confirmed after a moment that the little lantern spirit wasn't about.

Shadibriri couldn't help but smile.

Intoning with a loud, mocking slur the name of Cayden Cailean, the Lucky Drunk, and mismatching a good deal of the barkeep-god's articles of faith in the process, the demon upended his flask and dumped the cheap contents onto the pile of honored dead. He then began flicking droplets of the rotgut into the bushes, singing atonally, as he dug into his purse for a bottle of low-grade, pinkish wine he was nearly certain was stuck in there, too.

And that's when he felt the hard hand of a fighting man clamp down upon his glamer's shoulder. Right around the level of his own knee.

So soon? Huzzah!

Oh, such good fun!

IV

It was just past the last gasps of sunset when the gore-slick demon found himself back upon the winding roads between the camps, his claws and pinchers and wolfish fangs all a-quiver with the simple joy of making murder.

He was idly looking for the little girl, whatever her name was, when he happened across a young woman dressed in the colors of the brown bear camps.

She made a bow, but no eye contact. "Evening, Bishop."

"Ah! And the loveliest of all possible evenings to you, as well! How fare you, and have you seen a little girl about, and would you care for a drink?"

"I thank you, Bishop, but no. I must be getting along—and I've seen no one."

"Ah. More's the shame. Then might I join you on your walk?"

She hesitated, but eventually acquiesced—better to be wrong than to seem rude, the Wishtwister supposed with a smile. "Indeed, Bishop. I would share your company...there are dangerous things in the woods tonight."

"Really? Like what? Monsters, do you think?"

"No...just men."

She sounded like she knew there was little difference, given the right circumstances and the wrong sort of hunger.

That pleased Shadibriri immensely.

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He winked at her. "Oh, come now. Surely you cannot mean that there are men in these woods who would—could—*might*, even, assault an unarmed priest and a lovely young woman like yourself, can you?"

She stared hard at him and frowned.

To her surprise, the old man laughed.

"Ha! Oh, and so, and so...that makes me very happy; you do truly mean that. Ha ha! And you know, I suppose that you're probably right!"

She eyed him for a moment, there in the darkening woods as they strolled, and something within her balked. She wished, after a moment, that he was not accompanying her after all. The demon's glamor was convincing, certainly, able to mask scent and sight and sound and scores of other senses humans simply had no word for. But some part of her, in that space of a heartbeat, knew that the grinning old man was much more—and much less—than what he seemed.

He was like a great and gnarled bulk, somehow, huge as a cottage and thick like an ox, made of great green-grey limbs and shining pits in the snarling black, creeping along at the pace of a man.

The Wishtwister saw her fear, and his smile deepened. "The night is a bit... frightening, isn't it? Why, yes, yes 'tis—and it's even worse for me! For I'll have to walk back all this way alone!"



Under a bright moon on a perfect, starry night, clean and cold in a dark little clearing he had found, the whistling Wishtwister was taking joy in a simple thing—that is to say, he found himself about the damnably pleasurable business of slowly, methodically ruining a corpse.

It wasn't one of his, but one he happened on as he travelled.

It deserved ruining, surely, and anything worth doing was worth doing right. The pleasures of a job well done, of course, were almost equal to the twin joys of defiling a body and of setting a very nasty trap.

Oh, such a fine task he had set himself!

The rations the dead man carried had become subtly fouled by his condition, sure now to carry some grave disease or another, and his water-skin was made unclean with drops and smears of that certain filthiness which only a corpse can secrete. Shadibriri had seen to it that the weapons were made unsafe, each in one of the myriad little ways such things can snap, break and fall apart, and now was set to the task of figuring out how to ruin everything else. This was a chore to which he bent much care. Was it better to shred a fine leather belt such as this into useless, ugly ribbons and strew them about in an evocation of horror? Or should he in fact break the thing in some obscured fashion, thus giving momentary hope to whoever might find it, before realizing too late that it was useless and that the world truly is a terrible place full of bad people?

Hmm.

While he pondered, the Wishtwister idly punched holes in the man's boots with his sharp fingers, and reminisced with a fond smile upon the faint, tangy scent of a gooeey, translucent neurotoxin he once owned, which he might have

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applied to the insides of these woolen socks had he still possessed it. If there had been any spiders or scorpions about, he might have put one of those in, as well.

The footwear tasks completed, he began idly carving obscene runes, sacred to some Hellish beast or another, into the dead man's skin. This served no practical purpose whatsoever, but the images were shocking and disquieting to look upon, and such an action was something of Shadibriri's calling card. Furthermore, it might convince someone that the victim had either been a devil worshipper in life or had been slain by Chelaxians.

Either way, it roused suspicions and ire, churning up accusations and paranoia and general misery and, *sometimes* delightfully wrongful executions.

In short, it would put people in a less joyous mood.

The demon thought a moment on the topic of joy and recalled a sober and stalwart sage by the name of Master Lewis, a writer and theologian of some backwater reality on the far edge of forever's bunglehole. He had once remarked of demons that "bad angels, like bad men, are entirely practical. They have two motives: the first is fear of punishment, while their second is a primal kind of hunger."

In this, he described the Old Wishtwister perfectly; his own hunger, as he understood it, was for joy.

Shadibriri was mad for the stuff. He craved it, gobbled it down and lapped it up like a dog, every chance he got. Riddles, games, songs, skits, funny faces and lovely smells alike. All the things that make life worth living—especially from millennia to millennia and world to world—and he made damn sure, every-which-where he went, that he sucked as much joy out of everything and everyone else that he could.

A finite amount of it must exist, after all. And the Wishtwister was determined to keep as much of it to himself as possible. He was happiest when the people surrounding him and those reeling in his wake were abjectly miserable to the point of homicide, suicide or regicide—or preferably a uniquely bleak combination of all three.

The fiend's wandering and tuneless whistling slowly turned to an odd and disharmonious hum as he finally set about systematically stripping the belt into bits. He smiled; his decision regarding the article had been idly made without his even realizing, and little slivers of coiled leather began to collect in a tattered pile between his clawed and cloven hooves, falling like sad shreds of sullied snow.

And then, a sound.

A snap.

Thirty five yards away. North by northeast. A man, probably this corpse's killer, garbed in light leather armor adorned with steel—a professional killer, to be precise.

The ageless demon continued about his work and grinned to himself, quite truly delighted to hear someone creeping upon him in the quiet, lonely blackness.

He let the man get close. A dozen-and-a-half paces from him, perhaps.

Then the demon turned with a start, and painted a look of startled shock upon

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his illusory face, pretending to squint in the soft moonlight.

“Ah! Who goes there!?”

The armed man crept closer still, all cloaked in shadow, the washed-out colors of his pirate’s motley clashing against the bright, orange-and-red fox-shaped badge pinned to his coat. Shadibriri wondered, ever so briefly, if the man might have been all-but-invisible to more human eyes.

He decided to run with that notion. Even if he had misjudged the dark—which swift parted, like transmutations and illusions alike, before his potent divinatory sight—his fake priest’s persona could believably have particularly poor vision.

“Gah! I say again, who goes there? I am but a simple cleric, and unarmed! Be you friend or foe?”

Again, the near-silent man moved closer, his bare axe blade—perfectly (if crudely) wrought for chopping wood, boarding ships and hacking open torsos—catching a brief glint of faint light. The Wishtwister tried to remember if his glamor’s visage wore eyeglasses. He was pretty sure that it did. He pretended to back away as he feigned adjusting the spectacles, and made a show of tripping over the corpse beneath him.

“Oh! I can see you there, ever so barely! Please, I only seek to give this man his last rites to send him along to the Boneyard to meet whatever god he might have served. I will gladly give you whatever provisions he held, and moreover, whatever I carry is yours for the asking! You need but ask!”

With that, the axe man hesitated, still a dozen paces back.

“Please, oh please, spare me!”

Then the axe man’s voice came, more growl than words. “Shut up, priest.”

“Eh? A-what, now?”

The man advanced, firmer now in his resolve. “I say again to shut up, old man, or I’ll shut you up.”

“Of course, fine sir. I merely desire to do my duty. Oh, but also—have you seen a little girl somewhere around here?”

The man blinked and his eyes narrowed.

The demon smiled and pretended to consider. “I could swear that I left her nailed to something, but when I went back, I couldn’t find her.”

The man blinked once more, and his footing shifted as he became uneasy.

The demon went on. “Ah, perhaps the dogs got to her, come to think of it.”

The man gaped slightly in confusion. “Wha—?”

“Yes...well, I suppose there is that...magic?”

A freezing blight of slick, silent blackness suddenly shattered into the world in a choking spray around the man, greasy tendrils oozing and groping in an unholy, killing horror. This nameless, wordless malevolence sought out kindness and good will, in its cloying, mindless hunger...and ate it, burning it from skin and soul in lethal bites.

It found none.

After a moment, the blasphemous evocation cleared, and the axe man stood unblemished—if, perhaps, slightly startled.

He took a step forward, blinking at the priest. “...Wha—?”

“Hm. Yes. You said that already.”

The demon next unleashed a raw burst of sizzling, unbridled primal energy, cascading in a spastic torrent, scribble-bright and swift enough to sheer flesh from bone. It washed over the mortal, seeking out oaths and rites, promises and prayers, loyalties and fealties; orders obeyed, agreements kept, plans executed to the letter, conscriptions faithfully endured. These, it sought out, only to char them away into something less than strewn ash.

The man blinked again. “...Wha—?”

“Ah-ha! Yes, less subtle than divinations, certainly. But those can be tricked. More interesting, still, that your heart is unbridled and unrighteous, both...so you’re one of mine, then. Now this gets interesting.”

Shadibriri took a step forward, and cast aside his illusory veil. “Try your blade against me. Try, try, with all your might, your strength against mine. See if you can spill a single drop of my ichor before I have you helpless. See what it is you face.”

The man’s eyes went wide, his hand sliding on his axe hilt.

Then a single scream pierced the night.

It was delightful.



The one-time axe man, now bereft of axe, armor and clothing alike, twisted slowly in a night breeze just cold enough to bring shivers and gooseflesh to his naked limbs, hanging about thirty feet from the ground by the pincher of a gnarled beast like something spawned, scuttling, at the lightless bottom of an unholy and oily ocean.

He could not scream or speak, for his mouth was stuffed with various fresh-cut parts of a corpse, and a strip of leather was tied around his face to keep it in...but his rolling eyes, the tremble of his hands and his pale, sweating skin bespoke his panic.

In his mind, the silent voice of the Wishtwister echoed.

“Welcome, welcome, little man. You’ve lucked into a rare opportunity.”

The man squeaked.

“Yes. People like you—my friend, my dear, my droplet, my dulcet dove—tend to get scared when no longer in power. That’s the term, isn’t it? Scared? Yes. Yes it is. Well, I’m here to fix that. Why, if it were up to me, you would never be scared again!”

The man gibbered in his own head.

“No, no, that will never do. Think out loud, boy. Pretend that you speak—that your tongue is not pinned, that your mouth is not bound, that your throat is not choked and letting in trickles of foulness no matter what you do. Pretend, as if your life depended upon it. Say ‘hello’ for me.”

“H-hello?”

“Good, good! Now we speak as immortals do. We speak as the first and eldest of souls did in the formless, dancing time before time. I have taught you a

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new language, boy. Say ‘thank you.’”

“Th-thank you.”

Shadibriri shook the man like a leaf. “Say ‘thank you, master’ when you thank me.”

“Thank you, master!”

“Ah, and very well, and you are most welcome! It was but a trifling thing, to open your mind like so. Now, however, my fine lad, I must apologize—I cannot grant you your heart’s desire on this evening, much as I would like to. It is promised to another—your better—although he does not know it, yet.”

The man whimpered once more.

“Yes. Yes, indeed. Do you know the most powerful words, boy?”

The man quailed.

“The most powerful words; they are, quite simply put, ‘I want.’ They are the heart and heat of all power. ‘I want.’ Against these words, there can be no debate, no shield, no resistance. These two words make the blood flow and the grass grow. ‘I want’ leads to ‘I take’; ‘I take’ leads to ‘I have’; and ‘I have’—well...it leads to all the mysteries and miseries and miracles of all the universes. Just two syllables—less than a mouthful, yet so much more than a handful. ‘I want.’ Just so. Do you understand?”

He did not.

“Oh, do you dislike how I speak in riddles, little mortal thing? Do you *want* to understand? Then let me be clear: I grant wishes. Any wish you like. I can call forth any spell, I can resurrect the dead, I can rewrite time and space. I can make you wealthy beyond your wildest dreams. I can open doors to other worlds. I can cast you across the infinite pleasures of the planes as you desire. I can turn lead to gold, pig farmers to pigs, and day to night. With but a word, I can unmake mountains, reshape flesh and topple kings...but my powers, this eve, are granted to the local potentate, this “Greythornne.” Am I understood?”

The man, dangling, nodded.

“Speak, boy!”

“Y-yes, master!”

The demon smiled. He liked telling half-truths. “Very well. Yet my vast and otherworldly powers are otherwise mine to implement as I see fit; therefore, on this night, I can grant you one of three requests: death, madness, or the promise of power...and of a wish in one year’s time. Which shall it be? What do you choose? What do you...*want*?”

The man shook, but his mind was shrewd. “*Power?*”

“Ah, yes! I am but poorly bound, and will not be constrained even in this way for long. I can teach you potent words, holy to my patron Baphomet. With these rites and rituals, you will have power—over the arcane, and over beasts and those who conspire against you, and over the secret societies of the Ivory Labyrinth who will take you in and make you strong. Be obedient in these, and meet me in one year here in this place.”

“In this place?”

“Here, and only here.”

“...and then?”

“Then I will grant you a wish, boy! Think hard on it, for you may have anything you want. Upon the year after that, then, bring me thirteen human hearts, and I will grant you another. For as many years as you have, mortal, this shall be our bargain.”

The man considered.

“One wish a year, as long as you live, and power, yours for the taking. The first will be free...and after that, not too difficult in the paying, yes? Of course, my offers of death—or of madness—still stand. So tell me truly, boy...what do you *want*?”

In the end, man restated. “*Power.*”

Teaching him of the Ritual of Horn and Haunted Eyes, as Shadibriri liked to think of it, and sending him on his way into the darkness with visions of wishes and power roiling in his mind, took almost no time at all.

And just like that, the world was a worse place.

V

As the easterly sky began to brighten, and with so many of his errands completed, the Wishtwister found himself—at last—alone with the tiny lantern-spirit.

It twinkled high above him, some twenty meters above the earth, a glow like the faintest of candles, shifting between branches and hiding between the morning stars, as it watched the comings and goings of men.

“Hello, little angel!”

It paused, its featureless light and the dim, attendant runes of righteousness that hung about it all but inscrutable. And then the celestial drifted lower. After a moment, it spoke with a strange, echoing and language-less whisper that set Old Shadibriri on edge and grated against his mind: the truespeech of the Empyreal Lords, bane of lies and the inversion of his own sickening and slithering telepathy.

“Fair morrow, good priest. I am somewhat taken aback that I have been discovered—though, mind you, not displeased.”

The demon chuckled. “You are subtle, little angel, and most unobtrusive in your vigilance. My own eyes are keen, but other than I, who here would think to cast their gaze heavenward, and chance to spy a glimmer so soft and so distant in these black woods?”

“Please, good priest, speak of me to no one.”

“This, I do promise. So then, if I may ask, why are you in attendance?”

“A fine query, one which you may ask and I may answer. I am merely here to observe, friend; to learn what I am able of mortal chivalry, of honor and of virtue, and of that integrity on combat’s field which is oft spoken of, but rarer seen.”

“Ah! And what have you discovered, little angel?”

The angel paused. “Nothing that has made me proud, priest. I had thought to find some good here, and to nurture it in what quiet way I can, but naught

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to which I have been privy has been valorous or noble, in purpose or of deed. These conflicts are without reason or merit which I may see: base passion without temperance, hostility without the barest thought of fair play.”

The demon shook his head in feigned disgust. “It is as you say, little angel. I, myself, have seen only one truly honest and courageous act these past few days.”

“Ah! And what was that, if I may ask?”

“You may! Yet before I answer, little angel, I must ask of thee: are you the only of your kind in these woods on this lovely morning?”

“Indeed, I am, friend priest.”

“I see. So there are no other angels who might come forth and bear witness to my tale of true chivalry and purity of both reason and action in the face of danger?”

“I answer honestly: none.”

“Hmm. Then, your brethren shall have to hear of this goodness I have witnessed. Can I trust you to take my tale to them and to be ardent and forthright in its telling?”

“You can trust me in all such things, good man.”

“Very well. I have seen, as I say, but one noble act these past few days—and ‘twas this very morning.”

“What was it?”

The priest-demon hesitated, his smile frozen on his lips.

He was thinking again of the Heavenly host, of trumpet archons.

Against such creatures, it would be a contest of magics...and at range.

Ech. A losing proposition; trumpets were well-famous for their spell-power, and possessed a versatility in casting that any mortal arch-mage could only hope to match.

The Wishtwister did not relish a brawl against such a celestial, in truth.

If he caught it unaware, maybe. In the stunning wave of his terrible power word, with the angel unable to pierce his illusions... No. Not possible. Not unless it was wounded, for its soul burned so very bright.

Hmm. So he would be outgunned, possibly, and slow and earth-bound, certainly, but he might not be *outnumbered*; at best, it would be even-odds as to whether the Wishtwister could hope to rip reinforcements from the other side of the Astral Plane, and another gamble, as to whether he might summon up one or a full pair of winged, screeching wind-demons.

And what use would the things truly be, he wondered, against the paralyzing menace of such a god-messenger’s mighty, ceaseless horn blast? Against mere men—or better yet, against unarmed women and children—the flailing, winged vrock were like the reaping of a whirlwind, a frenzy of claws and spores and screams and horror.

Delight, made dancing flesh.

But in this, the vulture-headed, frothing favored of Pazuzu would probably be little more than a distraction, hardly worth the time and effort in calling them.

And then there was the trumpet’s retaliation to consider.

Hmm. Its blade was a concern, to be sure, but the greatest fear was that

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the angelic thing might simply choose to banish the Wishtwister back to the Abyss; trumpets, infamously, often prepared such divine words, thick with their damnable faith. He would put his chances, in such an instance, at only a little better than half that his ensorcelled skin might innately shrug off the aforementioned abjuration...and then only slightly better again that his sheer will might be able to resist its mystical power if his flesh failed.

Eugh.

Poor chances, truly.

And if he could resist? For a minute or an hour, it would matter not. In the end, all luck of every kind in the Wishtwister's favor and the fight decidedly his—the celestial perhaps stupid enough to fall into the grip of his rending claws—in that eventuality, the archon might simply retreat and regroup, vanished in a wash of teleportation and be made whole with healing conjurations aplenty...to strike again upon the morrow.

And again the next, and the next; a relentlessly unkind hunter, ever weakening the harried fiend.

Then there was also the remote but sickening chance that the creature might have studied the Wishtwister's breed, might have some insight into his strengths and tactics. It might cast upon itself an abjuration of spell immunity to ward against the demon's mighty chaos hammers, his vicious blight bolts and his potent confusion enchantments, all. And from such thoughts were anxious nightmares born.

Could he truly hope that the creature had studied, perhaps, only the living, the dead, the unborn and the undying...yet never demons?

No, no, not good odds at all. Not good enough for him, at least.

And where there are trumpets, well...let the great and powerful Thirteen Lords and all their numberless, nameless, nascent rivals forbid it; may our jests and japes, our scraps and scrapes, and our eternal inventive cruelties forever amuse them and those who claw and scheme their way to take such rank. By lovely Nocticula, his dark muse; by mighty Baphomet, his potent patron; by beautiful, unconquerable Lamashtu, his great Demon Mother—may her black cervix ever twitch and spit; and above all, by himself, Shadibriri, who will one day make himself king of them all, ruler of the Abyss and all it touches, may it be forbidden to even *think*....

Where there are trumpets, there are often stars.

Against a celestial star, there could be no hope, nor even hate. No victory. No chance, no succor, no stratagem nor plea. It would be better to have never crawled up from the Maelstrom and into the world than to think that an angelic star, of all things, might cross paths with the Wishtwister.

The demon exhaled slowly, letting his mind flicker back to the moment at hand. "You are certain, little friend, there is no other archon of Heaven you might call up? None you might teleport to, or beg into our audience?"

"None. None, I do swear. Now, *please*: tell me, what goodness you have seen?"

"Do you...*wish* me to tell?"

"By all means, yes!"

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The old Wishtwister smiled. "Very well. It was you, and only you, my dear angel. You, with all your many powers, who in your decency did not violate my privacy with your divinations to see if my heart was wicked."

A wave of unnatural vileness engulfed the little lantern, and it was summarily snuffed from the world.

"You stupid shit."

VI

So very nearly finished with his work, the Wishtwister found himself, late that afternoon, in the profession of a weaponsmith and in the guise of a moon-eyed fool.

It had taken both some heavy drinks and some heated words, cloaked in his priestly glamor, about the glory of battle and the righteousness of war and the need of stalwart men in these dark times to take up arms against their oppressors, to send the man who owned these weapons away and into combat. But in the end, he had gone—and had left his wares and tent in the hands of Shadibiri.

So that was nice of him.

And, in truth, most damnably necessary...because the Wishtwister had work to do.

The Wishtwister thought of himself, primarily, as a creature of open and unfettered space for two major reasons.

First and foremost, he loved the feeling of raw soil beneath his feet...or stinging sand, or sheer and shattered ice, or rain-worn stone. He adored tangles and rust and gnarls, and abandoned and rotting tracts bleached pale by the sun, shadowed by overgrowth and smudged with ages of grime and disuse. He loved the smell of wind, and of isolation, and the sound of thunder pealing across lonely places. He was always most comfortable walking naked amongst the uncreated things of the world: the uncut, the uncrafted, the unwashed, the unworked, the unshaped and untamed. In the places where men froze, or burned, or huddled and wept and then died of exposure and thirst and want, he found that he was most at home and most alive.

Secondly, in his true form he was half-again the full height of an adult Vudrani bull elephant, and weighed not an ounce under three tons, so he had trouble fitting through doorways.

Oh, certainly, he had his ways of making himself comfortable around presses of humanity. His potent illusions could make him *look* like a man, certainly, or draw him onto the fabric of the mind's eye as small and silent as a field mouse, if he so chose. He could step between the spaces of the Astral and walk with a single sideways step from mountaintop to ocean's floor, and beyond. And there were no shortage of cathedrals, corridors, catacombs or crypts scattered about the world which had been crafted wide and tall enough to accommodate his frame. He could be a creature of cobbled streets, carnivals and cottages, too, when it suited him.

But damn it all, there was no way in heaven or on earth, or any other reality

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he could recall, that Old Shadibriri was getting inside the private tent of Good Governor Greythornne to give him this stupid haunted book. Even if he crawled on his belly and tucked his arms to his chest, held his breath and crept along on tippy-toes, there was no way he was getting into that little demi-pavilion without knocking over everything in it, ripping the roof off and wrenching the pegs from the earth as he tore it to shreds.

He stared at the place, and hated. If it was more than seven feet wide and seven feet deep, the Wishtwister was a monkey's damned uncle. It looked like a child's play-toy, stitched of bright silk in the blue, white and red of the Revolution, and it was closed on all sides, the better for the Citizen in High Standing's privacy, and to keep him from having to look directly at the rabble he ruled.

The man didn't like to take walks, either. Ugh and sigh, damn and damn and double-damn.

The demon knew in his heart of hearts, as he stood and ruminated and fumed, a few very important things—and that he wasn't getting into the tent was one of them—but, at the top of the list was his suspicion that his time in Lesser West Podunk was going to need to come to a satisfying and swift conclusion...and the sooner, the better. Already, he had killed too many. Left his maiming, ruinous mark in too many places. Shown his face and tipped his hand a few too many times.

In short, he had made a mighty mess of everything.

And that was all well and good and deeply delightful, as such terrible things go...as long as he got the hell out of here, and fast. Let the folk here be suspicious; let them tell tales of a monster in the woods and of innocent lives stalked and snuffed out, one hot summer night, by something inhuman and huge. Let the angels of the Empyrean Lords shift between the planes and waste their time hunting after the vanished demon that gleefully slaughtered their tiniest, most foolish of standard-bearers. Let the whispered word go forth from killer to craven, from pirate to heretic, about a wish-granting spirit bound to the forests here.

Durnaur would tell a few tales, and if they ever found that little girl, so would she.

The Wishtwister, for one, intended to be on the other side of the world by nightfall. Sundays are always a good time for travel, and there was trouble and mischief to get up to in every place on every globe. Specifically, the old demon mused, he had a familiar itch to push someone off of a bridge in Yen-Shuan. Maybe disrupt a tribal wedding in the ruins of Anchor's End. Or spread a few false omens and kick a baby over a fence in some rustic village somewhere in the south side of Sarusan.

But he wasn't going anywhere until this errand was run.

Old Shadibriri admitted to himself, after a humble moment, that perhaps he might have planned this one a little bit better.

He had spent the weekend lollygagging, there was no doubt.

With the shake of his head and wry chuckle, the demon tsk-tsked himself for his lack of preparation.

BATTLE-BANNERS OF LESSER WEST PODUNK

Yet it had seemed so very simple, on the face of it: beneath his robe was an abundantly evil text, semi-sentient and hungry—a loaded and lethal weapon of sorts, penned in virgin’s blood by a mad necromancer and bound in the skin of a tortured god from some obliterated world on the forgotten edge of another universe. And here, in Good Governor Greythornne, was a smug, ambitious and cruel little guano-psychotic pseudointellectual with a chip on his shoulder—a seemingly-perfect recipient, already reveling in the mean sort of power that comes to selfish and shrewd men with a bit of political instinct and a willingness to bellow for witch-hunts, and whisper for assassinations in times of turmoil.

This was the sort of problem that traditionally solved itself. How could the two—evil man and evil book—resist one another?

It was exasperating.

And the worst of it was that he couldn’t just throw the book into the man’s tent and be done with it, or hire Durnaur—wherever he had gotten himself off to—to do the same. No, nothing ever so simple as that. The bloody text, whatever it was called, wasn’t in any language the Governor or even old, wise Shadibriri was familiar with.

In fact, the book was quite possibly scribed in a language without any hope of translation by any creature in this world.

So, then, this was going to call for the implementation of magic.

Potent magic.

He was going to have to trick the stupid mortal into *wishing* he could read the book.

It was enough to make a demon want to chew someone’s eyebrows off.

The other thing he was aware of, as the sun glared hot off the weaponsmith’s abandoned wares that the demon was all-but-giving-away, was that there was no way in hell he was carting all of this crap around with him once this chore was finally over and done with. Swords, shields and scabbards were heavy, dull things, suspicious and prone to entanglement in legalities. And they were poor bartering chips in the first place—not like ales and meads and wines and potions.

And poisons. Oh, those lovely poisons, light, liquid, lovely. Every drop a thing of pricelessness, in the right hands and with the right words.

So the demon Shadibriri stood in the sun, and garbled and goggled and fumbled at his appointed task of getting good prices for good steel, letting the fine folk of Galt gleefully fleece a simpleton for the fruits of his “father’s” only livelihood, and he worried, very quietly, somewhere in the very pit of his stomach, how long it was going to take for a trumpet angel to show up and avenge its tiny lantern-light counterpart.

His concerns about fighting trumpets and stars were unabated. In all honesty, they had begun to grow.

The Wishtwister stared at the tiny, taunting tent of the Good Governor and hated, and waited, and resisted the urge to kill every single person there.



It was coming up on sunset when the Wishtwister finally realized what he

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needed to do.

He was simply going to have to get himself a different body.

Demonic possession, unfortunately, was tricky.

Oh, it was *easy*, certainly. Though less than a third of the screaming damned below in the Maelstrom knew how to do it properly, and less than half of those who had mastered the procedure had any comprehension of how dangerous it was, it was the sort of trick that any wriggling fiend anywhere in the Abyss might pick up.

Shadow demons were the undisputed masters of the art, certainly, but there were a dozen brute force cheats that could accomplish half of the same thing. The bluntest, most brain-dead dretch could attempt the feat; the most feebly useless quasit could try to muddle through it. It was just a simple matter, after all, of exhaling one's self into smoke and then letting a mortal breathe it in. From there, it was the merest problem of intertwining with their soul, letting your own predilections seep into their bones and then telling them what to do from the back of their mind.

Which was much like saying that it was very easy to win a chariot race: it required only that you make your own horses go the very fastest at pulling your chariot, while simply not letting anything bad happen.

Accurate as such a statement was, technically, it quite missed the difficult parts.

Human minds, the Wishtwister well knew, were as slippery as a greased eel and twice as wiggly, when you got right down to it. There were demons bound, enslaved, captured and ensorcelled in all manner of terrible circumstances, all across all the many worlds, by mortals virtuous and villainous alike, who wished they had had half the sense not to try such a tricky thing as possession.

There was nothing for it, at the end of the day. It was not as if the tent of the Governor was going to get any bigger, and there was most certainly no way that the Wishtwister was going to be able to tiptoe through a crowd, or collection of armed guards, up to Greythornne without *someone* noting that he had shoulders eight feet wide and cloven hooves the size of a particularly large and deadly wagon-wheel.

And so Shadibriri, still in the guise of a simpleton, shouted, "I gotta go potty!" at the top of his lungs, flailed his arms over his head, and ran into the woods as fast as he could.

He was going to have to find that little girl, after all.



He found her in the woods, wandering aimlessly and alone, and quite possibly, quite deeply in shock.

The demon approached her in the guise of a young woman, close in description, but of no precise relation to the nameless woman he had murdered somewhere out here in the woods the night before.

"Hello!"

The girl looked up, and Shadibriri was pleased to see she had not been crying.

“Hullo.”

He feigned kindness. “What are doing out here all alone?”

She eyed him warily. “Looking for treasures.”

“Ah, I see! And where is your family?”

The girl shrugged. “Dead.”

The demon nodded. “Good. So is mine. I find that I can have much more fun this way.”

The little girl seemed surprised at the remark, but showed little other emotion as she looked away and back to her search. “You can’t have any of my treasures.”

Shadibriri smiled in spite of himself. The greedy minx. “Hmm. Alright, but perhaps I can show you something else that’s fun?”



Dashing through the darkening wood, the little girl’s legs pumping with a fury spurred by a litany of encouraging threats from the back of her mind, they managed to make it back to camp just in time.

Absentee-Master Short-Stride the Tax-Fat, flanked by a dozen armed men, swaddled in silks befitting the richest of Qadiran spice-merchants and outfitted in soft, buttery leathers like a Taldan noble set to embark on a carefree fox hunt, was making his first public appearance since his stirring speech at the start of this disastrous weekend.

Apparently, he was still intending to have his merry feast, the scores of dead who chose this inopportune event to get themselves slaughtered be damned.

Shadibriri admired the man’s flagrant and cavalier cruelty, at the very least.

He approached the gouty, ridiculous and red-jowled figure in the body of the impish little girl. Still, despite his apparent wholesome harmlessness, the soldiers of the Governor’s elite patriot guard brought him up short as he skipped playfully, near enough to smell the imported liquor, tobacco and cheese lingering on the regional ruler’s breath.

Expensive tastes, this one.

The Old Wishtwister painted a fresh and beaming look on his face, and somewhere inside he was tickled that the men before him looked him over, more than once, to be certain the little girl, emerging from the throngs, did not conceal a grenade, a poisoned dagger, or a coat pistol intended for their master.

“Lord-Governor Greythornne, might I beg of you an indulgence?”

The waddling man stopped and looked blankly at the girl, and then scanned, with his piggy eyes, the small, yet-growing crowd surrounding him. He was checking to make sure this looked good. That it would “play” well among the people. And somewhere deep inside, the demon knew that if there hadn’t been a witness here, the Good Governor would have told these men to kill the girl without a second thought—or, perhaps, he would have done her in with his own bare and pudgy hands.

The Wishtwister nearly did somersaults and clapped with delight.

Honeyed insincerity dribbled from the Governor’s sweating lips. “Of course,

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young patriot. How may your fellow citizen be of service to you today?"

The truth—or some element of it—was probably the simplest start, the demon thought. He fed the girl her dialogue. "My father found this book, Good Governor, and passed it to me; he bid me grant it to you. A gift!"

A humorless chuckle escaped the rotund man. "I see."

"Yes, for he knows you as a man of letters, lord, and admires your legendary studiousness. He believed you would find this text, in his words, 'Illuminating.'"

"Ah. And what book, pray tell, is it? I have read many."

"I could not say, although I know it to be unique—possibly priceless! It is all quite beyond me, truly—but he wishes you to have it."

The flabby little lordling scanned the crowd again, and gave them an indulgent smile. "I see. Well then, give your father my dearest thanks."

The old demon inched his borrowed form forward, and set the tome into the hands of the closest guard. "I shall, most gracious Governor. So, then...do you wish to read it?"

A condescending smirk creased the face of the doughy, spheroid fellow as he began to turn to go. "I will read it, little one."

Ah, here was the annoying part. "Yes, truly? You do wish to read it?"

"Of course, dear girl—you may trust me in this, as in all things. Now run along."

"Yes, but ... do you truly, *truly* wish to read it?"

A patronizing smile appeared, and fit tight and fine upon a face begging for a fist. "Yes. Yes, of course I do."

Shadibriri did not, at this point, vomit himself from the girl's mouth in a wave of smoke, take on his terrible true form, and kill everyone.

He also did not ask the man to, perhaps, re-phrase that—which was sometimes something of a give-away, he had found over the years. Instead, he regrouped, and waited for the chubby man and his retinue to begin their departure.

This insignificant little potentate was not the only one who could play to a crowd.

Just as the silk-draped figure was lost in the shuffle and press of bodies, the old demon nudged his girl to speak again, now in the reediest and neediest of pitches. "You *do*?"

The assembled throng laughed, and the Governor turned to address the old demon, wrapped in his borrowed body, in a singularly mocking way. "Yes. I wish to read the book."

"Good!"

And with that, in the quietest of ways, a wish was granted.

By the spin and weave of mighty magics, the greatest trick of the arcane, those alien scratches and skitters of the blasphemous text would now be as clear and concise as native Taldane to Governor Greythornne...and to no one else.

And that would mean corruption, in time.

And that leads to treachery, and to deceit, and subversion, and all the best things in all the living worlds.

A job quite well done, if the demon did say so himself.

BATTLE-BANNERS OF LESSER WEST PODUNK

This called for a celebration, the Wishtwister decided as he wandered off into the woods to find a safe place to vanish.

He unceremoniously coughed himself from the girl's body, and then sent her on her way, giving her the name 'Durnaur of the Legion-Serpent' to be her new guide and chaperone, and a few choice secrets of the man, with which to blackmail him into service.

There was some question as to how all of that would work out, but the Wishtwister had already lost interest.

As he walked and idly considered where he would find himself next, he spotted something glittering, low, in the high glass. There sat a small and broken bottle, unstopped, leaking the last drops of a sweet and slow-acting toxin disguised with the tang of an orange liqueur. It had been found, and used, and discarded...like so many other things in the world.

Oh, someone was going to be very sorry that they drank that.

Ah, and ha-ha, such good fun, thought the demon!

And then he was gone.

NATIONS
OF
TREACHERY
~
ARRISEN

“Queen Elvanna has a beautiful smile if you
don’t think too much about what lies behind it.”

-Nikol of the Jadwiga Anya

ENGL AND ENGA

By Elaine Betts



AMONG THE wagon-folk there lived an old woman dressed all in purples and greens with silver bells tinkling on her skirts and scarves and silver coins adorning her wrists and sash. She sat in front of her wagon with a table and cards before her. Beside her, a small fire burned under a large, black cauldron. She was a talented seer, gifted with the Harrow and wise with years. But, she was more renowned for her fantastic tales that captured the mind and intrigued the soul.

"Come, little children," she called.

"Gather round and hear old Varushka's tale. At the cost of a rabbit for my pot or a copper in my hand, I'll tell you a story that'll send shivers down your spine. Come, come, my children. Don't be afraid. Gather round my fire, safe and warm, and listen to what old Varushka says!"

The children moved around the old woman, bringing gifts of food for her stew and coppers for her purse. She counted them and smiled.

"What story shall I tell today?" old Varushka asked as she hobbled over to the back of her wagon and gestured inside. "Come, children. Reach inside and show me what you find. It could be a magic bean. It could be a bird..." One brave child reached into the wagon and pulled out a pair of dolls. Another child took out a crystal jar, while yet another retrieved a blood-red velvet sack. The old woman smiled.

“Ah, such treasures,” she said. “Yes, they all belong to the same story, my pets. Shall I tell you the tale?” Old Varushka led the children back toward her fire. She sat down on her stool with a groan as her old bones creaked and crackled like the dry wood burning beside her. Then, she rested her knobby hands on her crooked cane, her small dark eyes gleaming as the children sat on the ground at her feet. She leaned forward on her stool and began the telling of her tale...



Far in the north, in the land of the linnorms, there once lived a pair of twins. Their names were Englhard and Ingahred. Now Engl and Inga were the envy of all who knew them. Inga was the fairest maiden by far in all the land. Her brother Engl was handsome and brave, perhaps the bravest lad the little village of Kaldrbrek had ever known. Yet Engl and Inga were as vain as they were beautiful.

Every Midsummer's Eve, their little town held a festival near the forest, and the twins' sixteenth year began like all others. The young maidens wore ribbons in their hair, and the young men made flower crowns for their sweethearts. Inga received more than any of the other girls, and she reveled in their envy. Engl was strong and skilled with the sword, but as conceited as his sister. He took great delight in beating all the other young men at their games.

Decked in her flower crown, Inga skipped along the edge of the forest while her brother Engl had his fun. As she danced along, something caught the corner of her eye. She turned and peeked around a tree, just in time to see a small light flutter out from behind a bush.

“A pixie!” she exclaimed, and the young woman immediately decided that she had to catch it.

Inga was a great collector of dolls. She had hundreds lining the walls of her room from the floor to the ceiling. There were dolls made of wood and of cloth, porcelain dolls, dolls made of glass and of fine crystal, and in the center of them all was a crystal jar with a single word etched into it: *Pixie*. Inga was determined to catch a pixie and put it in her little jar where she could keep it forever, a *living doll*. She heard stories, you see, of how her great-great-great-grandmother Adalrhuna caught a pixie once. It kept her young for years and years, until it managed to escape from its crystal jar when some careless child removed the lid. Inga knew she would one day have a pixie too. A living doll would complete her collection, and it would keep her beautiful forever. She would seal the lid on tight to ensure the exotic fairy could never escape like Adalrhuna's.

Inga hiked up her skirts and ran to her brother. She would need his help, for pixies were very fast and clever. She found him playing in the midsummer games against the other young men of the village. Engl was winning, and making quite a show of it, too. There was only one thing Engl loved more than showing off in Kaldrbrek, and that was his sister. He would do anything to make her happy, and Inga knew he would forfeit the games for her if she but asked. So, of course, that is what she did.

“Brother!” Inga called to him. “Brother Dear! I saw a pixie. Come and help me catch it. I must have it!”

"Of course I'll help you, Sister," Engl said. He left the games and led his sister back to the village.

"We need a net," he told her. "That special net in Mother's room, the one Grandmother gave her."

"I'll fetch it for you," Inga said before she ran to their mother's room.

Hidden under the bed was a long chest with a silver lock. Inga knew the key was under her mother's pillow. She opened the chest and pulled out a velvet sack the color of rich, red wine. She peeked inside the sack and smiled. Inside was an enchanted crystal netting that her mother said belonged to great-great-great-grandmother Adalrhuna.

"Here," she gave the sack and net to her brother. "This is all we will need!" Inga took her brother's hand and grinned.

"Worry not, Sister," he vowed. "With this net, I shall catch it, and that pixie will be yours." And so, hand-in-hand, the twins left the celebrations behind them as they chased after the little light.

It darted along through the forest, leading the vain twins deeper and deeper into the shadows. But as fast as they ran, they never got any closer to catching the light. It danced in front of them, always just beyond their reach. If they slowed, it slowed. If they ran, it flew faster. Determined as they were to catch the little light, Engl and Inga paid no heed to where they were going.

The trees grew thick around brother and sister, blocking out the light of the setting sun as they traveled into the dark forest. They reached the standing stones that marked the border of Irrisen in the growing twilight. Red eyes followed them from the long shadows. Somewhere behind them something growled. The twins held on to each other, looking around at the surrounding shadows.

"Perhaps we should turn back, Sister Dear," Engl suggested. He drew his sword, ready for any beast or monster that would leap out from the shadows.

"But we are so close, Brother!" Inga said as she took a step toward the standing stones.

The little light floated just beyond the border. It let her get closer as she held out a hand to it.

"You see, Brother, it tires of the chase."

There was nothing for Engl to do but follow his sister into Irrisen. As soon as he crossed the border, the little light winked out. Inga clung to her brother.

"Don't be afraid, Sister," Engl said as he turned her around. "I'll get us home safely. Perhaps the pixie will return, and we can catch it then."

The twins walked back the way they came in the growing darkness. The glowing red eyes continued to follow, sometimes far away, sometimes close. Every so often, they heard a low menacing growl. First it was behind, then to their left, as well to their right, and finally, in front of them.

"What are they?" Inga whispered to her brother as they walked along the snowy path. "Why are they watching us?"

"I don't know, Sister Dear," he answered, clenching his sword tight in his hand. "Beasts of the forest, I imagine. Just keep quiet and don't look at them. Maybe they'll leave us alone."

As night fell, the path before them was lost. Engl and Inga stopped.

"Brother, what shall we do? We'll surely be eaten if we spend the night in this forest!"

"Don't despair, Sister," her brother answered. "I shall protect you." A shining light flickered through the trees in front of them.

"What is that?" Inga whispered.

"I don't know," Engl answered. "Perhaps it is a hunter's cottage. Come, let us see."

The trees closed in around them as they walked toward the light. After a few steps, they could no longer walk side-by-side. Engl went first, with Inga close behind. At last, they squeezed through a tight ring of trees and into an open clearing.

In the middle of the clearing was, indeed, a small cottage. Smoke rose from the chimney, and flickering lights glowed in the two small windows on either side of the door. The tantalizing aroma of roasted venison, turnips, and freshly-baked bread filled the air. Brother and sister breathed in the smell of food, their mouths watering and stomachs growling with hunger. The two made their way into the cottage.

Inga pushed open the door of the little house and walked right in without so much as knocking. Engl sheathed his sword and followed after his sister. It was a tiny little cottage, just one room with a table in the middle and a fireplace set in one wall. Someone had set the table with a serving plate heaped with food, a large tankard filled to the brim with hot mead, and two plates and cups, forks and knives set before two chairs.

Engl and Inga immediately sat down and gorged themselves on the food. As much as they ate, the plate never emptied. As much as they drank, the tankard never ran dry. Bits of venison and chunks of bread littered the floor around them as they tore into the food with very little regard for table manners.

"I don't think I can eat another bite," Inga said with a mouthful of turnip. Engl leaned back in his chair with a yawn.

"I'm so tired," he said, rubbing his eyes. His sister also yawned.

"So am I," she said.

"Well, it's too late to find our way home." Her brother stood up from the table with a stretch. "We should spend the night here."

"Are you sure it's safe, Brother Dear?" his sister asked. Engl looked around the one-room cottage.

"This must be a wilderness hut for hunters and lost travelers," he said. "No need to fear, Sister. We will be safe here."

Inga smiled at her brother.

"Look!" she said as they moved to the fire. "I didn't notice those before."

On either side of the fireplace were two beds, and on the two beds were two sets of night clothes. There was a long nightgown for Inga on the left bed and a shorter nightshirt for Engl on the right. As the twins changed their clothes, Inga noticed curtains lining the walls surrounding the fireplace that stretched from ceiling to floor. Mystified, she walked to the curtains and pulled them back.

"Dolls!" she exclaimed. Inga threw back the curtains to reveal shelves and shelves full of dolls.

They were organized by how the dolls were dressed. The first set was of wooden dolls with painted eyes and were dressed in furs. They all had axes, traps, and other woodmen trinkets. Then there were dolls that appeared to be carved out of animal tusks and bone. These ones were beasts and men that looked like beasts. Cloth dolls with glass eyes filled the next set of shelves. Some were simple rag dolls. Others were dressed in silks and furs. Inga ran to the next set of curtains and found even more dolls made from porcelain, glass, and crystal. Each shelf was more richly dressed than the next. Finally, on the very last shelf, was a silver cage. And in the cage...

"The pixie," Inga whispered.

"It's just a doll, Sister Dear," Engl told her as he peered into the cage. "Come, let's go to sleep."

Inga climbed into bed with a pout. The collection of dolls in the cabin eclipsed her own. The more she thought about it, the more she couldn't stand it.

"Do you think people leave these dolls, Brother? They are so detailed and the workmanship is better than any doll I have."

Engl raised an eyebrow as he looked at the dolls. "Sister, they look like real people. Some of them, too real." Engl's eyes centered on one doll in particular, "What an ugly doll."

Inga looked up from her bed and shuddered when she saw what her brother had discovered. In the middle of the cloth dolls sat a hideous rag doll with an empty space on each side. The dolls around it were crowded and squished together as if cowering from it. It was a withered old crone with scraggly white hair and a large nose with a long protruding wart. It wore a tattered dress made from mismatched scraps of purple and green fabric and was stained with blotches of what looked like dried blood. The doll was leaning on a crooked cane and stared down at them, its glass eyes gleaming red in the firelight. Engl took the doll from the mantle and threw it into the fire and turned to smile at Inga.

"Good night, Sister Dear," he said as he climbed into bed.

"Sleep tight, Dear Brother," Inga replied.

The twins drifted off to sleep, while the fire slowly died. The room grew icy cold and frost tickled their noses as their breath steamed into the air. Inga woke up, shivering. She pulled the blankets tighter around herself to keep warm. Then she heard a scratching, scrabbling sound that seemed to come from the dead ashes in the fireplace.

"What was that?" Inga whispered.

"Nothing," her brother answered. "Probably just a mouse."

The twins wriggled lower in their beds until the heavy blankets came up to their noses as they listened to the sounds coming from the fireplace. Inga heard a scrape and a clatter from the shelves lining the walls. She stared hard at it, trying to see through the darkness.

"Who's there?" she asked, quaking under the blankets. "Show yourself."

The scraping and clinking grew louder. She pulled the blankets up as a weight landed on her feet. Something scampered up her body. Inga squeezed her eyes tight as something brushed up against her cheek. She heard a tinkling as a soft breeze ruffled her hair. She slowly opened her eyes and peered through her lashes

at a little light hovering in front of her face. Sitting up, Inga smiled.

"The pixie," she whispered as she held out her hand.

The little light flitted closer and she could just make out the form of the tiny fairy. Another light joined it from beside her bed, then another and another. Inga giggled as the pixies combed her hair and twisted it into beautiful braids. One of them brought a flower and placed it behind her ear. It was better than anything she could ever wish for.

"Ow," she complained as the braids pulled tighter and tighter. "That hurts." The pixies didn't listen and continued their work, pulling tighter and tighter.

"Stop it!" She tried to wave the pixies away, but they pulled hard on her hair until she fell back with a scream. She turned her head to see her brother fast asleep in his bed.

"Engl, wake up!" she shrieked. "Help me!" But her brother only stirred to turn away on his side. The pixies continued to pull and tug on Inga's braids as they tied them to the bed. Then Inga saw their faces.

"You're...you're not pixies," she whispered tearfully.

The tiny creatures were shaped like pixies, but their faces had no eyes or nose. All they had were gaping mouths filled with razor sharp teeth. She let out one last scream as the tiny creatures drew needles with thread, squeaking horrible shrills as they started sinking them into Inga's beautiful milky flesh...

Engl awoke to the sound of serene humming. In the darkness, he could barely make out the figure of his sister sitting at the foot of his bed. The cabin was freezing cold and the door was wide open. She wore nothing but the flimsy nightgown the cabin provided. Her hair was beautifully braided, silvery with a radiant glow. Engl didn't recognize the tune.

"Sister Dear, you'll catch your death in this cold." He sat up and draped a blanket around her shoulders.

She stood abruptly, the blanket falling to the floor. "Come, Brother Dear. I have something to show you," she said as she walked towards the door.

"Inga, wait," Engl protested, as his sister headed outside. He was just able to pull his boots on as she made her way to the trees beyond the cottage.

Engl followed his sister into the wintry woods. Quickly, the frost began to chill his bones, and he shivered as his breath fogged the air. His sister didn't seem to notice as she walked through the snow in her thin nightgown, her bare feet caked with snow.

"Sister, aren't your feet cold?"

She didn't answer as she continued to a clearing. The white snow glowed in the full moonlight and Engl could see as though it were day. There, in the middle of a ring of trees, sat a silver cage. Inside the cage, he saw a light flitting about.

"You caught it?" he asked, slowly approaching the cage behind his sister.

"Yes, Brother, and my collection is *almost* complete," Inga spoke, facing into the pitch black woods.

"Almost? Sister?"

"Engl, do you love me?" Inga took a step further towards the dark woods.

"I do, Sister, mo-more than anything else."

"Then swear to me, Brother, you will always be at my side."

"I, I swear it, p-please let us g-go inside. I-I almost ca-can't feel myself in this co-co-cold."

Inga turned to face her brother, "Then I am complete. How could I finish my collection without my dear, dearest Brother."

Engl fell back into the snow in horror. His sister's blue eyes were replaced by glass beads. Her skin was painted porcelain, fixed with a permanent smile and rosy cheeks. She stretched her arm out toward him; a porcelain hand bore a needle and thread.

"The pixie found me. I was afraid at first, but now I'm better," his sister's voice spoke through a doll's mouth that didn't move. "And you will be too, Brother Deaaargh."

Inga pounced fiercely onto Engl where he sat chilled to the ground, blood and snow mixed as thread and needle tore into his flesh.



The children sitting around the little old woman leaned forward, staring up wide-eyed as she came to the end of her tale.

"Then what happened?" one of them asked. "Did he fight back?"

The old woman chuckled, "Against his beloved sister? Not a chance."

"The next day, the villagers of Kaldrbrek went looking for the twins. All they found, sitting on top of the standing stones, was Engl's frozen sword. And that is the end of the tale."

The woman shooed away the children to prepare her supper. A child or two walking away glanced one last time at old Varushka. They saw her climb into the wagon with the crystal jar, the dolls, and the velvet sack. She placed the dolls in a birdcage that hung from the ceiling of the wagon. The dolls stared back at the children from the cage as if she had purposefully placed them there to watch the children leave. As the old woman walked to the front of her wagon, the cage heaved as it began to rock from Varushka shifting. While swinging back and forth, the dolls appeared to cling to the cage, until finally falling over.

THE GRAY TERN

By Andrew Crossett



IN AN EVENING in what the calendar claimed was late spring, I sat at my usual table in the Blue Bottom, a drinking barn—*tavern* would be too dignified a term—in the cold city of Whitethrone. The place was frequented mostly by trolls and goblins, and the biggest and bravest of the lesser Jadwiga, of which I am one. The ale was foul, and my mood wasn't much better.

There was a commotion over by the door as a frosty-furred winter wolf the size of a pony came loping into the place. Halfway to my table, she changed into human form, not even breaking her stride as she shifted from four legs to two.

"Nikol," she said to me through her thick wolven accent, "I have bad news."

Now, I realize that most people, drunk or sober, would find this chain of events rather unsettling—but White Hell is my partner. Together, we solve problems for our Icy Queen, Elvanna of Irrisen. More often than not, those problems are best solved through the shedding of blood, be it with a poisoned dagger in an alley, or a gruesome rending of flesh and bone in full view of the slaves and other lesser beings in need of example.

White—don't call her that unless you're her friend, which you're not—has the ability to switch between human and wolf, courtesy of an enspelled pendant given to us by Elvanna's ice mages, so that we might better pursue the tasks

entrusted to us by Her Majesty. As a human, White stands well over six feet tall, as muscular—and as hairy—as most men. A tangled cascade of white hair hangs halfway down her back. Her startling blue eyes hold a feral gleam that cannot easily be mistaken for human, and even in this form, her teeth are big and sharp enough to bite through cured leather.

I tossed her the short tunic I always carry with me for her two-legged arrivals. She caught it and pulled it on, not out of modesty (she had none) or because of the cold (she felt none), but simply to avoid the inconvenience of having to kill any of the males in the place. To many of them she is the perfect woman, and some might be drunk or suicidal enough to say so.

The bar-slaves knew from experience that White only bothers to take human form in the Blue Bottom when she's thirsty, so they quickly brought her a bucket-sized tankard of the near-chewable ale the place specializes in.

Her news was important. Important enough that she told it even before she drank.

"I was in the hills a mile or so outside the bone gate, making water, when I saw grass."

"Damn. How much?"

"Not a little, but a lot. Almost a whole field. And it was not dead...it was new and fresh."

I shook my head and took a drink. "Elvanna is going to spit shards."

This might be a good time to mention that in Irrisen, the Land of Sweeping Snow, spring has not actually arrived for nearly fourteen centuries—not since my fearsome ancestor, Grandmother Yaga, swept in with might and magic and took the land for herself and her daughters. The human slaves seem to get restless and more prone to rebellion and violence during these months of Longer Light. I suppose something deep inside them, and perhaps even in the land itself, yearns for the warmth and the green that comes to other places this time of year.

I really couldn't care less. They say might doesn't make right, but it does make reality. And reality—not right—is what matters. Through snow and ice, we Jadviga rule. I prefer that reality to the alternatives.

"I asked an Ulf slave who lives in those parts if he saw anything," White said. "When he could speak, he told me that a gray bird is always seen flying above, just before the snow melts. A tern. The Gray Tern, they call it."

"Wonderful. Magic, then. And with a name the slaves can whisper to one another. Some meddling southern druid on a mission? Or one of the witches, making a move against the Queen's rule?"

"Don't know," White said with a shrug, and took a huge swig of ale. "When you find out, tell me. I will bite it, and hurt it, and kill it. It's been too long since I last crunched the bones of anything that can beg for mercy."

"I'll keep that in mind. So, we're looking for a gray tern in Irrisen. It should be easy enough to find one of those. In fact, it should be easy enough to find a hundred. And that's just on my walk home tonight."

White glowered in frustration, and gulped her drink.

"I know of this tern, kinsman," said a female voice behind me.

A middle-aged human woman stood there, dressed in a rather elegant red

gown. She was attractive for her years, her black hair streaked with silver. The woman was far too well-dressed to be a slave, and far too plentifully dressed to be one of the unfortunate, shivering girls who are sometimes brought into the Blue Bottom and laughingly told to dance on the tables to avoid freezing to death. The witches and other respectable people never came into this hole. So who was she?

"You call me kinsman. Do I know you?" I asked her.

"Not yet," she said, "but you will. It's said among some of the people of this land that fourteen centuries is long enough for winter to last. They wonder who might be powerful enough to bring the springtime back again. It may be that Baba Yaga was not the only great witch from her world, they say. Perhaps there were others as great as she, less cold and less cruel. And perhaps the gateway she used so long ago to come to this world did not close behind her."

Well, then. A breakthrough already. I set my drink down carefully.

"I don't know who you are, but you've just spoken about five different kinds of treason *and* nonsense. The nonsense, I just find funny. The treason...well, I'm paid well enough not to see the humor in it." I reached for my dagger.

She laughed. It might be accurately said, in fact, that she laughed in my face.

"Well," she said, "Baba Yaga is due to return in just a few years, isn't she? Perhaps then Queen Elvanna can ask her advice in dealing with her bird problem."

The woman shimmered, and transformed before my eyes into a beautiful gray tern. It flew two complete circuits around the room, leaving startled men and monsters choking on their drinks in its wake, and then darted out the door into the night.

White howled in rage...a human howl that turned into a much more impressive lupine one as she transformed back into wolf form, sending shreds of her tunic in all directions. She galloped out the door after the bird, in her fury blasting forth a cloud of deadly ice from her muzzle, which seriously inconvenienced three drinkers who had chosen to sit too close to the entrance.

I sighed and finished my ale. "Elvanna is going to spit *shards*," I repeated to the dazed goblin at the table to my left.



The Queen, if she had indeed been spitting shards, had finished doing so by the time I was summoned to see her the next day. She was quite calm—even friendly—as we walked along a windy, exposed gallery high up in the Royal Palace.

Elvanna is a lovely woman, provided that your tastes run to white, white, and more white, with just a hint of blue here and there. Though the icy wind was howling hard enough to strip the skin from a normal human (even I had to steel myself against it), she walked along beside me in a light, airy gown, like a southern princess at a seaside pavilion in the summer. I wondered if Elvanna actually laid out and snowbathed during her private hours.

"Do you think I have been a good queen, Nikol?" she asked. It was an absurd question, and she knew it.

"You know any answer I could give to that question would be meaningless,

tetya,” I replied. “I am no traitor.”

She nodded. “Fair enough. But what do the people think of me?”

“The Jadwiga are happy enough, except on tax days. The merchants likewise, and they enjoy the prosperity that has come with your rule. The slaves curse your name and spit in the snow when it is spoken, if they think no one is watching.”

She beamed at me. “See, then? I *have* been a good queen.”

“Your mother would be proud, I’m sure.”

Her smile disappeared. “I like to think so. But what would she think of me now? What about this damnable *bird*, Nikol?”

“There are more than four years until Grandmother is due to return. I see no way this woman—she is no bird—could survive for that long. From the things she said to me, I think she means to play to the rabble. She won’t be able to help showing herself and explaining to the people why she does what she does. As a stealthy bird she might elude us, but as a loud-mouthed human, it won’t be long before she makes a fatal mistake.”

“And what of your companion, the wolf?” Elvanna teased. “Does she enjoy the taste of poultry between her jaws?”

“She is my partner, *tetya*. And she is as loyal to you as I. She enjoys the taste of traitor between her jaws.”

“I am a fortunate queen, to have such a capable champion to protect me. And with such an impressive...*ahem*...partner.”

I rolled my eyes when she wasn’t looking. “We will keep you safe from all threats, my Queen, be they the barbs of a treacherous mortal or the wrath of a demanding mother.”

She smiled at me again. Hers really is a beautiful smile, if you don’t think too much about what lies behind it.



In the days that followed, I rounded up the best archers in the city and set them to work patrolling the streets, the walls, and the surrounding countryside, with orders to shoot from the sky any gray tern they spotted, no matter how innocent-looking. Elvanna had authorized a bounty of one silver for each one brought in.

As if in response, the number of gray terns sighted around Whitethrone increased as never before. They seemed to be arriving in flocks, and the city’s nights and days soon became blighted by their screeching and their rasping, gobbling squawks. Soon, annoyed citizens were joining in the attempted massacre, with slings or hurled rocks or whatever else they could find at hand.

It did no good. For every bird brought down, it seemed three more arrived to take its place. One of my archers even swore he shot a tern, only to watch it split in midair into two terns, which flew away screeching in opposite directions.

The significance of this wasn’t lost on me, nor on Elvanna. Someone with great power was behind this, and we got the definite sense that we were being taunted.

The White Witches could make no headway in trying to catch the guilty party, or even uncover his or her identity. Was it the woman who had transformed before

us in the Blue Bottom, or was that merely a messenger? One of many enemies? Was she even real, or just an illusion sent to unsettle us?

All I could do was keep killing birds, and hope that more information would fall in front of me. Little did I know that would happen quite literally.

As I walked the streets on an evening chillier than usual, I was beset by a particularly loud and irritating tern. It circled and swooped ten yards above my head, as if its aim were to trouble me in particular. I looked around, cursing the lazy archers who let this bird gad about so freely, and raised my crossbow to take it down myself.

I hit it squarely, and it fell. But instead of landing in the road with a solid thump, as dead birds do, it hit with a strange rustling sound, bounced a few times, and came to rest.

Curious, I walked over to examine it. With considerable surprise, I discovered that it was no true bird at all, but an artfully done simulacrum, made from thin paper.

As I nudged it with the toe of my boot, I noticed that its paper wings had writing on them.

To Nikol of the Jadwiga Anya, greetings. I have enjoyed our game, but now the time has come for it to reach its grand finale...an ending and a great beginning. And what better place for such a spectacle than a theater? You shall find me before the doors of the Frosthall as the sun rises, three mornings hence. I trust you shall have the good taste to hold your applause until the break between acts. With fondest regards, Your Kinswoman.

White came trotting up to me as I stood there in the middle of the street, reading the note for the third time. There was a gray feather stuck in her jaws, which she was trying to dislodge, making funny *pah* noises. It did her no good, since wolves can't spit. I plucked it out for her.

"Thanks," she said, "I've come to hate the taste of tern more than I can ever tell."

"As have I," I agreed, and told her what the note said.

"Three days, then," she said darkly. "Poultry on the menu one last time?"

"So it seems," I replied. But I knew that fanatics infused with such smug confidence are seldom good news. A great deal of preparation would need to be done before then.



The next morning, as White and I walked the streets—she in her wolf form—I couldn't keep my eyes off the maddening flocks screeching overhead. What is the mark of suspicious, treasonable behavior in a bird? Should I look for one that drops its turds more frequently on Jadwiga heads than on others?

"A puzzle," I said. "A dilemma. How do we flush out a traitor who lives in the skies and on the rooftops, and not in the alleys and slums? I have no winged informants. My assets among the clouds are woefully inadequate. But the rabble

this Gray Tern means to rouse is here on the ground. Can we afford to wait for one of her disciples to slip up?"

"We could start interrogating people," White suggested.

"What people?"

"People at random. I chew on them while you put them to the question, and sooner or later one of them will scream the right answer."

I glanced sidelong down at her. "You're joking, aren't you?"

"Yes. As far as you know."

I shook my head. "A wolf with a sense of humor is...a disturbing thing."

"Disturbing is good. Terrifying is better. Speaking of which, shouldn't we be hunting down some Mudfeet and making them squeak?"

The Mudfeet—or the Heralds of Summer's Return, as they prefer to be called—are a band of misfits and malcontents who have lurked around the edges of Irrisen for centuries, during which time they have notably failed to herald the return of even a single summer. We call them Mudfeet because of their favorite ritual of melting the snow in some small clearing, using torches or temporary weather magic, and dancing barefoot in the "spring grass." This earns them muddy feet, congested sinuses, and little else.

"As much fun as that would be, it's not Mudfeet behind this. They have a few rag-tag druids among their number, but even the most powerful druids don't have the power to permanently banish Baba Yaga's winter from entire fields and hillsides. Who would have the power to do so, besides Grandmother herself? Or... someone very much like her."

"You think that bird wench was telling the truth? That she's from the same folk as Baba Yaga? Seems ridiculous to me. If it's true, why didn't she come with an army and a withering storm of magic, rather than riddles and a silly disguise?"

"I don't know. No one knows anything about Baba Yaga or the people and world she comes from, except for Elvanna and perhaps a few of the eldest Jadwiga. Perhaps I should talk with the Queen and find out what she knows, for the good of the realm."

"For the good of all our necks, you mean."

"Yes, that was what I meant to say."

"Well, I will go back to the Howlings and see if others of my kind know anything. If we unmask this traitor and her minions, there will be a great opportunity for bloodshed. That should be enough of an incentive to get them to tell me anything they know."

"Then I will head to the Palace to ask the Queen for secrets. I hope she's in a good mood."

"She's always in a good mood when you come to visit," White said.

"What do you mean?"

But White was already loping off in the direction of the Howlings' den.

I shook my head, and thought that if she and Elvanna didn't stop making these sly comments about each other, I might have to knock their heads together and wait the three seconds to see which of them killed me first.

Tradition holds that Elvanna, like all Queens of Irrisen, is the daughter of Baba Yaga. This is a pious fiction, of course. Elvanna's actual late mother was a well-known White Witch, quite admired for her facility in creating decorative ice sculpture. Anyone mentioning this openly, however, would not live long enough to realize the enormity of their blunder. To all of Elvanna's subjects interested in remaining on this side of the ground, she was born and bred the daughter and confidante of the Mother of Witches.

What interested me was that, as Queen, she had met Baba Yaga personally and was privy to secrets no one of my lesser rank would ever be entrusted with. Unless, I hoped, the good of the realm, and of Elvanna's reign, stood at stake.

Elvanna was reading and signing documents when I arrived...probably raising taxes on somebody or other. She wore a remarkable dress made of what seemed to be pliable ice. It was opaque where it had to be, and in a few other random places, but transparent in rather more places than that. I had a hard time taking my eyes off her long, shapely white legs, which were somehow free of goosebumps.

"Thank you," she said, without looking up.

"For what, *tetya*?"

"This dress took a great deal of effort to make. I am happy to be reassured that it was worth it."

I cleared my throat. "I thought I was being discreet, my Queen."

"You were. What brings you here, Nikol?"

"In my search for the notorious Gray Tern, I need some information that I believe you, of all people in Irrisen, might be able to provide."

"Really? And what's that?"

Elvanna wouldn't be impressed by false diffidence, so I went right ahead with my impertinence.

"Do you know if Baba Yaga has any sisters?"

For the first time, she took her eyes off her documents and gave me a sharp look. For a long moment I thought she might call for the executioner, but her expression never quite made it all the way to anger.

"I can't recall any aunts ever turning up to any of our cozy family dinners," she said at last, turning back to her work.

"Forgive me, *tetya*. I know my comprehension of the complexities of your... family situation must seem ridiculous to you."

"Very true, I'm afraid. But don't feel too badly, Nikol. Did you know you are one of the very, very few people in this kingdom, apart from my own daughters, who can ask me such questions without being killed right where you stand?"

A chill passed through me, and not just due to the ungodly temperature here in the palace. "I am grateful, *tetya*, for your forbearance and your knowledge that I press my luck only out of desire to keep you, and Irrisen, safe."

"Your high favor comes with high expectations. I'm a woman who likes results, Nikol. And I don't really care how you get them, within reason."

"On that point, we understand each other perfectly, my Queen. I will resume my investigations."

"You do that. Find out what needs finding out, and kill what needs killing, with

my blessing.” She favored me with another warm, cold smile. I gladly left.



“I think,” I said to White, “that a visit to the Little Girl may be in order tonight.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” she said. “But you’ll go without me. Those cats of hers...”

I nodded, understanding her reluctance completely. There are a few things we have no lack of in this harsh land: snow, intrigue, and frightening females.

Zoya, the Little Girl, is just that—a pretty young girl of perhaps eight or ten years, who lives alone in a cottage outside of town with her three cats. Before you express your righteous indignation at such a small child being left to fend for herself, you should know that she has been living there for longer than anyone in Irrisen can remember, and has never aged so much as a year in all that time. Though most people know better, every so often some would-be thief or housebreaker or molester of children tries his luck with the helpless little girl alone in the cottage. The pieces of them that remain are invariably stacked neatly in the snow in front of the cottage the next morning, to be picked up by the meat wagon.

I approached her home with less fear than most. I have dealt with her before, respectfully, and she and her cats know me.

Her cottage has been there at least as long as she has. It’s a neat, half-timbered little dwelling built among the ruins of a small fortified keep that was supposedly destroyed by Baba Yaga’s armies at the time of Irrisen’s founding. The only bit of that original building still standing, more or less, is a crooked stone tower about twenty feet high, attached to one end of the newer cottage. At the top of the tower is an open cupola that resembles a stone lantern. Although it strains credulity that anyone could climb up the inside of that tower without sending it crashing to the ground, a warm light can be seen glowing from the cupola every night without fail.

The last time I visited Zoya, several months ago, her snow shovel had been planted upright in the snow bank next to her front stoop, a severed goblin head perched elegantly atop it...the latest would-be thief. This time, though, the smell of gingerbread wafted out of the cottage’s chimney. The Little Girl was baking.

The moment I knocked on her front door, it flew open. I caught a glimpse of Zoya’s face, eyes flinty with determination, as something was shoved into my mouth.

Normally, I would have the common sense to spit out a mysterious piece of food crammed into my mouth by any witch, white or otherwise, but... it was delicious, so I swallowed.

“Sorry about that...” she said. She showed me a platter stacked with gingerbread cookies shaped like wolves. “But I’ve been baking all day, and nobody else ever comes to see me. It’s bad luck to eat gingerbread all by yourself. I’d give some to my kitties, but they can’t taste sweet things. They prefer salty.”

In various locations around the room, I spotted three orange tabby cats, all fixedly staring at me. I munched calmly on my cookie and hoped Zoya didn’t happen to want me dead.

"You didn't bring White Hell with you?" she said, waving one of the wolf cookies. "I was hoping to make a cannibal of her." She ate the gingerbread wolf's head with a smile.

"She sends her regards, to you *and* your kitties," I said.

The inside of Zoya's cottage seemed to be a world apart from the rest of Irrisen. The place was a treasure trove of herbs and spices. The warm, fire-lit front room, and the sunlit kitchen behind it, were filled with sheaves of dried and drying vegetation that I could never hope to put a name to. Beautifully carved, gaily-painted tables and shelves held a constellation of pottery bowls, jars, and fluted bottles of colored glass, all filled with powdered herbs. The entire wall of the short passageway into the kitchen was full of tiny drawers, each containing some ingredient that Zoya could identify by memory, or failing that, by smell or taste.

It was a mystery where she came by all these things. There was no sign she had them imported from outside Irrisen, nor did she have a greenhouse to grow them in. Some claimed she had stored them all up in the time before Baba Yaga came, before the land was blasted with ice. The Mudfeet held Zoya in awe—from a safe distance—and claimed that when she finally reached womanhood, spring would return to the land. The one time I'd mentioned that legend to Zoya, she had snarfed mulled cider out her nose in laughter.

But the smell of all those spices, mixed with the scent of fresh-baked gingerbread, was like a child's idea of heaven. I wondered for the thousandth time who the Little Girl really was, where she came from, and why the White Witches tolerated a powerful spellcaster in their midst who wasn't one of them. But this day, I had come in search of another bit of ancient history.

"Are you here about the terns?" Zoya asked, taking a seat by the fire and waving me into the one opposite. Her feet swung in midair as she perched on the edge of the chair. "I won't help you kill them. I never kill animals, except to defend myself, and I don't think these birds are threatening anyone with anything, except maybe poop bombs."

I snorted. "No killing," I assured her. "Not by you, at least. I was hoping you could give me some information that might be of great service to Irrisen, and especially to Queen Elvanna."

"Ah. So time to earn my keep, pay my rent in kind, and keep the wolves from my door, so to speak." She bit into another cookie from the plate in her lap.

"The Gray Tern made claims that she is kin to Baba Yaga. I need to know about the time before Irrisen. Who Grandmother was before she came here with her Dancing Hut and her Armies of Ice. This will tell me if the Tern might be telling the truth, and if so, what we are dealing with."

Zoya sat, chewing her cookie for many long moments, gazing into the fire as if contemplating my request. It was obvious I had asked a question that wouldn't be answered in comfortable fireside chat.

Finally, she hopped out of her chair, crossed the room, and opened the low wooden door that led into the stone tower. She climbed the stairs inside, and a moment later reappeared carrying a book almost too large for her to manage.

"Let's go in the kitchen, the light's better there." I got up and followed her.

Zoya brushed aside several bowls, utensils, and sheaves of herbs that had been sitting atop her kitchen table, and laid the book down before us. As I examined it, I could see the covers were made of inch-thick oak planks. There were carved and painted designs on the cover, but no title...at least not one I could read.

The pages were made of thin sheets of ivory. The words were scratched, in fine calligraphy, into the surface of the pages, with black ink or dye rubbed in. They seemed to be arranged in verse, but were in no language I had ever seen. There were pictures, too, etched into the pages like the words, and picked out in full, vivid color. They showed two beautiful women, one dressed in white finery and the other in red. Every detail of their sumptuous clothing and glittering jewelry was rendered in fantastic detail. Whomever had created this book had been a true master.

"I can't understand this writing," I told Zoya, but she was already standing next to me with a small spoonful of some peppery-looking black spice she had fetched from one of the many little drawers in her kitchen.

"This will give you the gift of language-sight for a few minutes," she said.

"What do I do, swallow it?"

"Not unless you want to throw up all over my nice clean kitchen. Which you don't. No, you sniff it up your nose, then count to twenty. And try not to sneeze it out...this stuff is hard to get."

I figured that if Zoya hadn't poisoned me with the gingerbread, it was unlikely she was foisting poisoned snuff on me either. I did as she instructed, holding in the urge to sneeze, with some effort.

Twenty seconds later I looked back down at the pages. For a panicked moment I thought the Little Girl had drugged me, for the writing had gone out of focus and seemed to be moving about the page. My vision was clear when I looked anywhere else in the room, though, and presently the words arranged themselves into a form that I could understand.

The translating effect of the powder apparently didn't replicate such niceties as rhyme, meter, or scansion...or else the writer had had a far different concept of poetry than we do. In any case, I could grasp the meaning well enough.

*Pale Jadzia, battle's mistress,
Red-garbed Mira, loving sister.
Warriors raise their eyes to see them
In chariots of wood and gilding,
Fearsome, fickle, choosing, slaying...*

As I read the words the pictures seemed to spring to life around them, and combined with the words to form a sort of mental narrative. Within moments, I was no longer conscious of reading the verse at all, but instead seeing the story told before me like a waking dream.

Jadzia, the beautiful woman in white, rode her flying wooden chariot above and among tall warriors, who looked rather like elves, but still different in some ways. When she saw one she fancied she would fall upon him with an exultant cry, and run him through with her silver longspear, then move on to her next

conquest.

But right behind her came her red-robed and equally beautiful sister, Mira, who would touch the body of the slain warrior with the golden sword she carried, whereupon he would stir again to life, none the worse for his goring.

Despite seeming to work at cross purposes, the two sisters expressed no anger or annoyance at each other, but rather laughed together as if this strange sport was the most exciting and exhilarating pastime they could imagine. Snow and ice seemed to fall from Jadzia's robes as her chariot flew, but these were really pea-sized diamonds. Likewise drops of blood, or perhaps tiny roses, fell from Mira. These were rubies, carved to resemble rose blossoms.

For ages, Jadzia and Mira pursued their odd ritual. The time came, however, when a darkness fell over the radiant Jadzia. Neither the verse nor the pictures were terribly clear on the nature of the trouble, but the words *poisoned womb* were mentioned.

Mira tried her best to console her devastated sister, but eventually found herself shut out of Jadzia's life as the white lady shut herself up in her cottage and sank deeper and deeper into despair and resentment. The day eventually came when Mira arrived to attempt a visit, only to find her sister, and the cottage where she dwelled, missing entirely.

*...Dark Jadzia, icy-hearted,
Soul and body withered, twisted,
Still does Mira journey ever,
To quell her sister's wrath with mercy.*

The final picture in the book showed a dark-haired woman in a red gown, with feathery gray wings spreading from her shoulders to touch both edges of the page.

I gradually became aware again of the sights and scents of the kitchen. Judging by the light, rather more than an hour had passed. But Zoya still sat by me, watching with interest.

"Did you get the information you wanted?" she asked.

I sighed. "No, but I got the information I needed. Tell me, is this marvelous book a true account, or merely folk stories?"

"It is a tome of veracity," she replied solemnly. "The pages can't bear any word or image that isn't true. It's older than Irrisen. If Elvanna knew I had it, she'd most likely want to kill me."

"Want to? Not *try* to?"

She gave me an indulgent smile.

She also gave me three gingerbread wolves to take with me. But my appetite was quite gone.



The sun rose to find me, White, and two dozen heavily armed city guards waiting in the small cobblestoned square in front of the Frosthall, Whitethrone's famous theater. Since the Gray Tern hadn't given any indication that a stealthy

or secret meeting was intended, I figured her purpose was some sort of public spectacle or showdown. Two White Witches, both daughters of Elvanna, stood on the steps of the theater, while two others waited at either end of the little plaza.

I hadn't told anyone—not White, not even Elvanna—of what I'd learned in Zoya's book. If what I'd read was true, it wouldn't really matter anyway.

On the other side of the square from the theater was a small area with several large, ancient larch trees standing in it. Like all the other trees in Irrisen, these larches had gone permanently dormant when Baba Yaga imposed the rule of winter on the land. They had dropped their needles at that time, which had never grown back.

The bare trees of Whitethrone were never cut down, it was said, because Baba Yaga wanted them to stand forever as a testament to her power—to the fact that nature itself bowed before her might. She had not simply killed the trees in some show of brute force. She had forced them to live on, forever, on her terms.

Just as the first light of dawn struck the upper branches of the barren trees, the familiar screech of a tern rang out, and we all looked up to see it descend gracefully into the copse. A moment later, the mysterious woman in red stood in its place. The archers and the witches took aim at her. I'd instructed them to fire only on my command or upon an attack from her. The reason I gave them was that I wanted her alive for interrogation, if possible. But the true reason was that I wanted to delay our probable mass suicide for as long as possible, at least until we knew what her intentions were.

Smiling, the Gray Tern surveyed the forces I'd brought to bear against her.

"Why, kinsman," she called, "all of this for me? You see I'm unarmed."

"You're a witch, or something close enough. You're never unarmed," I replied. "And why do you call me your kinsman?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'm used to being a family embarrassment. So tell me, why do you trouble yourself so against one old witch in a land filled with them?"

"And why do you trade words with me when you know the answer as well as I? You've declared yourself an enemy of this land, in defiance of its lawful queen and her mother, Baba Yaga, who rules here by right of conquest and magic. I trouble myself because I love my land, and I love my Queen."

"You *do* love her, don't you?" she asked with what seemed to be a positive sparkle in her eyes. "I think you would have been a fine match for her, if only these queens were allowed to take true husbands. It's a cruel land you've created here, to deny an aunt the simple pleasures of a nice family wedding. So much needs to change."

"Why do we talk?" White snarled to me. "Why do we not kill?"

"Be patient," I told her. "She may have strong defenses. And we need to question her if we can."

"Let the Witches question her severed head. They can do that, I hear. I promise not to crush it. And if she has defenses, let us *make her use them*."

My only thought was that I might be able to stall the witch, and perhaps think of some way to dissuade her from doing whatever it was she intended.

"If you're who you claim you are," I called to her, "why haven't you killed us

all? Why the display? The theatrics?"

"If I am who I claim I am, then you know I'm not here to kill anyone. That is the province of my sister."

"That doesn't make any sense. White is for life; red is for death."

"No, Nikol. Red is for blood. Blood is life. Ice is death. In Gora, the Old World, my sister bore the touch of death and I the touch of life. This was good, until she allowed death to become murder and something evil. And now, it falls to me to set that right. It works out well for all of us, you see. I'm sure you can guess what my sister's ultimate plans are for this land and its people. If I succeed, you get to live. And perhaps, I get my sister back."

"You know we have to stop you."

"Yes, I do. And the beauty of it is, in doing so, you help me." She turned to look at White. "You're a beautiful creature," she said. "It will be an honor to be rent asunder by you."

Perhaps White felt she was being mocked. I don't know; I've never asked her. But at that moment, she let out a bloodcurdling bay and charged across the square, straight toward the powerful witch. I might as well have tried to keep a midwinter blizzard bottled up in the mountains.

Two of the archers, apparently thinking White's charge was the signal for a general attack, let fly their arrows. One struck the Gray Tern in the shoulder, while the other caught White in the flank. Neither one of them seemed to notice.

The Gray Tern threw her arms wide and laughed as White bore down upon her. She looked like a farm wife ready to wrestle and play with a pet hound. Ordinarily, I would have thought the woman mad. If she had been, it would have been easier. There would have been an end of it.

White barreled into the woman with enough force to kill any normal human outright. The two of them somersaulted together a few paces into the grove, until White came up on top of her.

The witch laughed gaily, even as the terrible wolf savaged her. She laughed as long as she still had a throat to laugh with.

It was a gruesome killing. Even I had to look away as my partner turned that stand of trees into an outdoor slaughterhouse. I saw that some of the assembled archers and Witches were watching with delight, smiling and chuckling at a job well done. Others fidgeted nervously where they stood, and I noticed quite a few rising gorges being swallowed back down.

Ten minutes later, White, finally sated, came trotting back out to my side.

"I love problem solving," she told me, her feast having put her into a fine mood. "A red muzzle and a full belly...that's living. I hope nobody wanted to keep her heart as a trophy for the Queen? It tasted too good to pass up."

I surveyed the state of the larch grove. There were bits and pieces of erstwhile witch spread over an impressively wide area. Most of the tree trunks were spattered with blood.

I sighed. "You're savage," I told White grudgingly, "but effective."

She chuckled. "Sometimes I wish you were a wolf, with sweet talk like that."

I conferred briefly with the sergeant of the archers and two of the White Witches, to arrange for the clean-up of the area. The Witches wanted the Gray

Tern's head for questioning, but it was nowhere to be found. I turned back to the grove to have a closer look.

As I stepped gingerly into the killing ground, I saw that things weren't quite as gory as I had first thought. There seemed to be much less blood on the tree trunks, and on the dirt and snow beneath the trees. But it was hard to see clearly, since the morning sun had apparently gone behind a cloud bank.

I looked up. There was no cloud bank.

Before my eyes, green needles sprang forth from all the branches of the larches, where no needles had been in fourteen hundred years.

I smelled sap. Sweet, pleasant and terrible.

The archers stood around, their mouths agape, as the square rapidly grew dark from the shade of the trees.

I could feel the eyes of the guardsmen and the four Witches on me, and on White. She changed into her human form, which was better equipped for looking up.

"Did I do that?" she asked. "Do...do you think anyone saw?"

I almost laughed at that. Almost.



I didn't hear from Elvanna, or any of her servants, until her first messenger arrived two days later. The message he tried to deliver rode on the point of a poisoned dagger. He wasn't very good at his job, and I killed him easily. To this day, I still like to think Elvanna intended for him to signal a termination of my employment rather than of my life.

The copse of larch trees in front of the Frosthall Theater was in full foliage by then and the ground beneath it fully clear of snow. I heard rumors concerning what the authorities intended to do about it. All attempts to force the trees back into dormancy had failed...even Elvanna's own magic was useless against it.

The choices seemed to be leaving the trees as they were, which meant Elvanna would have to explain to Baba Yaga in a few years how she had allowed her mother's magic to be defeated...or chopping down the evidence and letting the mightiest of witches return to find bare ground where the evidence of her power had once stood. Neither seemed like a very good idea, and neither boded very well for Elvanna's future when Baba Yaga came to take her away to another world, and an unknown fate.

Speculation about the identity of the Gray Tern was varied as well. I heard some claim that she was merely a southern fanatic who sought to loosen the grip of winter on Irrisen in order to make it more vulnerable to conquest. Others speculated she was a rival of Baba Yaga's from the same forgotten world, who had come to challenge her dominion here. The most outlandish rumor I heard claimed she had been Baba Yaga herself, returned early in disguise, to test us.

One thing was certain: the number of terns in Whitethrone did not decrease after the incident at the Frosthall. As far as I know, they plague the city to this day, like flying rats.

And within days, there were reports of a woman in red, standing in the midst

of green fields blooming with heather and gorse. Life, it seems, cannot be killed.

The second assassin that came for me was slightly more skilled than the first. Still not much of a challenge, but the message he represented was crystal clear.

And so White and I left Irrisen forever, to save our lives from a badly inconvenienced and unquestionably frightened queen.

I suppose I could have saved my career by blaming it all on White. She had, after all, disregarded my orders by attacking the Gray Tern as she did. But she is my partner, not my servant, and I've known from the beginning that following orders is not what winter wolves do best. It could just as easily have been my mistake that ruined the both of us. Anyway, I think I prefer the company of a wolf who doesn't hide her bite behind billowing gowns and friendly words.

We left under the cover of night in the back of a covered hay wagon. Zoya had procured secret passage for us, although I never asked for her help. I had acquired for White a full suit of clothes—breeches and a tunic, boots, and a hooded coat. She still didn't look particularly human if you looked her full in the eyes, or if she opened her mouth, but it would have to do. Outside of Irrisen, a winter wolf in its natural form would be attacked on sight by every armed party we met.

I remember the night we left, sitting side by side in the straw in the back of that wagon. She kept clutching the magical pendant that hung around her neck, the only thing that could let her pass for human and keep her alive in the world outside. I looked at her, and I saw something in her eyes I'd never seen before: *fear*.

I took my life in my hands by daring to put my arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. To my surprise, she refrained from removing my arm from her shoulder, and from its socket. She slid over to me without a word and accepted the comfort. It was a time for firsts in Irrisen, and for White and me too.



And now you know the true story behind Nikol and White, the famous “brother and sister” mercenaries, leaders of the White Band, praised and cursed in every tavern and council hall throughout half a dozen kingdoms of the Inner Sea. Keep the story to yourself, and you will live longer.

But if you have any news of what became of the larches of Whitethrone, I'll make you richer for the telling of it.

THE CHANGE

By Crystle Stevenson

HE TOLD me he recorded everything: weather patterns, distance traveled, flora and fauna, notes of people he met, sketches of what he'd done—even a map of his journey from Absalom.

All done for posterity, so others like him could read about his experiences, his *chronicles*.

The more he talked, the less he wrote and the more excited he became. I could see wanderlust in his eyes and an eagerness to see the world. He threw his writing to the ground and stood up, withdrawing a magnificently carved panpipe. Grinning, he closed his eyes and began to play a ballad. At first it was whimsical, but then it lingered on a soft note. The frail sound created a terrible longing within me, a sadness I'd never be rid of.

I turned away to load supplies on our pack animal, concealing my tears. I didn't want him to see how his playing affected me. Though I desired to praise him, I couldn't; I worried he might see me as being naive.

The song was a creation of his, something unique only to him. I believe my silence implied that I didn't appreciate his music, so I decided to say something.

However, before I could speak, the winter forest swayed as a terrible gust shot through the area. The wind rustled the trees and the woods made their own song.

The wind's tune became louder than Jaik's, and his white skin cloak lifted up and flew off. Between the creaks of the branches and the air rushing through the pines, I heard a subtle feminine laughter.

"Well, someone's always a critic," he exclaimed, chasing after his cloak.

It was at that moment I knew...I felt something for Jaik.

I had first met him in my home town of Algidheart. He retained my services for a journey to the outskirts of Crowtop, a fabled village whose people miraculously disappeared from history. Normally I would refuse such a fool's request, but Jaik had a certain guile which made it hard to resist. Somewhere in the conversation he mentioned my eyes, saying how beautifully different they were. I scoffed at his comment, for I'd been ridiculed most my life for having two different colored eyes. He put his hand out before us to cover half my face, moving it slightly left and right to observe the contrast of my one green and turquoise eye. He marveled at the difference and I could tell he appreciated them. Quite the charmer, his flattery endeared me to him, but it wasn't enough to sway me to his cause. I did, however, want to experience the deeper wilds. I was turning nineteen and had a desire to see something beyond my town. My rise in the Circle of druids proved I was ready, and the Elders agreed. Jaik's offer couldn't have come at a better time.

We set out with my pack animal, Tayla and my owl, Ademir to lands few traveled. The first week of our trek had been pleasant and the winds calm. I taught Jaik about the terrain, pointing out edible plants, and instructed him on navigating by the stars. It was common knowledge, something the elders of my Circle taught every child, but our children learned in the safe confines of our village. For an outsider such as Jaik, it was imperative he master it quickly. Unfortunately, he wasn't the fastest learner, so I kept on him, making sure he repeated my instructions. If he failed to remember, I reminded him the consequence was death.

I was a demanding teacher, but not as harsh as nature would be if Jaik failed to heed my lessons. As he chased after his cloak, I couldn't help but smirk. I had told him a simple shoe tie would not suffice in the wilds of Irrisen, but it seemed he preferred to learn the hard way.

The wind calmed and Jaik reached his cloak. He brushed the snow off it and threw it back on. I removed my smile as he turned, sternly staring him down.

Sensing another reprimand, he walked up, holding out his pipes. "Here, let me teach you how to play, and hopefully the wind will have no objections."

I saw through this diversion but decided to go along. I took the panpipes and blew—but despite my effort, I couldn't blow hard enough to make a sound. I impatiently tried again, but banged my tooth against his pipes.

I expected a rebuke, but Jaik was gracious, simply telling me how to hold the instrument properly and exhale using my diaphragm. I was about to try once more when he asked to see his pipes. I handed them back, noticing a deep scratch where my tooth had connected.

"Wow, it's like you took a bite out of it," he said, mystified.

I apologized, and he accepted.

The depth of the graze surprised me and I ran my tongue along my teeth to discover the edges were sharper than I remembered. It was odd to feel the protruding ends, but it didn't feel any sharper than before.

This was the beginning of my *change*, and the first sign of what was to come. I chose to ignore it.

I tried to study my teeth further with a hand mirror, but another strong wind blew through the forest, and the sky went from crisp blue to dull gray. I gave up my study and decided we had to move before more clouds appeared. We struck camp and made our way out, hoping the weather would remain overcast, but the coming storm had other ideas; the winds picked up, turning to gusts and ushering in dark clouds. Soon, heavy falling snow slowed our progress as a brutal gale blasted us across the open landscape while we trudged through its wake. Our breathing turned into thick misty clouds and the temperature plummeted. I thought it couldn't get worse until my ears popped from a massive pressure blowing straight down on us. All sounds were drowned out as a blizzard descended upon us.

We couldn't see each other anymore, and our ropes tied to Tayla were the only thing keeping us from being separated.

As evening drew near, the wind raged against our faces and snowflakes cut like blades slicing our skin. This was not a problem for me because I was gifted at birth with indifference to the cold, but I could still tell this was the kind of chill that killed. Jaik stumbled with every step and tried to keep his cloak tightly around him. I huddled close to Tayla, doing my best to shield her from the brunt of the storm. It did little good, and even my owl, Ademir hid in a sack on Tayla's side.

Though big-hearted and sturdy by nature, brave Tayla couldn't take much more. I wasn't surprised when she abruptly stopped, preparing to lie down in the snow, to die.

"Jaik? Help me get Tayla moving!" I yelled, but he never came. I tugged Jaik's rope, but he didn't pull back. Quickly, I followed his line making my way to him until I saw his body lying in the snow. Terrified, I flipped him over to see his face had turned completely blue. Tayla had been dragging him.

"Jaik," I yelled but he didn't respond.

I looked back at Tayla and shook my head; she would have to carry him.

I tried to lift him up but between his gear and the snow sticking to him, I could barely carry his weight. Lifting him slowly, I took on the heavy load as the wind tried to topple me. I made my way back to Tayla and gently placed his body on top of her. She sighed from the extra weight and I hugged the animal with icy tears. Her tail flicked, returning the sentiment; she felt the direness of the situation.

I prayed for deliverance from the storm, taking deep slow breaths.

"*This way,*" I heard a lithe voice whisper to my right.

In the distance the snow cleared, and I could see further than before. I spotted a cave with a marking of an elder's rune above its entrance. Impossible to find in the squall, I knew the voice was aiding us.

"*Hurry,*" it said.

I turned Tayla towards the cave, heading for a copse of trees that would shield and guide us the rest of the way. Hastily, we rushed forward as Jaik slowly began to slip off. We barely made it to the trees as he hit the ground. I lifted him upon Tayla once more as the blizzard returned in full. We then moved from tree to tree, until none remained. I hoped the cave was near, and I blindly put my arms out until I felt rock. I pulled my rope and Tayla followed. Hugging the rock, I slid to

my right until I came to an opening. We had made it.

I picked up whatever dead wood I could find at the entrance and dragged it in, pulling Tayla behind. Quickly, I built a fire and then tethered Tayla close to the flames. Ademir made a terrible racket, scratching Tayla through his sack. I pulled him out and he fluttered to the fire. Tayla limbered and breathed with a gurgling breath. I feared she would collapse in her delicate condition, so I unloaded Jaik and he groggily began to shiver as his temperature began to rise. It was a relief to see him breathing. Smoke started to build in the cave and Jaik coughed as it hung heavily in the air.

For an hour I rubbed Jaik down, finally draping him in a warm blanket. I then set about thawing turnip roots to feed Tayla. I made a stand over the fire and took out the remains of some potato leek soup, dropping the frozen clump into a pot. I hung the kettle over the flames and walked outside to gather more wood and fetch some snow to thaw. Jaik huddled between Tayla and the fire, rubbing his hands incessantly. Even Ademir crept closely enough to the flames to catch fire.

Two days passed with everyone cold and miserable, save myself. We huddled together in the cave while the weather ran its course. It was nature's blessing that none of us suffered frostbite or pneumonia.

The howling winds eventually died and we dug our way out, finding the squall had calmed to a light snowfall.

Once again, I tethered our ropes to Tayla and let Ademir take flight to scout ahead.

The snow was incredibly deep and we proceeded slowly. By late afternoon we had barely trudged a few miles, but we had reached one of our landmarks and the snow had begun to thin. From there on it was all new territory for me.

The druids of my Circle warned of the many dangers in that region, but the worst was known as the Frozen Fog. They often talked about it with whispered voices, calling it an abomination of nature and something to be avoided. But the Frozen Fog bordered on a path that was the quickest way to our destination. It was also known to make sudden shifts and swallow up unwary travelers who walked the path. I was warned that one had to outweigh the risks of an extended journey around the fog as opposed to travelling a shorter distance near it.

I told Jaik what I knew and he chose the shorter path, but later I realized he chose the Fog itself.

"We must not stop while we are near the fog," I demanded.

He agreed but was oddly distant.

We traveled for three more days until we reached the mist of the fog. True to what I had heard, it never moved, but as we walked further down the trail, it rested closer to our path. A breeze blew against it from our direction, but it remained still, unnaturally fixed in place. Jaik smiled when he looked upon it, excited to see a wonder he could write about.

"I want to go closer to see what all the fuss is," he stated seriously.

"No, Jaik!"

He sighed and looked to the mist longingly and we continued on. After a few hours I could see the mist receding behind us, and I slowly exhaled a sigh of relief.

"Are we clear of it?" he said disappointedly.

“Yes, we are safe to move...”

Jaik turned back, walking towards the fog.

“Please Jaik, don’t go!”

“It’ll be alright,” he replied, not looking back.

It hurt to see he didn’t respect me. As his guide, I knew I had failed to convey the risk he was taking. I doubted my credibility and contemplated how I had failed to convey the danger.

Given his behavior, I considered turning back to Algidheart before Jaik got us both killed. It also had become clear to me that Jaik was planning to enter Crowtop itself. I wanted to walk on and let whatever the gods had in store for him occur; but I felt responsible and turned around, keeping a respectful distance.

As he neared the fog, I waited for the worst. He paused a moment to study an ice-encrusted tree. I could see frozen sap that had leaked from gaping wounds in the bark. Oblivious to his danger, he paid no attention to the fog. I moved a little closer to watch over him, keeping my eyes fixed on the mist.

Are all Pathfinders this foolish? I thought.

Clouds darkened as early twilight fell. Pale frost reflected off the sun’s fading glow and an eerie beauty settled in.

“Sweet Shelyn!” he cried.

In a slight depression, closer to the mist laid the corpse of a lacerated bull elk. Jaik walked over to examine its deep cuts which were rimmed with frozen blood.

“The Frozen Fog did this?”

“Yes, you fool!” I whispered harshly from a safer place down the path.

My heart raced for my last whisper seemed unbearably loud, but I had to be sure Jaik heard me. If the fog moved just a few feet, it would take him. I held Tayla’s rope tightly with sweaty palms and dared to open my mouth again, “It isn’t safe here, Jaik! The fog’s chill kills everything it touches.”

He nodded in understanding, looking at the mist with new respect and stepped back.

Relieved, I turned away pulling Tayla. Jaik followed a few steps behind, but without a word, turned impulsively back. He pulled out a knife to scrape a bit of crystallized blood from the elk. I frowned as he placed a sample in a thin vial. Satisfied, he put the sample into a belt loop.

“Is this worth dying for?” I whispered furiously as he stepped away from the corpse.

He yelled back to me above my whispering, “I want to study it, and I disagree that there is a danger.” I winced from the indiscretion of his raised voice. It came off oddly as a taunt to the Frozen Fog. I could feel my blood boiling as anger coursed through my veins. Almost immediately I was overcome with thoughts of how I would bury Jaik’s body once his curiosity had gotten the best of him. I didn’t want to care about him and I wondered if he would even get the chance to apply anything I taught him.

I remained silent in my thoughts, even though I wanted to scream. I would never understand why he did these things in the name of his research.

As he walked closer to me, he gingerly tapped the vial he had slipped into his belt. I looked over his shoulder at the mist and noticed the bull was no longer

visible.

The mist had moved!

Shock crossed my face and Jaik changed his cavalier attitude to one of concern.

Strands of the Frozen Fog suddenly shot through the air, moving fast toward us. I could sense malevolence in its intent and there was little time to react.

“Run, Jaik!” I slapped Tayla on the rump and raced down the path, looking back to see him turn to face the fog. Misty feelers from the strands set out to surround Jaik, and I wondered if he would remain there long enough for them to kill him. They displaced the air and coiled about, erratically twisting in a rhythmic motion.

Jaik turned and ran just as they tried to envelope him. In response to the failed attempt, the whole fog moved at us, enveloping everything in its path. Strange sounds began to erupt from behind as trees, once brown, turned crystal white, cracking and popping. The sound wasn’t only behind us, but to our left and right, growing louder all around as the fog attempted to encircle us.

I looked ahead to see the setting sun in the distance. The far-off light began to grow stronger as it narrowed, shining with ever more intensity. It eclipsed on the horizon and its brightness seemed to ebb out. As the sun disappeared, I saw one more ray of light slip out from behind the hills. It blasted forth, knocking me off my feet, filling my vision with bright whiteness. I hit the dirt with a hazy glow all around, lying on the snow, feeling nothing, overwhelmed by a powerless state. Jaik pulled me to my feet and we continued running, but I felt myself becoming more fluid and less in control.

He grimaced as we moved on and Tayla pranced ahead faster than we could keep up. On my peripheries I could see the fog flowing ahead of us, and I didn’t dare look behind.

“Why did I agree to this trip?” I said as I staggered to the ground.

Jaik did not answer; his stupidity was too clear. He held out his hand and helped me up, but I wobbled forward into his arms. Sighing, he felt how weak I was and put my arm around his neck as he helped me along.

I still wonder how I allowed myself to get into that situation. Up to that point in my life I had lived carefully. Algidheart was a safe place that I loved. I would have belittled anyone’s suggestion of my leaving the place, no matter how attractive the man paying me was or what influence I would gain in my Circle.

No, Jaik wasn’t enough to get me to leave, and now I realized that my Circle’s wishes weren’t enough either. So why was I about to die in the Frozen Fog’s path?

Jaik continued to try to save us, to keep moving. I could feel my feet dragging on the ground as he sometimes picked me up. I remember thinking what a fool he had been to squander our lives over a vial of elk blood.

I thought back to when we had first met. I remember seeing him standing next to his boat on the dock at Algidheart. He had come on the first ship of the season and before he even said anything, I knew he was going to take me somewhere. Somewhere I wanted to go.

Had he not come, would I have gone anyway?

It’s difficult to recall why I did what I did during *the change*. I try to piece it together, how I felt before meeting Jaik, before he hired me. I try to remember if

I was excited at all when he mentioned our destination.

Did I even have a genuine desire to help him, or was it just fate that we were heading in the same direction?

When did I feel the need to leave?

When did I feel the need to care for him?

Jaik desperately dragged me along with my arm over his shoulder. I could smell the sweat on his neck and recognized the terror in his eyes. It tempted me, excited me. He looked into my eyes and I could see he was completely spent, and I smiled at the thought of feeling the Frozen Fog's chilling embrace. My tolerance to the chill wouldn't be enough to save me, and secretly I wished to feel the sensation of cold. I put strength under my foot so I could stand. I wanted to witness my death with my eyes wide open. Jaik mistook this as a sign I could carry myself and loosened his grip, believing I had my strength back.

My legs collapsed beneath me. I hit the ground on my back and stared up into the patterns of snow-laden tree branches. Jaik's worried face towered above yelling something I couldn't hear as all turned dark. A giant forest appeared before me. I knew it well and it spoke to me through several voices on a gentle breeze. I couldn't make out any distinct sounds, but I did hear one word which assaulted my very soul.

I screamed louder than I ever had before as every painful syllable invaded my mind with oppressive force. All reason and thought vanished. My body reacted with no self-control.

"Easy, Runa! Easy!" my arms flailed about as my body shook violently. Jaik grabbed my arms and held me tightly, more than anyone ever had.

"It's okay, Runa, it's okay." He rocked me in his arms as I lay in the snow. All around, an intense light made it hard to keep my eyes open. I winced and my head hurt as I tasted colors. All along, the terrible popping and cracking of the trees echoed around us.

The word.

What was the word?

I had forgotten.

Jaik helped me to my feet and we moved forward as the fog suddenly came at us from the left and right. Frustrated, Jaik picked me up and ran with me in his arms. The fog changed direction again, racing along our sides to get ahead of us. As he ran with me I could see the fog banking inward, trying to close the gap in front of us. Jaik increased his strides, running at an uncontrolled gallop until he made a mad leap. The fog shut behind us and we rolled down a hill out of control, tumbling and sliding until we came to a stop. Above, the fog hesitantly swirled before quickly pulling back.

I didn't want to go on anymore. I couldn't make any sense of the purpose of our journey.

I didn't feel like Jaik's equal, either. He was seeing me in a state I had never experienced, and I considered asking him if he was willing to turn back if I gave him what remained of his payment.

However, I knew what the outcome would be, even if he agreed.

He would find another way to Crowtop without me.

Realizing that truth, I wished for Jaik to abandon his foolish infatuation with Crowtop, but we both got up and moved forward.

He wouldn't be satisfied giving up, and I wanted to keep him alive, if I could. I would have to see him to his journey's end.

Heading back to the path, we both watched the mist recede and the sounds of cracking, frozen trees slowly faded. Jaik continued to hold my arm around his neck, carrying my weight. Dizzy and tired, I let my head droop until I began to smell vomit in the air and heat rising over my head. Another surge of intensity shot through me, but this time it was a lancing pain. I reeled as my fingertips pulsed and it felt like piercing razors had been shoved into my flesh. I could taste blood on my tongue and I wondered if I had bit myself.

"Runa, are you okay?" Jaik laid me down and examined me. He gently brushed my hair from my face to feel my forehead.

"Yes," I nodded, waving him away.

He moved back, staring at me. "Are you sure you're alright? Perhaps I can go on..."

"I'm fine," I said, knowing his next words, "I just..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

He didn't say more, but his concern worried me.

Glaring, I feigned feeling better, but he seemed deep in thought as I lay in the snow. I pulled my gloves off to see my fingers. They appeared as they always did and the pain was no more.

"Looks like we'll just camp here," he said. I looked up and saw the stars coming out between the clouds and closed my eyes.

Jaik unloaded Tayla and built my tent in the failing light while I fell fast asleep. I think I thanked him for doing so but I can't remember.

As a child, I had a dream I would experience over and over. I called it my favorite dream. In it, I would be flying high above the clouds, looking down at the Rimeflow. There, the air would caress my feathered wings until I decided to drop towards the river. Then I would pull my wings together, diving at the water until the final moment, where I would spread my wings once more to cruise along the bank. Icy droplets sprayed up from the tumbling river waters, and from there I spied my prey coming to drink on the embankment. Seeing me, they would run for cover as I plunged at them. I put my talons before me and scooped one up by piercing its skin. It screeched as I made broad strokes of my wings, lifting us higher and higher into the sky where I could find a clearing. Then, when I was sure there were no predators to be seen, I retracted my talons and my prey fell to its death.

It had been years since I experienced that dream, but that night it happened exactly the way I remembered it.

When I awoke, it took several moments to realize I was no longer flying. I was human, but something was different. My hands ached once more and the tips of my gloves were wet with a rank smell. I took them off, to examine my fingers.

There are many things about *the change* that are terrifying; but there is no moment that is worse than that first realization something is happening, and you

don't know why, or if it will stop.

I gasped, unable to hold what was in my stomach. Vomit flew from my mouth. My pretty fingers had grown thick, black talons, and pus wept around the eruptions. I was scared...worried what Jaik would say if he saw them. Quickly, I put my gloves on and crawled from my tent to see if he was awake.

I looked around the camp and noticed Jaik's tent had fallen during the night. I could make out his figure beneath it, and for a moment, I was terrified something happened to him. I lifted his tent flap. He didn't stir, but I saw his chest rising and falling. I should have dropped the flap back down, but I left it open, leaving him slightly exposed. He was beautiful in his sleep, and I remember crying, for I'd never get the chance to touch his tanned skin. My hands were no longer instruments of affection, but unsightly claws. The thought of Jaik seeing them was repulsive and I went to strike my tent to keep my mind off them.

He awoke later, after I had packed Tayla for the day's travel ahead. He wrote in his journal and ate dried fruit, after which he packed his gear. During that time I went behind Tayla and took one of my gloves off. My skin had become wrinkled and tough around the talons. I ran its sharp edge along Tayla's harness, adding pressure as I slid it across. Slowly, it cut deeper into the leather, almost effortlessly. Jaik walked up to me and I sheathed my hand once more.

"You ready?" he said, turning to the path.

I nodded.



We reached Kallagard a few days later. It was a small town, nestled beside the Marbleflow River. I didn't know much about it, but the place was known for its river crossing, and we had to cross.

The town was much smaller than my home of Algidheart, and on every building the eaves were decorated with the same gingerbread work used in Whitethrone. We had little time to appreciate the architecture, as it was late in the day and I'd hoped to get a good start towards Hoarwood before nightfall, but Jaik changed his mind about hurrying to Crowtop when he learned the town had an inn. He wanted a night in a warm bed, so I agreed. We split up; I went to buy provisions and Jaik set out to procure our room.

I found a decent supply store owned by a man named Lars. We haggled a little over rations, but he clearly controlled the town's prices for food. I came away with some dried meats, berries, roots, and bone meal bread—of which I assume the town had ample supply. It was more expensive than it ought to be, and when the transaction was completed the man laughed me out of his store.

Fuming, I put the trade out of my mind and set out to find Jaik. I headed to the inn, which also was the town's tavern. The sound of Jaik's pipes was easy to hear from the streets, and I tied Tayla to a post and headed in to ask for the innkeeper's horse stalls. It was an uproarious crowd and Jaik was playing to them. Between his sets, he told me the main road was mostly clear, despite the recent storm. I asked if he had made our accommodations and he mentioned the inn had plenty of rooms, so we could decide later. I listened to a few songs played by the local

minstrels, but constant mutterings from the patrons distracted me. I looked at them, and they glared back at me. I had thought Jaik would have won them by that point, but it seemed none were too happy I was there.

Perplexed, I mentioned to Jaik their reactions and he frowned.

"We have to leave, Jaik."

He sighed and put his pipes away.

It was clear he preferred the warmth of the tavern compared to the cold of the road—but the locals wouldn't have us. They watched as we took the ferry out of Kallagard to the other side of the river. Over the water, I heard a few whispers, but then all was quiet. We paid the ferryman and he said nothing in return.

As the barge went out of sight, Jaik turned to me, "It was going so well until you arrived. Is there something I should know?"

"Did you tell them where we were going?"

"Yes."

"Then that's why."

Jaik thought a moment, "But when I told them I was going to Crowtop, they didn't seem to care."

I stopped walking, "They knew you couldn't make the journey without a guide. Look at yourself, you're completely foreign. But after I walked in, they saw you had a competent native, they knew you would make it there then. They're afraid, Jaik, afraid that we will do something that will come back to haunt them. And I can admit I'm afraid of what you will do there too, after that stunt you pulled back with the Frozen Fog."

Jaik rolled his eyes, "Stupid superstitions. As far as the fog, we would have been fine, had you not had that freaky episode."

I blew my hair out of my face and stormed off.

We continued down the Hoarwood Road, travelling east of the river, reaching the forest in two days. The woods were strange to me at first, until I saw a grove of very large trees.

After that, I recognized everything, not from a description I had read or heard, but from my dreams. This was Hoarwood forest and it felt like home. I didn't know why I felt that way, but it disturbed me. I hid this revelation from Jaik and that was a mistake, but I doubt even today it would have changed his plans.

We set up camp at the entrance of the forest. The day had been long and we weren't in the mood for talking. Jaik had become glum since Kallagard and had started keeping a count as to how many days it had been since he slept in a warm bed. That number was sixteen, and every night thereafter he raised it by one. I tried to ignore this behavior, but it seemed he was bent on torturing himself.

After dinner I went to celebrate the coming moon, and though I needed my sleep, I had to stay up to carry out my offering properly. From the moment the moon became visible to the time it went away, I chanted my blessing. When the ritual was complete, I crawled into my tent to get whatever sleep I could for the journey ahead.

Dreams came quickly that night, and I knew they were waiting.

I slept with the taste of blood on my tongue and a sweet aroma came into the air. I could feel dark hair brushing over me while a soothing hand touched

my back and ran along my spine. It tingled painfully but also itched as the hand satisfyingly scratched. I recognized the touch, and it made delicate swirls on my spine which brought a smile to my face. The hand that touched me knew me well.

I fell into a deeper sleep still and the hand grew. It grew so large that it held my entire back. Instead of a hand on my spine, it was just a finger. The finger touched me and rubbed the same twirls. In an instant, I was no longer held but stood before my parents. They were laughing and telling stories by the fire, but their laughter rang hollow and their smiles wore thin.

I blinked and they were gone. I rustled my feathered wings as I feasted on rodent in a clearing. I picked and tore at its flesh, swallowing each morsel until I'd had my fill. I watched the landscape, noting two foxes creeping up on opposite sides. It was time to leave, so I thrust myself into the air as the scavengers closed in to finish the remains. Over the Rimeflow I flew, gratified for having experienced a successful kill. And as I looked beyond, the horizon it hit me. I had never seen this part of my dream before. Ahead I could see the magnificent trees of Hoarwood Forest, and beyond that, a clearing surrounded by trees with runes...

"Wake up, Runa—the day waits."

...chiseled into...

"You used to be ahead of me on this, but now it seems I'm always ahead of you."

The dream slipped away and I could no longer hold myself under. I opened my eyes and over my shoulder stood a steaming tea cup where my tent flap had been raised. I could see Jaik standing on the other side of a small fire, feeding grains to Tayla. I smiled and held the tea cup close, breathing in its aroma. Greedily, I took a drink, but realized too late I wasn't fully awake. It poured too quickly, running down my chin and into my shirt. It wasn't too hot, but the liquid had slightly soaked me. I had made a damp spot on my bedding as well. I felt along the spill to see how far the tea went, but the more I felt the more wet it became. I lifted my top sheet to reveal clear yellowish stains. I turned to see if Jaik was watching, but a sudden pain shot up my back, followed by a deep ache. Instinctively, I put my hand toward the pain. I felt along the back of my soaked shirt moving my fingers along my spine, to where an odd lift of my shirt began that ended in...protrusions.

Fearfully, I dropped my tent flap.

"Don't be like that," Jaik kidded.

"I'm just, just *changing* Jaik." I felt along my spine more carefully, feeling the protruding nubs of my vertebrae poking through my skin. I took my shirt off and studied the yellowish stains blotting along the fabric. It was horrifying. I used my soiled shirt to wipe along my back, sponging up whatever was oozing from the protrusions, and buried the fabric in the snow outside my tent where Jaik couldn't see.

"We should be going," Jaik said, trying to be humorous.

I put on a fresh shirt and threw my cloak over.

"Coming!" I answered.



We continued down the road until we reached a junction where a path headed to Crowtop. The path went deeper into the forest following a trail, but the further we went the less obvious it became.

No one travelled it anymore.

Ademir scouted for trouble ahead, but as the day went on, I felt the need to stop and relax. It was not even afternoon before I was feeling tired. My back was soaked and my shirt had been ripped. I had twisted too abruptly and the fabric caught on my protrusions. I dared not remove my cloak.

We made camp in a dense grove of old trees that Ademir had found. Many of the trees had fallen and a massive thicket had grown around them, making it ideally secluded.

I decided to make a large roaring fire and Jaik was thrilled.

“At last, real heat for a change,” he bellowed.

Our camp was in a small depression just inside the grove, and I walked its perimeter making sure to block any sign of our fire, plugging holes with brambles and snow.

The sky above was steel gray from our view through the forest canopy, but the weather finally bore snow as we ate dinner. The forest’s tall conifers shielded us from most of the initial flakes, but in the end winter came, falling in large clumps as the weaker branches let go of their accumulated snow. Flakes fell on my hand and I watched as their crystalline form slowly changed to water.

A sudden gust ripped through our campsite and the trees swayed and creaked as the icy wind howled around us. Jaik pulled his heavy furs over him as cold misery returned with a vengeance. I held out my arms, laughing as the snow toppled from the trees like a tiny avalanche. With my mouth open, the tumbling snow landed on my tongue, and I remember savoring that unmistakable flavor of ice and pine. Silence returned and the wind died momentarily, leaving peaceful drifts of flakes. I slid slowly down against an old juniper until I sat on its large gnarled roots. The stillness in the air held me softly.

“It’s a good thing we made our camp when we did,” Jaik said, patting the snow off him. “Looks like it’ll be quite a storm.”

“Hah, this is nothing like the first storm that nearly killed you!” I ate a few more flakes. “And even that storm was nothing compared to a morozko—a “shrieking blizzard”—now *that’s* a storm.”

“I thought those only happened on the Crown of the World,” Jaik said as he began to rub his hands.

I shook my head, “No, they’ve been moving south for years. One hit Algidheart when I was very young. It terrified everyone, but I wasn’t afraid. I was mesmerized by its raw fury.”

I closed my eyes, remembering the raging winds that shrieked like a thousand men being torn apart by wolves. I was inside my parents’ home, huddled in a basement corner with my mother. I could hear the creaking of the rafters, the sagging of the roof under the weight of tons of wet snow. Mother was shivering uncontrollably and I held her close. We had a fire in the basement raging only a few feet from her, but I could still see the chill stealing the warmth from her breath.

Jaik trembled just as my mother had. I stepped away from the tree and came over to be near him. He looked into my eyes and I met his gaze. Sitting down, I put my arm around his back, placing my body against his. His arm went to my shoulder and I let him pull me closer. With my gloved hands I delicately reached out to touch his face and pulled his lips to mine. We tasted each other and I longed to experience more. His hands began to run down my back, and I knew he would soon feel my protrusions.

I pushed away with my palms and Jaik didn't hold on.

I smirked cautiously and then rested my head on his shoulder.

"Uh...okay," he briefly laughed.

He then stroked my hair for a while before he eased me off his shoulder. He lingered for a moment, finally sighing as he began to shiver.

"I have to get under my blankets."

He walked away, looking back once as he crawled into his tent. A tear slipped from my eye, but I didn't know how to tell him. If he had learned what was happening, I knew he would see me differently. But had he known, would things have ended differently? I will always wonder if it was I who decided Jaik's fate that night. Each time I withheld that truth from him, it was a wasted moment to save his life.

There were no stars in the sky, and I added a few more fallen branches to the fire. I asked for a blessing from Gozreh, the god of nature, to protect us and bid Jaik goodnight. I set about putting up my tent and climbed in.

There is a difference between a dream you expect and one you don't. I was full of questions at this point, and I knew my dreams could answer them. But somehow, I was sure the answers I'd receive wouldn't be to my liking.

I remember landing in the snow and thinking I was still a bird, but I was not. I walked in a deeply wooded forest and stopped, waiting for what I knew would come.

A voice spoke, and I turned to see a silhouette standing ahead in a clearing. I could see runes carved on trees and the figure held out its arms, welcoming my presence.

She was my blood, *my kind*.

"Runa, wake up!" Jaik shook me and I jumped with a start, breathing quick with a panic. It was still dark outside.

"Something's out there, Runa! I heard it making a hideous sound like hoarse children's voices, blended together."

I looked out of my tent to a branch where Ademir sat. I nodded and he took flight, briefly flying above our camp. He then landed, making no sign that something was amiss. I looked up into the night sky, noticing the stars were fading as a shade of dark blue slowly grew lighter. It was early.

"I don't sense anything, Jaik."

"You don't believe me?" he retorted angrily. I then noticed through the darkness that Jaik had drawn his sword.

"I do believe you, Jaik, but it isn't here anymore."

He looked around my tent and then slid his sword back in its sheath. Disbelieving, he looked around the camp, shaking his head. Finally, he breathed

out with a heavy exhale and spoke, "All the same, let's pack. By the time we're done, it will be daylight and we can move on."

This was our last day. The day I would finally meet *her* and Jaik would learn the secret of Crowtop. Everything ended that day.

In silence, we broke camp and moved out, traveling through the ancient woods. I was impressed at the sheer size and beauty of Hoarwood's primeval trees. Its ancient conifers towered above us and its dense web of needles kept us in a shadowy gloom beneath. Some of the trunks were as wide as a house, and one exposed stump contained more rings than I could count.

Each step forward, I could feel a growing chill flowing in my veins and the surroundings drew me in. I was driven, and my heart pounded more and more as the sun moved across the sky. By dusk, the pressure was enormous, and I felt nothing for myself. Jaik wanted to rest, but I ignored him, pushing on.

I had to see what I was being led to.

Exhausted from my unending obsession, Jaik fell to his knees, breathing heavily. I am sure he would have stayed that way had he not seen the abandoned village he so desperately sought.

"Is that it?" His eyes widened, fixed on the crows roosting on the distant rooftops.

But I was not looking at Crowtop—I was looking at a clutch of trees, one I had seen in my dreams. Each curled branch and each high bough was clearly defined in my mind.

No longer would I wonder.

I ran with no hesitation, no self-control and no choice.

Jaik faltered and stumbled as I went ahead with Ademir flying above.

"Runa!" I heard Jaik call, "Runa, wait!"

I didn't stop, and Jaik fell behind.

Thinking back, I am not ashamed of what happened. It was too late by then, too late for anything to happen differently.

I left him, running harder than I ever thought possible. And in a way, I hoped he wouldn't follow.

I skidded to a halt as I came to a clearing.

There she stood, beautiful with long black hair. She was beside a crackling blue fire with a black blanket lying on the snow. The material was covered with mushrooms, nuts, and dried meat. My owl alighted on a branch far above her, cautiously eyeing the surroundings. Below his branch were runes carved into the tree. She stepped forward with her arms held out.

"Welcome, daughter, I've been waiting for you."

Daughter?

The word hit as hard as stone. My mother was in Algidheart, but as I looked into this woman's face I saw myself staring back. It didn't escape me that she had two turquoise eyes, like my one. She looked just like me. I thought back to the mother I'd known all my life, realizing she looked nothing like me.

I didn't have time to consider what was happening when the rustle of Tayla and Jaik stirred behind me. They slowed to stand by me.

"Do you know her?" Jaik said, looking at me in surprise.

“My name is Satella, Jaik. I’m Runa’s mother. And I thank you for bringing her here.”

Leaning forward, Jaik whispered with uncertainty into my ear, “Did you plan this all along?”

I couldn’t answer him. It felt like a design, but one I did not make. Inside though, I knew I had failed to tell him the truth. I stared at my real mother and she smiled back warmly. Whatever my past was in Algidheart, it no longer mattered now.

“Come, child. It’s time we leave.”

I snapped out of my reverie.

“What do you want?” I unconsciously rubbed my gloved pinky against my thumb. The claws beneath my supple leather poked through. I looked at Jaik to see if he had noticed, but he only looked at her.

Satella smirked, “Ah, you are finally accepting your true self. To answer your question, I want to help you through this transition you are going through.”

“Runa?” Jaik asked suspiciously.

A tear fell from my eye and I removed my gloves to reveal my long black claws. Withered and shrunken skin wrapped around boney fingers. Jaik’s face curled in revulsion and he looked into my eyes, then back at my mother, taking careful steps away.

“You’re...I don’t know what...I’m...not sure.” His eyes returned to my hands. “Why didn’t you...” The shock he felt was hard to take, and I wished I had told him sooner.

“Well,” Satella relaxed, “you are almost complete. How beautiful you are becoming.”

“Beautiful?” I cried, “I’m hideous!”

“Oh no, child. No, no, you must not think like that. That is the way they think. There are many kinds of beauty. Do you think I look beautiful?”

Inside, I felt compelled to say she was beautiful, but there was something more to her question. If I was related to her then she was like me, *changed*. Intuitively, I realized her question was rhetorical.

“But, you are beautiful,” Jaik replied.

I would have turned to slap Jaik for his unwanted answer, but my mother’s expression turned to a hateful glare that made me fear for him.

“In that, boy, you are sadly mistaken. It is no wonder I dislike you and your kind so much. Judge me by my appearance, do you? You know what they say, beauty runs only skin deep.” A wrathful visage replaced my mother’s pleasing facade and she ripped her clothes off, exposing herself with no modesty.

At that moment, I knew she was going to kill him.

“Run, Jaik!”

My heart beat fast as she ripped at her back and her spiny protrusions lanced out. A gangly pale color appeared from her revealed spine and she tore at the separated skin, shedding off her silky exterior. The skin pooled at her feet and she discarded it like clothing. In place of the lovely woman with dark hair, a withered figure with whitish-blue skin grinned wickedly. Her mouth was filled with razor-sharp teeth, and her vibrant turquoise eyes sparkled with malevolent glee.

Tayla reared in terror, bolting into the woods. Jaik grabbed my shoulder, and I could hear his sword clear its sheath. I struggled to remain objective, but events were unfolding too quickly to comprehend.

"Runa!" Jaik yelled as he took a step back. "We have to run for Crowtop. She wouldn't dare follow us in there!"

Satella laughed, a deep cackle that caused every hair on my body to stand. She took a few steps closer, her eyes locked on Jaik's sword.

"Fool," she spat, "Skoldheim will give you no refuge. Its original inhabitants fared no better in our wake."

Conflicting emotions came across Jaik's face as his burning curiosity held his terror in check. His eyes darted back to Crowtop, but returned to my mother.

"What—what do you mean?" He hesitantly stood his ground as she slowly closed the gap.

"Curious little thing, aren't you?" She took another step closer, "We killed them all—not directly, mind you, but when we crossed the barrier to this world where Crowtop stands, the rift took them all. The opening closed, and a handful of us—and our crows—were brought through."

She smiled cruelly, "I fear my world wasn't too hospitable to your kind."

Jaik swallowed his spit, unable to take his eyes off the disgusting visage before him. I myself was taken aback by her hideous appearance. I looked at the ground, horrified, knowing soon I would become like her. Jaik now knew what I was. I could still feel my own transformation wanting to break free, and it terrified me.

I lifted my hand to wipe away tears, but all I could see were terrible claws.

"Jaik, please go," I croaked.

He looked at me, and I saw realization in his eyes, a fear for his own survival. At last, it seemed, he had learned his lesson, but it was too late to save his life. He turned and ran, leaving me behind. As he left, my heart sank and my mother saw I felt for him.

Sneering, she darted after him, striking with her black claw against his delicate throat. He stumbled forward, crashing to the ground. A spurt of blood flew out on the pristine snow as I gave a terrified shriek that quickly turned inhumanly guttural. Ademir echoed my cry, his wings flapping as he launched into the air. I ran to stand between Jaik and my mother.

"No please, please don't kill him! I beg you."

"Silence, daughter!" She advanced. "You are too young to decide. He knows too much and cannot live."

"He's mine, mother!" Jaik looked up at me, his hand against the slit in his throat. Blood oozed out in spurts, spraying for a moment.

"He can't be allowed to go on like that, daughter. I've nipped him in the jugular and he will bleed out until he is dead. Your time with him is over. Let me end his suffering."

I could feel the ground swirling beneath me, the light in the distance growing brighter as the taste of colors came from whatever I looked at. It would have been so easy to fall and let it take me away, finish off what little was left.

However, I was a druid once, a child of nature and a guide of the forest wilds.

I swore to protect and keep those under my watch safe.

If Jaik died and I did nothing, I would have no honor, no love.

He struggled, dying in front of me. I shrugged off my cloak and peeled back my shirt, finally dropping my trousers to the ground and stepping out of them.

I would fight for him.

Until my last breath, if need be.

“Daughter, stand aside. I, I don’t—I will not fight you. You are...”

I charged, reaching for her head and pulled out a chunk of her dark hair. She reeled to the ground with a horrible shriek that made the trees shake.

I could feel it now. My exterior was nothing more than a slippery sheath. Within me, untold power grew, and I was ready to release it. I popped the skin on my back and it slipped away from my body, sloughing off in gory, bloody chunks. My gangly skin glistened freshly with pus and pulp. At my feet was the hollow face of a child, one I had seen many times in the mirror. She was dead now, and I never wanted to hear her name again. The word I had forgotten was *Runa* and it hurt to hear it. The rune carved trees spoke with voices, painfully pleading for my mother.

Runa, don't do this. Runa!

I never wanted to hear *that* name again.

The snow sopped up Jaik’s blood as a pool formed around his neck. His hand quivered, trying to keep pressure on the wound, but it slipped away as his arm grew too weak. The cut opened and his lifeblood flowed like a stream. The certainty of death was before him, and his eyes drifted towards me.

Mother no longer showed anger or pain as she rose. She was solemn as a tear ran down her face.

“I never wanted to hurt you, daughter, I just wanted to show you our way.” She shuddered while looking at me, and pity crossed her face as she turned away to view the runes on the trees. She breathed out slowly and looked up at the darkening sky and put her hands to her head and then to her waist.

“Oh, child, it is a sad thing you will have to learn this...all alone. I so wanted... to share it with you.”

With savage abandon, I lashed out with my crescent-shaped talons and ripped through her flesh. Muscles and tendons parted as her throat severed. Her expression turned to horror, but she made no attempt to save herself. I leapt upon her, knocking her down, slashing repeatedly at her innards. I didn’t stop until I was certain she was dead.

I stepped from my mother’s blood-covered corpse and ran to Jaik’s side. I fumbled for a pouch on his belt, removing herbs to staunch his bleeding. He waved me off weakly, pain and sadness being all he could express. The pulse beneath his skin began to slow and he became pale.

“What horror have I become, Jaik?” I cried.

His feeble hand took mine, lowering it to his blood-soaked chest. “No,” he croaked. “Runa...I’m...”

His eyes stared away, and he shuddered with a long exhale.

I leaned over slowly, kissing him goodbye.

Lowering his eyelids, I closed my own, hoping when I opened them we would be back at our campsite. Safe. Together. I would sit beside him and kiss his lips.

He would play me a song with his pipes, and I would show him my tears.

I opened my eyes, but nothing had changed. Ademir let out a mournful screech and I lifted my gaze up to watch him fly. Slowly, I stood up and reached for the sky.

One last time my body rippled with a surge, and the creature within me sealed its hold forever. I could feel its power, not from the woods or nature, but from somewhere else, somewhere *unnatural*. A wind blew in from the forest, circling around me. Whispers and voices spoke. There were many, but one in particular I heard above all others.

“Take care, my sweet; you are the last of us. You are beautiful not by what they see, but because of who you are and where you come from.”

The wind faded away, and I breathed the cold air in deeply. Focusing, I knew with certainty I would fly. Painlessly, my bones twisted and reshaped as white feathers erupted from beneath my skin. I looked up and spread my wings, taking a full swath of air, propelling myself above the trees.

Higher and higher I flew, rising to the clouds as wind came beneath my wings to carry me west, toward Whitethrone. Ademir followed, trying to keep up, but I was too fast.

Whatever link Ademir and I had shared was gone.

I flew away, never to see him again. I regret that I left Tayla to die in the forest, but she was always meant to fall to a predator, as I was meant to become one.

For years I traveled, seeing the world as a bird. I studied everything and everyone and lived simply off the land and the wind. Eventually, I traveled back to bury Jaik’s remains and retrieve this book.

It was the first time I’d walked in human form since his death. The trees and runes of my mother and grandmothers then taught me more about who I am.

For years I treasured the memories and sentiments Jaik wrote about me in his book. I memorized every word, every picture and every stroke of his quill.

That is why I am sending it to you, his fellow Pathfinders.

Jaik would have been happy to know his journal was finally chronicled.

Forgive me for not being honest with him. I lead him to his death, and I will never forgive myself for that. And perhaps, because of what I am, no one ever will.

THE GROWTOP

MURDERS

By Elaine Betts



ND STAY OUT!" THE hulking doorman roared as he tossed a couple of brawling drunks out into the street, narrowly missing a prospective patron. I sighed as I knelt on the floor, trying to clean up the mess they left in their wake. I wrung out my filthy rag and noticed the water in my bucket was quickly turning into a greenish-brown sludge.

Another typical night at the Goblin Den, I thought.

Grump, the half-breed muscle who'd been hired to prevent bar fights was still busy throwing people around the room and out the door. Like most brawls, this one had started when some drunken imbecile challenged Grump to a contest of strength, and the half-orc was only too happy to prove himself. It didn't take much to provoke the others to join in, and the skirmish was still in full swing as I crawled around the floor, attempting not to get crushed as I cleaned up after them.

It was dangerous work, being the "puke boy" of the Den, a wretched drinking establishment tucked in the seedy heart of Absalom. But it was better than starving to death on the streets, so I kept my head down and did as I was told. The tavern owner, a cruel man named Ahmed, never let me forget that he was my master and the only reason he kept me was because my parents had been some of his best

patrons when they were alive.

Not wishing to incur his wrath, I focused on my task when a few of the wrestling patrons fell over me in the midst of their drunken revelry. I sprawled forward into a mess of spilled ale, tobacco spit, and something that I really hoped was stew, and closed my eyes tightly. The drunks rolled off of me, laughing. I pushed myself upright and tried to ignore the smell, swallowing back my bile as I continued my work. Suddenly, a hand clamped onto my shoulder and I flinched, expecting a strike from Ahmed or Grump.

Instead, an unfamiliar voice spoke my name.

“Rashyyd? Rashyyd Jazik Sjarpson?”

I looked up.

The man standing over me was tall and pale. His long, braided hair and beard were almost completely white except for the silky black feathers woven in. His clothing was strange to me too, heavy and dark and covered in a feathery sheen. He had a sharp nose and well-chiseled features, but his eyes.... I had never seen a person with eyes like his before; they were as beady and black as a raven’s.

“Who are you?” I asked warily. The man pulled me to my feet and looked me hard in the face.

“You look like your mother,” he whispered in Skald, the language of my father. My eyes widened. I threw a glance at the bar and saw Ahmed busy harassing one of the serving wenches. I was free to talk for a moment.

“You knew my parents?” I whispered eagerly to the stranger. “Are you a Pathfinder? Do you know....” I heard familiar, heavy footsteps and looked over at the bar again to see that Ahmed had left the serving wench and was now walking toward me. He was angry to see me talking to a patron; his hand rested on the handle of the whip he wore coiled at his belt.

“I have to get back to work,” I said in a low voice. The man let go of my arm but didn’t leave. I knelt down and grabbed my rag to continue cleaning.

“My name is Regin,” he said, righting a stool and squatting down beside me. “Indeed, I knew your mother and father. They would be horrified to see their son in a place like this.” He shook his head and I paused for a moment.

“Then they should’ve come home,” I muttered, dropping my cloth in the bucket. “I’d rather be a slave here than out there begging and starving to death.”

“Would you now?” the man questioned. I looked up at him. He threw an angry glare at Ahmed, which surprised me. Ahmed narrowed his eyes, but he stopped his advance and returned to the girl at the bar.

“Are you happy to serve this man, or do you want something more from your life?” the stranger asked, then studied me again. “Have you ever wondered what you’re *really* capable of?”

I stared at him quizzically, and he leaned closer.

“I can help you discover what became of your mother and father.”

My eyes widened again; this question had plagued me since childhood when my parents disappeared and presumably perished on some unknown quest. I threw a glance at Ahmed and looked down, shaking my head.

“I can’t just leave,” I whispered, retrieving my cloth and furiously scrubbing the floor. “I am indebted to Ahmed. Until that debt is paid, he *owns* me.”

“How much would your freedom cost?” the large man asked me, and I heard a clinking sound as he pulled out a sack of coins. “What more do you owe him?”

I looked back up at the Ulfen in shock. “I...I don’t know,” I stammered. “I’ve served him for so long...fifty measures maybe?”

“Give this to your master,” he said without hesitation, letting the coin purse drop into my hands. “I travel north to the Winterlands at sundown. If you wish to be free, you will find me at the stables. I will wait until dusk for your answer.” Then he stood and walked away.

I glanced around the common room then stealthily opened the pouch underneath a table; there was easily more than enough to pay my debt to Ahmed.

I felt myself start to smile. I could hardly believe what was happening. Finally, someone had come to take me away from this place. I would be free again. I hadn’t felt happiness in such a long time that it frightened me. I quickly pushed it down as I stood and walked shakily over to the bar where my master was ogling the barmaid’s tight-fitting blouse. Ahmed glared at me as I approached and tossed him the sack. The gold chinked together inside and his eyes lit up.

“My debt is paid,” I told him as evenly as I could. Then I turned and walked to my meager quarters, which were huddled in the back corner of the kitchen.

I stripped off my filth-covered tunic and bent down to gather my belongings, hidden under a loose floorboard beneath my cot. I didn’t have many possessions—a couple sets of clothing, a small hunting knife, and a platinum-and-onyx ring that once belonged to my father, strung on a leather cord. As I pried the board loose, I heard footsteps behind me.

“Get back to work, boy,” Ahmed barked, “or have you forgotten that I own you?” I bristled at his tone. Fear rose in my chest but, for the first time, it was also accompanied by anger. I thought of my mother and father then stood up straight and turned to face the innkeeper. Ahmed was a bigger man than me, but I was several inches taller. I mustered my courage and glared down at him from my full height.

“The hells you do,” I said as my hands clenched into fists at my sides. “I paid you more than enough to cover my debt. I’m not your ‘puke boy’ anymore.”

Ahmed scoffed. “You think you can throw a few coins at me and walk away!? For twelve years I fed you, clothed you, and gave you a roof over your head. I protected you when no one else would. You don’t get to say when you’re done!”

He threw a punch at my head. I managed to duck, but his second fist came out of nowhere, striking me in the stomach. I reeled and doubled over as I tried to regain my breath, but before I could recover, Ahmed’s whip came down across my shoulder blades with a sharp crack. I bit back a cry of pain and tried to stand, but he lashed me again with such strength that I was forced to my knees. As the blows rained down, I covered my head with my arms and squeezed my eyes shut, gripping my hair tighter with each stroke that fell. And as the whip cut deeper and deeper into my flesh, my heart sank lower and lower; he would kill me before he would let me leave. I was never going to be free.

I don’t know how many lashes I endured, but just when I thought I couldn’t take any more, the blows mysteriously stopped. I slowly lowered my aching arms and gingerly turned to look up. Ahmed’s whip was raised, poised to strike another

blow, but a strong hand held his arm immobile.

The stranger who had bought my freedom was standing between me and the whip.

"Are you alright?" he asked without taking his eyes off Ahmed.

"I'll live," I croaked, betraying my fear and pain.

"Get your things, then. We'll walk out of here together."

Ahmed protested. "That boy is my property!"

"Rashyyd belongs to *no one*," the man called Regin growled, barely containing his rage. I was trembling as I dug my things out from beneath my cot and rolled them up into a bundle. Then the whip cracked and I flinched, expecting another blow. When I turned, I saw Ahmed bleeding on the floor and Regin standing over him with the lash in his hands.

"If you follow us, I *will* kill you," Regin spat at Ahmed. I saw my former master nod, his arms raised over his head, cowering in surrender.

I surveyed my quarters one last time, making sure I had everything I needed. Regin took off his cloak and carefully draped it around my shoulders.

"Let's go," he said. He hefted my pack, extended his arm, and helped me to the stables where two horses stood waiting. My shredded back burned and throbbed as I mounted, but I leaned forward and did my best to hang on. Regin climbed onto his steed and took my horse's reins. Then he clicked his tongue and we were off.

Through the pain, I allowed myself one glance back and felt a smile creep onto my face as the Goblin Den faded into the darkness.

I was barely conscious when we reached the pier and the black-sailed ship called the *Corvis*. Several pairs of strong arms helped me from my mount and half-carried me aboard.

"Get him below," I heard Regin say through the haze. "I'll fetch the surgeon."

My bearers brought me to a cabin and laid me face-down on a large comfortable bed. I heard someone else enter and felt the cloak peel away from the seething wounds on my back. I clenched the blankets in my fists and buried my face in a pillow to stifle my cries and hide the tears of pain that rolled down my cheeks. Soon, the worst of it was over and a soothing salve was applied to my skin. I closed my eyes, feeling drowsy now as my back was swaddled in cool, clean bandages. As my breathing slowed, Regin and the other men must have thought I was asleep because they began talking in hushed tones in a corner of the room.

"Who did this to him?" a man asked with surprising disdain.

"His 'master,'" Regin replied with venom. "I found him living in a stinking hole called the Goblin Den. The owner of that wretched place kept him as a slave. I paid for his release, but the man refused to set him free."

Several of the voices murmured indignantly in response. I tried to keep my breathing relaxed so I could listen. Why would they care about how I was treated? I was just a street kid.

"Well, that's all over now. He should heal up just fine," an older voice said, "provided that he doesn't move around too much the next few weeks."

"How much did you tell him?" another man asked.

"Nothing," Regin answered. "There wasn't time. I had to get him away from

that place as quickly as possible. Their reach is getting wider, and it wouldn't surprise me if the tavern owner was an agent of the witches."

"If that were the case, though, he would be dead," the old man stated.

My exhausted mind stumbled over the revelation. Someone wanted me dead? Why? What was going on?

"Take care of him," Regin said. "I want a guard on this door at all times. We may be in for a fight before we arrive."

I heard footsteps, and then the door to my room creaked closed. I tried to remember their words, to figure out what they meant, but my brain was foggy. The rocking of the ship was soothing, and my back was pleasantly numb from the herbs in the old man's balm. My resolve faltered. It wasn't long before I fell asleep.



Over the next few weeks, it seemed all I did was eat and sleep as we sailed on. The men guarding my door were polite and brought me anything I asked for, and I was treated like an honored guest by everyone aboard, though none of them would talk to me for long, with the exception of Regin.

He entered my cabin one morning as I stood by a porthole, looking out over the sea. "Here, I brought you something."

"What is it?"

He motioned me over to sit at the table against the wall. Then he set a book between us, turning it to face me. I stared at the worn brown leather in disbelief. The cover was embossed with the image of a rearing horse, its long mane and tail flowing behind it as if blown by a desert wind. I ran my fingers over the majestic creature; I recognized my mother's horse as easily as my own hand.

"Khismei," I whispered.

"This is my mother's journal.... Where did you find it?"

"In the snow outside my village," Regin said. "Books are not common in the Winterlands so I knew it was important. Your mother wrote in an unfamiliar tongue, and it took me some time to decipher it, but it led me to you. I only wish I had found you sooner. Your father and mother were great people, Rashyyd. They would've wanted you to have this."

I met Regin's dark eyes. "Do you...know what happened?"

He remained silent for a moment.

"Our enemies will stop at nothing to kill you," he said finally. "You need to be prepared."

"Why?" I asked in confusion.

Regin smiled sadly.

"Read your mother's journal. It will give you some idea of what we're up against." Then he stood and left me with the book.

I opened the worn cover and stared at my mother's scrawl. It took me a moment to recognize the squiggles of her native tongue. My mother was from the Summerlands far to the south, and she always wrote in Qadiran unless she meant for my father to read it. They travelled often, writing in journals and then sending

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them away to a place in Absalom called the Pathfinder Grand Lodge. When my parents didn't come back from their last journey, some friends of theirs took me in for a while. But then the money ran out, and they left me to fend for myself. I wondered if my parents knew what would happen when they didn't come back. I sighed and picked up the book, turning to the last pages and hoping my mother's words would provide some answers.

30 Sarenith, 4699

I have finally caught up with Sjarp just inside Irrisen, thank the gods. I demanded to know what madness drove him to come here alone, but he refused to answer. It must have something to do with that old woman we met in the market a few months ago, though of course he denies it. He's been acting strangely ever since. All he says now is that he must get to Winterheart. He has something to give to his father--he won't tell me what. I even tried reminding him of why he left Irrisen in the first place, but he remained as silent as these snow-covered wastes. I swear, if he's trying to get himself killed, he won't have to wait for the Jadwiga to do it.... The man is infuriating!

9 Erastus, 4699

By the gods, it is cold! It's summer everywhere in this northern corner of the world—everywhere but here. It seems Sarenrae has forgotten Irrisen. Even the shelter Sjarp built does little to block out this biting, unnatural cold. We have nothing to do tonight but sit and wait for the sun; there is a winter wolf tracking us, a spy for the Jadwiga. They know we're coming, though I still don't know why, and Sjarp is as closed-off as ever. If it weren't for the very real danger he's put himself in, I would be tempted to go back to Absalom and let him freeze here by himself. Dawnflower, protect my stubborn husband.

I puzzled at the meaning of these entries. Why had my father gone back to his homeland without my mother? They had always journeyed together before. Why not this time? What was he trying to protect her from?

A cacophony of awful caws and shrieks broke into my thoughts, followed by shouts and running footfalls on the deck above me. Crows again? I remembered hearing them several times over the past weeks, but I couldn't begin to guess what it meant. I shuddered involuntarily. I was beginning to think these people were hiding something sinister from me.

I listened a few more minutes and the sounds eventually died away. I turned back to my mother's journal, seeking desperately for some way to make sense of it all. How I wished she and my father were here with me, to help me understand, to tell me what was happening. But deep down I wondered if they hadn't come to my aid because they were beyond aid themselves.

Deeply troubled, I continued reading.

12 Erastus, 4699

Today we reached Winterheart. On first glance, the people here appear broken, defeated, and hopeless. Everything about the place is dismal, from the gray

THE CROWTOP MURDERS

timber houses to the colorless faces of men and women dressed in dingy furs and untanned leather. There were no children to be seen. I learned later that their mothers and fathers keep them inside as much as possible, as nothing attracts the attention of their witch masters more than the face of a pretty child.

Yet beneath this frozen surface, I feel the heat of anger and defiance. Winterheart has not given up. Though outwardly they appear to be obedient, dutiful slaves, behind closed doors they still observe their old ways and remember their old kings. They are merely biding their time, waiting for something. I long to ask Sjarp what that something is, but I fear voicing it aloud for I am told the Jadwiga have spies everywhere. My beloved's 'secret mission' undoubtedly has something to do with it though; as soon as we reached Winterheart, he sought out his father.

Unfortunately, Jarl Gunther is very ill. He was pleased to hear that we have a son, but was even more pleased that Rashyyd isn't here with us. The village healer doesn't expect him to last much longer. Even my prayers to the Dawnflower seem only to offer moral comfort. Sjarp sits beside him, holding his father's hand while the old jarl gasps for breath. The air seems to tingle with icy anticipation.... This will likely be my last chance to write until this is over. I am anxious to be home with my son.

I flipped through the remaining pages but, except for some rust-colored stains, they were blank. I sighed and closed the journal, hugging it to me as a heaviness filled my chest. I had always held out hope that they were out there somewhere, but now I wondered if my parents really were dead. I got up and moved toward my bed, then closed my eyes and fell back onto the mattress with a mournful sigh. I laid there for a long time and eventually managed to fall asleep, but I was restless and my dreams were haunted by visions of monsters, claws, and my parents bleeding out in the snow. They reached out to me, and I could almost feel their cold hands on my skin.

I awoke with a start...and felt something beside me in bed.

"Wha—?" I stammered, moving quickly away from the presence. Two soft hands stopped me.

"Shh..." a soothing female voice said, lightly caressing my chest. "Don't be afraid. I'm here to help you." I sat up and a beautiful woman propped herself up on one arm beside me, smiling serenely.

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice cracking as a fog of confusion still lingered from my nightmare. I shook my head to clear it.

"A friend," she whispered. "I'm here to take you away from this place. You can't trust these people."

I narrowed my eyes and studied her face. "But...they saved my life," I scowled.

"Are you sure?" she asked, raising herself up further and moving closer to me. "How long have they kept you locked in this room? They paid your debt, but now you are their prisoner. A new slavery awaits you if you stay with them, Rashyyd."

"I belong to no one," I asserted. "Regin set me free." I rubbed my brow as I felt my head begin to swim. Something about her was intoxicating.

She laughed. "Are you *sure*?" she asked again. "Or was it all a lie? A trick to get you to trust him? What do you really know about these people, Rashyyd? Who

are they?"

She leaned closer. Uncertainty and disorientation paralyzed me. I recalled Regin's concern for me when he thought I was asleep, the kindness of the ship's surgeon, the care of the guards. She had to be wrong.

"No," I said, pushing her away and standing up. "It's no trick. I don't know who or what you are, but I don't believe you."

For a moment, her face twisted with rage, but her features quickly smoothed. "I am only trying to help you, pet." She rose from the bed and glided toward me, diaphanous fabric clinging to her perfect body. I clenched my jaw and glared at her. I felt a chill that I couldn't quite explain.

"This isn't real," I said with more conviction.

"You shouldn't be here. *You* are the lie!" Her smile faltered. "What *are* you? Show me what you really are!"

Her face changed then and beauty was replaced by ugliness; her soft hair transformed into rotten strings of seaweed, and her alluring form shriveled away, leaving a skeletal figure covered in sagging, greenish skin. She let out a hiss and swiped at me with black claws. I twisted away from her and ran to the door. She lunged again, and I cried out as her talons raked my back. With unnatural speed, she seized my arms and threw me away from the door. I hit the wall and slid down with a grunt. She was on me in an instant.

"Get off!" I shouted, struggling against her, but the foul thing was stronger than I was. She pinned me to the floor and leaned so close I could feel her rancid breath on my face. It was enough to make me gag.

"Look at me, pet," she hissed. "I have a job to do, and the witches would have you returned to them alive." I turned my head away and closed my eyes.

She gripped my chin hard with her claws, digging them into my skin.

"I *said*, look at me," she whispered in my ear. She increased her pressure, forcing my head to turn toward hers.

"Regin!" I screamed, keeping my eyes squeezed shut. She hissed again and her hand let go of my face.

I opened my eyes just in time to see her fist come down as she struck me hard. The force of the blow drove my head into the floor, and all I could do was lie there in daze as the room spun around me. The next thing I knew, she was dragging me toward an open porthole near the corner.

"No!" I struggled and kicked, but I was unable to break free.

I clenched my fists and closed my eyes, trying desperately to think of a way to escape. Then I felt it—a heat that started in the pit of my stomach and coursed through my body. I opened my eyes and everything had a reddish aura around it. I kicked hard, harder than I had before, and the creature let go of my legs. I jumped to my feet and instinctively shot my hands out toward her as a word came rushing to my lips.

"*Eldur!*" I shouted.

Warmth engulfed my body, boiling up from my core and running like magma down my arms until a jet of flame shot from my fingers. The ugly woman let out a shriek as her hideous green skin burned. Then the door burst open behind me, and Regin rushed in, sword drawn, followed by several armed guards. I let my hands

drop to my sides, feeling cold and utterly drained as the creature writhed.

"Take that thing up top and dispose of it," Regin ordered, and the men surged forward to subdue her. Powerful as she was, the creature was no match for their combined strength.

"Are you alright?" Regin asked me as they dragged her past.

"I think so," I replied. "She tore my back a bit, but it doesn't feel too deep."

He glanced over and nodded.

"Just scratches," he agreed. "I can fix you up."

I lay down on my stomach and thought about what had just happened.

"What was that thing?" I asked, gritting my teeth while he cleaned the cuts.

"Sea hag. It must've slipped in through that porthole." Regin wiped the last of the blood from my back. "There, all set." Then he went to the portholes and made sure they were latched securely before turning back to me.

"Get your things and follow me."

I nodded, wondering where we were going, and reached under the bed for my small bundle of belongings. As I picked it up, something hard clattered to the floor. Regin bent down and picked up my father's ring.

"Oh, thank you," I said, holding my hand out for the ring. Regin studied it for a moment before handing it back to me.

"You should put that on. It'll help protect you," he said, turning to the door.

I stared at the platinum band for a moment, then slipped it onto my index finger and followed him into the narrow passage and down to a room deep in the bowels of the ship. The cabin looked much like the last one, only a bit smaller and with no portholes. A warm, inviting lamp burned on a table between two smallish beds, one of which had clearly been slept in.

"They know that room now," Regin said, "but you should be safer here—or harder to reach at least. There's only one way in, and I'll be here to watch over you," a smile spread across his features, "although it seems you're more than capable of protecting yourself." He nodded with approval. "You'll need to cultivate that fire in your blood."

I managed a weak smile. "So...this is your cabin?" I asked, moving to the unclaimed bed and stuffing my small bundle under the pillow.

"It is," he said, crossing to a small table against the far wall. It had a simple supper laid out on it, and he motioned to one of the two chairs.

"Hungry?"

"Thank you." I sat down as he ladled steaming soup from a pot into two bowls and set one before me.

It was a hearty meal: a salted fish stew with barley, a hard biscuit and a lump of smoked cheese, much better than the slop Ahmed had provided. We devoured the food in hungry silence, washing it down with warmed mead. After it was gone, Regin sat back and fished a pipe out of his tunic.

I stared down at my hands on the table, trying to think. There was so much I didn't understand. Why had the witches sent their forces against me? What could I possibly do to challenge the power of the Jadwiga? I was just an orphan, a slave who ran away from his master.... What awaited me in the frozen north?

"What's on your mind?" Regin asked, breaking my reverie. A puff of bluish

smoke drifted in front of my face and I stifled a cough.

"I'm trying to understand what's happening," I said, not looking up at him. "No one has taken much interest in my life for a long time. I just can't see why a slave like me—" I jumped when his fist hit the table.

"Stop that!" he said. "Do you think the men on this ship would risk their lives for a slave? Do you think *I* would face death to bring a slave into the Winterlands? Don't *ever* call yourself a slave, do you hear me?!"

I looked up at him, bewildered.

"Then what *am* I? Help me understand! My mother and father never had the chance to explain anything to me; they were gone more often than they were home. And after they left, no one remembered that I existed. My caretakers were more interested in my parents' wealth than me. When the gold ran out, they left me on the streets! Ahmed may have been a cruel bastard, but he saved my life!" I sighed. "So tell me, Regin: who am I? Why are the Jadwiga trying to kill me? What am I supposed to do?"

Regin stared hard at me, tilting his head and puffing on his pipe.

"I'm sorry that life has not been easy for you, Rashyyd. You have deserved better, but your parents thought only of your safety when they left you behind. They wanted a better life for you...." He sat silent for several minutes, ruminating until his pipe smoldered to tiny embers.

"Alright," he said. "You wish to know who you are? I will tell you what I know. You, Rashyyd, son of Sjarp, are the last of an old bloodline, prophesied at the fall of Variksvelde to bring summer back to the Winterlands. Your very existence threatens the Jadwiga and their icy hold over our land and people. You have the blood of kings in your veins, Rashyyd. Every man on this ship would give his life for you in a heartbeat."

I looked down at my hands. It was a lot to take in. Most of my life I had thought so little of myself; this news was difficult to accept. I soaked in the silence for a while, running scenarios over in my head. Finally, I looked back up to meet Regin's gaze.

"If what you say is true, then they don't just want me dead—they want me utterly broken."

"What makes you think that?" he asked in a somber voice.

I smiled bitterly. "I've been a slave most of my life. I know what a threat hope is to a master's power. The only way to ensure obedience is to wring every drop of it out of a slave—to show them their last promise, crushed and broken on the ground before them."

"They'd have to kill every one of us before we'd let them take you," Regin vowed. "And you have fire enough to fight them too. I can see it in your eyes, tinged red like those of the wild crow."

Regin looked me over for a moment, then stood and tapped out his pipe on the bottom of his boot.

"We should rest."

I nodded, lifting myself from my seat and heading to bed. A heavy weight settled in my stomach. As soon as I was under the covers, Regin blew out the lamp and stretched on his cot.

“Goodnight, Rashyyd.”

I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but visions of ice and torment wracked my mind. I lay awake shivering for a while in the cold cabin, listening to my Ulfen guardian’s gentle snoring, wondering if I would ever again feel at peace. Then I felt a pleasant glow creeping across my hand. I touched my father’s ring and warmth spread throughout my body. I sighed. It was comforting, almost as if I was a small boy again, carried in his arms. The night no longer seemed so cold. I could almost hear him telling me that everything was going to be alright. I drifted off into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.



From that night on, the rest of my voyage on the *Corvis* was uneventful. Though the crows were still with us, I heard their unsettling caws much less acutely in my relocated quarters. Regin was my constant companion. He was stern and quiet, but I liked him and respected him for his candor. He reminded me of my father—what I remembered of him, anyway. The last time I’d seen him was on my sixth birthday, the last happy one I could recall.

I found myself thinking of him, of that day, very often. It was when he had given me his ring, passed down from his father, and his father’s father before him. I remembered how important it had made me feel to carry it on the cord around my neck.

“Make sure you never lose it,” he’d said. “Keep it on always, and one day you will be old enough to use it properly.” I studied the ring, now sitting on my finger as he intended. The onyx stone was engraved with the image of a raven and words were etched into the platinum band: *Sem i beini linu; Sem veidir beigjum*. As the crow flies; as the willow bends.

Such an exceptional gift for a young child.... He must have suspected what awaited him when he left that day. And it was becoming clear to me now that it was more than just a sentimental heirloom; as Regin had said, it also possessed protective abilities. I wondered if it could have made the difference in overcoming his struggles, and I scoured my mother’s writings for clues, but found none. Still, thinking of them, it made me smile a little whenever I recalled how I had channeled the warm rays of fire from inside me towards my hag attacker. My parents would have been proud; my father had been a skilled mage, and as a priestess of the Dawnflower and a daughter of the Summerlands, my mother had no doubt influenced the fiery nature of my developing skills. It appeared I had taken after them both, and as I continued to think of them, I could feel the subtle flush of heat deep in my core.

I took to reaching for that feeling more and more. It was invigorating. Perhaps I could form it into tangible flame again, even when my life wasn’t in danger? I sat on the edge of my bed and faced the small table where Regin and I ate, recalling what my father had said about using his abilities: “I clear my mind and focus on what I want to accomplish. I feel that desire deep inside and then let the words and the motions come naturally.”

A few hardtack biscuits sat in the middle of the table. They would be much

more pleasant warm, I decided. I took a deep breath then looked at the stony lumps of dough, picturing them toasting with heat. Warmth rose toward my fingers.

"*Neisti*," I said, flicking my wrist out and uttering the first thing that came to mind.

Nothing happened.

I took another breath and focused harder. "*Neisti!*"

A brief shower of sparks danced over the surface of one biscuit, then died.

Frustrated, I narrowed my eyes and stoked the fire in my core.

"*Brenna!*" I shouted, extending both hands out toward the table.

I felt heat surge inside me as a funnel of flames roared from my palms. The biscuits blackened and caught fire. I had done it!

Then I realized half the room was ablaze.

With my heart pounding, I grabbed a blanket and began smothering the flames that had ignited the tabletop, chairs and several boards in the floor.

That night, Regin pulled out two candlesticks. "I think it might be a good idea for you to focus your training on something a little smaller," he encouraged, dusting a few charred splinters from the rim of the table.

I practiced calling on my gift for the remainder of our voyage, lighting candle wicks as he'd suggested, until I at last felt comfortable with the growing warmth that smoldered within me.

How I wished my parents could see me now.



It was night when we finally reached the northern city of Kalsgard. As soon as the ship pulled into port, I followed Regin up to the deck. I stared up at the stars, grateful to see the sky again, to feel the wind on my face, even as I shivered under a fur blanket. We left the *Corvis* behind, boarding a smaller longboat designed to navigate the northern rivers. A small escort attended us, and as Regin led me aboard I heard flapping wings accompany us as well. Red eyes stared down at me from the riggings of the vessel as a murder of crows silently settled in and watched me descend below decks. I shivered again and turned away from the accursed birds.

This new "prison" was named the *Krahte*, and it set sail immediately, up-river toward the frozen land of Irrisen. My windowless cabin was tight but comfortable, and Regin stayed with me as before, so I didn't lack for company. The crows continued to follow us too, their cries echoing from the trees along the riverside.

Our journey by river, however, was mercifully shorter than our sea voyage, and we soon left the *Krahte* behind us.

Regin made sure I had warm clothing and a cloak much like his before we disembarked. The longboat was anchored close to the eastern shore of a wide, rushing river. It was dark, with no moon or stars to be seen. A lantern guided us along a wide plank that extended to the shore, where our horses already waited.

"Welcome to Irrisen," Regin whispered as the crew of the *Krahte* pulled up the plank and rowed away with the other Ulfen guards. "Come, we must get moving. There are spies everywhere near the border."

We rode for hours through the dark, our horses' hoof beats muffled by the packed snow of the game trail we followed through the bush. It was dawn when we finally stopped. We chose a campsite in a sparse grove of trees, and Regin dug a shelter out of a dense mound of snow while I saw to the horses, draping a few blankets over them for warmth and feeding them handfuls of oats.

Once they were settled and tethered loosely to two pines, I gathered fallen branches and decided to put my newly-discovered skills to the test outdoors by making a campfire. I placed the wood in a pile with some tinder in the center and stared at it. Then I closed my eyes and held my hands out, picturing the branches igniting like the candles I'd practiced on.

"*Neisti*," I whispered, putting all of my will into my thoughts.

I felt warmth flow through my hands and laughed as I opened my eyes. I knew it had worked; the tinder had caught fire, even out here in the cold.

"Well done," Regin said from behind me. "It's good to ready your skills, now that we draw nearer to our enemies. But you'd better stamp that out now before we draw too much attention. We'll be eating cold rations from here on."

He put his arm around my shoulders and showed me to the snowy cave he had made for us. I crawled through the low hole that served as a door, then up into a domed space where furs were laid down for our sleeping rolls. A lantern burned on a ledge between them. It was surprisingly cozy. Regin pulled out some dried meat and berries and a chunk of bread from his supplies. When we had both eaten and rested, he sat back and lit his pipe, then drew a map out of his cloak and laid it between us.

"This is where we crossed the border," he told me, pointing to a spot near a river that separated Irrisen from the lands of the Linnorm Kings. And this is Winterheart here, your ancestral home on the northern edge of the Hoarwood. It will take us three nights to get there. The winter wolves that serve the Jadwiga are more active in the dark times, but we are more likely to be seen and reported by the witches' spies during the day. We also must avoid any encampments we encounter, and stay out of the deep woods if we can help it. And no fires; it is said the witches are drawn to fires that burn without permission in their land."

"Do you think they know we've already crossed into Irrisen?" I asked. A wolf howled somewhere in the distance, as if in answer, and was echoed by another cry somewhat closer to us. I shivered.

"Yes," Regin replied, "and I believe they're tracking us. But while you wear that ring, they will have a difficult time locating you. We will have to ride swift in order to reach Winterheart before them." From just above our shelter, a crow cawed loudly, making me jump. I was beginning to hate those birds; they were always around and I was growing more and more suspicious of their motives. Perhaps they were the spies reporting our every move to the Jadwiga?

Regin seemed to sense my unease. "Get some rest," he said. "I'm here to keep you from harm. You'll need all your strength if we run into trouble." I adjusted the furs and crawled into my bedroll. I was quickly lulled to sleep by the warmth and smell of Regin's sweet pipe smoke. My dreams were filled with fire and magic and crows.

Regin woke me just after twilight. We were soon packed and saddled. After

destroying all evidence of our camp, we rode on. Throughout the night, we heard the howling of wolves across the open plain and the cawing of crows, but saw nothing. The birds stayed close, but they didn't harass us. It seemed they were just marking our passage, while the more frightening howls were always much more distant. When we finally stopped as the sun rose, I was exhausted. As soon as the shelter was dug, I fell asleep among the furs.

I awoke with a start to a loud chorus of cawing.

"Get off me!" I shouted, waving off the black bird that had been perched on my head. At least five more roosted on the ledges in our little ice cave, and they were making a terrible racket.

"Regin?" I rubbed my eyes and looked around, but the Ulfen man was nowhere to be seen. I glared at the crows and hurried through the entrance of our cave.

"Regin?" I called again, sticking my head outside. The sun was just beginning to set. There was a flurry of movement, and a shadowy, cloaked figure approached the hole. I quickly ducked back inside.

"Trouble," Regin said as he scrambled in after me. "We are near Hoarwood Forest now, and that can harbor any number of our enemies. We need to move. Now."

"But what about all these crows?" I asked, watching the birds nervously.

"They'll fly away as soon as we're out of here," he said, hastily gathering the last of his supplies. "They should be safe enough. It's not after them."

"What?" I asked in confusion, but Regin didn't answer. He finished packing then slipped back outside.

Everything was happening so fast, and I felt disoriented. Something was after us? I rushed to keep up, and when I emerged from the icy dome, the crows hopped out after me and took to the trees. We broke down the hut and loaded the last of our gear onto the agitated horses. They clearly sensed something as well. Then we mounted and rode hard through the darkening snows.

A few minutes later, I realized what Regin had meant. I heard the sounds of large, running feet and a deep growl somewhere nearby. I whipped my head around as I urged my horse to run faster, but all I could see was the blue-white landscape of frozen Irrisen to my left and the gathering darkness of the forest looming on my right.

Then, out of nowhere, a huge figure leapt from the trees with a great roar and tackled me off my horse.

I flew through the air and hit the snow with such force that it dazed me and knocked the air out of my lungs. An enormous white shape loomed over me, but all I could make out was a blur of movement until its giant fist was just a few feet from my face. I rolled out of the way just in time and felt the ground tremble as it hit the snow where I had been lying. It let out another thunderous roar that shook the ice from the frozen pines.

Then a voice cut through the chaos. "*Rashyyd, move!*" Regin shouted.

I rolled again as a monstrous foot stomped down. Then I scrambled to my feet and ran. Regin rode toward the creature, sword drawn. I heard the beast howl as he charged past, cutting into its flesh. It took a swipe at him, but missed by several feet.

“Argh! You’re fast, little morsels!” Its booming voice sent chills down my spine. “But so is Mordruum the Merciless!”

The beast lunged at me. I dodged out of the way, but its ice-cold fingers still managed to catch my cloak. Its other hand clamped around my legs, and I found myself dangling at least ten feet above the snow.

It held me up to its white eyes, and I stared with horror as I finally got a good look at its face. It resembled a man, though one of huge proportions, and its skin was pale with long hair tinged blue like deep arctic ice. As a child, my father had told me stories of such giants, and I remembered they had a taste for human flesh. I shivered in its frozen grasp and tried to wrestle free.

“Are you the princeling that has to die?” It squinted as it studied me. “Or is it the other one? Bah! I’ll tear you *both* apart, just to be sure.” It swung its great empty hand and tried to seize my arms, but I frantically swung out of reach, certain it could make good on its claim. It grunted with annoyance as it missed me; next time I would not be so lucky. I had to do something, so I did the only thing I could think of: I reached down to the fire within me and pictured the creature’s head bursting into flames.

“*Brenna!*” I called, thrusting my swaying arms toward it.

Fire blasted from my hands and over its body, tracing channels through its long, tangled mane. It had just the distracting effect I was hoping for. The hair caught fire, along with some of the creature’s clothing, and the beast dropped me with a bellow of shock as it beat at its fiery pate. I landed hard on my back in the snow, and for a moment my vision was clouded again, but I was fairly certain nothing was broken. I looked around for any sign of Regin, then watched as the flames spread and charred the flailing creature’s hands. It roared again in frustration and pain, shaking its arms around, which only caused the fire to creep further up its limbs. Desperately, it dropped to its knees and thrust its head and forearms into a snowbank. There was a hiss of steam as the flames were extinguished. Then I heard muffled hoof beats approaching and Regin’s sword swung down, separating the bent creature’s head from its shoulders. Without watching it die, he rode to my side and jumped off his horse to help me up.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m alive,” I grunted, getting to my feet. “Just a bit bruised.”

The Ulfen gave me an approving nod. “That was a good use of your fire. Frost giants are too much of the snow and winter, so fire hurts them keenly, as it would a statue of ice.”

Regin wiped his blade clean in the snow and then we scanned the vicinity for my spooked horse.

Crows called to each other in the trees as we found him, snorting and stamping nervously behind a stand of firs a few hundred feet away, but with a few soft words and reassuring pats, I was soon able to mount. Regin and I continued on our way once more as the cawing of crows echoed across the snow, following our movements. The adrenaline from battle had me on edge, and I kept my eyes trained on the towering trees.

“I think I know how the Jadwiga are keeping track of us,” I said after a few minutes when another crow called. “These crows have been with us all the way

here.”

Regin turned his head to glance at the trees.

“They have,” he replied. “All we can do is ride hard and hope to reach Winterheart in time.” I frowned, but Regin obviously had much on his mind, and I was too tired to press him further. We rode in silence through the night, even stretching a little past dawn to make up for lost time. By the time we stopped, I was stiff, sore, and barely had the energy to dismount and crawl into the ice shelter.

We both slept hard that day. My dreams were a muddle of flapping wings and black feathers, and I could vaguely recall Regin’s half-crazed voice saying something unintelligible about the crows keeping watch. By the time we awoke, night had settled over the land. We began to pack up camp and I was securing my bedroll to my pack when a crow once more found its way into our shelter. It hopped twice then began cawing incessantly.

“Go away!” I shouted and tried to shoo it out, but it nipped at my finger and croaked even louder. I looked to Regin as an uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. Then the bird flew up and perched on Regin’s shoulder.

“Report,” he commanded, and my eyes grew wide as the crow made sounds that could almost be called speech. Astounded, I watched as Regin nodded, listening to it, then sighing heavily.

“Your murder will stay with us until it passes,” he said to the crow. It squawked in what I could only describe as a contradictory manner and twisted its head from side to side.

“You can’t fly through that,” Regin asserted. “You will stay here where it is safe and warm. Go retrieve the others quickly. Then we will seal this entrance.” I blinked a few times and stared at him, wondering if he had gone mad, but the crow bobbed its head as if it understood and made its way back out the sunken entrance hole.

“A storm is coming,” Regin told me when it had gone. “The crows came to warn us. We need to block the entrance completely to shield ourselves.”

The Ulfen began shifting the snow to reinforce the structure and fill in any gaps as I slipped outside and gathered evergreen boughs to help with the blockade. It briefly crossed my mind that perhaps my guardian really had gone mad and that he was now helping the crows seal us in an icy tomb so they could peck us to death. Then the first long, unearthly moan whipped through the dark trees and I abandoned the thought.

Before long, I had a heap of stout branches piled next to the doorway. I slid back into the snowy dome and one by one the group of crows hopped in after me. Regin hurriedly wove the boughs into a dense barrier and wedged it into the structure, while the birds tore off small pieces and fit them into the gaps. We piled snow against the branches and filled the angled entrance chute with our packs. Then we secured those with more snow and waited, huddled around the dim lantern.

Within minutes the assault began. I had never heard a storm like it before; it sounded like rushing breath and wheezing groans, and I swore that there were voices in the air. The way it moved, it almost seemed alive too, the winds swirling

around our shelter, pushing at potential weak spots in the walls. I shuddered, pulling my cloak tightly around myself and lowered my head to my knees, praying to the Dawnflower for the storm to pass. The crows tucked their heads under their wings.

"It'll end soon," Regin reassured me. I looked up at him and nodded, but didn't feel confident.

"Raaaa-shyyyyyyd!" a muffled voice screamed through the wind.

I gasped. It wasn't possible.... It couldn't be.

"Rashyyyyyyyyyyd!"

"Mother?" I whispered. A sort of fog came over me, and I knew I had to get outside.

I scrambled to the entrance to pull down the snow and ice separating us. I hadn't heard her in thirteen years, yet I knew that was my mother's voice. Somehow she was out there in that storm, and she was in terrible pain. I felt powerful hands pull me back before I could do any damage.

"It's not her," Regin said firmly. "It's the storm. It's trying to lure you outside. *It's not her.*"

"Let me go!" I shouted, squirming away from him "*Mother!*"

"Rashyyyd..." her voice faded away to a whisper. I stared at the entrance, my breath ragged.

"She's in pain," I pleaded, reaching out toward the snowy obstacle.

"It isn't real," Regin said, softer now. "It's not her, Rashyyd. It's just the storm." He placed his hands gently on my shoulders. The whimper faded into the roaring wind while we sat there in silence. My face felt wet, and I realized that tears were streaming from my eyes. I twisted away and angrily wiped my cheeks. The fog in my head cleared as I realized that he was right. It couldn't possibly be her. She was dead and gone.

"What kind of storm is this?" I demanded.

"It's called a *morozko*," Regin answered, double-checking the entrance. "It comes down from the far north and sweeps across the country whenever the witches call for it. It's more than just a blizzard; it's alive, and it's pure evil...but it can't last forever. This far south, its power fades. It will be forced to retreat north again. As long as we don't listen to it, we should be able to ride it out."

"Regin!" Another voice now called out from the storm. "Husss-band, help me!" This time it was the voice of an Ulfen woman. Puzzled, I looked at my guide and saw him close his eyes tightly and ball his fists.

"No," he growled, and remained motionless as the voice screamed for him again before fading away into the wind, just like my mother's had.

I lowered my head to my knees again and covered my ears with my hands. This onslaught was nerve-wracking. One of the crows flew to my shoulder and nuzzled my fingers. It felt strange, but there was something comforting about it, as though it understood. Perhaps I had been wrong about them all along.

The shrieks, cries, and howls continued into the night, followed occasionally by the moaning whispers of our loved ones, begging for us to join them in the wintry wastes. Every time they did, I shuddered, imagining my mother suffering and dying all over again.

"I don't think I will be able to rest if this keeps happening," I confessed, gritting my teeth as another howl pierced the air, freezing the blood in my veins.

As a child, my father had told me terrifying tales of wendigos that stalked hunters on the coldest nights, bringing them nightmares and driving them to madness and cannibalism. I hoped nothing like that lived within this storm. I shivered and pulled the cloak tight around myself. Regin also looked unnerved as he glanced up at the roof of our shelter, studying it, then looked over at me.

"Turn up the lantern light, Rashyyd," he requested, then fumbled in his cloak for a small box and gave me a couple of balls of supple wax from inside. We stuffed our ears to drown out the wind. Then Regin dug deep into one of his pockets and tossed me a flask of mead.

"Now drink," he said. "I'll scrounge something together for us to eat. Things usually seem a little better in the light and on a full stomach."

I took a long draught from the flask and coughed a little as the potent brew warmed my throat and belly. Regin handed me some salted fish and dried fruit. After we ate and drank, the voices in the winds seemed to fade. I curled up in my cloak, and a large crow perched like a sentry on my shoulder. Then I closed my eyes, determined to sleep as Regin pulled out his pipe. Huddled together in the warmth of our small burrow, the morozko wasn't nearly as horrifying.

The storm raged for a day and a half. By the time it was over, we had to dig ourselves out of a deep snowdrift. Our horses were nowhere to be found. Any trace of their fates or where they might have fled had been obliterated by the blizzard.

"We must continue on foot," Regin sighed, squinting against the glare as he looked for their tracks in the brilliant morning sunshine.

Fortunately, there was no sign of our enemies either, so we decided to risk the daylight and packed up quickly, loading everything we needed onto our backs. Then we made for Winterheart along the edge of the vast forest.

As we trudged through the snow, I went over what little I knew of the place from my mother's journal. My grandfather had been jarl, the chief of the village, but he was very ill when my parents had visited, and he was most certainly dead by now. I wondered who was jarl in his place and hoped that they still managed to quietly defy the white witches as he had. A part of me longed to find my father as jarl, to discover that he hadn't come home because he had a duty to our people. But I knew this was unlikely, and I soon pushed this hope away.

Our progress was slow and discouraging. I felt as if we had only gone a mile or two, when Regin signaled to stop.

"There's something in the forest ahead," he whispered, gesturing to a wall of snowy firs thirty yards away. A few crows cawed from the trees, and I watched several low boughs tremble.

My guardian silently drew his sword and motioned for me to stay put as he advanced.

A branch snapped among the trees. I focused on the warm glow that smoldered in my center, readying myself for a fight. A white shape shifted behind the foliage.

Then there was a pronounced snort.

Regin let out a laugh and sheathed his blade. "Thank the crows. Andoletta is

watching over us,” he chuckled as he strode forward. He clicked his tongue and our horses nervously edged out of the trees, their coats crusted with snow. It took us half an hour to brush out the worst of the ice and give them something to eat before we set off again.

We reached the town just ahead of the sunset.

“Hello?” I called, dismounting and walking through the gate. There was no answer, no challenge, so I headed down the main road that wound toward the central square.

“Hello?” I called again. Eerie silence echoed in response. I continued past gray-timbered buildings, stables, and shops, checking houses as I went.

They were all empty.

Regin rode behind me for a minute, then finally spurred his horse on ahead. By the time I neared the square, the large Ulfen man stood facing me, blocking my path.

“You don’t need to see this,” he said in a grim voice, stretching his arms wide and attempting to intercept me.

“See *what*, Regin?” I asked, sidestepping him and hurrying forward. A pit of dread opened deep in my stomach, but I swallowed and shoved my fear down. This was supposed to be our sanctuary—my ancestral home. If something had happened....

I rounded the final bend then gasped as the first body came into view.

A young red-haired man lay motionless, gazing at the sky with white, dead eyes. His skin was bluish and frost-covered, and the snow around him was tinged red where his torso had been ripped open, spilling his entrails onto the frozen ground. I stumbled back against a wall, horrified as I took in more of the scene: the men, women, and children of Winterheart were all gathered there, frozen in scattered piles in the manner in which they had died. Mauled and broken bodies crumpled against timbers; dark red stains splattering the walls and icy road; heads, limbs and chunks of rent flesh, *pieces*....

I turned away and doubled over, throwing up in the doorway of an empty shop front. The images of that dead man’s tortured grimace and mutilated remains burned into my brain. He had been about my age. My stomach lurched again and I felt Regin’s hand on my back as I continued to heave. When there was nothing left to empty, he steered me away from the square.

“There’s nothing we can do for them now,” he said. “We have to carry on and complete our quest. In that way, we can avenge them.” I tried to nod, but fear and revulsion made his logic difficult to comprehend.

“The children...” I whispered. “Even the children...” I never knew how cruel, how truly, inhumanly evil our enemy was until that moment.

“It’s a better fate than if they had lived,” Regin answered. “The witches show no mercy to those who defy them, not even to children. They are as likely to leave little ones to freeze or starve to death as they are to take them and...and...well...at least they are free.” He studied my face. “But now, Rashyyd, we must go. I dislike being so exposed and the enemy is sure to be watching for us here. When this is over, we will build a pyre for the fallen, but for now we must move on.”

“Move on?” I asked as he led me to the horses. “Move on *where*? I thought *this*

was our destination. Where do we go from here?"

Regin hesitated.

"There is more to do...I can take you to your mother and father," he said. "If you think you can tolerate seeing them—seeing their bodies—after all this."

I stared at him in stunned silence for a moment as his words sank in.

And then my anger exploded.

"You *knew*?" I demanded. "All this time, you knew what happened to them! Where they died! How they died! You knew!" I glared at him with fire in my eyes. "Why did you keep this from me? Why didn't you tell me?!"

"You weren't ready. I'm still not sure you're ready *now*, but we have no choice left! The enemy destroyed our allies when they massacred the people of Winterheart." Regin sighed then cast a quick glance around the snowy street as the shadows lengthened. "Time is running short and we are all that remains. All that matters now is you. Your destiny. Are you with me, Rashyyd?"

I stared at him hard, feeling wounded and betrayed. But I knew he was right. If he had told me everything I knew now at the beginning, I wasn't sure if I would've ever left the Goblin Den. I exhaled and nodded. Regin smiled grimly, and we left the ravaged town behind, heading deeper into the Hoarwood.

Less than an hour later, we slowed before a dense pine grove.

"We're here," Regin said, dismounting. I swallowed with nervous anticipation then followed his lead, and we scrabbled through the dimness of the tight thicket before emerging into a small, circular clearing.

There I saw them, my mother and father, lying side by side on a gleaming bier of ice that bathed their tree-lined tomb with a soft silver glow. A little crow sat at their heads, watching as we approached. It clacked its beak then flew to Regin's shoulder and watched me as I drew closer.

They were facing each other, holding hands. I turned away for a moment and covered my face as tears spilled down my cheeks. I heaved a heavy sigh, feeling fresh grief wash over me. To see them lying cold and pale as stone before me... their deaths were never truly real until that moment. I felt my companion's hand on my shoulder. I shook with quiet sobs but didn't flinch or pull away. It was comforting, knowing I wasn't alone.

"Tell me how this happened," I requested, hoarse with emotion.

"The enemy's forces were too great," Regin answered. "The night after Jarl Gunther died, they amassed outside Winterheart and demanded our surrender. Your father had become the new jarl, and he would not yield. He was powerful—an equal match for any one of the Jadwigas' champions—and a natural leader, even though his grief was fresh. He bolstered us, gathering a group of warriors, including myself...and your mother too.... She was something to behold. I could see the sun in her eyes as she rode through the battlefield on a glowing white steed. Even after her mount fell, she danced through the enemy with burning blades...." Regin bowed his head, dragging a finger along the icy platform before continuing. "They both fought valiantly, but in the end, they were surrounded. A rider clad in ice—an ancient fey lord with terrible power—came against them with a pack of winter wolves at his back. Both your parents were gravely wounded, and your father...he knew there was no escape.... I heard the roar of the explosion echo

across the field as he unleashed a final fiery burst that tore through the trees where they fought. I charged to their aid; the rider was gone, the wolves, incinerated. But it was too late.... I was too late...to save them. So, we brought them here, to this sacred bower, to honor them and keep them safe. We could think of no better resting place.”

Silence fell as we stood, remembering my parents’ sacrifices. I kicked the snow at my feet, deep in thought, and watched it skitter across the ground in tiny beads, leaving trails as it went. My mother and father had not abandoned me or died in some accident while on a routine journey for the Lodge. They were martyred, murdered by the witches here in faraway Irrisen. But the reason escaped me. Why was Winterheart so important? I didn’t understand.

I turned to my guide and found that he had again been studying me with his keen dark gaze.

“Here,” he said, handing me a black leather book covered with silver runes. “I think it’s time you had this.” I looked over the cover. The runes were oddly familiar, but I knew I hadn’t seen the book before. “It’s your father’s journal, Rashyyd. The answers you seek...are in there.”

My fingers shook as I took the book from him.

Then I sank down onto my knees and opened the journal to the last entry:

14 Erastus, 4699

My Son,

I fear I may not return to you, so I pray this book finds your hands. I will leave it where only the crows can find it. They will take it to you, if they can. They will guide you to your fate.

There is much I never told you, Rashyyd. You are young and I wanted to protect you, but if I should fail, one day it will be you who must carry out my quest....

Our people were once free. Variksvelde was our realm, and it was ruled by the mightiest of the linnorm kings, Ulfen warriors who proved their bravery and their right to lead by slaying a deadly wyrm called a linnorm. Remember the stories I told you of them, and of the creatures of the Winterlands; the witches and hags, the frost giants and the wendigos. They are all real, and they will seek to stop you at any cost.

Our forefathers were kings over Variksvelde many centuries ago. Then the Witch Mother, Baba Yaga, came. Our fathers turned to an ancient power to help them—a being as great as the Witch Mother herself, if not greater: Andoletta, our Grandmother Crow.

Under the leadership of their king and the protection of Grandmother Crow, our people stood against the witches for years. But the long war weakened our Grandmother. In desperation, the queen of Variksvelde, along with her princes and many others, fled into the wilderness, protecting our royal line. Then Grandmother Crow used the last of her strength to transform all who remained in the city into murders of crows. She wove a spell that hid the city from our enemies, a powerful curse to protect our one refuge. Any enemy to find the city was marked, and the murders ensured none escaped.

Exhausted from her struggle, Grandmother Crow laid down to slumber at the

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roots of her beloved willow. The tree hid her form deep within itself while she recovered. The curse and the crows kept any from disturbing her tree while she slept. Only her sacred Willow Staff, entrusted with the royal family, could awaken her. It was prophesied that, one day, when her power had been renewed and our need was great, a descendant of the king's blood could return it to her tree and she would arise to help us once again.

The king's eldest son, Ivarn, took the staff with him when he led his remaining family and subjects from the royal city. Ivarn founded the town of Winterheart, and the people assumed the roles of dutiful slaves to the witch-queens, all the while hiding the means of their demise.

Ivarn is our forefather, Rashyyd. You, son, are the last of his blood.

My father, Gunther, sent me and my mother out of Irrisen with the staff when I was a young boy, protected and hidden by an onyx ring—the ring that I gave you on your sixth birthday. That day, your grandmother came to me with the willow staff and told me it was time. Our people needed me. And so I had to leave you and your mother.

But of course your mother followed me. I should've known she would. I will do all I can to send her back to you, but if she is not with you when you read this, you will know that she stood by my side until the bitter end. Your mother is a brave woman, the best I have ever known, and she loves you with all her heart, but there is a fire inside her that burns hot and bright. And the hottest flames are the ones that burn themselves out before their time....

I never wished to burden you with this, Rashyyd, but I fear fate may have other plans. If I fail, find where the crows have hidden the Willow Staff and return it to Grandmother Crow's tree. She waits in the long-abandoned city now called Crowtop. The birds will guide you there, but you must take care, for if the Jadwiga find you, they will destroy you and the last hope of our people.

I believe in you, Rashyyd. You have the strength of our fathers in you. Stay strong, and know that your mother and I are always with you. I am proud of you, my son.

Love always,

Your Father, Sjarp

I closed the cover and continued to kneel before my parents' bodies, staring down at the snow. Regin stood behind me, guarding me. I could hear the crows gathering in the trees around us, watching for danger, calling back and forth to each other. I looked up and saw the silent little crow on Regin's shoulder staring down at me, waiting, and I thought of all the people whose lives were brutally ripped away by the witches of Irrisen. I did not wish to disappoint them.

"Where is the staff?" I asked as I tucked my father's journal into a pocket of my cloak.

The little crow clacked its beak again and flew to the far side of the bower. It landed on a low branch and turned its head, looking into a hollow in the trunk of a great oak. I rose and approached the tree, squinting into the darkness. I could just make out a tall, pale shape hidden in the shadows.

Regin took hold of my wrist as I reached out. "A word of caution, Rashyyd:

the enemy already knows we're here. Once you possess the staff, there is no going back. They will come after us in full force."

He drew his sword and placed it before me. "I will protect you as long as I am able, as will every crow in these woods, but you need to prepare yourself for what will come. If you fail, Andoletta's refuge will become her prison, and our people will be enslaved forever."

"Then I won't fail," I told him, and I reached into the tree and closed my hand around the staff.

The wood was cool and smooth against my skin, and as I pulled it from the darkness, I could see it was white and twisted, warped with natural knots. The head of the staff was carved into the shape of a crow and inlaid with onyx for its feathers, beak, and talons, and two glittering rubies for eyes. It was beautiful.

I carried it to the center of the grove and stood one last time before my parents.

"I can do this," I said, looking over their bodies as my grip tightened on the polished wood. "I know what it's like to be a slave, but I will never bend my knee in servitude again. Our people have suffered long enough. We will all be free, I swear it. I will do this for our people. I will do this...for you."

Caws and squawks answered my pledge from the trees. Then there was a great flapping sound as hundreds of crows lifted off from the surrounding branches. I turned to Regin and he bent his ear toward the little crow on his shoulder then nodded once.

"The wolves are close," he told me. "We're safe from them here; they can't enter the bower. We will rest here for the night and continue on to Crowtop in the morning." He quickly ducked outside and the little crow flew to my shoulder.

I stroked its feathers as I looked down at my parents, a few more warm tears finding their way down my face and freezing in the stubble growing on my chin. The little crow tucked its head under its wing as I reached out to stroke my mother's hair. It was as silky as I remembered, but icy cold.

It was hard to believe her fire was gone.

I heard Regin fight his way back into the bower and hastily turned away, wiping my eyes as the little crow flew back to his shoulder. A warm rush of air and a snort quickly followed and I whipped around to find a soft gray muzzle just inches from my face. My shaggy horse nuzzled my shoulder and I smiled slightly.

"Alright, alright," I said, reaching into my cloak pocket and pulling out a handful of dried berries. "There you go, pest."

"We'll have to keep them close tonight," Regin said as my horse licked my palm clean and then tried to get at the rest of my pocket stash. "Otherwise they'll attract the wolves and we'll lose them."

"Hey! Save some food for me, greedy," I laughed, patting the horse's neck as I pushed its nose away. Regin chuckled.

"Sifrerin!" he called. He clicked his tongue and the horse wandered to the side of the bower where Regin's steed nibbled on a tree branch.

I watched them for a moment, knowing Regin was right, but sighing nonetheless as I turned back to my parents' bodies. The brief smile slowly faded from my face.

Regin took a few steps towards me. "This is hard, I know," he said, "but tomorrow will be even harder. This is the only safe place for us."

"I know," I muttered, kicking the snow at my feet. I watched it skitter across the ground again. "I'll be alright."

Regin gave me a nod.

"You can light a small fire here, though," he added hopefully. "The trees will block out the smoke and light from watchful eyes, and the protective magic of the bower will keep us hidden from the witches."

I felt a little of my smile return at this news and I gathered sticks and branches while Regin prepared a spot for us along the edge of the bower, away from my parents' resting place. Within a few minutes I had a decent pile, and with a quick "*Neisti*," a small shower of sparks got the fire going.

"How far to Crowtop?" I asked as I watched the wood catch.

"Several hours," Regin replied. "Longer if we run into trouble." He gathered snow in a small pot and placed it in the fire to boil along with some dried meat, oats and berries as I fished out my father's journal from my cloak and re-read the last entry. Half an hour later, we had a hot meal together for the first time since entering Irrisen.

"Get some rest now," Regin said after we had finished, and shared the flask of mead. "I'll keep watch a while."

As he fished out his pipe, I curled up in my fur bedroll and tried to sleep, but the glow of the firelight flickered off the ice of my parents' tomb. I rolled over and shivered, twisting my father's ring on my finger. A pleasant flush pulsed from the band and spread throughout my body, bathing me in warmth. I held the staff close and sighed.

"Thank you, Father," I whispered, letting myself drift off to sleep.

I awoke hours later to the howling of wolves. I sat up to see Regin packing up camp.

"It's time to go, Rashyyd. Those wolf scouts last night did their jobs; already, the enemy approaches. We must make haste to the city." I rolled up my bedding and quickly saddled my horse.

Without another word, we left the bower and rode toward Crowtop, following a dark cloud of birds. It was a bright morning, the sun glinting off the blinding white snow. I bent low over the saddle and held the staff tight in my free hand. I kept my eyes focused on the trail and the small silent crow that had watched over my parents and now flew just in front of me, showing us the way. As the minutes and hours wore on, I felt a heavy burden settle on my shoulders, as though I was leading an army into an uncertain battle.

How right I was.

From somewhere among the trees behind us came a series of bone-chilling howls, followed by a barrage of feral voices answering with a deafening roar. My horse reared back in alarm, and I was nearly thrown from the saddle, but Regin was at my side quickly, grabbing the reins and yanking hard to steady the panicked beast.

"It begins, Rashyyd." His eyes met mine for a moment. Then he looked up at the crows above us.

"*To war!*" he shouted, sweeping his arm across the sky.

For a moment, we were engulfed by a cacophonous black cloud. Then the

murders wheeled and flew off toward the army advancing on our flank.

"They will buy us time. Now, ride!"

I needed no encouragement. We sped through the branches and across the snow toward Crowtop, our little crow guide flapping urgently ahead. We were nearly there; I could just see the walls of the city through the trees. I pressed my mount forward, eager to reach the site, but an icy fog rolled in around us and my horse slowed and came to a nervous stop, tossing its head in agitation.

"Easy," I said, patting its side and peering into the mist to see what was spooking it.

"Be on your guard," Regin said, edging in front of me and drawing his sword. "There is something in this fog. The horses sense it." I nodded and closed my eyes for a moment, feeling the fire inside me build and burn with each breath.

We proceeded slowly, keeping wary eyes on the surrounding fog. We hadn't gone far when I heard a whoosh as something slashed out of the mist, missing me by a hair's-breadth.

"*Skjoldur Brynja!*" I cried, and threw my empty hand in front of me out of reflex.

The mist swirled and condensed around my hand, and I felt a bit of warmth go out of me as the fog seemed to glow and shimmer. It coalesced to form a thin layer of soft candlelight around my body. Another strike came, but this time it was deflected away by the flickering armor shell.

"Rashyyd!" Regin shouted as the fog began to clear.

A dark figure loomed out of the parting haze, and my horse neighed and reared, nearly unseating me again. The figure resembled a man with the antlers of a stag, and it was covered from head to toe in armor of plated black ice. Two steaming red eyes stared out from its helm, matching those of its long-dead stag mount. The sight of it filled me with dread; it looked like the rider that had killed my parents.

The icy warrior stretched out a frozen black gauntlet and spoke in a deep voice. The words were strange to me, heavy and ominous, and my eyes started to drift closed with the hypnotic sounds it made. I shook my head and focused on my internal fire, fighting the urge to sleep. My horse was not so lucky. It swayed beneath me and started to fall. I managed to leap free, rolling when I hit the snow and clutching the staff close with both hands as Regin maneuvered his horse to protect me. The sinister figure readied its jagged blade and stretched out its hand again as frosty vapor coiled from its mount's decaying nostrils.

"Rashyyd, move!" Regin shouted again as he prepared to charge. I could hear a tinge of panic in his voice.

Then there was a blur of black as our little crow escort dove toward our foes' heads, flapping its wings and pecking at the stag's eyes. The bird was trying to distract them. I forced back a shiver as I reached out toward the ice knight and summoned the gift of my mother's heritage.

"*Brenna,*" I said. The little crow flew to the trees as a cone of swirling flames leapt from my hand and rushed to engulf my opponent and its undead steed. The creatures shrieked as the heat of the fire washed over them, but the spell only created a plume of mist as a skin-thick layer of ice melted from its armor.

"It's too powerful!" Regin warned, riding past and chipping a chunk of ice

from the knight's side with his sword. "Get out of here!"

I shook my head and stood my ground, drawing in a deep breath and pouring even more heat from my core to my hands. I would not flee. I would not let my parents down. And I would not leave Regin to face this thing alone.

"*Eldur!*" I screamed, concentrating on the creature. I imagined its glacial armor melting away in a jet of liquid fire as a stream of heat issued from my fingers and everything took on a red-rimmed hue. The flames splashed onto its chest, leaving a fist-sized crater of smooth ice over its heart, but within seconds it was already frosting over again. I felt my stomach drop as I realized Regin was right.

The knight's eyes focused on me. It thrust a hand toward the sky and called out wicked words in a booming voice. The air was permeated with biting cold as a dark cloud formed above, driving snow, sleet, and fist-sized hailstones toward us. I covered my head with my arms as the torrent of heavy ice bludgeoned me to the ground, and flashes of Ahmed's beating came to my mind while blackness crept to the edges of my vision.

This is it. I am going to die here, I thought, cowering on my knees.

The ground was caked in ice, and I was close to losing consciousness. I crawled back toward the trees, hoping they would provide some cover. The hailstorm stopped seconds later, but I knew I could not withstand an assault of that strength again. Nearby, I heard Regin grunt as he wheeled his mount and swung his blade, two-handed, into the loin of the unnatural stag. The thing shrieked as its spine was severed by the blow and black blood poured from the gash. Its rear legs buckled, sending our foe to the ground.

Another chorus of howls issued from deep in the woods as the thick snow continued to fall. For the first time since leaving Ahmed, I felt a truly hopeless panic rise in my chest. How was I supposed to do this? Even my mother's gift hardly seemed to affect our enemies. They were so powerful. I groaned as my cold, battered limbs protested as I stood. I was no royal heir. Just an orphaned slave from Absalom.

"Go, Rashyyd!" Regin's voice broke through my self-pity. "You *must* get to the city!"

I could see now that the ice warrior had not been defeated and was rising from the remains of its dying mount to pursue us once more. It seemed to curse in its foul tongue, training its black blade on me. I stepped back further into the trees, fear rising up in my throat. Regin positioned himself between us. He dropped from his saddle and slapped his horse's flank, sending it toward me.

"Take my horse! Save our people, my king!" he cried. Then my guardian turned and gripped his weapon tightly. He pointed the sword at our armored adversary, and their duel began.

Steel and ice clashed again and again with horrific grating strikes as Regin's steed ran to me through the sleet and snow. Shriill, unearthly screams and shouts of pain and exertion filled the air. I shivered, anticipating what might come. Another wailing moan issued from the fiendish knight as the Ulfen swordsman hacked another fissure into its icy side. I knew I should listen, ride with the staff to Crowtop, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to leave Regin behind. He was the one person who had faith in me. He believed I was their king. And he was

protecting me with his life.

I felt rustling on my shoulder and a tap on my ear as the little crow returned. It nuzzled my neck with its head, its wings fluttering. Suddenly, soothing warmth blossomed through my chest and spread in ripples down my limbs, chasing away the pain from the deep bruises. It seemed Regin wasn't my only supporter.

I looked at the bird in amazement. "Did you do that?"

The bird tilted its head as if to nod.

"What are you?" I whispered. Then I remembered my father's letter:

"Grandmother Crow used the last of her strength to transform all who remained in the city into crows."

The fall of Variksvelde was nearly 1400 years ago. I couldn't fathom how the people could still live, even as crows. *Especially* as crows. And yet, I knew that healing energy had not come from within me. Somehow the little crow had done it. The bird nuzzled my neck again and flapped its wings. I felt another layer of warmth spread over my body, and the air itself didn't seem nearly as cold to me anymore.

"Thank you," I whispered with a smile.

A keening shriek echoed among the trees. I turned and watched as the headless body of the armored ice creature fell to the snow. Regin groaned and hunched over it, leaning heavily on his broad sword. The little crow flew from my shoulder and perched on Regin's arm as the snow and sleet suddenly stopped.

"Are you alright?" I asked, hurrying towards him.

Regin didn't respond.

My stomach dropped as I rushed to his side. I could tell without seeing the wound that it was bad. His face was ashen, and underneath his sleek black-feathered cloak, his tunic was soaked with blood.

"This crow can heal you, can't it?" I asked, feeling panicked once more as I tried to think of how to help him. "It healed me somehow. We've come all this way and we're so close to the city now.... We can get you somewhere safe and warm, and it can heal you."

Regin shook his head and placed a bloody hand on my shoulder. I felt my eyes start to burn as I saw the horrible gash across his torso leaking red through the fingers of his other hand.

"Take my horse," he said in a strained voice. "You must...get to the city.... Free Andoletta...she can protect you." Every word was an effort for him.

"No, Regin...." I tried to turn him toward the horse but weak as he was, he still wouldn't be moved.

"Go, Rashyyd."

"No..." I protested. "Your horse can carry us both. I'm not leaving you out here to...."

"Go," his voice was growing hoarse. "I swore...to give my life...to protect my king. I am prepared to die..." he wheezed and drew a deep, painful breath "but... you must go now. More are coming.... I can keep them...from following you."

The little crow hopped up to his shoulder and buried its head in his neck.

He reached up and stroked the crow's feathers with a bloody hand.

"Stay with him, Haleena," he whispered. "He needs you, my girl."

"Regin..." I started to argue but he took a shuffling step away from me and hefted his sword again with supreme effort. I clenched my jaw and swallowed hard as he struggled, considering all he had done for me.

"Go!" Regin shouted once more. The little crow flew to my shoulder and tucked her head under one wing. I closed my eyes, choking back the tears that were trying to form. Again, there was no time to grieve. I took one last look at the man who had delivered me safely all this way, to meet my destiny.

"I will never forget you, Regin," I vowed. "I won't let you down."

Then I jumped into the saddle and dug in my heels, spurring Regin's horse into a run.

Behind me, the howling resumed from the woods, this time much closer. Regin issued a roaring challenge, and I turned my head to see him one last time, standing alone and defiant in the snow, before the path disappeared around a bend.

We reached Crowtop as the sun sank toward the horizon. The forgotten city was as quiet as a tomb, without so much as a breath of wind running through it. I reined in the horse and studied the wall before me. It was high, well over thirty feet, and made of massive stones supported by great trees that formed a huge fortified bower around the city. Two arching oaks formed the western gateway, sealing a thick wooden door behind the bulk of their wide branches. A brisk ride around the perimeter confirmed that the other gate to the east was closed tight as well.

The little crow flew from my shoulder and landed on a small ledge jutting out from the wall. She tapped the rock with her beak. I dismounted and sighed, realizing she was right; I would have to climb.

I slid the staff through the back of my cloak and tied the sash tightly around my waist to secure it in place. The fearless little crow hopped from stone to stone beside me, guiding my hands. Though the surfaces were cold and snow-covered, between the gnarled branches and the rocky handholds that my avian companion revealed, I slowly reached the top and looked out over the abandoned city called Crowtop.

Compared to the sprawling metropolis of Absalom, the ramshackle settlement before me could hardly be called a town, let alone a city. I could easily see across the low rooftops to the eastern gate, no more than a mile away. Roads ran from each cardinal direction to a smaller circular wall at the center of the town, and in each quarter, twelve longhouses formed a square with smaller buildings scattered in the space between them. A grand hall was set on a natural rise in the very heart of the village. No doubt that was my destination.

I carefully descended the inner face of the wall most of the way before my eagerness got the better of me, and I slipped and fell the last few feet to the frozen ground. I landed in a snowdrift and took a moment to catch my breath. Then I rolled out of it and brushed myself off. The little crow flew to my shoulder and nuzzled my cheek.

"I'm alright," I said, stroking her feathers before reaching back to retrieve the staff. I studied it for a moment, checking for damage. It seemed unscathed, so I gave the bird a nod. As soon as I was back on my feet, she flew down the main road and perched on the peak of an abandoned home, leading the way.

The setting sun gleamed on the white snow ahead as I walked cautiously through the eerie quiet. It was so strange to see all the trappings of life just sitting here, still, with no people around. It was as if all the people had vanished. To my right, a blacksmith's shop stood wide open, with forging tools and a bucket of frozen water still poised by the anvil. A block further, clothing hung stiff on a washing line. Everywhere, life had just been...interrupted. I was again reminded of my father's letter.

"Variksvelde," I whispered. "This was once Variksvelde."

I continued on, gazing in bewilderment at this strange place as I approached the inner circle. The center of Crowtop—of Variksvelde—was more crowded than the outskirts, and the snow blanketed all manner of household items. I soon realized that I would have to pay careful attention here, as my feet caught on a rough ridge in the middle of the road. I stumbled forward, reaching out reflexively with the willow staff and the wooden pole jabbed into the ground, stopping my fall.

Then I watched in horror as the snow and ice began to writhe before my eyes.

A white icy coil as thick as a tree slowly emerged from the ground and a terrible rasping growl echoed between the buildings from somewhere nearby.

"Freeeee!" a powerful voice hissed.

The blood in my veins turned to ice. I scrambled back, looking for a quick place to hide, but I was too slow. With a twitch of its monstrous coils, a colossal whip-like tail sent me flying through the air. I passed over several houses before crashing through a thatched roof.

Several of my ribs snapped as my body landed on a wooden banquet table. I struggled for breath, but all I could manage was a painful rasp. The glowing armor protecting me flickered and went out. Everything appeared to be surrounded by a white haze, and my ears were filled with a loud ringing that drowned out all other sound. The world around me began to fade away....

I closed my eyes and whispered a prayer, but to my surprise I did not reach out to the Dawnflower.

"Grandmother, please. Don't let me die. Not yet. I cannot fail them. Please..." I prayed to Andoletta, the protector of my people.

The ringing faded from my ears, but the white haze persisted; all I was aware of were my own ragged breaths, the laboring of my heart, and my whispered pleas. I heard the rustle of wings and opened my eyes. The little crow looked like an angel as she flew through the gap in the roof above and landed on me. She lowered her head, and I felt a warm pressure growing in my chest. There was a flash of pain as several bones popped. Then the pressure eased and I could breathe again.

I sat up carefully and pressed my back against the cold wall. The little crow flew to my shoulder as a shadow passed overhead. I looked up through the hole my body had made in the roof, trying desperately to come up with a plan. The monstrous serpentine creature was circling the town, searching for me from above. I reached to my belt and drew the small hunting knife my mother had given me, searching for any possible weapons I might have against the giant beast. Perhaps the staff might—

My heart nearly stopped. I tried not to panic as I realized I no longer felt it in my hands.

"I have to get it back before it gets buried or destroyed...but as soon as I leave here, that thing will see me," I pondered aloud. "What do I do now?"

"*You wait,*" I heard a soft voice say. I whipped my head around and looked for the source of the voice, but the longhouse was empty of all life, save for me and the silent little crow.

"Did you...?" I started to ask. The crow lowered her head.

"*Forgive me, my prince,*" her voice said in my mind. "*I did not intend to disturb you. I will watch for the beast. Wait for my signal.*" I watched in amazement as she flew back to the hole in the roof.

"My name is Rashyyd," I whispered as I slowly stood. "How did you...?"

The bird turned to look down at me. "*A blessing from Grandmother Crow, as I am mute. I may choose a person to hear my voice and speak for me. My father is no longer with us, so I have chosen you.*"

"Your father—Regin?" I wondered. I felt a wave of sadness from the little crow and knew I was right. "But...he wasn't a crow."

"*He was restored to aid your father,*" she replied. "*Now, we must keep moving. I will guide you from the air...Rashyyd. And please, call me Haleena.*"

I readied myself, looking for a way out of the longhouse as she took to the skies. I closed my eyes so I could focus on listening for her voice. It was strange; I could still feel her presence in my head. It was comforting in a way, like nothing I had ever experienced—as though we were becoming of one mind. Though I didn't understand how it was possible, I was grateful for the companionship. I knew I couldn't do this alone.

"*Get ready.*"

I crept along the wall to the door of the longhouse.

"*Go. Now!*"

I threw open the door and ran across the snow, scanning the ground as I headed for cover in the shadow of the next building. Above me, the wyrm roared. I could hear the sound of a rushing wind as it wheeled in the air and I crouched low inside the doorframe as the thing swooped over the street.

"*It's going to circle back,*" Haleena warned. "*Get to where you awoke the beast. The staff is there.*"

Then I was up and running again. I slipped down a narrow alley and sidled along the wall of the next longhouse. Another frustrated roar pierced the air. I stuck tight under overhangs and waited as the serpent passed overhead. I ducked behind wagons and barrels, sneaking my way along. After only a few minutes, with Haleena's help, I managed to find my way back to where I'd been hit by the monstrous tail. The Willow Staff lay in the snow in the middle of the street further ahead, just outside the archway to the inner walled court. It appeared to be intact.

The beast evidently hadn't seen it, or didn't know what it was.

I scanned the area and listened for the little crow's counsel in my mind. There was at least forty feet of open ground between myself and the staff, and another twenty more before I would reach the protection of the central wall. A single longhouse stood as my only cover along the road, its door ajar. I moved slowly along the face of the building, then squeezed inside the partially-open entryway.

"*Look out!*" Haleena screamed in my mind.

I kicked the frozen door shut just as the massive head of the great serpent dove at me, its gaping jaws wide and its fangs dripping with a brackish liquid. It slammed into the door, splintering the wood with a dreadful roar. I was sent sprawling as the massive body twisted and jerked, trying to force its bulk into the longhouse. I got to my feet and faced the creature. It was a dragon of some kind, with a long, white, horned muzzle and large eyes the color of deep ice. It snarled, baring its gleaming fangs as it gripped the door frame with two massive front claws. I drew a deep breath, my vision growing red as I summoned all of my fire.

"Eldur!" I said forcefully, throwing both hands out toward its face. I poured my heat into my hands and sent a wave of flame at the creature's head. The fire rolled off its scales like drops of water. Then, to my horror, it started to laugh.

"Pathhh-etic," it jeered. I stumbled backward as it tore the door frame apart and came at me with another dreadful roar.

"Run!" Haleena's voice pierced through my distress.

I scrambled over the frozen furniture of the empty dwelling to a stable area at the back. I ducked out a small door as horrible sounds of destruction followed on my heels. The creature was so large that it knocked over thick support beams and tore through the walls. The whole building was crashing down around it.

"It's stuck, but it won't be for long," Haleena advised.

I knew what I had to do. I dashed across the open plaza and scooped up Andoletta's staff, then bolted as fast as I could through the deep snow to the stone archway of the inner circle. Inside, there were six more longhouses laid out in a tight ring around the bottom of a hill. Rows of carved wooden crows stood watch on the apex of each roof, looking down on me. I marveled for a moment at their grandeur; these were once the halls of my people, and they would be again. I just needed to stay alive.

"Keep moving, Rashyyd. Get to the tree. Once Grandmother Crow awakens, she can help you."

I hurried through the snow drifts to the base of the rise. The faint outline of steps was visible in the contours of the snow, and above, on a stone dais, loomed the grand Hall of Kings. It was a longhouse, like most of the rest of the buildings, but it was much larger than any of the others, with stone walls and a thick shingled roof instead of thatch. I clambered up the hewn rock stairs, using the Willow Staff to guide my feet.

A great crack rent the air, followed by a bellowing roar. The creature was free.

I reached the stone dais just in time to see my foe take to the air, and for the first time I witnessed its full form. The horrific serpent was nearly one hundred feet long, with a ridge of jagged spines down its back. It flew without wings, its body undulating through the air like a swimming eel, and I was already well acquainted with its two vicious, clawed arms and its giant maw filled with curved fangs.

"What kind of dragon is that?"

"It's a linnorm, Rashyyd," Haleena answered, swooping past quickly as it approached. *"Get inside!"*

Without a thought, I pushed open one of the heavy doors and entered the hall, then slammed and barred it shut behind me. Seconds later I heard a heavy splattering noise as the front of the building was bombarded with a coat of icy

liquid which seeped slowly under the doors and solidified with a crackle. A crystalline chill shivered through the air. The entryway was sealed tight.

Along with my fate.

With no immediate exit available, I pushed deeper into the building, past the inner doors, and entered the great hall. I gasped at the grandness of my ancestors' throne room and temple. A massive, leafless willow tree atop a raised earthen mound filled the far apse of the long room, flanked on either side by thick oak colonnades easily sixty feet high. The willow's limbs twisted ornately as they spanned the roof and supported the vast network of arching beams. Stone steps led up to a dais that circled the mound, like a giant planter built to contain the soil. I stumbled down a few steps that led from the outer chamber into the grand hall, feeling small in the presence of my forefathers' legacy. I approached the dais reverently, cradling Andoletta's staff in my hands.

Then I saw the throne. Wrapped beautifully within the willow's ancient trunk, a seat of delicately twisted and carved wood melded seamlessly with the sleeping tree. The back of the throne fanned out along the trunk like the tail feathers of a bird, inlaid with subtle slivers of onyx and tipped with rubies.

Another roar shook the hall and panic surged in me anew as I remembered Haleena. I searched for the little crow's presence in my mind.

"Hurry," came her exhausted reply.

I looked at the staff in my hand and studied the tree. There was a channel in the trunk that ran between two of the carved feathers down to the base of the seat. It looked just large enough. Carefully, I lifted the staff and whispered as I slid it into the hollow.

"Arise, Grandmother."

The ruby eyes of the crow-topped staff gleamed.

I held my breath as a soft ripple trickled through me like a summer breeze.

A pulse seemed to throb at the base of the throne. The boughs of the willow rustled and the earth began to shift as a sleepy, sing-song rhyme yawned in my ears:

One for sorrow,

Two for mirth;

Three for a wedding,

Four for birth;

Five for silver,

Six for gold;

Seven for a secret,

Not to be told....

A furious feral scream shattered the tranquility.

Then a section of the roof disappeared as two mighty claws tore it asunder. I shrank back against the tree as a long serpentine tongue flicked through the air and the beast's muzzle poked through the rent roof.

"I tas-sste you," its hideous, hissing voice breathed. I shivered, feeling the air around me grow colder.

I crept around the tree, thinking of a plan of attack. I had already seen what the thing could do with its freezing breath. Somehow I had to get behind its head. I

clutched my little knife tightly and grimaced. I knew I couldn't kill the thing, but I could keep it from the tree until Grandmother Crow revived. I thought of Regin, my parents, the people of Winterheart. I would not allow their sacrifices to be in vain. Our people would be free, even if it cost me my life.

"My turn," I whispered and circled the tree cautiously to face the linnorm.

That's when I saw it. Deep in the roots at the base of the trunk, a hint of red gleamed amongst the earth. I knelt down and dug into the cold soil with my bare hands as the room darkened and a cacophonous black cloud engulfed the hall and swooped down on the linnorm.

"*The murders return,*" Haleena told me. "*Stay hidden. We will distract it until Grandmother fully awakens.*"

"Do what you must," I whispered, "and I will do what *I* must."

Something hard and black was surfacing underneath my fingers, and I gently brushed the dirt away, revealing the hilt of a sword. I put my hands around the grip and drew it out of the tree roots. I felt the tree shudder and resist for just a moment before releasing the sword to me. The blade sang as I held it out before my eyes. The hilt was onyx and silver with a crossguard shaped like outstretched wings covered in onyx feathers. The pommel was a crow's head inset with two ruby eyes.

"*Blodlinnorm,*" I whispered, reading the Skaldic runes etched into the cold iron blade. It glowed with a cool blue light, chasing away the dark gloom of the early evening.

The linnorm roared again and I heard a terrible rending sound as it tore through more of the roof. Shingles and heavy beams tumbled down as the monstrous beast crashed into the hall, besieged by thousands of crows. It inhaled deeply and exhaled a stream of liquid ice into the air which shot toward the cloud of birds. The murders parted as the thick ooze splattered against a large section of columns, ceiling and supporting tree limbs, but dozens of them didn't make it. They fell to the ground and shattered.

"Haleena!" I shouted, praying she wasn't one of the fallen. The massive head of the linnorm turned sharply, its glacial eyes glaring menacingly.

"*Rashyyd, get down!*" I heard her shout.

The tiny crow swooped to circle the wyrm's head, trying to distract it as I dodged for cover behind the nearest oak pillar, clutching the sword. But the linnorm fixed its cold eyes on me, its serpentine tongue flicking the air. It slowly twisted its mouth into what I could only describe as a hideous grin. Fear gripped my heart and paralyzed me just as effectively as the ice I knew would soon issue from its jaws. I stood there, transfixed, staring into the face of Death.

Before I knew what was happening, Haleena flew straight for the linnorm's head. I saw her talons and beak dig into one of the creature's eyes, and it roared in pain. It tried to twist away from her, but she dug in deeper, rolling with it as it flailed, then flying over its snout to take out the other eye. The linnorm made a sound like a scream as her black claws blinded it. It tossed its head and writhed forward, smashing through a few of the oak columns and swinging its great front arms as it tried to get its bearings. A razor-sharp claw caught Haleena's wings as she tried to dive out of the way.

"No!" I shouted as it snatched the little crow out of the air and tossed her into the wall in front of me. She hit hard and fell to the ground limp.

"Haleena!" I cried, taking a few steps toward her. I stopped short as the massive head lowered toward me. The torn, bloody craters of its ruined eyes made it seem all the more menacing.

"I can s-still s-smell you," it hissed, "s-still tas-sste you." Its long tongue flicked the air.

"Once I kill you, I think I'll tear out your pet's-s feathers, one by one by one," it taunted, "if it's not dead already."

It lunged at me, and I dove out of the way, swinging the sword wildly and slashing its thick white hide. The linnorm roared furiously and twitched its tail, knocking me back and sideways into the throne. Wood splintered as my body slammed into it and my head cracked against the side of the chair. I lay there for a moment, stunned. Then I felt a tingling rush of warmth spread through my shoulder and down my arm. I looked behind the cracked boughs of the throne; hidden inside were the artifacts of a king: a crown of braided wood set with eye-shaped rubies, and a wooden scepter miniature of the Willow Staff tipped with a large ruby and inlaid onyx feathers. The power I felt pulsing from the scepter was intoxicating.

A hiss drew my attention back to the linnorm. It was coiled in the middle of the hall, its head swaying from side to side as its tongue flicked madly through the air, like a blind cobra trying to catch the scent of its prey. I closed my fingers around the scepter and gasped as the fire in my core kindled and blazed throughout my body. The linnorm snapped its head around at the sound and lunged at me with dripping, icy fangs. I rolled to the side and thrust the scepter forward, envisioning the linnorm's snout wreathed in flame.

"*Brenna!*" I shouted, pouring my fire into the scepter. Flames blazed from the ruby point and rushed toward the linnorm.

This time, the fire didn't just roll off the creature's scales. This time, it swirled around the beast in an inferno, scorching its hide and burning its nostrils. The wyrm reared back with an anguished scream, and I picked up my blade and scrambled behind the tree as it charged after me again in retaliation, tracking me with its singed tongue. I slipped behind its massive head and hacked a deep fissure into its passing body. It whipped around the tree to face me with another roar and drew a deep breath.

I knew what that meant.

In desperation, I tried to spring out of the way, but I knew I wouldn't be fast enough. A stream of liquid ice poured from the linnorm's mouth. I shielded my head with my arms out of reflex and felt a wave of cold wash over me as the air shivered and crystallized. But I felt no pain. Instead, I looked up to see a black cloud splinter as hundreds of frozen crows fell to the ground at my feet.

I closed my eyes for a moment as I realized what just happened. A murder of crows flew between me and the icy breath of the linnorm. They gave their lives for me, like so many others. So many...

My vision tinged red, deep as their blood.

"*Kviknadh!*" I shouted angrily, pouring every bit of my fury and strength into

the scepter.

The flames leapt from the ruby and engulfed the linnorm. It twisted and writhed in agony as its hide started to burn. It screamed an unearthly, hideous shriek, rolling and thrashing against the floor and the tree and the walls in an attempt to put out the flames.

I shuddered, feeling weak and empty as the cold seeped in and my fire faded.

Then, as if awakened by the heat, the willow tree stirred. It stretched out its roots and shook its branches, showering the linnorm with the ice it had meant for me and the crows. Icicle spears rained from the ceiling and skewered the beast's tail and claws, pinning it momentarily to the floor of the hall. The blue glow of *Blodlinnorm* grew as an unfamiliar voice resonated from within the ancient tree.

"Now, Rashyyd!"

Without hesitation, I ran underneath the great wyrm and slashed its belly open with the sword. The linnorm roared and twisted around, tearing itself free of the fallen ice barbs. It tried to catch me in its lashing tail, but I hit the floor and rolled under it. I leapt to my feet and ran up the dais toward the throne as the linnorm recoiled to strike at me again. When I reached the top, I threw myself backward, flipping through the air as its maw launched at my legs.

I brought the sword down on the linnorm's neck. With a surge of power, *Blodlinnorm* quivered in my hand and severed the creature's head from its spine with a metallic ringing. The body of the linnorm fell heavily to the ground and thrashed as it bled out down the stone steps in front of me, a vast red carpet spilling onto the floor of the great hall.

My hands fell limply to my sides as exhaustion swept over me.

Then my eyes went wide. "Haleena!" I suddenly remembered the little crow and rushed back to where she had fallen against the wall. Her eyes were glassy and her breathing very shallow. I bowed my head and swallowed back the emotion rising in my throat. Again, someone had put my life ahead of their own, and was paying the ultimate price for their devotion.

"Grandmother Crow," I whispered. "So many sacrifices.... Please don't let her die too...." Then I felt a hand on my shoulder and I turned. An old woman dressed in simple homespun clothes was standing behind me, with black crow feathers adorning her snow-white braid of hair and a soft smile on her face.

"Give her to me," she said.

I picked up the little bird as carefully as I could and placed her in Grandmother Crow's weathered hands. She turned away from me and I saw her lower her head for a moment. She whispered something, but I couldn't make out the words. When she turned back to me, she stepped to one side; a young woman with pale golden hair and striking blue eyes knelt in front of her. She was dressed much like Grandmother Crow herself, with black feathers in her hair and a black cloak like mine. She smiled at me, and I saw a long scar across her throat.

"Haleena?" I whispered.

She nodded and reached for my hand as she rose.

"You did it, Rashyyd," she said happily in my mind as I took her small hand in mine. She placed her other hand over my heart and closed her eyes for a moment. Warmth filled my chest and spread throughout my body, chasing away aches and

bruises.

"Thank you," I whispered when she opened her eyes. She just smiled and nodded. Then we both turned to Grandmother Crow.

The old woman stood before the throne, surveying the carnage before her. She heaved a heavy sigh and bowed her head for a moment. When she looked up again, her black eyes gleamed with purpose.

"Fetch my staff, child," she said to Haleena, "and help me gather the fallen. We have work to do. And you, my boy—you need to clean your sword. Leave the scepter. I'll watch over it." I gave her a bow and handed her the scepter before hurrying to obey.

The linnorm occupied a large section of the hall, and with all the debris, ice and blood on the floor, it took me several minutes to navigate a safe path. Andoletta and Haleena continued to speak in my absence.

"I'm sorry, my dear," I heard Grandmother say as I climbed around the tip of the linnorm's tail. "Your father has already passed to the land of the dead. He is with your mother now. His fight is over; he has earned a warrior's rest." Though I knew they weren't intended for me, I pondered her words as I left the hall.

The ice sealing the door had vanished, and I was able to force my way outside. As I descended from the dais and bent down to clean the sword off in the snow, it struck me that I wasn't the only one to lose someone I loved. I scrubbed the linnorm blood from the blade then carefully dried it off with my cloak.

By the time I climbed the steps back to the hall, Haleena was waiting for me, standing between two blazing torches. When she saw me, she extended her hand with a smile.

"Grandmother is at her work," she stated as I smiled back and took her hand again. "*Wait with me a moment.*"

Before I could ask what she meant, the darkening sky was filled with the sound of beating wings and the cawing of several thousand crows. The caws gradually gave way to cheers as feathers melted away and we were suddenly surrounded by the people of Variksvelde. I looked out over the gathering crowd milling on the dais, steps and path leading to the great hall, feeling quite overwhelmed as shouts of "Long Live the King!" reached my ears. I turned to Haleena and she nodded and squeezed my hand.

"*It is time,*" she said. "*I will be right beside you.*"

I turned as the doors to the hall were opened by two large Ulfen warriors in feathered black cloaks and clothing that reminded me of Regin's attire. I drew a deep breath and entered the hall with my head held high. Chants of "Long Live the King!" followed me and I felt a deep pride rise in my chest.

The entrance hall glowed with warm light and the floor was carpeted with black feathers. The outer room was full of people, all chanting with the throng outside. Another pair of warriors in feathered black garb opened the inner doors to the great hall.

Hundreds of torches burned in golden sconces on the walls, and in the torchlight, I could see that the oak colonnades flanking the ancient willow were restored and gleamed with gold reliefs depicting crows in flight. I walked along the carpet of feathers and willow leaves past the crowds filling the hall. The

body of the linnorm was gone, as were the fallen crows and the debris from the damaged roof. I wondered how many Grandmother Crow was able to save, and how many had died to protect me. I clenched my jaw at the thought of hundreds or even thousands slain.

I swear I will honor your sacrifice, I pledged silently to the fallen. *Your deaths will be avenged.*

I approached the stone steps leading up to the willow tree. Above me, I could see the twisted limbs had sprouted leafy branches that formed a cascading green dome across the broken roof, closing out the cold night air. The foliage was so thick I couldn't see even a speck of sky through the branches. I turned my attention back to the dais where Grandmother Crow stood before the throne, leaning on her staff with the colossal head of the linnorm sitting at her feet. She watched me with her gleaming eyes as I mounted the steps with Haleena by my side.

"Give me the sword, if you would," Haleena said. *"I will hold it for you."* I gave her a nod and handed *Blodlinnorm* to her before turning my attention back to Andoletta.

"Rashyyd Jazik, son of Sjarp, grandson of Gunther, last heir of King Varik," Grandmother Crow said in a strong voice that echoed throughout the hall and silenced the chanting. She paused for a moment. "Do you come today to claim your birthright?"

"I do," I said firmly.

"Have you passed the test of kings?" she asked with a smile.

"I have. I have slain the linnorm, and I present its head in tribute to those who gave their lives in service to this throne." I gestured to the head below us and Grandmother Crow gave me a nod.

"Kneel, Rashyyd Jazik, son of Sjarp." I knelt before the old woman and Haleena knelt beside me, still bearing the sword. Grandmother Crow turned to the throne. She leaned her staff against it and bent to retrieve the crown and scepter which rested upon the seat.

"In the sight of all your people, I name you King Rashyyd of Variksvelde. The Summer King. King of the Crows." Andoletta set the crown on my head and presented the scepter to me. Then she gestured for me to stand.

I turned to face the assembly and they let out a loud cheer. I felt myself smile again. This time, I didn't stifle the happiness that I felt. I glanced at Haleena and she grinned and presented *Blodlinnorm* to me. I took it and stepped forward to shouts of "Hail King Rashyyd! Long Live the King!" I held up the sword and scepter and felt a wave of joy as the chanting grew louder. Then I passed them to Haleena and raised my hands to speak. The people fell silent.

"People of Variksvelde," I said in a strong voice. "My people. This day I pledge my life to you, as so many of you have given me yours. We are free! And I will not rest until *all* our lands, *all* our people are free once again. Let the witch who sits upon her stolen throne hear this and tremble: there is a king once more over Variksvelde, and his murders are coming for the Usurper!" A roar went up from the people and resounded through the hall, a cheer so defiant and loud that I was sure our enemies could hear it all the way to Whitethrone.

TALES
OF
GOLARION



“That’s it! We’re hiring more people.”

– *Donavan Harper, explorer*

THE LORD WITH THE GOLDEN TONGUE

By Robert Gresham



RED-ARMORED MAN wearing an insectoid helm moved soundlessly through the back alleyways of Westcrown. The city, with its jagged monuments to devilry and doom, provided the perfect backdrop for an assassin such as himself to hide. But this night, his usual allies of shadows and darkness provided no comfort and instead filled him with dread.

Tonight he was not the hunter, but the hunted, and it was no ordinary foe that stalked him.

In anticipation, he withdrew his twin saw-toothed sabres and sidestepped down a narrow passage. But after only a few yards, the alley abruptly opened up to a large street with shops and an inn on the corner. A large wooden sign displaying a copper coin hung over its entryway.

A possible refuge.

He exited stealthily, his black manticore-skin cloak fluttering softly behind him as he ran. A howl in the distance gave him pause, halting him in his tracks.

Shadow beasts. He shuddered, realizing he would have to evade them as well.

In the alleyway behind, he heard a footstep splash into a puddle. He broke into a hard run straight for the inn on the corner and crashed into the wooden front doors. Grabbing the handle, he twisted it, but it would not turn. He glanced

over his shoulder to gauge his distance from his pursuer, only to see him standing directly behind.

“How?”

“You are far too loud, *Slient*,” the hunter answered in a velvety voice.

Slient brought his serrated sabres up in an arc, but the man evaded him effortlessly, stepping aside and drawing a thin, gold-pommeled rapier from a white leather scabbard. The assassin slammed his twin sabres down on the man, imitating an attacking praying mantis. The man blocked the blades with ease, flourishing his sword with lazy disdain for the assassin’s effort.

An oily, golden tongue unfurled from the man’s mouth as he held his rapier before his prey. The morbid thing dangled to his waist, and thin needles protruded from the tip, while two barbed pincers spread apart on either side. The assassin looked on in disgust and then maneuvered his toothed sabres in a whirling pattern at his sides in an attempt to outflank his opponent. The tongue thrust forward, smashing through Slient’s red leathers, the pincers burying themselves into his chest. It undulated grotesquely as it pumped a paralyzing toxin into his body. Slient slumped to the ground.

The golden tongue curled back into the attacker’s mouth like a retreating serpent. He stood over the fallen man, listening to the sounds of an approaching carriage. After a full minute, the coach arrived and stopped next to the pair. A bleached white gnome with short platinum hair hopped down from the driver’s platform and approached, surveying the scene. Bending down, he removed Slient’s helm and glanced up while running his finger across his own throat.

The man with the golden tongue shook his head and sheathed his gold-pommeled rapier.

“No, Hektor, I want him alive...*for now*. His suffering has yet to begin.” He turned and walked to the carriage.

The gnome nodded, producing a jar filled with bluish paste. He scooped out a thick gob and smeared it over Slient’s nose and mouth, then plopped down a second gob, coating the rest of his face. Satisfied, the gnome wiped the excess on Slient’s cloak and then grabbed the collar of his armor and, with some effort, dragged the heavy body toward the waiting carriage where a rope dangled from behind. He tied it to Slient’s torso and then cranked a lever, which hoisted the paralyzed man into the luggage compartment.

Another shadow beast howled in the night, causing the gnome to smile with manic glee.

The sound was much closer than before.



Purvis Wade, secret agent for Taldor’s Lion Blades, entered the hidden office of Sir Dominicus Rell, his face red with anger. Lady Chasity Fluxgold, Rell’s personal secretary, had never seen the man’s emotion so unguarded. His blue eyes, always warm and tender to her, had become like icy steel. The hard edge of his jaw line suggested tightly-clenched teeth, and she could tell by the unkemptness of his normally-immaculate black hair that he had no patience for their usual flirty

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rapport. She stepped aside and permitted him entry into Rell's personal quarters without a word of protest. As Wade went in and closed the door behind him, Lady Fluxgold let out the breath she'd been holding.

"When were you going to tell me Agent Four had gone missing?" Wade asked angrily, on the verge of shouting.

"Good morning to you too, Commander," Rell replied. The imposing head of the Lion Blades military schools sat behind his large mahogany desk, besieged by piles of scrolls and paperwork. A square glass filled with dark liquor rested within arm's reach, the ice cubes within almost completely melted. His violet eyes stared unflinchingly back at Wade.

"I have someone looking into it already," Rell said, "and I didn't want to interrupt your *holiday*."

"With all due respect, sir, consider my holiday at an end. I'd like to be assigned to Agent Michaels' disappearance."

"Is there some reason I should do that when I already have Agent Eight en route to Woodsedge? You do know he's capable, Commander Wade. He'll find Agent Four."

"I know Michaels," Wade continued. "She helped me on assignment in Pitax last year. I also have contacts in Galt who can move me around that blood-soaked state quicker than Agent Eight, I'm sure."

"Is that all?" Rell asked, raising his thin, right eyebrow quizzically.

"No, sir. Agent Michaels saved my life in Pitax. I owe it to her to try to save hers in return. And if I fail her, I'll make damned sure that whoever's behind her disappearance suffers."

Rell nodded and stood. He grabbed his liquor glass and a scroll case, then rounded his desk and handed them both to Wade.

"Then you'd better hurry to Galt. Agent Four's mission was to monitor troop movements along our northern border. She disguised herself as a soldier and infiltrated the Galtan army. By all accounts, that portion of her mission was a success. Yet, her last communication was nearly a month ago. One thing is certain: if she'd been discovered as a spy they would've publicly executed her. The mob is hardly quiet about whom they bring to the *final blades*, and that information would have reached us by now. Go to Woodsedge, Agent Seven, and bring our cub back home."



Purvis Wade hated Galt. Whenever he entered the country, which was as seldom as possible, the devastation that clung to the place always struck him. His Taldan sense of grandeur simply couldn't accept that the Galtan people, most of them Taldan descendants, could lay waste to their once-beautiful and enviable cities, turning them into crumbling ghettos of political terror. It didn't make sense to him.

Dressed in a dark gray cloak with a tricorne hat on his head, Wade hardly looked fearsome until one saw the silk face mask he used to conceal his identity. This attire was the very same as the Order of Gray Gardeners, hatchet men of

Galt who were synonymously known as symbols of terror and distributors of the mob's "justice." Wade moved through the daytime streets of Woodsedge without comment or second glance. The dread these enforcers wrought made their hated uniform the perfect disguise for the Lion Blade agent. But despite the anonymity the costume provided, Wade did not want to linger long on the streets, and quickly found his target: the Woodsedge Pathfinder lodge.

Located just outside of town, the luxurious manor house sported new, well-groomed hedges, but the building itself was marred by missing windows, rotting shingles, and peeling plaster. Wade instantly hated the structure, seeing it as yet another symbol of Galt's slow suicide. He pushed open the massive filigreed front doors and walked into a spacious great room with an enormous fireplace set against the opposite wall. A sweeping staircase ascended to the mansion's second floor balcony, while elegant upholstered chairs and couches sat scattered about the room. A tattered, stuffed owlbear stood menacingly in one corner and an old red carpet ran up the center of the stairs. Two men, one wearing a necklace of bird skulls, lounged lazily in the great room, drinking aromatic black coffee. A handful of servants wearing porcelain masks with red ribbons tied around their necks set about performing cleaning tasks. The masks were symbolic and meant to protect the identities of the servants from vengeful Galtan revolutionaries. Despite that, Wade found their blank, eerie countenances disturbing.

A door on the right wall opened to a long corridor and led to a finely-appointed meeting room with a long oak table set for a dozen guests. Inside the room, hanging a small painting of a yellow flower, stood Eliza Petulengro. The venture-captain of the Woodsedge lodge was as beautiful as Wade remembered, though her flowing red locks had grown. She turned, her pale green eyes startled as Wade entered the room, but they relaxed as he removed his tricorne and gray mask.

"Eliza. Long time," Wade said.

"Not long enough," she replied, walking over to where he stood. She leaned in and kissed him passionately, then reared back and slapped him hard across the face.

"I haven't seen you in five years and you just waltz in here wearing...that, that symbol of hate and fear? Tell me it's a disguise."

"And a good one," Wade said rubbing his cheek, a red welt already forming where she'd stung him. "I need your help, Liz."

Eliza sighed and walked to the head of the table, then sat down. She grabbed a small gold case and turned it over and over in her hands. "You're lucky I've never forgotten how you kiss," she said. "I've had some trouble with doppelgangers recently. I could have killed you. I probably still should."

"Liz, I'm looking for someone." Wade took a seat near her. "Her name is Magenta Michaels but you know her as Twila of Absalom. She's a Taldan agent and she's my friend." Wade realized he was pleading and he didn't like the feeling.

Eliza laughed.

"So you came back here looking for another woman? I should be enraged. I knew Twila—ahem, *Magenta* was a spy," she laughed again. "I didn't know she'd gone missing, however. I simply thought she'd gone on another task for her true masters. I could tell she wasn't a Pathfinder, or a Galtan soldier for that matter;

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she was a tad too snobby.”

“We Taldans prefer the term ‘privileged,’” Wade said.

“Of course you do,” she replied with a smirk. “Okay, how can I help?”

“Well, for starters, you just said that you thought she’d gone on another task for her true masters. What makes you think that?”

Eliza removed a thin black cigar from the gold case and lit it off a candle on the oak table while staring deeply into Wade’s eyes. She slid the case to him and he caught it, removing a cigar for himself.

“At first, Magenta just hung around the lodge,” she began, “never accepting any jobs. Then I received word that a Red Mantis had been asking around Absalom for a Pathfinder named Bozreh, who’d written at length about the hags of Irrisen. Soon after, a man came to me seeking those very chapbooks. I don’t have them, *never have*. I only have a few maps of the region. When he left empty-handed Magenta became more animated than I’d ever seen her. She grilled me about the man and then purchased all of the maps and healing tonics I could gather. Then she left. That was about a month ago.”

“Irrisen,” Wade repeated. “This man who came to you, did he have a name? How did you know he was Red Mantis?”

Eliza blew out a thick cloud of tobacco smoke.

“He didn’t conceal his sawtooth sabre very well. His accent gave him away as well; the Garundi lilt in his voice rang clearly of Mediogalti Island. I’ve been there in the past so I recognized it immediately. I think his name was something like ‘Quint,’ or ‘Quiet.’”

Wade’s stomach dropped and a chill gripped his chest.

“Do you mean, ‘Slient?’”

“Slient! Yes, that’s it.”

“Damn the gods’ luck,” Wade said, putting his mask back on, “Slient killed Michaels’ father in Zimar and she’s hunted him for the past ten years. He’s good, Liz, *he’s very good*. If she went after him then she’s in real trouble. You say you sold her all of your maps of Irrisen?”

“I did.”

“I don’t know my way around there very well.”

“Desperation doesn’t suit you, Purvis.”

Wade took a long drag off his cigar as he stood to look out the window. A brooding stillness fell over the room for several minutes.

“Okay, I’ll help,” Eliza said, breaking the silence. “It just so happens that I have a contact there. Jacobis Renaard. I sent Magenta to him as well. I’ll send word ahead that you are coming and see if he can help you find your missing spy.”

“Thank you, Eliza,” Wade said.

Eliza walked over and embraced Wade, lifting his mask and kissing him softly, her hands tracing the muscles of his chest beneath his cloak.

“Purvis... don’t wait another five years to come back.”



Despite it being the height of summer, Irrisen remained locked in eternal

winter; the White Witches made sure of that. Purvis Wade had never traveled to the frozen country before and immediately promised himself he never would again. The cold weather bore through his clothing, giving him a chill his bones couldn't shake. He traveled in a carriage drawn by two white wolves the size of horses. Leitholfr, his Ulfen driver, had arms as thick as tree trunks, spat gobs of foul tobacco that streaked his snow-white beard red, and smelled worse than the beasts trotting ahead. The sickly scent clung to Wade, making him queasy. He fantasized about a soapy, scalding bath as soon as he returned from this task.

Leitholfr had been recommended by Eliza to be his guide, but Wade soon discovered much to his luck, that the man also crafted a potent caribou blood whiskey and had a reputation throughout Irrisen as a bardic champion. Leitholfr also knew Renaard, which made Wade's trip through the snowy lands to the city of Hoarwood far less bothersome.

As the carriage made its way through the metropolis, which was carved from the trunk of a titanic tree, Wade marveled at its ingenuity. When he arrived at his final destination, marvel turned to outright awe as he discovered the manor home was sculpted completely from ice.

"This is the home of the White Witch Anelisha and her brother, Ghrathis. Tonight they are feasting and celebrating," Leitholfr informed him. "Renaard is here. You will find him inside."

"Arriving during a dinner party? How convenient. It appears my luck continues," Wade said, adjusting the expensive black dinner suit he'd purchased on Leitholfr's recommendation. "You're not coming?"

"No," the Ulfen said flatly, "and it is not luck at all. Anelisha holds these...*parties* every few days. The truly unlucky sometimes do not survive the celebrations. As long as you mind your manners and don't look as if anything you witness disgusts you, you should be fine. Here." He handed Wade two black wine bottles. "One is for the mistress of the house. The other is for Renaard. I'll wait for two hours. I'll assume you'll have lost all your luck after then."

Wade nodded and exited the carriage. The dire wolves growled at him as he passed by, snarling and baring their dagger-length teeth. A wide ice staircase, carpeted with an exquisite violet rug, led to the entrance of the manor. Ulfen men wearing heavy furs lined both sides of the last four steps, their heads uniformly shaven and tattooed with strange runes. A bent old woman stood in the center of the last step, her ivory gown draping off her frame like a shroud. She held an unfurled scroll before her like a shield.

"Welcome to the home of Mistress Anelisha and Master Ghrathis. Whom may I say has the privilege of enjoying Her Radiance's hospitality?"

"Wade. Purvis Wade."

The crone scanned the scroll, shaking her head and clacking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Before she could utter a rebuke, Wade handed her one of the bottles.

"For Her Radiance," he said.

The crone smiled a black-toothed grin.

"Please go in and enjoy the festivities," she said, stepping aside.

Wade entered the manor. Elaborate ice sculptures filled every corner and

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topped thick ice-slab tables. Trained polar bears marched confidently throughout the room. Men and women in expertly-tailored fur garments with garishly-painted faces mingled and danced to the sounds of halfling musicians playing violins and flutes. Jugglers tossed snowballs back and forth in the air through a large wreath of heatless blue flame. The entertainers all bore the same shaven heads and rune tattoos of the Ulfen guards out front. *Slave brands*, Wade surmised.

A scream pierced the air, causing Wade to jump. He turned and saw a woman, her head encased in ice, surrounded by a gaggle of onlookers. Her skin had turned blue and black in places from frostbite. The terror in her eyes pleaded for help from everyone watching her suffer.

“Don’t look alarmed,” a voice said from behind him. “It invites the wrong sort of attention.”

Wade turned, coming face to face with a Varisian man with a thin mustache and long, curly black hair. He smiled and pointed to the bottle that Wade held in his hands.

“Leitholfr’s fine blood whiskey, I see. Jacobis Renaard at your service. Eliza Petulengro says good things about you, Mister Wade.”

“All lies.”

“She tells me you are in search of a fellow Imperialist. Honestly, I don’t have good news for you. I had hoped to get word back, save you a trip to this... wonderful place.”

“It is rather scenic,” Wade said, preparing himself.

“It is that. Sadly, this friend of yours may have met a terrible end when she arrived in Hoarwood, I’m afraid. My sources say a light-haired Taldan woman did come here a month ago, but after a couple of days she vanished, leaving behind all her belongings in a tavern room as well. I’m truly sorry.”

A servant carrying a tray made from ice walked by Wade and Renaard, who deftly plucked two glasses filled with dark green liquor from it. He passed one to Wade and held the other in the air between them.

“Prost,” Renaard said, “a toast for the missing.”

The pair clanked glasses and drank deeply.

“Now this Red Mantis, Slient; him I *do* have some better news about. He’d been employed recently by Lord Ghrathis to handle a trio of troublesome hags that had been spreading some rather scandalous gossip about our incestuous hosts. Needless to say, those hags were all found chopped to bits, perhaps by a serrated sabre. Word on the street, however, is that after completing that task, Lord Ghrathis wanted to keep Slient on retainer—but the Mantis refused and left Hoarwood in a big hurry. It’s a shame, too.

I hear the Lord offered Slient’s handler a king’s fortune, but she refused. This all coincides with the period your friend went missing. If I gambled, I’d bet that the two are linked.”

“His handler? I assumed only Red Mantis leaders dealt with contracts.”

“I think they do. But Slient is out. He got burned during a botched mission in Korvosa a couple of years back. You know that plague business? It seems he was involved.”

“The monster,” Wade said, shocked.

"I don't know all the details," Renaard replied, "but after that, he apparently wasted two different Mantises who tried to make sure he was permanently retired. They stopped hunting him then and he started taking private contracts...high profile, hush-hush ones. It took some, shall we say, *indiscretions* on my part, but I learned that Slient's handler is Saela Darquset, priestess of the House of Stolen Kisses. It's a Calistrian temple located in Quent. It's basically a brothel. Saela is the most connected person throughout the isles of the Shackles. She'll know how to get in touch with Slient."

Another scream stabbed the air. Wade could feel the liquor in his stomach threatening to erupt.

"I have to get out of this place," Wade said to Renaard. "This is entirely too much celebration for me to endure."

"Imagine how I feel. I have to *endure* these atrocities every week. The tragedy of my post, I'm afraid. The Decemvirate can be cruel in their punishments. Come, my friend. I have made my appearance. Let me show you some more pleasing Hoarwood nightlife."

"Will there be more Leitholfr whiskey?" Wade asked.

"Enough to forget this place," Renaard said, holding up his bottle.



In a small section of a red light district, a church stood for those in need of respite. However, it was not a church one would normally associate with prayer and song, but rather one devoted to debauchery and pleasure. The church, as it was known, was the House of Stolen Kisses, and its tribute to the goddess Calistria was paid in information, gold and lust. The town was a dirty, seedy place located on the tropical Motaku Isle in the contested area known as the Shackles. Though the temple stood in the red light district, most visitors to Quent wouldn't see any difference from one part to another. The building itself was one of the few in town that wasn't badly rundown and the interior décor catered to the rough pirate clientele that frequented the region. The walls displayed fine artwork depicting seascapes and heroic-looking pirate ships. A half-dozen humanoid women, all wearing alluring attire, lounged in the central salon, while an iron, spiral staircase led to the second floor balcony. Several doors on the second floor led to private "pleasure chambers." A couple of women stood on the balcony surveying the lobby below. They all perked up as Wade entered, standing straight and heaving out their ample bosoms.

A half-elven woman with bright blond hair pranced toward Wade and placed her hands on his chest.

"Oh, a Taldan," she said playfully, "I haven't had a rooster in years. Your countrymen always take such great care of their bodies and they return the favor. Do you take care of your body, Taldan? I can feel your chest. It's a good chest." She ran her hands up Wade's torso and then stroked his face.

"I'm looking for Saela Darquset," Wade said coldly. "Jacobis Renaard recommended her."

"Oh, did he now?" a woman called down from the balcony. She wore a tight

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black-and-yellow leather corset, a short sheer black skirt, and black fishnet stockings that ran to her mid-thighs. Blood-colored hair spilled over milk-white shoulders and black makeup accentuated her striking blue eyes. A barbed whip rested in a holster at her side. She exuded dangerous sensuality, and even Wade felt slightly intimidated in her presence.

"If Renaard sent you," the woman on the balcony continued, "then you can return and tell him his business is no longer welcome at the House of Stolen Kisses. He will have to...accept a lesser church."

"My business comes from the emperor of Taldor, His Imperial Majesty Grand Prince Stavian the Third," Wade responded impatiently, "and I'm not here on holiday."

The woman glowered down on Wade, and for a moment he thought he'd taken the wrong approach and iced her over. Instead, she extended her arm and made a beckoning gesture with her forefinger. Wade climbed the spiral staircase and made his way toward her.

"If you want to talk to me in private, it's going to cost you," she said, "and I'm an expensive date."

Wade removed a small, sparkling azure gem and held it before her. It matched her eye color. He placed it in her hand.

"It's a good thing I'm not cheap," he replied.

"Do you have a name, Taldan?"

"Wade."

"Well, Wade, I'm Saela Darquset." She judged the stone's weight in her hand. "This is a good start. This way, Wade." Saela turned and led him toward the last door on the balcony. She entered into a finely furnished bedroom with a black, crushed-velvet chaise lounge sitting opposite a kingly, oak-framed bed. A sculpture of Calistria, Lady in the Room and Goddess of the Savored Sting occupied a place of honor in an alcove on the far wall. Several yellow roses decayed at the statue's feet. Church paintings and a collection of barbed scourges adorned the walls. Saela sat on the edge of the bed and gently patted the spot next to her, inviting Wade to join.

He did not disappoint.

"So, Wade, what type of...tryst are you trying to negotiate? From your mention of Renaard, I can only assume you have a specific...*taste* in mind." She began to trace a circular pattern on his thigh with the red painted nail of her forefinger.

"Silent. I want him."

Saela exhaled, a look of satisfaction on her face.

"And you think that some token gem worth maybe a few hundred gold is going to get me to sell out one of my best?" Saela laughed. "You're more arrogant than I'd imagined."

"Maybe, but that's because I know what I'm worth."

Wade reached into his coat and removed a perfectly cut, fist-sized yellow sapphire, streaked with onyx, and handed it to Saela.

"The question is: do you know what you're worth?"

She took the gem, gasping with surprise at its weight.

"This," she said, gazing at the gem hungrily, "this is—"

"My final offer," Wade interrupted.

Saela stared mischievously at Wade.

"Did Slient kill someone important to you or your emperor?" She smiled coyly as she spoke, her finger tracing up Wade's tailored vest. She was enjoying herself.

"Yes," Wade replied flatly, making clear that he did not enjoy their trite banter. "*He did.*"

"I see. Well, it's only business, you know. But, Mister Wade, I'll tell you this: I'm not sure where Slient is, though I have my suspicions. The only reason I'm going to disclose them to you is that if you find him, and if he still lives, he will certainly kill you."

"What makes you think he might not be alive?"

"Oh my, so full of grit, are we? Good. You'll need it. Have you heard of the Great Hunt, Mister Wade? It's a true contest between assassins, created to find the unparalleled best. Slient heard about it and, after he returned from Irrisen, decided to enter the game."

"I've heard of assassin's guilds in Daggermark holding similar competitions," Wade said, "but I didn't know that independent assassins did so as well."

"Well, they do. In many ways the tournament is very spiritual; it is a divine ritual of pursuit and murder. The organizer of the game is a Varisian named Jobry Tryvannish, formally of Magnimar. He operates out of Nidal. I know of some smugglers who make regular trips from here. I can arrange passage for you, if you wish. Consider it a favor, in fact. You can repay me by not mentioning to Slient that we spoke."

"Fair enough," Wade said, standing. "When do these pirates sail for Nidal?"

"First light."

He nodded, then turned and walked to the door.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" Saela asked, stretching out like a cat on the bed. "The room's paid up."

Wade smirked and turned back to Saela.

"I paid for the information. This next part I do for free."



The pirate ship *Wayward Rogue* plowed over the harsh waters of the Arcadian Ocean on course for the port city of Nisroch. Nidal had been cursed during the Age of Shadow, a dark period in Golarion's past, and it had never fully recovered. It was a horrific country, one of the few Wade dreaded. He could understand places like Geb or Belkzen, where the undead and the monstrous walked the streets like men, but Nidal made his skin crawl and his brain rebel. While seemingly civilized on the surface, sadism lurked behind every smiling face and masochism topped most agendas. Why anyone, humanoid or otherwise, would search for ecstasy and enlightenment through pain and torture was greatly disturbing to contemplate, and it horrified Wade.

No wonder Slient hid so well for ten years, Wade thought. *He went to places only a crazy person would dare to search.* He smiled as he realized that, by his own logic, he'd lumped himself in with the insane.

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How his transport managed to sail at all also mystified him. The crew of the *Wayward Rogue* lounged lazily about while the captain, a half-Chelaxian, half-Varisian harrower, kept them well supplied with alcohol and a cadre of “clerics” from the House of Stolen Kisses. They held orgiastic celebrations on deck each night after sundown, their loud revelry lasting until dawn. Wade didn’t join the festivities, finding them too debased and decadent for even his Taldan sensibilities. Instead, he chose to remain sequestered for the first two days in the small quarters below deck designed for smuggling the desperate.

Like the first two evenings, Wade retired early on the third, praying to Desna that he wouldn’t suffer another restless night of seasickness. He’d only been sleeping for an hour when his trained ears registered a snapping sound as the twine he’d fastened over the door’s lock broke. Instinctively, Wade’s hand slipped to his side and readied his wand.

The door opened slowly and Wade narrowed his eyes to slits, trying to spot the intruder while still appearing asleep.

A female half-elf, one of the prostitutes from the House of Stolen Kisses, crept forward holding an evil-looking, curved, black dagger. She moved silently, applying milky-white oil to her blade with practiced precision. When she reached Wade, she raised the weapon high for a killing blow, aiming straight for his heart.

Wade brought the wand up from below the covers with a quick, fluid motion, activating it and sending two streaking blue-white bursts into the blond woman’s face. She screamed and dropped her dagger, then clutched her cheeks in pain and fell to the floor.

A second prostitute, a stocky Ulfen woman or a half-orc—Wade couldn’t tell—rushed into the room wielding another curved black blade. She swung out in an arc and Wade ducked back, avoiding the weapon by mere inches. Then he lashed out with a kick to her pelvis, doubling her over. He moved in to follow with an uppercut, but the burly girl jabbed forward, catching Wade hard in the left eye with the pommel of her knife. He heard a sickening crunch as his orbital bone shattered. A second blow from the woman struck him in the side of the head and sent him reeling.

His first attacker continued to wail and writhe on the floor.

Wade’s left eye filled with blood and the surrounding tissue swelled it shut. His face throbbed with sharp pain as his footing weakened below him. In vain he reached for the wall to steady himself, but fell forward, tripping over the screaming blond. Her muscular counterpart rushed in for the kill, but Wade rolled to his back and kicked upwards with all his might, catching her under the jaw. Her thick neck snapped straight back.

She laughed, unfazed by the attack.

Wade used the momentary respite to bring his wand to bear, pointing it right at the large woman. Two bolts erupted from the device, crashing into her torso and knocking her back. She hit the wall in a daze and blanched with nausea, gasping to replace the wind that had been struck from her lungs. Wade tumbled awkwardly to his feet and unleashed two more bluish missiles of force at his struggling foe. Finally, she dropped in a heap.

The pain in Wade’s face threatened to overwhelm him.

The half-elf still moaned, rolling on the floor, holding her jaw. Wade casually shot a volley of glowing bursts into her, silencing her cries.

Within moments three crewmen appeared in the doorway of Wade's small cabin, one man holding a flintlock pistol. Their eyes scanned the carnage, seeing the two dead prostitutes and the dagger the burly girl still held. Wade sat gingerly down on the edge of the bed.

"They liked to play rough," he grimaced, collapsing in pain, exhausted.

He blacked out before his head hit the pillow.



Wade awoke with a start, still lying on the bed of his cabin. A dark-skinned Garundi man applied a cold rag to his face and dabbed carefully where his cheek had been broken. It still throbbed angrily, but the bone had been set and Wade could see out of his eye again. Seeing Wade return to consciousness, the Garundi man inclined his head and offered the Taldan a slight smile, then pressed a finger against his lips.

"I'm glad to see you are okay," he whispered, "but we must be quiet now."

Wade nodded and gingerly explored his left cheekbone with his fingertips. It had indeed healed, but a thin waxy scar now circled the outer rim of the socket. Outside the cabin a commotion erupted. The sounds of wooden crates being thrown about, followed by loud protests, echoed against the hull.

"What's going on?" Wade asked quietly.

"We have docked in Nidal," the Garundi whispered. "As we speak, the ship is being inspected by the Silent Enforcers. If they find us here, be prepared to fight to the end; if they take us, the horrors they inflict will be too great to imagine."

"I know of the Silent Enforcers, men who cut out their tongues to ensure their secrets are kept. They scour the city, hunting down alleged criminals for the brutal entertainments of this foul land. You don't have to tell me about Nisroch."

"No, only to remind you to be quiet," the Garundi muttered. Looking nervous, he stealthily moved to pick up his spear by the door, then returned to Wade, scanning his face. "You've healed, but the injuries were very bad. Even my skills cannot prevent the scar."

"Quite alright," Wade said, fingering the waxy new skin. "I like scars."

The disturbance outside began to quiet down, and after a few minutes, ceased completely. Satisfied, the Garundi set his spear back down and began gathering the rest of his belongings, including some ointments he'd laid out on Wade's bed. He put on a light gray cloak and threw the hood over his head.

"Why heal me?" Wade asked, softly.

"I would not let any man die that I could save. The crew wanted you to die, I could *feel* it, but I would not allow it and neither would Captain Dragnavar. It was the right thing to do."

"You have my eternal gratitude," Wade said as he stood and gathered his own things.

Ten minutes passed before the door of the cabin unlocked. A gangly Chelaxian man with half his upper teeth missing stood by the open door and gestured for

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Wade and the Garundi to exit. The dark-skinned man wasted no time climbing the ladder to the deck and leaving the ship, disappearing quickly into the crowds swarming the docks. Wade reached the deck and immediately saw a group of crewmen make a beeline for him. He went for his wand, relieved to find it holstered in its usual place at his hip.

The group parted and the captain of the *Wayward Rogue* continued forward, his hand outstretched to Wade, who scowled suspiciously at the pirate. Dragnavar looked more like a typical Varisian wanderer than a Shackles pirate. He had a bright-colored scarf tied around his head and a gold chain that ran from his nose to his right ear. He wore no shirt, revealing a gallery of exotic tattoos across his chest and back.

After an awkward pause, Wade accepted the pirate's hand.

"My apologies for your experience aboard my vessel," Captain Dragnavar began. "I may be a pirate, but I'm not in the business of murdering passengers who've paid for secure passage. I'm not pleased with Priestess Darquest for attempting such a thing aboard my ship, and I will let her know of my displeasure."

"Not if I tell her first."

"Indeed," Dragnavar said, smiling in agreement. "Now, this Jobry, he'll be easy to spot; he's Varisian, like me, but always wears rose-colored glasses. He likely doesn't expect you anymore. He'll be out at the opera tonight. He's an enthusiast of the torture dramas at the Nocturnal Theater. Do you know the place?"

"I do," Wade said with revulsion.

"Wonderful. That makes it all the easier. So then, I bid you farewell."

Wade thanked the captain and walked down the gangplank to the docks. It had been a while since he'd been to Nisroch, but he remembered the place well. He'd been here before for the Lion Blades and for the Pathfinder Society. *My last mission as a Pathfinder*, Wade recalled, *when I lost her*.

Wade shook off the memories and made his way toward the Nocturnal Theater. He did not see the albino gnome approach Captain Dragnavar from the shadows of the *Wayward Rogue's* deck, nor witness him handing the pirate a sack full of coins.

"I told him exactly what Evicercus wanted me to say, Hektor," Dragnavar said giving the pouch a shake, "though if you wanted him dead it doesn't make sense to hide him from the Silent Enforcers. We could have just handed him over to those ghouls, if that was your intent."

The gnome angrily stomped his feet and shook his head. He waved his finger threateningly back and forth at the pirate.

"Okay, okay," Dragnavar said, throwing his hands up in surrender, "none of my business."

The gnome exited the ship, following Wade at a distance.

Wade navigated the streets easily, the occasional sighting of a familiar building or landmark triggering brief recollections of his last time in Nisroch. Try as he might, the haunting thoughts wouldn't relent. He pulled up the collar of his blue leather coat and readjusted the violet scarf he wore around his neck. It wasn't particularly cold, but Wade felt goose flesh nonetheless. More than once that feeling translated into paranoia, and he found himself constantly glancing over

his shoulder. Darkness slowly encroached upon the city, causing the busy streets to grow silent and the shadows to stretch from the alleys and corridors. By the time he reached the Nocturnal Theater, night had completely fallen over Nisroch.

He approached the theater doors and was stopped at the ticket window by a pale, bald usher. Scars marred the usher's face like a road map, destroying any obvious signs of ethnicity or gender.

"Thur, thath five crownth for a ticket, ten for the fron' of the houth," The usher said with a lisp. The tip of its tongue had been badly mutilated by flame and steel.

"Of course, how silly of me. I'll take a seat in the front." Wade reached for his coin purse, not finding it. He checked frantically in his other pockets, jacket and belt, but came up empty. *Damn pirates*, he cursed under his breath; they'd even found the ten platinum coins he'd sewn into the lining of his coat in case of an emergency. Wade sighed and realized with annoyance that he was stranded in Nidal without any money.

A tugging at his side caused Wade to whirl about. An albino gnome stood holding a Chelish platinum piece in his outstretched hand. He smiled at Wade and offered the coin up as high as he could reach.

Wade accepted it.

"Why thank you, good sir."

The gnome clapped his hands happily, flashed his ticket to the attendant, and walked through the doors of the theater. Wade slid the platinum across the counter and received his ticket: a thin piece of sharp, black metal. *It's a mutilation device to be used during the show*, Wade realized with revulsion. He walked ahead into the theater.

Long benches rose up into the higher reaches of the building, giving the auditorium a feel more like an arena than a traditional opera house. Tapestries hanging from the ceiling depicted a skull with manacles inserted through its empty eye sockets—the symbol of their dark god, Zon-Kuthon. On the stage, two hairless nude women, painted jet-black from head to toe, sliced at a human man hanging upside down on a large wrought-iron wheel. As his pleasure-filled cries reverberated throughout the theater, many in the audience joined in the chorus, cooing and writhing in their seats with ecstasy.

Wade scanned the room, looking for anyone that fit Jobry's description, but found none. Native Nidalese tended to be pale with hawkish features, like their Chelaxian neighbors, with a proclivity for shaving their heads or keeping long, singular braids. With his Taldan tan, Wade was easily the darkest man in the room. He took his seat in front, matching the number to his mutilation ticket. On stage, to Wade's disgust, one of the clerics of Zon-Kuthon continued to flay the willing participant. The other wafted smoke from a bundle of smoldering reddish-brown leaves over him, bestowing the blessings of their foul god and forestalling the inevitable. Wade looked away, his mind aghast with horror.

A deeply-tanned Kelishite man sat down next to Wade. He had strong noble features, and thick light brown hair, slicked back. An expensive white suit tailored from cotton and silks hugged his body like a second skin, while a light pink, spider-silk scarf was draped neatly around his neck. He wore thin gold jewelry around both wrists, and Wade could see the chain of a gold pocket watch tucked

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into his vest. His style impressed Wade, who found himself enamored by the ensemble.

“Good evening, Mister Wade,” the Kelishite man said in a velvety voice, shattering Wade’s momentary admiration. “Enjoying the performance?”

“Hardly my taste in entertainment,” Wade snapped back. “Forgive me if I sound rude, but who in the hells are you? You know my name, but I don’t know yours. Hardly seems fair.”

“It’s not,” the man responded in his velvet purr, “so let’s remedy that, shall we? My name is Zandor Evicercus. I’m an associate of a friend of yours.”

“Jobry?”

“Yes, and Slient’s too,” he said with a slight chuckle.

Wade turned his whole body towards the Kelishite man and slowly reached for his wand, but a sharp pain in his lower back made him wince. He glanced behind him and saw the philanthropic albino gnome flanking him, holding a thin, gold-bladed stiletto. The gnome slid the weapon out of Wade’s side, and a spurt of blood followed. Wade realized with terror that he couldn’t move.

“I’m pleased to see that you survived the attempt by Saela’s girls. Huzzah, Mister Wade; that was my first test. *It’s always my first test.* Oh, and don’t mind the poison Hektor’s stabbed you with, it’s just a paralytic. You will be fine after a few minutes as long as you don’t bleed out by then. I didn’t want you doing something rash like interrupting or attacking me. That just wouldn’t do here.”

The audience surrounding them gave out a collective moan of pleasure as the participant on stage screamed his death cry. A torrent of blood erupted from a deep gash in his throat and doused the front row. Wade and Evicercus were both caught in the spray. The man then slumped motionless, held up only by his restraints. The painted priests pushed the large wheel off stage and brought in a new one with twin girls strapped down to it.

“Now *that’s* a show!” Evicercus said with delight, marveling at the red droplets that splattered his white clothing. “You see, Mister Wade, I’m a gamesman, more gambler than true hunter. I believe you know the basics from Saela: I hunt down assassins. And you, Mister Wade, behind your staunch mantle of imperialism and blind loyalty to your corrupt government, *you* are nothing more than a hired killer. Just like the other little lion that crossed my path.”

Wade’s eyes grew large with rage. “Yes, I have her and she lives. Well, *sort of*,” Evicercus continued. As he finished speaking, a bloated and grotesque tongue crawled out of his mouth and slid down his chest, snaking its way toward Wade’s paralyzed body. Needles covered the tip of the sickly worm-like appendage, and the mandibles protruding from its sides clacked hungrily together. It probed Wade’s chest, leaving a fetid trail of saliva and then slithered back into Evicercus’ open mouth.

“She brought me a little challenge with Slient, and now she brings me you. Oh how useful my trapped lioness is! I wonder if, because of her, I will add your entire organization to my collection? We shall have to see. Come to my family’s noble estate, Mister Wade. We will have our little contest—the most dangerous of games—where the winner’s reward is a life well-earned. You, of course, have no choice but to accept my challenge. If you try to flee and hide like Mister Mantis

did, I will find you, and then I will kill you.”

The pincers on the sides of Evicercus’ tongue snapped together, accentuating his point.

Evicercus stood and straightened his white suit, smearing the rapidly-drying blood droplets down the front.

“Outside of Graydirge, in Geb, there is an oasis. It is my family’s estate. Come to me within the fortnight and we will begin our game. Bring any weapon, magical or mundane. Nothing you possess will concern me; my skill is too far above yours. Good evening, Mister Wade, and of course, enjoy the show.”

Evicercus turned and walked away. The albino gnome smiled widely and clasped Wade on the shoulder, then gave him a wink before scampering off after the man with the golden tongue.



“It appears you were poisoned with some sort of derro toxin,” the old half-elf said to Wade, wrapping thick, linen bandages around his waist. “It seems it was designed to paralyze you and not to kill. There’s an alchemical compound in it as well...perhaps if the engineer had used more potent strains of the fungus it’s derived from, it might be capable of keeping someone paralyzed for hours, even days.”

“That’s a nightmarish thought,” Wade said, pulling a shirt over his tanned, muscular body. He stretched out on the medical cot, relaxed. Even with a poisonous knife wound in his side, being back on Taldan soil in Oppara gave him more peace than all the religion in the world.

“I think I can make something out of what was left in your wound—hopefully even an antidote. It might take a couple of days, but I’m pretty sure it can be done,” the half-elf said, moving slowly toward a workstation where a dozen beakers collectively brewed a reddish concoction. Noxious steam poured from several of the glass vials and a snake-shaped tube-beaker looked ready to burst from the pressure of the fluid passing through it.

“What would I do without you, Llewellynn?” Wade asked from the cot.

“Probably die in a ditch out in the field somewhere, utterly useless.” The half-elf adjusted an array of valves and knobs on the beakers, which seemed to exacerbate things. Two of the vials began overflowing with vapor and whistling two distinctly different high-pitched screams. Wade got off the cot and walked over, looking curiously at the device.

“Did you break it?” he asked, reaching out to touch one of the beakers.

Llewellynn slapped Wade’s hand away.

“No, I didn’t break it. Don’t touch anything, Agent Seven, or you’ll be the one getting broken around here. Now follow me, I have some information for you from some deep sources.”

The half-elf led Wade through a brightly-lit corridor into a vast laboratory and crafting room. Several gnomes moved about the room, working on a variety of strange-looking devices. Some appeared quite dangerous, sporting mechanical sword arms and fonts designed to spew flame. Wade and Llewellynn passed a pair

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of gnomes working on what appeared to be an ordinary helmet, but it suddenly sprouted spikes pointing inward and obliterated the head of the straw dummy they had placed it over. Wade realized that he did not hear what Llewellynn had just said.

“Care to listen, or am I keeping you from something?” the half-elf asked with annoyance, noting Wade’s distraction. They had come to a stop in front of an oak table set before an archery range. Two straw dummies with red circles painted over their faces and bellies stood defiantly at the far end of the range. Atop the table rested four flintlock pistols. One had a golden cylinder and a set of mirrors covered in arcane symbols attached under the barrel.

“You’re doing fine, old chap. I’m an apt pupil back here.”

“Always with the sarcasm. It really doesn’t befit an agent of the Empire. Now pay attention.” Llewellynn picked up the first pistol and pointed it down range. “This is your standard flintlock; Tian made, with cold-iron ammunition, and a two second delay.” The half-elf pulled back the hammer and fired the weapon. It sparked the gunpowder and, a brief moment later, fired the iron ball and hit the dummy in the head. Llewellynn never missed during one of his demonstrations.

“I know about pistols,” Wade said, “but I do enjoy having a magic wand that hits a target I don’t have to aim at. I didn’t have a hundred years to practice like you did. And besides, those things corrode after you use them enough. The energy in my wand recharges.”

“You’re confusing me with an elf again, Agent Seven.”

“No, I’m saying you’re over a hundred years old,” Wade said with a smirk.

“Your wand may recharge, but you will be coming across more powerful enemies, and down in Geb a couple of bursts from that stick aren’t going to drop anything. You’re going to need four, six, eight—and they won’t make a bit of difference! Your precious resources will be used up in no time. So, Sir Rell has decided that you need to upgrade your personal armory.”

“With a pistol?”

“Pay attention!” Llewellynn picked up the fourth pistol, the one with the gold cylinder and the strange mirrors. “This contraption is a revolver. It fires ammunition differently, and without the need for black powder; it’s contained inside each individual bullet.” The old half-elf proudly aimed the weapon down range. Light reflected from the mirrors under the gun, creating a targeting point on the dummy’s torso.

“I’ve seen those too, from Alkenstar,” Wade said, unimpressed.

“But this one’s been alchemically modified.” Llewellynn fired the revolver, and no sound escaped the gun at all. The half-elf pulled the trigger again and again, hitting the dummy an additional five times. The weapon remained absolutely silent. When Llewellynn finished, very little remained of the straw figure.

“By Gorum’s hand,” Wade whispered in awe, “that *is* interesting.”

“Silencing oil. Apply it to your ammunition and it will radiate perfect silence right to your target. They are standard issue now, Agent Seven.”

“How long does the effect of the oil last?”

“An hour, so use it only when you need it.” Llewellynn palmed the empty revolver, then picked up a small item from the table. “And, last but not least, we

have this little spider.” He held out a tiny crystal arachnid figurine. Wade took it and studied it closely.

“This little fellow rides on the end of your barrel there,” Llewellynn continued. “After each shot, it scampers inside the barrel and cleans it of any residue, thus preventing it from exploding in your hand.”

“Extraordinary,” Wade said, touching the figurine to the gun. It sprang to life and clambered onto it, freezing like a statue at the barrel’s end. “What if I fire while it’s inside?”

Llewellynn smirked. “It doesn’t go to work unless the barrel is cool and there is no vibration.”

Wade took the empty weapon from the half-elf, along with a boot-sized wooden box filled with ammunition. He then aimed it at a practice dummy as Llewellynn continued.

“Now, as to the intelligence I mentioned, we’ve been able to compile a dossier for you regarding Zandor Evicercus. The man is indeed Gebbite royalty and he’s human. His parents were loyalists and governed fairly, but they turned down the offer of undeath. Can’t say I blame them; I personally can’t wait ‘til I see my gods. I’ve lived well.”

“You’ll live another hundred years, you old fool,” Wade said with a chuckle.

“Gravelady, I hope not.” The half-elf smiled, rolling his eyes. “Anyway, if I may proceed...it seems that upon the natural death of his parents, Evicercus inherited both the title and estate, but stepped away from politics. He became a hunter, and at one time had the largest collection of exotic animals stuffed and displayed in museums throughout Northeastern Garund. And not just natural animals either, Agent Seven, but creatures like griffons, manticores—even a dragon. Then he abruptly sold the collection to some wealthy Tian lord and retreated completely from public life. It appears he began hunting a different prey, as you well know.”

“So it seems.”

“Now to the business of that tongue you described. Sounds like a mohrg’s tongue. Mohrgs are horrible monsters, unrepentant and vicious killers brought back from the dead to continue their foul, murderous work. They enjoy paralyzing their victims using their poisonous tongue, which are actually extensions of their bloated entrails.”

Wade shuddered.

“I’m guessing Evicercus has had a graft of some kind,” the half-elf continued. “It isn’t unheard of for human Gebbites to apply the limbs of the undead to their bodies. It’s expensive and dangerous, but it’s just the sort of thing a noble there might do.”

Llewellynn grabbed an additional box of ammunition from the table and handed it to Wade, along with a marked flask of clear liquid.

“Holy water?” Wade asked. “I thought you said he was human?”

“Just because he is doesn’t mean you won’t need this if you run into some sort of undead. You are going to Geb after all.”

“True.”

Wade stared at the destroyed dummy at the end of the range for a moment, his mind stuck on something else the old half-elf had said.

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"You mentioned that he had the largest collection of taxidermy animals in Northeastern Garund, right?" Wade asked.

"At one time," Llewellynn said, not following.

"Evicercus told me that Slient and Michaels were his...that he'd add our whole organization to his collection. You told me that derro toxin he used on me could potentially be more potent. Do you think it could be made strong enough to permanently paralyze someone?"

The half-elf thought it over.

"Of course, anything's possible with magic," Llewellynn said. "There are lesser spells that, when used in combination with a stronger alchemical paste, could undoubtedly accomplish that."

"Drop everything else and get working on that antidote," Wade said, nodding, then turning on his heel and heading toward the exit. "I think Agent Four is still alive, and I'm going back to get her."



Geb can be an unnerving kingdom to those who have never ventured there; it is a desert realm where the undead walk the streets and have the same rights as the living. Purvis Wade did not like the land of the dead, but he did not fear it. The denizens of that place took extra effort to accommodate the living, to prove that even the dead can be civilized. Wade didn't buy into the façade, but he'd never experienced ill will during any of his visits. He traveled to the country by camel, having first flown from Oppara to Nex in the colossal imperial airship, the *Golden Dawn*. The vessel would remain docked in the city of Quantum for three days. Wade understood he had until then to return or face a long trip home on his own.

Arriving at the oasis outside Graydirge, he approached cautiously, alert for danger. He scanned the desert sands for signs that the man with the golden tongue had begun his terrible game. A wide, clear lake surrounded by tall coconut-filled trees marked the beginning of the oasis. Lush green lands offered respite from the sand dunes of the surrounding wastes, and Wade saw a half-dozen ibex grazing in the taller grasses. A one-story manor occupied a small hill in the center of the oasis, surrounded by a waist-high, white picket fence. A path, flanked on both sides by long blankets of wildflowers, led up to the home. Moving closer still, he spotted the albino gnome standing patiently on the elegant front porch. He stood perfectly still, dressed quite dapperly in a black nobleman's suit and holding a silver tray before him. Wade climbed off his camel and approached up the path, un-holstering the new revolver and carrying it openly for the gnome to see.

Reaching the veranda, Wade saw that the albino's silver platter held a fist-sized golden key. Wade took it and the demi-human dropped the platter to his side, holding it under his arm, and pointed towards the front of the manor. Two large bronze doors greeted Wade, covered with carvings of long-tongued, undead nobles being supplicated by throngs of living acolytes. The mouth of a carved skull served as the keyhole. He placed the key into the mouth and turned it, hearing a satisfying click as it unlocked. Wade turned back to face the gnome, but the little man had vanished, leaving behind the silver platter. Wade picked it up and, after

a moment of thought, doused it with holy water and slid it under his shirt.

Pushing open the ornate bronze entrance, Wade found himself in the lobby of an impressive structure. In the center of the room a wide staircase wound down towards toward a vast lounging area. Large windows set in the roof let in the natural daylight. He approached the stairs slowly, his firearm held before him. The lake from outside the manor fed in from an underground tunnel, creating a pool in the lower lobby. A skeletal statue stood in the center of the pool, its ribcage filled with the carving of a long, undulating, worm-like creature that twisted up through the jaw of the skeleton and out of its mouth like a grotesque tongue. Tiles with a colorful, repeating mosaic pattern covered the floors along with dozens of man-sized potted ferns. Long reclining chairs sat close to the pool, a table with a pitcher of clear liquid nestled between them. Wade could see the table top held another golden key, and three sets of bronze doors lined the walls to the left, right and far opposite side of the lower lobby.

Wade reached the bottom floor and headed straight for the table and the second key. He pulled it from the surface only to discover that a thin cord kept it tethered to the top. A loud whistle filled the air as the wire tripped an alarm. Two skeletons rose from hiding places in the water and moved forward, rusty falchions in their bony hands.

I see we're playing it this way, Wade thought with disdain. *With traps.*

Wade aimed his weapon, and the mirrors shone prismatically, projecting a targeting spot. He fired at one of the skeletons, connecting, and the undead guardian fell back into the pool with a splash. The other skeleton rushed forward and swung its rusty blade, missing him by a hair. Wade fired at his second assailant and its hollow skull exploded in a fountain of bone shrapnel as the rest of its body fell backwards into the pool. He stared down admiringly toward the weapon. The revolver's oiled bullets kept his shots silent. Once again, Llewellynn's gadgets had proven handy.

"Now I know what you've brought as your first weapon," a velvet voice projected from the pool statue. Wade whirled and aimed the gun at it reflexively. "Before you are three doors," Evicercus's disembodied voice continued. "Make your choice, for now our game begins."

Wade took a dagger from his belt and cut the cord tethering the golden key then walked towards the far wall. Another skull-faced lock greeted him. He scanned the threshold for hidden wires and then gingerly inspected the lock with the thin metal ticket he'd retained from the Nocturnal Theater in Nidal. Satisfied that no hidden dangers lurked, Wade inserted the gold key and opened the door.

Inside, a small passage passed between two alcoves and led to a square chamber. A lifelike statue stood within each recess. One wore only a loincloth and held a huge two-handed sword over its head; the other had dark black cloth covering its entire body with only its eyes exposed. It carried a Tian katana and held some sort of round device in its free hand. In the square room beyond stood a dozen more statues, all outfitted in various regional armors. A carving of the pool skeleton dominated the central far wall, its horrific tongue extending out to the room. Near it, the statue of a man in full Red Mantis armor struck an intimidating pose with his twin serrated sabres. A black fur cloak hung from his body, bristling with what

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looked like quills. Opposite the Mantis statue stood a woman in blue and green leather armor holding a gold-pommeled falcata. Her light brown hair flowed in waves down her back while stray locks danced in the air around her face.

"Magenta," Wade whispered.

He looked again at the statues and realized that they were all paralyzed victims. He rushed over to where Magenta stood and touched her face, finding it warm. "I'll get you out of this," Wade said, throwing his arms around her waist and trying to lift her.

"No absconding with my trophies," Evicercus's velvet voice came from the carving in the wall. "Not unless you defeat me."

The bronze doors at the end of the small passage slammed shut and stone holes in the ceiling burst open, showering Wade with sand. The force threw him to his back and knocked the wind from his lungs. He rolled out of the gritty shower and stood, shaking the dirt from the revolver. Above the skeletal wall carving, a small panel had slid aside, revealing the pale gnome sitting behind a thick sheet of glass, happily clapping his hands. Wade shot at the glass, but the bullet ricocheted off and soared around the room, finally impacting into the sand, which was rapidly rising.

"Be careful with your weapon, Mister Wade," the wall carving teased. "You might hit one of my trophies, and I do so hate preserving them the old-fashioned way."

Wade turned the gun toward the carving and shot three times, emptying the gold cylinder of its rounds. The stone skeleton shattered, the tongue falling and burying itself in the sand.

The tiny granules continued pouring through the holes in the ceiling, filling the room knee-deep. Wade could barely move through the heavy stuff, and his boots threatened to pull free with every step. He staggered down the hall to the bronze doors and searched for a lock, but found none on this side. Desperately, he probed the walls for any lever or panel he could operate, hoping to find some way to stop the sand or reopen the doors. He found none. He made his way back into the chamber and saw the gnome up behind the glass, laughing in silent hysteria.

The sand reached Wade's chest, slowing his movements to mere inches. In less than a minute it would reach past his head. If it did, then everyone in the room would suffocate, including himself and Agent Michaels. Wade sheathed the revolver and removed a small metal cylinder from his jacket. He uncorked the top, releasing a noxious vapor into the cramped room. Hopefully Llewellynn's antidote would work, though Wade felt apprehensive at the thought of a dozen newly-freed assassins joining the game. He removed his wand and whispered a command word, feeling the magical stick grow clammy and oily in his hands and aimed it towards the gnome, who danced and gestured mockingly behind the glass. Two greenish-black bolts flew from the tip and splashed against the glass, in front of the gnome's face. The albino stopped dancing as he saw the glass begin to bubble where the wand's acid had struck. He scowled angrily and hopped backwards, disappearing into the room above the skeleton carving. The acid ate away the foggy glass until it collapsed.

The pouring sand slowed and then ceased all together, burying Wade up to

his neck. He smiled. *Of course*, he realized, *Evicercus doesn't want to kill his "trophies."* Luckily, the antidote hadn't yet taken effect and the dozen paralyzed assassins remained motionless in the sand.

Wade struggled to climb out of the grit, using the window's ledge to gain some leverage. He pulled himself into the observation room that the gnome had been sitting in. A table occupied the small space along with a comfortable viewing chair. A stone box with a wheel and axle sat nearby. Wade turned the wheel, causing a loud, clockwork noise to echo in the chamber. Slowly, the sand began to drain through hidden grates in the floor. A passage in the room led out, deeper into the manor.

Artificial crimson light illuminated the deeper recesses of the passage. Wade reloaded his revolver with six fresh bullets from a pouch at his waist and continued forward. Ahead he could hear a faint song playing from a wind-up music box. He pressed on, exiting the passage and coming into a diamond shaped chamber.

The rose-colored light filled the room, allowing him to see with some difficulty. Statues, all twins of the skeletal pool statue, stood menacingly around the chamber, their horrific tongues extended and ready to strike. Wade prayed to Desna they were purely decorative.

A small crossbow bolt whistled through the air and sank into his shoulder. He felt intense heat as the liquid coating the bolt's head seeped into him.

"That weapon is remarkable," Evicercus's smooth Kelish accent came from somewhere in the shadowy room, "but unfortunately, it won't save you."

Another whistle shot towards him. Wade turned his head, but the bolt bit into the side of his neck, leaving a long scratch; an inch closer and it would have hit his jugular. Wade scanned the red-lit room for movement—but saw none.

Then the light switched from murky blood-red to bright platinum. The sudden flash blinded him, and he instinctively dropped to his knees for protection. The light began to pulsate and strobe, giving everything a delayed, surreal look. Wade struggled back to his feet and saw a form charging him through his hazy vision. He pointed his weapon and fired, but missed his target. Seconds later, Evicercus slammed into him, knocking him down. Wade tried to lift the revolver, but the man brought his foot down on his wrist.

"Even your powerful weapons cannot rival a few gnomish illusions," Evicercus said. He rammed his knee into Wade's stomach and pinned him to the ground. Blood leaked from the bolt wounds, and the toxin coursing through his body sapped his strength. Evicercus laughed as he saw the life draining from Wade's form.

"This was such a disappointment, Mister Wade. I had such high expectations, given your notoriety. I wonder who they will send for me next? Whoever they are, I truly hope they are more capable. Still, it was a pleasure. I shall enjoy you in my trophy chamber."

Slowly, the golden mohrg tongue unraveled from the Kelishite's mouth and crept toward Wade. The mandibles snapped together hungrily, appearing to move in slow motion from the effect of the strobing light. The tongue coiled and slithered like a snake and then slammed into Wade's chest, its pincers eager for his flesh. Evicercus's eyes shone with pure hate and triumph.

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Then confusion replaced their previous gleam.

The tongue dug ineffectively into Wade's chest, the mandibles wedged in tight, unable to retract from it. Evicercus pulled back, struggling to free his long, gilded appendage, and momentarily losing his hold on Wade's wrist. The Lion Blade brought his weapon up and pressed it against the side of Evicercus's face. The man flailed desperately to free his golden tongue from Wade's chest. Wade pulled the revolver's trigger and the hammer fell, silently sending a bullet into Evicercus's skull, blowing a huge chunk out the other side of his head, and spattering blood, bone, and brain all over a mohrg statue. Evicercus slumped against Wade, his golden tongue deflating like a withering vine, wheezing and rotting away to dust. Still poisoned and weak, Wade rolled Evicercus's corpse off of him.

The light in the room stabilized, turning bright white. Wade stood with tremendous difficulty and removed the silver tray from beneath his shirt. An ugly dent testified to where the tongue's mandibles had attached. He tossed the tray aside and then fell forward hard, smashing onto the ground. He laid there for what felt like hours before regaining the strength to stand. Carefully, he made his way back towards the room where the assassins had been trapped. Most of them remained crumpled on the tiled floor, too weak to stand. Agent Michaels sat against the far wall, unconscious and breathing slowly.

Silent and a few of the others were gone.



The airship, the *Golden Dawn*, left Nex on schedule with Wade and Michaels aboard. Both were exhausted from their ordeal, and glad to be back in Taldan luxury, away from the harsh deserts of Geb. The *Golden Dawn* afforded the wealthiest travelers private cabins with steam-heated bubble baths. The agents relaxed in one of the finest tubs, eating fresh fruits and enjoying Taldan champagne. Light filtered in through wide glass windowpanes and brightened the room, creating a dazzling view of the world beneath. Bearded porcelain statues stood about the cabin like watchful sentries, embodying Taldan wealth and extravagance.

Agent Michaels poured the last swallow of champagne into her glass and frowned, holding it up for Wade to see.

"Looks like we'll need another bottle," she said, "and some more fruit and cheese."

"Good thing the galley's fully stocked. I'll be right back." Wade rose, dripping from the elegant bathtub, and put on a white cotton robe. He walked from the cabin and went to the galley, whistling as he did. Pushing open the swinging doors, he found it strangely empty. An assortment of beef cuts laid prepared on a worktable while three large pots boiled noisily on a metal stove against the left wall.

"Hello?" Wade called, looking around the room. His eyes were drawn to the butchered meat again, and he noticed no knives or cleavers lay anywhere nearby. "Hello, anyone in here?" he called again.

No one answered.

Bothered, Wade opened all of the ice closets and searched the meat larder for

a member of the kitchen staff. Still, he found no one. In the distance beyond the kitchen, soft music began. *They must all be off serving dinner*, Wade surmised.

Shrugging, he reached into the nearby wine rack and removed a vintage, two-century-old chardonnay. He resumed whistling and departed for his cabin.

"Last of the 4500 right here," he said as he entered, "though I forgot to look for fruit and cheese."

On the cabin floor, Agent Michaels lay with her hands tied behind her back, a white gag clamped around her mouth. The albino gnome stood above her, holding a bloody meat cleaver in each hand. Flames danced around the floor, threatening to engulf the entire room.

Before Wade could react, a cleaver came whirling at him. He dodged aside, and it buried itself into the wooden doorframe. Wade lunged for the gnome, who tossed his second cleaver, hitting the Taldan man in the chest. The blade bit deep, but not enough to stop him. Blood began to pour down the front of his white bathrobe. He wrenched the cleaver free from his chest, his face contorting from the pain.

Wade swung at the gnome, who ducked and tumbled forward, rolling to his feet by the door. He pulled the cleaver from the frame. Wade closed the gap, swinging his butcher's blade, but Hektor parried with his own. Wade jabbed hard with his off-hand and the gnome lowered his head. He heard a crunch and pop as two of his knuckles shattered. He winced.

Damn gnomes! I keep forgetting how hard their heads are.

Hektor took advantage of the reprieve and tumbled across the cabin with acrobatic flair, but as he somersaulted through the flames, Wade noticed that they didn't react to the gnome's sudden movements. He breathed with relief; *An illusion!*

The gnome rolled to his feet on the far side of the cabin, pointing his off-hand at Wade. A brilliant ray of light shot from the gnome's forefinger, filling Wade's eyes. The Taldan's vision went instantly blurry, and he could only make out a silhouette through the haze, as Hektor tumbled toward him swinging with the cleaver. Wade stepped backward, hitting something with the back of his boots. The albino attacked again and clipped Wade across the torso, his dual chest wounds now forming a bloody cross.

Then suddenly, the illusory flames vanished from around them.

Wade chopped downward, missing the gnome and narrowly throwing out his shoulder. Stepping back again, he realized his feet had hit Agent Michaels, and he stumbled over her bound form, falling hard on his tailbone. Hektor pounced onto Wade, an insane look of pleasure and joy crossing his bleached face. He tried to pin Wade, but the Taldan responded with a head-butt to his face. The satisfying sound of the gnome's nose breaking seemed to help clear Wade's vision. As the little man reeled, Wade shoved Hektor off him and climbed to his feet.

Hektor rolled like a log towards Wade's clothing piled by the bath, coming up with his revolver. He aimed it at the Lion Blade, but Wade hurled himself forward, slamming the gnome against the glass window of the airship cabin. A loud snap sounded as long cracks spider-webbed beneath him. The gnome fired the weapon, but Wade managed to knock the firearm from his grasp just as a bullet

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sailed silently through the air, smashing into a porcelain statue. Wade swung the cleaver again at the pinned gnome but missed, hitting the window and shattering it completely. Glass flew out and wind blew through the cabin, buffeting Wade and the gnome through the opening. Wade held tightly onto the window frame forcing his whole body against it, while the gnome latched onto Wade's left foot, dangling in the air. Slowly, the gnome began to crawl up Wade's back in an effort to reenter the cabin. His face was a mix of rage and manic glee. The expression fell away from the gnome suddenly as he peered through the window.

Agent Michaels had escaped her bonds and held Wade's revolver aimed straight ahead. She fired and the bullet ripped through Hektor's torso. The gnome looked down at his wound in disbelief just as an ear-shattering second boom filled the cabin. The shot hit him in the center of his forehead, the force of the impact tearing his small body off of Wade's.

He vanished into the clouds below.

"Are you all right?" Wade managed to say through shallow breaths. Michaels braced herself and hauled Wade back through the window frame.

"Am *I* all right?" Michaels gasped. "You're a bloody mess and you ask me if I'm all right? Oh, Purvis..." she leaned in and kissed him softly on his lips.

The door to the cabin burst open and the ship's captain entered, pistol drawn, followed by two blue and green-uniformed Taldan soldiers armed with falcatas.

"By the gods, Commander Wade! We heard the commotion. Men, fetch a healer immediately. By Abadar's grace, you're bleeding everywhere, sir."

The captain placed a thick white towel to Wade's chest. Voices in the hall grew louder as the guards returned to the room with a diminutive man wearing white-and-gold robes with a hand-sized gold key on a golden chain around his neck.

The healer approached and began to pray under his breath in old Taldane. A warm glow began to coat his body. He kneeled, placing his hand upon Wade's wounded chest, and the warmth passed from him to the Lion Blade. Slowly, the agent's pain relented and the blood began to ebb as the slashes diminished and the captain wiped Wade's chest clean.

"The things I do for Taldor," the healer said with annoyance in his voice. He and the soldiers left the cabin leaving the captain, Michaels, and Wade alone.

"I'll get someone from the crew to repair the window posthaste, Commander," the captain said, apologetically.

"That won't be necessary," Wade replied, "I rather enjoy the fresh air." He took Agent Michaels in his arms and kissed her passionately. The air captain nodded, suddenly flustered and then hastily excused himself as his cheeks reddened.

The two Lion Blades held each other and lost themselves in their kiss.

"That's another one you owe me, Purvis," Michaels said, a wry smile on her lips. "I think we'll skip the fruit and cheese."

The End

Purvis Wade will return in "Sphere of Annihilation"

Hunger

By Todd Stewart



OR A YOUNG Taldan mercenary, the markets of Katapesh hold great promise: adventure, glory, gold, food, wine, and women. Back alleyways also have their share of delights too. A whore's touch leaves you gratified and spent, yet all but the most exclusive grant you a withering, lingering curse all their own to mark your visit like a burning keepsake trinket. But women, hired or not, cannot grant you the pleasure that comes from pesh, nor do they extract such a price from the weak. Pesh burns hot in your veins, hotter than the midday sun. And when it burns, it takes some of you with it."

Raven-haired and violet-eyed, Corin Salavon's confidant looked up at the Taldan from her apothecary's table. Her lips pursed in a small, appreciative smile. Despite the Katapeshi heat, Inusalia dressed in black silk and velvet. She wore none of the cosmopolitan city's cosmetics, and her exotic features and accent had defied his attempts to place her origins.

"Did it begin with pesh?" she asked, grinding carefully measured herbs in her mortar. Her intense gaze never left his face, despite the delicate nature of her task.

Corin strummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair before he could stop himself. Despite his need, he didn't want to appear like some common addict. He merely had a predilection for the substance, a refined taste for its finer aspects. She was an artist, and he appreciated her skills. She was hardly one of the

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greedy pack of common dealers who supplied dirty, half-refined, often-cut-with-something-else pesh.

Her dulcet voice brought him back from his self-absorbed thoughts. "Please, do continue. It won't be long before I'm ready, and once I am, you won't be nearly so eloquent."

He savored the sweet smell rising on the air, different from anything she had enticed him with before. "Yes. It was pesh. Refined pesh, not the raw, milky garbage the locals use. It was no more than a taste that first time, but I remember everything from those few minutes. The faint hint of lavender in the vial, the burn in my nose, and the moment I inhaled. I even remember the name of the man who gave it to me: Amarus, if it matters."

She smiled, giving every evidence of intense personal interest. "All of it matters. But let me guess. You remember nothing else after?" Briefly, she passed a flame over a vial that was similar to the one etched in his memory. She held it in her hand like a priestess of Sarenrae calling down the sun's fire.

"I woke up the next morning knowing nothing, except that I wanted another taste. It was a moment of ecstasy more poignant than the touch of the most skilled concubine."

"It made you happy."

"It did. But it didn't last."

She nodded. "And here we are."

Corin stared at the empty vial, the tip of his tongue just wetting his lips. "It's a slow spiral. You need the pesh. You—need—it. In my case, I could afford it, and it was on every street corner. I had it when I wanted it. But you always need more. So I took more, but it wasn't the same religious experience. The light fades to a shadow of itself, and you need more and more..."

"...more refined and exotic things."

He looked away, lost in memory.

"Eventually cost ceases to be the limiting factor. It is the potency which fails to suffice."

It was true. He had despaired, but as desperation set in, one of his companions on this road had given him a name. The man made a warding sign after saying it, and hurried away quickly, his face ashen pale. Corin never saw him again.

Gold motivates many men, addiction motivates others, but Corin's source was motivated by neither of those. He trawled the pesh dens for particular addicts, looking for those with coin and with *need* haunting their eyes and crawling along their veins like parasites. Among the masses they were so very easy to select by that look, and further selected almost as an afterthought with a list of other traits that his mistress Inusalia had provided. He did so not for the meager coin she gave him, but because of the geas she'd burned into his brain. He fished for her, casting a furiously selective net, and in turn was spared the magical pain that would have driven him to suicide, had it allowed him that option. She gained her clients and largely avoided the notice of Katapesh's rulers that the other manners of solicitation invariably gained.

Once Corin found her—once he'd been selected—she had been his salvation, his enabler and his messiah. And like a faithful worshipper, he always returned.

"Inusalia, please hurry." Her name was honey on his lips.

"It will be worth it Corin, I promise." Her smile became predatory as she proceeded at an even slower pace, making him fidget and squirm. It would be even better if she waited, prolonging his yearning anticipation.

"I just have one question, if you don't mind." The thick, sweet fragrance grew even more potent amid the hiss and bubble of her alchemical apparatus. His fingers twitched again, and he shoved his hands in his pockets to restrain himself.

"Ask. I might answer."

"The Pactmasters. Your shop's not licensed. I've seen what happens to those who flout their authority." He grimaced.

Her response was dry, unconcerned and arrogant. "They have to find me first. And if they do, they're welcome to try."

He blinked at her casual dismissal. Either she'd been sampling her own wares, or she had power and political connections beyond his imagining. Ever since he'd come to her, she'd been cool and unconcerned with such worries as she practiced her craft, unlike every other illicit merchant seeking to profit at the authorities' expense. As for sampling her own wares, he'd never seen her take so much as a taste.

A subtle smirk played across her face as she reassured him. "My shop is much too small for the Pactmasters' notice. I serve select clients of my own choosing, those who can appreciate my wares, and *need* them enough to be discreet."

She was probably right. He'd certainly never heard of her before that other addict had told him her name. No, not addict. Connoisseur. Corin made a distinction between himself and those others along the way. He had too much class and too much fine Taldan blood running in his veins to be like the street rats begging for money to get just one more hit. He prided himself on being something special, much more refined than the common sort.

Yet here he was, the yearning *need* burning him to a dry husk. He clenched his fists as he glanced at the wilted flowers and dying potted herbs on the windowsill. He knew how they felt. They needed water, he needed something too.

He'd walked that street a hundred times, but he'd never seen her shop and its sickly pale purple frontage. It simply hadn't been there. It was as if it didn't exist until he knew to look for it. Like the delusional hallucinations of tainted pesh, suddenly it had just been there for him to ring the bell and present himself, his money, and his *need*.

The first time he went looking for her shop was confusing. "North from the Grand Coliseum, one block south of Zandrek's so-called palace whose dome should be visible over the rooftops of the block on your left. There is no sign upon the door, but no other shop is built of purple stone." He'd spent a month purchasing from the Pesh Palace before that sorcerer's vaunted ability to satisfy his patrons' needs with new and delightful substances ran dry. Yet in all those times walking along that road, he'd never seen Inusalia's unique shop. He'd walked up to the door and shivered, perhaps with anticipation or just from the sudden shrill whistle out of the Wailing Obelisk a district away, but he shivered nonetheless as he stepped out of mundane Katapesh and onto her stoop.

He strummed his fingers again, eager for the bliss, glancing across the wilted

flowers and herbs once more. It brought back a memory of the owner of the shop next door. An old woman, she watered her flowers each day as the sun rose in the sky, vainly trying to keep them alive. She'd scowled and cursed at them, withered and stunted at best, inexplicably wasting away as they resisted all of her efforts to provide a spark of color to her own shop's frontage. What struck him most though, was how she never seemed to notice him standing there a few feet away as he walked up to Inusalia's. She was oblivious to him just as he was to her, and the fact that his shadow, which should have fallen upon her, didn't, being it was truncated and cut off at the edge of the stoop.

But it was an idle memory to distract himself as he waited for his artist savior to finish her work.

"Before it's ready," he said, "I should thank you, for more than just the drug."

She gave a small, sardonic chuckle, waving away his gratitude.

"No, really," the Taldan insisted. "Every time I've come, you've upped the ante with a more potent extract, or a more exotic substance, one I didn't have a tolerance for. You never merely gave me a larger dose, and you always take care of me during the experience. I owe you."

Every time he'd screamed and thrashed, laughed and wept through the throes of each ecstatic episode, she had been there, her eyes locked on him.

She gazed at him intently. "Oh, yes. And I will be paid in full."

He reached into his belt pouch for a generous handful of gold, but she ignored it. As if she was the one who could no longer wait, she decanted the apparatus in a single swift movement and offered him the flask. Trembling, he gazed at its golden, swirling iridescence. His desperate expression was reflected back at him in the brief, dark moment before he swallowed.

A rush of pleasure/ecstasy/terror/bliss/memories-not-his-own washed over his senses. It was as if he were drinking the purified bliss of a dozen other people. He shuddered, hardly able to stand.

A silken whisper, much too close to his ear. "I know how you feel." Inusalia was touching his cheek with a bare hand. He hadn't seen her remove her gloves. There was a lot he hadn't seen during the moments of his flowering obsession. He'd never noticed her taking notes, writing every detail feverishly in a heavy black book. He hadn't seen her salivating, digging her nails into the table with the shrill shriek of breaking stone. And he hadn't seen her twice stumble towards him, eyes wet with *need*, before stopping, inhaling, and holding herself back.

"No. No. No." Corin was trembling. "You can't have any idea how it feels unless you've taken it yourself, and you never partake of your work. Nothing compares. Nothing. You can't know."

"I know how you feel." She spoke with an intense certainty. "You ride that edge. You need, you hunger. Each time you catch a glimpse of that moment, it fades, and becomes harder to reach. You need more."

Corin twitched and gasped, barely hearing. He never saw her features blur, the human visage melt away like candle wax, evaporate like an oasis mirage. Inusalia, the Lady of Wasting Intoxication, resumed her true form, baring her fangs and filling the air with an alchemical chlorine stench mixed with blood, vomit, and offal. Claws touched his face and burning eyes of violet flame stared back at him,

helpless in his ecstasy.

"I know how you feel," she whispered, drooling in her finally unrestrained hunger. "Lesser, more prosaic souls simply will not do any longer. You become inured to them, to the high of their consumption. You need...more. You need souls who have experienced the heights of sensation, experience, and bliss. Souls that ride that edge."

"I know how you feel, Corin. Because I hunger *just like you...*"

BLOOD IN THE WATER

By Alex Lindsay



T WAS JUST another day.

I woke to scratch the week's stubble on my face and seek out another cup to fall back into; a bitter sea to drown myself in, sending me to a place enshrouded in darkness and mist. Only when it all dimmed, like a cave swallowing a lone candle, did I find peace.

I didn't hear them whispering.

I didn't hear the screams.

I didn't have to care about right or wrong.

All I had to do was be devoured and let myself fall prey to the drink.

The dull thud of my heart beating in my ears disguised his footsteps on that most inauspicious day. Captain Jaen Weimar, Absalom's finest, had come to muck about with the rest of us sewer rats, down in the Puddles. I recall him laying down a paper with a name and a face, and a bag of coins falling onto the bar with a heavy thud. I pulled the paper toward me, fingers numb, scraping it across the worried wood.

Mathias.

The poster was a picture of a cruel-looking man with a sneering scar that bit up through his eye and crested his short-shorn hair. I'd heard about him: wicked with a knife, cold as a corpse. It looked to me like he'd finally angered the wrong

person; some thieves' guild perhaps, or crime lord. *They* didn't like a loose blade running around, so they turned him over to the watch, and the watch turned him over to me.

Weimar left my gloom the same way he came, masked by my thuddin' beater.

I took the job. Don't ask me why. You listen to your heart enough, and it reminds you how things used to be. What they could be.

My heart was the best liar I'd ever met.

My search began with people. Someone had heard something; it was all a matter of finding that someone, and encouraging them to speak. I started with the regulars: Ananias Belfleur, the pimp, Hess Mainer, the thief, and Jade Stern, the enforcer, to name a few. All of them old, but old friends too, from the old days long gone. They all spoke to me. They remembered what I used to be. They remembered the look I gave them, my gray eyes gazing into and through theirs, understanding them and knowing them better than any friend, family or lover.

They remembered me pronouncing their guilt.

To my misfortune I learned there was little to *be* learned about Mathias; all accounts described him as a very slippery fish. And slippery fish can be bloody-near impossible to track in Puddles.

Belfleur came through, though.

He told me a story.

He told me about his girls and how someone had been taking liberties with them: *permanent liberties*. What his men had found was near impossible to identify.

Fancy blade work, he reminded me. Wicked with a knife, carving with inhuman hands—with a demon's mind.

It made no sense. No one would mess up Belfleur's game with so much to lose, and no one liked lighter purses. Mathias didn't care about profits, nor did he care about the working order. For him it was just for the carving.

It wasn't much of a hunch, but it was enough to plan on.



The streets of the Puddles were unfortunately, as the name implied, wet. The rain probably wasn't helping, either. Night had fallen, and I found myself wading waist-deep in my used hauberk, my sword propped on one shoulder. The more rust I could avoid, the better. It made me glad I'd sold my plate armor a while back, although I did miss the inch of steel covering the space between my shoulder blades.

I positioned myself on the corner of Sally's Street. With its lower water levels and lack of street lamps it was a decent set up for the cheaper and more desperate of disreputable women. I imagined his options for victims had steadily decreased, thanks to Belfleur and his boys. This place was his best and only option.

I never really frequented such areas.

Hiding behind a stack of filth, I was able to watch the comings and goings of men of ill repute, creeping and slinking amongst the pools. All were brigands, but none was *my* brigand.

A few hours of watching my fellow lowlifes, and I was beginning to lose faith in the plan. That is, of course, when things got interesting.

A scream echoed across the moldy planks, then suddenly cut off.

How did he get by me?

I ducked from my cover and pulled out my sword as I ran through the shin-deep mud and water, working hard not to slip on a slick cobblestone. Midway down the street, a rope hung from a building, swinging. Climbing it was a darkly dressed man with shorn hair and an unmistakable scar marring his features. An unmoving woman lay across his shoulder. I yelled for him to surrender, but only got a curse in reply as he quickened his pace up the rope.

The clever devil had been using the rooftops.

I caught up and was able to begin scrambling after him. Again, I was thankful for my lack of plate armor. I wasn't as skilled at climbing as he was, but he was carrying a whole person, so I slowly gained on him.

With a grunt of effort, he hurled the woman atop the building before pulling his own self up.

A chill ran up my spine as I saw the knife in his hand unmistakably cutting at the rope.

Panicked, I worked my arms and legs, pumping and pulling furiously to reach the top. I'd just made it to the ledge when I saw a look come across his scarred, milky eye. He raised his knife and stabbed me through the shoulder. A cold pain lanced into my arm as my grip weakened on the rope. I grabbed at his wrist and managed to take hold of his cuff. Without hesitation, I pulled him overhead.

The sudden jerk and weight caused the rope to snap, and I found myself plummeting with him.

I didn't remember the impact.

All I remembered was hauling myself from the shin-deep water, and gasping for a breath as my whole body burned numb with pain.

I saw him stumbling, knife in hand, sputtering and cursing as blood coursed down his face in rivulets—a new scar, I reckoned. His glazed eyes focused on me briefly, then became alert, and he limped toward me with a mad grin on his face and eyes that burned with manic fire.

I stood, my legs holding firm, and reached for my sword.

It wasn't there.

Fine by me.

He surged forward, knife raised, and I grabbed a nearby bit of flotsam. His attack was cut short as I swung the heavy plank upwards. I heard the pop of his jaw dislodging with the impact. He spat blood and reeled back, nearly falling over. I felt a moment of satisfaction until the plank cracked and fell to pieces. Cursing, I rummaged through the water for my sword.

Then he was on me, and on top of me.

He latched onto my throat with his spare hand and began to bring his blade down. I lost my balance, grabbing for his knife hand. I fell, but managed to stop the advancing blade. Coughing and growling, I took a deep breath before he shoved my head underwater. I could feel the heat rising in my face, the pressure building behind my eyes, and my lungs burning. I grunted as my head impacted a

cylindrical object...*my sword*. A flash of hope caused my heart to ache as I threw one hand back for a wild grab. My weakened arm stopped the knife short as I whipped the hilt across his face. I felt his hand on my throat loosen as he recoiled, and roaring from the water, I bore upwards, air filling my lungs as I swung my sword in a downward arc. Warmth splashed my face and a shudder ran up my blade, followed by stillness.

I knelt for a moment, breathing heavily, my body a single dull ache, the copper tang filling my nostrils. I didn't worry about someone finding me there or raising an alarm; it wasn't that kind of place. It was the kind of place where, despite the money in your purse and the woman lying unconscious on the roof, there was no justice.

Just blood in the water.

THE DANCE

By Ted Thompson

“YOU’RE TALKING about my daughter, aren’t you?” Presina looked away from the cards, doing her best to hide the horror she felt.

On the other side of the table, the one-eyed woman furrowed her brow in contemplation. She had coldly flipped up the most recent card, thinking it was for Presina, but her guest’s tell-tale reaction proved it was for someone far more dear.

She would have to choose her words carefully.

“Yes, it’s unfortunate, but I’m not finished. One more card has yet to speak.”

Presina turned back to the fortune-teller. Nine cards waited, all revealed but one. The Dance laid face up in the center of the bottom row. It was in the wrong position, a serious danger.

The old woman unveiled the last card.

“The Keep. It’s a good sign. There’s a *chance*.”

Presina placed her offering of wild mushrooms on the table.

“You have my thanks, old one.”

She stepped out of the harrower’s wagon and breathed deep the cool Ustalavic air.

It was moist; by nightfall, a mist would settle over the camp.

She walked to the center of the vardo caravan. Several hearty men were bringing

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in wood for a large fire. They had caught a wild boar to roast and everyone was busy getting ready for the feast. An elderly man named Jangler prepared to play his violin. Presina saw the instrument and immediately altered her course.

"This is no place for such mockery," she growled under her breath, heading straight for him.

Suddenly, Presina's raven-haired daughter ran from their wagon up ahead, skipping toward the violinist. For a moment the mother paused, watching the scene and considering the events being set in motion.

Jangler finished adjusting the pegs and lifted the instrument to his shoulder, resting his fingers on its neck. He then took up the bow and headed into a song as her daughter arrived. Presina looked to the woods beyond, feeling a terrible urgency to stop him. She came swooping in as some of the men dropped their kindling to watch. The music drove her daughter into a dance, and Jangler quickened his pace. She twirled her dress, spinning it into a wondrous red plume.

Presina cut through the circle of men as they began to clap, her eyes fixed on Jangler. With a face of stone, she snatched the fiddle from his hands, interrupting their revelry.

The man stood quietly, dumbfounded. A bit of anger and humiliation reddened his cheeks, but he yielded to her in respect. Presina handed the instrument back and put one finger to her lips to show her desire for silence. She stood ominously before the camp, and then looked fearfully to the forest.

"No songs tonight! You eat and go to bed. We'll be lucky to count our same number in the morning. We camp in the shadow of Virlich, and even now something in the forest eyes our wagons. This is a cursed place with harsh lessons to teach; it is a terrible but unavoidable danger as we travel between Vigil and Canterwall. Had we gone further to the west, orcs would've surely butchered us. So don't think for a minute we can celebrate out here with food in our bellies, when not even orcs would dare hunt the plentiful game."

Presina took her daughter's hand and marched to their wagon, shutting the door and locking it tight. Inside, she grabbed a nearby lantern and looked her daughter sternly in the face, preparing a lecture, but then decided to wait. She sighed and helped her slip the red dress off, and pulled a white sleeping gown over the young dancer's lithe body.

"No sleeping out under the stars, Selinda. We're in here until morning."

The girl nodded. "I understand."

Presina also got comfortable, and then the two laid their beds down. Each snuggled under their blankets, and when the woman saw her daughter was tucked in, she cut the oil to the lantern's wick and the light dimmed. Outside they heard the occasional voice, but the music did not resume.

Presina sighed again, thinking her daughter saw her as a witch. "I know how much you like to dance, Selinda. I'm sorry for interrupting you."

Her daughter turned on her side, facing away. "It's ok, Mother, I just got lost in the moment. I forgot we are in a dangerous place."

"Dancing is good, daughter; it shows men that you are stronger than them. You are the most beautiful dancer this family has ever seen, and I don't blame Jangler for wanting you to ornament his playing. He isn't very good with the instrument,

but somehow when he sees you, he gets a lot better.”

“His violin takes me away, Mother. Sometimes when he is playing, I just want to become the music, and when I dance, it feels like I’m in control of it. I can’t even read a note, but I can dance to them.”

Presina shed a tear, but swallowed hard. “You’re all I have, Selinda. Remember that I love you.”

“What are you afraid of, Mother?”

“The unknown, child.”

“You lead the whole camp and you attend the harrowings. You must know something of what lies ahead?”

“I counsel them, Selinda—not decide for them. Sooner or later, each lamb strays from the flock.” Presina’s voice shuddered and Selinda could hear her crying.

“Don’t be sad, Mother. You can’t stop everything, and we all have a good life under your guidance.”

“Sleep, daughter.”

The two spoke no more, and silence gave way to restful breaths.



Selinda stirred to the sound of musical strings. She swayed back and forth in her bed, as if dancing with the mattress she slept upon. When she awoke, her feet were cold and her blankets laid in a ball on the floor. Her sleeping gown was soaked in sweat. Outside, she saw the cool fog and the bonfire where the pig had been roasted. The smell of meat permeated the air and her stomach growled.

She looked to her mother, who was resting, and then to the door. Her stomach protested more loudly and she stirred with hunger. She unhitched the lock and guiltily slid out of the wagon, heading for the fire. A guard stood nearby and nodded to her in acknowledgement. He handed her a plate of peppered pork and then kept his eyes on the lookout. Ravenously, she ate the roasted meat, and then turned to head back to her mother...until she saw the animal pen.

The caravan’s oxen had grazed all the tall grass in the enclosure and every blade they could reach outside. The beasts looked longingly at the grass just out of range. Selinda went near the woods and grabbed several large fistfuls, then returned to the pen. The animals started moving towards her, smelling the fresh scent. She stuffed green mouthfuls into each one and they chewed greedily, swallowed, then looked up for more. Selinda laughed as she patted their rough noses, and then glanced at her feet, noticing they were wet and dirty.

“You sure are a demanding lot. Look at what I had to do to get this for you!” She had not meant to be out so long, but she found the hungry animals too lovable to ignore. She went for more grass and then returned, but the oxen stirred and moved away from the fence she stood beside, unwilling to come.

“Lost your appetite, eh? What’s the matter with you boys?” The herd stayed away, oddly quiet. Selinda held out the grass, and then looked behind her to the strip of pasture and the dense forest just beyond.

The echo of a violin broke the stillness.

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“Jangler,” Selinda recognized in surprise.

The strings resounded with tantalizing notes, calling her into the woods. She worried for the man’s safety, feeling compelled to go after him. His playing resonated deep within her being, reminding her of the fond memories they had shared. She needed to find him, to bring him back to the caravan. With a look back to her wagon, she headed into the forest, straight for Jangler and his violin.

She stepped past the grass, and the cool mists parted in her wake as she moved towards the crisp sounds of a bow striking strings. Quickly, the music grew more flamboyant and audacious as she came upon a clearing where the moonlight illuminated a silhouette.

The melody stopped at her approach.

“Jangler? You shouldn’t be out here.” The player turned to her, and she realized it was not the man she knew.

The fiddler’s bow slid lightly across a string.

She walked towards him, and with each footstep he plucked a note.

“This is Virl—”

The violinist whirled and began a brisk, heated piece.

Selinda felt the grass undulate around her feet, and the desire to move to the melody became...irresistible. The music coursed through her muscles, imbuing her body with unusual grace.

She fought somewhat at first, her bare feet getting muddled in the wet grass, but soon embraced the tempo as the stranger tipped his head to her. The serenade ended suddenly with a bombastic twist, and Selinda smiled at his mastery. He bowed, and then changed to something more whimsical. She let the moment slip between her steps and closed her eyes, taking in the sweet sounds as she exerted her body to new limits. The dance went on as the moon continued its arc across the midnight sky. Each piece moved Selinda more, and she responded with strides and motions more sensual than she ever imagined, all the while wondering how it would feel to *be* the violin.

The night went on, and the blackness waned; the music had stopped. Selinda’s body dripped with sweat, her face flushed as her heart pounded with youthful exuberance. This was it, all her life she had waited for this moment to feel total release.

Selinda took a deep breath and asked if he was the one. He smiled sadistically, then played the violin at a frantic, torturous pace. Suddenly, Selinda’s feet moved with a will she did not control.

“Sto—Sto—Stop-p.” The music played on, and her lack of participation hurt more and more as her body was thrown about by the melody. She closed her eyes, focusing on her steps.

The song was agitating, and each stroke across the strings required a move that was more outrageous than the last.

The dark violinist’s eyes gleamed as the starry sky turned a deep shade of purple. He ended the music abruptly with a screech unbecoming of his skill, causing Selinda to collapse mid-stride.

“Your desire, is it true?” his whispering voice echoed throughout the clearing.

“Who *are* you?” Selinda asked between winded breaths.

"I am here to fulfill your darkest wish. You will become my beauty, the sound of graceful perfection, and I your deliverer."

The violinist struck his bow, opening a requiem. The sound mesmerized Selinda, replacing all love she felt for anything or anyone. The music fondled her in places she had never explored. The kiss of lips, a taste of wetness, the warmth of breath—all she had ever wanted to feel.

The ballad halted and the violinist used his bow to caress her neck. The bow's string glided delicately across her skin, its unusually keen edge leaving a light red mark. She looked into the face of her musician lover as his gaze lingered upon her silken form, lustful and hungry. He ran the bow further towards her while she stared trustingly into his mesmerizing eyes.

He smiled, and then viciously pulled back, releasing a warm, crimson geyser into the dawn.

He continued the ballad as the girl's blood dripped from his bow. Selinda collapsed to the grass, a red pool gushing from her fading form. Her body twitched to its own dying dance and her pulse slowly lost its rhythm. And when the last of her blood drained, her spirit rose to embrace her killer's bow. The violinist waved his murdering tool seductively in the air and Selinda wrapped herself around it. He then struck the violin and wove her soul in between the strings, uniting her with the instrument and bringing the ballad to a close.

Selinda blinked and the scene returned as before. The violinist stood with his weapon poised at her throat.

"I refuse," she said, raising her hands to push the bow away, knowing what was to come.

The violinist shook his head in disbelief, realizing his victim no longer acted like the others; she didn't look at him anymore, but gazed at the violin on his shoulder. Just a moment earlier, she was ready to be rightfully plucked, but now it was as if she knew his plan through the influence of another.

"What trickery is this?" The violinist sneered and pulled the bow hard, sliding it back against her neck.

His bowstring broke.

In shock, the player looked to the sun creeping across the clearing, and then to Selinda. Frightened, he looked finally to his violin.

"Master, I only wished to serve you. Do not forsake me for her!"

The violinist threw off his cloak to reveal his true self, and Selinda gasped. He resembled the shadow of a hideous creature, misshapen and grotesque. He turned his attention to her, his eyes glowing in hatred.

"I can kill you at a whim! Chase down your whole puny caravan and leave no trace behind. And I will do it!" The thing moved towards her with the violin closely tucked at his side.

But despite the creature's threats, Selinda felt at ease. The violin's music still lingered in her head, playing another song she had never heard. Between its seductive notes it sang with a voice that made her weep. She could not tell if it was male, female or cherub.

"Dance, dance, my love. You are mine and I am yours. Together we are one, forever to endure."

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Selinda stood before the creature defiantly and shouted, “You fiddle to my dance now!”

Her feet stepped lightly to the song she heard. The shadowy creature grimaced, unable to move from where it stood. Its arm wove back and forth, wielding the broken bow to a lament it couldn’t hear.

“How?” it croaked. “No one can resist...”

“I can,” Selinda mocked, “because the violin wants me, not you!”

The thing howled as the sun cut through its shadowy exterior. It dropped the bow and violin, then cried out in horror as the brilliant rays set its body aflame, covering the instrument in ashes. Selinda walked over and picked up the violin. She took the bow with her other hand and waved it in the air, the fibers mending through her delicate touch.

She held the violin lovingly, fondling the pristine wood with a covetous grin, and then laid down in the grass beside it, moved by its inaudible notes. She tilted her head and writhed in the morning dew with sensual longing. As the birds began to chirp, she turned to the violin, caressing its neck with a lover’s touch and whispered,

“I will do your bidding.”



Presina awoke with a gasp.

Immediately, she looked to her daughter’s bed. The girl slept contentedly, exhaling a small sigh. Presina put her hand to her heart and thanked the gods.

She was *safe*.

Looking back, she noticed Selinda had muddied the bottom of her sheets. The girl had gone outside, despite her warnings. She would have to be punished.

She stood up to prepare her morning tea, but was shocked to find a strange violin sitting prominently on the table. The instrument was beautiful and the craftsmanship without equal. She looked back at her daughter, wondering how she’d acquired it. Presina opened a cabinet door to hide the violin. For now she would put it away, so Selinda might learn her lesson. She reached out and touched the bow, but pulled back immediately as a lancing pain shot up her arm. Blood welled and trickled down her finger.

The sharpness of the string had cut her deeply.

A FINAL TOLL

By W. David Wood



ORRIS MANN sauntered from under a shop's awning and felt the oppressive heat of the pre-noon sun press down on him, like firm hands resting heavily on his shoulders. He paused, watching the crowd gathering around the market square, then waved and continued walking to a clear area near the center of the cobbled pavement. The confident gesture was returned half-heartedly by a few in the crowd, but was bolstered enthusiastically by his entourage, who followed him from the tavern and spread among the spectators.

He stopped and stared down his nose at the dark-skinned little man he had come to meet and, assuredly, kill. He flicked an imaginary piece of lint from the sleeve of his silk blouse as his target regarded him evenly from across the square. The man's clothing was a jumble of colors and styles from various lands, giving him a well-travelled-if-threadbare look. A pair of worn kukris hung from his hips, along with various pouches and bundles. His shoulder-length black hair was a bit unkempt, with long bangs that kept drooping over one eye or the other. He appeared to be in his late twenties, perhaps early thirties, but his eyes seemed much older.

Orris was not impressed with him, and hadn't been since their first meeting at the tavern's gaming table. The little man had asked to join their game and,

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sensing an easy mark, the players invited him into the next round. An hour later the stranger was well ahead and Orris was the only one still giving him a run for the winnings.

“You’re cheating!” Orris accused, finally giving voice to his frustration

“That’s a lie,” the small man said coolly, his voice carrying across the inn’s main hall.

Silence followed as the tavern’s patrons froze and all attentions turned to the table. The small dark man remained seated, but his weathered eyes absorbed the movements of everything around him, including Orris. The young Taldan dandy rose from his chair and leaned over the table, lightly resting his knuckles on its wine-stained surface.

“What was that you said?” he asked.

“I said, ‘that’s a lie.’”

Orris smirked. “You’re actually calling me a liar?”

“Well, if you say I am cheating, then yes, you are a liar.”

Orris spread his hands wide. “Did you all hear that?” He turned slowly as he addressed the crowded hall. “This disheveled little crud just insulted my honor! What does that demand?”

“Satisfaction!” his friends at the table cried, almost in unison.

“And what say you all, my fellow patrons?”

The crowd murmured their assent out of what seemed more habit than actual agreement. They had seen this before. Orris Mann was a consummate duelist—a devil with a crossbow—and that horrid skill alone kept the people of Yanmass from speaking out against him or his friends. He fancied himself the town’s champion, but didn’t care what they really thought.

Orris spun to face the upstart. “So, it comes to this: you meet me in the market square, five minutes till high sun, to remedy your transgression—”

“Or?” The little man asked, calmly keeping his seat.

Orris chuckled. “Or, my companions and I will scrape it from your flayed hide.”

His friends rose from their chairs, cracking their knuckles and gripping the pommels of their sheathed blades in an effort to look menacing, or so the smaller man assumed.

“What will it be, friend?”

“Well,” the little man said, tipping back in his chair, “it appears that I have little choice...so satisfaction it will be.”

“Excellent!” Orris cried. “It will, of course, be crossbows, raised and fired when the clock tower strikes midday.”

“Excuse me, but I thought the challenged party was given the choice of weapon?”

Orris chuckled yet again, a sly grin squirming across his face. “Not in my town, little man. Here it’s the offended party that chooses. See you in the square!” And with that the Taldan spun on his heel and stormed out of the tavern in feigned indignation, his compatriots in tow, all laughing at the prospect of the dark man’s skewering.

A quarter of an hour later they were in the plaza, fifteen paces apart and staring

at each other. Orris was the picture of confidence, resplendent in his silks and fine leathers. He turned and raised a hand behind him toward his friends and made a beckoning gesture, not once taking his eyes from his opponent. A gangly youth with an admiring smile plastered on his face walked briskly to Orris and offered a fine crossbow.

“Here you are, Milord Mann. Oiled and ready, as always.”

The boy handed the weapon over. Orris inspected it, couched the stock on one hip and cocked it with a deft, precise motion. He looked over to the little man.

“Katapeshi?” He asked simply.

The man nodded.

“Hmph. You’ve come a long way to die, then.”

The man shrugged.

“When the clock bell strikes high sun, we raise and fire. Any questions?”

“One: don’t Taldan duelists use swords?”

Orris noticed the man was still as calm as ever.

It was becoming...unsettling.

The little man acted as if this were nothing more than an inconvenience. Orris shook his head, thinking it ridiculous the Katapeshi wasn’t taking this seriously. Didn’t he know his life was about to end? Didn’t he know who he faced?

Orris’ face colored briefly.

“No,” he said. “I like the crossbow. That’s what we use.” Agitation was creeping into his voice. He glanced at the clock tower. “You have only four or so minutes to live. Any last words?” His friends chuckled behind him. The grim crowd remained silent. Duels were entertaining, but executions were another matter.

“Yes. I need someone to lend me a crossbow.”

Scattered chuckles emanated from the audience. Orris shook his head. Pathetic, he thought.

“Will someone please lend this fool a crossbow?” he requested loudly from the gathered masses.

“I have one,” a voice called out. A tall, wiry man walked up to the small man with a measured stride. Curiously enough, Orris observed, this man was also Katapeshi. This fact was not lost on some in the audience, and murmurs arose here and there. The tall one handed his countryman a battered crossbow and a single bolt, then smiled, turned, and jogged lightly from the open square, easing into the crowd and out of sight. The little man readied the weapon.

A minute passed, and Orris began to feel as if something was happening that he was no longer in control of. His friends were exchanging unsure glances, and his palm was beginning to sweat around the grip of his crossbow.

Another minute went by.

Only two minutes left.

Orris switched his weapon from hand to hand, flexing his fingers as sweat beaded on his brow. The little Katapeshi looked infuriatingly composed. He should be sobbing— like a child, begging for help. That’s what all the others did. That’s what was supposed to happen. Not this utter...disregard.

The Taldan risked a look at the clock’s face. The long hand clicked to just a minute before. Ah, Orris thought, only a—

W. DAVID WOOD

Bong.

“Wha—?” he began, but something slammed into his throat and pain exploded through his neck and head.

Orris sat heavily onto the cobbles, cracking his tailbone. He managed a weak, wet gurgle and dropped his crossbow. He wanted to swallow away the lump in his throat but sucked blood into his lungs instead. Raising his hands to his neck, he felt the quarrel buried deep, its fletching tickling at his chin. The small dark man walked toward him, casually resting the crossbow over his shoulder. Orris fell onto his back, gagging as the little man paused above him.

“You were right,” he whispered, “I did cheat. I just wanted to see what you would do about it.” He bent over and snatched Orris’ purse from his belt. “For my troubles.”

The clock tower finally sounded out the hour of high sun. Orris Mann wheezed once and died. His killer turned and walked calmly from the square, his passage marked only by the stunned silence of the crowd and the final tolls of midday pealing across the town.



A mile outside Yanmass he met up with his fellow Katapeshi.

“Nice shot, Omas,” the tall man said with a smirk, passing him a short bow.

“Yours hitting the bell was better, Rulhor.” He handed the crossbow back to its owner.

“If you say so. Next town, then?”

Omas nodded “There’ll probably be one like him there, too.”

“Aye,” Rulhor agreed, “and they’ll pay a final toll, as well.”

Omas chuckled, hefting the dead man’s purse then tucking it away in a pouch. The open road beckoned, and on they walked.

By William Dodds

HISSSSST! THIN slices of raw red gar sizzled as they dropped onto the fire-blackened shingle of stone, emitting clouds of delicious, oily smoke. The boy leaned forward as his stomach growled, and he reached out a finger to sneak a taste. His uncle's annoyed grunt made him freeze. "Careful, Joquaik," his father's elder brother warned, "or you'll knock over the stone." The boy withdrew his hand and straightened back from the flames in deference; the cooking slate had been used since before his grandfather's time. He watched his father finish skillfully deboning their meal, laying the last strips down to sear. The mouth-watering aroma of sizzling fish filled the leather tent as Joquaik waited impatiently.

The hunting party was four days out from their steading, traveling to the hunting grounds that lay two weeks northwest of their slate-roofed home in the rough tundra north of Kalsgard. The flickerscale eels were swarming up the channels to their spawning beds, and their passage meant the large redbelly gar would be swimming up from the depths to hunt. Redbelly gar meant the return of the seals, and Joquaik's family was in the sealing business. This was Joquaik's third trip to the hunting grounds, and he had even speared his first kill last season. Joquaik's stomach rumbled again; he needed a distraction. He grinned mischievously across

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the seal-fat flame of the cook fire to his little brother, Kongiquo, who huddled in his new furs, looking bored and hungry.

"Kongi, do you hear the whisper of the witchlights outside?"

Kongiquo scowled across at his older brother. "There are no witchlight spirits outside, icebrain."

Joquaik grinned wider. "Of course there are. Why do you think we bring the blue candle?" He gestured over to their father's pack where the long blue-tinted candle was lashed to the frame.

His little brother eyed the candle suspiciously. "That's just a stupid story. If witchlights came, the dogs would bark and scare them away."

Joquaik glanced over at his uncle and father, who were struggling to keep straight faces while they cooked. They had told him the legend his first hunting trip, and now it was Kongiquo's turn to hear the scare tale.

"No, bear-scat, they don't walk on the snow, and they don't have a scent. How would track dogs even know they were there? Dogs just sleep in their snow-dens while the witchlights float into our tents and suck our souls out."

Kongiquo looked interested now, even a little scared. Joquaik continued, "The witchlights are the spirits of hunters lost in the white who froze to death when they couldn't find shelter, or died of hunger because they couldn't catch food. Some even..." Joquaik knuckled the double-thick leather of their shelter, "...lost their whalebone tents, or their dogs ran away with their sled, leaving them to wander until they died."

Joquaik leaned closer to his little brother. "And when they died, their spirits were sucked out of their mouths by the Winter Witch to forever wander the tundra, looking for other hunters to kill to keep their witchlights glowing."

Kongiquo gave a nervous shiver, and his eyes flicked towards their father, who steadfastly ignored his sons.

Joquaik reached over and drew out the blue candle from their father's pack. "It was my duty as youngest and smallest to hold the candle and keep watch, since I couldn't do any hunting. This is your first hunt, little brother. That means it's your turn to watch and keep us safe from the Winter Witch's lights."

Their father finally handed them each a piece of the stone-cooked fish, and Joquaik chewed his happily, closing his eyes as the rich flavor of the seared gar exploded between his teeth. Kongiquo seemed uninterested in his dinner until their uncle nudged him with a serious look on his face. "Eat, little Kongiquo. You need the food to help keep you awake tonight."

The smaller boy looked at their uncle, fear plain on his face as he took a big mouthful.

Kongi's father pointed at him with the long fish-knife. "Good, Kongi. It's your turn to watch for the lights. You are old enough now."

The rest of the gar was shared around until nothing but a pile of bones and scales remained. Joquaik snuggled under his blanket, eyes reflecting the rancid light of the tallow flame and glittering in amusement as he watched his brother clutch the blue candle, looking about for the witchlights. They would find him tomorrow, asleep sitting up with it clutched in his cold fingers like they found Joquaik three years ago on *his* first seal hunt. Joquaik felt his eyes drifting shut.

The last thing he saw was his brother's nervous face, his eyes darting back and forth at each creak of the leather in their snug tent.



It seemed mere minutes had passed when Joquaik heard his name whispered harshly. He sat up, blinking sleep from his eyes as Kongiquo hissed his name again.

"I'm awake, Kongi. What is it?"

His little brother pointed over to their father who was pulling on his heavy outer jacket. Joquaik looked around and did not see their uncle. Outside, the track dogs were whimpering and yipping, and a quick glance revealed that their uncle's short spear was missing. "Papa?"

Leathery Koqua hushed his son. "There might be a bear or some other night-hunter. Your uncle went outside to check, and I had better go out too, or I will never hear the end of it."

He grabbed his spear and slid through the thick leather tent flap, out into the night.

Kongi moved around the fire stone until he was next to his older brother. The blue witch-candle shook in his hands with his nervousness. Joquaik took out his long gutting knife and laid it on the stone within easy reach. He stifled a yawn and scrubbed at his eyes, pausing when the whining of the dogs outside became snarling. When the growling rose to a crescendo, his eyes met his brother's and he took up the knife, holding it as their father had taught him.

Outside the hut, the track dogs seemed to be attacking something, and Joquaik wondered what it was, for it fought without a sound. Sudden yelps made both boys jump, and Joquaik was certain he heard repeating spear thrusts stabbing into flesh. The jingle of sled tackle grew fainter as some of the dogs ran from the campsite. Several more cries of pain came from them, then fewer, until finally all was quiet outside but for the moaning wind spattering snow against the tent.

The brothers strained to hear the familiar sounds of their father or uncle returning, but no call, insult, nor joke echoed outside, nor did any curse erupt had either been hurt. Joquaik looked at his brother, swallowing a sudden lump in his throat, his knife tip shaking as much as the blue candle in Kongi's hands. They both trembled at the crunch of footsteps in the snow outside, which began near the back and slowly walked widdershins around the whalebone tent. An eerie blue light seeped around its edges, despite the multiple layers of leather. Joquaik's eyes grew wide.

"Kongi. Kongi, light the candle."

"What?"

"Light it—the candle."

Kongi dipped the wax-covered wick in the flame, and it spit its way to life, filling the tent with a cool white light that illuminated much more than the seal-fat fire ever could. The sound of footsteps stopped outside the entry, and Joquaik watched as a mittened hand reached through the flaps, trying to find a way in. Kongi slumped in relief, but Joquaik remained tense, his knife pointing at the

entryway as the hand withdrew. Kongi began to say something, but Joquaik hissed him into silence as a different hand reached through the tent flap. This one was without a mitten, the smallest finger missing and dripping blood on the hides below. The mangled hand pulled at the flaps, clumsily attempting to remove them, and the blue light outside grew stronger still.

Kongi began shaking again, and Joquaik pulled him close under one arm. The younger boy held the candle bravely, biting hard on his lower lip.

Joquaik spoke. "Close your eyes, little brother. Close them, and do not let the candle fall."

Joquaik prepared to defend his brother as the long drawn face of their father slowly wormed its way through the tent flaps. The man's cheeks were hollow and tight while blue light leaked like blood from his eyes, his jaw gnashing as smoke slithered through blackened teeth.

Kongiquo clamped his eyes shut and held the candle tight, whispering child-prayers while trying to ignore his father's chattering teeth. He squeezed his eyes tighter as his brother moved away. He heard Joquaik's grunt and the sound of his knife striking flesh, followed by the spatter of blood on the leather walls.

The tent shook violently, and the brutal ripping of leather flaps released a sudden burst of freezing wind, making Kongiquo shiver. He fought the instinct to open his eyes, but he followed his brother's last command and kept praying, lips forming words as his mind grew ice-white with fear.

Quiet seemed to settle in the tent like some great, cold beast. Kongiquo strained to hear his brother, clasping the blue candle and its protective light. His whispered prayers continued, and his eyes clenched shut as tears froze on his lashes, the sound of cracking teeth still looming above him.



The five hunters came over the rise, their sleek sleds pulled by panting gray dogs as the morning sun shone with acidic brightness on the new snow. The east-most sled driver saw the tent first and gave a warbling call that echoed across the tundra. The other four sleds skidded and slowed, having heard the signal. They unlimbered their spears as they drew near, for the site before them was deserted, with ominous lumps of snow scattered about a single half-open tent, its leather flapping in the wind.

Magnu approached first.

He was the boldest, gifted with bravery that held little regard for his own life. He trotted towards the tent as his cousin Kawai approached one of the mounds. Kawai poked at the lump and shouted a curse as it revealed a dead sled dog, its blood glittering like rubies in the bright morning light. The dog's face was curled in a rictus snarl, though no scavenger or beast seemed to have feasted upon it. A broad gash had been the final blow, opening its neck and causing the animal to bleed out.

Magnu and Kawai exchanged a look from afar as the larger man moved towards the tent, spear ready. He used the weapon to slowly lift the tent flap, then cried out. The men behind twitched, and the sled dogs began barking madly. The other

sled drivers prepared to fight, but paused as they saw Magnu come from around the tent, his spear flicking back and forth in a crude prayer to ward off bad spirits. Kawai moved towards his cousin, eyes round with fear. The creak of wood and leather from the manned sleds echoed across the frozen dunes.

The eldest hunter whispered intently from his perch, "What did you find?"

Magnu answered, "Boys—two of them, and a man with a slashed neck." He gestured with his spear in a circle. "Blood everywhere; everyone's dead."

The elder slumped on his sled, as if a terrible weight had landed on his shoulders.

Magnu looked at his cousin. "The body in the tent belonged to a hunter; his eyes are burned out, his mouth full of ash. The children's faces were frozen, terrified. What kind of thing does that?"

The other men looked at each other, saying nothing, and turned to the elder. Reluctantly, the old man stepped away from his sled and approached the tent.

Magnu moved to walk alongside him, eyes scanning the horizon. He pounded the butt of his spear into the snow. "These are the hunters from the Hadawa tribe, who count us as friends. We should take the bodies back for the singing ceremony."

The old man shook his head and turned to Magnu. "Their spirits have been consumed. We burn them here."

Magnu sputtered in indignation, and even Kawai drew near and spoke up. "But their families would want t—"

The old man interrupted.

"No. To carry back their shells would invite death and horror into their homes. Take the oil from my sled and douse them thoroughly. Leave the dogs; they are of no consequence, but those three bodies must be burned."

Kawai and the others exchanged looks, and Magnu barked a laugh. The old man slowly turned towards Magnu with a frightful glare that warned the others into silence. Magnu stood his ground, sneering at the elder's superstition.

"Those are just fey tales, you old fool. Scare stories for children." But Kawai shook his head at his cousin and pulled him aside.

"Stop. Do you forget? That man is blessed, chosen by the shamans and scarred by years of fighting in the hot lands to the south. Do not mock him." Magnu jerked away from his cousin, scowling and cursing as he headed back to the old man.

He paused, watching his hunters and fellow tribesmen hurriedly fetch the bodies with fearful glances at the elderly warrior, and his brow furrowed with increased frustration as they stacked them according to the elder's wishes.

Emotion betrayed the elder's wrinkled features as he slowly reached into a well-worn pouch at his belt, withdrawing a blue candle. He clashed firesteel against flint several times to start a spark and carried the candle towards the corpses. The man incessantly rubbed rivulets of burning wax from his hands, where faded scars of other burns marred his skin.

Magnu turned to look at his cousin in disgust. "He's mad. Why do you respect him?"

But Kawai only shook his head and walked away, making Magnu all the more furious.

The old man gave a blessing and lowered the blue candle to touch off a massive

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blaze that engulfed the anointed remains. The enraged hunter walked up to the elder to stand beside him, ignoring the pyre.

“Kongiquo?” he bellowed.

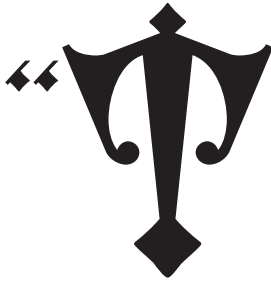
The old man did not look up at him, but instead began to chant another prayer.

“Kongiquo, there are no such things as witchlights! They don’t exist!”

The fur parkas and pale frozen flesh blackened and charred. Kongiquo did not look away, even as Magnu cursed his name. He only muttered to himself: *Goodbye again, father, uncle, brother. I pray you are ash and bone. Sleep now and forever in the sun.*

ALONG THE FINAL PATH

By Laura Sheppard



HANK YOU for saving me, Seenric..."

Her soft Osiriani voice echoed in his thoughts as Cynric rode his steed to a slow canter and approached a copse of trees. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, and the western skies had turned to blood. Normally, he would have made camp before this late hour, but this was no ordinary night; *they* were coming for him.

He slipped from his saddle and set his feet heavily on the ground. Beyond was a clearing where his horse could graze and he would make a fire.

His mind drifted tiredly; it had been a long day. In fact, it had been a long few months. Gently, he took down the shroud-wrapped form from across the stallion's shoulders and laid it on the ground. The body was so light...

His gaze lingered on it a moment.

The sun was gone and the darkness began to stretch out, reaching with shadowy fingers to the opposite horizon. He went into the forest to collect the wood he would need to see his adversaries; there would be no second chance to get it tonight. The light from the fire wouldn't be much, but it would be enough.

"I was a fool to think they wouldn't follow me," the Ulfen grumbled as he threw an armful of dry tinder down. "I promised to bury you among your own. You trusted me! I swore an oath, but I can't even do *that* right, and now..." He

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kicked the sticks into a rough mound as his thick jaw set in frustration.

"If only I'd thought this out better!"

Fuming, he spotted a large fallen log nearby and hefted it with a roar, hurtling it end-over-end towards his growing pile. Then he wiped a hot tear from his cheek. Even now he thanked Gorum for small mercies; at least Jenessa's body was still with him...

...but *they* wanted it.

There would certainly be a few scores to settle. He gritted his teeth as his temper flared again.

"Oh, let it be a bonfire, Nessa. I won't hide from my fate."

Cynric threw a flask into the pile, shattering the vessel against the wood. Black fluid seeped to the bottom and he struck a tindertwig and tossed it in. Instantly, the oil-soaked timber erupted into flames, flushing his skin with intense heat, and he yelled out into the night, "Come and get me!"

He waited for an answer as a churning pit roiled in his belly, but the forest was silent. Reaching for his wineskin, he took a sip to quell the feeling, then breathed deeply and resigned himself to what was ahead.

This was not how it was supposed to be, Ness.

His eye moved to her still body and he watched as the light of the flames danced over her gentle, familiar curves while countless memories of their shared fires flickered through his mind. He swallowed hard to fight a lump in his throat.

"You used to warn me that I was too reckless to become an old man..." a hint of a smile crossed his face, "...and tonight you've proven yourself right." Cynric closed his one eye a moment, almost able to hear the echoes of her laughter.

Perhaps this is why you left me. You knew I would end up like this...

He sighed and shook his head.

"Lord knows, I never saw this coming. And now...since you're gone and I am alone... I will die alone."

A sharp crack from the underbrush took him out of his reverie. "Hmm...not entirely alone." He turned his back to the fire and gripped the hilt of his sword.

A raccoon wandered out of the woods. It was curious but kept a respectful distance. Small animals didn't venture out when *they* were nearby. Cynric breathed a sigh of relief, watching the inquisitive critter, and planted his blade in the dirt behind him.

He understood.

This was to be his final hour. He turned to look into the flames, but again his gaze drifted to the veiled silhouette on the ground and an unsettling thought nagged at him.

It was not with himself he needed to make peace, but with Jenessa.

She had been the reason he'd ridden from Restov so many months ago in early Pharast, as the Brevic snows began to melt. She had been the one that set all of these events into motion by her decision to go alone.

"By Gorum, Nessa, why did you leave me behind?" Cynric cursed. He would have followed her to the nine hells had she asked him.

Maybe it was the recent loss of his left eye that had given her pause. Their last expedition had been a harrowing one at best, and many didn't make it back

alive. He couldn't be sure of anything—he'd seen her less and less during his recovery—but as usual, it had been her idea to go and she took their losses hard.

Cynric grimaced and turned from her, looking back at the grass beyond; it was impossible for him to know her mind.

He watched the raccoon cross the clearing gingerly as the bonfire grew in intensity with each branch that turned to flame. Feeling uncomfortably hot, he walked over to his horse, giving it a gentle pat as he withdrew a note from his saddle. Grudgingly he read it, hoping to find some clue he had not seen before:

Cynric,

No doubt you are wondering where I have gone. I am sorry you must find out this way, but I know you would have demanded to come had I revealed my intentions. I am traveling west in service to my order, following a lead from the diviners at the temple. It is a mere scouting trip and the faithful and I will be back before harvest's end, Pharasma willing. Recover your strength, old friend, and have a few ales until I return.

J.

Had he only known...

He threw the note into the fire.

Over the years she had brought him ill tidings in many a tavern, but she always did it with a smile and a tankard. She would tease him, hinting at details as he probed her for information. Her chestnut eyes would gleam and then she would place her hand on his bearded cheek, staring tenderly into his eyes, and ask him to go on one more adventure.

Sure, he would grumble and make objections, but in the end he would relent to her whims and leave his mead tankard full as they ran off.

Why couldn't she have asked him like that again? Cynric sat down dejectedly and kicked the dirt beneath his heel over and over as he stewed, feeling betrayed.

Somehow, he had lost the right to be at her side. She had left him.

"Damn it, Ness," he choked as grief climbed up his throat. He bit his lip to contain a whimper and reflexively moved his fingers across her shroud, searching to feel her delicate hand.

When he had found out about Jenessa's departure, it hurt him deeply, and each day that went by further saddened him. He drank more and started leaving his rooms in shambles, evidence of his grief-ridden rages fueled by dwarven spirits. His debaucheries continued as autumn passed, giving way to the snows of Neth, then Kuthona. It was not until the middle of that cold, dark month that another letter arrived, laid on his scruffy face. He'd read it when he woke up with a bitter hangover in a barn, huddled between two pigs. He didn't know it at the time, but it would be the last thing he would ever receive from her.

My dear Cynric,

I miss you, and I feel I must confess the truth you deserved to know months ago: our mission was to seek out a vampire coven beneath Karcau in Ustalav. It is much larger than the oracle foretold, and their organization vexes me... I am reminded of the attacks on House Orlovsky in the summer of 4689. Two of our scouts now walk their Final Paths on the endless spiral. They fought bravely, but I could not save them. I lost Talathel in a raid only yesterday as well...

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Much more work remains in my service to the Lady of Graves. I have to expose the heart of this cabal further.

In case I don't return...forewarn the Houses.

I know the cold this time of year reminds you of home... Please be well, and do not come for me, though I know you will do what you must. I will leave when my task is finished.

Jenessa

After reading that letter, Cynric had only one thought: to depart immediately. Outside the barn, a blizzard raged as he saddled his horse, half-dressed. It had taken the intervention of friends and several pints of Stronghammer stout at The Ailing Alchemist before he was convinced to wait. Somehow the long nights of winter crept by, giving way to the first flush of spring. On the 5th of Pharast he paced, watching the temple gate for any sign she was among her fellow priests; he knew she would not miss observing her Lady's Feast of Bones. And when at last the sky dimmed and the shadows lengthened, he departed, mounted and charging toward the setting sun and the lure of Ustalav.

It took him three weeks to reach the outskirts of Karcau, and only another few days to search for her, deep within the city's subterranean labyrinths. He'd followed a trail of ash and blood, where scorch marks charred the walls, and staked decapitated bodies floated in stagnant canals, tell-tale signs of her unmistakable work. Yet for all the destruction she had wrought in her goddess' name, when he'd finally found her she was drained of all life, *dead*. Her arms and neck bore the markings of vampires, and their intent to make her one of their own was abundantly clear.

He snatched her away, cradling her body against his chest until he found his way back to the surface. He then sought out a priest to undo their foul designs and purify her, so she could begin her journey to the Boneyard.

"Oh, Nessa..." Cynric brushed a stray curl gently from her face as the rites finished. "By the Lord's Blade, look at you!" He shivered as he felt her cold cheek against his hand, then swept her tattered shell into his arms and carried her away in a daze. A few unbidden tears escaped as he walked, yet he managed to curb his emotions long enough to reach his horse. There, he tenderly draped a cloth around her, weeping as he secured her body to his saddle. Mounting once more, he rode quietly out of the city, never wanting to see it again.

Cynric stared at that last letter, turning it over in his hands and caressing her signature with his thumb. The paper was weathered soft like her skin and the worn creases reminded him of the lines that gathered around her eyes when she smiled.

A few sparks sputtered from the fire, climbing up into the cool night air. His eye followed them into the heavens and lingered there while he slowly crumpled the paper and tossed it unceremoniously into the dying flames. He no longer needed to look at it; its hold over him was no more. When he would fail to return, messengers would be dispatched to all the Houses. His disappearance would compel them to take action. It would be enough for her.

"Thank you for saving me, Seenric..."

The words tortured him. He longed to hear them whispered in his ear, but they would never come. She was gone.

The majority of his wood had started to collapse into glowing embers when Cynric focused back on his surroundings. He looked for signs of the raccoon but the clearing was empty and deathly quiet. It meant only one thing.

They were here.

He pulled out his wineskin and took a very long draught before spitting it before him. He then threw down his fur cloak, rekindled the blaze and took out a small knife, running it along his chest until it bled. He winced a smile, knowing the smell of blood would try his foes' patience.

Just the night before, he'd had a run in with one of their scouts. He was out of firewood and had been searching for dry branches when a chill ran down his spine. The lone creature had attempted to ambush him, perhaps trying to secure its master's favor. Before it had a chance, he incapacitated it, then nicked open his palm and taunted the beast with his blood, tempting it to reveal the cabal's intentions. To his surprise, it told him everything as if it didn't matter: the entire coven had mobilized to reclaim the cleric's corpse and deal with him. The thing tried to barter with Cynric, promising safe passage in exchange for Jenessa's body. He spurned the proposal and drew a wooden stake, but the creature warned him he couldn't kill it, for if it failed to return, the whole group would know precisely where it went missing. Reconciling himself to the news, Cynric nodded and then drove the stake into its heart.

Tonight there would be more than just one. The odd silence around him persisted as his blood dripped from his chest down his abdomen. He circled warily to his greatsword and reached out to grasp its hilt. Still, there remained only the crackle of the fire. The wind breathed through the tree branches and Cynric cocked his head toward his left, listening hard.

A few unsuppressed hisses came from the woods.

"You want her?" he shouted at the surrounding trees. "Well, you can't have her! You'll have to take me instead!"

In the bonfire, a large log still burned. Cynric kicked it toward Jenessa's shrouded body, catching her garments ablaze and igniting a small pyre he had fashioned beneath her. He watched as she began to glow and the flames turned the cloth from white to black. Her ashes would be useless to them, but this was not the burial she'd wanted.

I'm sorry, Ness... Be at peace. I'll see you soon, dear friend.

Angry howls and curses rose from the woods, but nothing entered the clearing.

Cynric drew his sword, then quickly swiped his dampened eye with the back of his hand as he wheeled to scan the increasing gloom. "Today I die on the Numerian plains," he growled, "but I do *not* die in vain."

A dozen hungry red eyes glinted at him from the shadows, lusting for blood.

"Take me, if you dare!" Cynric challenged defiantly, and a hateful pair of eyes charged from the brush. Cynric's mighty two-handed blade slashed, severing the snarling creature in half. The Ulfen smiled as its blood coated his face and chest; *a good omen.*

Enraged and snarling, the frenzied creatures swarmed in, biting and slamming into him from all directions, including the air. Cynric roared and took a massive swing, sundering multiple creatures and littering the earth with their appendages.

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A bite on his arm and at his thigh drew blood as the towering man still swung.

This night, his Path to Elysium would be coated with their blood, and by Gorum's will his Lord would be well-pleased!

"For Nessa!" he yelled triumphantly, and then hurled himself into a cluster of the fiends, casting them about as his greatsword continued to sing with undead blood. He remembered everything about her in that moment: the way her dark, braided hair would fall in coils around her shoulders; the hint of her musky perfume; the way she used to gaze into his eyes with an unspoken reassurance built by years of camaraderie.

And somewhere he knew...

Jenessa waited for his return to their tavern, ready with a smile and a tankard to convince him it was time for another adventure.

STIRRING SHADOWS

By Arthur Boyd



ONAVAN HARPER sighed deeply and sat on a large moss-covered rock, running his hands over his stubble-covered chin. Overhead, the summer sun beat down through a clear blue sky onto the Curchain Hills. From this windswept vantage point, he could almost see all the way to the Varisian Gulf.

“What’s wrong, dear?”

“I don’t know...it’s just...this whole thing has become far more complicated than I planned.” He pulled off his wide-brimmed hat to wipe the sweat from his brow, exposing pointed ears.

“Worthwhile things usually are difficult to achieve, my love.” Gwyneth Harper knelt behind him on the rock and began rubbing his shoulders. Wearing leather breeches, and a white shirt covered by a light brown cotton vest, she seemed completely unaffected by the heat. Smiling softly, she gently kissed the top of his head.

“I hadn’t really intended to seek fame and fortune by running about the countryside chasing rumors and buying fake maps from crazy old Varisian women telling fortunes in a painted wagon.”

She fingered the brightly colored scarf acquired at the gypsy camp. “Would you prefer we settle down in some backwoods town and earn a respectable living?

“Oh, you mean the boring kind of life spent digging in the dirt for a livelihood?

The kind where it takes a year to earn enough coppers to replace the pig you bought the year before? Living in a place where everyone in town knows you and you know everyone? Live there until the day we die? And our children live there all their lives, and die there, and their children, and so on? Living at the mercy of the weather, where the work of an entire year vanishes at the first early frost, or drought, or flood!" The half-elf sighed deeply, letting all his frustration out in one loud exhalation. "To hell with that, Gwyneth, I won't do it! I can't."

"I know, dear, I know." The Ulfen woman stood up, tying her long red hair back into a single ponytail to keep it out of the way.

He stood and helped her up off the rock.

"You should stay out here this time."

Gwyneth put her hands on her hips and gave him a stony glare. "Really." The icy tone of her voice let him know that that one word wasn't a question.

Defeated by the upraised eyebrow of his wife, the Harpers entered the cavern together through the carved stone archway.

Donavan pushed back his long brown duster coat and reached down to his waist to feel the reassuring handle of his sidearm. With his right hand he opened a pouch on the bandolier across his chest and pulled out a small compass-like device. Holding it aloft, the instrument began to glow, illuminating the chamber ahead. Carefully, he clipped the device to his front shirt pocket and proceeded onward. Each wall was made of stone, engraved with runes and sigils that covered nearly every inch. Immediately, Gwyneth pulled a large, leather-bound notebook from her pack and began to sketch.

"This is amazing!" Gwyneth marveled out loud while scribbling and dipping into an ink bottle fixed on her waist strap. "Look, these glyphs predate the Age of Darkness! I think they might be Thassilonian, though that would make these writings over ten thousand years old!"

"Exploration first, documentation second. Come on!" Slowly, the duo descended deeper. Gwyneth sketched furiously as Donovan pushed, prodded, and pulled her further into the ruins.

A few hallways and several rooms later, they reached a subterranean chamber that had once been the stage for a scene of great violence, played out by actors whose desiccated remains littered the rooms. Stone pillars draped with cobwebs appeared as silken curtains, scattered throughout the room. Leather-wrapped skeletons still clutched their rust-pocked blades; gaping jaws lent the appearance of laughter at a joke that the living would never understand.

"Should've waited outside like I told you to," he muttered darkly.

"Then who would keep you out of trouble?" she riposted while lighting a lantern from her pack.

He clenched his teeth to keep from saying something he'd later regret. Well, maybe he wouldn't regret it, but he'd regret letting her use it in an argument against him later. His wife had a particular knack for dredging up his careless words and using them against him in a fight years later. Donovan narrowed his eyes and peered forward into the gloom just so he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of seeing the look on his face.

Gwyneth knelt next to one of the corpses, rubbing a finger across the skull.

"Take a look at this."

"I don't see anything"

"Exactly." She stood and dusted off her hands. "There are no visible injuries of any kind. There are no scratch marks on the bones to indicate claws or sword wounds. No broken bones; every skeleton is still more or less in one piece."

"So what killed them?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Something obviously threatened these men; look at how they clutch their weapons, even in death. If it had been poison, they'd have dropped them to grab their aching stomachs or throats. If it had been magic, we should have felt the effects by now. I'm certain these people were murdered by something," she declared. "Do you think 'whatever-it-may-be' still inhabits the site?" she wondered out loud as she began rummaging through her pack.

Donavan drew his pistol. It was all the answer she needed. A delicate hand on his shoulder gave him a reassuring squeeze. He paused for a moment and looked back at his wife.

"Be careful," she said.

As he disappeared into the darkness, Gwyneth set her lantern on a broken pillar and sat down to sketch the pictographs inscribed on the walls.

Donavan moved as quietly and quickly as he could, straining his eyes to see ahead. Despite his light, the hall remained oddly dark, and he rubbed one palm along the stone surface of the wall to guide himself. As he traversed the hallway, he heard a faint skittering noise, like leaves rustling in the breeze.

The darkness pressed in closely, resenting light's intrusion into dark's domain. Unseen cobwebs caressed his face with wraith-like fingers. A soft, sibilant voice suggested sleep. He closed his eyes and stopped moving, thinking how easy it would be to rest. Whispers reminded him how tired he was, urging him to lay down for just a few moments.

Shadows bore down on him as if they had physical weight. Another low murmur reminded him how heavy his pack was, suggesting that he should release his burdens, lie down, and let the darkness cover him like a thick, black blanket. His breath and pulse began to slow as the darkness began to surround him. Donovan could feel the shadows gently enfolding him and enshrouding him in an eternal damning lover's embrace.

Angrily, he shook his head in an attempt to physically shake his thoughts loose, to break free of the malignant will digging deeper into his mind. His eyes snapped open just in time to see the shadows peel themselves off the walls and start reaching out for him with long, claw-like fingers.

"Time to run! Time to run now!" Gwyneth heard her husband's words echoing from the blackened corridor.

She rose to her feet, and shoved her gear back into her bag. "Donavan! What is it?" she shouted back.

"Less talking—more running!" He emerged from the darkness and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her with him.

She could hear it now; something was moving behind them, something large, something loud, something faster than them.

"Keep running!" He spun on his feet, his pistol outstretched towards the corridor,

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firing blindly backwards.

“What are you shooting at?!”

“I’m attacking the darkness!”

“Are you hurting it?”

He fired twice more, but this time the gunshots were answered with a deafening roar, as if an angry tornado was bearing down on them in the subterranean shade.

“Enough to make it mad!”

He ran after her, his longer strides putting him next to her in a moment. The pair pumped their legs rapidly, their chests heaving in air with great sucking breaths. Light from the outside was a small circle ahead.

“How far to the exit?” she asked.

“Not far!”

“How far is not far?”

“500 paces!”

Sardonically, she yelled back, “Oh great!”

They leapt through the open archway into the daylight. Tendrils of darkness reached beyond the confines of the cavern, and were burnt by the unforgiving sun. The shadows howled in frustrated rage, lamenting the failure to add two more souls to their dark chorus.

Donavan gasped for air and angrily brushed grass and dirt from himself.

Gwyneth stared up at the midday sun. “Well, scratch one lantern from the supplies.”

“That’s it! We’re hiring more people.”

“Dear, I believe you were the one who explained at length several times that more people mean more shares of the loot. More shares means smaller shares. Smaller shares mean waiting longer to reach our goal of fame and fortune. Waiting longer means doing more jobs. More jobs mean more danger, which you hate. Besides, more people mean less stealth. Less stealth means more danger. Which you hate.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I hated it per se...” he muttered.

“Oh yes you would! When we first discussed this whole ‘adventuring’ idea you said ‘Why would I want to risk life and limb? I hate danger!’”

“Do you have to use the quote fingers when you do that?”

His green-eyed wife grinned at him, reminding him of the way a tiger must grin before it pounced on its prey. “Yes dear.”

He threw his hands up in the air. “Fine! But what I meant was that I hate putting you in danger, which is exactly why we’re going to hire a few extra hands to keep you safe. No more splitting up, no more running from every fight.”

“Yes, dear.” Satisfied with being right, she was willing to be charitable.

In his heart, he secretly noted that she was gracious enough not to tell him that extra crewmembers had been her suggestion from the very start of their endeavor.

“And that’s final!” he huffed, folding his arms over his chest.

“Yes, dear.”

“It’s very aggravating to have an argument with someone who agrees with everything you say,” he told her.

Her grin widened.

“Yes, dear.”

THE RITUAL

By Ted Thompson



HE BELLS OF Abadar's temple chimed twice in the market, echoing off the buildings as a lone woman reclined on a high balcony, overlooking the view. She swirled the steeped leaves in her teacup as she stared at the vast metropolis of Absalom that spread before her feet.

He would be here soon.

They would kiss, and then make love. And then he would leave. Each passing day he seemed quieter, more distant. She chewed her lip, watching the murky liquid whirl. How much longer could she endure this?

The door behind her opened. Finally, he had come.

A figure entered almost reluctantly and stood for a moment. The woman noticed his signature blue robes and concealing black mask, but he still did not speak. "Marcus?" she asked, turning her head towards her guest.

The door locked and he proceeded to remove his facade. "Yes."

She exhaled in relief and pushed her cup aside as the menacing leaves gathered along the brim. "I haven't the stomach for this." She glanced over at him and rose from the balcony table as he ran his fingers through his short dark hair.

"It's okay, Viviana." Marcus walked up to stand beside her. "I'm here now. And I know how we can make this right."

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Viviana's green eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

He reached for her hand and cradled her cheek with his other. "Do you love me?"

She chuckled softly. "Such a silly question. I am *here*."

"Fair enough. Then, do you trust me?"

She hesitated and then nodded. "Yes, but—"

"Good. Then we're leaving."

A scroll slipped from his sleeve and Viviana gasped. She sensed the aura around it rippling with power; it had to have been scribed by a master of the arts. A mere glance at the parchment's runes confirmed her suspicions. It could take them anywhere in the world.

Curious about the intent behind the scroll, she studied the man she thought she knew. His bronze Garundi features still took her breath away and she was overcome by this sudden notion. He had been so reserved recently.... Yet, Viviana played with the thought that her younger lover was willing to throw away everything...for her.

A rush of excitement tingled through her body. Perhaps he was right. She dared to consider they would never return and turned to the window one last time. She would miss the view, but it meant very little without him. Quickly, she grabbed her bag by the table and packed up everything that would trace her to the room. Her hand lingered on the cooling teacup. Without a second thought, she tossed the contents over the balcony and walked to be at Marcus' side. He held out his hand and she took it, feeling a thrill as they touched.

He entwined his fingers with hers and smiled, unfurling the scroll and reading the mystic letters that shone on the page. The words sounded like eloquent poetry coming from his lips, where others would have butchered them. Her life was safely in his hands. Viviana smiled and looked to the walls in the room as they began to fade and blur. A brief twinge of fear filled her as two spaces began to merge into one...and then they were gone.



The jungle was hot. Even at night the tropical forest was uncomfortably warm and humid. Viviana mopped her forehead and neck with a cloth as Marcus swung his machete again and again, hacking the relentless wild growth from their path. Drenched with sweat, he stopped to check his compass and get their bearings. He pressed a jewel on its face and a soft light spread forth, providing momentary clarity. Handing the device to Viviana, he reached into his scroll case for a map. He consulted it carefully before rolling it up and returning it to its container. Then he put a finger over his lips and shushed. Viviana remained absolutely still and watched as Marcus strained to listen.

"You hear that rumble off in the distance?"

"Yes," Viviana said, gesturing south. "It sounds like rushing water."

Marcus nodded. "That's a waterfall. We're close now." He held out his hand for his wayfinder and Viviana passed it back. He shone the light on the jungle foliage ahead. Cutting a few more stubborn vines, he revealed what appeared to

be a path and smiled.

"This is what we're looking for. See those white roots ahead? No arcane or divine arts have power beyond there." He tossed the compass onto a pile of leaves within the white region and the light went out.

"Hah! See?" Marcus held out his hand to Viviana, but she hesitated as her eyes adjusted to the darkness once again. "What is this place, Marcus?"

"It's alright, Viviana; it's a dead zone. Nothing we do here can be seen—not by the guild, our enemies or even the gods. This place will protect us." He drew closer and looked into her eyes. "Trust me?"

Viviana returned his gaze incredulously. "You can be so melodramatic sometimes. What if I said no?"

Marcus' face fell and Viviana immediately regretted her words, but she wasn't one to apologize, even when she was wrong. She studied their surroundings and bit her lip, waiting for his next move.

The Garundi man sighed, stepping into the pale, vine-covered growth and retrieved his compass. He held out his hand to her once more, a gesture she interpreted as forgiveness, which she gladly accepted.

He pushed aside some overhanging branches so Viviana could pass under them. "So your plan is to truly be free of them?" she smiled as it slowly sunk in, "...and no one can find us."

It made more sense now: the impulsiveness, his odd behavior. She entertained the thought of throwing away all those years of secrecy and responsibility. But, they would let so many people down. When they didn't turn up, some would hate them and others would suffer, maybe even die. But the life they'd share, the tenderness they would have. There would be no more sneaking around in fear, hiding their affair, their feelings. Didn't they deserve this chance?

She gripped Marcus' hand tightly. "So, are we running away together?"

Marcus halted. "Running away? What gave you that idea?"

Viviana's blood ran cold. She'd assumed wrong; Marcus had something different in mind. Uncertainty crept into her thoughts and suddenly she felt embarrassed for her moment of naiveté. Her composure returned and she backed away from Marcus. "Why are we here?"

He clasped her hand tightly. "I found a solution in an old tome. This has gotten much more complicated than either of us ever intended and we really have no idea of the danger we face in Absalom." He pointed down the path in front of them. "Just a little further is someone who can—"

"I see," Viviana interrupted, pulling her hand away from his.

Marcus closed his eyes and took in a frustrated breath. "Viv, I'm trying. I am doing the best I know how under the circumstances."

Viviana shook her head. "What is your plan?"

Marcus swallowed hard. "This place is not only a dead zone—it's special. Everything we do here, we'll forget. It'll be like all this never happened. It's the only way to protect ourselves. To be safe."

Viviana felt tightness developing in her chest as she breathed. "Marcus...."

A low beat pulsed through the air.

"What's that?" she gasped.

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Marcus turned his head toward the sound. "It's for you."

"What have you arranged?"

"You'll see."

"Tell me!"

"You know the answer already," he said flatly, walking on without looking back.

Viviana looked up at the moon and searched for a sign, for some indication of what to do, but all she felt was its cold light. Sighing, she clenched her teeth and dashed forward to catch up.

When she reached his side, Marcus stood at the edge of a clearing, where a wild-looking woman waited silently with a roaring fire behind her. White and black paint adorned her ebon skin in exotic patterns that masked extensive scarring from burns. Engraved rune stones hung from her reed skirt and dark, tangled hair flowed down her back and shoulders. She stretched out her hand as Viviana walked up to stand with Marcus.

"We been expectin' you," the witch leered.

The fire behind her flared as three men pounded drums with increasing intensity.

"I feel you both are powerful outside, but in here, I am more powerful still." The woman looked Viviana over then pointed to her belly. "You come to me with a problem." The drums changed to a low somber pulse. "I can make it go away. But, you might not be ready for what it costs."

"We are prepared," Marcus asserted. He took out a purse and laid it on the jungle floor, untying a cord and parting the velvet to reveal a shining mound of ruby jewels. "Where we come from, there is always an exchange for services."

The painted woman glowered at Marcus and shook her head.

"Bah! You've learned very little out there. That is not the price *I* be talkin' about." She thumped her chest and smiled sadly at Viviana.

Marcus' eyes narrowed. "Well, we will pay no other price, Zenj witch!"

The dark woman's gaze snapped back to the Garundi man.

"The most precious thing you brought, you wish to throw away!" she retorted. "This price you mention *will* be paid, but not to me... 'cause I have no idea how you will repay yourself."

Viviana scowled, her cheeks flushing with heat. "This is insulting!"

"This be the ritual, girl, and it be serious business, so I speak it plainly: I make murder here, murder of the foulest kind. You outsiders think this a cure for what troubles you. Well, if you call killing innocence a cure, I believe you fouler than I. Still, someone should look after the child. So I deliver that innocent soul to Pharasma's arms and she take it the rest the way."

The witch crouched down to put her hands into the earth and pulled up white dirt. "In this place no one see in or out... 'cept me! You won't even remember you been here. When you go home, this baby fall outta you like rotten fruit off a vine," she stood and let the soil slip through her fingers and filter to the ground, "but before I make that happen, I need something." Her dark eyes met Viviana's. "I need the name of the child I take this night."

"*What?*" Viviana gasped, putting her hand to her breast as her stomach flipped nauseously. This was already a night of disappointment, but it was quickly slipping

into one of torture as well. She looked to Marcus with disgust.

"It's just that simple: give me the child's name. I have all else I need."

Viviana hesitated as her emotions spiraled. "Why?"

"Because, no god takes a mortal soul without a name. What I do is not easy. I have to get real close to somethin'...maybe even more powerful than the gods themselves. Somethin' that reveals the life I am gonna take, the life that will never be. It will be a hard thing to hear, but just remember that you'll forget it all. You understand? If you do, we begin."

Viviana looked to Marcus, studying him one last time. He gave her a slight smile and put his hand on her back and rubbed it slowly in encouragement. Viviana stiffened at his touch. She bent her head and closed her eyes tightly as a ball of hatred and resentment swelled inside her. Then she slowly nodded.

"Good. Now, my girl, give me your son's name."

Tears sprung up in Viviana's eyes instantly. A son. *The witch said she had a son.* She swallowed hard.

"My father died in the crusades before I was born. I never knew him...I never...knew." Marcus moved his hand onto Viviana's shoulder, but she shrugged it away. "'Suri' was his name. *Suri.*" Viviana lifted her head and turned to Marcus with dead eyes, neither acknowledging nor seeing him.

"And family name?"

Viviana froze as her stomach roiled again. "Family?"

"Yes," the witch whispered.

"Well...my last name is Tilden, of Taldor.... And Marcus' is Amar. Together..." Viviana focused on the drumbeat pulsing behind the witch. "Together, that makes...Tilmar."

"Alright, girl," the dark woman nodded, "just one last thing. What god should I tell Pharasma to deliver Suri to?"

Viviana looked to the heavens. "Abadar."

The rhythmic tempo quickened and the drummers around the fire stood up, still beating their drums. They began to leave the clearing, singing.

"Come now! We go to the shrine."

The procession snaked into the jungle and Marcus and Viviana followed. Three dark-skinned women moved in from the shadows to walk beside Viviana. They smeared swirls of paint on her face and arms. The path ahead was wide and the jungle beyond dense with darkness. Ahead, Viviana saw a white, thatched hut.

"Go inside." The witch pointed to her.

She stepped forward and Marcus began to walk with her, but the witch thrust out her arm, separating them.

"*Not* you. *You* have no more part here. Leave this place and wait out beyond the pale ground. I be watchin' you! Do what I say! I know why you're *really* here...."

Viviana was ushered forward by her escorts as the witch and Marcus continued to talk in heated whispers. She stepped ahead uneasily, and when she reached the hut's entrance she looked back to see Marcus, but he was already walking away, jotting something down in a journal. The witch turned toward her and Viviana averted her eyes.

With a deep sigh, she touched her belly and then pushed the thick woven

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curtains aside, ducking under the low doorway. Inside, the room was dimly lit and the air thick and steamy. A bent old woman with blank, milky eyes tended a fire pit in the corner. She pulled hot coals from a pot with her twisted, bony fingers, then reached into a water pail and withdrew wet cloths, which she laid upon the coals. A fresh cloud of vapor billowed around them. The women who had painted Viviana guided her to lie down on a mat in the center of the room, then surrounded her with smooth disks of ebony and ivory, overlapping and alternating them in a circular pattern. The drummers arranged themselves along the walls and started a spirited beat.

The witch swept through the doorway and entered the circle to stand above Viviana. "This be it, girl. After this, there be no goin' back."

Viviana thought of Marcus and his true motive in bringing her here. "He's a coward," she whispered. She looked at her belly. *What would a coward's child become?*

Viviana clenched her fists tightly. "Do it."

"This circle binds the power I be callin' and protects us. Leavin' before we're done is a bad thing. You understand?"

"Yes."

The drum tempo increased and the witch began to dance within the circle. The drummers pounded and the tribeswomen chanted as the witch started to sing. Viviana couldn't understand the words, but the melancholy tone brought tears to her eyes. She stared at the thatched straw ceiling above her, focusing on the details of the weaving, the smell of the fire, the steam in the air—on anything other than what was happening. The witch kneeled beside her and placed long fingernails on her abdomen.

Viviana's stomach churned as guilty thoughts ran through her mind. She bit her lip, hoping pain would bring clarity. She was stunned when it came in the form of a small kick from inside instead.

The witch retracted her hand from Viviana's belly and returned to her song. An uncontrollable urge to protect her unborn child surged into Viviana's thoughts.

"Here we go, girl. His spirit be comin' up to meet me." The witch smiled and closed her eyes. "Mmm, such love. He gets it right where everyone else has it wrong. He wants to be like them, but never will be. *He's no good at their games and schemes.*" The witch's voice quivered as tears flowed down her face.

"He's goin' on his own journey now. He finds what makes him so special, but they punish him for it. They see their pride bein' knocked and not the boy's potential. He loses somethin' he truly loves. He can't forget his passion though, so he goes back to where it began, but there it feels emptier still. With that not workin', he decides to prove himself. He's goin' to a place..." Viviana noticed a twitch in the woman's face.

"...a bad place."

The witch's breath froze in the air, dropping tiny ice crystals onto Viviana's stomach as a seeping chill swept over her and toward the witch's hand, frosting the Zenj woman's fingers. The sweltering heat in the room dissipated as white rime coated everything. The drummers stopped and the chanting ceased as the women looked at each other in confusion. The sightless old crone by the fire pit

cried out as a wind blew the curtain door open and extinguished the oil lamps.

Only the dim, smoldering coals illuminated the witch. Her lips parted and a small black beetle ran out of her mouth. Then the witch's hand left Viviana's abdomen and contorted backwards. Her eyes snapped open as her arms and legs popped from their sockets with the odd bending of her joints. Staring directly at Viviana's womb, the witch shrieked, shaking the very ground with the timbre of her cry. Her jaw dislocated with an audible crack as a hollow voice erupted from her maw.

"This soul is mine! *Suri* is mine!"

Viviana recoiled from the deformed witch, but was pushed back by the firm hands of the old blind fire-tender.

The once-chanting women huddled with the drummers in fear as the echoing voice continued. "You cannot steal my triumph from this past! I will take what is mine now!"

The witch lifted off the ground, her appendages hanging like a limp doll.

"This domain is mine! Your world's fate is sealed. You will all *die*!"

The witch's levitating body twisted and turned into impossible positions. Bones cut through flesh, spilling dark red blood onto the white earth. Her face bulged, as the muscles and tendons underneath were torn away from bone, molding into a hideous form. Then her frame jolted erect, like a mere puppet being pulled by powerful strings.

Viviana looked into the witch's eyes.

Only black emptiness stared back.

She got to her feet as the witch's body slammed down into the circle with weight that belied her size.

"I did not think we would have the pleasure of meeting again, Decemvirate!" the guttural voice teased.

"We've never met, fiend!" Viviana spat, standing defiantly.

A hissing laughter jeered at her and she felt an invasive pressure pushing into her thoughts. Viviana reached for a pendant that hung around her neck. It shielded her from intrusions of the mind, but the defiling presence continued to flow into her. She could see a form manifesting in her head as an immense headache began to pound at her sanity. She closed her eyes tightly as the desire to vomit permeated her. In that moment, she saw it: the visage of a man with dragonfly wings. Every moment she looked upon it, the details became clearer as her ability to think slipped further away.

Viviana shook her head and opened her eyes to see the witch's twisted hand outstretched, touching her belly. The woman appeared to be withering more and more as Viviana's pain increased.

Why has my amulet failed? Viviana thought.

Then she remembered where they were.

The dead zone!

I'm exposed!

The witch's hand lifted from Viviana's abdomen. "This bond between us crosses space and time. Now I will pass into you, Decemvirate! Your love for this child cannot deny me."

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Viviana turned and shoved the sightless old woman aside and leapt from the ring. The witch shrieked as Viviana's foot touched the ground outside. A dull rumble shook the entire hut, growing in intensity until a massive force blasted outward from the circle. The building exploded in all directions. Debris, wreckage and mangled bodies were hurled hundreds of feet away.

Still standing at the center of the blast, Viviana remained untouched.

The invading presence was gone.

In the moonlight at her feet lay the witch, coughing and gurgling in her own blood. She spat out a mouthful of red and struggled to speak.

"When you see your son...you'll spend your whole life...tryin' to protect him. You'll have no regrets...but his destiny is tied to that thing...as is yours." The broken woman gasped and inhaled painfully. "I hexed it somethin' good...gave it...a weakness. What will come, will come...but it...has plans." The witch spoke a prayer with her last breath, then her shattered body shuddered and was still.

Viviana dug into her bag and struck a sunrod to examine her surroundings. She checked for signs of life among the others, but none survived.

With a gasp, she remembered Marcus. He was waiting and had to have heard the blast. She hiked back to the clearing where they had met the tribes people, but silence was all that greeted her; the fire had been snuffed out, just like the lives that had tended it.

She moved to continue down the path toward him, but then stopped herself. *What was she going to say?* The truth was a difficult thing to put into words, and this place assured she wouldn't remember any of it.

She lowered herself to the ground by the firepit, stuck the sunrod in the earth, then pulled out an inkpen and paper and began to write a letter...to herself. Marcus had done the same, she presumed, the last act she had witnessed before entering the hut.

She considered her words carefully.

Her son's future was uncertain but it had meaning; he somehow became important enough for a powerful entity to desire his soul. And then there was his life. Viviana wondered about the events the Zenj witch had alluded to: the love the boy would feel and how it would briefly make him happy. His future sounded so much like her past. She too shared the desire to love and be loved, despite the rules and her formidable position on the Council. She closed her eyes, remembering Marcus' smile and his soothing touch; the soft firmness of the hands that had held her safe. It had been worth it, if only for an instant. *Such an illusion could be more important than the truth.*

In the pit of her stomach, she knew she would never be truly happy without Marcus. But he had made his choice to reject their child and she now realized that was something she could not forgive. She had to carry on without him.

She would raise Suri alone.

Viviana thought for a moment longer and then finished her letter. Sighing, she heated a stick of wax with a smoldering ember from the dying coals and dripped it on the folded paper, pressing her signet ring against the puddle. She watched as it hardened, then slipped the letter into her pocket and withdrew a small glass vial from her satchel.

She would have to remind herself of what was to come.

She would test Marcus' love and loyalty, to see if he was a threat to her child. She examined the deep blue liquid in the vial. She used to use this with her friends long ago to indicate that danger was nearby. The paint was usually thrown against a wall, but this time Viviana was going to hold it concealed in a handkerchief inside her pocket.

Exhaling a long breath, she continued through the brush until she spotted Marcus standing by a large fern, reading a book by torchlight. She waited just inside the edge of the dead zone until he noticed her, then she dropped her sunrod and bag and leaned heavily against the trunk of a tree.

"Are you okay, Viviana? There was an explosion, and I was worried." He took a few steps toward her.

"Then why didn't you come?" A slight tapping from within Viviana's stomach emboldened her.

Marcus grimaced and shook the book he carried. "This note in my own hand stated I had to stay out here until it was ov—"

"Come here, Marcus." She met his eyes, holding his gaze intensely.

Surprised at her tone, he walked to her, stepping inside the pale dead zone.

"You aren't in love with me, are you? You just wanted to get rid of our son!"

Marcus' features slackened with shock, then slowly transformed into a devious grin.

"It's true," he agreed, tossing down his torch and the journal. "I brought you here to protect myself, my position among our ranks. We're good together, but that...that child you carried had to go. It threatened everything I stand for. Now that the link between us has been severed, we can go our separate ways."

Viviana reached into her pocket and popped the cap off the glass vial, letting the pigment stain the cloth around it.

Now it was her turn to smirk.

"But that bond isn't broken, Marcus. The ritual was never finished. Your child still lives within me."

"What?" Marcus blanched as he absorbed the news and then shook his head.

"Well...we will head back to Absalom then, and you will find a way to be rid of it there or else...."

"Or else *what*, Marcus?"

"We're Decemvirates, Viviana! We swore oaths to hold these positions for life in order to keep the darkest secrets uncovered by thousands of Pathfinders! These responsibilities preclude our having a child." He paced frantically in the clearing, running his hand through his short hair as he continued to rant. "I got too close and that was a mistake. But I won't let a little indiscretion ruin everything. It must be taken care of. And if you refuse to do it, the price that will be paid is death!"

"Then we stay here where they cannot find us, or we die, Marcus," Viviana asserted as a few tears escaped down her cheeks. "I'm not afraid, are you?"

She huffed and turned her back to him.

Marcus sighed. "Are you sure about this?"

Viviana's heart sank and she turned her head slightly to catch Marcus slipping his hand into his belt pouch. She nodded as her fingers crept to the hilt of her

TED THOMPSON

dagger. “Yes, Marcus. I’m sure.”

“So be it.”

Marcus flicked his wrist and tossed a black iridescent powder upon her as he uttered three words in his smooth arcane tongue. His hands moved in artful gestures as his whole body tensed with his intent to do malice. The forces he called upon did not heed his request, however, and Marcus’ eyes gaped wide in horror as he noticed the white vegetation of the dead zone under his feet.

“*You!*” Viviana roared. She charged and shouldered him into a tall jungle tree, her knife slamming up into his throat. The blade entered messily as hard and soft tissue gave way beneath the keen edge and her expert hand.

She stared into his wide eyes, her vision blurring with angry tears. Blood flowed down the blade and between her fingers as it trickled from the wound.

“It hurts me, Marcus. It hurts me deeply that you would use such a horrendous spell against me, against *our baby*.” She rammed the dagger deeper and turned it, then withdrew the blade as a spray of red showered them. Marcus lurched to the base of the tree, spluttering and gurgling in the white dirt until he slumped over on his side and lay still.

Viviana stumbled back and dropped her weapon, crashing into the trunk of a tree. She slid down its smooth bark, trembling with fury as she wrapped her arms around her middle.

She closed her eyes and took a few deep gulps of air, trying to calm her rapid pulse. Then she ran her hands over her face to clear her mind—but quickly felt the hot stickiness of blood coat her skin. She recoiled in revulsion, only to see Marcus’ twisted and motionless form still hunched over in a dark spreading puddle.

She loved him.

She would have left everything for him. And though he did not deserve it, he was the father of their unborn son. Brief moments with him flashed through her mind: happiness, tenderness, and warmth.

Now there was only his blood.

Viviana reeled in horror and she leaned over and vomited, heaving repeatedly until there was nothing left. She got up and pushed her hair from her face, then grabbed her waterskin to rinse her hands and flush the taste of bile from her mouth. Closing her eyes again, she inhaled deeply, concentrating on calming the queasiness as she listened to the sounds of the jungle nightlife and the constant rumble of the nearby waterfall.

Her pulse quieted and her emotions settled.

A small kick fluttered inside her and she impulsively moved her hand to her gore-spattered belly. That blood would always be with her...

Viviana sighed, realizing what must be done. “I did this” she said aloud to the trees, “but perhaps I don’t need to know I did...”



Viviana looked around, disoriented.

One moment it had been dark, and the next, the bright sun was filtering down through the dense jungle foliage.

“Marcus?”

She waited a moment to get her bearings. The last she recalled, he’d been right in front of her. She was following him into this place, where they would be protected from the outside world. And now he was gone.

He had asked her if she trusted him.

Viviana scanned the area for any signs of what might have happened, but nothing seemed any different. She looked herself over, assessing her supplies. She had her satchel, her waterskin and her dagger—but she also had Marcus’ scroll case. Searching for more clues, she rummaged in her pocket and pulled out a letter sealed by her own signet. In the other pocket she found a cloth covered in blue dye. It was wrapped around Marcus’ wayfinder. Her heart dropped.

Something must have happened.

“I think you made a mistake, love,” she said softly, “...a mistake in trusting this place.”

Viviana found a shaded place to sit, took a deep breath to steady herself, then broke the letter’s seal and began reading its contents. When she reached the last word, her face creased with pain.

He was gone—*dead*—and nothing could bring him back.

Viviana groaned as her eyes brimmed with tears. This was not how she imagined it would be. And in response, the life within her kicked at her side. Surprised, she looked down at the spot that had been delicately touched. A second thump drummed against her abdomen and a thrill of awe and gratitude shivered through her.

The child inside her was right.

Marcus would always be with her.... He lived on in the life of their son.

She was going to have to disappear.

She opened the scroll tube at her side and pulled out a single piece of parchment. The spell it contained was just like the one Marcus had used in Absalom; it could take her anywhere she wished. She began to speak the words slowly, her tongue less fluent and practiced than Marcus’ had been. Yet, as before, her surroundings began to blink in and out around her.

“Abadar, save me.” A tear escaped and ran down Viviana’s cheek as she prayed and focused on her destination.

Then with a flash, she was gone.

LAST VICTIM

By M.C. Shelby



HE BODY CRUMPLED like an old sack of laundry in the vampire's grasp. He licked his lips and stared into the fast dwindling light of the man's eyes. This passing of life never failed to captivate his attention. The vampire suspected, during his brief moments of sobriety after feeding, that he had once been like this man in his arms. But that was long ago, and the vampire could not remember if it was so. When the life at last passed from the body, when all tension had eased from the cooling muscles, the vampire let the husk fall to the ground. One more, just one more, and the bitter cold within would be driven back for another night.

"Sasha!" cried out a small voice.

The vampire's head snapped up. His hand touched the rapier that hung by his side by some old habit, even though he couldn't remember the last time he had drawn the blade. Here in the gloom, back in a narrow alley between two houses, the night encompassed him in an abyssal pitch. The homes here were old, their wood threatening rot, their roofs flaking shingles like dead leaves from a tree. Behind the houses, an axe stood cleaved into the flat round of an even older hewn tree trunk. The vampire felt comfortable here, and it had been here that he discovered the man braving the Caliphas night to procure more fuel from the

wood pile. He hugged one wall, wood splinters tugging at his cloak. The small voice called out again, and the vampire's blood hummed.

A small girl, her form a pale flow in the night, took several tentative steps into the deeper dark. She called, more softly this time, "Sasha?"

The vampire watched her from beneath dark locks of hair which spilled down his forehead. The moonlight cast her form in perfect silhouette, and she glided up the driveway as if a shadow. Her approach became more cautious, and the vampire could see her clear now, and watched as her worn nightgown trailed the ground ever so slight about her. He could smell her in the air, like a touch of jasmine. And he could smell her young, fresh blood. She came closer still, brown eyes skittering here and there.

"Sasha, where are you?"

She was almost on top of him now, but even her young eyes couldn't pick out the vampire's dark form from the deep opacity. He could see the vein pulsing in her neck, could hear the rhythmic thud of her racing heart. His sharp tongue, black and dry, flicked over one fang, and he prepared to take her just as the girl spun and faced squarely towards him.

"Yaah!" she squealed, and fell backwards on her rump. She scrambled to her hands and knees and stood up. "Gods, mister, you scared me! What are you doing out here?"

The vampire hesitated.

"Are you a nobleman?"

The vampire glanced back where the corpse lay folded in darkness. He had once been a man, hadn't he? Or was that the dream? Sometimes, though, it felt as if it must have been real. The young girl looked at him, brave, but he could hear how her hopeful heart now beat faster with the fear of an unknown stranger.

"I am no nobleman."

The words felt strange on his lips, the sound of his voice an old friend long forgotten. But the vampire found it pleasurable to speak, and the words and thoughts so disused came easily to him while the dead man's blood was still alive within him.

"Oh. My name's Elle. What's yours?"

Name?

"Varic," the vampire at last replied. And, perhaps in some forgotten time, that was true.

"I'm looking for my cat, Sasha," Elle explained, looking around. "Sometimes he gets out at night, and I want to find him so he doesn't get hurt. He's all black with one white paw. Have you seen him?"

"Little girls shouldn't be out so late at night; it is dangerous." How long had it been since anyone faced him with such fearlessness, much less spoken to him? This child was too young to see her danger, or to appreciate the fear of the Ustalav night instilled by years of nightmare and superstition. Her boldness struck a chord within him.

"I only live just down there. Besides, I'm almost to my seventh name day. I can take care of myself." Elle's eyes scanned the vampire. "Are you sure you're not a nobleman? You have a sword."

"I am not. We had best take you home now."

"What about Sasha?"

"Your animal will return. Come, now, you must go home."

The vampire nudged the girl forward, his fingers touching light upon her shoulder. He could feel the vibration of her blood coursing beneath his touch. Already, the cutting cold was crawling back into his extremities and his conscious mind fraying ever so at the edges. Soon that cold would begin to burn, his lucidity crumble, and he would be forced to feed. The little girl's heart continued to beat in his head, and his lip trembled in anticipation. He squinted as they stepped out into the brighter moonlight.

He kept his eyes focused sharply on the ground passing beneath his boots, his eyes peering into its many cracked canyons and jungles. But the thud-thud of the girl's heart grew stronger, more persistent, with each passing step. The strange affection he felt would soon melt away to raw desire. He wondered if he would remember her when his splintered thoughts coalesced and her body lay before him.

"You wring your hands a lot," commented Elle, her voice chiming in the vampire's ears. "I have a grandmom who does that too. She says it helps keep her hands warm."

The vampire glanced over, but said nothing.

Elle skipped beside him; any initial fears or startles she may have had washed away. "I'm glad it's summertime. I hate the winter, don't you? I don't like cold weather."

"Everything has its own time," replied the vampire, his tongue traveling about the inside curve of his lower lip. A part of him wished he could linger longer with Elle. It was then that the vampire realized he would be disappointed with this child's rejection—this child he did not know—when she realized the truth of what he was. He would miss her when she was gone, as much as he could miss anything, as all his past experience was a fog. Once, he imagined, he had been a man of culture. Even a father. "Are we near your home yet?"

"We're here!" Elle said, smiling back at him.

The vampire gazed about them. No sound came from any of the houses. A candle burned here and there, and the moonlight cast all into silver and shadow. The vampire leaned his head back, the stars pinpointing diamonds in his dark pupils, before returning his attention once more to the girl. Her body was a tiny furnace, the only source that could relieve the cold that was now a million needles piercing his being. Perhaps he could take just enough of her to melt away the cold for a little while, and still spare the child's life. No. No, that would never be. Once he started, he would not stop. Everything had its own time.

"Thanks for walking me home, Varic. Keep an eye out for my cat, okay?"

The vampire clenched one fist, the nails digging deep into his palm. His teeth ground together and he pointed to her home. "Go inside now, child, and never come out at night alone again."

Elle turned and ran towards her home. Her heartbeat grew fainter and fainter in the vampire's ears, and when the weathered door to her home shut, he was left only with the cold fire worming its way deeper and deeper into his body. His

thoughts dissipated, words lost in mad scrambles until they became words not at all but animal hunger. He felt something brush against his legs. He looked down to see a black cat bearing a single white paw winding itself between his legs. It looked up and gave a hopeful meow. In an instant the cat was in his grasp, and his teeth sank in around the soft black fur. Moments later, the vampire let the carcass fall to the ground and took one step towards the house.

He stopped then, and looked down at the cat lying still. One word, less than a whisper, escaped his lips. "Elle."

The vampire turned away and disappeared into the night.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

By Bjørn Evensen

R

USK WHIFFED the aroma of roasted onion. He thought it morbid how pleasant the smell was, as he watched the life dwindle from the eyes of the woman next to him.

*Go to the Stolen Lands, the Swordlords had ordered.
Find the interlopers. Eliminate them.*

His targets had been five brigands. An unusual crowd, he thought, though not one he was wont to care about. The order gave no names, and names weren't important. He checked the kettle and coated the onion in gravy, as he looked about at his victims.

The marks had been cautious; when he arrived, two were awake, patrolling the area while the others slept. They didn't watch each other, and that was their undoing. Rusk snuck up behind the half-orc guard and slit his throat. By the time the other noticed, Rusk stood in his shadow, throwing the garrote over his head.

Neither presented a challenge.

The halfling was the one to break his momentum. At first, Rusk covered his mouth and sunk a dagger into his belly. A soft, pitiful gasp issued forth.

Then his eyes opened wide.

They reminded Rusk of his daughter's: blue like the sky and the sea.

But he didn't hesitate and moved on.

BJØRN EVENSEN

He snuck over to the dwarf and spotted the battleaxe that lay next to her. It fit snugly in his hands and he examined the blade. The edge was a little dull; he'd need several strikes to finish the job.

Suddenly, he looked to the trees; the morning birds had begun to call.

He was out of time.

The sleeping dwarf at his feet yawned as Rusk drove the edge into her neck once, twice, and thrice. Her head rolled, coating the ground in blood. As he tossed the axe away, Rusk looked over his shoulder.

The final target had awoken, her face flushed in anger.

And fear.

Rusk drew a second dagger. The woman yanked forth a longsword, advancing swiftly.

He observed her stance and poise, noting her erratic breathing and the tension in her muscles. She descended upon him, a fury of steel. He dodged every futile strike, watching intently for the opportunity to retaliate. And when she misstepped, he seized the moment and delivered a decisive nick upon her tender, exposed throat. She fell to one knee and clamped her hand on the wound to stem the bleeding, then collapsed.

Rusk sheathed his daggers and rekindled their campfire. He barely paid the corpses any heed as he feasted on their burnt venison and roasted onion. The smell of death added a spice of its own, the aftertaste of which grew more bitter with every passing minute.

He wiped his chin on the dying woman's cloak, then threw the bodies to the fire. At the break of dawn, he began his trek back to Restov.

He arrived at the river crossing as the sun broke past the far-off mountains. There, he knelt on the edge of the water to quench his thirst, but saw his reflection. Dark eyes peered from under an unkempt tangle of hair, and his unruly beard still could not hide that part of his nose and lip were missing. A gray moleskin cloak hung around his shoulders and several daggers were strapped to his belt, the hilts of which were adorned with differently carved writings.

Old memories.

An elf's mouth covered by a hand. A blade driven through her heart. No sound. No gasp. Only tics and twitches. A dagger pulled, a body pushed, a splash.

"I'm sorry."

The moon cast a pale shadow across the water.

Fifty sphinxes, for a life.

The body sunk slowly.

He hid the sack in his cloak, and made his way to the edge of the docks. In the moonlight, he saw his reflection: his nose was crooked, his lips were thick. His beard was trimmed.

He heaved his head over the side and hurled.

Old stains.

Rusk washed his daggers clean of blood before he continued. In the distance he could see the road, and further still the walls of the city. He crossed the nearby

bridge and straggled across hills and uneven stretches of sun-bathed plains. He lowered his hood over his face to shield himself from the staunch sunlight. It was past midday when he stepped upon the dirt roads.

He walked through the gates as any traveler would, his weapons well-hidden by his cloak, garnering no attention. Immediately, he set toward the grand plaza.

A boy, no older than sixteen, approached him, his face hidden in the shadow of a brown hood. Without a word, he handed Rusk a missive, and a thick leather bag that rattled with coin. He then disappeared as quickly as he'd arrived. Two hundred dragons, as agreed upon.

Rusk noted the amount quietly and peeled off the wax seal of the missive.

Eliminate the son of Lord Mayor Ioseph Sellemius.

His heart stirred.

He put the missive into the pocket of his cloak and walked off.

Names aren't important.

The dead halfling's eyes were, though. Blue, every time he blinked. It was as if they had been stolen from his daughter, staring into his soul.

Her letters had stopped coming for over a year.

Because you never wrote back, he told himself quietly. Pale fingers grasped at the back of his mind as he wandered to the nearby inn. He needed a drink, a meal, and some sleep.

The temple guards shoved Rusk out the door.

Cursing loudly, he damned all the gods as he descended the stairway. The healer insisted on a "donation" for his services, oblivious to Rusk's pleas. He stormed through the city, towards the docks, seething with anger. He passed through an alleyway when someone tossed a scroll in front of his feet.

Anger shifted to confusion, and then became curiosity.

He picked up the scroll. It was a death warrant. Fifty sphinxes, for a life.

Could he do this?

He checked his surroundings, then folded the scroll into his sleeve.

Fifty sphinxes. A life for a life.

When night came, his thoughts had been put aside. Rusk was a shadow. The guards, few as they were, patrolled the streets, lighting up their routes with lanterns and torches. They avoided the alleys. Rusk didn't mind.

He calmly counted their steps, their breaths, their heartbeats, and crossed unseen from one street to another.

Watchmen were predictable.

When he arrived in the noble district, however, it was a different ordeal. The other districts of Restov had few guards, and fewer lights. Here, the guards swarmed like bees, their torches and lanterns illuminating every corner, nook and cranny.

Rusk took a deep breath. *Steps, breaths, heartbeats.* He snuck into the streets. Slowly, subtly the light parted at his whim. He clung to walls and lantern posts, making his way through shadows.

The manor he was headed for was well-protected. Ten-foot walls with spikes

on top prevented most from entry, and the gates were never unmanned. When his ilk was suspected, every shadow cast was that of an enemy.

He stepped up to the manor wall. The brickwork was smooth, difficult to climb. Rusk pressed his fingers into the hard stone, his nails cracking from the pressure. But he found what he searched for: grooves in the polished stonework, enabling him to ascend. He cast a glance at the streets, and began counting.

Steps, breaths, heartbeats. He set to climbing.

It was tedious and demanding of his attention, but it wasn't long before he reached the iron spikes. With one final pull, he was on top of the wall.

The manor grounds were unguarded, and the guards by the gate kept their eyes outwards to the streets. Rusk pulled out a black silk rope from under his cloak, and tied it around one of the spikes. He then descended swiftly, landing on soft, dry grass.

Darkness eased his passage, with each step surer than the last. A quiet groan filled the air when he pushed the door open, and he glanced at the gate. The guards still looked out to the streets.

The manor was large, the wooden floor well kept. Not a single board would creak if Rusk could be careful. He walked slowly, shifting weight as necessary. He checked one doorway after another, looking for his mark. The sound of scribbling caught his attention. Up ahead, soft light poured from the slit of a barely open door.

He peered in. A candle flickered on a desk, and the scribbling was louder. The boy was still awake at this hour, clad in a finely tailored doublet of cloth-of-gold and feverishly penning. On the back of his chair hung a dueling blade, sheathed in a jeweled scabbard.

The scribbling ended abruptly, and the boy rose from his seat. There was tension in the air. Rusk pried a finger betwixt the door and the jamb, pulling it open.

The soft sigh of steel being drawn from its sheath resonated in the room.

"Who's there?"

Rusk clung to the wall, a dagger in his hand.

The boy had blue eyes, blue like the ocean.

"Show yourself!"

Rusk stepped into view and the boy narrowed his eyes, trying to see what wasn't there.

Youth had always been prone to fear, he mused. For him, those days were long gone.

The boy's eyes grew larger and Rusk prepared himself for the charge, his dagger concealed behind his back.

The boy gripped his blade with both hands, frightened of what was to come, as his muscles twitched.

Rusk took a step forward into view and the boy charged, letting loose a battle cry loud enough to wake the entire mansion. All Rusk had to do was advance, break the rhythm, and thrust.

He wanted to move forward, to tighten his fingers around the hilt of his blade. But he remained still. His nostrils flared, taking in the smell of the boy's sweat.

Rapid steps approached, thundering against the floor. He could hear the labored breathing. He could feel each separate heartbeat.

But the boy's face wasn't there. In its place was the furious visage of his daughter; *she had never looked so fierce...never in her life.*

"Wait—" Rusk began, his voice hoarse.

He let his dagger fall to his side. The boy buried his steel into Rusk's flesh, his eyes burning with anger and fear, a vortex of rage.

The dagger slipped from Rusk's fingers.

The wound didn't hurt.

As the dagger crashed against the dark wooden floor, Rusk spoke softly to the boy, "A life for a life. My daughter's..."

"Papa, why do you have to go?"

She was seven. Her dark hair complemented the stout features of her heritage. Her eyes were bright and blue. Her skin was gray. She clutched her pillow. Rusk could hear the soft snoring of her mother in the bedroom. He was busy counting his daggers on his belt and checking his vials in his pockets.

"I'm sorry, sweetling. I have to." He knelt in front of her and kissed her brow. "I'll write you. You remember your letters, right?"

"Yeah, but...but...can't you take me and mother with you?"

Rusk shook his head. "I'm sorry, sweetling, they only need one dwarf. They say Brevoy is cold, too. I couldn't bear you getting sicker."

"Okay..." She sighed and then gave a cough, spattering blood into a handkerchief. "I'm...I'm hungry, father."

Rusk felt his stomach rumble, and smiled softly with concern.

His last smile.

"I am too, sweetling. Go fetch some onions. I'll warm up the kettle..."

And all he could smell was roasted onion.

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When the gods waged war,
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RAZORBACK
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GODS AND MONSTERS

By Michael Wallace

ALATE AUTUMN wind blew across the countryside, plucking yellowed leaves from the trees. It kicked dust off a dry and well-kept road that wound through the landscape toward a rocky expanse. The packed dirt was replaced by cobblestones as the trail widened, leading through a sturdy archway flanked by two bastions; a chokepoint entrance lined with enough murder-holes for dozens of crossbowmen. Beyond the arch, the road ascended further still to a gargantuan gate built into stone walls. Guards walked along its palisades, calling out the all's-well into the crisp morning air.

Beyond the gate, an entire town bustled in relative safety even at the pre-dawn hour. Butchers chopped meats from fresh kills and the smell of bread wafted from bakers' chimneys. A castle stood in the middle of the town, a small fortress that lent the town a regal air. A moat surrounded the structure, with four adjoining towers at its corners reaching up to the sky. Sentinels watched the vast horizon from each tower, mindful of any sign of signal fires that would alert them to danger leagues away.

On a third floor balcony of the main keep, two figures stood looking out at the view. The taller and older of the two clasped his hand on his younger counterpart's shoulder as they watched the first rays of the sun peek over the horizon.

"Not like dawn back at the monastery, is it, Evane?"

MICHAEL WALLACE

The boy nodded. "It's beautiful. Calend has so few trees, I feel like I'm on the edge of the world sometimes." He rubbed his hands to keep off the chill. "Plus Confessor Baltus isn't around to scold me for being out of bed."

"I thought that old badger would have retired by now," the older man laughed. "He wasn't too hard on you, was he?"

"A bit at first. He vowed not to play favorites, not even to the son of Reddak Orrest, heir to the Empire," he smirked. "But I did what I had to. I promised Mother I would never miss a single dawn." He squeezed his fists and squinted into the rising sun.

The tall man nodded. "Your mother never approved of my sending you to Tor Makar. We argued over it every night. But it was a time of war, and I wanted you to be safe. I...am ashamed that she, that you—"

Evane turned. "It's alright, Father. The Tomes of Truth say death is only a release, not an end. She watches over us still, with the Gods."

Reddak smiled sadly. "Then I know she is proud of you, as I am."

They watched the sun until it was a perfect molten orb over the horizon, and then Evane looked out beyond the fortress walls to several piles of decaying wreckage. "Father, what is all that junk in the fields over there?"

"War shrines. When we marched into Calend, this fortress was the first we attacked."

Evane frowned. "We were at war with Calend? Wasn't Mother Calish? Aren't I—?"

"Yes," Reddak said, "But those were difficult times; Calend was ruled by a tyrant who thought himself a god."

"Blasphemer," Evane said.

His father smiled. "Yes, but he was quite persuasive. He had worshipers, a cult, and thousands of mercenaries in his service. They are who we fought, not the Calish themselves. The siege engines you see on the plain drew first blood for our crusade, but many were destroyed by spells. Their husks are now shrines. Travellers place prayers upon them, asking the Gods and the fallen to watch over their journeys."

Evane was silent for a long moment, his brow furrowed.

"What is troubling you, Son?"

"A few students in the monastery resent me. They say that I am not a true Haegen. That I don't deserve to be there."

Reddak sighed. "I hope you knocked them on their arses for such talk. The Calish are our friends, our neighbors. We Haegen are bull-headed thugs at times, but we have no reason to hate them. That's why I married your mother. That, and the thought that perhaps a half-Calish, half-Haegen heir would cement the unity of our Empire, once he took the throne."

"Me?" Evane smiled. "No thanks."

Reddak tousled his son's blond hair. "I can always hope... Someone has to do it, and your grandfather has it in his head to select me, of all people."

The two chuckled quietly. Reddak withdrew from the balcony into his private quarters, leaving his son with his thoughts. Footsteps echoed from the hallway and Reddak opened the door to admit an elderly man holding a stack of folded

cloth in his hands.

“Come to rouse me, Samel?”

“At your request, m’lord.”

The two men were picture opposites: Samel was Calish, with olive skin and thinning gray hair, short and almost mouse-like, while Reddak was tall and broad, with cropped blond hair and a heavy jaw. The valet bowed and offered the neat bundle. “Your dress uniform, m’lord.”

“You didn’t stay up all night on this, I hope?”

Samel shrugged. “I swore I’d lose a finger if I ever failed in my duty, but as you can see”—he held up his free hand—“eight years and not a scratch.”

“I’ve met priests who wouldn’t even count that high, Samel. Not if they had to live by your code.”

Reddak took the bundle from the man and unfolded it, revealing a long white military tunic and tabard with gold filigree. “I hate the embroidery.”

“The Emperor desired a Calish aesthetic for his armies,” Samel explained. “To promote unity.”

“Well, it looks like a woman’s dress.”

“If you’d prefer, I could fetch your old uniform.”

Reddak sighed. “No. No, I’ll wear it.”

Samel bowed his head and smiled. Reddak went behind his dressing screen and slipped out of his trousers.

“You have my boots and weapons polished as well, I assume?” he asked over his shoulder.

“All is prepared, m’lord. I even had *Morenstal’s* scabbard oiled and polished. The parade begins at—”

“Not *Morenstal*, Samel.”

“But, m’lord, it is—”

“It’s a weapon of war. The Gods consenting, I want this to be a day of peace. *Especially* today.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

Samel inclined his head. “As I was saying, the parade begins at noonsun. Your fath—excuse me—the *Emperor* will give a speech at the third bell. The banquet is at fifth bell. I took the liberty of having a peek at the seating arrangements. You’ll be seated next to the Emperor, with Captain Herissa Tarek to your right.”

Reddak paused. “Tarek? Of Zelkkos?”

“The very same.”

“How did *she* manage an invitation?” Reddak stiffened. “That city of hers is a pit of brigands and Daels.”

“I cannot question the Emperor’s whims. But out of habit, I inquired with one of His Majesty’s messengers. It seems Count Versale of neighboring Port West wishes to see more Imperial presence on the frontier. One might conjecture he sponsored her attendance, to address the issue directly with His Majesty.”

Reddak emerged from behind the screen, straightening his new tunic tight. “Hmph. I feel like an over-dressed throw pillow.”

“You look dignified and authoritative,” Samel corrected. He adjusted

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Reddak's belt. "I believe His Majesty would approve. What do you think, Master Evane?"

The boy came in from the balcony and smirked, then burst out into a laugh.

Reddak frowned. "This doesn't bode well..."

A bell sounded over Fort Carous as excited shouts came from outside the keep.

"Too late to change anything now," Samel grinned, "But I could try to—"

Reddak shook his head. "No, Samel, this will be fine. Time to go, Son. Your grandfather has arrived."

+ * +

The gates of Fort Carous were thick, tempered steel, as resistant to siege as they were to the weather. With a shout from their commanders, two teams of strong-backed men pushed the great wheels on either side of the gate, pulling the massive chains that hung from it. Slow as the sunrise, the heavy doors began to swing open.

Reddak and Evane rode up as the first glowing rays peeked through. The father dropped from his saddle beside his son and smiled into the glaring light. "Backs into it! Show the Emperor your best!" he encouraged.

The gates groaned and the men strained, and finally dawn's light bathed the cobblestones. Soldiers dressed in white-and-gold tabards marched out of the sunrise in parade lines: mounted cavalry first, with banners fluttering, then infantry marching to the beat of a drum.

The Imperial Escort—two hundred of the Empire's finest clerics, paladins and warriors—entered the fort clad in gilded plate mail, the horns of their warhorses polished and capped in gold. They surrounded several open carriages of Haegen nobility who observed the fort, speaking in casual whispers.

Finally a massive carriage squeezed through the gates. It was almost the size of a house, drawn by a team of three dozen horses. Crossbowmen sat in armored turrets atop the lumbering hulk and the entire contraption was plated in gold-hued shieldoak, a testimony to the Empire's wealth.

Bells within the great carriage rang and the three-man drive team brought it to a steady halt. The rest of the convoy hurried to do the same. Escort Knights dismounted and rushed to the doors of the great carriage, and a small army of servants—following behind the convoy on foot—laid out a fresh red carpet and produced trumpets and bells from their packs.

The carriage doors flew open to a rushed clarion call. Knights fell to their knees, fists clenched over their hearts, and the cavalry raised their lances overtop them in arched salute. Reddak took his place on the center of the carpet with his son behind him.

The Emperor stepped out of the carriage, dressed in flowing robes that matched Reddak's own. As tall and broad as Reddak himself, the Emperor was far heavier thanks to decades of comfortable eating, and he leaned on a ruby-capped cane. He carried his girth well however, and his eyes twinkled with a father's pride and a beaming smile that made him seem decades younger than his

seventy-three years.

As the Emperor approached, Reddak dropped to one knee and bowed his head, as did his son. “I, Reddak Orrest, Lord Marshal of the Protectorate Armies of Calend, welcome you, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Orrest the Sixth, Master of all Haeg, Master of all Calend, Chosen Lord under the Silent Gods. May the Haegen Empire live forever.”

The Emperor put his hand on Reddak’s shoulder, “It’s been too long, my son.” The older man then looked beyond Reddak to the boy. “And you, Grandson. I could hear your restlessness in the monastery from the palace. Has a week in this dusty place been enough for you?”

“It is always a reward to be with family,” the boy said.

The Emperor and his son exchanged proud grins. “He’ll out-humble us all at this rate, Father,” Reddak laughed.

“Well, off your knees then, both of you. Evane, you are in Calend now. It is not their custom to bow. Calish grasp arms like this”—the Emperor gripped Evane’s arm just below the elbow—“as equals.”

Evane rose and did the same. “As equals,” he smiled.

“How was your journey? How is Mother?” Reddak asked as he got to his feet.

“Fine, fine. Your mother sends her love, angry as she was for being left behind. She misses you, Reddak. And she has not seen Evane since he was... oh...” He held his hand at waist height.

“It’s been thirteen summers,” Evane said.

“Thirteen already?” the Emperor gaped.

“I counted.”

Reddak chuckled. “Her correspondence did have some fire to it. Something about shoving your head into that vase I sent her for her birthday.”

The three Orrest men shared a laugh. “I see the fortress is in good form,” the Emperor noted, studying the battlements and narrow buildings as they walked. “Are the walls still necessary? The war is long over.”

“They keep out the wind; Calend is little more than grass and open fields, unlike the forests back home. And besides, it would be a crime to see such craftsmanship destroyed.” Reddak gestured to the gates. “It took four months to drag those doors all the way from Kol Dir. Not everyone has three dozen Kordic horses to haul them around, you know.”

“Too true!” The elder Orrest laughed. He clapped Reddak on the back and the three continued further into the stronghold.



The time between sunrise and noonsun was too brief. The Imperial Escort had to be moved into the keep itself. The town’s merchants—anticipating His Majesty’s arrival—had prepared their shops and wares in small and accessible booths out of the way of the parade lines. Local Calishmen and Haegen nationals gathered in the streets with their families, cordoned behind protective ranks of white-dressed soldiers. Military processions moved through the streets, and cheers rose up from the crowds as armored knights tossed white rose petals before

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them. Throngs of followers gathered behind the parade, pressing themselves into the courtyard with hundreds more gathered outside.

Emperor Orrest stood on the keep's largest balcony—just below Reddak's own quarters—with the assembled lords and ladies who had attended him on his journey. As was his due, Reddak stood closest to the Emperor on his dais and had a good vantage to look upon the others. He recognized many of the faces beyond; nobles from both Calend and Haeg who had proven their allegiance to the Imperial Crown.

He continued to scan the crowd until his eyes came to a woman's silhouette. Herissa Tarek seemed a typical Haegen woman—tall, blond, with seafoam-green eyes and a muscular build—but everything else felt out of place. Her chin and cheekbones were too sharp, and without her helmet, her long hair—far too long for military law—gave her a regal, arrogant appearance. Reddak pointed her out to his father.

"My advisor mentioned Captain Tarek had joined your escort, Father. I have to say that I disapprove."

The Emperor looked out to the assembled dignitaries and nodded. "Count Versale has been sending me correspondence over the past months. I am sorry if she went over your head but the nobility have been clamoring for improved safety so close to orc territory. Try not to begrudge them for it, Reddak. The frontier is a bit more wild and unorthodox than life here on the border."

Reddak stared at Herissa as she spoke with a bald, aloof gentleman he assumed was Count Versale. She caught Reddak's gaze and offered a curt nod before turning back to the masses, a strange smile on her lips.

Emperor Orrest VI raised a hand to silence the crowd below. "Citizens of Calend. Citizens of Haeg, of the Empire. It is my great honor to stand amongst you on this day of days. I have traveled far from home, and yet I find myself in the company of friends. I look out from this balcony and I see brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters—all freed from tyranny, comrades united in a common cause. It is fortunate that our children grow in an age free from the shadow of the tyrant, Xenaxis."

People exchanged uneasy glances and a silence fell over the crowd.

Orrest nodded and grimness crossed over his face. "All of Calend felt his claws, his flame. For centuries he ruled and enslaved you! Your ancestors were crushed under his whims, victims to satiate his desires!"

The Emperor paused, letting his words sink in. "The Church of the True Gods speaks to us. It tells us that long ago, the Gods walked at our side, spoke in our dreams, and raised us up to become their champions. But there were those who would not bow. The most powerful creatures of Ovassa, the wyrms, dared to wage war against the heavens. For their hubris, the Gods struck them down. For our weakness, the Gods turned their backs on us."

Reddak bowed his head humbly. He could almost feel the judgmental eyes of the Silent Gods on his back.

"We have endured the Silence for untold years," Orrest continued. "But our penance is not eternal! The Church teaches that mankind can redeem itself through pious service! The Empire of Haeg was born from that truth; the knowledge that

all mortal races can prove themselves worthy. When we witnessed Calend's suffering under the Red Fiend, we knew it was our duty, our *honor* to fight at your side! And it is the will of the Gods that my son and grandson stand before you today, seventeen years to the day after that horrible tyrant was struck down."

Cheers broke out among the crowd, rising to a deafening cacophony. The Emperor winked at his grandson and the boy beamed. The Emperor then put his arm around his son and pulled him forward. Reddak stiffened under the applause and reluctantly stepped in front of his father. After a moment of suffering their revelry, Reddak gave a brief nod of acknowledgement and slunk behind, as his son slipped next to him.

Excitement ripped through the assembly, spreading through the town as cries of "Reddak! Reddak!" reverberated through the streets.

Evane grinned at the spectacle. "They call your name, Father!"

Even the imperial soldiers and the elite imperial knights broke their stoic demeanor and threw up their fists offering praise to the Emperor's heir.



The speech went on for nearly an hour as the Emperor spoke of many things: unity between the two nations, ending the wars between feuding Calish merchant houses in the west, fortifying the defenses of the frontier, dealing with Sarkaszi goblin raids to the north, and on and on. Each promise from the Emperor's lips prompted a flurry of applause. The speech ended when the Emperor's wizards—standing by throughout the courtyard—summoned a rainfall of sweet candies that fell into the hands of laughing adults and children.

Reddak waited in the hallway as the nobles filed from the balcony, chuckling to each other. Herissa Tarek strolled out on Count Versale's arm.

"Prince Orrest," she acknowledged, her lyrical tone barely masking a sarcastic edge. "Uncomfortable in crowds? Not to offend, m'lord, but I've seen virgins with more confidence."

She turned her gaze on Evane and smiled, baring white teeth between her ruby lips. Evane looked downward, shuffling his feet as he tried to will away the redness on his cheeks.

"Yes, just so!" Herissa laughed as she ushered the flabbergasted Count away.

Reddak growled under his breath. He started to go after her, but Emperor Orrest clapped his hand on Reddak's shoulder and stayed his advance.

"I daresay they applauded best for my son," he said.

"Nonsense, they roared loudest for the candy. You promised you wouldn't do that to me."

"I promised no such thing! It's been seventeen years, Reddak. You need to remind them of what you've done." The Emperor looked at Reddak's scabbard to see the decorative blade he had chosen for the ceremony. "And where is *Morenstal*?"

Reddak shook his head. "I did not wish to be vain. The Gods blessed me to wield *Morenstal*, and I will not dishonor it by brandishing it like a trophy."

"The Gods favored you, Son, but *Morenstal* was also crafted through the

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hands of pious men, Reddak. There is nothing more humbling in my eye than that.”

““Pride damns the soul that claims divinity as deed,”” Reddak recited solemnly. “You know the Tomes of Truth as well as I.”

The Emperor’s smile flattened a little. “A good ruler knows when to be led, as well as when to lead. Remember this too. You’ll make a fine emperor one day, Reddak.”

“There will never be a more worthy emperor than you, Father.”

Orrest grunted. “I’m not good for much other than candies and speeches.” He put his arm around Evane and gave his grandson a smile. “Come. Let’s get to our banquet. Your grandfather’s throat feels like a hooked fish; pierced and far too dry.”



The banquet hall was quiet save for the polite hum of dinner conversation. The nobles rose and bowed as father, son and grandson entered the room. Soldiers stationed along the walls saluted. The Emperor nodded and waved them all back into their seats.

“Friends,” he declared, raising his goblet from the table. “Before we settle down to a most excellent feast, let us offer a toast to my son, Lord Orrest. Truly Calend and Haeg are brothers tonight thanks to his courage, strength, and faith.” He drank deep, emptying his cup.

Reddak offered a meek wave as he sat. He briefly surveyed all of the assembled nobles and caught Herissa smiling at him in the neighboring chair. She turned and grasped Evane’s arm as he tried to pass, like an eagle plucking up a fawn.

“Why don’t you sit here, young prince. I do not bite.”

“Mind yourself, Captain,” Reddak said, “You are speaking to your better.”

“It’s alright, Father. Excuse me.” Evane withdrew his hand, but Reddak didn’t like the way the two continued watching each other as his son found his seat further down the table.

“Such a good boy,” Herissa said, toasting her goblet to Reddak and turning to speak with Count Versale.

All around there was quiet laughter and idle chatter. Reddak sighed. He had no stomach for noble gossip. The Emperor had fallen silent to sip from his goblet. Reddak had to admit that his father looked...tired. It had already been a long day, though, and at over forty summers old himself, that fatigue was certainly understandable.

Chuckles rolled down the table from Evane’s seat, catching his attention. Reddak turned to see him talking with a pair of young nobles.

His son was almost eighteen summers and Reddak felt a pang of regret. He had sent Evane off when he was barely old enough to speak. How many moments had he missed with his own son? Had he really expected a four year old boy to arrive at Fort Carous a week ago? The world seemed to be moving by so fast.

Herissa’s honeysuckle voice pierced his reverie. “You look like a man in need of confession, my lord.”

“Be silent, Captain,” Reddak growled, “unless you wish to discuss how you bribed your way into the royal escort without speaking to your commanding officer.”

Herissa just smiled at him over her goblet, looking like a viper.

Bells chimed and servants fluttered into the room like butterflies, adorning plates with food. An appetizer of pickled asparagus wrapped in aged cheese and thin slices of seasoned pork was followed by a main course of tender roast bear that had marinated over a week in Calish vinegars and spices. Reddak waited for Herissa to continue her snide remarks, but she remained focused on her food.

The second course arrived, platters of bitter Kordish cheeses and smoked meats. Reddak smiled as the nobles—accustomed to soft, salty Haegen cheeses—made faces over the harsh, sour flavors and tucked into their wine. Finally the servants brought out small bowls of chilled, sweetened lemon to cleanse their palates.

“Your Majesty,” Herissa spoke up, half-way through dessert, “if I may be so bold?”

The Emperor—whom Reddak suspected had gone hoarse from his speech—merely nodded and continued to eat.

Herissa turned to Reddak, but spoke loud enough for the entire dining hall to hear. “The Emperor spoke quite highly of your victory over Xenaxis, Lord Orrest. All of us attending this dinner have heard the tale; indeed, it is one we eagerly tell our children before bedtime: the heir of the Empire slaying a fiend who fancied himself a god. But none of us have heard the whole truth. I would be very grateful if you could regale us with a story of the deed.”

Conversations in the hall ceased, cutlery was laid down, and silence reigned as the other diners turned their attention to the head of the table. Reddak set his bowl down.

“The Captain would again be mindful of her place. She is here as a guest.”

Emperor Orrest coughed into his bowl, and Reddak met his eyes.

With a sigh, he cleared his throat. “I take no pride in my...actions. My place as heir, as the son of my father, is one I was born into. But the Gods set a path for me, one I was honored to walk. I make no secret of my priesthood. I studied among the battle-priests and clerics of Tor Makar. Some there considered me...a prodigy, blessed for greatness. I do not. It is not for me to decide or boast.”

Herissa pursed her lips and whispered. “Truly?”

Reddak clenched his teeth. “It was seventeen years ago, at the place we now call the Black Field. My men had fought hard for weeks against the armies of Xenaxis: warriors of his cult who had sworn themselves to their ‘god,’ mercenaries purchased from Dunweald and lands beyond; orcs and goblins from the wild frontier. A despicable, cowardly, dishonorable force. But one that had a *wyrm* leading it.”

“Surely such a creature would be no match for the Haegen war machine,” a nobleman declared.

“Only a fool dismisses the threat of such evil,” Reddak said. “And the red wyrms are more wicked than the rest. Xenaxis was a monster, a blasphemer; a blight on all Gryan. But he was old and powerful. Where his shadow fell, men

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died by the hundreds: his breath could melt entire lines of cannons; a flick of his tail would level a company of infantry. His army—forces that would not ally under any other circumstance—basked in his presence.” He paused to take in a long breath.

“The deceiver played mind games with us. He would appear in the night, roaring and spewing hellfire, then slip back into the darkness. Sometimes he would appear in the guise of a man—a red-haired, wild-eyed fop, from the reports—and butcher our officers like lambs. Many of my men refused to sleep, believing they would never awaken. When the dawn came we would count the dead, taken without a sound, their eyes boiled out of their skulls.”

The dinner crowd grew uncomfortable, squirming in silence. Even Herissa hung on Reddak’s every word.

“On the fifteenth day, I and my fellow clerics gathered to prepare a great ward; one that we hoped would keep his evil at bay. But we were unaccustomed to such rituals. We were young, and the Gods demanded payment for arrogantly grasping at power we had not earned. Two of us—Ishwar and Jahain—fell as the magic we summoned burned out of control. But our ritual worked...somewhat. Xenaxis was already hidden among us. He felt the sting of our ward and chose to end us all right then. He shed his human guise, and suddenly a beast the size of this castle stood in our midst. With a mere shuffle of his body he killed most of my camp. I...I could not...”

Emperor Orrest cleared his throat. “It’s alright, Son—”

Reddak put up his hand. “I could not bear the death of so many. At that moment, I no longer cared if I lived or died. I faced him alone, with nothing but my rage and the wrath of the Gods. He laughed at the sight of me. But justice would not be denied. For hours we battled—hours, I admit, that were mostly spent avoiding the fiend’s breath and claws. But at last, my hand found my mark and I struck the beast in the throat with my glyphblade, *Morenstal*. With a great crack the monster’s scales rent and his neck split. He fell, and his carcass has rotted on the Black Field ever since.”

Reddak leaned back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. The banquet guests said nothing. One or two touched their hearts with their fingertips and mouthed prayers to the Gods.

Herissa waited, her face twisting into a scowl. “That’s it?”

“The details are...unimportant. When I look back, I see the Gods working through my blade. I should have died that day. I was...a flea facing a mongrel.”

Herissa swirled her goblet. “And yet you killed him.” It was not a question.

“*Morenstal* is a blade like no other. The Gods have blessed it. If they willed, *Morenstal* could pierce even a dragon’s hide.”

“A miracle!” A noblewoman cried. “Truly you are our champion, wielding the sword of the Gods!”

“No,” Reddak said. “It was no act of glory. Tiny and unseen, dismissed by his victim until he pierces a soft, vulnerable spot like the eye or throat. No, madam, I was not a champion. I was...an assassin.”

Herissa smiled. “A quaint choice of words, my lord.”

Reddak felt the coldness of her voice. “Of what are you speaking, Captain?”

Count Versale cleared his throat.

“Assassination, of course,” Herissa said, ignoring the Count. “It was a word we heard most often on our trip here.” She cast her eyes amongst the nobles in the crowd, including Count Versale who shrank back in his seat. “There are some who feared that the Emperor would not make the journey. They spoke of the Xenaxar.”

“The Xenaxar—”

Herissa clenched her fists and leaned over on the table. “I have a tale of my own that you all might want to hear. Xenaxis, as some here know, was renowned for his greed and depravity, but what many don’t know is that he had a lust for more than gold: the flesh of human women. They excited him like nothing else.”

“I’ve heard enough of you,” Reddak reached for Herissa but she stepped off her chair and climbed the table, marching down its center. Reddak nodded to his men and they moved to cover the exits. The Imperial Escort unsheathed their blades. The nobles began to push away from the table, Evane with them. The Escort Knights herded them behind their protective steel.

“Captain...” Reddak warned.

Herissa ignored him. “They say he bedded thousands of women during his reign. Hundreds a year. Those he sired were human...at least in form. But they carried a shadow of his blood, the fiery will of a dragon. Many served in his cult; sons and daughters to a living god.”

Count Versale rose to his feet. “What are you doing, Herissa? Majesty please, I apologize—”

Herissa kicked a goblet into the Count’s face, showering him with wine. “Calend does not belong to the Haegen! There are thousands of Xenaxar lurking all around you! You know this, Reddak! You marched your army to the gates of Wyrmhound—to the doors of Xenaxis’ lair—and what did you find? Empty vaults, burned records! You have slain one dragon, and now you face thousands!”

Reddak reached to the scabbard at his hip and drew his ornamental weapon, then tossed it unceremoniously aside. He focused his will into the empty sheath. His skin shivered as an ivory hilt adorned with gold formed within his grip, and he withdrew a second blade; a longsword marked with shimmering blue glyphs across its flat edge. It hummed with power as it settled into its owner’s hand.

Herissa leaned forward, grinning at the sight of the blade. “Such toys.”

Emperor Orrest stood, his face dark with rage. He waved the guards forward, and their spears trained on Herissa. “You have one chance to surrender,” he said, his voice cold with the authority of a true ruler.

Herissa laughed as her form began to shift and the illusions of her muscular Haegen façade evaporated into the air. The woman that emerged was taller, with a slimmer build, blazing scarlet hair and eyes the color of molten brass. Red silk robes clung to her body like fire. With a flick of her wrists her hands warped into red-scaled claws with thick black talons, and she let out a savage, joyful cry and pounced at the Emperor.

Reddak hurled himself at her, smashing his shoulder into her thighs just above her knees. Her swipe missed the Emperor’s throat by a hairsbreadth. Reddak tried to hold her down and strike with *Morenstal* but she turned on him and released a swirling cone of flame from her lips that set fire to the table and forced him away.

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She rolled to the floor, her claws scraping the stone.

The nobles exploded into panic as the guards attempted to close in on the draconic assassin. She leapt upward with a snarl, landing further down the table, and Reddak realized who her next target was.

Evane faced the danger without fear. The boy held Reddak's discarded sword in a soldier's grip, though it was not balanced for combat. He swung the blade as Herissa leapt at him, but he misjudged her power and she sailed over his head. One of her claws flashed out and a guard fell, gargling from the gash in his opened throat.

Evane spun, tracking Herissa's movement and trying to correct his stance as Reddak pushed forward in an attempt to reach his son. Herissa grabbed the dying guard and hurled him into his companions. Evane lunged forward and struck, but she slapped the thin blade aside with a laugh and wrapped her claws around his neck.

"Stop!" she shouted, her eyes on Reddak. She pried the blade from Evane's hand and tossed it under the table. "One more step, *prince*, and your son meets your gods!"

Reddak cursed. "You dare, and I will see you burn for all eternity!"

She sneered. "Empty threats to one of my blood." She ran a talon down Evane's cheek, and he groaned as blood rose to the surface.

"You cannot escape," Reddak said.

The guards began to regroup, discarding their spears for short swords. They circled around Herissa, but none dared approach.

"Where is the real Herissa Tarek?"

The imposter's grin was sadistic. "Ash in the wind, poor girl. You may call me Zeltrice."

Reddak let the name burn into his mind. "What do you want, dragonspawn?"

Zeltrice smiled. "Me? Oh, many things: a mountain of gold, a nation to rule, an army of strong Arlikan men to oil my...*back*. But today I'll settle for your blade, prince."

Reddak frowned. "My blade?"

"The sword that killed my father!" she snarled. "A fair trade for your son's life, isn't it?"

"You cannot harness its power; a glyphblade answers only to its wielder!" Reddak said.

"Owners change," Zeltrice said, "But if it can't be turned, then at least it will never draw wylm blood again! Hand it over or I will rip his head from his shoulders, I swear it! Look into your son's cute brown eyes and tell me you'd choose faith over blood."

Reddak cursed again. His fingers squeezed the hilt of *Morenstal*, but the silent blade offered no more advice than the Gods themselves. Finally he set the sword on the table and backed away, growling.

"Father!" Evane said. "Don't let her do this!"

"Shh, boy," Zeltrice said. "One day when you are a father, you will understand how something as simple as blood controls us. Think then of how, when your father had a choice between the Gods and his heir... he chose you."

She shoved Evane forward and Reddak caught him. Quick as lightning, Zeltrice grabbed hold of *Morenstal*.

"Stop her!" the Emperor shouted.

Laughing, Zeltrice leapt onto the smoldering table once more and rushed for the entrance. The guards pressed in to block her but she vaulted over them and blew a kiss that erupted into a howling column of flame, searing their flesh and sending them recoiling in pain.

Samel emerged from the doorway, eyes wide, a kitchen knife in his trembling hands. "M'lord, is the danger—"

Zeltrice barreled past and backhanded him, the force sending Samel spinning into the wall and onto the floor. Then she was gone down the corridor.

"Alarm!" several men shouted.

The Imperial Escort surrounded the Emperor, and Reddak brought Evane to him. The three generations of Orrest men embraced.

"We're unharmed, Reddak" the Emperor said. "Do not let her escape!"

"Father!" Evane retrieved the ornamental sword and handed it to Reddak.

"I'm proud of you, Son," Reddak told him. Then he went to Samel and helped him off the floor. "Samel, take my family to my quarters!"

The small man sniffed through a heavy nosebleed but nodded. "I will guard them with my life!"

Reddak turned to the guards. "Escorts! See to the Emperor and my son! The rest of you, with me!"

He dashed with a handful of the castle's guards out to the courtyard, where the Xenaxar assassin was leaping onto a horse.

"Gods strike you down!" Reddak snarled. He charged his fury into his free hand, and the magic warped the air into a lance of crackling light, a bolt of solid lightning. He hurled it like a javelin. Zeltrice leapt from her mount and rolled away as the horse was struck and exploded in a burst of golden fire.

She rose into a fencer's crouch, *Morenstal* aimed at Reddak's throat. "Tsk, ts, stupid boy."

Reddak clenched the ornamental sword, his knuckles creaking over its hilt. His men began to circle the courtyard, blocking any escape. "Damned witch, you dare strike at the Emperor? *At my family?!?*"

Without waiting for an answer he charged in, swinging for her stomach. Zeltrice gave ground, nimbly avoiding his blows as she danced across the courtyard with him. She gripped the glyphblade like a practiced duelist, but did not strike back.

"This was almost too easy," she said. "Count Versale and your father ate up my lies about improving conditions in Zelkkos. A handful of bribes and I got to ride in that lovely carriage with his entourage, watching that oafish pig of an emperor stuff fried bread and wine into his gullet!"

"Did you believe you could sneak into this place and murder my father?"

"Is that rhetorical?"

"I ask because you have failed."

Zeltrice's ruby lips curled into a savage, dragon-like snarl. "Have I?"

Reddak rushed her. He struck *Morenstal* with a resounding clang, batting the

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weapon aside. She lashed out with her free hand, her talons tearing three gashes that stained his white uniform crimson. Reddak roared through the pain, grabbed a handful of her blazing red hair and yanked her backward. Zeltrice was taken off her feet with a hiss. He brought his sword down and impaled her through the stomach, pinning her to the cobblestones. She let out a shocked gasp, coughing up blood as her eyes went wide.

Reddak took in a slow breath. “It *is* over, assassin.”

Zeltrice’s expression paled then turned to amusement. She threw her head back and sputtered a laugh. “I am not... an assassin.”

She clutched *Morenstal* tight. “I am the *distraction*, stupid boy,” she whispered, and vanished with the sword before his eyes.

Reddak gaped at the empty space in front of him, his ornamental blade left naked and skewered into the stone. He turned back to the keep and looked up at the balcony of his private quarters. Black smoke was billowing out of the windows.

“Damn the Silence! To my quarters, all of you! The Emperor—and my *son*—are still in danger!”



Unencumbered by armor, Reddak raced ahead of his men. He reached the door to his chamber and noted the absence of the Escort. He grasped the door handle and cursed as it seared his palm. With a snarl he slammed his shoulder into the wood and it splintered under his weight. He entered cautiously, gathering his will into a potent spell as a thick, acrid smell filled his nostrils.

The Escort lay dead in heaps before him, their bodies burned to ash within their own armor. Blackened skulls smoldered behind their helms.

“Come in, Reddak.”

Samel stood near the bed. The Emperor was on his knees before him, clutching at a wound on his arm. The quiet, unassuming guise the servant had worn in all the years Reddak had known him had vanished, replaced by cold eyes that showed nothing but hate. He held a stiletto to the Emperor’s throat.

“That look on your face... yes. That is what I have been dreaming of,” Samel sneered.

Reddak could only stare. “H-how? When?”

“Always. You murdered Father. If my brothers and sisters had asked, I would have carved out your throat the day we met. But she wanted...more.”

“She?”

A woman rose from the bed behind Samel, barefoot and dressed in a plain red robe. She swept her curly black hair off one shoulder so Reddak could see her better in the waning light.

“Hello, my love,” she smiled.

Reddak stumbled as the strength threatened to leave his legs. “L-Livia?” he stammered.

“It has been too long, husband.” Livia patted Samel’s arm. “Did Samel treat you well?”

“You died,” Reddak gasped. The words sounded distant in his ears.

"Not quite," Livia said. "A fever is a simple deception for someone with fire in her blood. As for the delirium and hurling myself into the sea, well... Acting runs in the family, doesn't it, brother?"

Samel smirked. "Finish this, Livia. I am tired of waiting."

Livia sighed. "A minute more, Samel. I've planned too long for this to end prematurely."

Reddak felt tears on his cheeks. "Why?"

"You *know* why," Livia said. "You know all the answers, Reddak. You were always wise."

He struggled to swallow. "You want to kill my father?"

She shook her head. "A murder of opportunity."

"You wanted *Morenstal*."

"A bonus."

"You want to kill me, for killing... your father?"

Livia's smile faded. "No."

Reddak frowned. "Then why?"

Livia looked down at the Emperor. "He knows why."

Samel jabbed the Emperor with the tip of his blade. "Speak up, fat man."

The Emperor groaned. "They wanted Evane, Reddak. They couldn't get to him in the monastery.."

"Evane?" Reddak asked. He looked about, panic rising in his chest. "Where-?"

"Gone," Livia said, "But safe. With his kind now."

"His...kind," Reddak said. The words tasted like venom. "You are Xenaxar... and so is he."

"Reddak—" The Emperor spoke, but Samel jabbed him again.

"*Why?*"

Livia smiled, her eyes flashing like molten brass in the dark. "Father wished it. His own blood on the throne of Haeg. It would have... *it will be glorious.*"

Reddak clenched his fists. "You were my wife. Did you ever love me?"

"Always," she said, "And never. I chose to be your wife. But you *hate* what I am. Your... *faith* hates what I am." She clenched her fists in front of her chest, her eyes shimmering. "I realized I could never turn you to our cause, but for the sake of Evane I thought..." She glared at him. "But then you murdered my father!"

Samel plunged the dagger into the Emperor's throat. The elder Orrest's eyes went wide as he collapsed onto his back. Reddak let out a howl of anguish.

"A death for a death, an eye for an eye!" Livia said. "The fall of the Haegen begins tonight!"

Reddak's rage exploded. He hurled himself at his wife and former servant, screaming hate. Livia darted to the side with a dancer's grace, but Reddak caught Samel by surprise. The spry assassin lashed out, sinking the stiletto into Reddak's forearm, but it didn't slow the Haegen man. He squeezed Samel's head in his grasp, yanking the butler into the air. With a snarl he channeled his divine might into his hands, feeling the arc of power ripple in his flesh as it shaped him into a weapon of purgation. He could smell Samel's blood, sensed the taint of the wyrm within him, and released his magic to burn away the filth. Samel screamed as golden light erupted from his mouth, nose, and finally his eyes, scouring his flesh

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like water sweeping away sand.

Reddak whirled, yanking the dagger from his arm. Livia stood out on the balcony, teeth bared. Her eyes darted from Samel's corpse to Reddak.

"A blade for a blade," she conceded. She turned and leapt off the balcony, her robe slipping off her shoulders as leathery red wings sprouted from her back. She soared out over the courtyard and glided over Fort Carous, vanishing into the dark of night.

Reddak clenched his fist over the stiletto and screamed to the Silent Gods. Breathless and hoarse, he stumbled back to kneel beside his father, forgotten tears running down his face.

"M'lord?"

The guards hovered near the doorway, dumbfounded by all they had witnessed. One of them had composed himself enough to approach.

"Lord Reddak," he said, "We... What do we do?"

Reddak stood. "Send word to every corner of the Empire. We have suffered this corruption for too long. We are going to cleanse this land of Xenaxis' blood if I have to butcher every heretic myself! Summon the Inquisition! Tomorrow, we go to war!"

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