

Din of Whispers

A Novel by S. Michael White

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2nd Edition



Foreword:

This book is entirely a work of fiction and no real-world persons are represented here. The main character, of course, shares many idiosyncrasies with the author. Despite this, his thoughts, feelings, and actions do not necessarily represent my own.

This book is juvenile, yet is not intended for juveniles. It contains immature attempts at dark humor, amateur story-telling, lewd situations, and excessive armchair philosophy.

Read only if you are okay with this! No complaints.

I wrote Din of Whispers for entertainment purposes.
I sincerely hope it accomplishes this. Please enjoy.

-Mike

*I dedicate my first book to my new wife, Suelynn.
Her infinite support encourages me beyond belief.*

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Chapter 1: Urges

I'm a rat-eating, back-stabbing, lying, murdering thief of a whore's-son.

That degree of candor is typically reserved for confessionals or deathbeds, but I suppose that being stretched across a rack, four cords of knotted rope tied to each of your bleeding limbs, may fall somewhere between. Sorry if I offended any of you scurrying little vermin, I just needed to clear the air between us. Don't you squeak at me! I assure you it wasn't personal. Nothing personal at all. Those tiny black eyes glinting in the torchlight are hard to read, but I'll just assume that you forgive me, just as I will forgive you. When it's my corpse to be eaten. Not unless any of you wanted to scramble up my bindings and gnaw me loose? Ahh. Didn't think so. Bet I'll taste better than your relatives ever did. Oh. Don't be that way. Humor and insult are distinguishable only by perspective. And from your perspective, this is probably all rather funny. How I got here. What I've been through."

Okay, okay, let me start over....

There I was, an unwavering rock amid a river of drab, huddled forms. The waning daylight peaking across the congested network of stone rooftops seemed to reveal a driving throng of honest, hard-working people, but I knew better. That light also cast deepening shadows. Dark, cold shadows. Every person was clutching something: a bag, a bundle, a baby. You clutch to keep. You clutch to protect. You clutch if you have something worth having, and in this city, the honest and hard-working have nothing. It inevitably winds up in the hands of others. On the subject, do you know how much a baby is worth? It's just something to think about. I doubted if all the children I saw that evening would grow up with their parents (if they were lucky enough to have any), nor would they survive if they neglected to learn the hard truths of our fair city.

This was a crowd of survivors. They knew the rules, or rather, knew the selfish guidelines imposed on a society stretched to its limits. This logic would infer that I was visually perusing a sea of sin, but that is probably a little too dramatic. I don't condemn anyone, make no mistake, but justifying one's actions is the second hardest thing next to staying alive. Seeing the path is one thing. Walking that path and living with the person you'll become is another challenge entirely. Ultimately, we're all the same, them and me. And you rats too, I suppose. The natural laws of survival aren't a human invention.

I remember sniffing the air. A perversely curious action given the hot, fetid breeze I already knew to accompany the swelling numbers of merchants and "business-men" swindled and swindlers, the impoverished populace of a burdened metropolis. The stench wasn't strong as to make one retch, but just adequate enough to taste on your tongue and to comically change your expression. My mouth was instantly full of thousands of unwashed armpits. I now remember regretting doing that, and shrinking back a bit into

my cramped alleyway as quickly as if the odor was a physical manifestation tossing me aside.

Looking around the bobbing sea of faces, recessed into their cowls and bathed in fiery-crimson, the features became redundant and indistinguishable. A hellish army of insatiate need and desperate malice driven forward in a like-minded goal. But, unlike an actual army, this collective would fall upon each other for mere promises of individual gain much faster than uniting for a common cause. No word of communication could be heard as they marched the filthy streets, just the disharmonious shuffle of sandals, the wheeze of the infirm, and the self-mutterings of the insane to whatever entities they imagined.

Spotting a target, I rose from my position stooped between the claustrophobic monoliths of economic housing. The district that had once flourished and evidently grown beyond its means had produced these shells of civilization: a decaying infrastructure that, due to improper planning, became an undeniable labyrinth of sun-bleached walls and vacant windows. The very same that hosted this human spectacle on a daily basis, morning and evening. Rats in a maze. And there's no damn cheese. I threw myself into their midst.

The gawking nobleblood I tailed looked about as cunning as his feathered turban is fashionable, a self-indulgent garishness that draws attention in all the wrong ways. One should know better. Straight-backed and impossibly rigid, he led us along, though it would be difficult to steer this mob any direction but towards the setting sun as it chased the remaining shreds of light. He plodded along without fear, in stark contrast to what we're used to around here, signs of either a fool or a madman but that hat, as hideously gaudy as it may have been, was a status symbol. The poor have better taste.

With the intent of closing the distance, I forced my way in front of, between, around, and past my fellow herd, none too happy to be man-handled by a scrawny guy like myself. But neither were they familiar with anything different in their trek back to the safety of their...wherever. I wasn't their focus in this pulsating swarm of sweating bodies. I elbowed a woman reeking of rotten produce, shoved aside a man dragging a young girl by the wrist. Twisting my torso, I managed to slide through the small opening allowed between a pair of hulking forms, all manner of weapons sheathed up and down their bandoliers. Every story, though unspoken, seemed apparent to me. This one's a farmer, pads her bushels of rancid produce with fresh ones, those not eaten by her dwindling family. Probably sold the worm-ridden cart used to bring them into town. That one had just acquired a young girl for slavery, prostitution, or both through abduction or purchase. Judging from the resigned look on her face, I'd say purchased. These burly mountains of muscle. They probably have more blood on their hands than I have coursing through my entire body, offering their services as bouncers, hit men, lackeys, grunts, and general dismemberment-experts. Best not to stare. Picking up speed, I circumvented a man with a pedophile's grin, cleared my way past a sullen woman with sanguine sleeves, and nearly hurdled over a hunched elderly of indeterminate gender. There, a gluttonous slob with disproportionate jowls. There, an ashen visage coughing up a lung. There, a man leering from behind a bushy beard and a grid of scars. The faces of the damned. My neighbors.

Like eddies in a stream, the flow of our procession quickened and slowed in unpredictable currents, sweeping us along at the whims of a collective un-consciousness. For just a moment, I lost sight of the pomp's feather as I was helplessly engulfed in a mass of greased flesh and crusty garments that would likely be worn until they disintegrated. *Or pried off a corpse in the growing pile at the city's edge.* Scanning the crowd a little too intensely, I neglected the sun which set my single eye aflame as a slight bend in the road removed the occluding outline of a building. Those split seconds of abuse were apparently enough to burn the image of a colored disc into my vision, even after we re-entered the protective shade. I deftly swiveled my bandana to cover the other side, my other eye, to enjoy the unfettered vision of an orb attuned to darkness. It comes in handy, especially then when I barely caught glimpse of the ostentatious accessory steering its owner down a corner away from the main traffic. It was a corner that I came a heart's beat from missing as I literally fought my way perpendicular to the cattle flow, sustaining a couple of ill-intended knocks in the process.

The flood of people vomited me out into a cross street, much smaller than the previous but, thankfully, less populated. Although there was barely enough room for three men to walk abreast, the passage was still littered with beggars and prone forms all successfully on their way to dying. Just one of the many reasons not to use these sorts of alley ways. I skipped across several pairs of sprawling legs to fall in step a few strides behind the mark, unblinkingly affixed on the back of his head as if attempting to read his thoughts. It was relatively dark there, both walls reaching high into the dusk but only one becoming cusped with the sun's stinging radiation, the thin bar of light extending the length of the wall and illuminating the stinking wretches encapsulated in dust. It was here that I would make my move. A small sack swung teasingly from beneath the edge of his elegant vest.

Although our synchronous steps remained even, my pulse escalated enough that each footfall pummeled my temples, tricking my senses into hearing muffled echoes where there were none. I had to consciously force myself to continue breathing while I restored an even greater bit of self-control in fingering my concealed weapon: a six-inch serrated meat hook which I had lifted off the local butcher. One who may or may not have used it on people. Regardless, the thing had cleaned up nicely and had an almost therapeutic quality on me in times of danger, in addition to its surprising number of...other applications.

The longer I followed this character the more he felt out of place. What sort of extraordinary doofus, having the least bit of respect for his own life, would venture this calmly through the chaotic dusk-rush with a dangling purse at his hips? And to just take a nonchalant stroll through an alley? I'd be damned if something wasn't amiss, but I would be damned even harder if I missed this opportunity. Slipping the hook from its pouch, I shot a glance over a shoulder before silently bounding the remaining distance to the target. Still unwary and still unsuspecting, an affront to the rules of this city. Natural selection in this place should have taken him out a long time ago.

Facing the prize but glaring through eyebrows at the man's cleanly shorn neck, I extended a steady arm. His feather, airily dancing in the breeze, beckoned a come-hither

motion and egged me on. As did the purse as it bounced and bobbed, twisted and swung, the mark's awkward gait jostling the contents even more than normal. Holding my breath, I corralled the string with my hooked blade.

A sudden flurry of motion and shrieks. Bodies collided. Limbs flew in wide arcs as the sound of ripping cloth and a cacophony of laughter assaulted my ears. It was over in about the time it took my reeling mind to recollect its functions. The echoing hall died in pulsating waves to an eerie serenity, an action enforcing the abrupt stillness of the air. I stood dumbstruck, frozen as I attempted to wrap my brain around the situation. One of the beggars, menacing and toothless, stood beaming directly across from me, cooing softly as he stroked the inner lining of his rather elegant vest. Too elegant for a beggar. He gave himself a mirthful hug before cocking his head to the side and furrowed his unruly brows at me. We made eye contact. Without warning, he lurched and tore down the alley with his stolen article of clothing, gibbering a hyena cackle and tripping over bodies in the direction that we had come. We. The noble-born lay sprawled on the floor, wide-eyed and visibly trembling. He jolted when my head swiveled his direction.

"Take it! Take all of it! It's yours." he mewled at me. His fumbling fingers working furiously at his belt.

I blinked once. Twice. It still wasn't registering. The beggar had assaulted him, not I. No shred of violence had crossed my mind in this undertaking. And I hadn't even had the presence of mind to take any action, much less his precious pouch.

The noble-blood peeked at my relaxed arm, sharply inhaled, and refocused on extricating the drawstring bag from his possession, his increased haste actually becoming a detriment to the process. I gazed lazily down the length of my own arm, curious as to what instilled such fright in my company. *Just the hook*. I was still brandishing the hook. The accessory was little more than an aid, a trinket of necessity, a tool for getting what I needed. And I had never had the need to rend human flesh, nor to use it as a supplemental threat for that matter. I simply didn't have the physique to be in the least bit intimidating. Bottom line: I cut purse-strings, not throats! But given the item's origins, and being wielded by a man "towering" over a freshly abused victim...

A knot of anger lodged itself in my windpipe. This man thought he knew me, that I was a fucking murderer! Ha! His recent assault had obviously addled what little wits he had, you know! Unless his gross inbreeding had diluted that beyond salvage! Him, surrounded in his sheltered life of luxurious opulence, had the sheer gall to accuse ME of such... atrocity! In my own home, no less. This wasn't HIS home, you know. He had no clue how to survive here! Not that survival was any concern of his! Every, single, thing, at his beck and call. His social caste certainly didn't feel the sting of famine, disease, and...

The tinny clink of metal on stone derailed my thought.

Between he and I lay the bag, a brown, fist-sized pouch whose paltry contents barely influenced the shape of their container. There it was for the taking. It seemed so trifling,

so small a thing to dispute over. But he and I both knew that, in fact, it was the very thing on which our society hinged. Tangible items that represented intangible thought. Something that man created and subsequently became a slave to. Artificial necessity worth dying for. With a shame I couldn't suppress, I reflexively snatched the purse and shared a silent moment with the hapless gawker before flitting down the alley, clutching the bag of three coins to my chest.

For some reason, the corner of his mouth raised slightly.



Chapter 2: Investments

It's a strangely euphoric feeling: knowing that you possess the ability to satisfy any desire you choose. The mind buckles. Every base instinct or finely-honed taste imaginable can be bought for the right price from the right people. There is an undeniable thrill in this acquisition, the possibilities, as ownership is both empowering and alluring as well as addicting, regardless of the product. The goods, themselves, may be fleeting but we are creatures of habit and inherent greed. We want, we consume, and we want more. In that order. We develop expectations and standards, both of which can be dangerous, even fatal, to someone who can not afford them.

Ah, but to those who can and do, acquiring can be very, very exhilarating! The act of buying can even be more seductive than the physical possession, as demonstrated by those who are caught in the vicious cycle of needless purchases and wasteful expenditure. Mercantile slaves. There are those who stock and horde, those who pilfer and collect, those who gather, gorge, and acquire goods and services to their very limitations. Many seem driven to acquire for its own sake. Out of excess. Out of jealousy. Out of boredom. They spend their lives spending their money, acquiring a chunk of the world to call their own. A chunk that inevitably outlives them. Purchasing a legacy. Bargaining immortality. Bragging rights for the afterlife.

Wealth is the facilitator of acquisition, and an addiction in its own right. Wealth, too, can be collected. It's also the equivalent of opportunity, for wealth opens doors. The greater the wealth, the greater the options: possibilities limited only by society's faith in the perceived value of metal and promises. Unfortunately, the greater the wealth the greater the time spent managing it, a privileged burden every czar or prince must bear. This management may even breed paranoia given the right conditions, especially if the distribution of wealth is drastically askew. Especially if a ruler's society crumbles around him. Especially if his son inherits the whole maddening mess. It's a reasonable theory between the connection of riches and eccentricity, at least.

It's true that, in a sense, poverty frees a person. There is a definite ease in living when options are limited, choices are obvious, the management of wealth, of life, is reduced to a handful of possibilities. But the quaint simplicity is hard to appreciate on an empty stomach. And while a sultan faces the agoraphobic despair of a hallway of infinite doors, of infinite choices, the utterly destitute are more than likely ushered down a cold stretch of hallway toward a single door: a lonely death in some back alley. The presiding king may face the resounding cries of a multitude of the starving, the homeless, the diseased, but being one of them, a number, a statistic...

At some point the numbers become so great that the mind can no longer fathom. At some point, when someone recounts a statistic, one can only reel and say, "Wow, that's a lot." without full comprehension, much less a plan to fix it. It's not their fault. Humans are human too. So when the masses start demanding action, start demanding solutions, start

screaming for salvation, when a whole populace turns feral, when society's domesticated conditioning unravels and begins shouting for blood, your blood, it's only natural that a ruler turns inward. Fortifies his walls. Guards his treasuries and artificial boundaries. Guards his possibilities and future. Guards his home. Guards his life. Isn't that we are all trying to do?

I trotted down the cobblestone street. Although my burden was literally heavier, my spirit soared. Try as I might, I couldn't keep my hand from invading the pocket and rubbing two coins together. What a delightful sound! It was that very sound that sparked the paranoia, that the faint grinding was audible. Indeed others had taken notice, but probably more from my demeanor than a profoundly supernatural hearing. A grim wave washed over my face as my twitchy fingers were instantly stilled. The carefree trot degraded into a plodding stride as my hand became an airtight fist around my pocketed treasure, an impenetrable shield against whatever probing eyes were speculating its contents.

The dusk rush had dwindled with the tentative twilight, and the broad streets now seemed to be disproportionately wide and empty, its corridors having been swept of many worth stealing from. Stragglers still traversed the city, enough of them with limps and oversized bundles that I felt less of a target, all of them making their way between the imposing silhouettes of the featureless buildings. And featureless shadows. I had already adjusted my bandana, the ability to actually discern the lurking forms superseding any current need for depth perception. I may have forgotten the rules once and again, but I inevitably returned to the course. The rules of self-preservation. The course of survival.

It was this line of thinking that became a mantra of sorts, a flawless vindication for whatever I was forced to do, fortification of my most important asset: myself. If it benefited me, then it was worth doing. But how that reasoning had allowed for such blatant deviation in my behavior at times, I still have no idea. At the time, I sought such deviation.

Easily navigating the stages of urban decay, I wove a wide berth around the stragglers for both personal comfort and to avoid weakness by proximity. At one point, I believe I had even passed the wrinkled wretch I hurdled in pursuit of the feather. Still, it's hard to tell in a city such as this. You see one filthy denizen, you've pretty much seen them all, although I do applaud the subject's audacity to grow so old. Age is the ultimate battle that we eventually lose, but some are better fighters than others. Bravo. To some, aging is a victory, others an obsession. Me? I just hope I'm removed quick and clean before my body falls at the mercy of itself. Not that death from age is that likely here. Unless it's from being too young.

I spied the boy, Aran, from a block away. His pitiful size and posture were evident even at this distance, the runt of any litter, the result of inconceivable malnourishment. I'm not the religious type, but it was a damn miracle he had managed this long. An urchin of eleven or twelve summers and a cripple to boot, he was the second youngest of a family already in the double digits. And that was certain to have changed by now. Had themselves quite an operation, they did. The boy had told tales of the patriarch and his

multiple wives, growing up with no idea as to which was his honest birth-mother, on account of them all being in the throes of one stage of pregnancy or another. A room of toothless wenches, manufacturing their own labor force year-round. Indentured children. A home-grown army. Most of the strong were kept as helping hands but the weak were inevitably bartered away, scattered by the winds of commerce.

Isn't it sad? They had it down to an art, the timing of the pregnancies, the distribution of the duties, cultivating the young, and the subsequent breaking of their spirits. The lad told me all this. The older ones perpetuated the cycle as it was all they had ever known. Doubling as jailors, their responsibilities extended the gamut of the production cycle, everything from feeding and changing to educating and managing the laborers, even naming the newborns. Aran confessed a compassion for his wardens, second only to his love for the younger sister whom he clung to throughout the ordeal, a sharp girl who was apparently adept at navigating the field of rusted clap traps buried along the compound's perimeter. Whether the metal mouths were to keep people out or in was never explicitly stated.

The boss tyrant and his harem of sows, Aran turned away every time he remembered them, sniffing away the tears of a memory which obviously ate at his soul. Filthy clothing was shed and recycled according to size. Bedding was as simple as assigning three children to a hammock, and food was rationed according to necessity. He had stuck with it, though. The young urchin had even managed to get an emotional handle on his situation by the time it came time to be sold. A smart kid and an uncanny face-reader, Aran had once described to me how he pieced together the truth of city-life by sifting through his parents' propaganda. How bad it had become. How he understood he was better off where he was, being fed and sleeping in the midst of a "family" if only in name. He didn't like to recall how his younger sister was taken. How he had pleaded to go with her. How he took off after her one night and paid dearly. He admitted that he had never mastered her ability of spotting traps.

Ever the sensitive humanitarian, I greeted the youth with my gaze fixed keenly on his mangled leg.

"Hello Din!" he chirped, "There's a dust storm approaching. Bound to be here within the next day or so."

A concerned murmur rolled off my tongue. From the knee down, it was a gnarled tree root. All knotted and lumpy. Like he had multiple knees...

The boy continued, "The pressure has been dropping slowly, but surely. Coupled with the severe drought we've had, it would be a real surprise if the buildup brought any moisture with it!"

The limb was a rainbow of patchy bruises, each a vivid hue of red, yellow, purple, green. I wanted to look away...

“...And if you think back four seasons ago, a monster of a storm came ripping through. Blasted them walls and left a real mess on the east side near the dead pile. The rushes were diverted for days ‘till they bribed some beggars to clear it!”

A higher pitched murmur was my reply. Veins arched and branched visibly underneath sun-blistered skin, a street map of blood vessels. Hypnotized, I tried to pinpoint our location...

“If it wasn’t for this leg, I wouldn’t be able to sense the pressure shifts so good or give you a weather forecast!”

It convulsed when Aran mentioned the word “leg”. As if it understood. The thought of this ugly thing acting as a meteorological device forced a full-body shudder into awareness and averted my stare. I registered his face as if for the first time.

He was a handsome lad, otherwise. Bright eyes and an unflappable grin. He contrasted heavily with my own stark visage, from what I could tell of my reflection in the drainage canal at any rate. Of course that rivulet had dried several summers ago, leaving behind a stinking ditch lined with sewage mucous, not even enough to bathe in. A ludicrous degree of temporary vanity made me ponder what the heat had done to my face as well. (I’m of the easily distracted sort.) Cracked skin lined with a thin sheen of oil, a network of tanned scales, baked adobe bricks in the form of a man. Unlike this boy. His frame was certainly thin, but Aran retained a rebelliously healthy pallor and suppleness, despite his hours of begging the rushes at choke points throughout the city. Strangely, he didn’t strike me as being as sickly as I remember. His cheeks were flushed and defined, a child’s mischief radiating from quick, watery eyes that absorbed every detail. I thought of my own sunken orbs, and the rare occasions they were both allowed to operate simultaneously. My face lacked the charismatically penetrating quality that the urchin exhibited, a gleaming expression indicating an enraptured conversationalist. What a little trooper. His face did not yet betray the amounts of fatigue and stress of living hand-to-mouth. This is what I wanted to preserve. It was too late for myself. I had been assimilated into the masses, an every-man among every-men. Wiry, black-haired, and plain, I was nearly indistinguishable from any other in my demographic. It aided in anonymity but... this kid was something special.

“Have you seen my sister, Din?”

I paused thoughtfully out of politeness, knowing full-well that his search was far from likely. I still wanted to preserve as much hope as possible. But...

“I did see a young girl today!” I blurted with a little more excitement than expected.

A subtle gasp. “Did she have sandy hair and blue eyes like mine?”

His piercing gaze was likely to discern the answer before I had the chance to formulate the words: “I’m sorry.”

Crestfallen, a light went out and he lowered his head, depriving me the joy of eye contact. “Oh. Well, thanks for looking. I just pray to see the day that we find her.”

If anyone could make my heart ache, it was this kid. He knew all my strings. A slight cough, poorly concealed by Aran pretending to clear his throat, accentuated his dire condition.

“Hey, kid. I brought you something.”

I made the move real slow, to watch the transformation at a more appropriate speed. First, he peeked sidelong at my hand tucked into an inner pocket of my layered vest. As I extended my arm for a handshake, his eyes became large and mouth parted in a sense of awe, almost trembling. As I deftly slipped a coin into his palm, the action disguised from any nosy beggars, Aran’s shoulders slumped ever so slightly, as if the combined weight of that coin and his heart were more than he could bear. So satisfying. Struck with a rewarding look of spirit-felt gratitude the boy just sat there, cupping the currency tight with both hands, the glimmer of youthful exuberance restored. A beacon in the night.

Before I left, I needed to know. “When was the last time you ate, Aran?”

“I filled up real good after the last time you visited, Mr. Din!” he exclaimed in earnest.

“Well, hang in there and we’ll see what we can do about your sister.”

“Thank you, sir.”

And with mimicry of stone-faced resolution that I somehow pictured to be parent-esque, I nodded solemnly and walked off. Only when I was well out of view did I allow a broad smile to creep across my face and my fidgeting digits begin grinding my remaining wealth together.

 Chapter 3: Acquaintances

With the deepening night came deepening caution. But it was well-familiar routine. These streets were dangerous regardless of illumination and I had, quite honestly, grown fond of the bleak serenity and monochrome landscapes they had to offer. It's true that those who stayed beyond sun-fall tended to be exclusively scum, and that evil had a monopoly on the dark, traditionally speaking, but I relished this period of time for several reasons. Aside from the brilliant opportunities for self-inflection the quiet offers, the after-hours also provided the perfect chance to scope the layout of the city. It's how I got my start. And, obviously, there was a significantly reduced amount of pedestrians. Less sentients. Less unknowns. Not that a brisk stroll around the bell tower would fetch no fewer than a hundred pair of glaring eyes but, as I said, LESS sentients and LESS unknowns. It's easier to be on guard against hundreds as opposed to thousands I suppose. Being approached in the daytime is a common occurrence, but should one of the bipedal shadows lurking on the corner shamle up to you unprovoked... well, the flight or fight decision should have been prepped at the first echoing footstep ricocheting the city streets.

One of the advantages of being a night-walker, however, was an unspoken respect between peers. Or rather, a common wariness of confrontation. (It's pretty much the same thing.) You never know what overwhelming degree of malice may erupt from a confronted mark in the night; after all, these are people who willingly surround themselves with the dregs of our city. Or don't sleep. All good and fearful citizens are tucked-in 'till dawn, relatively safe and sound behind locked doors. Some clutching their weapons. *The daytime crooks hit the hay, as the night-time villains come out to play.* One of the few limericks which make a lick of sense in this city. Bottom line: survivors don't typically approach a target until they know a good deal about them. And in the dark, it's just too risky. An unidentified man walking confidently at night deserves a second scan, and thus, the best defenses one can have are anonymity and unpredictability.

Indistinguishable features, like mine, aid in keeping the cohesive community ill-informed. Hells forbid I might attract attention at the wrong place at the wrong time, but what will be whispered in my absence? That I'm under six-feet tall? That I've a ruddy complexion and stubble? Dark eyes, slight frame, patch-worked pants strapped to their legs, and a brown sash? Could be anybody. Even those making a positively notorious name for themselves, people truly worth stepping over your own mother to avoid, become a victim of their own infamy. Alliances form, traps are made. Suddenly, having a city of cut-throats know your name doesn't seem like such a great idea. And there are unlimited reasons for literally anyone to acquire a death-mark. This is why the boy-king Mathias sleeps in a vault. This is why you should never respond to your name being called from an alleyway. This is why I keep my head down and my mouth shut.

Unpredictability is just as easy to explain. If an enemy knows where you are: don't be there. If they know your next move: don't do it. In an environment where every day is

spent scraping and clawing for resources, where every action is scrutinized for its exploitability, where “minding your business” is a laughable concept, knowledge is a keystone to life and patterns in your behavior are an informal death sentence. Knowledge of yourself, knowledge of your stalkers, knowledge of your surroundings, and knowledge of the various factions and sub-cultures around you. All of which are subject to frequent change. If a person understands you, they own you. The world itself is unpredictable, so to stay ahead, you have to change faster than anyone else. Adapt, evolve, assimilate. See the game for what it is, learn the rules, and play several moves ahead. The struggle for information is strong and depriving enemies of knowledge is just as important as acquiring it. Growing up, I infrequently broke into a private library purely for the sake of fortifying my knowledge of the city. I dare say that doing so kept me alive (as well as teach me a few frivolous things, like vocabulary). Knowing is an intimate and personal relative to predictability, but you’ll ideally be placed on the non-pointy end. To be known is a surefire way to get knifed. Routine kills. Confuse the enemy. Keep them guessing. This is why Mathias makes no contact with the outside world. This is why psychopaths are exceptional card sharks. This is why I take a different route to my favorite bar every night.

Strange how I never remember seeing it in the daytime: a squat, window-less stretch of non-descript wall amid the tight colony of civilian hovels. No sign. No picture of a frothing mug. And yet, everyone on this side of the outskirts knew of its existence. Maybe it’s because of the thin strip of light escaping from under the door, brighter than any oil lamp on any corner. Maybe it’s from the occasional, rowdy brouhaha ending in blood on the bar’s doorstep. And maybe the recognition is due simply to the fact that alcohol helps a city forget its troubles, a potent poison ever-so-eager to bludgeon self-awareness into oblivion.

In the sunlight, the outside shell might accurately represent what it was: a pathetic enclosure where the most miserable go to commit passive suicide, where even the temporary benefits of false comfort, come at the expense of long-term stupification, blunted senses, and poorer health. An illogical place, where even a drink does nothing to quench thirst. Maybe the day reveals all of this but at night, at night it looks like a shining oasis. The moon hung low behind the heavy stone awnings, offering no glimpses of irreparable foundation damage and peeling paint, but limning the boxy shape in a silver glow that seemed to emanate from the bar of its own accord. The entryway’s beam of illumination wasn’t seen as a land-locked lighthouse, deterring passersby from the hazards within. Rather, it drew the self-loathing moths to the flame. I thought this as I climbed the worn and maroon-speckled steps.

A large, bear-like man was contained behind the counter, and standing beneath a glinting seven-foot halberd mounted for decoration. The only greeting anyone ever received in this dump, actually. Polishing a flagon engulfed by his furry arms, the barkeep eyed me through a prickly tangle of beard that burned red as if born of flame. Flames that could be mistaken as the source of light in this joint, a real shock coming in from the darkness. I stole a shifty glance around the single room, the bare walls unadorned with even the slightest distraction, crudely built tables set along the perimeter served as the only

furnishings. And only one of them was occupied. A decrepit figure sat bent over his cup, forehead resting on clasped hands in a gesture reminiscent of prayer. Whether it was for release or quick intoxication was anyone's guess. Approaching the bar, I turned up a hooked nose as the red bear spat in the cradled flagon and furiously began scrubbing what was apparently rebelliously persistent grime. He paused in his perseverance, returning my look of disgust with a flash of teeth beyond fiery bramble.

"Hello, Rant." he grunted, "Looks like the streets have yet to claim your flea-bitten hide."

I bobbed my head for a couple seconds, spitting back. "It's the fleas that make me so quick. Keeps me jumpy... erm, Cornelius." A shared grin.

I continued, "Neither the Gods nor King Mathias knows how you managed to keep this place open day-in, day-out."

"Prince Mathias knows nothing at all, for starters." The barkeep suddenly stiffened, a raw spot. I marked, not for the first time, how there were still those who openly denied the formal title-ship to the paranoid upstart.

He exhaled a tired sigh. "But if there is drink to be had, there is a man to drink it. Especially in times like these."

"But what if that man has no coin?"

"I've always been privy to barter." he gritted.

"Men have none but their lives to trade anymore."

"Or their souls." He was ribbing me, I knew. Trying to get me off the subject. I bit.

"You'd be hard-pressed to convince me I still possessed one if ever!" I spouted while leaning heavily on both the dramatics and the counter, half in threat of going off on a religious tirade and half trying to provoke the red bear out of his doldrums.

I reminded myself that we weren't alone. I caught the barkeep's eye and tilted my head concernedly in the direction of the mopey wretch sitting alone on the far wall.

"That's your last one, pal" the hairy giant bellowed "and this is a far-cry from an inn! You keep napping an' I'll have to charge ya!"

The poor gawker remained frozen momentarily, same position of prayer, before he finally made a decision and, without looking up, slowly dragged his feet out the door, leaving his cup bone-dry atop a rough-shod table. The door shut firmly in his wake.

"I didn't mean for you to scare off your customers, Gerd." I said in earnest.

“You didn’t. I make ‘em pay up-front now and when they don’t have coin, they’re not customers no more.” The barkeep shot a grimace that I wouldn’t dare question. “He was on his last one.”

The grizzled man went back to “cleaning” his cups while I pondered the information. In conjunction with the others, the latest policy was causing this place to stray a bit from the cozy. Sharpened weapons of promised doom, harsh oil lamps to prevent napping, shoddy furniture, no décor, and a gruff barkeep. It was a regular bed ‘n’ breakfast, this one. And the cleanliness. I peeked discreetly out the corner of my vision. The cup continued its thorough rub-down by the burly man. He looked up blankly as I quickly turned. Gerd had once told me that the bar was window-less for privacy reasons. But actual reason dictated otherwise. I knew that, to many drunkards, the blue light of a fresh dawn was a chastisement of their habit, the curtain call for reality. No one wanted to be caught shit-faced when the world’s lights go on, much less awake when actual “life” happened to them. They would hurry home the minute the rays of a new day permeated the fog of stupor. Rats scurrying into their holes. But patching up the windows, that would stave off the light of day or more accurately, distort the perceptions of the drunks (even further). It would extend time, squeeze ever more out of both the night and its patrons. It would create an alternate reality, separate from the outside world that caused the clients so much pain. Well, I guess that’s what they wanted really. And “cozy” was just something that didn’t exist anymore. Not in a place that served poison, at any rate.

“Cornelius, huh?” Gerd scoffed. “You know I’m not for adopting a public alias like you... eh, Rant?” the large man snickered. Or came as close to it as I had seen him.

Puffing out my chest, I retorted defensively, “I’m just trying to help!”

“Oh, I appreciate that, Din.” He suppressed a gut-rumbling chuckle, his beard quaking, “But I’m not thinking that I can hide as easily as you can.” His eyes arched warmly. “Nor can I keep my name a secret if I want to run an honest business.” He paused. “Cornelius, though?!”

I protruded my lower jaw as I pretended to be interested in something perched in the high rafters. Odd, how it was so dark up there. The wide, criss-crossing cabers forming a heavy wooden web that kept the roof off our heads...

Sensing that the red bear had finished his fit of laughter, I glanced back. He hadn’t. Gerd’s face now matched his beard and the intimidating man was reduced to a quivering mound, his shiny cheeks bulging comically. I must have made a face of my own, because it was enough to push him over the edge. He spewed forth in an uproariously deep, mule-guffaw that I could feel in my chest and bowels. I admit that I was quite alarmed. But to prove I wasn’t a wet blanket, I offered a few disingenuous smiles before the last of the echoes resounded off the barren walls.

Snatching the rag from the beaming fat man, I wiped a spot on the bar clear of spittle to rest my elbow. The redundancy of using that particular rag did occur to me, thank you.

Using the word “fat” to describe Gerd, however, is a little unfair as the man clearly had the strength to split that counter in two. With or without the mounted halberd. I could never quite extract details of his earlier life, before the bar, but the years of managing that establishment had done little to wear away at his muscle mass. I’d shudder if it had. No, not obese exactly. Instead, it would seem that he had simply hung satchels of fat off his already massive frame. Quite the mental image, I know, but a necessary one in speculating the man’s origins.

“Gerd, say I wanted to join up with a mercenary guild. What kind of training regimen do you think I’d have to adopt to bulk up to their standards?” I asked this with an eyebrow half-cocked. Awaiting a shred of detail explaining his girth.

He looked flabbergasted. A palm raised to support his blocky head, fingers spread, a confoundedly befuddled expression as if I had requested he count the grains in an hourglass. “Don’t think that’s possible, bud.” Gerd squinted. “I can’t see any kind of routine giving you that kind of size.” Thoughtful pause. “Yer just so puny.”

Not the conversational direction I was going for.

The barkeep, wide eyed, stared over my shoulder, “You’d have to eat a Hells of a lot more. Meat in specific. Not just the leavings you find in the street, or vermin. Eat your weight in meat daily and you might stand a chance. Yup.”

I sighed inwardly, determined to better my diet one way or another. My stomach growled its lament of a meal that didn’t squeak. Patience, my pet. Tonight’s haul would fetch sustenance for a good while, and hold me over until the next.

Unexpectedly, Gerd produced an unseen half-loaf from under the counter, setting the stale chunk of bread before me with an audible thump. I eyed the morsel, fantasizing its taste.

“What’s this?”

“Bread.” he remarked, without even a hint of the deserved cynicism.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Of course.” he replied. Once again, missing the opportunity for biting sarcasm.

Finding that gnawing at the hardened crust just wasn’t yielding progress, I began extricating the middle in chunks, tearing the relatively soft innards away to leave a shell that I would then crack and digest in bits.

Gerd monitored the spectacle and exhaled. “I worry about you sometimes.” He gave all manner of sidelong glances in resuming his work.

“The disappearances are increasing, you know.” He stated, not asked. “Mostly poor wretches that folks won’t give a damn about.”

I knew he wasn’t being exclusive with the word “poor”. Everyone but the noblebloods was poor. I smacked louder on the bread, possibly for the sake of drowning out the depressing news.

“My clientele’s been hit hard.” Gerd continued as he buried his chin in the scratchy beard. “All I gets now, are the lay-about who’re too broke to pay for nothing.”

I didn’t take offense, but I thought I read a hint.

“Oh, speaking of...” I rasped, reaching for my vest’s inner pocket while an arid shard lodged itself in my windpipe, tickling my esophagus. I wheezed uncontrollably, the malady not keeping me from mouthing words.

The red bear poured a frothing cup of swill, setting it down under my nose as I simultaneously placed a stamped coin adjacent to it. We looked at each other in tandem.

“Din, your money’s no good here.”

“Well, neither is your ale.” I replied humorlessly.

We sat there in the uncomfortable silence, neither flinching. An inane challenge of strength that neither was backing down from. In a way, I was grateful to return the coin to my pocket, just as I’m sure he was happy to down the tepid beverage. After all, it was no surprise that Gerd sampled his stock from time to time.

The barkeep had to press matters, though. “I don’t get it.” he injected into silence. “You’ll sample a wizard’s brew, but shy from a real man’s drink!”

For Hells’ sake. Gerd and his superstitions of magic. He was referring, of course, to that private library I had frequented long ago. The one I broke into when I was young. Apparently, I had made the mistake of telling him of my good fortune in finding unfinished plates of food and drink. Nothing fancy mind you. Just a saucer of mash and the occasional goblet with the remains of a fine wine, or better yet, sparkling water. The old codger who owned the book selection simply didn’t finish his liquids. And the mash was undoubtedly left for the cat, a curious creature who would stare at me long hours while I pored over pages upon pages of distant lands, history, and the sciences.

“It wasn’t wizard’s brew.” I exasperated. “Besides, wouldn’t it take more guts to sip a mysterious potion than to sample your...” At a loss, I motioned towards the dripping cup, smudged, grimy, and dribbling yet another brown ring to the surface. Surely, it was a mixture of drool and diluted spirits. “Maybe not.”

As much as I would have liked to stay and while the time, I had one more stop on my agenda tonight. My stomach full and yet another problem alleviated, I had another pressing issue....

With a nod of finality, I turned to leave. Walking sure-footedly for the door, I waved the remaining crust at the red bear before gorging it. "Thanks for the bread."

I reached for the door.

"Wait!" Gerd shouted frantically. "Din!"

"Yeah?" I replied rather flippantly, rolling my eyes at the prospect of discussing the finer pleasures of alcohol consumption.

Instead, Gerd commanded my full attention, regarding me in all seriousness with his mouth drawn tight and body tense. "Hold off on joining a mercenary guild." he said.

Chapter 4: Urges

One of the core rules of survival is to overcome shame. Because this much-overblown trait is virtually useless to the average citizen and even less to that of a person undergoing hard times, it's best to subvert, repress, extract, or otherwise get rid of this loathsome and bothersome reminder of what it is to be judged by society, peers, and especially one's own self. Practically speaking, shame denies opportunities and limits choices. But shame is also relative, disruptive, and unfounded. It scars and destroys. And the worst part: shame is completely self-inflicted. No one can force another to feel shame, it comes from within. A punishment exacted by a guilty psyche. At worst, shame can be strong enough to destroy someone from the inside out, imprisoning their mind in a perpetual state of fear, incapacitating them of social (or any) action, haunting them throughout life in vividly torturous flashbacks and debilitating anxiety. At best, shame is a nagging nanny. So, to one wishing freedom of action, of unfiltered choices, to one tired of needlessly crippled spirits and self-persecution, speaking to the person who desires to axe both the jury AND the executioner: lose your shame. Resourceful individuals even find a way to sell it.

The whores looked lovely that evening. Just as I had always imagined angels, but much sexier. Although each wore the uniform of the same lusciously painted lips and shadowed eyes, each was also sporting their own particular hue of bright and enticingly-colored garments with matching veils, hair done up or allowed to cascade bountifully over ample, nearly-exposed, bosoms. The aggregate stood in a rough line, a picketed barrier between the street and their place of business, milling about and enduring the heat for a small chance at reeling in some poor slob who had a coin or two to spare. Grin. I had found myself in a unique position that night, having both a raging libido and the means to release it.

Needing no introduction to the ladies, I straightened my trousers, cleared my throat, thought twice about testing my breath and assumed an air of quiet dignity. I think. The effort may have resembled confusion, or perhaps flatulence. One can never be sure. I popped a piece of sweetbark (essentially tree skin) into my mouth, grinding the sinewy material to release a pleasant-smelling juice. Whether or not the sap actually freshened breath was yet to be determined but I made the effort all the same. In the time it took for me to reach the front steps, the group formed a tight huddle and, having elected a representative to remain behind, headed indoors. I had never spoken with this one before, but because she had a pleasant face and a thin enough smock, I didn't mind in the slightest.

A modest pair of perky breasts, nipples dark and alert, stared back at me from behind a turquoise sarong with gold trim. Her eyes, which I would later tell her that I had noticed first, twinkled in the moonlight. This was a fact that all the tramps assuredly knew, seeing as a cloud of glitter-dust wafted from the building's interior at every breach of a door or second-story window. As if a den of mystical pixies frolicked and made rabid love within

the walls. Some said it was real, honest-to-gods magic or even that an exotic aphrodisiac powder was imported from faraway lands. I stand by my theory of pixie orgy.

“How does the night find you stranger?” she asked warmly, due in no small part to the heat wave.

“Sultry” I replied, flashing a charming smile, “just like I want my women.”

She must not have recognized the double entendre, as she began to glance around thoughtfully. I stole the opportunity to look her up and down once more. *Very nice.* I must have whispered this to myself because she suddenly straightened and affixed her eyes keenly on mine. They WERE lovely, now that I was actually noticing.

“I have coin, tonight!” I professed, suddenly on the defensive.

“Oh?” She seemed to relax slightly, but I felt that I was losing her.

“Yes.”

An awkward pause, her gentle features seemed to flush. She must have been new. Wishing to ease the tension a little, I asked if she had worked in the whorehouse long.

“Look, mister...”

“Cornelius.”

“Cor-neel-yus.” She upturned her nose. “We should go inside and discuss the particulars with my Madame.”

“Actually, I wanted to proposition you.” I spoke quickly while she was within earshot. “On my way over, I noticed a nice, clean, little spot over in that alley where I thought we could... erm, have some alone time.”

Her beautiful brown eyes widened, glittering as they did.

“I have coin, tonight!” I blurted out, remembering my previous success with the phrase. “And I thought that you could make a tidy profit. I mean if you, if WE, were to uh... You would retain the whole amount. No Madame involved.” I stammered, tripping over my own sentences.

Her pouty lips fused in a line as she shook her head in tight little movements.

“No,” I continued, “it’s not creepy.” I waved my arm toward the dark, just outside the torchlight illuminating the brothel. “It’s right over there. I even saw a horse cart we could lay in to avoid messing your pretty clothes.” *Give her a compliment,* I scolded myself. “They’re really pretty clothes, by the way.”

I blame the lack of an appropriate word for casual sex. “Fuck” lacked tact. “Make love” sounded way too complicated. Copulate. Ah, why didn’t I think of that one in time?

Her eyes glistened anew, but it wasn’t from pixie spunk. One wrong move and the girl would be awash in tears. Damn it! I hadn’t even gotten this one’s name yet. Had to rethink my strategy...

“Honestly,” I affirmed, “this won’t take very long...”

“Is this guy bothering you?” a voice boomed from the darkness.

I spun in place to see a slab of muscle striding powerfully towards us. I couldn’t tell if he purposefully flexed as he walked, but his grim consternation indicated he wasn’t one for mincing idle threats. What a bruiser. I looked to the prostitute pleadingly as if for protection, and indeed, her next few words would be crucial. Instead, fresh tears cut a swathe through glitter-dust and make-up alike, the rivulets conforming to the length of her soft cheeks before convening under a trembling chin. That wasn’t good.

My mistake was not darting off into the night at that moment. In lieu of an intelligent move, I once again turned towards the approaching denizen, only to get an eye full of sweating man-chest, the beast looking down the angular bridge of nose at me. My inclination was to faint, but I chose words.

“We weren’t...”

“Damn right, you’re not.” he snorted. “Now leave.”

“But I...”

“Did you know that you talk too much?” he demanded, though in practice I knew rhetorical when I heard it.

“Yeah, but...”

His fist connected with my gut, the impact sending a wave of shock throughout my body, the pain not registering until I hugged my organs and knees slapped the hard ground. A squeaking cough escaped my lips as I leaned over in a hunch of defeated silence, a palm extended to keep my face from kissing the floor.

“You don’t listen, either.” he sneered passively knowing he held all the cards. “Piss off.”

Without a further word of explanation or even a glance from the path of least resistance, I rose to half my height, arm holding my guts in place, and hobbled away. I half-expected a boot to aid my progress, but the man had apparently turned his attention on the young harlot. I believe he had asked her if she had been hurt. I didn’t look back.

When I was finally able to straighten, I recall hearing:
“Hey baby, how about a reward?” I didn’t look back.

And by the time I was a block away, the aching pain that gnawed my intestines finally starting to diffuse into a different, duller pain, I heard a scuffle and truncated scream. I didn’t look back.

Only when the ever-increasing curiosity outweighed good sense did I look back to see the two disappearing down the very alley that I had been proposing.

“Serves them right” I spat. She thought she had found a dashing hero? A Prince Charming? There are no heroes dashing to the rescue here. No Prince Charmings. In reality, there aren’t even damsels in distress. Just inexperienced hookers. With any luck, she would survive the encounter with at least one valuable life lesson, and he would develop a terminal case of crotch-rot.

I continued walking, attempting to shake off the clingy, nagging sensation of an unsatisfied conscience. That stuff about “shame” earlier? How it was self-inflicted, disruptive, and useless? How it closes doors and is vividly, hauntingly torturous? The same goes for morality. I tried to focus on salvaging a night gone awry, on cutting losses and forging ahead. I tried to think of the essentials I could purchase, and the pleasures that I would indulge now that I was spared a couple of coins. I had everything I needed, either in my belly or in my pocket! I had no inherent need for danger, no need for stupid risks. No need for thanks or gratitude, or brownie points with Gods I didn’t believe in. I didn’t need my mother’s approval. And I certainly didn’t need for an over-sexed meathead to shove my own head up my ass for the sake of some glittery trollop!

And yet I went. I went back to the brothel. I went to the alley. I went up to the couple, not “copulating” but full-on rape in progress, behind the cover of a decomposing horse cart. His back was to me, pants at his ankles, bare ass pumping, but through the cycle of emphasized thrusts I could see that his enormous hands were around her throat, the prostitute’s features a strained grimace of pain and desperation sprouting bug-eyed from the interwoven knuckles. One of the most disturbing images that I’ll never outlive. Veins threatened to break through her skin as eyes lolled to the back of her skull. The only sign of movement in her face was the rhythmic impact of the beast slamming into her, his barnyard grunting the only sound reverberating back from the depths of the desolate alley. It may have already been too late to save her.

But because my good sense had abandoned me a block back, I approached them empty-handed as it were. Had I really cared about my safety... well, I wouldn’t have been there, but I also would have palmed my six inch meat hook, as opposed to wielding a piece of curved wood that had once completed the cart’s wheel. It made a hollow kind of rasping noise against the flagstone, but nobody seemed to notice. Hands held high for the strike, I tiptoed behind the mass of exposed skin and slapping flesh, my breathing halted, my own heartbeat becoming deafening with every pulse. I moved slowly as if submerged in a sea

of doubt. My consciousness joined my good sense in exiting my physical body and chose to watch the spectacle from above. A split-moment before I brought my makeshift club down, too little time to stop myself but enough to mull it over, my “good sense” resurfaced long enough to scream out a warning to my consciousness.

My hands, white-knuckled and unyielding, brought the club down with as much force as I could possibly muster, the tenseness of every muscle convincing my eyes to shut upon the stick’s impact with the back of the beast’s skull. A sickening crack froze time around us. The planes of reality surrendering all motion and noise for the purpose of watching this single action unfold. The alley, in turn, replayed the crack over and again before switching it up with a resounding thump and a clatter. My eyes remained clenched, opening only when I heard the ecstatic gasp of the harlot as time returned to normal.

I opened my eyes with a grin of disbelief, a disbelief that continued even as a meaty fist gripped my windpipe and used it to slam me against the wall. Although the grin was assuredly gone, then. Stunned, I stared wide-eyed into the face of the beast, the length of muscular arms between us looking like a corridor of death, framing the visage of true rage. His distorted features screamed for my blood, a drop of his own trickling down the crenulated brow from where the termite-ridden club had snapped in half and uselessly clattered to the floor. I still had the other half, gripping the splintered wood with a ferocity that pleaded to tear the mitts off my throat, to extend my miserable life. Although my floating consciousness had returned, it now threatened to jettison once again, the shock of my failed attack presumably too much for an ego such as mine. I could feel it slipping, slipping away, a warm comfort taking its place, relaxing my body and calming me to the point of ambivalence. A muffled hum dominated my hearing and reduced the volume of the outside world. A world that I had a dwindling amount of time on. Death didn’t seem that scary anymore. It felt rather... pleasant. I no longer saw the hateful face of my attacker, but somehow saw past it, through it. The young whore-lette had apparently gotten to her feet, stroking her throat as she staggered away, exposed and unsupported breasts wobbling all the while. Well, at least there’s that. I had saved a life and gotten a free peak, pretty good deal. I closed my eyes and rode the ecstasy of asphyxiation, holding the image of her pendulous tits as the selected memory that I chose to die with. The amorous sensations were allowed to course easily through me. Though I was pinned, I imagined making unadulterated love to her. Yes, actual “making love”. Our languid bodies intertwined, my pants bunched around my ankles. I could almost feel it as I guided myself into her...

The wood. My consciousness plummeted back into coherence. I could feel the restricting hands squeezing with all their might; saw the rancor-wrinkled face of the thwarted rapist. I could now sense the oaf’s breath and briefly wondered why the *beyond* rank odor didn’t act as smelling salts. I still gripped half of the failed club.

With an unguided flurry of quick, decisive hits, I jabbed, again and again and again and again, into the man’s exposed genitals. With his pants still at his ankles, his over-zealous member still saluting the victim who got away, the beast received repetitive blows from the splintered half-piece of wagon wheel. I stabbed and I stabbed and I stabbed, shards of

barbed, dead wood undoubtedly piercing his prick or lodging themselves into his gonads. The reaction on his face was immediate, eventually followed by a loosening of his grip. I never stopped, the vicious assault gaining momentum as I was allowed more room to maneuver and actually view my target. Soon he buckled to the ground, trying for a fetal position but settling for spread eagle as he slipped into unconsciousness from the pain. A half-naked man covered in blood, leaking from concentrated patches of splinters. An ailment that only a good pair of tongs, wielded by an even better friend, can remedy. A pain that will last a lifetime.

With a wet victory-gurgle, I flopped beside the prone rapist to catch my breath.

Fucking women.

Chapter 5: Proposal

A litany of curses span the short distance between the brothel and whatever dank, cross street I ended up on. The whole thing was ridiculous. I didn't even want to reflect on how poor my luck was that such a promising night filled with food, friends, and coin could end that sour. *Let that be a lesson to you*, I taunted my conscience, *for the next time you feel the need to speak up*. Massaging my crushed windpipe and sulking ego, I wriggled my bones into a comfortable spot beside a pair of child-size burlap sacks set a ways into the alley, but still within range of the street. Since they appeared to be unclaimed, and didn't smell as if they actually contained children, the refuse would be my bedding through the next day, an entire city lying between me and my usual crash-site. Being in a relatively unfamiliar part of town, I simply didn't want to chance breaking into one of the surrounding buildings. They seemed abandoned but I knew otherwise, as I had stumbled across way too many street lords of varying degrees of self-importance, to waltz blindly onto someone else's turf. The districts were impossible to memorize, and were ever-changing. A single block or building may change hands up to three or four times in a fortnight depending on how valuable the real estate was. This was all invisible to the public eye of course, and meant nothing to anyone else. Despite my injuries, I closed my eyes and coughed up a laugh. People actually fought over the dried-up, tenant-less husk I laid my back on. What a joke. Well, not exactly fighting, but more like posturing threats. Inane babblings from one pompous idiot to another. It was harmless for the most part, and I almost had myself convinced that I should jump through a window and scope out the interior, maybe find myself a dingy home away from my dingy home. A summer crap-hole. But I decided to keep my life-threatening mistakes to a minimum this evening, roll over, and just go to sleep. Sleep. If I was knifed in peaceful slumber it might be an easier passing. You wouldn't have to see it coming, no fear...

I froze instinctively as I heard a rustling from deeper within the alley, the thick noise of even thicker cloth rubbing against itself. The footsteps were heavy, but the pacing was uneven, signs of either the feeble, the injured... or a pretender. Having enough youth to sidestep the first two, the third was really the only one that I worried about. In my distorted view of probability, two-to-one seemed like fair odds, so I decided to hold off on flight before I got a better view.

My 'darkness' eye assuredly saw him before he saw me, a limping huddle of crusty rags, shuffling along at a rate all his own. Undoubtedly just noticing my low outline amid the sacks, he paused, his arms bent at odd angles like an insect. We sat like that for a moment, but I gasped sharply when the curmudgeon suddenly shambled a few feet closer, the soiled garments strapped to his back and feet making a disturbing scraping sound throughout the alley. He was still well outside my comfort range but his last motion was an uncharacteristic burst of speed that persuaded me to keep an eye out.

"Hello-o?" he called. I wondered if he presumed me dead.

"Hi." I replied flatly.

He erupted in a fit of glee, pacing forward to my tense chagrin then back to the spot he stood originally.

“Do you wanna make some mo-ney?” he enunciated slow and carefully.

“Are you insane?” I asked with earnest, the question having absolutely no impact on the man’s wild expression. “How much?”

Once again he flew into action, limbs flailing as he spoke, literally bouncing off the walls when he wasn’t dancing in place, speaking as if he had but one breath left, “Now, one can’t be too demanding in this world anymore. Patience, patience is key! You seem like a nice kid, very nice. I had a nice kid once, very nice. You don’t-”

He froze mid-ramble, leaving a void in the barrage of information he had presented me with. I had just gotten up to speed when he faced me, trembled violently as if shaking the demons loose, and continued. “I have a job for you.” he stated. “I’ve not got much for pay, a pittance really, but it should deem worthy.” His eyes communicated a depth of sadness experienced by few, an infectious and sobering look of defeat amplified by loss.

The unpredictable manner of this man was almost too much to bear. “I’d kill for a steak.” I muttered.

“Splendid!” he giggled maniacally, clapping his padded palms together, hopping from his lame foot to the other. “You’re hired!”

“No!” I interjected, maybe a little too forcefully.

The crazed bum perched still on one leg.

“The answer is no... I’m no murderer.” I trailed off.

The loon held his position a bit longer before gently lowering his leg. “Very well.” he stated solemnly, reversing directions multiple times before finally heading off from whence he came, leaving our brief exchange echoing between my ears for some time.

The dawn was around the corner for sure, and though I was blessed with an ability to drift in and out of sleep at will, I always found it harder once the day-walkers were about. I attempted to fight off the inherent questions for some much needed rest, but I couldn’t help myself. Had I made the right choice? The bum was half out of his gourd, well on the way to losing the second half, but he could have been a legitimate employer. I had coin then, but that wouldn’t always be. It never was. I had never been comfortable with picking pockets for a living, but the so-called “easy cash” was just as dangerous as other work, other work that may prove lucrative and....

“Excuse me,” a woman’s voice broke my thoughts. “May I take a moment?”

I jumped out of my skin at the sheer proximity of the voice, directly across the alley! I clenched every muscle as I pressed against the wall, my mind racing for an explanation of what had happened. Must have drifted asleep. I looked around spastically. That's the only way I could have missed her approach. And there she was, leaning easily on the stone, eyes affixed and probing the gangly wretch sprawled in filth and hugging a burlap bag for dear life.

"I have a lucrative opportunity for you." she purred, the combination of timber and topic cutting through any and all defenses I might have erected. But the hair on my neck still stood on end, like during a thunderstorm. I briefly thought of Aran's forecast.

She cleared her throat, a sound similar to shifting sand, intending to focus my attention. I must have been staring. Staring at what is hard to say, as she was clad in a full-length robe, a formless and non-descript brown robe cinched at the waist, giving just a hint of femininity to her outline. A concealed temptress.

"Oh?" I remarked, fulfilling my part in the conversation.

Without missing a beat, obviously waiting for my contribution she stated something in all confidence. "You wish for riches."

Hardly an oracle-worthy comment, but I played along. "Yeah." I peered into her cowed visage to get a better fix on this character. Something just wasn't right. She was *different* somehow.

As if reading my thoughts or sensing my unease, she pulled back her hood with a fluid movement, the sound of her finely-woven robe rustling above the din of my thoughts. I have to say that the action did little to ease anything, as it merely confirmed my suspicions that she was, in fact, very different than anyone I had ever seen before. A fact that wasn't entirely unwelcome, but still a detour from what I had grown accustomed to. Her eyes were an electric blue, bluer even than Aran's unusual orbs, and they all but shone from within. I briefly wondered why they appeared so luminous despite failing to pierce the darkness of her cowl, but the biggest puzzler was the intricate mass of tattoos that spread the breadth of her face, even disappearing into the depths of her dark hairline. Branching pathways, elegant spirals, and hooked leaves of bold lines caressed and danced about her gentle features, leaving a beautiful woman trapped behind a wall of systematically applied designs. That must have hurt like a bitch. I didn't see a square inch uncovered, all lines seeming to trace figures towards her torso, begging the question of how much of her body was actually adorned with the looping, graceful tattoo powder.

She smiled; the initial reaction of strangers to her startling appearance was probably a source of amusement to her. There was pride in that smile. I didn't know what the tattoos symbolized or otherwise meant, but it was obviously a choice which she didn't regret in the slightest.

"Now," she said, "let us discuss what you will do."

Everything about this woman exuded power. And from my position on the ground, she looked rather imposing. I said nothing, although I immediately had the childish inclination to do the exact opposite of whatever she was about to “discuss”.

“In the crypt on the outskirts of the city, there is a mausoleum, a family plot of one of the most esteemed families.” she spoke in practiced rhythm.

“How will I know...?”

She continued chanting over me. “The structure has been marked for you in addition to the seal being removed from the doorway. Once inside, you’ll find a secret entrance that leads down to a catacomb beneath the surface, where they have hidden something of great importance.”

Intrigue. “What kind of...”

“The object is of great importance, a thing of magical properties. You must find it, and then speak with me.”

“Is there any...”

“Your reward will be extreme” she stated, “and determined by your willingness to cooperate. If you do this for me, you won’t have to worry about riches ever again.”

Well, that shut me up. I liked the “no worry” bit, but what kind of grand reward was I to expect? Did she say “magical”? Who did she think she was, anyways? She hadn’t addressed that. Hadn’t addressed anything really. This whole situation was certainly a detractor from the norm and gave me a bad vibe all-round, all manner of alarms going off in my head at the prospect of accepting anything offered from this cloaked beauty. This situation seemed tentatively dangerous.

My eyes narrowed. “Do you mean me harm?”

She looked surprised, the first true emotion in this exchange. The subtle way her eyebrows furrowed followed by a softening of her features indicated to me that the reaction was, indeed, genuine. I believed her when she said, “I don’t want you to be hurt. But, there is an element of danger.” Doing a bit of face-reading of her own, she responded to my sour expression with a supplemental answer. “Nothing, I’m sure, you can’t handle.”

“Have others gone before me?”

She paused, seeming to re-evaluate her impression of the dirty man at her feet. I assumed that her previous judgment of me had been significantly harsher.

“I believe we understand each other a bit better.” she whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. “You’re sharper than you look.”

Needing answers more than compliments, I stared her down, the pretty face gazing back through its permanent mask of dark powder, the beautiful flourishes relishing the fleshy curves of which they embraced and encaged. Pulses appeared to flow the individual pathways, much like blood through veins, but I attributed the illusion as a trick of the eye, nothing more.

“How many others?” I questioned, losing patience, hope, and sleep at roughly the same rate. The first rays of daybreak were just around the corner judging from the gentle shift of the lightening sky, and this deal was shaping up to be more risk than I would normally agree to.

“Enough,” she remarked wryly, “to make you outright refuse.”

Heaving a sigh, I broke eye contact and lost myself in thought, the mysterious stranger’s mysterious answers evoking little to no interest in me anymore, much less an eagerness to embark on what seemed likely to be a death sentence. It was late, and I was tired. Tired of this night. Tired of sleeping in alleys. Tired of uncertainty and a world stacked against me. Absently stroking my tender neck, I pontificated on what it was all for. What was the point of struggling in the overall scheme of things? My struggle, Aran’s struggle, the schizo bum’s struggle. We all would end up the same way. The lonely and selfish march towards oblivion was littered with the corpses of others at the end of their own individual journeys, each certain that their march would be fruitful, would be worth something. When in reality, the world was simply going in circles. Wait. What? I didn’t even make sense to myself at that point, fatigue and apathy clouding my mind and hampering my wits, the waning night compounding an increasingly foul mood. No one wanted to be caught shit-faced when the world’s lights go on, after all. My bruised body and weary mind called out for rest, interchangeably attracted to either death or sleep, whichever was offered first, the differences seeming minute. I dragged my stubborn gaze up to meet hers, half-forgetting that the woman waited patiently.

“Well?”

I may have been sleepy, but I wasn’t suicidal.

“As it stands, the answer is no.” I spoke truthfully, the words causing the stranger to bristle like a preening bird. “But let me sleep on the idea and I might get to it tomorrow.”

I heard not a sound, but the tattooed beauty cocked her head and shot a chastising glare at something out of my field of view. Turning my head sharply to the street, I caught a glimpse of darkness which ducked around a corner. I hadn’t heard this one approach either. Was it that bum? A nosy passerby? A bodyguard, perhaps? I spun to face her, once again seeking to read unspoken answers. Instead, she sought my gaze and made sure that my undivided attention was focused on her next words.

“Very well.” she stated solemnly, never blinking. “You are freed from answering immediately, though the opportunity remains open to you. But,” she slowed her rhythm, “maybe one of your brethren might be interested?” she contradicted an expectant face with a lilting tone.

“Brethren?”

She paused before suddenly adopting an air of annoyance. “I thought we understood each other.” the woman quietly exasperated. “You know of the... failures before you, and I know of your secret associations.”

What in the world?

She continued babbling, the blank look plastered on my face obviously fueling some fire within her. “Don’t play games with me.” she muttered, “Your organization and its affiliations are well-known throughout the area. I’m offering you a chance to make something of yourself beyond what the Thieves’ Guild has to offer.”

“A Thieves’ Guild?!” I exclaimed a little too loudly, awe-struck by the beauty’s naiveté and her implications. I had never heard of such a preposterous thing! Petty crime was certainly rampant in our city, possibly increasing, but the notion of a tie that bound desperate, pick-pocketing souls was absolutely ludicrous. How would they be led? And for what purpose? Furthermore, what would stop them from stealing from each other, or avoid anonymous backstabbing for that matter?

The tattooed woman simply stared at me. “Have your fun,” she hissed, “but breathe not a word of this conversation, or me, to any other or you will find that your life can actually get worse.” She spat the last three words in careful articulation. And I believed her. “You have been given an extension to answer my request, but I will need more cooperation from you the next time we meet.” She spoke low, the volume demanding that I strain to hear. “I am not to be trifled with.” she added needlessly.

“Just who ARE you?!” I asked incredulously, more than a little perturbed by her cloak-and-dagger attitude.

“Your new employer.” She smirked, and without hesitation, pulled the cowl over her lovely features as she headed for the street.

Entranced by the pendulous motion of wide hips beneath cloth, I remained silent, crouched in my refuse heap as she unhurriedly left my temporary bedroom suite. “Remember” she called over her shoulder, “go to the crypt and look for the mark.” she advised, my last vision of the tattooed temptress being a profile as she turned the building’s corner and draped herself with the night.

I sat blinking for a bit. *What the Hells just happened?* The combination of weariness and shock from the incident created an ethereal and hazy recollection of the conversation. It all happened so fast, but the more I pondered details, the less I understood. Catacombs, noble family, object of “great importance” Thieves’ Guild. I wasn’t joking when I had said I needed to sleep on it, as the whole encounter was too convoluted, too strange, raising too many questions to be deduced in one sitting. Especially in my current state. It was best to approach the dilemma of a dangerous woman’s dangerous proposal with a sharp and rested mind.

And with that conclusive finality and a surprising ease in which I ejected the night’s events from my thoughts, I allowed myself to fall into a deep sleep as the first light of daybreak streaked the heavens clear of stars. Soon, I was spirited away to an alternate reality, one where I roamed a harem’s halls in a decorative feather head-dress, the scantily-clad women smiling at my approach. In my dream, I accepted a peace offering from the dead and even danced with a man made of clay, all this while real society occurred around and without me, the dawn rush disturbing me only once from my peaceful slumber.

Chapter 6: Decision

I woke with a crick in my neck, the hours spent sprawled upon the burlap bags of questionable content not as kind to a human spine as one might expect. Trailing a thin line of drool to the coarse material, I brought my groggy head to an upright position, doing so slowly to ease the pain. It was but a few hours until nightfall, my biological clock functioning as it always did, waking me at roughly the same time each day. The populace had not yet seen fit to pack up their belongings and begin the frantic dash home, so the streets were still relatively clear, but I knew that I had just enough time to reach the market. My gut rumbled angrily. And no wonder. I had been mistreating it more than usual, what with the involuntary fasting and receiving sucker punches. To placate my stomach a little longer I unrolled a sprig of sweetbark and popped it in my mouth in springing to my feet. A little too quickly it would seem, as the full circuit of blood flow returned and caused a brief spell of dizziness along with wobbly knees. The blackness dissipated soon, however, as I relieved myself of fluids, a droning tune making its way to my lips sometime during the process. I tried to write my name on the wall, a feat easily attained given the brevity, though the letters soon became a dribbling mess. I jiggled once, then twice.

With a bit of annoyed curiosity, I remember investigating a newly formed rash. On my hand, that is. Itching like wildfire, the offending blemish encompassed the two smallest fingers on the left side, a mottled puffiness spreading throughout. It was all probably due to my choice in bedding of course, but regardless, the rash's location would prove rather ironic as you will eventually discover.

What a fool I've been.

Still, I ignored it to the best of my ability as I headed for the street, having finished the afternoon ritual and gently gnashing the bit of sweetbark between my teeth, I took in a lung-full of warm air as I surveyed the new day. A day of fresh possibilities. And mistakes.

Palming a carina fruit from a bushel basket was simple; convincing a butcher to sell me a huge leg of mutton for a single coin was a little trickier. But, I've always been up to a good challenge. Although showing my protruding ribs in a plea of sympathy fell on deaf ears, the bearded lummo accepted a barter of a coin plus my few remaining sprigs of sweetbark. No matter, I stole them too. Well it was a slight loss, I admit, but as long as I could beat the urchins to the few sources at the first signs of the growing season I could replenish my supply. No easy feat in this wasteland, though. The little scamps were always adept at shimmy-ing the high-to-reach branches, stripping the sickly trees of every shred of our city's unique commodity, fetching a fairly decent price for the scraps in the process. But I had lost enough weight in the past summer to be fair competition for the children. I would have my turn! The butcher watched me strangely from behind his black scrub as I plotted my future sweetbark glory, but I shook the meat at him in protest and scuttled off to find a suitable dining spot.

Dinner would be devoured in the lengthening shadow of a large barrel, perched high on a second-story terrace overlooking the bustling market. The sun had yet to dip beyond the bleached grid of buildings but the citizens still scrambled for sanctuary, snatching anything that wasn't bolted down in the dusty streets. Bright but aging tents were being packed away, worn and filthy carpets were rolled up, unraveling banners were removed as wooden stands were dismembered into individual planks of petrified wood. All the knick-knacks and essentials, the clothing, the shoes, the meats and the produce, the trinkets and baubles, the aphrodisiacs, the charms, the seeds, the pets and harnesses, weapons and tools, blankets, bowls, and beasts of burden, what was left of that day's meager transactions anyways, were stowed away safely, most of which remained unsold from many days past. What could best be described as a whole street of gaudy colors and a parade of products, a bazaar that many attended only for the purpose of pawning their shoddy wares off on each other, turned into a drab, brown, dirty road like every other. Market Street bloomed and shriveled every day, reverting to a barren stretch of filthy flagstone with each individual duskcrush.

Crouched on my haunches, looming over the mob tearing apart their displays for mobility, I ravaged my food in the greedy way that you might see feral animals doing. Ha, I guess I am a bit of a stray myself! Nothing seemed more important than that meal at the time, though. Salivating ferociously with each vicious bite of the leg, I gnawed every scrap of the stringy tendons and tenacious fibers off the bone, leaving clean and polished remains. Of which I sucked dry and pocketed in case I needed to flavor a soup, tucking the massive bone, picked clean, in place against my torso. The carina fruit was equally delicious, but infinitely juicier, given that it is composed mostly of water. However, in my zeal to devour every succulent drop, a seed, just like in the folk tale actually, lodged in my throat and forced performance of emergency blows to my own chest, the offensive particle being hurled over the balcony into the crowd. I was instantly reminded of the stories behind the carina's namesake, being notorious for such accidents, but I still chided myself. What an embarrassing way to die.

To die. That thought had crossed my mind more than once the previous night. The fop, the beast, the temptress: all potential sources in their own special way. Life's bitter surprises that can never be truly prepared for. It was a miracle that I had remained relatively unscathed to reflect on all three incidents, but was there more to it than that? Could there be a connection in the seemingly random occurrences, none of which were the norm for an average night on the town? Oh sure, there was always an element of danger in my escapades across a city of thieves and crooks, but this simply FELT different. I just had no logic to back that up.

Speculation aside, there truly seemed to be an opportunity lying beneath a myriad of mysteries here. The tattooed woman was a force to be reckoned with, that was for sure; and I was quite certain she could have destroyed me where I sat. After all, she did sneak up on me in the dark. If she had really wanted me dead as the whole suicide mission implied, how difficult could it have been to thrust a dagger in my heart instead of opening with a polite greeting? No, she needed me alive. Or at least while she thought I was part

of a mythical thieves' guild! The real concern was: just how dangerous would a task be if it exceeded not only the temptress' abilities, but also a slew of disposable suckers? A fact, I reminded myself, that she chose to conceal from the start.

And the truly powerful always have their own resources. What could she possibly need with MY help? And for that matter, what lay buried in the tomb of a noble family that warranted such persistent attempts at reclamation? From her bizarre appearance, it could be assumed that the temptress was a foreigner, as I had not seen many- scratch that- ANY that were fool enough to endure facial mutilation of that magnitude. Foreigners brought their own set of problems, their own set of unknowns. On the plus side, however, the tattooed tart was apparently at odds with the noblebloods. I presumed that her exploits into the lower levels of their catacombs were compromising whatever dwindling reverence people had for their dead anymore.

The dead. I stifled a shudder. For a brief moment, my imagination got the better of my good sense as it entertained an army of darkness lurking beneath the surface. Clenched skeletal teeth. Rotting flesh. The organic creak of yellowed bone as they straightened their decomposing frames and shambled, en masse, towards my labored breathing in the pitch blackness. Jealous of my flickering life force. Wishing to consume my soul.

Stop it! You're just creating excuses. I am not! Are too. You're just a frightened little infant, afraid of the dark and afraid to get his hands dirty. Whatever. You could succeed where others have failed, but you're just going to sit there and cry, cry, cry. That's not true! But it is. You know you can't handle this, or the reward. If you're happy with the way things are, keep on being what you've become: a rat. Shut up! You can sleep where the rats sleep. Eat what the rats eat. I said shut up! Scurry around in your little maze just like all the other rats.

With my hands clasped uselessly over my ears, I screamed "Stop!" loud enough to attract a handful of duskrushers who, in response, turned to face my spot on the terrace. To my horror, their features were elongated, distorted, concealed in ragged brown fur, their cone-shaped ears contrasting needle-thin whiskers which jutted outwards from their sharpened muzzles. Large, filthy rats staring back at me through polished coal eyes. I blinked and the hallucination was gone, a figment of my imagination that was as insubstantial as a breeze but as damaging as a monsoon. *You're one of them*, my inner voice taunted cruelly.

Chapter 7: Adventure

The long stretch of road leading to the city graveyard was one of the most despairingly lonely walks I had ever taken. The night air was tepid, stagnant, and filled my lungs with the thick consistency of a warm stocking slithering in and out of my esophagus. Although I would normally be relieved to find myself unaccosted, this evening was an exception in that I got the distinct impression that I was not even being watched. I felt no eyes on me at all, a disconcerting thought made worse by the fact that I actually desired anonymous on-lookers. I dragged my feet just to break the oppressive silence. The flagstones responded as intended, but in a muted, echo-less manner that discouraged me from continuing the action. Finding myself glancing over a shoulder a little too often, I attempted to calm my nerves by working a thumb-sized groove into my hookblade's handle, the warm air seeming to instill an infectious life as it radiated a clammy heat from within my pocket. I imagined that the blade breathed.

Passing nearly every conceivable city section in succession, I felt an impending sense of doom. How it is said that people are shown moments of their life before they passed on. How I recalled hearing those close to the brink flashed back to key moments in their lives. That is how the scenery struck me. A visual eulogy lowering me gently into depths from which I would never rise. I was led from the inner commerce area to the abandoned housing district, then past the irrigation ditch where makeshift shacks and businesses had been erected on the cracked banks. I passed the fortified palace, and along the razor's edge that established a line between noble and common dwellings leading up to the grotesquely obtuse deadpile. And beyond, there, a cemetery had been plotted on the fringes of the metropolis, physically dividing the nobles and commoners, but a place where those from all strata were interred regardless of terrestrial caste. It sat as a neutral ground for both camps, an implied gesture of peace designed to fill the rift of differences inherent between the haves and have-nots. Instead, it was actually a testament to the true priorities of life. The graveyard was a strange sort of boundary between rich and poor, a metaphor for those wishing to stray across social lines, a macabre site that made promises of integration at a severe cost. The cemetery sulked on the sidelines of our community as a spectator, its ever-growing population silently monitoring the squabbles and folly of our interactions with placid scorn and a piercing objectivity. The city was an affront to the deceased as much as the cemetery was a blight on the landscape. Although it would appear that both dead and living "societies" were at odds on every level, both reflected a degree of deterioration matched by the other.

It was nearly impossible to traverse the iron-gated, desaturated hills without throwing a guilty look toward the weathered mounds of soil crested with various markers of stick and stone. It covered a fairly large area of land, but the expected capacity had been reached and subsequently surpassed several decades ago. Since, every square foot of gray dirt had been packed with bodies any which way they would fit, stacked and vertical even, a good number of the buried remaining unlabeled. One could literally dig anywhere on the grounds and uncover at least two or more partial skeletons. For this very reason, a pile was started just inside the rusted gate during the onset of famine. Once the general

public became accustomed to “alternate” forms of sustenance including (but not limited to) rats and an isolated trend of cannibalism, a wave of disease increased the pile enough to collapse the surrounding fence and spill out onto the street. The street, of course, remains unused to this day and is the worst concentration of stink that I can personally imagine. Like a concoction of rotten eggs and manure, seasoned with burnt hair. The stench radiated outward for several blocks, even further on a stiff wind. Although tonight’s air hung low as a suffocating woolen blanket, the smell still preceded the actual viewing of the cemetery gate which stood off-kilter like a drunk sentinel tending to the deadpile. An assault on all five senses.

I approached with concern and a wad of loose shirt covering much of my face, averting my gaze from a small form thrown carelessly on the pile who looked too similar to my urchin friend, Aran. Despite the heat, an involuntary chill ran the course of my spine as I passed the wrought-iron fence. I was setting foot on the compacted soil for the first time, and felt an intruder to another realm. As if the land was reserved for a different species. A different race. A different life form of which I could never hope to understand. I felt as prey to a superior force of predatory ghouls and spirits, ghosts and specters, all desperate for a taste of the living energy of which I exuded. I imagined them permeating my body just as they were said to penetrate walls, slurping my life force dry at their leisure and bemusement. Of course, I didn’t truly believe any of this, but was on edge all the same.

The graveyard was everything I imagined, having only viewed the place from outside the fence. And from a modest distance at that. Everywhere you looked the very cemetery, composed merely of earth and stone, seemed to be decaying along with its inhabitants. Statues of cherubs alighting to the heavens juxtaposed grim skeletons in the likeness of mythical undertakers, both peppering the land with fist-sized chunks from their crumbling features. As if being denied their passage into their respective afterlives. Both belonged to other planes of existence, and yet, both angels and demons would be condemned to this purgatory, our city. Grass did not grow in this hallowed prison for the damned despite an abundance of fertilizer, making maintenance of the area an almost negligible concern though a few hired hands were known to attend the more affluent corpses. This sanctuary for the deceased enclosed all manner of memorials, from poorly cobbled symbols placed at the head of some lowly dirt farmer to magnificent mausoleums intended for whole families of distinction, it’s ridged columns and ornate awnings having been swept and scrubbed on a monthly basis by paid servants. No servants tonight, though. Indeed, even the dead were elevated by their wealth in fashion similar to their living counterparts. The rules were written and there was no escape, even here. Good news, if you are an anal-retentive dead man with coin.

In search of the structure which was supposedly marked for my convenience, I perused the mausoleums, the action reminding me of window shopping for a final resting spot. No matter the soothings or self-encouragement, I just couldn’t shake the fear. Fear of blundering through total darkness. Fear of spontaneous burial in the lower catacombs. Fear of the walking dead. Primal fears. I stopped as if listening for audible clues, hearing not a sound past my own breath. Not a murmur of wind. Not the chirp of a night fowl. No, it was *dead* silent... Pardon the pun. (Ha, I *kill* me...) The crypt was at rest as it

should be. As I should have been, for that matter. Weaving between the headstones, an unseen layer of bones paving my path, I thought of all the places I should have been. Gerd's tavern, a hooker's arms. Hells, a dank alley downwind of the ditch would have been better than that awful place. Wandering aimlessly, hunting for a sign. I had no idea what I was doing aside from burning night and generating stress. Graves were packed tight, the head markers giving way to erosion or listing or cracking where they stood, the gray nubs piercing the soil, extending several feet above the surface. Petrified fingertips clawing their way from the earth. A field of stepping stones between the crypts dotting the gray hills. Hills of bodies. What was I doing there?!

Just as I was about to run screaming from that accursed place, I was drawn to a blocky silhouette in my peripheral vision, my intuition directing me toward a lone building set apart from the rest. A somber mausoleum built on a solitary hill. It's always in the last place you look, right? Crimped in the door jamb, a red rag contrasted heavily with the ashen environment and removed all suspicion about the place's identity. This was it.

The future is birthed from each fleeting moment, just as the past is buried under the same number of moments. We sculpt our lives in the design of our actions, each movement, each word, irreversibly penned into the story we call our lives. An indisputably significant power that is often underestimated. Executives of our individual fate. Stewards of our destiny. Authors of our own demise. Choices are routinely thrown at a person without warning, but with a cruel clarity of eventual hindsight exposing any and all errors in judgment. The path that should have been taken. The condemning action in a successive string of failures. A decision best left unmade. A better way to have lived... Too bad. We are both participant and spectator in this thing, our stories both permanent and fragile at the same time, the occurrences of which can only be altered through the pseudo-solutions of faulty memory or booze. We only get one shot in exchange for a lifetime of lamented mistakes. And life bends the rules for no one. I decided to enter the mausoleum, but would come to regret my choice.

Seeing no handle, I leaned into the heavy door with enough effort to send me sprawling once it swung inward, the thing scraping the dusty floor with a grinding groan. The groan resounding off the walls even after I raised my head, a vertical strip of illumination spilling across the stone. A strip which I noticed was narrowing. Instinctively, I scooped up a spherical chunk of rock and dove for the closing portal, somehow managing to wedge it into the jamb as the opening clamped down on my makeshift doorstep. *Like I might attempt to crack a nut with my teeth*, I thought, bringing myself to a stand as I ran a hand up my side of the opening. No handle, as expected. It would have certainly been a challenge to open had I not reacted.

The light afforded from the door did little to aid my vision, but a quick adjustment of my headwear did the trick. I could see little else besides shelves in the room. Shelves of decomposing bodies stacked floor-to-ceiling, but still shelves. The corpses lay peacefully on their sides, naked and curled into fetal positions hugging their knees as was customary. *Exit life as you were brought into it*, I had heard. But if that were true, we'd

all need to find some poor woman to suckle and crawl up into before shuffling loose our mortal coil. I curse you to think upon that, for a while.

Wary of the first indication of an undead horde, I scanned the hexagonal sanctum, massaging the hook-blade as if it would do any good against unfeeling flesh and creaking bone. The lazy skulls just grinned at my actions, or some other joke they had been told in the afterlife. A joke I didn't want to hear the punch-line to. The macabre spectacle was indeed laughable, though. A lone man, eyeing the naked deceased for anything of value in their barren grave. In this city, it was guaranteed that a body would be stripped of any possessions by those lucky enough to stumble across him in his death-throes. If not by them, then the urchins who were paid to collect bodies would certainly finish the job. If not by urchins, then a priest looking for a donation. If not by the priest, then the undertaker. If not by the undertaker, then certainly by a grave-robber...or other, within a week of the initial burial. You took nothing but your naked hide to the spirit world here, whatever wealth you acquired assimilating itself back into a society that had no other use for you than to pass it along. Not that misers hadn't tried to thwart the system of involuntary inheritance.

Still, there was nothing here except an abundance of bones and nightmare-fuel.

Gods, how those empty sockets pierced me! I felt like I was losing myself in the black morass of eye-less skulls, like I could plunge into any one of the inky depths of pitted faces. Their skin peeled away, revealing yellowed, pocked, and angular bone. An inner face. An inner person, hidden from the world. A person that resided in us all, just concealed behind an adherent mask of blood and tissue. Of organs and muscle, flesh and hair. I shuddered. There was something starkly alien and fearful beneath us all, biding its time through the misgivings and imprisonment. Waiting for its fleshy captors to die, decompose, and give birth to a...

My nervous fingers, making their best attempt to whittle the hook-blade's handle, slipped painfully along a serrated edge, the injured hand flying up for inspection in a flash. Perfect orbs of dark liquid formed a string of black pearls along one of my digits, the low lighting not enough to perceive the color red. Black blood. I sucked gingerly at my finger to stem the drips, my eyes going wide at yet another thought. Could the dead smell blood? My eyes darted along the shelves, meeting not a gaze in the mausoleum. A fact that was somehow soothing. Regardless, I turned to leave.

In squeezing out the entry-crack, one foot planted firmly in the land of the living, the other envying its counterpart, I had had the grave misfortune to make a discovery. The rock used to prop open my escape wasn't a rock at all. And just above its row of calcified nubs and their crenulated ridge. Above the heart-shaped indentation and its brittle divider. Just above the sightless holes and protruding brow, drilled squarely dead-center in the cracked plates fused into a solid mass, was a bit of finely chiseled geometry that screamed for attention. Stupidly, I paused in thought. Stupidly, I brought my free foot back into the confines of the darkness. Stupidly, I stooped to get a better look.

In my initial rush to prevent entombment in a nobleblood family plot, I had neglected inspection of a skull which had subsequently faced outwards... towards freedom. A hexagonal shape adorned the top of the disembodied head, punched cleanly and filed meticulously to six equal points, a hole that was assuredly formed after death. A design that was carved for a purpose. A purpose tied to this room. A room seemingly barren of interest. The skull was obviously a key. I took a closer look at my surroundings.

The cubbies remained as they were, hollowed portions of the walls inlaid with a grid of curled bodies. The interred were motionless and uniform, neatly arranged into columns and rows, set between actual architectural columns made from a material only slightly more lustrous than the dull bones they stood sentinel over. An empty torch brazier and flint were set on the far wall, but other than that... Wait. Just a few hand-lengths beneath the metal holder's bolts, was an embossed nub jutting from a circular indent. It had six sides. It was a miracle I saw it in that gloom, actually.

Excitedly, I leapt back to the entrance, grasped the skull with both hands, and nearly pulled the doorstop loose before I caught myself in realization. It needed to be replaced, of course. Stepping towards the nearest corpse, hands outstretched to tear its head free from its shoulders I, once again, paused. Did I really want to risk the zombie apocalypse? Conundrum.

The key fit perfectly over the obtuse projection. And with a few deft turns, the skull acted as crank to a hidden tunnel which opened up dead-center in the floor. A tight fit to be sure, only a few feet across, but a marvel of machination that I couldn't help but be impressed with. Looking down a minor vertical drop that ended with the head of a descending flight of tread-worn stairs, I could make out a faint glow in the recesses of the dark. I glanced back at the brazier, having taken the flint, but saw no need to disrobe myself of darkness's hug with a torch. I would proceed without the guidance of fire. With a final glance around the room, and a doleful look at my shoe wedged in the doorway, I slid to the stairway of fate and took my first step.

Chapter 8: Regrets

The passageway was long, tedious, and humid, but surprisingly cool. Enough so that the spine-chills were no longer coming from fear. A relatively straight path parallel to the surface, support beams were lodged at odd angles to keep the tunnel from swallowing me whole. The proof, of which, were shallow sections of airy soil where the natural grit of the floor had been blanketed, knocked loose from the cylindrical passage and spilling into the walkway. Even as I guided myself along, using the tunnel's sides for stability, a light graze of my hand would catalyze small avalanches of rich brown dirt. I hunched as I traveled, avoiding both the inconsistently low ceiling and the thick cabers of obstructing wood, stirring only the air with my passing.

I felt guilty in a strange way. In no small part due to the fact I had forced my way into the realm of the dead, but also because I somehow felt I was disrupting a natural order. My movements and raspy breathing resounded mutely off the insulated walls. My very presence created a flow of air that swirled and churned with every step, of which was subsequently recorded in the tunnel, itself, in the form of my unique prints trailing behind. I was blundering my way across a road built under fields and fields of the deceased. They undoubtedly slept mere feet above where my head was now, disconcerting considering how fragile the tunnel proved to be. And there were so many reasons why I didn't want to fall victim to a crypt cave-in. To assuage my odd feeling of desecration and paranoia, though, the passageway produced several articles for contemplation.

The first curiosity was the subdued light from what I had come to dub "glow globes" orbs of light which were spaced at intervals along the tunnel, sandwiching pockets of darkness between. This phenomena was the minor illumination of which I had spied from the mausoleum. Despite closer inspection, that was simply all that could be discerned: glowing globes. No strings, no fire. Just small incandescent bubbles of light about the size of a fist stuck flush against the wall. The effect would have been soothing, had the mystical nature been explained to me. And under different circumstances, of course. The second article was what I could occasionally view using these very globes: overlapping sets of footprints that were not my own. Deep gouges in the terrain ranging from soft-heeled slippers to heavy boots, criss-crossing patterns of all manner of people creating troughs at rare and sporadic times throughout the tunnel. Previous attempts. Previous victims. The temptress's words evidenced. I found no comfort in this in the slightest.

And still, the tunnel continued. It never curved visibly but the eventual end, assuming it had an end, was hidden behind distant and gradual bends that alternated between left and right hooks. Of what I could see through the network of wooden supports, that is. I quickened my step, first out of a motivational fear, then out of impatience, boredom. And finally fatigue. Having acclimated to the limits of what there was to see and hear, and developing a minor cramp from the infrequent bouts of stooping, I glided the length of the passage with a grace befitting a stampeding beast of burden. Several times did I ponder turning back, the identical number of times that I convinced myself that I must have exceeded the halfway point. Who knew the distance I had traveled? Who knew

where in the city I had wandered, or if I was even still within the city limits? Only when I collapsed to my knees, sweating buckets despite cool air enveloping my frame, did I regain a shred of hope. Almost a full sandglass had passed, but the end was finally in sight.

It's amusing how goals sometimes don't seem as appealing when on the cusp of realization. The fruits of our labors becoming unwanted or even a hateful thing in the face of acquirement. Uncontrolled conditions can change exceptionally between the points of setting and achieving a goal, making all the difference to someone who had thought they wanted a thing at some point in time. Occasionally, the actions involved in meeting a goal are more trouble than the rewards are actually worth, thus negating the value of achieving it. Sometimes, people embark on things they really don't want to do, or might become enraptured in the procedure of working towards a goal, any goal, not specifically the one they are aimed at. And sometimes, we set goals that we never should have even considered. I experienced one, if not all, of these feelings that night.

Freshly alert, I crept the remaining distance while berating my inner voice, attempting to convince whatever force was driving my feet forward, and it certainly didn't seem to be me, that the best course was to turn around and run like mad. Logic failed to slow my pace. When the imagined arguments fell on deaf inner ears, a part of me descended into hysterics. Wild mental thrashings. Begging and pleading. A portion of myself wanted to flee screaming from this unnatural place, to forsake whatever reasons I could possibly have for being there. To turn tail and unabashedly cower in some corner of the furthest reaches of our city.

And yet my steps continued, the balls of my feet landing softly before the heels. The flat outsides tentatively finding footing and guiding the high arches into place. Hunched low to create an indiscernible profile, my hands were outstretched for balance, seeming to reach for intangible pockets of shadow that my small form clung to. The glow globes were now my enemy, casting dim pools of light that may potentially equate to death to one who relied heavily on stealth. Spherical snitches that would betray my existence to anyone with the gift of sight. My own senses were awakened for my final approach, scanning, feeling, listening, smelling, and even tasting this place anew. The tunnel acting as it had for the last hour, still and quiet, but an alkaline twinge now permeated the air, a bittersweet coppery flavor that I couldn't seem to place. It grew as I drew near.

The passageway opened abruptly into a full-sized chamber. Large enough for a dozen market stands to occupy side by side, the room spanned greater than the mass of glow globes at its center could illuminate. But, oh, did that gem sparkle! A massive, multi-faceted, twinkling, flaming red jewel of sorts sat perched atop a small podium in the midst of the surrounding light. My inner conflict was instantly abated. And I very nearly dashed to claim the glittering prize had not a learned patience temper my brash impulses. Eyeing the ruby like a predator stares down prey, or rather a scavenger/carrion relationship in this instance, I strafed the perimeter of the room in a nervous pacing.

There it was. That had to be what “it” was! Nothing else down there had the look of “an item of great importance”. Even if that wasn’t it, I had to take it! You can’t leave a gem of that size lying around. Bigger than my fist, it was. But why was it down here? There had to be a reason. Magical? No, that’s silly. Cursed? Get real. No such thing. But then again, before today I wouldn’t have believed in skull-keys, infinite tunnels, and jewels bigger than my...oof!

Momentarily unfocused, I had managed to knock my wind loose via an immobile object haphazardly placed in the ring of shadows lining the determinedly circular chamber. Massaging the point of impact, I adjusted my bandana in an attempt to identify the source of my blunder. I gazed up the broad forearm of a gigantic man. At least, it looked like a man. After calming my initial inclinations, I found the bipedal construct lacking in most areas identifying it as even human. With a disproportional emphasis on upper body, shoulders, and arms, but no face, clothes, or distinguishing details beyond the outline of a person, the giant sat motionless with knuckles almost scraping the floor, appropriately primitive in nature. It almost looked unfinished. Seemingly carved from a single piece of smooth material, possibly clay, the creation was buffed in areas, yet reflected no light in a supernatural way. Having worked up a profound courage, I dug my fingernails into the thing’s arm and, with some effort, gouged a couple of scratches into its bicep, of which the height of my head didn’t surpass. Flimsy material for a statue. For that very reason, the golem’s form seemed to have been wrapped in a metal lattice, most likely for structural integrity. Raw bands of wrought iron hugged the contours of the beastly visage vertically and horizontally, bolted into place at every juncture where the ribbons crossed and creating a sort of protective metal girdle. *Weird*, I thought, walking around the hulking husk gazing up and down the ugly lump of... whatever it was. Molded clay.

This curiosity piqued my interest in the skirted darkness, causing me to traverse the perimeter, searching for anything at all besides the central temptation. In between amorous glares at the podium, I found only one more adornment: a single door atop a flight of stairs, worked non-discreetly into the tiled stonework that reinforced the cylindrical room. Excellent craftsmanship, to be sure, as it was extremely difficult for even myself to notice the stairs’ slight protrusions from the wall, or discern the portal’s outline amid the textured rock. Had I wasted my time in a fool’s route to this location? Just where did that thing lead? My mind was awash with new questions, new fears, as to my predicament. Curiosity was fleeting as baser emotions overshadowed any desire to open that door. I needed to get out of there, and fast. I floundered backwards, my eyes transfixed on all manner of imagined terrors emerging from that portal. Through that door was pain, and suffering. I could just feel it. It radiated with malice and harmful intent.

I had stumbled backwards toward the altar, looking it over with a crazed expression. From my new vantage point, it looked like an eye! With the sparkling blood-jewel as central iris to the curving bronze lids at both poles, the entire altar was an unblinking and watchful eye, staring up at me from hip’s level. It sat, waiting, begging me to take it, the facets shimmering in the light of the surrounding glowing spheres. Producing an irresistibly hypnotic effect. I stared at the gem, and it stared back at me, our gazes locked in a struggle of domination. The thing would be worth a king’s ransom, get me off the

streets. It meant strength, leverage, every desire satiated. This jewel meant pure unmitigated power, wealth beyond imagination. Women, clothes, and food, many times over. A home, protection, security. It all resided within the crimson translucence of chiseled angles. Eyes wide, arm extended, I reached for my destiny.

A small shock. Tried to pull away. The idol blinked. Hand caught. Fingers numb. The lids...a trap. Pain shooting up arm. Vision cloudy. Must be a dream. Can hear scraping metal over screaming. My scream. Deafening scream. Wrenching pain. Blood. Lots of blood. It's mine. Coppery smell. Trembling. Movement in the darkness. It's coming! Fingers on fire. Shaking. It's huge! Strange, glowing symbols. Creaks as it moves. Have to escape. Have to escape. Pulling. Pulling. Pulling! Twisting pulling! It's HERE! Pain! PAIN! AGONIZING PAIN!!

Two of my fingers fell to the floor as I wrenched my left arm free of the powerful bronze eyelids. With a sickening snap, they clasped shut, the whole device bearing likeness to hunters' traps I had seen used on small game. I was small game. The clay golem, impossibly animated and walking steadfastly in my direction, moved with purpose, swinging its massive arms to counterbalance its fearsome bulk. Strange, looping calligraphy and symbols now burned bright on its clay flesh, seemingly lit from within as if the monstrosity was powered by an inner furnace. My gods, the thing was magical. Magic exists! It showed no emotion, no remorse or hatred as it lunged at me, sculpted hands spread wide and face devoid of any recognizable features.

I barely had enough time to dodge, the tuck-and-roll maneuver resulting in a sharp pain running the course of my arm, partially alleviating the shock of simultaneously seeing a statue come to life and the removal of two digits. The behemoth, recovering from its failed charge, cast a chilling expression-less glare over its shoulder. It made no noise, save for the creaking of its iron reinforcements as they twisted and arced with the fluid movement of the pliable material underneath. Somehow, I would have felt better had the thing growled. Instead it stood, shoulders spread, legs together, arms at sides, a wall between me and the dimly lit maw of the incessant tunnel leading from my purgatory. Well, it looked like my decision had been made for me. Spinning in place, I made a hasty retreat for the covert stairwell, but skidded to a halt across flagstones in seeing a new figure emerge. Shit. My mouth down-turned in seeing familiar symbols glowing eerily, the designs cutting a swathe through darkness, through my hopes. The portal was awash in electric blue, blocking my intended exit from this surrealistic nightmare. I had to get out of there!

I charged the golem. Screaming like a flaming banshee fleeing the conflagration of Hells, my voice was a primordial battle-cry for my own existence. Every pain, every torment, every torturing injustice that I had experienced surfaced in one long exaltation of the lungs, of indomitable will. A proclamation by the hardened spirit of one who had lived day after day after day in one of the harshest and most trying environments imaginable. I charged as a creature being cornered. I charged as a survivor.

The wall of clay, iron, and magic responded by crouching low, planting its stubby feet, arms swinging wider than two men lain head to toe. It was braced for combat, or the biggest hug the likes of mortals had never seen. The living mountain seemed to rise in height as my perspective shifted ever closer, towering above with strength backing its sheer intimidation. Stirring the air, it's trunk-like arms were brought in to enclose my assault, a speed not thought likely with a being of that size. The creaking iron shrilled independent of the "whoosh" of whipped wind, logs of bending clay wrapped in an embrace that would certainly squeeze the life from my spindly body. It nearly had me too, but the momentum of a mad dash allowed me a grating slide between the behemoth's legs and a burst towards the tunnel of salvation. Cradling my injured hand, my wince became a self-aggrandizing grin in light of the victory.

A short-lived victory as it was. I gleefully bounded around and between the wooden support braces, comforted by the fact that I was gaining significant distance between myself and the cacophony behind. I dared not look back at the cracking sounds of the golem dismantling the cabers in pursuit. But just as I prepared to leap over a slanted pole wedged across the passageway, the glow globes dimmed to nothing. My foot hooked the log. I tripped and stumbled, the sounds of the fall resonating in my mind as I planted my face and plowed a track through the soil. Fresh wounds mingled with dirt. I lay in shock with creeping tingles running up and down exposed arms, chancing to roll over only after the shock had dissipated. My heartbeat pounding percussive drums in my temples assured my status among the living. My face was hot and flush in the pitch black. More than a little discombobulated, I arose only to be knocked aside by the splintering crack of a support beam, the spray of wood shards stinging life and limb as I was thrown violently to the ground. In complete and natural darkness, I experienced a true burial, watching in horror as the arcane writings binding some supernatural demon blazed fiercely in the profile of my executioner. The symbols pulsed and writhed angrily in the inky black, giving shape to an unseen assailant as it loomed closer, hunched low to fit in the precarious space. Gravel shifted, iron screeched, and my own labored panting all serenaded the otherwise silent moment as it was drawn out in monotonous harmony, my eyes going wide in desperation for a light leading away from the madness.

Suddenly, the symbols lurched forward. Claspng my leg with a firm and deliberate delicacy, the emblazoned writing began drawing me toward the mass of throbbing calligraphy. I felt, not saw, my body sliding across the ground. I felt, not saw, a sinister purpose in this thing's intent. I felt, not saw, that it was instructed to capture me alive. Feeling the familiar contours of my brandished weapon, I scraped frantically at the giant hand dragging me towards uncertain doom. Slashing and clawing, scratching and scraping, my hook-blade tore at the arcane glyphs encircling an enormous clay hand pulling me away. Away to oblivion.

And to my surprise, my attempts actually gouged the arm. The string of symbols disturbed, its angry brilliance faded slowly to nothing, the light dissipating in the fashion that a smith's metal cools. An entire limb swallowed by blackness. Instantaneous with the fleeting fire of the arm, I wriggled free of the relaxing fingers, the digits no longer channeling magical power. But the creature was not phased. It, once again, brought an

arm to bear on my extended leg while I, once again, unleashed a flurry of attacks on the integrity of its life-endowing writing, focusing on disturbing the blazing symbols more than doing structural damage. The golem's reluctance to use lethal force the only reason that I survived.

With both weighty supports out of commission, the unbalanced torso collapsed forward, still glowing, pausing only briefly before resuming. I almost sympathized for the unthinking construct as it began to inch towards me, using its tiny legs to propel its pathetic pursuit, dragging heavy cabers along with it. A single-minded weapon of castrated strength. It was obviously a mere tool to another master, making every attempt to fulfill its instructions. That was its purpose. That was its life. To capture me? What would be the point? What was I worth to anyone?

Regardless, the golem continued relentlessly, steady progress despite little movements. I backed away slowly, sensitively probing each step while I tore sections of my baggy shirt. These became my bandages as I doctored what was left of a throbbing pinky and ring finger. The darkness was a blessing, as I didn't want to see them as they were. Not the blood, not the bone. Not the dirt encrusted stumps that protruded from my palm. The monstrosity marched on, dragging itself across the tunnel, toppling support beams and bulldozing a crest of dirt that was undoubtedly forming in its advance. The rest of the tattered shirt I swaddled tightly around the tip of drumstick from my earlier meal. And, with some difficulty, I ignited it with the flint from the mausoleum above, calling on skills that had created many campfires for a lonely, homeless drifter. Ingenuity had provided me a torch, but would it last till I escaped?

The golem unwittingly complicated matters. In its mechanical persistence, the clay creation was compromising our shelter and bringing the fragile tunnel down around my ears! Cascades of dirt and debris rained upon us both, clogging the air and threatening the same to an already cramped passageway. With a final glance of awe at the magical construct, still no signs of cognizance that it was sealing its own tomb, plodding fervently at the same pace it ever had, slaving zealously at a one-tracked goal, I righted my course and sped away as a large chunk of land came spilling in from above. Coughing violently, I ran, one hand attempting to filter the nigh-unbreathable air while the other stabbed a torch through enveloping blackness.

Chapter 9: Interrogation

I nearly knocked the tavern door off its hinges, my legs giving way for the first time since my encounter. Dazed and finally falling victim to the physical and psychological abuses of the evening, my knees buckled, causing me to limply crumple into a ball of pure fatigue.

“Din!” Gerd exclaimed with a graceless leap over the bar. “Din, get up! What happened? Who did this?” He handled me roughly in a check for injuries. Who knows what I must have looked like at that moment? I felt helpless against his own fleshy meat hooks prodding for breaks and sprains, a miniature ragdoll to his giant child. “You’re filthy more than your usual!” he jested, choosing to mince our usual banter amid genuine concern.

My head hung low as the barkeep gently lifted my middle off the floor, seemingly content at finding no wounds beyond minor cuts and scrapes. Although I didn’t see his eyes, the room tensed when he finally managed to extract my left arm from the crook of its counterpart. We sat frozen like that for several moments before I peered up at him, my face a quavering mask of fresh tears draped over set jaw.

“A fucking jewel bit my hand!”

Hitting this man with any number of weapons wouldn’t have produced the same effect.

“Then a magic statue beat the shit out of me!” Gerd flinched. “I escaped through a tunnel of infinity...” He hung on every word. “... but not before my torch went out, forcing me to crawl blindly through unending darkness...” The barkeep was entranced. “... Where I emerged in the land of corpses!”

More silence. More waiting. More of the same baffled expression from the huge, hairy, red-bear of a man.

“Are you... alright?” he questioned, more out of reflex than a measured response.

“No!”

“You must be a bit... addled.” he soothed patronizingly while hauling my scrawny carcass effortlessly to my feet. “Come sit down and I’ll grab you a drink.”

I flopped in a chair near the counter as the barkeep bounded for some hidden cask behind the bar. Annoyingly, due to bad carpentry, I couldn’t get all four legs to simultaneously touch the floor, causing me to rock diagonally between the two longest pegs. I grunted several times in scooting to a table suffering from similar problems.

“Now what exactly happened out there?” the bartender called. His voice was muffled and when I turned to look, all I saw was a bulbous backside waggling over the counter top.

“I told you everything I know.” I harrumphed, suddenly afraid of the door.

Gerd produced a black bottle and a pair of matching cups as he straightened in place. “Really?” he asked incredulously, a tone of disappointment hedging in.

“Really.” I replied never taking my eye off the entrance. “I think someone wants to get me.”

“Pshaw.” the red bear sputtered in his approach. He dragged a chair over, tested it with his ample frame, and exchanged it for another. “Who’d want to do that?” he asked condescendingly. Gerd’s face was flush and I could smell his paint-peeling breath from there. Glancing around, I again confirmed that the bar was empty. Another slow night.

“I don’t know.” I muttered to myself, keeping eyes everywhere, anywhere, but on the mangled hand. I hadn’t even looked yet, couldn’t yet own the tragedy. From deep down, a concern surfaced: my chances of learning to play the balalaika were diminishing.

A trickling sound caught my attention, and I swiveled to witness the barkeep topping off the second cup with whatever was contained in the black, label-less bottle. With a long, silent glare at the bearded man, then the glass, I picked it up. Instead of lifting the swill to my lips, however, I doused a rag and began sterilizing my scrapes. Gerd, gripping his own by the rim, made a gesture of a “toast” before dropping the foul smelling liquid past his prickly facial hair.

“Gimme your hand.” he slurred.

I merely stared at the man, my good arm swabbing a particularly nasty abrasion on my bare chest.

“Give me. Your hand.” he enunciated gruffly, ensuring that no slur muddled the meaning of his words this second time.

As a reluctant child, I brought the injury to bear on the table’s surface, looking away as soon as Gerd grasped my wrist and began peeling the sticky article of clothing off gnarled flesh.

A repulsed condolence was breathed before a sigh. “A mean wound this is.” he stated sympathetically. “But you staunched the blood with dirt quick enough. A youngster like you ought to heal alright.” he barked.

The man’s optimism infused me with argument, but the liquid-fire that followed made my body rigid as contrary thoughts melted away into painful moans. The bartender set the bottle back down before redressing the wound with a brash tenderness that could be compared to the paternal instincts of wild animals, using an unsavory rag shoved in his breeches. The antiseptic proved to be a vigorous awakening in contrast to the comfortably

numb dullness of mind and body. Still, the seduction to disconnect from reality was strong. I needed to rest soon.

Gerd caught my attention and pierced my weariness with a grim countenance. “What have you gotten yourself into?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who is supposed to know?”

“I don’t know!” I spat exasperatedly. My head glided into a praying position. “It was supposed to be some job for some lady.” I murmured, suddenly unable to keep my weary skull off the table, nestling it into a nest of folded arms. “I think the Gods have it in for me.”

“Gods? Don’t tell me you’ve finally found religion?” the barkeep scoffed.

Cocking my head to free my mouth from slick filth encrusting my flesh, I snapped. “Never touched the stuff. Talking to invisible men is one step closer to going crazy in my book!”

“Not in OUR books, though. Keeping an open mind never hurt anyone.”

Having no patience for this lecture on a GOOD night, I was in no mood to parlay on the subject after being buried and groping my way through total darkness. “Oh please.” I sneered. “Like any action borne of faith could possibly be misconstrued as having an ‘open mind’! Your Gods are just a bunch of horseshit and hocus pocu...”

“Ho!” Gerd slammed both palms on the table, rattling the glasses and jarring me to a full sitting position. “Bite your tongue and swallow your devil words!” he fumed, forming each syllable in hateful bits of drunken spite. Rarely did I see the typically friendly man that worked up. Spittle erupted from an elastic mouth, his trembling apparent in both meaty hands as he opened and closed them. Chubby pink roses blooming and fade, blooming and fade. “If I’ve EVER seen anyone who needed religion, it was YOU Din!” he accused.

I was speechless. And mildly terrified of what the large man might do. I peeked sidelong at the halberd glistening from its brackets.

Gerd’s reprimanding continued, “You lead your life according to some fool idiocy, some damned RULES you think will save you. But they won’t. They WON’T!”

I had half a mind to run.

“You use them as some shield so you don’t have t’ face the world, or face yourself!” He stabbed an accusing finger my direction, looking down the point of it at a squirming,

scraggly, weathered man. But he blinked a couple times and I witnessed intelligence draining from eyes as surely as from a leaky washbasin. “And the holy priests are goodly ‘nough.” he rambled. “But I’ve heard... I’ve heard they’ve spells.” He droned on interruptedly, a dizzy, light-headed façade taking precedence over his livid barbarian one. “They’ve spells that could... BRING down these walls. Set me beard aflame. Or even...” Gerd finally noticed that his finger still pointed at me. Using his other arm to guide the digit away, the red bear leaned in close with eyes shining glassy and unfocused. “Those priests can even raise the DEAD!” he hissed in a forced whisper which was probably as loud, if not louder, than a normal speaking voice.

Sensing the danger bleeding away with my friend’s sobriety, I egged him on. “But ya know, a flask of your ale would send those zombies right back!” I proclaimed with mock seriousness.

Gerd seemed to struggle interminably with a single thought before replying, “All the same. Gods are to be a’ feared, and I’ll not...” He swallowed, squinting as he glanced around the room. “I’ll not have you... INCITE their wrath in my place of... in my bar.” He spoke this, substituting a phrase after wrestling with the word “business”. As far as I could tell. He continued. “Nor will you... REPEAT any of them incan-tay... inkan...shuns... SPELLS you be picking up in no wizard’s library.”

I ignored the huffing. Gerd and his superstitions. Though, in light of that night’s events, even magic seemed possible, if not absolutely proven to me.

“You need a priest.” the ruddy man stated, spellbound by my injured hand and teetering to one side of his poorly-cobbled chair.

“What?!” I took my turn slamming a fist (and a half) on the table as I rose, succeeding the motion with my infirm nubs twiddling at Gerd’s direct gaze. “Should I PRAY that my fingers grow back?!”

I toppled the seat and placed a hand to steady the wall. My other pinched my nose’s sellion, careful to not brush the bloodied snot-rag serving as a medical bandage. Knowing the grizzled barkeep without actually seeing, I pictured him sitting glumly, my despair slowly working its way past the defenses of a poisonous stupor. A large man in a tiny chair, his shellacked visage staring at a knot of wood on the table in front of his protruding belly. Instead, a meaty palm found a spot on my shoulder, the weight nearly causing me to lose balance. I appreciated the effort, regardless.

“Do you mind if I sleep in the bar, Gerd?”

“Where?” He sounded surprised.

“Up in the rafters.” I pointed absently as I turned around. The lummox bent at the knees as he followed the trail to the relatively dark recesses of the criss-crossing slats, his beard acting as if it was tied to his chest. Soon, he pivoted back into a forward-facing position.

“Well.” he sniffed casually, “Alright.” But the red bear thereafter donned a stern grimace.

A bit puzzled by his mixed signals, I held my breath for a statement sure to follow.

He leaned in closer, the fetid breath laced with alcohol, the ruddy complexion looking like porous, scalable peaks. I imagined fleas frolicking freely in his fierce tangle of facial hair. “But don’t you disturb my customers.” he warned, eyebrows pinched in a scowl.

Was he serious? Losing myself in an inward struggle, I sought the best put-down of the plethora that popped to mind. Too easy. I opened my mouth to speak, but saw that Gerd had already cracked a grin, wrinkles at his temples and cheeks trying to catch up with the hilarity that was already raging in his laughing eyes. The jackass was messing with me. With a guttural belly-laugh that seemed to erupt all the way from his toes, the bartender merrily gave me a boost into the network of broad timbers that sheltered his tavern. Not before I slipped my final coin into his pocket for the inconvenience.

I nestled my posterior in the right angle formed by two beams, finding just enough room to extend my legs outward before hitting a diagonal joining the two. The dark wood smelled of smoke and soil, but wasn’t unpleasant in comparison to some of my other “beds”. Having unsmoothed, hardwood spurs that pricked the skin did decrease my opinion, though. *Still*, I told myself, *better than a night on the streets*. Between folded arms, I rested a heavy chin to chest, thankful that I at least had a vest to protect my skin from the barbed timbers. *That’s it!*, I thought furiously, *No more searching for silver linings*. It was time to put this forsaken day behind me.

Meanwhile, Gerd continued to find his self-deprecating joke absolutely hilarious, the booming laughter echoing off the plain plastered walls, my perch literally vibrating with the resonance. It died down soon enough however, as the red bear settled himself with another pour from his potent black bottle, making a to-do out of his drinking ritual below my perch. I closed my eyes in preparation for peaceful slumber.

“They killed your wee crippled friend, ya know.” he muttered grimly.

My eyes flew open. At that same instant, so did the door to the tavern, the stillness of the preceding revelation adding a dramatic flair to the entrance of a bar patron. Despite my lofty vantage, I was still facing the wrong direction, seeing little besides the sparsely covered head of my host, his drink, and the bar. A disadvantage really. But judging from the tavern keeper’s motionless silence, and a profound death grip on his flagon, the newcomer was more than just the average newcomer. Gerd knew this person, and dare I say, feared him as well. Racking my brain, I fought for a recollection of anyone who could boast that power over the red bear, whose intimidating glare, physique, and battle-halberd were all backed by substance behind the front of harsh exterior.

The door closed discreetly but firmly, squeaking on its tilted hinges before clicking into place, the next few moments utterly still. Did the person leave? But wait. Straining my

ears to the best of their ability, every muscle clenched in tension, I could make out the rhythmic footfalls of an advance. Such a soft step! He could be stomping for all I knew, he was that quiet. I gripped the triangular space wedged safely in my nook. Whoever it was had likely made his way around a shadow or two, and judging from the measured gait, had confidence if not skills in great supply.

The ruddy, drunken man rose to meet the newcomer halfway, every fiber in my being on edge, mentally screaming for Gerd to grab his glistening weapon poised above the counter. I'd never seen him use it, but this time, this confrontation, most assuredly demanded it. I could see neither of them now.

"Where is he?" the same momentum driving the footsteps somehow made its way into the rasping voice of a male stranger. The softness, of which, also caught me off guard. It was the hiss of cloth dragging upon sand. The hiss of a den of snakes. This snake was after someone, and my heart of hearts knew it to be me. Fear strangled all breath from my lungs as Gerd facilitated a slurred response.

"Who?"

I became aware that I was holding my breath, an exasperated squeal escaping my lips at the barkeep's reluctance to point me out. Unless my presence fell victim to a drunk's memory... No, it had to be the first one. Within moments of my relief, however, I heard the distinguishable slap of fist-to-face contact followed, possibly simultaneous, with a duller impact that resulted in the wind being knocked from the gruff giant. The ox had forced air audibly from lungs in a quick exhale, the grimace on his face almost visible given the strained groaning that now escaped his lips. I pitied him in every way possible.

The stranger's bellow shattered all preconception I had made to this point, almost dislodging me from my hiding spot with surprise alone. "The gutter trash street shit which you're harboring!" he shrilled, "That's who!" Another sickening sound that sent Gerd crashing into a table. "THE LEADER OF THE THIEVES' GUILD!"

Once again, I almost fell from my perch. That guild thing again? Me, the leader? Someone obviously had their stories confused. I wanted to drop down and dispute the accusation. To clear the air in a fiasco that was obviously result of a misunderstanding. To become an acting participant in the descending madness of senseless conflict unfolding below me. I wanted to drag the whole situation back into perspective, to stick up for my acquaintance in this new guy's hostile little face. But I didn't. If Gerd was reluctant to defend himself, why should I? Me, a "gutter trash street shit" who was a third his size couldn't possibly fight the battle in place of a grizzled mountain of muscle. *Besides, I told myself, I don't think the newcomer would have listened.*

Instead, I grimaced and winced, cringed and flinched through the deliberate and mechanical thrashing of the bartender, whose cries became increasingly higher pitched as both he and his tavern were reduced to tatters. Chairs met their mark across the bearded face. Tables splintered under the impact as the barkeep's weight split them in twain. Not

once did I cry out. Not one time did I betray my location. Not one time did I witness the assailant's face, his black hood drawn in tight around narrow shoulders. Gerd didn't resist, taking the full brunt of the attacks as they were intended, not once giving the indication that he was fighting back. I hated him for that. I hated the way he was all bark and no bite. I hated that he allowed that stranger to pummel him senseless, when I knew he could have fought the attacker off, even drunk. He could have won if he had but tried.

"Why do you protect him?" the newcomer sneered. "You've been reasonable in all else, compliant even. Why THIS one?"

I wondered what the man alluded to.

"I haven't seen him all night." the red bear panted, voice bubbling as if liquid poured freely from his lips.

"Lies, lies, and more lies. You never lied before. Why now?" the stranger queried with almost a tangibly thick malice dripping from every syllable.

Still, my thoughts became hung up on this line of questioning. What affiliation did the pious, stoic barkeep have with this man? Was Gerd more than appearances showed? Whether in response to my own inner question or the attacker's, Gerd made a sort of quivering sound in the negative.

"Then how do you explain THIS?!" the assailant screamed.

I listened intently for the damning piece of evidence, the one clue that indisputably betrayed my presence. *The bloody shirt!*, I chastised myself. The clothing was an obviously personal item that gave it all away! I thumped my head mutely with a fist. How could I be so stupid! But instead of hearing the rumpled flapping of a shirt being tossed, I listened carefully to a thin piece of metal as it bounced off a prone form and fell to the ground. Metal that whirred in tight concentric circles on the hardwood floor, that slapped the surface with a tinny clink as it ceased movement. I sat puzzled. The coin? My coin? It was just a common bit of currency that I slipped in his pocket as the red bear gave me a boost. But there were hundreds, thousands of them in the city. How could a coin be indicative of any single person?

A flood of thoughts drowned my senses, nothing making sense. My mind came gasping for air as those same thoughts drained at the scraping ring of an unsheathed knife. Gerd's anticipatory groveling gave me more than enough time to plug my ears and squeeze my eyes closed. Try as I might, though, I couldn't deafen the sounds of the big man scrambling backwards into a defensive position against the bar, or the horrifying screams that were to follow.

Through some inner miracle I kept my presence unknown throughout the duration, but somehow, I just never felt quite whole again. Not even considering the finger thing. Regardless, by the time the dark stranger had gotten his point across, an alarmingly quiet,

still, bartender lay propped up by his own bulk. With a glassy stare that penetrated my core, Gerd sat gaping at the very thing he had been worked over for, even cut for: me. Only the faint movement of his lips and the fact that the newcomer continued to talk to him, or to me for all I knew, provided proof of the red bear's status.

"Well," the hooded man announced loudly, shaking off his threatening demeanor as if brushing a piece of offensive lint from a tunic, "keep up the good work Gerd. We appreciate your services as always." His voice had become... professional, for lack of a better word. Respectful, charismatic, business-like, and... oddly lilting. Especially odd after hearing the stranger's savage grunting and threats for the past quarter hour. Both facets were so real, so passionate. So convincing. He laughed, a fluttery chortle at the tip of his tongue, "We'll overlook this transgression for now, given all the benefits that owning a tavern brings..." the stranger paused as if to smile brightly "...and the potency of our product". Neither the blood-thirst nor the chipper small-talk was an act, I realized with horror, a tingle running the length of my spine and back again. This man was rotten to the core and was so engrained with his line of work, so satisfied with what he did, it seemed that even outright murder would slide off his back like a water fowl. The actions he had just performed, the brutal and unprovoked beating of an unarmed man, meant no more to him than the fleas on my hide. He believed in himself, in his cause, and slept well at night. I was sure of it.

But it wasn't the stranger's demeanor that gave me pause. It was his parting words soon after. Cold, precise, and undoubtedly uttered for my benefit, the newcomer was steadfast in his belief that I had been within earshot as he left. I didn't believe him at first. It had to have been a trick. It just wasn't in the red bear's nature to... to condemn men like that. Much less for personal gain. I had noticed the clientele thinning in the joint but... The clientele! Why would the barkeep sabotage his own business?! His livelihood! The anchor in what had been described as a "sea of shit-storms". It just made no sense.

I gazed upon the prone form of my fallen mentor, my personal hero, the impromptu surrogate father I never had. And never asked for. I just looked at him in disgusted awe. Time passed like this, him muttering what could only be a prayer of forgiveness to his executive judge above, me looking down with only contempt. I simmered in it all, utilizing the time since the stranger's departure to not only defend against a return visit, but also to mull over the new information. Could he? Would he?! Was it possible that I never truly knew the depths of this man's heart?! I had happily taken for granted that I would never know Gerd's past, but to completely mistake the very nature of a man I trusted?! MY rock. MY support! MY friend to turn to! With each passing moment, the pressure built within. Fueling the fires, stoking the embers, fanning the flames. Until I could wait no longer.

"Is it true?" I asked, having vaulted onto a table and crept around the dark coagulating pools to hear the strained words of the tavern keeper. "Is it true that you sold out your customers to that man, that you drugged them and played a sympathetic ear, that you...?" I exasperated. "Did you turn them over to that psycho?"

“It’s true.”

“WHY?!” I howled. “WHY WOULD YOU BETRAY SOMEONE’S TRUST LIKE THAT?!”

“They were b-” he winced and sighed simultaneously, “Were bad men.”

“WHO ISN’T?!” I flipped over one of the few tables standing upright, wooden furniture clunking against wooden floor, heavily and hardily.

“You aren’t.”

I stared at him dumb-founded. “Fuck you.” I spat, shaking my head as if to rattle loose the proper words to express myself. “You betrayed them all. After you learned their secrets, didn’t you?” I bit my lip as I paced frantically. “After you got them to open up with a few stories, a few anecdotes, you got to the good stuff. The dark stuff. Once you tapped them dry in both thought and coin, you sold them up the FUCKING river to that-that-PSYCHO!”

“Din, I...”

“SHUT UP! I SWEAR...”

It only occurred to me later after the heat had died down, after the anger subsided, that the threat I swore in leaving Gerd’s Tavern was a little over the top. And a bit redundant given the barkeep’s pattern of behavior up to that moment. It has been one of the few things I truly regretted in my short life, and a stain on my memory. There were more to come however.

As I emerged into the moon-lit night, my own shadow cast long and low across the dusty street and sparse scattering of hovels, I instantly realized yet another mistake I had committed for that evening. Looming ominously behind the cover of a nearby hut, gesturing emphatically to what seemed a conversational partner, was the man in the black hood. Not blocks away as I had given him time to be, but right outside the bar waiting for my departure. Without a second glance, I tore off into the darkness, weaving in and out of corridors and alleyways, side streets and passages, double-backing across a quarter of the city at times while cutting across courtyards and plazas, scaling strings of rooftops and running and running, just running until I could no longer run even from the adrenaline high. My veins pumped acid. Unable to run further and with a whimper of fatigue, I crashed to the cobblestone juncture between rock and unpaved road, unsure of where I was, where to go, who to turn to, or even if I would live to see another morning.

Chapter 10: Faith

It's funny how precious life becomes in the face of imminent destruction. One never feels more alive than when the biological functions overtake whatever mental stranglehold the brain has over the body. Your conscious being can think and say whatever it wants, but the body is always primed, always geared for survival as if running off its own motivation and goals independently of the experiences that are locked away in one's own head. The exhilaration, the fear, the adrenaline, the lust, the hunger for living overpowers any and all in the face of danger. No matter the will of a person, no matter the penchant for death or the desire, no matter the infatuation with the idea or the morbid curiosity, the physical body always craves life and reacts instinctively to preserve it. And with the same universal ferocity. Bodies contend for the last scraps of food, they battle for the right to procreate, they occasionally scream for blood of rivals, and bodies will most certainly fight for their right to live, with or without the consent of their mental counterparts.

In a sense, we are all symbiotes with our bodies. The mental aspect that composes ourselves; the part that says "I am" shares space with the physical shell. We are enclosed within a creature that lives, that has needs and makes decisions. We can be at odds with our bodies while, at the same time, being co-dependant. And yet we point at our chests and say "this is me", like we encompass the entire organism of which we pilot. Like we own it. When in reality, we're just along for the ride. Cut off a piece of a man and have him identify himself. Cut off another piece and have him do the same. Continue the grisly experiment until he has no limb to point to the bone casing that houses his brain and you will find the part that truly makes a person. We see, we eat, we hear, speak and think exclusively with our heads, and even all of that real estate is not under our control. Command your heart to stop pumping blood. Command your organs to halt nutrition or to even cease digestion entirely. By will alone, have your nerves desist feeling. Turn off your growth, your healing. Make your hair and nails shorter, or stop breathing through your power alone. You can't. Should you hold your breath long enough, you'll pass out and the body will just resume normal functioning.

The body knows more than us and has a greater will for survival. It keeps a person alive no matter how brain-dead stupid they are, or how harmful to the mind/body dichotomy the person becomes. We can not ever truly fathom the incredible minutiae of the complex subtleties of the body in which we claim to own. Imbibe enough alcohol and the body begins shutting down all but the most dire functions to stay alive. Including motor functions that might otherwise continue to funnel poisons into the system. Eat too much and the body vomits. Stay still too long and the body becomes restless. Electric shock and heat make the body jump as if all on its own.

And should a person make their way into the unimaginably dry cold of our northerly desert, the body has a frigidly efficient plan that supersedes any ideas a person may have for their destiny. First, no matter the objections of the mental hostage, the body will shiver. All extremities will vibrate in tandem, urging the person to bring their limbs to their core and conserve heat, allowing the muscular movement to generate warmth, insulating the torso. The body will constrict blood vessels, specifically routing the flow

away from limbs and doing its damndest to keep the core, housing all but one of the major organs, warm and alive. The body does not care if you are a thief who utilizes your hands on a daily basis, whether you play an instrument on the street corner for a living, or even an artist working canvases with flourishes and style unseen in your generation. The point is: your body will systematically sacrifice fingers so that other pieces may live, despite any objection mustered through chattering teeth or any amount of mental berating. And the toes will go, then the limbs, skin, nose, lips, and eyes. And genitals. The body will trade any identifying, enjoyable, or otherwise controllable part of “you” so that it may continue living. A limited form of living, but living all the same.

Regardless of what we may tell ourselves or what we tell our bodies, the conscious part, the part that says “I am” is not in charge. We don’t even occupy our mental thrones interminably on a daily basis. Aside from the times when we are thrust into unconsciousness by a result of our own dumb actions, the average human mind needs an average rest period of eight hours a day. That’s one third. A third a day, a third of our lives in which we are not running the show. 33% of the time our conscious selves are not giving commands, but rather, being entertained in a make-believe dreamworld of wonder, comatose to the real world. And the rest of the time? The body tells us how to grow, what features to have, how to react, when and what to eat, when to drink, when to make love, when to exercise, and when to eventually die. The only thing that we the conscious parts do is to grasp beyond the general rules of survival and to make a general mess of things by constantly endangering ourselves and the lives of others. In that sense, “we” are but parasites in the mind/body dichotomy. Saboteurs. Hostages.

At the moment, I was awake and in control. But I was finding new ways to endanger myself. Visiting places I shouldn’t have been. With the increasingly dry weather, it was a surprise to feel anything short of a sultry atmosphere hanging thick, not the feather’s caress of a breeze that blew faintly from the north. Evidenced by stirring ripples of gray dirt on the gray hills, the wind had indeed picked up a bit. But not as much to make the night any cooler. In the very least, I had a reprieve from the droning monotony of hearing nothing at all. The zephyr blew monotone music across my ear drum, a welcome distraction from the morbid work ahead. And but a small relief from the smell.

Creeping along and hugging the shadows like a dying friend, I made way along the iron fence wrought with grief. Grief that made it hang low in places, assisted by the weight of hundreds of souls pressed against its restrictive borders, though. A somber wail from a somber field played in my ear, lamenting the living in the same way we mourn the dead. Who’s to say who had it easier?

The crypt looked different this time around. With monuments reaching higher and taller than any erected for those still on this mortal plane, the place still stood as a testament of remembrance, but with less high-strung fear and more... sorrow? Funny how most people never earned a marker for their existence until they passed on. Even then, several decades of life were reduced to not a brief paragraph, a couplet, a limerick. At worst, just a name and eight numbers chiseled into a crude epitaph pressed into the side of a piece of rock set atop your head. Even then, the markers eroded away with enough days gone by.

Chips and rain-cut ridges erasing the words. Discoloration and dark streaks carved vertical lines to the soil below. Tears from a stone. The very last thing to cry when you are gone. But the elements of nature even forget your name given enough time to wipe the name clean from the headstone. Tabula Rasa. The earth's way of dusting its hands of the fact that you ever crawled its surface. Sometimes I feel that the planet wants to forget we were ever here, that the pathetic monuments we erect to ourselves are destined to crumble after enough waiting, after enough patience. Looking on the enclosed grounds of our dead, seeing empty husks of our fallen spilling into the streets up and over their intended container, I didn't feel it had long to wait at all.

I could never get used to seeing that mound of bodies. Interwoven arms and legs. Torsos stacked as bricks in a wall of flesh. Obscene parts exposed for all to see, a modesty found only in the beautiful, the senile, or the deceased. Their faces were a spectrum of emotions, but mostly a composition of bared teeth and vacant stares, glassy eyes appearing to view things beyond this reality. I scanned the deadpile with an unintended intensity, noticing far more details than I care to remember. My vision became transfixed on one horrid, silent scream after another, successfully tearing my sight from one gravity well of despair only to be drawn into the next. What was meant to be the briefest of glances inevitably turned into a battle of willpower, again and again and again. A string of staring contests with the dead. A tournament of hollow sockets cocked at various angles, some with turgid gray flesh and others without. Some with maggots and others without. Some with lolling tongues. Some with wicked distended sneers exposing recessed gums. Some with ragged gaping wounds lanced across facades of horribly mutilated faces. Others without.

He was where I had seen him last. Half-buried under fresher corpses. Face down in a tumult of splayed forms. A jigsaw piece in a canvas of interlocking bodies so overwhelming in number, that it was difficult to discern them as individuals. Appropriating limbs to people was nigh impossible due to the twisting and abnormal positions they had taken either from being tossed, or from the natural shifting as decomposition ate away at the pile's foundation. They almost seemed to belong to one organism, one giant mass of hands, feet, and accusing eyes. Regardless, I saw him there, a small and wretched form amidst a sea of adults. Sandy hair capped a downturned head, of which I had thought I recognized earlier but was too afraid to check. The boy lay limp as was to be expected, but upon grasping his thin arm, I noticed a stiffness reminiscent of broom handles or planks of wood. I recoiled in disgust, more at myself than Aran's corpse.

Ugh. What was I even doing there? I stared pleadingly at the mop of wispy bangs that shielded the child's face. Arms reaching out to me, protruding from underneath the crushing weight of another. I seized the intruder's grubby leg and whirled him in a flailing cartwheel, an unfocused anger manifesting itself in a surprising way. The lodestone removed, a cascade of corpses rolled lazily into place where the man had been dislodged, burying the urchin more than before. I jerked maliciously at their limbs too, gritting teeth and making short frenzied growls as I tossed them aside, one by one, freeing the clutter from my poor little Aran. I knew each thumped audibly as they slid the

steep cadaverous slopes and hit the ground, but I heard nothing other than my own pulse at my temples. Gently, I flipped him over and wept alone, rivulets of salty tears forging trails through layers of dust and grime. Somehow I knew that I was the only one to cry for him.

Soul-less, life-less Aran. He stared back at me with a look of requited peace, a fierce contrast to the crushing despair that pervaded this place. Perhaps he had died well. In response, a dissoluble lump made its way from the recesses of my chest, lodging firmly in an inopportune place making it difficult to breathe. A physical barrier as if mirroring the detour erected in my mind. No. Aran had been murdered. There was no wellness to be had in that. Brushing a fat drop from the corner of my eye, I realized it to be the last I would shed for this boy. I set my jaw, brow furrowed with determination. I no longer felt sadness for him, nor would I again.

His face, no longer flushed with pigment, was smooth and taut. His flesh pulled back in what had to have been a post-mortem swelling, making him seem even more flawless, even more angelic in the bluish hue of moonlight that complimented his eyes. That would have complimented them had I not eased his lids closed with a deft movement of a single hand. His trap-mangled leg, as horrible as it ever was, seemed less of an eyesore as I looked the urchin up and down. It was a part of him as much as anything else, and it was beautiful. I thought this as I hefted the child's dead weight, throwing him easily across both shoulders, the malnutrition making him quite easy to handle. Balancing his mid-section upon my neck, I pulled the outer arm and leg stiffly around for stability as I walked, heading off once again into the darkness of an unforgiving night, plodding along with a new burden on my back. It would be difficult to justify my actions to another, but I just had to try.

I found the place easy enough, though I had never been. Most in the city hadn't if I guessed correctly. The building was supposedly one of the sights to see, an attraction for tourists that we never received or travelers from far off land. To me it was just a joke, the people who ran it the biggest swindlers and charlatans for blocks in my humble opinion. Sizing up the high masonry and the exaggerated height of window slits set stories above ground level, I shifted the dead child on my shoulders to a more comfortable position. Well, I was unimpressed. The only architectural message that I received was that someone must have an inferiority complex. Marble beasts reared majestically from their vantage point, a stiff tailwind catching me off balance as I scaled a set of broad steps.

Balancing my burden as I struggled with the cast iron door knockers, I lifted and dropped the heavy rings a couple times, and then one more for good measure. I waited patiently for the scuffling and hushed voices to subside before a heavy bar scraped free from inside and the opening creaked slowly inwards. But only just enough for a frantic eyeball to press firmly against the crack.

“Yes?”

I strangled his gaze and loomed near, “Let me in.”

“W-what for?” he stammered shyly. A small man by my own standards, his pale visage blanched even further at the gruff words.

“It’s a matter of life and death.”

He looked at me coolly, but was obviously struggling with a decision, his large rodent eyes flicking back and forth minutely. “I need to check with my broth-”

I wedged a foot into the doorjamb and returned the wide stare, issuing an undeniable challenge.

He looked downward and up again, hesitated, and I began feeling a pressure building on my foot as he winced for the effort. The little man was attempting to bar the door on me. With a slight bounce, I adjusted my cargo and slammed backward into the portal with enough force to send what I could now fully see as an older gentleman with matching stark white hair, brows, and smock, spread eagle on the colorful bits of tile. The elderly man came to and wedged himself in between rows of low-backed benches. Paying him little mind, I advanced, walking powerfully past him to the center of a dais. Other men dressed in uniform white scurried out to see the scuffle in their foyer.

The ceiling was almost impossibly high, narrow buttresses flaring out in arcs and flourishes of craftsmanship that I really hadn’t seen outside pen drawings in that man’s library so long ago. Beautiful banners and tapestries depicting various scenes of bearded humans and symbols adorned the walls, draping elegantly from golden rods over strategic places throughout the cavernous area and complimenting balconies that overlooked the pulpit of which I approached. Lit by tens of candles, the front dais was appropriately raised in the middle by tiers of steps, surrounded on all sides by rows and rows of those low-backed benches extending out in six different directions from the center. Seats that could house hundreds at a time, all of which now sat empty as if they had never been used. Marching straight up to a ceremonial altar flanked by candles and a handful of fragrant bouquets, I lay the urchin child in a pleasant resting position before I whirled on the men, whom were aiding their fallen comrade.

“BRING THIS CHILD BACK TO LIFE!” a voice, my voice, boomed resoundingly throughout the cathedral, startling the priests into a huddled cringe. They were afraid. And rightly so.

“Live up to your revered names and your revered Gods and BRING THIS CHILD TO LIFE!” I screamed, a little too much hysteria working its way into the command. “If you can do it, DO IT NOW!”

Hushed whispers passed between them before an elected representative stepped forward from the congregation, wringing his hands as he gazed up a flight of steps at my stern pose.

“Still yourself.” the priest said in what I considered a ballsy opening in the face of a raving madman, “We understand your grief, but it is a natural part of life that our lords give and take away. They bless us with so much and ask so little. It is their will that-”

“No GOD took this boy’s life.” I enunciated, “It was mortal man. Bring him back to life so that I may find him and exact revenge for this lad who will never see another sunrise in our shithole city.”

“Maybe it was for the best then,” the Priest ventured, “that our Gods saw fit to welcome him home at last.” His supple hands spread wide in an open gesture. “We shall all make it home one day, leaving this world to be reunited elsewhere.”

A moment’s silence. “Bullshit.” I snarled, curling my lip high to reveal rows of crooked teeth. “You would rather a murderer loose and controlling your destinies?” I paused to gauge my audience’s reactions. “Or is it that you would rather cower behind your barred doors as the city crumbles around you?” Several of the background priests flinched in unison. “So that’s it, then?” I lorded the new information mockingly as I paced the top step. “You would rather them all die and let the Gods sort them out then?”

“This city needs the Gods more than any other!” the representative exclaimed.

“This city needs a firm leader.” I combated, a general concurrence behind the priest taking away much of his bluster. “We need decisions,” I glared determinedly, taking a step towards the aging man of the cloth. “Order.” I spoke loudly. Another step. “Compassion.” Another. “And justice.” Face to face, now, with the representative at the stair’s base, chin held high to match this one’s stature, I squared myself and mirrored his stance. “You would let the guilty run free?”

Buckling only slightly under pressure and having difficulty in meeting my eye, the priest moved as if to cast a plea of support to his awaiting congregation. But he didn’t get the chance. Instead, I threw my disfigured limb around his throat the instant I whipped out my hookblade. Placing it easily on his collarbone, I rested my chin to his ear so that we may speak with my new negotiators, of which were pissing themselves in a fretting flurry of undirected feet shuffling and exasperated gasps. I believe we understood each other better then.

“Bring Aran back, or I’ll send another of your flock ‘home’.” I stated coldly.

Faces contorted with fear, as none of them were thinking clearly. I could see this as readily as I could feel a calm collectiveness emanating from my captive.

“Direct them.” I hissed in his ear, quickly tiring of playing the bad guy in this farce.

He choked out an answer, “What do you hope to accomplish with this foolishness?” I loosened my grip. “Killing is wrong no matter who does it.”

“I actually agree.” I answered truthfully, spinning the priest to face me as I took a step back in releasing him completely. The flock fell upon him like protective mothers to a newborn. “But some things are worth more than principles.”

Staring out from a cloud of fawning old men, the representative regarded me silently.

“Can it be done?” I asked.

His eyes spoke volumes.

“Then do it.” I said.

Convincing them was the easy part. The complex ritual to follow was strange and foreign to me, and certainly beyond anything I’d ever experienced. Though I was instructed to sit quietly on a pew, far from the elaborate gestures, chant, and interactions of the old men clad in their white pajama robes, I was still swept up in the emotion of it all, the crests and the troughs, and I sincerely felt a sympathizing connection with their efforts. A swelling spirit rose inside as hands reached and grasped for the heavens, the unifying chant reaching a crescendo, and I felt crushing despair as they lowered their voices, placing their knobby hands on Aran. The ebb and flow of their actions seemed a metaphor for their intentions: to grab pieces of their Gods and instill energy within the child. I was sold on their showmanship if nothing else, but then again, this stage was more than familiar to them all. I was in their home. But the dais did look sacred at that moment, the skinny pale codgers reaching their skinny pale arms to the sky and dipping simultaneously into a spoked wheel pattern with hands funneling invisible matter into the corpse. More candles than before were placed symbolically around and atop a podium in which a dense, lusterless, stone about the size of a human head sat. It seemed gray from most angles, but as the priests did their thing, it looked to shimmer in a passing light, in rhythm with the looping chant. I imagined a slight aura about it. Just a few minutes after the show had gone on a little too long, the representative turned to me.

“Are you sure?” he stated more than asked, measured tones coming across dull and lifeless, a stark contrast to the now glistening stone. “We have done our best, but I fear that the results will be imperfect. The chance to speak will assuredly be fleeting as the spirit is resistant.”

I blinked at the news.

The representative continued, “I fear he doesn’t wish to return.”

I nodded absently, more than a little shocked that this was actually happening. Either the clergy could easily out-bluff myself, or I was about to witness something truly amazing. I’d have to rethink life in general after this night. Gripping the polished bench, white-knuckled and breathless, I watched. The priests lifted the shimmering stone, which seemed to have taken on life of its own, in tandem and ever so slowly brought their conjoined arms lower, lower, to place it gently upon the lad’s head.

Aran gasped loudly as his eyes flew open, a sound which launched me out of my seat, hands numb, mouth agape. They had actually done it. I couldn't believe my eyes. I couldn't believe anything at all, in fact. My whole world had been rocked to its very foundations that evening and I felt a stranger in my own land. Nothing would be the same ever again. Walking statues and animated corpses... Was I dreaming? I felt faint, but a priest who was seated behind my pew, assumedly to monitor the intruder, grasped my shoulder and urged me on.

I walked as if in a dream, my mind a thousand feet away from my body. Stumbling only once, I guided myself up the short flight of stairs to the raised dais, left, right, left, right. I was a mere baby learning to move again. It was unreal, a fake, a hoax, a fraud... but there he was, looking at me sidelong, his resurrectors still crowded around the altar. I never broke eye contact, hovering along at a manageable speed. At my approach, the priests bowed their heads and turned away, leaving me with my once-dead friend.

"Hello, Din."

I nearly broke down, moisture forming a barrier from which I couldn't see. A strange and unique embarrassment invaded as I hid my mangled hand from view, freshly aware of the connection we shared and of my own previous behavior. We were akin as cripples.

"Did you need me for something?" he asked innocently, a voice that made an attempt to hit the same chipper inflections, but falling a bit short. He spoke as one brought back from the dead might.

I just couldn't find the words.

"I suppose you came to ask why I ratted you out?"

Cold-water-to-the-face surprise. "What?" I asked, the word escaping my lips as just a reflex, my mind reeling without words.

"Oh? Oh. Never mind, never mind." the corpse chuckled dryly in what seemed to be his own embarrassment. Aran closed his eyes and straightened his posture on the slab, resuming the prone, rigor-mortis position he had held before the priests called him back.

"Aran?" I thought I was losing him. Not now! "Aran!" I screamed into the cold, swollen face of the little dead boy.

"Wha-a-at?" he answered with some annoyance, raising a grimy eyelid.

That set me on my heels. "I came to find your killer." sounded so whiny carried by my own vocal chords.

The stiff little limbs got even stiffer as both eyes went wide.

“I’m going to find this man.” I vowed, consciously dropping my timber low.

A few moments passed. “He’s not a man.” Aran adopted an air of solemnity, though his expression was admittedly difficult to read through the puffiness. “He’s a monster.”

“Tell me how to find this monster.”

“I’ve never seen him before, and that’s saying a lot.” Aran confessed, pausing momentarily to collect his thoughts. “He was a shadow adept, had skills we could have used. But he was a disciplined killer.”

“What do you mean w-?”

“Clean shaven. Piercing gaze. He dressed all in black and had a way of speaking like he was two men at once. One all business, the other murderous.” the dead boy said with a wince.

The surprises kept rolling in.

Aran continued. “He approached me on the street. Threw a sack over my head. Took me back to some place where he-” The urchin’s voice sounded so frail. “He t-tortured me Din.”

I set a comforting hand on the lad’s arm, but will alone had to keep it there. The skin was clammy, rough and seemed to writhe on its own. Like a bucket of worms. A tingle shook its way up my limb and into the back of my neck where it stayed, complacent at last.

“The flippin’ gawker even took my last coin.” the urchin muttered.

“Aran,” I whispered involuntarily, “what did you mean when you said you ratted me out.” He looked shamed. “Or ‘we’? What did you mean by ‘we’?”

The dead boy sighed long and deep, the degenerative tissue making itself known in more ways than one. An awful, ragged, and hollow sound pervading the action. “I did bad, Din.” he said, the weight of the misdeed apparent in his features. A hole began to open in his cheek. “You’ve given me more than most folks do.” A thoughtful silence allowed more than a little flesh to rot away, his face becoming twisted and gruesome, the graying features and thinning skin tearing finely then falling away, collapsing in on itself in a frightening, accelerated self-consumption. I jerked my arm spasmodically away from an arm that was doing the same.

“You were always so good to me,” he rasped, eyes filming over as a translucent milk spread the surface like a cloud, “and I felt that you really cared.” Only bone and muscle remained. “I’m sorry for what I did Di-” Aran’s last words were stolen from his lungs, as I assumed he no longer had any. The jaw continued to move despite this, though, as the

little body with the mangled foot rotted and dissolved before my eyes. I took a step back as Aran's bottom palette clattered to the floor, the item disintegrating into ash before its momentum carried it off the dais. Soon, all that lay on the table was an outline of settling dust, encased in the dingy clothes of a street beggar.

I was stunned, to say the least. Words seemed so trivial, so inaccurate, so I stood silently. I waited until it felt right to move once again, for Aran to complete his passage to... wherever. When the moment had passed, when it felt that the dead boy's spirit would no longer be around to be offended by my desecration, I began corralling the soft deposits of grey particles, holding my breath as I did so. Thick neutral-smelling ash permeated the air, as I'm sure it did to my clothes and hair. It found its way into crevices and clung to me like a bad habit. The small clouds settled delicately and I managed to brush the majority of it into little piles, of which I scooped into my empty coin pouch. Sweeping my way towards where the child's torso had been, I stopped, feeling the cold links of an object buried within the gray mound. Fingers covered in tenacious soot, I brought them up for a closer inspection. A tiny, finely crafted chain kept a flat oval suspended in air, the picture of a young girl etched into its smooth surface. Her impish features were round, forgiving, and eerily wise despite her age. A familiar mop of assumedly sandy hair topped the cherub's portrait. *Aran's sister*, I thought, *the one who was sold before he escaped*. I pocketed both the necklace and the urchin's ashes as I spun on a heel, finding a secure place for them within my weathered vest.

To their credit, the priests were respectful enough to remain unnoticed throughout the exchange, surprising me a bit as I turned to find the congregation forming a wall at the dais's edge. A bit obnoxious, I would say. Wearing masks of frowning disapproval, the clergy looked ready to pick a fight or at least to bar my exit. The representative, in particular, appeared grim.

"What will you do with this information?" he questioned mechanically, a sullen certainty gripping his words when I, myself, wasn't entirely sure.

"As always..." I began, descending the stairs slowly to buy time, coming face to face with the stern visage of a perturbed priest, his geriatric cronies at the ready. I wiped a creeping smirk away before finishing. "...What I must." I stated, an undeterrable resoluteness weaving its way into my face and words.

The priest was obviously dissatisfied, but he eventually nodded reluctantly, stepping aside and serving as model to the others who followed suit. On edge and somehow expectant of an ambush, I meandered cautiously through the clergy gauntlet, knowing all too well that an exposed back was a stabbed back. Nothing happened though. I soon emerged from the high cathedral doors into a world whose very substance was becoming more and more a mystery to me, a night filled with dark corners and infinite possibilities, of unseen dangers and grand adventure. The world was bigger than me, I now understood. I couldn't encompass it, or put it in my pocket. I couldn't grasp the intricacies or fathom the extents. The things I *thought* I *knew* were unraveling at an

alarming rate, and a unique wave of agoraphobia at the sensation made me want to crawl under a rock to spend the rest of my days in quiet, closed-minded contemplation.

Chapter 11: Women

Just when you've figured everything out, just when the world starts to make sense, it doesn't. Advancement and exploration are engrained in our genetic code, and with time on our side, each generation learns more and builds upon the previous in a never-ending cycle of discovery. But the universe is too big. We'll never unlock it fully. Even our own terrestrial world is largely a mystery to us, the recesses of the deepest oceans and the densest jungles teeming with intrigue. Every square foot can not be known, just as the delving into the natural forces will never be fully complete, fully realized. The will for discovery is powerful, its spirit indomitable, but how big of a chunk have we actually bitten off the whole? Is the stuff we *know* today the stuff we'll *know* tomorrow? And for that matter, is one person's discovery the property of those who share it? Do the conquests of mankind apply to the individual, when the general populace commits no effort to the act of discovery, and rarely understands it? In my experience, most simply stand on the backs of the accomplished, leeching discovery as if it was their right, implementing man's conquests at their will, at their discretion. While still claiming to be an advanced people. Better than the previous. Better than the opposition.

Time has been kind to humans, in the sense that it allows growth, development, and a reservoir of knowledge from which to draw on for future necessity. But just because a library exists does not mean it is used. A wealth of facts and experience is at our disposal, storehouses of knowledge scribed by our predecessors, the wisdom of the past recorded for future generations. But only select excerpts readily make their way into the public eye, a torrent of fads, painfully rigid beliefs, and manipulated misinformation dominating all else. Facts are filtered by those in charge, ensuring that only the immediately beneficial or the immediately harmful are well-known. And rarely is it insight on long-term effects. Rarely is it the divulged secrets that could upset an agenda, or disrupt an immediate goal of the system's leaders. This is why popular opinions are typically the most diluted, the most misdirected, the most controlled. This is why public knowledge is not the whole story, the whole truth. The immediate information is rarely the correct information. Doubt words born of immediacy.

It's impossible to speak unbiased language, true. The man threw the dagger *to* me. The man through the dagger *at* me. The truth is often as relative as the language which shouldered it. But truth is rarely on the surface and must be pursued to find. Little if anything handed to you is the truth. Oh they may believe it fully, but how accurate is their source? About as accurate as your own. Taking information at face value is possibly the most poisonous act possible, the spoon-fed words spreading to the extremities of a society and debilitating, crippling everyone from the inside out. Thus it is a person's responsibility, their duty, to find truth to their own degree and to live by it. It is impossible to discover everything, to truly know everything, but to seek the relevant in the storm of information, the kernel of applicable knowledge in one's existence, to pursue your own bit of relevant truth and embrace it is commendable, even respected.

Still, after the pursuit, after the acquisition, it's noteworthy that truth changes, a tendency of evolving and adapting more than abrupt and sudden shifts. In this and all cases, an

open-mind is one of the most powerful devices a person can have, a brain receptive to the varied and numerous experiences and information accumulated throughout a lifetime. A vessel capable of adapting to the whims of our environment. The truth is there, undoubtedly, but what can you ever truly *know*? Is anything every truly *obvious*? What lies below that veneer?

The brothel's façade stood warm and inviting. But because of the previous night's incident, though, it wasn't surprising that not a single baiting prostitute was to be found milling about the front steps, or even an open window from what I could see. The whores were all certainly inside under close observation, in addition to the voyeurs who paid for that particular service, of course. I glanced about nervously, slipping into a state of vulnerability in remembrance of the woman's rape and my own assault, the echoes of the struggle still fresh though the wounds were well on the mend. Stroking my throat lightly, I ducked into the alleyway, confronting the avoidance I had developed head-on, and taking a moment to spot any tails I had acquired since the event at the cathedral.

That was a ballsy move, by the way. I mean, lugging a corpse across half the city. I had to do it. It's not easy to explain. You could've easily been seen. And that would've ended just great, right? Right. You need to decide right now what you're going to do, fight or flee. The man in black isn't looking to just talk, so what's going to happen when he finds you? I'm not sure. You're not sure? What kind of piss-stupid answer is that?! In all likelihood, you're going to have a knife at your throat and a second grin if you don't get your shit in order. I know. This is real. This is for keeps. I know! You've got a psycho at your heels with a penchant for cutting up your acquaintances, and you aren't going to luck out with a piece of deadwood and his drawers down will you? Scanning the area, I could find neither the worm-ridden cart nor the splintered wood I had used in defense. Wake up, ass!

I chose that moment to scale the steps and slide through the front door, seeing no indication of a follower, anyway.

I was greeted by a blast of exotic perfumes and that curious shimmery substance that seemed to coat the whores whom rested languidly about the many niches of the main foyer area. They sprung into action as soon as the door clicked behind me, several girls rushing to welcome the newcomer at once, breasts jiggling with excitement. My broad smile slipped away as easily as they returned to their positions, however, each one having a disturbing grimace of recognition plastered across their pretty faces. One lay back down across a body-sized pillow, supporting her bored head with the crook of an elbow. One sat temptingly in a chair, slouched and legs apart, her sarong tucked strategically to expose little but oh, so close. What spite. One draped herself around the broad back of a bronze statue of some beast while the last struck up a conversation with one of the several women who hadn't budged at the sight of me. It was a paradise-worthy harem in there, the amount of supple flesh splayed across the backdrop of pleasing décor mixed with the tantalizing scents and aromas was almost more than I could bear. The bevy of tasseled pillows were inviting and firm, the plants exotic and green, the surfaces marble and

shiny, the smells fresh and alluring. Everything had gold trim. A man could be struck dead in this place and not care.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” a delectable voice called from back and behind my right shoulder. I was caught off guard, admittedly, but the resulting jump seemed to amuse her. Her laughter was like honey cakes, warm and sweet. “Yeah, you’re him.” she said, with not one iota of cynicism, scorn, or disgust. I liked this one.

“Him who?”

“Corn-ay-lius”

“Cornelius”

“Cornelius.” the buxom brunette repeated, covering up her mistake with a gentle cupping of her left breast in heartfelt apology, “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh-ho-ho, no problem.” *Eyes up. Eyes up. Eyes up* “Um.” *You fool.* “What’s your name?”

She paused. “My name’s Honeycakes.” she affirmed, eyes not matching a genuine smile. A fake name. The irony did not escape me. It’s like we never met.

“*Really?*” I feigned astonishment. “You don’t say?”

“Ha ha. Yeah.” She bit her lower lip, shifting stance in such a way that her mounds rubbed softly through sheer cloth and adopted new contours at the elevation of a single shoulder. Lovely. “So, you here to see Moira?” she asked.

“Ha ha. Yeah.” Her words slowly caught up to me. “Wait, who?”

“Moira?” She seemed to submit the name as if unsure, a slight frown creasing a flawless face. “She’s my friend here. You... helped her last night.”

“Oh.” I said. All I *could* say. “How is she?”

A downturned stare told me all I needed to know.

I followed suit, looking past the comfy hand-woven rug at nothing of particular interest. *It must have been bad.*

Honeycakes broke the silence. “We think she might get better in time,” the prostitute informed, “but she won’t be having kids ever... and she can’t speak right now.” A surprising amount of rage washed quickly over her delicate features, a flush of red thrown into the mix. “That bastard took her womanhood, kids, and voice all at once!” she spat through gritted teeth, “*And* he got away!”

“Well, at least she won’t have to worry about siring some pervert’s child.” My ears heard the words as I spoke them aloud, brain registering them for the first time. I exhaled deeply in closing my eyes. *Idiot.*

The woman just sat there, thunderstruck. I could sense her thoughts through the stunned mask, a picturesque statue who was undoubtedly going to administer a well-deserved slap to my face. I consciously disabled all reflexes and stood rigid for the punishment.

Her features went soft. “Ha ha. Yeah. I guess you’re right.” *You got lucky, asshole.* “If only you could have gotten there a bit earlier.”

If you had only manned up sooner... The disappointment in myself must have been a little too evident, as the whore responded instantaneously to my sheepishness.

“Oh, we all appreciate what you did, honey!” Her hand rubbing my arm as if the biting criticism was visibly resting on my sleeve. Turning to look, I caught the baleful glare of a harlot filing her nails. Honeycakes continued, “I didn’t mean nothing. It’s just that a little earlier may have made a... you know, a difference.”

Ouch. That bite wasn’t going anywhere soon.

“Moira was just lucky you happened across them, you know... in the alley... at all.”

Lucky? With mutilated genitals and no voice? I shuddered involuntarily. “Is she around? Should I talk with her?” Wait. Once again the words escaped a little too quickly, the familiar sheepishness returning.

“She’s resting dearie... But maybe *I...* might be able to *help you out.*” With each of the last three syllables, her fingers imitated miniature legs as they raked across my groin. My manhood surged. Gods, I thought I loved that whore.

All of a sudden the door, which I had never taken the time to clear, opened forcefully, scaring whatever wits I had clean out of my skull and actually giving my physical skull a good knock in the process.

“Move, scrub.” A not-so-kind, foul-smelling pile of rags grunted at me before eyeing a particular girl and allowing himself to be led past the veil of one of the partitioned nooks near the stairwell. I was too vulnerable in this place.

“Oooo.” Honeycakes cooed over the superficial wound as she touched my scalp tentatively. Cradling my head, the prostitute made a motion to kiss the bump but took a detour and nearly planted it on my lips before I caught a wrist in each hand, one painfully, and dodged her. Then I let go.

The whore looked as if I had broken her heart; face flush, eyes watery, mouth agape. I thought briefly of giving her a hug. But with astonishing speed, velvety arm a blur, she grabbed the front of my trousers, my dick threatening to tear its way *to* her silky touch, which now formed a firm claw around my genitals. After a not-so-gentle squeeze, she withdrew almost immediately.

“Hey, what gives?” the harlot announced, loud enough to draw the attention of the whole room. “You want me or not?” Honeycakes’ voice had degenerated into a harpy’s shrill, cutting my brain into little cubes of which she passed around as h’ors derves to be ridiculed. I felt every eye boring into me, the scrutiny superseding any I’d experienced before. I felt nude and on display.

“Oh I do, I do.” I said in an attempt to sooth, holding her at arms’ length in defense against this surprising outburst. “But I need to take care of something first.”

“What? You think I can’t take care of you?” she challenged, baring her lower teeth as she jutted her jaw. Flames licked at the windows of her eyes.

“Oh no. No no no no. I, uh, just needed to see... Madame Ashani for a moment.” I said hesitantly, realizing how this all looked.

“The Madame?” Honeycakes sneered. She took a steady sweep around the foyer to rally support before focusing on me once more. I snuck a peek to either side to witness the prostitutes’ watching eagerly in my peripheral. “What do you want with that frumpy, withered old hag?” the whore’s mouth angled sharply. “She’s wrinkled enough to be your mother.”

I gritted my teeth.

“Are these not good enough for you?” the prostitute whined teasingly, supporting her breasts individually and tossing them back and forth in a rapid see-saw motion, the milk jugs seeming to slosh for dominance within the confines of her thin sarong. One woman made an encouraging “whoop” from the crowd.

Yet another yelled, “That’s enough!” the husky female voice cutting the tension like a knife, causing more than myself to jump from their skin.

Honeycakes herself bounced to attention, straight backed and eyes forward, ample bosom taking longer to cease and desist.

I turned to see an older woman at the head of the stair, a tier above ground level and a perfect place to leer menacingly at the audience. She had the girls’ rapt attention, taking but a moment to survey each face with obvious and unshielded contempt. Hiking her plainly elegant robe with the grace of a single hand, she floated down the stairs and across the room to stop a foot shy of bowling me over. I tried not to flinch. Especially

when the Madame began sizing me up, her uncomfortably probing eyes cutting to my very core.

“Zibell!” Ashani barked humorlessly, addressing the duplicitous whore, “Gather and wash the bedclothes.” The others’ jeering taunts trailed the order like a pack of wild dogs. Bitches. But the head-mistress just crinkled a weathered smirk as she eyed me keenly. “I can handle this one.” She spoke wryly, the audience boisterously cheering as the aged woman led me across the foyer and up the stairs, myself feeling too embarrassed to even look up from her grey robe as it whisked across the expensive rugs.

“Knock ‘em dead Ashani!” one of the harlots called after us.

At last out of the spotlight, away from prying eyes, away in the recesses of the brothel’s second floor in the Headmistress’s personal candlelit room with a view, the aged woman pushed me aggressively on the bed and shut the door behind us.

“It’s been a long time.” she said, folding her arms scornfully across her chest, adopting a stance of authority a few feet from my seat on the feather mattress. “What do you want?”

“I didn’t come here to fight.”

“What *do* you want?” she exasperated throwing her hands in the air, “What do you ever want?”

I stared hard at her oval face, noting the infectious silver of her hair, the little frown wrinkles around her mouth and forehead outnumbering the smile ones around the eyes. Her watery hazel orbs telling the tale of hardship, pain, and remorse. *Would my eyes look like that one day?*, I thought. This stare told her I was serious.

“I’m looking for a man.” I said.

Pause. “Well son, I think you’ve come to the wrong place.” she smiled ever so slightly, receiving no more mirth from me than an indiscreet eye roll as I slapped both palms on the downy bed, gripping the thickly woven blanket to restrain myself.

“Come on, mother!”

She stifled a giggle by pinching her tightly drawn mouth, no doubt recalling yet another humorous tantrum from my childhood. With a disciplined sweep of regained composure, though, the Madame rid herself of any outward joy. I always hated that. “You came to me.” she cajoled in reminder.

“Yeah, I did.” a flustered mal-intent suddenly clouding my objectivity. “In fact, I did so AFTER gambling on the resurrection of a dead beggar child.”

“Now what does *that* mean?” Ashani sounded offended, almost whining, though I’m certain she didn’t fully understand.

I waved the question away with impertinence. “Forget that, someone’s trying to kill me.”

“What has happened to your hand?!” she yelled, pointing squarely at the injury I had waved her off with it. The bar rag tourniquet was a crusty maroon in places.

“Did you hear me, woman? I said ‘someone is trying to kill me’!”

“I knew it.” Her limbs were in the air again.

“Gods, *how* did you *know it*?”

“I just knew.” she said, pacing an even deeper trough in the rug than what I could see. Little fibrous tumbleweeds marked her most common habit trail.

“Whatever.” I looked at everything but my fretting parent, the delicate end tables and their hourglassed vases, tasteful paintings, the elaborate metal candleholders casting deep shadows that flickered with each reversal of my mother’s direction.

“Oh, I knew, I knew. Mother’s AND woman’s intuition! I knew that you were up to no good. I knew that someday you’d just step on the wrong toes and get yourself killed. I knew that one day you’d be back begging your poor ol’ mom for help.”

“Gods. You also know that this is why I haven’t visited in years, right?” I snapped.

She froze where she stood, eyes cold and hard. With the very tips of her fingers, the other hand holding skin taut, she wiped both rims of her eyes in such a way that didn’t smear her subtle make-up.

I sighed, averting my gaze once more. “Come on, mom.”

“So. What did you need?” she sniffed, the martyr’s ‘crucify me’ tone edging slowly into her voice.

The description gushed forth as if I’d recited it a hundred times. “I need you to tell me if you’ve had a patron that dresses in a black hood, who may have a bit of an aggressive streak, and walks lightly as if he’s constantly stalking his own shadow. He may change personalities on a whim, one moment being a gentleman and the next a raving maniac. I need you to tell me everything you know about this guy: who he is, what he does, his name, his habits, possible weaknesses, whether he tips the girls et cetera et cetera.”

She sighed again, having methodical slogged through my words. “No.” she clipped immediately without thinking, the very last thing I thought she would utter.

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

“No means no.” she stated stubbornly.

“What exactly are you saying ‘no’ to?”

Her eyes closed, head tilted indignantly. “I haven’t seen him.”

“Are you *sure*?” I could feel the vice-grip of a headache coming on.

“I’m *not* sure.”

“*Well...*”

“Well, I’m not sure.”

“For shit’s sake, mother!” I exclaimed rising to my feet to look her straight in the eye. The Madame turned away obstinately, arms folded securely to chest. She was an immobile block of ice now, I knew from experience. Immune to begging, immune to barter. “Alright,” I said with finality, deciding my parting words to be a damning accusation, “but if I’m murdered, it’s gonna be on YOUR head.”

A rhythmically hollow scraping penetrated the walls. The headmistress heard it too. Frantically, I scanned the room for a hiding spot, opening the second story window only to reel backwards onto the feather mattress after looking down to the dizzying streets below. I was out of options.

Madame Ashani, no longer a cold gargoyle, tiptoed stealthily to the door, making not a sound as she listened intently. The heavy wood creaked ever so slightly in its jamb, a surefire indication that someone rested against the other side. Listening. Waiting. I could only hear these events unfold, my breathing short and shallow to conceal my position, jaw clenched in anticipation.

I sensed the door opening, a destabilized person falling into the bedroom, crashing into the solid dresser but only upsetting the items on its surface. The rattle of the candelabra and a set of eating utensils, a metal spoon clinking to the hardwood floor. What in the world?

“What in the world?!” A scream, my mother’s scream. I quickly assessed whether I would remain hidden or erupt into action, fending off the intruder with the element of surprise reversed, getting the drop on them when it was myself that had initially had the drop... put on him. On me. *Don’t hurt yourself. Better stay put.*

“Get out, get out!” The headmistress again. It sounded like she was well in control. Obviously it wasn’t the man in black barging in; he seemed to be able to stare down a

king. One of his lackeys then, perhaps to spy on me? A fierce slam brought all senses on high alert, my breath stilled for any indication of what was going on or who remained.

“Din?” The Madame. Could be a trap though. I strained to identify signs of life. Only one set of footsteps in the room, though, a softly muffled pair that padded gingerly. It would seem the headmistress had a thief’s gait, her voice becoming slightly louder as she came closer and hissed into the night. “Din?!”

Only when I heard the window shut firmly, no other indications of company, did I emerge from the slit I had sheared in the mattress, briefly pondering whether scaring the stuffing out of her would be worth the subsequent beating, or if her old heart could even take it for that matter. I decided in the negative.

Regardless, she looked mildly surprised when she turned to see me standing directly behind, covered head-to-toe in light downy feathers in varying shades of gray. But the slight dip of her composure returned at the utterance of a single word, speaking it as she grabbed a handful of plumage from my shoulder and held it to my face for inspection.

“Jumpy?” the headmistress ventured.

“A bit.” I admitted, brushing a cascade of airy moltings loose. They were everywhere, under folds of clothing, stuck to sweaty pools of exposed skin, woven in my hair, and bunched in various orifices. I stood in an avalanche of fowl that had erupted from my hiding spot in the fluffy mattress, spilling onto the floor like a snowdrift.

“It was just one of the girls, you know.”

“I didn’t know.” I stated flatly, “I don’t have a mother’s intuition.”

“You owe me a mattress.” she spoke even flatter.

“Bill me.” I said spinning on a heel as I stormed off, a blizzard of feathers trailing in my wake. I had already snatched several that had managed to penetrate my ears and nose.

But just as I had grasped the doorknob, the Madame caved. Her voice was as steadfastly independent as ever, but a stifled desperation managed to eke through. “I’m not sure, like I told you, but you might be speaking of a man named Kamal... Or Malak as he calls himself interchangeably.”

I froze, cocking an eye her direction.

“I’m not sure where you might find him-”

“I’m not looking for him.”

She ignored me. “-but Kamal visits infrequently over the years. Has quite the silver tongue and twice as much confidence to offset his... anger.” She wrung her hands absently. “We’ve had some incidents.”

“What else? Any weapons?”

“We confiscate his dagger during visits but... Din are you sure?!” she exasperated, interrupting herself with a minor outburst.

“Mother, this man may have possibly killed three this evening, including myself, if you don’t tell me what you know...”

She gasped, but still looked reserved, split on the issue of protecting clients over protecting me, her only son. Well at least as far as I knew. But a mousy woman eventually won over, using my mother’s mouth as a conduit for the information. I’d never seen that side of her, nor expected to again.

“It’s a serrated straight-dagger with a green pommel.” she droned. “The man has black hair and piercing dark eyes, a wicked grin and is always clean shaven.” She paused, but I didn’t have to urge her on. “He’s never short of coin... or energy, as I’m told. He’s insatiable.”

“Alright, alright.” I said, waving her to stop. I didn’t want a full fetish report.

“Why he doesn’t make it with that beautiful woman he’s with is beyond me.” she added, more lively in tone this time.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“His woman. His companion!” the Madame exclaimed. “She either waits patiently with the girls, or drops him off and leaves.”

Maybe I could approach the situation from a different angle after all. “Well, what does she look like?”

The headmistress’ eyes peered through the walls of recollection. “She’s tall.”

“Uh huh.”

“Has long, gorgeous hair, which she keeps covered up, but really shouldn’t.”

“Okaaay.”

“And, poor thing.” my mother’s fingers went splayed at her throat, a hushed voice that became a forceful whisper. “She has a face of tattoos.”

My heart stopped, blood replaced with crystalline ice. Electric tingles traveled from torso to extremities where they remained in place to a chilling, numbing effect.

“Wha-?” I asked, an eyelid catching halfway, my face stricken of feeling or articulation.

The Madame went unphased. “Yes. Curious thing, I know. But she never explained where she got them.” A gossipy smile snuck into a corner of the headmistress’ mouth. “Had to have been a punishment of some kind, though. No woman I’ve met would ever undergo that pain willingly.” She focused on me once more. “Except in childbirth, of course.”

“I gotta go.” I slurred, fumbling with the door and spilling into the hall.

In catching my balance, my good hand planted loudly on the opposing wall, inches away from a striking young woman with desirable features. My bracing appendage separated our faces by a mere breath, my stance leaning forward for support, hers pinned between a dolt and a hard a place. Still, she seemed more captivated than captive. Large doe eyes returned my gaze, her two brilliant orbs speaking volumes despite the woman’s silence. A real beauty, uncovered, exposed, devoid of any noticeable make-up, though I did imagine an irregular smattering of powder below her chin.

“You have real pretty eyes.” I said, hefting my weight from its position and dragging my obstinate feet unwillingly down the flight of stairs towards the only exit.

Had my graceful plodding while gripping the banister not commanded the attention of every whore in the house, then the trail of feathers certainly would have. As sure as an animal tracking through mud, my grey molting defined the exact path I took to the foyer door. A cloud of down wafted in my progression as it billowed freely in my wake.

“Madame Ashani did you over good, huh?” a whore cackled in my ear.

“Damnation, I’ve got to sit in the next time around!” another howled from a lavish seat propped against body pillows.

Nodding wildly with a forced smile, I endured the uproarious tumult of giddy laughter in anything but good humor, the feeling now starting to return to my extremities. The pins and needles at my soles were starting to dissipate.

“I hope she didn’t break anything off!”

“You’re walking kind of funny. Was it worth every copper?”

“You don’t kiss your mother with that mouth, do you?” another chimed in.

“Thank you. Thank you.” I waved, wishing to strangle each and every last harlot dead at my feet. A whore pile. A quivering mound of peddled flesh. The thought eased my ego a

bit, indulging in a forbidden and baseless fantasy to combat the demeaning effects of that feathered procession. Despite my hasty departure, though, an inconsistency in the audience caught my eye.

Amid the prostitutes, amid the jeering bitches, a thin girl stood navel-high, beaming politely at the birdman in his approach. Sky blue eyes shone from underneath a mane of sandy locks. It was the specter of Aran made flesh again, but with two working legs. She had intelligently probing eyes, but with a calm neutrality unseen in many children her age. The girl lowered her gaze respectfully, though given my momentary lack thereof, it may have been largely out of embarrassment for herself if not for me.

“What?” a harpy called out, “I thought you liked ‘em OLD!” I recognized the voice as belonging to Honeyca- Zibella. A fresh cacophony of shrieks deafened the room as I knelt down in front of the girl.

Motion slowed, I handed over Aran’s necklace, cupping the small digits around the wad of intricate chain and brooch of which her own face had been engraved. She knew what it was. Instantly, her grip formed an airtight seal, squeezing the memories and emotion away. I smiled weakly.

“He’s in a better place.” I managed, the sweet acidity of bile stinging my windpipe. Reverting to a popular phrase when no other words came to mind. I lied as all adults do, as everyone does to each other. She said nothing and remained as I left her, my last vision of the brothel being a heart-breaking image of a passive girl, staring blankly at her fist in concealment of a truth she didn’t want to acknowledge.

Well, I thought, closing the door behind me and sniffing the street’s air in an attempt to sense the next disastrous windfall, *I think it’s about time to just pluck myself and call it a night.*

Chapter 12: Reflection

I awoke with a crick in my neck, a bad night of bad dreams behind me. A purportedly bad night with low hopes in front... In general, there was an all-round bad feeling pervading every thought I had, every action I made, every breath I took. A fitful, restless day of sleep preceded my stiff arousal, nightmares stalking me at every corner. Pacing the enclosed four-cornered space, actively jogging to rid my memory, I intentionally shook myself free of disturbingly real dreams. Dreams of unmentionable pain, bolts of blue light, and a rat horde. Nightmares that were more chilling than the fearful, painful life that I had stumbled into recently. As it were. Within minutes of the impromptu exercise, I couldn't recall details of the lucid mind-numbing creations had I wanted to, or if my life depended on it for that matter.

What a useless thing, dreams. For those who even have them, they tend to come in two varieties. One was a lurid world of fantasy and wonder, where your greatest desires manifest at your fingertips and the imagination ran rampant in things it could reach and touch. The type of surreal pseudo-world that you claw desperately to get back into upon awakening. The type that if you had to piss, as I did at the moment, but it interrupted the realization of your wettest fantasies or the reunification of yourself and dead loved ones, you'd curse your bladder while simultaneously trying to trick your body back into the dream-state. Back into a creation that was infinitely better than your own miserable stinking life. I unbelted my pants and aimed for the rope draping down into the recesses of the narrow tower, watching the golden stream descend far below. Somewhere at the bottom, it splattered several half-gnawed rodent bodies that littered the floor.

The second type of useless dream would be the ridiculous mind-fuck of a nightmare. The kind of demented, sadomasochistic stuff of terror that is so tailored for your own insecurities and fears that it could only have come *from* and be administered *by* your own brain to exist at all. We are our own best friends and our own worst enemies, masters of inner torment and, occasionally, the most hateful to ourselves. I tucked my member away in clearing my throat, hawking phlegm to the abyss as I turned and made way for the ladder extending even higher. While waking from a fantasy had you clawing to get in, nightmares had you clawing out. An escapee from prison, self-inflicted torture. Running from the wardens of the soul. No other entity could be so cruel than the psyche which inflicts these injuries, these scars.

The first type of dream is useless because it gives false hope. And while hope, even dreams themselves, can be positively inspiring and even beneficial, the simple recognition of them as a false source, conjurations of a disconnected mind, disqualifying them from anything more than intangible fluff. Even acknowledging them as purely entertainment, I don't see fantasy dreams as a relief from the drudgery or a reward for a long day of suffering. It was simply a taste, a tease, a tantalizing tidbit of a life you'd never lead. It rubbed the contrast in the face of reality, tormenting in the way it goaded you with bait you were doomed to never, ever experience. Fantasy dreams aren't the dessert to a main course; they're the mirage on a desert horizon. In no way can they be acquired, the minute satisfaction of the hazy image the best you could hope to hope for. I

shook off my phobia a bit longer in scaling the wooden slats, the platform I'd taken sleep from looking as a tiny square surface in my ascent. The vertigo was unparalleled. *Don't look down*, I scolded.

If one didn't consider dreams of a bizarre nature, the mish-moshed pieces cobbled together within the fabric of sleep, the only other type were the truly horrid. The scary compilations of our worst fears realized. At the moment, I had hoped my pursuers shared a fear of heights. Hells, I'd even banked on it for the span of a day. The hatch above seemed so far, but the floor below... I kept my pace; hand over hand, over hand. Nightmares, now they were the ones I could truly do without. In a perverse way of exposing one's self to their darkest aversions, or immersing a thrashing mind into the pit of unspeakable terrors of little escape, nightmares were the opposite of fantasy yet served the same uselessness. One never learned anything by rousing from the gripping cold sweat of a bad dream, or the strangling sensation of emerging from the pit of your own mind into the tangled sheets of a ruffled bed, or the spastic fall from a cot consumed in the throes of a night terror. I gulped. Falling. The trip back down again from my loft would be the true test of composure; I knew that much for sure. My good hand driving splinters into itself out of sheer white-knuckled grip on the ladder, its less fortunate counterpart forced the trapdoor aside, allowing me just enough space to frantically slip through. I sensed the dizziness, the fresher air, could see the pink-stained clouds out to one side as the flaming star seared its path somewhere towards the west. I knew what I had decided to do, what I must do, but clung momentarily to the floor.

No being could torture a body more than the hidden jailor governing the dreams of the mind. At his disposal were tantalizing treats that, though insubstantial, shaped and broke a person, whipped and manipulated. The building up and subsequent deconstruction of the mind, again and again. A covert barrage, by comparison, to the other jailor's arsenal. Overt and unfocused abuse complimented it well, causing direct harm, direct fear. This weapon held an icy grip on the victim until the pain was too great, the response too intense to keep them under the spell of sleep. Whatever demonic possession saw fit to subject ourselves to either fantasy or nightmare, to punish with both good and bad, devoid of reason, goal, or pity... I could do without.

Mustering the strength to move, I crawled to a sitting position and finally to a shaky stand, using the massive iron-cast centerpiece as a brace. The bell moved gently at my persistent touch, and it swiveled on its supports in the bracket above. Had it a clapper, it may have rung at the motion, a snitch to my existence. A herald of my life. But I knew the hammer to be dislodged and fallen, even saw it on my initial climb, resting dead on the floor buried by dust and time. My legs wobbled, giving the impression that the whole tower swayed idly in the breeze which had accumulated since the previous night. *Maybe it's just the increased altitude*, I thought. Arms outstretched for balance, a mockery of unworthy sailors making their way back on land, I proceeded. Finding my footing. Finding the edge. I gripped the bell's support beam as I stared across the city, a ragged network of brown rooftops sprayed in sun-bleached white, the gentle curvature of the land contorting the sky and earth around me in a panorama centered on myself. I felt at the core of a bubble in that moment, looking at the world from behind glass, a visitor. A

spectator. The sun burned hot yet waning towards the horizon, casting deepening shadows on the city of the damned, contrasting a sky which seemed ethereal and inviting.

Dreams are as temporal as that sunset, I thought, and about as useless as my life has been to this world. I was the dream of the society around me, a figment in the waking reality. A minor torment, good or bad, on the collective unconscious of those around, a bipartisan sinner-saint to my environment. Each one of us hurts others just as much as we help, regardless of intention, disposition, personality, the will of the person absolutely negligible. How many had I hurt? How many had I helped? A balance seemed to persevere everywhere, including my own actions, canceling out any greater purpose of me even being there. Life lived within me and without me, would consume and outlast me, unaffected by my presence in its progression through time, negating, and ultimately forgetting I ever walked here.

“Still” I said aloud, removing an item from my inner vest, “I *am* sorry Aran”. I pinched the pouch tightly between thumb and fore-finger as I cast his ashes adrift, injecting his remains into the slipstream that promised to carry it for miles. The cloud of fine mist poured freely from the bag and gave shape to the wind which threatened to tear me free of a stranglehold on the roof’s girder, the particles dancing and darting across the city, frolicking and playing in their release. They seemed to wave a final good-bye in their retreat to the horizon, burning bright in the remaining hours of daylight. The sun was a golden disc, suspended in the air like an enormous coin. “Farewell, dreams” I muttered to the fore wind, squinting both eyes after Aran’s ashen remains. “May you find value in the gold you seek.”

I shielded the sun’s intensity in a stiff salute of the dust’s departure, hand to bandanna, the rays threatening to burn the retinas clean from my sockets. On a whim, though, I mastered perspective and pinched the sun between my remaining fingers, the bandage darkly splotched, and pretended to pluck the giant coin straight from the air. Old habits were hard to break after all. Robbing the sky, pilfering the stars. Stealing from the heavens. You never know unless you try... The act, of course, failed to my mild chagrin, having bought into the belief enough to wince as I enclosed my digits around the fire. I had imagined it to scald my fingertips. *Just as well*, I thought, a little disappointed, *Gold is the scourge of our civilization. It scalds in its own way, searing, scarring, branding anyone it touches. Anyone who comes in contact wi...*

Realization. An epiphany. Ice water thrown on the consciousness of rational thought. My brain churned anew, refreshed by discovery, the inner workings a mystery but running at speed regardless, top efficiency. The coins. It was all about the coins! Everything that was happening encircled those coins. *Doesn’t it always?* No. Well, yes, but this is the answer. I’m sure of it. *What are you ever sure of? What do you ever know? Look at yourself. Look hard, have you ever done one thing correctly?* This is different. *No! No different. It’s the same, all the same. But... But nothing! You shouldn’t even be out here! When you can see the world, the world can see you. Either scurry inside and wait until this storm blows over, or do everyone a favor and just... let go.* I squeezed tighter at these thoughts. I wanted to make my way backwards to the bell, towards a stable platform, but

doubted if my motor functions would allow me that much. *It's not hard... just... let go.* I squeezed my eyes even tighter. *Why are you more afraid of this than what's out there?* An inner beckoning motioned for me to open my eyes, to scan the city below. I looked down with a start and felt the support beam digging into both arms painfully. *Come on... It's not that bad...* I bit my lip and shook, attempting to shunt my inner focus to something tangible, something real. Something that wasn't a Gods-damned voice in my head! *Din...* No! *Din... Din...* My thoughts whispered.

“RAAAAARGH!” I shouted across the cityscape, reaching deep and finding mutual compliance in strong muscles. Muscles that kicked me off the beam and sent me sprawling on a beautifully fixed platform, face to roof, the enormous and defunct metal bell looming monstrously to my right. The large curves overshadowed my view like a concerned giant peering over a fallen comrade. “No.” the words wrenched from my own throat, speaking to only myself. “I have preparations to make.”

Chapter 13: Game

There I was, an unwavering rock amid a river of drab, huddled forms. The waning daylight peaking across the congested network of stone rooftops seemed to reveal a driving throng of honest, hard-working people, but I knew better... They were cowards. They were aggressive. They had dabbled in cannibalism and carried disease. They were poor. And they were desperate. These were folks who would create an army of subjugated children to manage a slave empire, the same who'd send their young daughters away to whorehouses and place hunting traps around their compounds to mangle escapees. These were people who'd sell their bodies to any passing buyer, *and* cop an attitude about it. These were bums with personality disorders, muscle-bound machismo types with sexual deviancies, merchants looking to gyp a customer any way imaginable. They were rapists, thieves, crooks and murderers. Peddlers of everything under the sun, pushers and embezzlers, alcoholics, addicts, muggers, smugglers, and traitors, pick-pockets and kidnappers, liars, cheats, and conspirators, whores and shadow-lurkers, beggars, assassins, hit men, brawlers, dangerous temptresses and duplicitous schizophrenics.

And yet I looked for a single man, one apart from the rest. One who, knowingly or not, stood as the lynchpin to an operation which was still largely a mystery to me. A plot of several conspirators, of many roles. Powerful people in a powerful game, with enigmatic magic and sharpened blades at their ready disposal. Who bragged every advantage: of power, of skill, of numbers, of experience, mystery, and resources. A secret war in which I knew little, and cared little, about. Still, I sought that man because I had been betrayed, maimed, bruised, almost abducted, nearly killed, and subsequently hunted. Those around me had suffered and bled, an innocent was dead, and my own stubby digits screamed for resolution. I sought him because I was compelled by unknown forces to take a stand, to get a jump on those undoubtedly closing on my position. Lugging corpses and trailing feathers would only allow me to run so far in a city of finite width and darkness...

Wedge into the shadowy recesses of two claustrophobically erected buildings, I waited for him with patience. The dusk rush was obviously narrow-minded as usual, each person focused on their individual trek across a dangerous city at a dangerous time, fighting a surf of bodies to get home and in no likelihood aware of my current position in the dim light. As far as I knew. I scanned the crowd, furtively looking for the tell-tale attire and distinguishable features, the man's... unique appearance proven to be easy to spot. Should he pass by. *I wonder if he managed to get his self killed in the span of a single day.* I pondered this silently. *Or was too frightened to leave his home?* I rattled off reasons to my own bemused frustration, heavier on the frustration as time wore on. *Maybe he wizened up, or found a new route?* I furrowed cumbersome brows. *Maybe the fucking gawker gave up, or quit his role in the conspiracy?* Unlikely. Somehow, I felt the whole thing ran deeper, implicated more than just my pursuers, victimized more than just myself. *Maybe he just simply took a day off,* my wonderfully constructive inner voice taunted. "Maybe you should shut up."

I clapped a hand over my mouth at the surprising volume, a useless effort given how noisy the shuffle was and how little anyone was paying anyone else any mind. Especially not some loon talking to himself in the shade. *Sounds like you need to get a hold on yourself*; a part of me chastised another.

Just when I was about to go off and find a sheltered hiding spot for the evening, just when I had given up hope... I waited some more. But when the waiting was over, when the sun beat the sky bloody and deep black bruises emerged from the crevices and encroached the surrounding architecture, when the dusk rush was burning the last shreds of daylight and quickened their already hasty withdrawal, that is when I saw him. Or rather, I saw his hat. His silly, stupid, asinine, frivolous, come-hit-me-I-carry-cash-and-crumple, hat. The one with the flaming red feather, which ducked and weaved as a buoy in the crowd. That same broom-handle spine. That same bobbing gait. A burdening feeling of *déjà vu* overtook me but this time, I intended to call the shots.

Locked on the fop's gangly visage, I slithered free from my concealment and entered willingly into the flow of pedestrian stink, cast adrift in the river of desperation. Bandana in place as a secondary precaution, I tracked the sun's position behind individual buildings as a primary defense against losing sight of the mark from blinding sunspots. Like last time. A deathly focus consumed my features, eyes honed on the garish needle in the sweaty haystack. He avoided no one, being carried freely along as if possessing no will of his own, no desire to fight the crowd's collective direction or to resist in the mob's march from street to street, lane to lane in the criss-crossing pattern as the road opened up into others before being diverted by a wedge of tenements. His mind seemed to be elsewhere, his wits absent. Staring hard into his soul, I saw that the offending gawker had no place to be at the moment. He had no aim, no prerogative; he simply ambled where the swarm led him. He wasn't headed anywhere, not for fun, not for purpose. His intent was clear: to gain something, someone, and lose something else in the process.

What a devious game they play, I commended silently. The average thief wouldn't suspect such a reversal from *this* man, this decoy. I studied the profile intently, finding an avenue in the crowd that matched pace tens of feet parallel. Burnt amber hair fell loosely around a face a few hands' breadth above the human surf. Squinting eyes, a hooked nose, low brow, and protruding Adam's apple. A diminished chin and ears dwarfing his narrow head. I entertained the notion of the fop gliding away on ears spread wide and flapping, soaring away on the updraft of fumes, riding the backs of the poor, flaunting his wealth for all to see while nose-diving through the air. *This* is the one who started it all, the catalyst, the keystone. This was the courier, the carrier, the target, the mark. His stupid face among others killed Aran, had maimed ME.

In my tunnel vision of penetrating malice, my peripheral severely shunted, I stumbled headlong into a bruiser in front, one who wasn't too amused at my transgression. But, with an entirely submissive gesture and a pleading look, I managed to duck the meathead before he could deck me, flitting further into the crowd than he could reach. I had to be more careful. Adopting a new resolve, all-professional with a stymied sense of bubbling

personal vendetta, I tailed the feathered gawker with a different mindset. There was no telling how many chances I'd get, so it was important to get it right. This was business.

Finding myself a few feet behind the pomp, I did my best to look indifferent, to seem unconcerned with those around me. To be a little more aware of my surroundings. It was an exercise in discipline, in self-control. It was about bringing my skills to a new level and deflecting curious onlookers who happened to see a shirtless bum staring daggers into the back of a nobleblood. I made no excuses about revenge, about reciprocation, but there was always time for self-improvement. Besides, had the fop any lookouts, any silent wingmen in the crowd, they would certainly notice the intent if not my hatred. *There's a thought*, I sighed. I still didn't completely understand my opposition, *or* their motives. Only assumptions on their methods.

I decided to make my move in the crowd, not wishing to cause a confrontation in the limited confines of some side passage. The likes of which I knew this noble was privy to strolling. The last thing I needed was to be boxed in on either side of a ten-foot stretch of back alleyway, blades of any caliber at the ready and blocking escape. What if I was the one being tailed? What if I was being watched? A bit unnerved, I glanced around, trying to catch the gaze of prying eyes in retreat, hidden threats in plain sight. I saw none. *But*, I condescended, *you wouldn't be able to spot a professional*. I always knew just what to say.

Bodies pressed in from all sides as I feigned disinterest with the man in the feathered cap. The streets seemed to narrow. Buildings loomed tall and appeared to curve inward, leering critically overhead as the insects of humanity scurried about their barren facets, guided and controlled on their way out of the city's center. I eyed them, the buildings, suspiciously. *What the Hells do you think you're doing?* Before I lost my nerve, before I just simply lost 'it' in the middle of this throng, I had to do it. The feather beckoned. It danced and flailed, waved and flickered with every motion of the crowd captured in its airy movements. A red plume of destiny. Of fate. It marked my objective like a lighthouse guiding a ship ashore. Life knew my course better than I did, a disturbing revelation from a disturbed mind. But does life know best? *Quit dawdling and man up*, a piece of me berated.

I swooped in. Falling into the appropriate angle, I positioned myself behind and askew of the gawker's purse which I confirmed to be there, swinging idly with every jostling step. It slapped the man's side as routinely as the footfalls tapped flagstone, a sure indication to him of its presence. He would certainly notice it missing. I glanced up though, finding only the feather looking on passively, awaiting but one of many probably thefts it had monitored. That thought was creepy, and yet I acted, quickly, soundly, deftly. I hooked my blade around the drawstring, the weight of several coins creating perfect tension, and sliced it clean through, catching it in a ready hand. I had it! Time to make myself scarce... But as a reflex, I snatched what seemed to be the only witness: the crimson accessory, from the pomp's hat before scrambling perpendicular to the flow, stealing away into an alley before even I had time to register what had transpired.

There they were. Three copper coins, just as before, tucked nicely into an indiscreet tan pouch. Just as before. I hugged my knees in thought, peering down the mouth of the drawstring bag at my tainted treasure. And it *was* tainted; I thought I knew that much by then. Literally anyone who came in contact with the coins befell a cruel intent. Gerd, with his beating. Whatever happened to Aran. Me... Me, dumb enough to fall for such an obvious trap. All three of us had an accursed coin on our person at the time. The coins had to exist as beacons for danger, more specifically, either the schizophrenic man in black or the tattooed temptress. Both of whom knew each other according to Madame Ashani's recollections. It would seem that reason, as warped and ridiculous as it sounded, would indicate a connection between the little copper discs and a visit from the assassin and his lady friend. Unless I was being tailed. Legs tensed as springs, I nearly bolted reflexively at the idea. "No. No." I soothed, "I do some regrettable things, but I'm good enough to spot a shadow." *You would hope, at least.* I stiffened a lip with confidence. No, the coins had to be some form of tracking. The only other explanation would be a string of extremely bad luck. I sighed pitifully. But the true question was: which did I now believe in more, magic or luck?

The coins spilled carelessly into the alley at my feet, the tinny clinking of metal resounding small and insignificant on the packed earth interspersed with stones. I scrutinized them meticulously. All this fuss over something so trifling. I gazed lazily left and right from a squat position, my initial instinct to shield the currency superseded by an avoidant behavior, an almost infectious quality surrounding the thin scraps of metal. What a waste. The things I could buy... And yet, I wished someone would just take them, remove the possibilities, remove the threat, the coins most assuredly useless to anyone had they the suspected ability of summoning villains. Although the killer/temptress duo seemed to work late, I was understandably anxious, my preparations incomplete. Unfinished. It was simply unacceptable to lead them straight to me, straight into a direct confrontation. Direct suicide. That would be foolish, even by my own standards. No, I planned on doing what I'd inadvertently done before: to dole out the coins. Dole out the targets.

I stared at them quietly, transfixed on something just beyond the gritty floor on which the discs lay. The alley was dark and growing darker, the dusk rush thinning proportionately though I continued to hear the hushed roar of their passage in the near distance. I knew the ultimate answer, knew what I had already decided in my own haste to get here, but contemplative procedure begged re-evaluation. I felt a nagging child of an emotion, guilt, tugging gently on the corners of my mind. To plant a coin on an unsuspecting dupe. To endanger a bystander. Was that the way this scenario would unfold, a dangerous experiment monitored from afar? Could I really do that? Was it morally better that I use someone I didn't know, someone who didn't know me? I thought back to the pain I'd unwillingly caused over the last couple of days, the injuries that did occur and could have occurred because of proximity. Association seemed as damning as anything else to my pursuers. Gods, all those people! Were they assaulted in a similar fashion? The whores, my own mother, the bum, that rapist, the priests? For all I knew, even the butcher who sold me the massive leg of meat could be cold and laid out over the dead pile, victim of having met me. Focus, had to keep focus. The other victims were unlikely; Gerd, Aran,

and myself had been the only ones with the offending coins. Except for the butcher. I cradled my nasal septum between two knuckles, eyes closed. What were they *really* after? What did *they want* from me, from anybody? The white noise of mass shuffling continued to echo across the artificial tunnel of barren alley, the din of feet whispering against filthy stone acting as masseur to my temples, to my hesitation. *There are plenty of people, a voice cooed, you just need one.*

Wearing the empty pouch reversed and as a finger-less mitten, I picked the coins up individually and flipped the bag right side out. *Just one. Just one. Then the work will be done.* It was a cold, calculating, almost demented logic... *People die all the time here.* ...but still logic. I found myself in a light trot, unblinking, unthinking, just motion. My eyes were vacant, but my actions flowed. Sympathy had been excised cleanly from my thoughts. I had no focus, only compliance with an inner force, my self-concept demoted to passenger as I watched my body enter the stream of the unwashed masses. I watched helplessly, carelessly, as my scrawny form was guided to a man of hulking stature, how my vessel fell into a rhythmic pace. Perhaps the larger man would fare better in a fight? But it wasn't me who had chosen him, I couldn't even think straight. I felt nothing, heard and saw little, reality seeming to morph into a crawl and was sensed many moments after it had occurred, only with a grainy clarity and washed out. The sounds I knew to be there were heard deeper, indistinct, as if my head was submerged. The sense of touch I had once possessed was replaced by only a dull, general pressure on different extremities. Frighteningly, it wasn't frightening at all, a comfortable numbness pervading both my flesh and skull, insulating my mind with the soothing lull of a warm hug. I seemed to be okay with that, but my body still moved deftly, acutely. Skillfully, silently, the tiny hand I once controlled slipped a single disc from the concealed pouch and smoothly inserted the coin into a curved scabbard that waggled stiffly at the man's waist. The coin vanished as if it was never there, the hand regaining the inconspicuous swing that matched the tempered footfalls in their nonchalance. It was done. The big man was marked and none the wiser.

Unapologetically, I looked on, *feeling* them happen more than guiding my own thoughts to their conclusions. We all have less control over other beings relative to ourselves and, at the time, I had less control over my own actions than any other. Including the man in black, whatever he would subsequently choose to do. It was out of my hands. What I did wasn't of my doing. A piece of myself may have willed it to happen, yes, but it wasn't my whole, my core, my entirety. Wasn't my fault. Who wants to be held responsible for their thoughts alone? Wouldn't we all be guilty? A crime does not exist if a person did not commit it, just as my thoughts were inconsequential to my actions, and my actions were inconsequential to someone else's actions. It wasn't my crime if I provoked a person to commit it. It simply wasn't murder if I didn't plunge the knife. Who wants to take responsibility for their role in the world, affiliate themselves with the atrocities committed daily? Society: an aggregation of man-sized, isolated islands.

The mark and I continued as we were for some time, though I witnessed my body cunningly tail him from various angles within a trailing semi-circle. To avoid suspicion. In the end though, it mattered little, as the burly man was too eager to arrive at his clay

hut on the outskirts of town than to look over his shoulder, too reliant on his muscles and scimitar to worry about confrontation. This guy would be correct in the assumption that no one in his right mind would cross him. Only me.

The sky dimmed and the faint twinkling of distant stars emerged with the last fiery peek of the sun over the shimmering horizon. The journey found us somewhere west of the outer-most rim of the city's architectural expansion, the once indomitable progress of urban development falling short of consuming the quaint dwellings where I stood at its fringes. Looking east, the broad specter of geometric shapes traced a pattern of ramparts indicating our origin; out west, flat arid desert contrasted with a handful of jagged embankments I had heard to be unreachable, un-climbable mountains. The sliver of visible fire accentuated the deadly terrain as it dipped behind what looked like the land's teeth.

I'd actually never been that far out of the city. Situated on the fulcrum, I felt between two worlds at that moment, one an inhospitable hell that we'd created, the other an inhospitable hell that we didn't. Man and nature, nature and man. An unforgiving balance I knew was destined to collapse at some point, each side having been steadfastly against the other for so long. The termination of man being the boon of nature. The termination of nature being the bane of man. Host and parasite, the fragile bonds we weave. To the south, the irrigation ditch ran like a dry earthen scar amid the clusters of hovels situated at its banks, our saving grace should nature be willing. I was mildly surprised it extended this far out, but there it was, intended to redirect rainfall from the streets of the city, which was notorious for smelly, stagnant pools of water refusing to absorb into the soil. When it actually rained.

In mocking response, a tepid breeze from the desert blew lightly at my cheeks, bringing my awareness to bear on gusts of warm wind. I blinked. As for the first time, I noticed the dry harshness of my surroundings. I noticed the low, inclined walls I sat cross-legged between. I noticed the shallow mound situated a foot in front of me and the granulated sand that clung tenaciously to my fingers. Clung to my bandage. I winced in wriggling my left hand, testing how far the microscopic pebbles had permeated the injury. Where the hell was I? What was I doing? I... didn't remember sitting, nor creating the earthen mound in front of me. More than a bit dazed, I rose to aching feet, body listing to one side and sore at every joint or vertebrae. Blood drained from my head in the movement, a dizzy wave of nausea waxing and waning as I worked stiff muscles, brushing the dirt that had collected in my various crevices and shook loose from my pants in light puffs.

The sky somehow caught my attention, pinpoints of faceted light in full bloom contrasting the consistently inky bluish-black of deep night, not the colorful gradient just after sunset. No, it extended across the horizon and persisted everywhere above. What the Hells? Time had passed, an inordinate amount of time. I looked at my feet, the mound, and to the sides, twin ridges of steep embankments flanking me, a triangular depression of water-cut rivulets somewhere ahead. I was standing at the mouth of the irrigation trench, the realization unveiling itself slowly, near the delta at the end of the emaciated

canal. The surrounding banks stood about chest-level, the modest adobe hovels looming tall and stretching outward as far as my vision could go.

And the tracking coins are buried at your feet. “What?” I started, startled backward as if a serpent lay coiled at my toes. *You should get moving;* the inner voice warned passively, mundanely, *they’ll be here soon.*

Chapter 14: Confrontation

I had broken off into a frenetic run, diving behind the first sign of cover in exiting the exposed ditch. As it would turn out, though, a tense quarter sandglass of second-guessing passed before I finally succumbed, deciding to risk transfer yet again to a more secure position shadowing the mark's hovel. In the end, I wound up under a pile of rotted boards thrown against the side of a vacant shed. The soil was softer on the outskirts, remaining unpacked by the incessant tramping of thousands of wandering feet, allowing me to dig into a tight position even further. I covered what parts I could with the shifting sand, bracing my limbs in coiled, though comfortable, positions underneath a composite blanket of granules and dirt. There, I waited, comforted by the fact my view faced east towards the city and encompassed the targeted dwelling, but also that I was well concealed for a position to spring into a sprint should the need arise. The best hiding spot I would find.

Throughout the night's escapades, I saw nary a soul despite their presence sporadically evidenced by an oil lamp or truncated candle burning low. Not one curious face framed by a cracked door or the passing shadow of an insomniac, just the still darkness interrupted by the isolated candle on an occasional sill. These were placed in elevated windows, ovular portholes cut high in the walls, as indications of occupancy though they inadvertently gave the dual-message of disposable income. Enough money to burn the midnight oil was enough to feed a hungry man for a few days. I wondered if that was even considered, or if the false security of fending off squatters and casual thieves simply won over in the struggle. The mark had one such lamp and at least one such window on my side, the hovel's opposing wall remaining unknown. A minor detail I should have surveyed before digging in, but no matter. From my position I saw the hut's only door, which was undoubtedly barred from the inside given customary practice. A modest level of security. I needed one of these huts.

Just as I needed the peaceful feeling welling inside me. The place was tranquil, calming, had at least the semblance of a tightly-knit community, people actually constructing their homes in huddled proximity. Actually choosing to live amongst each other, for protection or camaraderie remained undeclared. The sky expanded infinitely, unobscured by ostentatious architecture or gaudy design. Instead, a full arc of countless stars punched holes in the canvas that encompassed us, whose edges were the horizon. Innumerable insects sang their praise of the night, serenading me invisibly with chirrups emanating from everywhere and nowhere at once. A lulling white noise that was absent in the inner city. Half-buried in warm earth, trickles of sand gliding between my toes, I felt more in-tune with nature than ever before, closing my eyes momentarily to experience the full sensation. I imagined the irrigation ditch brimming with cool flowing water and pictured the barren fields ripe with harvest. Patches of edible green replacing dusty brown. Pools of crystal blue replacing... dusty brown. People smiled at one another because of this, because of the bounty. They appreciated the abundance. They appreciated one another. A paradise existed on the outskirts of civilization, a harmony between man and nature; I could see this now. But only if both sides were willing.

Nature silenced its insects. No more singing. The serenade ended abruptly, pulling the rug from underneath my fantasy and leaving me feeling overextended and disillusioned. Hope-groggy. World-weary. Prying my bleary eyes from their respite, I stared accusingly out to the darkness, the source of the disturbance becoming clear.

Two figures approached from the east. Both glided effortlessly in soft sand I knew to be taxing on the thighs, but only one of them visibly discernible. A tan cloak shrouded the straight-backed figure, cinched at the waist and voluminous, billowing elegantly in the slight headwind. A dramatic flair exuding confidence and inferred power. The other was harder to see, a trick of the eye causing the stooped posture to appear shorter and recessive with the background. The black form appeared featureless, without personality or emotion somehow. It crept along unhurriedly, methodically, persistence driving a razor's edge. The gait was slower, the only true telling that it was indeed not a shadow of the first. They briskly closed the distance between themselves and my location, a mild panic gripping my throat. Briefly, I thought my hiding spot as rotten as the wood I had burrowed under, my muscles geared for flight being held in check only by dwindling will. I was ready to run.

Mercifully, with a sinister point of the black figure the duo came to a halt just outside the mark's dwelling merely tens of feet short of my position. An ominous air surrounded the scene and their unspoken exchanges. They communicated freely enough, though my adept ears heard nothing, even at such a range to sense the whispers of their clothing as the fabric brushed itself in places. They were deadly silent. Falling into action, the second figure, whom I could now tell was at least a hand's length taller than the first, pressed lightly on the door, controlling the movement with his center of gravity versus the weaker dodgier motion of fingers and arms. I saw not what he subsequently tried on the jamb, his torso obscuring all, but instead witnessed the frustration in his shortened movements after yielding in the attempt. The shadow backed a few paces, scouring for entry, the whip-like qualities of his spine and limbs betraying a temperament beyond control. He soon disappeared behind the structure, leaving the woman I knew to be hidden beneath the tan cloak waiting, though motionless throughout his efforts. Within moments, the door opened slowly, the shadow extricating himself carefully from inside, trading places with his counterpart whom bowed gracefully in entering. All this done with exceptional speed. All this done with practiced efficiency.

It was the shadow's turn to wait, somehow finding a way to appear agonizingly restrained even while resting idly near the closed door. He fidgeted reflexively, fingers drumming lightly on his hip, legs shifting weight in a rhythmic tempo. But the shadow froze momentarily, clenching what had to be a holstered weapon around his belt, as a shrill yelp pierced the thick hovel walls. I tensed as well, unable to determine the nature or even the gender of the squeal. We sat like that for what seemed an eternity before simultaneously relaxing at the flood of subdued murmurs of varying pitch which soon followed. Two people were having a conversation within the dirt walls. And I had an idea of what they talked about.

A cramp developed in the time the temptress needed to administer her beguiling offer. Her sales pitch of death. The tingling began at the knee, and worked its way into my inner thigh, where it developed into a painful knot that demanded all attention. My body didn't like the position after all. Try as I might, I couldn't keep the unfocus long enough, the ample agony excruciatingly sharp. I ignored the cramp as best I could, but reflexively, the leg kicked of its own accord, the spastic jerk bumping the base of a timber which in turn made a modest noise against the shed. The shadow, of course, heard this. Before I plowed my head sidelong against the concealing sand, averting my gaze in case their moist reflectivity gave me away, I had seen his knotted form stiffen once again. Instinct screamed for an outright dash, but fear coupled with another sense a sense I couldn't explain, held me fast. Time went by, probably less time than it felt but I kept still, regardless of the mounting tension. Regardless of what every fiber in my being screamed for. Regardless of the second wave of mounting cramps. I kept my trembling to a minimum, kept my eyes winced shut, breathing shallow. I was astounded by my own self control, in fact. But still, nothing happened. I heard no footsteps, sensed no approach of any kind. From *any* direction. My ears strained for input, my body, buried as it was, became a sensory organ, feeling for vibration, for disturbances that would foretell a walking pattern. Nothing. In one of the most fearsome choices of my short life, I inflated my lungs and, moving ever so slowly, peered at the shadow's last known position. Nothing at all. He wasn't there. My heart simultaneously sank into my stomach, skipped a beat, and lodged in my throat. At that exact moment however, the door opened and a tan robe emerged. Within a heartbeat felt throughout the body, one enormous throb that pulsed in every limb, my mass seeming to double in size with that single pulse, the shadow emerged from behind the mark's hovel. He stood at the ready, a visible hunger evident in splayed hands, fingers spread wide in midair. He froze as a lapdog, awaiting table-scraps from a master who, at any moment, would toss him a morsel.

"Kill him." a cold voice breathed into the hot wind, causing a flurry of gusts in its wake. And similar shivers down my spine. At that simple command, the temptress strolled away, casually heading in direction of the irrigation ditch.

This is your chance, the inner me prodded liltily, You're ready. I'm not ready. You're as ready as you'll ever be. You mustn't run away. I want to. You won't. Go. Go do what you came to do. And just what is that? Just go...

I went. Crawling on all fours, scrambling as lightly as possible on loose soil, monitoring the temptress' departure as best I could, I made it to the opposite side of the hut with little noise. The momentary exposure across the gap was fleeting, but harrowing.

From there, I had my first view of the hovel's interior. Standing on tiptoes, witnessing the scene play out from the oval cut high in the wall. An enormous man was poised behind a curved length of broad metal, its glinting edge winking death in the lamplight. A massive sword to complement a massive man. Though backed to a corner, he stood his ground, sizing up the diminutive attacker, easily half his mass but still a bit larger than myself. The other padded gently toward and around the target, utilizing a step I was all too familiar with, outside of foot before inside, toes before heel. The shadow held his dagger

closely to the torso but reversed, pointing at the elbow. I could see the exquisite design of the weapon, the serrated edge, the jeweled pommel. I saw the tense black form wound tight like a spring, circling the larger man with intent. I still saw nothing of his face, this Malak or Kamal or whoever, but I envisioned his face to be contorted, a sheer malice dripping with bloodlust.

“Like I told yer woman, I never stole nothing!” the big man barked in defense. Maybe he, too, realized the disadvantage of a big sword in a small, low-ceilinged room. “And I’m not coming with ye!”

He got no response, other than one more step closer to his executioner. The big man braced himself with an arm extended backward against the clay walls. A sniveling voice quavered past a trembling lip: “It don’t have to be like this! Who are you people anyway?! What have I done?!”

“Bark and whine. Bark and whine! I’m still going to jump rope with your intestines!” the attacker sneered.

The target’s face blanched with equal parts terror and disgust, a mixture of emotions playing across features like a projection. He didn’t know what to make of the horrific mental image, what to make of the whole situation other than to react as all cornered animals react. Arms bulging with unadulterated strength, the man erupted into action, accompanying his attack with a terrifying guttural howl that shook the earthen home. A two-pronged assault, blade and bellow, both cutting the air with fearsome results. The scimitar, however, missed its mark, a lightning-quick maneuver on the shadow’s part aiding in the curved blade’s arc whooshing wide past his shoulders and becoming lodged deeply in an end table with a muted ‘thock’. Like a serpent’s fang, the jeweled dagger flashed out, piercing the man’s hand and recoiling before any involved knew the difference. A fresh trickle bled freely, the liquid limning the man’s knuckles much like the lamp’s light shining brilliantly along the contours of the stationary sword. The cornered man tried a new tactic, uprooting the small bit of furniture by its new handle, despite the pain, and kicked it loose at his opponent, who in turn made a minor dive before being pinned. The shoddy table exploded on impact, stubby legs clattering every which way. Stepping forward, scimitar high, tip touching ceiling, confidence refreshed, the muscled target brought his sword down swiftly in a vertical cleave, aiming for the black hood which enshrouded his foe, now on the floor. The shadow rolled just as swiftly, swifter, the vicious swipe gouging a deep scar in the stamped earth where his head had been. But before the wicked scimitar made a second attempt, an angled foot found the big man’s groin, sternum, jaw, then sword arm, dropping him like a sack of rocks first to his knees, then backward onto his haunches. The wind, wits, weapon and much more knocked free, the formidable target slumped in a helpless, amorphous pile against the opposite corner, drooling like a teething babe with eyes firmly closed.

“Sorry about this.” the shadow said in an upbeat cheer, clearly enjoying every moment. He advanced and looked down upon his target, weapon poised pitilessly above the

muscled man's exposed chest, the owner's head lolled forward in a comatose stupor. "But I'm afraid your time is up."

A blade ripped flesh in a jagged tear, chunks of organic flotsam slopping loose as tiny beads of blood trailed the murdering hand in its arcing motion. Droplets sparkled in the lamp light and found a final resting place spattering a nearby bed of rags. Countless dots growing larger as they were absorbed into the cloth. A red mist hung lightly in the air, a complementing hue to the stream spilling unhindered down the victim's chest, running rivulets across his clothing and skin. Pouring his life as easily as a pitcher serving water. Kamal, or Malak as he called himself interchangeably, dropped at my feet, his throat viciously torn from behind. My hookblade glistening in the light, slippery underneath trembling fingers. The loathsome weapon clattered to the floor. I raised my crimson hand for inspection. Yes. It had been me who killed that night. I saw no other explanation written as plainly on my palm. Looking between the stained fingers, my eyes saw the victim hunched there, turned away and bowed as if in prayer at the knees of some great drooling man.

I needed to see him. For whatever reason, I needed to see his face, to see the damage of which I'd wrought. Something forbade me, but I did it anyway. Gripping his shoulder as I had moments earlier, this time I pulled him down, pulled him away, toppling the pose of acquiescence and bringing the man onto his back. Dry, almost scaly, tan skin gazed back at me, a taut and constricted face baked by the sun. Deep-pitted eyes pocked a visage of mild surprise, the likes of which was intensified by brown penetrating orbs staring directly into my own. I didn't shudder, not even when my curiosity traveled downward to survey the grievous wound. The throat ripped, not cut, the cartilage flayed outward in a grisly manner. It looked more like an inner explosion than the work of human desperation raked across a windpipe. Oddly, I wasn't repulsed at that moment, just entranced by the bloody carnage, of which seemed more and more natural the longer I looked on. This is what our bodies are made of. This is what happens when you hook a six-inch serrated blade around an esophagus and pull with all your might. In a strange way, I felt more an ignorant witness than anything else.

The jeweled dagger was warm and surprisingly light. A fine piece of craftsmanship, aesthetically and functionally, with wicked angles and a honed balance, the fulcrum falling directly where the forefinger gripped the hilt. Both it and the belted sheath transferred easily to my own hips. The tiny necklace also caught my eye. Acting as an encircling dam to the blood pooling between clavicles, the item was barely noticeable as it was thin and submerged in sticky coagulant. Seeming small and insignificant, similar to Aran's chained brooch, I left it alone. And yet, the uncharacteristically dainty nature of the accessory continuously drew my attention while I rifled through the assassin's pockets. Surely a hardened killer had different tastes in jewelry than a nostalgic child. I hesitated. The necklace was inevitably going to be pilched, so why shouldn't it be mine? I made a grab for the circle pendant, fingers contacting the central amulet for the first time.

Suddenly, invasively, my mind seemed to warp and skew about my ears, bending and twisting as my vision followed suit. Almost as if various lenses passed seamlessly before my eyes, the room pinched and bubbled around me. There was no accompanying pain, but nausea accented an uncomfortable queasiness beyond description, my fragile brain seeming to unfold around itself, myself, encompassing me as my mental being seemed to reverse and turn outwards. A psychic pocket into which I was placed. Within moments the assaulting force stabilized, leaving me wide-eyed and my head aching, my mind feeling as if it had been plied flat, held in place by surgeons' pins for examination. Somehow, I just *knew* my consciousness had been expanded. The necklace opened minds. To what, I did not know, but experienced a new exhilaration at the thought of finding out. Glancing around the room, I searched for anything at all out of the ordinary from what I'd known before, seeing no difference until my eyes fell on a beacon that shone lazily from the sleeping giant. Or rather, his scabbard. A warming copper light emanated faintly from within, where I knew the tainted currency to lie. So that was how.

Releasing the amulet, I grimaced through the warping mind fuck once again, just in reverse and quicker, feeling bruised and insecure as if I had been somehow violated by a necklace. Of which, I fished from the man's pooling chest and slipped carefully into my pocket, making damn sure no flesh came in contact with the central pendant. *It's time to leave.* The hairs on my neck tingled fiercely, adrenaline starting as if on its own. I felt the urgency to exit the hovel, quickly no less, the nagging sensation burning my mind as an unspent coin through pocket. *Now...* But I had to do something first. The grotesquely orchestrated scene just didn't sit well with some part of me. Acting instinctively, my body moved along the course of some hidden agenda, working methodically, never hesitating in its deliberateness. It followed the guidance of an unknown will and when it was done, I knew to step back for one last look.

Memory burned the image for future reference, the carnage flitting past my eyes again in vivid detail. The exquisite battle, weapons flashing in the lamp light, furniture overturned, dodges and parries, and a deadly feint. Swift arms and swifter feet, the bigger man falling unconscious, his curved scimitar slicing a nasty jugular cut in its wake. The assassin, dropping to his knees. Pouring his life to the floor. From the doorway, I could see it all. The blood, the bodies. The wicked arc of broad metal baring the shadow's blackening fluid. The sleeping giant held it fast even in his slumber, the tainted blood of evil staining a magnificent sword. Had I the strength to wield such a weapon, I would have certainly taken it, just to own the blade that felled Kamal, or Malak as he sometimes called himself.

Move it! My skull echoed with the piercing mental command, cutting through due process and finding some way to ring painfully in my physical ears. And I did, exiting the modest mud hut after snapping to attention, striking out into the night after closing the door behind. I rounded the building, nearly colliding headfirst with a robed figure clad in the shielding darkness.

"Malak!" a voice called out mistakenly. "What took so long?" she hissed with an impatient tone.

I shot a look of pure terror before making a mad break for the city, fleeing the hovel with reckless abandon, tearing a path across warm sands that gave way to hastened feet. The sun-baked buildings parting lifelessly on either side. After all the noise, all the commotion that night had brought, not a soul stirred in their homes nor peeked through dimmed windows to witness the spectacle. It would seem that no one wished to be a part of that evening's proceedings. Nor to incriminate themselves through association.

Chapter 15: Infiltration

Conflict is human. Humans are conflict. Unfortunately, one without the other is completely unavoidable. Conflict occurs because the world is saturated with people who, naturally, cling desperately to the piece of world they've acquired, fighting tooth and nail in its defense, even if a free mind is but their only possession. People create conflict wherever they go but for basically only three reasons: someone has what another wants, they are too different, or they are too similar for peace to exist. Conflict takes many forms, the most basic being the power struggle, an imbalance seeking advantage, a definitive edge over others. Power is amid, if not the most, highly sought after commodities and truly, many aspects of our lives can be traced back to it. Power is displayed in countless ways and may be the base to which all other things stand. Depending on the definition, power can prevent a person from doing any number of things: the power to feed, the power to procreate, the power to assert individuality, or even to think for one's self. Power is the first step of any action, the root of any desire. It is worth living for and, to many, worth killing for.

Combat naturally leads to power, as it is conflict in its most primal function. But so do political affiliations, religious rallies, distinctions drawn amid caste systems, racial differences, and competing cultures to name a few. Conflict has infiltrated all strata of modern society, from drinking competitions to all-out war, but what it boils down to is simple: whoever is left, wins. The first to fall in an endurance trial, the last to cross a finish line, losers are always surpassed in every scenario, yielding titles, property, lives when necessary, but always power. Coveted power. The world has seen much conflict, from religious takeovers to military flexing, cultural extinction to population explosions; the winners are inevitably the last standing, the ones on top. *War doesn't decide who is right. War decides who is left.* Might makes right, and "right" makes the rules. "Right" shapes the future, governs destiny. And thus, the mighty control fate, the future.

Just as they also write the past. The strong, these survivors, are notorious for reshaping previous conflicts, previous history, reworking it to fit their scheme, their goals, their mindset. Informational power. Excising the bad and exalting the good, erasing mistakes and penning achievements. Those left sing the praises of their nation, their city, their culture, their family, their individual lives through tradition, manipulation, and a handful of outright lies. Information can be inherited and destroyed just like anything else. The truth maintains those exact qualities. Write something, anything, on a piece of paper and given enough time or luck, those words could become a law by which people govern themselves, or possibly even a new faith to follow. It would seem that historians and simple survivors might have more power than once attributed to them... Due in no small part to the lack of naysayers, of the educated, the specialists, or even casual witnesses, misinformation can quite easily become sworn truth, just as one in power may selectively delete knowledge. And with tempered practice, even the liar can be convinced of his or her own falsehood, completely burning any route back.

The point is this: whether winning a conflict based on their own merits, or simply outlasting others, survivors earn some of the most influential power there is, the power of

story. Without witnesses or opposition, a person can permanently change history, as well as manipulate the future through altering perceptions of the present. An unchallenged liar has the potential to command unrivaled power amongst their peers, setting the stage for their descendants as well as negating their ancestors' actions. Indeed survival, lying, and power are all linked on an intimate level.

It never occurred to me to seek royal assistance, to run tail-between-my-legs to the palace gates, crying of injustice and blood in the streets. I knew Mathias to have more pressing concerns for his own safety, more focus on defending *against* the city he inherited instead of fighting *for* it. I knew, as many did, that we the people of this massive city were on our own, without a center, without guidance. Adrift in the sea of self-governance. It was mutually understood by every man and woman, if not child, that the king had checked out for a bit, choosing inaction over a firm hand to lead us in times of trouble. The rabble camping around his compound, a city encircling a single man in his paranoia, entombing royalty in the shroud of a disintegrating society, it all sat hollow and undirected, turning upon itself from lack of organization. A house divided, we were torn across obvious lines of division: weak/strong, sick/healthy, honest/conniving, old/young. Cultures collided, religions rioted, factions fought while brothers brawled. In a society severely lacking in unity, or figureheads, mere acquaintances wound up in aggressive altercations, all because of slight differences. Strength was its own authority, deriving only as much leeway as respectful fear would allow. We were left to fight our own battles, to police our own streets, left to set our own boundaries, to barter anything that was available, left to interpret our own rules, and make individual, conflicting decisions instead of directing any constructivity towards the "greater" good of the community. All was done out of immediate personal gain instead of long-term, standing benefits that would have made life easier in general. Better, safer for the whole. Instead of a chosen societal peace, we had opted for a direct and consuming war on a personal level, between individuals, between families, between rivals, and between factions.

That's why I wasn't surprised when the tracking amulet sensed a massive cluster of coins amid the spotty targets scattered about the city. That's why I wasn't surprised when the accessory led me directly across town to one district in particular. That's why I wasn't surprised when my trail turned north of the cemetery, towards the cache of tainted treasures used to interrogate, wrangle, or exterminate the poor. Used to assassinate those driven to thievery, rather. Our city had been completely flipped on its head, true, but one constant remained stable, remained secure. In a town where guile, amorality, and brutality prospered, where good was subverted and righteousness non-existent, where open slavery was allowed and the king was more vulnerable than a beggar on the streets, unquestioningly, gold was still the standard definition of power.

Slowly rising in elevation, my path was paved with smoothly interlocking pieces of flagstone, not the haphazard blocks of the common quarters placed to stymie erosion. And clean, too, I could see this despite the night, the enveloping blackness having been chased away from the main road. Expensive oil lanterns hung high and proud on hooks placed well overhead the tops of gilded poles. The buildings were more aesthetic here, as well as enormous. Massive cross-timbers acquired from some long-gone forest defined

hearty structures and outlined their elegant bulk against a darkened sky. Not the hastily erected things meant to cage a population explosion, these houses were thick, strong. They were sentinels, stubbornly resistant to change and undoubtedly inherited from generations long passed, from when the city was young. Steady, unmoving shadows cast on their stalwart faces belied my own, as my black form skittered across the features of opulence incarnate. Broad windows had broad bars across them. Just as broad steps led up to broad doors, broad terraces overlooking broad tracts of land. Possessions inflated with wealth, got larger, though people all stayed the same shape and size. *More or less*, I thought, looking down at my own concave belly turning against itself in search of a meal. No, the convex shapes of the gluttonous were a stark contrast, much as the convex girth of wealth was evident in everything the rich did or owned. Moderation never worked its way into design. I sniffed the air, which even smelled better than the sections of town I had become accustomed to. Set on a plateau, the rich part was apparently raised metaphorically AND physically above the stink of the rest of the city. *If you've got it, flaunt it.*

I had to hand it to them, their sector was organized. Neat, tidy, everything seemed in its designated place, anal-retentiveness unmatched by any slum. The grounds were clean, dirt paths raked, the odd patch of vegetation was groomed, and the walkways swept. Not a chink could be found in any of the walls, not a loose brick visible. No door sat off its hinges and not a piece of random garbage could be found in the entire row. The poor *had* less and found it harder to keep after, a fact I had to contend with when thinking of all the servants at the affluent's disposal. I found it unlikely that the rich, themselves, cleaned their enormous estates, worked on hands and knees to scrub the dung out of animal pens, vigorously maintaining all surfaces, corners, and facets of their sprawling homes by themselves. Standing atop others to avoid the dirt. But, the results *were* indisputable.

The tingling amulet in palm, I knew which copious residence to be my target. I knew which one to harbor murderers, killers, and torturers. I knew which one concealed the dark broodings of evil behind an immaculate façade of luxury, behind the implied innocence of cleanliness. I knew which house to be stained dirty beyond comparison. Thanks to the magical accessory and the infected coins, I could use their own tools against them, sniffing out the source of my pain, of my persecutors. The necklace told of the currency's source, a location directly below a chosen chateau, a basement in the bowels of some gawker's mansion, a front for sinister schemes. I flitted the perimeter, crouching against waist-high divisionary walls between manors, wheezing uncontrollably in a spur of encroaching anger. This is where it all began. This is where it would end. Looking back on the vacant road, the streets devoid of the same fearful denizens ubiquitous to everywhere else, I saw nothing but the crypt to the distant south, its visage appearing gray and ominous across a barren stretch of no man's land. A lone mausoleum sat on a similar hill glaring straight back to my fuming demeanor. All roads lead to destiny. It was time to finally turn the tables.

Disconnecting from the necklace was like disconnecting my brain, then having it rattled violently inside a box. The sensation wasn't pleasant in the slightest, especially after gripping the amulet for so long, allowing the magic to intimately weave its ways, to hold

me just as tightly as I held *it*. The offending article stowed away safely in a pocket, my attention focused on how to enter the domicile. Wrought iron guarded wide windows, just as latches sealed every entryway. In rounding the back, I saw a similar situation, with the exception of servants' quarters placed a considerable distance behind the main dwelling. The cramped bunker sat lonesome amid the towering mansions, a necessary bastard oddity at the tail end of a string of stones leading up to the manor's rear entrance. Of which clearly needed a key. Directing my gaze aloft, I scanned the second story, searching for a cracked opening, a balcony, anything. I found none. A bit dejectedly, I approached the service portal, finding no better time than to practice my lockpicks.

I'd had a rare chance to use the things, an even rarer success rate, but I brandished the thin rods of scrap, plying the pieces into usable shapes. One became a saw-toothed zigzag, the other flat and straight. I bit my lip, incisors working flesh in conjunction to hands caressing the lock, massaging the iron to discern its secrets. I felt three tumblers, three fallen pins of which needed to be raised at varying heights for the master cylinder, the one rotated by a key, to operate. I fumbled with the pins, applying a steady torque with the flat bit in my left hand. *My mangled hand*. The subsiding anger found a new foothold. I jiggled, jangled, and jostled the stubborn things at random, yielding nothing despite supreme effort and sheer will for the damned lock to just open already. I sighed, resting back on my laurels. *Try again*, a part of me demanded. With an increased fervor but a lax attitude, I re-bent the saw pick before attempting to tickle the tumblers. Ear close, I listened carefully to the mechanism's distinctive sounds, the light tapping of my tools in adjusting the pin height, the hollow rasping of metal on metal. The relatively heavy clack as the cylinder clicking into place felt a godsend after so many breathless moments.

In picking their locks, trespassing their grounds, stealing their gold and... opposing their operatives, I confirmed every justification the nobles could ever cite for increasing the stakes in an on-going class war. They were killing what I saw as soldiers in a fight for survival. The wealthy had been pitted against the poor in a caste struggle of haves vs. have-nots that had burned bright in countless societies for countless years. One person in one society would never prove the be-all end-all of a conflict that was so engrained in humankind. I pulled the handle and entered the manor knowingly, understanding the senselessness of destruction, comprehending the factors involved, just not yet fathoming my role in the futility. I didn't want to hurt others, but I'd be damned if they hurt me.

The door led to a kitchen, large washbasins and food preparation areas lining the length of deep counters. Butcher blocks and cutting boards were stained with blood, meats sliced fresh and routinely upon their surfaces. All manner of cutting utensils made me uneasy, but I proceeded in a crustacean crawl, hunched to create a low profile in the dim household, limbs tucked close for greatest control. Square sluice drains dotted the fancy ceramic tile floor, until changing rooms gave way to a change in motif, polished wooden slats running the length of a living area. A recessed pit lay centered where guests enjoyed the comfort of dark ottomans and a skin rug, a furry animal of which I hadn't even seen before. A minimalist approach tastefully decorated the place; handcrafted adornments of varying browns brought the focus to and accented the architecture. Raw wooden support

cabers were to be found throughout the villa, firmly grounded and extending up to meet the high ceilings. I walked in awe, never before witnessing a building, much less a home, such as that. It made me sick in an amazed way, my back alley burlap bag of a bed no comparison to the exotic material which expertly upholstered even the lowliest of footstools in that estate. Like a stubborn child, my attention continuously wandered stray, from seeking responsibility for the horrific acts of violence I had seen, becoming too easily enamored with solid craftsmanship and the seductively feminine curves of attractive vases and archways. A pungent smell permeated my nostrils, a decidedly rich blend of sweet fruits drying above a windowsill, strung up for both looks and air quality. *Food is a decoration to them*, I thought sourly, finding no respite from the plaguing stomach pains that followed.

My sensitive ears detected something, a sound wafting on the oppressive ringing silence that clouded the dwelling. Nothing stirred, but my ears did not lie, my whole body becoming actively engaged in determining the source, tilting my head in a bird-like manner, listening for patterns, timber, and direction. A keen instinct led me to the main foyer, just inside the confines of double doors leading outside, a flight of stairs ascending into darkness. But the noise didn't come from above. I pressed lightly against a closet. Engineered flush below the straight incline of steps, the room itself couldn't have been much bigger than a man, though I believed I heard at least two speaking from within. Arguing, actually. I creaked the door open, the conversation becoming ever louder, light eerily defining the edges of a trap door cut precisely into boards in the cramped space. Entombing myself in the stuffy closet, I knelt in the darkness, eking closer on hands and knees to eavesdrop. When I pried the boards apart, ever so slightly, the ruckus from below became several distinct voices, flooding my ears as light cast streaks across my eyes.

"No one sympathizes more" an older man spoke his condolences, "but this operation encompasses more than just finding your stray children."

"Yes, many of us have lost loved ones to the despicable cutpurses as well." a voice grizzled, "My youngest was accosted just this last week, a mugging gone terribly-"

"And my niece received brutal treatment at the hands of some ruffian!" yet another interrupted, barely controlling his aggravation. "The beggar was after a family heirloom, one that was passed down for generations, but he took her violently... She was merely picking up groceries for a pie." He resumed after choking on tears. "She -sob- she, she didn't know any better to..."

"We all appreciate your pain, Janus. But your story is no different than our own." A calm, even voice tempered the squabbling men.

"And you! What about you Azuriah, what have you suffered in all this? While we're all mourning our losses, our families, what have you to lament?"

“I lament *with* you, gentlemen.” the collected one stated, to the chagrin of at least a single listener.

“Pshaw!” I could imagine spittle fleeing a disdainful mouth.

“It’s the truth. While I may not have an extended family to protect, it can not be disputed that I’ve been there and experienced the travesties with the rest of you.” I edged closer to the crack, seeing nothing whatsoever. “Janus, when your niece suffered so terribly, it was I who supplied names of worthy doctors. Aram, when your little boy and girl disappeared during the-”

“They were taken!”

“-when your children were taken during the night, I consoled you and helped overcome your grief.”

“No little ones should be out on their own!” a panicky, seemingly small man, professed. “They’re probably so scared. All they had was each other!”

“I know. I know.” the tempered man continued, balancing emotion with objectivity. “But they are part of the reasons we fight back, fight against those who brought the battle to our doorsteps.” A thoughtful pause. “Raziel! I apologize for neglecting our gracious host. How goes the operation?”

“No problem, chairman. All is well.” A harsh voice sneered in suspicious defense.

Another piped in, “Hiring those... people. I don’t like how the male looks at me.”

“I agree.”

“We all agree,” Azuriah, the chairman, wrestled to keep the group focused. “But none of us have had better ideas than to continue this route. Using a thief’s crutch against him has proven very effective.”

“Yes, but there’s just too many of them.” someone said. “I hate them! Can’t they all just die? We’d be better off torching the whole sector! Who’s with me?!”

“That’s quite horrible.” mustered someone. “But if that brought our little ones back, I’d vote on it in a heartbeat.” The weathered voice breathed deep. “There’s been quite the issue in our efforts so far... what with the trouble even determining a hierarchy. Less so in finding even a base of sorts.”

“But Raziel SAYS they found the leader!” a meek voice shrilled.

Some windbag harrumphed. “What?! I hadn’t heard this!”

“And lost him.” the small voice remarked off-handedly, relishing in being the one to reveal information. The council fell into disarray at these words, each increasing their volume to drown out the others.

“Intolerable!”

“Unacceptable!”

“Then the whole guild is most certainly alerted to the operation by now.” someone lamented.

“And the tunnel is destroyed! It would take too many seasons to excavate anew.”

“Gods! If we’re not losing our money to rabble, we’re spending it on them! Did we at least get a good look at the leader?” an exasperated sigh became a question.

“Of course. He looks just like-”

“Then what we need to do is simply hire soldiers! King Mathias has plenty for sale.”

“Yes. It has come to that, then.” I recognized Azuriah’s meting tone. Reluctance was apparent.

“Combing the streets has to produce more than a few lice. Thievery is a crime; the law is already on our side.” someone offered, not even believing his own words.

“What law?” a councilman mocked, “You need authority for a law to exist.” he chuckled alone at his own cunning remark.

“Gentlemen,” that was Azuriah again, clearing the room with a commanding oration. “*We* are the authority. With enough strong arms and sharp blades at our disposal, not a ruffian in the city could survive.” A hushed silence befell the others, one that made me deathly self-conscious above the group. “I vote to discontinue the current operation in lieu of more effective measures.”

“Seconded.” the meek one chipped in immediately.

“Third.” a disheveled voice croaked, followed by another.

The four men paused for unanimity. “...Raziel?”

But I didn’t wait to hear the verdict. Scuttling backwards as if my feet had burst into flame, I exploded from the closet, finding balance on a chest of drawers that sat beneath a vivid painting of a desert sky, longer than I was tall. Both complemented the other’s rich textures and expert design, the dark colors of pigmented soil matching the browned stain accents of the wood’s grain. I sliced a scar corner-to-corner on the canvas and flipped the

drawers on end. Pushing with all my might, the furniture scraped noisily across the hardwood floor, certainly sanding the finish clear off one side as I shoved it into the closet. The hatch was pinned closed. But my frenzy was just beginning. I heel-kicked gouges into ottomans and thrashed wild scars into any surface I could lay either blade upon. Vases shattered and cabinets toppled. Heavy pewter candelabras made contact with opposing walls until I tired, knocking chunks free of the pristine decorations and leaving bits of material collecting in small piles on the floor. Eating utensils were flung far across entire rooms, the cutlery and carving knives making twanging sounds as at least half of the ones I threw embedded into hard surfaces. I smashed décor and I stomped art. Anything tasteful and within sight found itself broken, its remnants spread across the graveyard of ceramic and clay chips, metal and wood shavings, adobe, paper, and canvas, cotton, leather, and fur. I destroyed everything I could get my hands or knife upon and when I was finally satisfied, I snatched a fistful of straw from a cornucopia centerpiece, the flint cradled in my other hand. I heard muffled protestations from below.

Crouched in a corner, I set to work striking the flint against the jeweled knife, directing sparks towards the tinder. I'd done it many times, but the pieces were being resistant. Just as they were all resistant. The whole damn world was resistant. In my head, I already saw the blackening husks, the peeling paint, the airy debris catching on the updraft of thermal winds as the crackling roar of this rich fucking wonder went up in smoke. I could smell the acrid texture penetrating everything, the magnificent flames licking at the night air as a pulsating light cast deep shadows until dawn. I salivated a bit. The warmth would be felt for blocks, the hoity-toity rich folks, as well as the poor, coming out to gawk and stare as a row of their beloved houses burned to the ground. Then they'd all be homeless. Just like me! Why wouldn't the straw catch already?! I wanted the pyrotechnics, wanted the destruction. I wanted the- *blackened bones of our enemies, their skin flying off like parchment*. The blackened bones of-. No... That's not what I wanted. I looked down at my hands, gnarled claws gripping white-knuckled against hilt and stone, cutting circulation to what fingers were left, a single palm bleeding from the vice-like constriction on sharpened flint. Knuckles lay exposed. These were not my hands.

"Need a light?" a voice hissed from behind.

Surprised, I turned in time to see a lightning bolt connect squarely with my chest, the awesome force knocking the wind free as I flew against an upturned divan. My fingers convulsed involuntarily, scraping at the blue light which seared my vision for several moments.

"Hmm." the woman pondered thoughtfully, "That should have killed you."

I forced my vision on the speaking figure, made the dual images align. The familiar tan robe lay open, electric blue rivulets tracing the voluptuous form of a very female silhouette, markings burning brightly even through wispy clothing. And yes, she had them everywhere. Even though the hood was down, I saw not a face, just a tangle of arcane symbols glowing fiercely in the dim light. Groping for stability, reeling from the

attack, I somehow found both wobbly knees, my hand braced on the furniture for support, a foot planted firmly against the ruined divan.

“You’re just full of delicious surprises, aren’t you?” she purred, tongue running the length of an upper lip slowly, sensuously.

If I wasn’t about to die, I would’ve been turned on. But, her idea of foreplay was another jolt, another arcing branch of neon that I managed to dive past, tucking and rolling before the inaccurate stream of energy could strike. A direct hit to a cushion left a blackened scorch mark, the stained blast a contrast to snow-white stuffing that erupted freely from a central hole like a geyser. A small fire flickered in its wake. I hustled to the nearest cover, several smaller bolts setting the pace for me; their changing angles indicated a pursuing temptress as the projectiles sizzled about my sprinting form. One caught me in the hip, my falling momentum enough to carry my graceful tumble behind a central support caber off-center of the large living area. I worked my calf in an attempt to flex the feeling back into my deadened leg, the flesh squirming grotesquely in response to the shock.

“Superb.” the temptress lauded mockingly, voice resonating in my ears, “No wonder you lead. Your underlings must be very proud.” She fired a couple of shots teasingly at my cover. My teeth gritted in response, the smell of roasted flesh coming from my chest preceding the actual pain which began to roll in like a tide. Pulsing waves of infectious agony seemed to worsen when I glanced at the seared skin. The burned tissue guarding my heart. I stiffened behind a wooden pole, drawing all limbs out of sight behind the nonconductive material. She had me pinned in a terrible position.

“You’re persistent, I’ll give you that.” she reasoned. “How about we just skip the torture and you spill everything you know about the Thieves’ Guild?”

“There IS NO GODS DAMNED THIEVES’ GUILD!!” I bellowed, the inanity built up from it all erupting forth from my depths in that single declaration. Pain was making a permanent nest in my chest as a gradual rhythm of pulses breathed new life in my leg. Everything felt on fire, a metaphor that extended to the manor, as an acrid smell then permeated the air.

A crunch occurred off to one side, the sound of a foot resting on shattered debris, and I dodged yet another bolt in throwing myself to the opposite side, little shards of pottery embedding themselves in my back as I rolled to safety. But the bitch had cut me off, wedged herself between myself and the servants’ entrance, going deeper into the manor my only choice. I faced a dark hall of many doorways, too many choices. Each with their own curtain of beads shrouding the room beyond. Each, no doubt, occupied by luxurious bedding, posh sitting rooms, or exorbitant excess in all its glory. None with unbarred windows. None with escape routes. And she was coming.

The temptress glided smoothly down the hall, footsteps exercising caution, but not fear; her breath was shallow for the purpose of listening intently, not to conceal. The hairs on my neck tingled excitedly in her approach, whether the sensation was chalked up to the

electricity she commanded, or something else, was anyone's guess. I heard her coming, *felt* her presence. The hallway reflected a dim blue as she floated in pursuit, the air gaining a murky quality the longer the fire burned elsewhere. She directed her calculating death with an outstretched hand, of which she pointed at a disturbed curtain of beads at the end of the hall. The only disturbed curtain of beads.

"You know," she enticed, a lilting girlish tone weaving almost imperceptibly into her typically commanding canter, "we don't have to *be* enemies..."

Footstep by footstep, she closed on my position.

"I *need* a strong man like yourself." she soothed, worked a different kind of magic on me. "We could be something better." I heard the exotic woman's offer as if she whispered it directly into my ear. "We could be something closer."

Soft-heeled soles padded lightly on hardwood floors, the sounds thumping carelessly, confidently.

"Friends?" she asked. Gods, she was right on top of me. "Lovers?" she enunciated as if pleasuring the word, itself.

The temptress's deadly hand breached the already swinging beads, parting them to exact her bolts of punishment. It was my cue to grab her from behind, a chokehold falling easily about her shoulders, pinning her tattooed arms, my jeweled dagger hopping lightly with each pulse at her soft neck, arcane runes burning icy blue up and down her lithe body. I had disturbed the opposing curtain before crawling belly-down to my hiding spot, directly across from the woman's target. Luckily, she had fallen for the ruse.

Feeling her in my arms, I recognized the vulnerability hanging lightly in the balance. She existed for as long as I chose, the tender rhythm of a heartbeat falling squarely on my own whims. Her blood was at my disposal, her lungs drawing breath of my will alone. She lived as long as I deemed necessary. Our positions somehow invoked a vivid and recent action, but I wafted the mind clear before delving too deep in the persistent memory. She leaned into my embrace, supple curves giving in to my unyielding posture; the tender flesh was arousing despite her fine clothing feeling unbelievably abrasive on a fresh burn. Limbs at sides, she was more like a serpent as she writhed against me, butt resting on my knee, her head swiveling to meet mine.

We kissed long and deep over her left shoulder, the knife still poised on a major artery, never leaving its mark, muscles never phasing in their concentrated efforts to keep the temptress from squirming free or her arms to pry loose. Her lips, forged in the heavens, pressed both firm and gentle against my own, an exotic dance of which we both knew the moves. It was passionate. It was wet. It was divine. I moaned lightly, she responding in turn by tensing even further against my stiffening body. I was alive, every bit of me feeling refreshed and reborn, awakened at last by the revival that woman bestowed upon me. Little hairs I didn't even know existed stood on end across my weary form, an energy passing from her to me somehow invigorating everything at its generation. Slowly,

surely, I felt warmer, stronger, her hips making little motions as I felt her chest heave. All of me was awakening. The gyrations continued, static building. Flames of desire spread outward to engulf the hallway, contrasting her blue calligraphy with warming orange, and still the feelings reached vehemently dizzying heights. My muscles clenched, the grip on her tightening. Through waves of ecstasy, I briefly wondered if I would unintentionally harm the captive, but the woman knew what she was doing. Knew the painful excitement that would gradually build to climax. She knew the effect on my body, the disarmament of control. She knew how to distribute her power, the proper voltage to bring me down, just the right amount to disconnect my senses, to disable feeling. Her lips held tightly as my body went rigid in its insurmountable pleasure. My breath halted, my mind fading. My heart literally stopped.

And as I spilled to the ground, falling loose of the charge which sparked between us in breaking free, I released all I had left to give of my body, of my mind, thinking: *Now THAT is a great way to die.*

Chapter 16: Hope

The afterlife was a red bird on which I alighted, gliding, soaring, gracefully parting the clouds for no other reason than we enjoyed it. With playful dips and aerial maneuvers, we flew to the farthest reaches of the sky, an effortless jaunt through the puffy pillows of moisture that dotted a perfectly blue day. Clinging tenaciously to downy feathers between its massive wings, I fell several times, only to be scooped back up again with looping accuracy. The bird would not let me fall, even when the thunderclaps began, and a cold breeze moved in from the west. Rain fell in torrents, drenching us in our flight, in our play, though the refreshing drops merely increased our joy as we knew it to be a life-giving rain, a rain from which health and prosperity showered freely from the heavens. All this, I watched unfold from the vantage of a mirror, its smooth surface reflecting all occurrences around me. The image was indeed accurate, but reversed, as mirrors sometimes do, causing a disjunction in hand-eye coordination that hindered my movements at times. From this mirror I saw the entire world and all the events around me, but try as I might, I just couldn't bear witness to myself. The image always dodged my gaze, was fleeting. Curiosity became annoyance, annoyance became aggression, aggression devolved into fear, but I just couldn't see myself. Even in engineered surprise, leaping in front of the smooth surface, pouncing the mirror in predatory ambush, I just couldn't see my reflection. Only the bountiful glory of the world behind me. And this terrified me.

I awoke in this cold dungeon, this very room, body aching something fierce, strapped to this contraption, stretched further than I thought possible. I stopped fighting it long ago. The effort required, the pain induced, all just greater than I could stomach. I saw my weapons lying remotely on that table. I felt my blood trickling down my tired limbs. I saw the bodies stacked in that corner over there, and I knew that there was no escape.

“And that brings us back to where we began, little friends. That's how I came to be in your good graces.”

A rat squeaks its protest.

“No, sorry. That's it. There is no more.” I say between labored breaths, “I'll finally die here and you'll exact your revenge for all the meals I made of your friends.” I sigh. “The circle is complete.”

Vermin scuttle about the edges of the room, finding scraps where they can but ultimately retreating to hidden crannies amid dank walls. The very last rat, one who sat with rapt attention throughout the duration of my story, scampers off after the others, giving me a decidedly resigned look of disinterest before retreating. I become alone, then, not even rodents to keep me company. Talked dry at last, I loll my head about, exercising the only muscles I could move in this position.

“Can I get SOME SERVICE HERE?!” I yell to no one in particular, my voice slapping my ears as it bounces recklessly around a cramped room.

The stone bricks are quiet, cold. The air hangs moist about me. A few moments later, a door somewhere behind rakes the floor with a nail-splitting squeal, tentative footsteps echoing unseen in the low lighting afforded by the few torches.

“Thank the gods, you’re here.” I groan sarcastically, shoulders slumping forward in complete submission. Better they kill me quickly. But should that be impossible, better they start *now*.

A gravelly chuckle continues down the hallway from whence it came, the voice receding a bit. “HE’S AWAKE” my jailor calls, “AND IN A FRESH MOOD! Ha ha!”

An eager amble brings the portly fellow around into the narrow arc of which I could see.

“Did you sleep well, precious?” he whines as if to a child, a geyser of spittle flying past puckered lips.

“Oh yes.” I wince politely, minding the spray. “Thank you.”

His face brightens with the promise of a challenge. “Ha! We’re going to break that spirit of yours, soon enough.”

He thinks I’m being resilient. “Wait, wait. No, no.” I start, “There’s no spirit. I’m not stubborn. Just-”

He looks on curiously.

“-ready to die.”

The jailor frowns a bit, more disappointed than anything, his wide mouth puckering genuinely this time. Like a big baby. He shuffles to one side, eyes focusing on something behind the rack of which I’m tied.

“But we’re not done with you yet.” a new voice sneers, my recollections identifying the harsh tones and serpentine rolling of the breath. I knew him from sound alone.

A thin, angular man pushes past the frumpy torturer, positioning himself to take up my entire field of vision. Standing straight, fists clenched, he looks down his long nose at me from a face devoid of every an ounce of fat, and even less compassion. Skin rippled in contempt. His name surfaces like an un-lanced boil. Raziel- from which the temptress and man in black obtained their employ. The apparent director of the whole dark project of which I’ve fallen victim to.

“You burned down half my house.” he fumes, face reddening, “and I will see you suffer until you haven’t a shred of pain left in your body before I finally grant you the death you ask for.”

Raziel turns to the other, nods stiffly before refocusing on me, eyes burning cruel, daggers into my soul. Stubby legs carry the gleeful jailor as fast as they can to a crank at my right. And upon the signal of an unceremonious hand gesture, he begins to turn the machination. Instantly, grinding gears reflect the grinding pain experienced throughout me, the torment of being pulled in many places at once stretches me thin. Indeed, that is what is happening to me. My hands pull taut away from feet, the agony of many joints dislocating at once. The excruciation of bones jolting out of place sears my brain, before localized bouts of pain fall numb to sensory overload. I tried not to scream, but a howl starts low and ends high, a halting motion from Raziel ceasing both the machine's movement and my yell simultaneously.

"Where is your headquarters?" he asks calmly, gaunt face barely discernible through my bleary vision. I see him only as cheekbones and forehead, shallow eyes being swallowed by the surrounding sockets. Raziel's face looks like a grinning skull to me. Buried in a darkened robe. I feel myself slipping...

Another hand signal from the interrogator sends ripples of clarity up and down my form, breathing painful awareness back into atrophying limbs. The machine continues to stretch, to pull, to rip me to my absolute limits. Popping sensations couple with frightful tingling, distinct tearing juxtaposed with a caressing trickle. Past a point, I no longer own my body, my features. I'm just *there*, an outsider watching this atrocity persist. A bit of me feels these things and I file the emotions away into categories. Magnanimously taking it all in stride, appreciating the bits of relief amid the indescribable pain. A soothing wave of euphoria dances lightly through my mind, my imagination conjuring the image of a glowing sprite, who trails wafting veils as she prances about, twinkling toes and exhibiting grace in its purest form. Flitting about in a performance just for me, the tiny woman hops and skips, jumps and cavorts, frolicking about in a light-hearted display. She looks happy.

"I say again, where is your headquarters?"

The machine has stopped. I'm in a dungeon. A figure looms menacingly, pinching my face with a skeletal grasp. Seeing my eyes finally focus on his, Raziel jerks his hand away roughly, my head bowing as the support is pulled abruptly from beneath. I feel nothing. Am I an amputee? Muscles convulse involuntarily to dismiss the notion, feeble attempts to combat the forces which rack it with such grief. They contract, fighting against hard knots and harder souls, to make my disconnected limbs whole again. To bring my pieces back together.

"Answer!" the reaper shouts, finally losing his cool demeanor. "Where do you meet?! How do you communicate with your thieves?!"

My tongue feels foreign, feels borrowed. "With little pieces of paper..." I drawl out the lie, or was it truth? "...dropped in locations about the city." I'm exhausted from the

effort. That, at least, would placate the demon momentarily, possibly shortening my extended demise.

Raziel looks pleased. Fueled by my response, he grins in saying “And what are your lieutenants’ names?” A wicked slit in his face extends ear to ear.

I rattle off names I’ve come across, though no faces are attached. Any names would do. “Fatin, Ihab, Kamal, Malak, Jabbar...” I pause, dredging my whipped mind for more. “Um... Loki.” I had heard the bartender tell a story about a Loki once.

My candor is rewarded with a backhanded blow to the jaw, the relatively insignificant sting fading quickly. The unseen jailor seizes one of my fingers, though, something sharp resting on the digit’s tip just under the nail, a clear warning against insolence. I wriggle weakly.

“Give me real names.” the reaper hisses, face flushed anew. In my head, I cite a litany of *real* names to myself, connecting actual faces to actual syllables that represent *real* people. The temptation is taunting, overwhelming, but my captors’ impatience does my acquaintances a service, a wooden sliver forcing itself under a fingernail before I soon buckle under the tension. My hesitation spared others this agony. A single pound from the jailor’s hammer drives a spike, freeing me of my immediate sanity. A salivating mouth leaks fluid down the front of a scar-flowered chest, jaw gripped in a permanent grimace.

“FUCK YOU!” I scream past two rows of clenched teeth, tongue bleeding mildly between them. The pink worm laces the drool with crimson.

Face stern, eyes boring into my skull, the reaper is clearly not amused. Nor will he tire. I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t, total compliance or no. This is inevitable, even if he extracts the false information he wants, dragging the interrogation out for days should he wish, or weeks if I’m extremely unlucky. *I’m destined to suffer a horrific fate*, I come to realize.

And after yet another signal; Raziel maintains a sullen expression as another shiv is placed against an adjacent fingertip, the sadistic jailor giggling ever so slightly at his work. Tap. A distinct wave of pain courses like a poison throughout my stretched form, setting fire to everything it touches. Tap. I flex every muscle, bracing for the next strike, the anticipation worse than the punishment. Tap. No it’s not! This is worse! This is... Tap.

I black out, graciously given a reprieve from the abuse, body finally succumbing to as much torment as it could take in this session.

Chapter 17: Release

A philosophizing masochist once told me: “Pain is illusion, enlightenment, and the only conduit for experiencing life to its limits. It is the only true antidote to depression, boredom, and a beneficial facet from which we may all learn and grow. Your pain is necessary, and unavoidable.”

I didn't believe him at the time... and I still don't. Pain is awful, unnecessary. It is a tool for keeping people in line, a threat to wield, a weapon to brandish. The strong enslave the weak, with pain. Authorities exert their will, through pain. Warlords reap the benefits of physical and emotional torment, but it is also intrinsic with civilized society. Pain is inflicted with both good and mal intentions, physical trauma and emotional scarring eventually resulting on the majority. Pain breeds contempt, hatred, harbored feelings of discord, in essence more pain. In this way, it spreads like a disease, eating some from the internal confines of a contained lockbox while others unleash it against their fellow man. Pain forebodingly dictates boundaries. But instead of assuming the responsibilities of a benevolent teacher guiding those who would otherwise inflict suffering, it informs victims, not the perpetrator, of its wickedness, the true lesson being that pain can leverage others and subjugate targets. A bitter pill for those who are leveraged or subjugated. Pain manipulates us, mistreats us, torments the undeserving and castrates the stalwart. Everybody hurts, and little good comes from it. Though it could be viewed as ‘the great equalizer’, a common thread of everyone and anyone with sensory receptors and feelings, pain's drawbacks far outweigh the benefits, especially considering the distribution among the populace. As pain has no honor, it isn't particular and far from fair, having a tendency to berate its favorite scapegoats and lending strength to those who would exploit it.

Pain is universal, inseparable from humankind, and a part of every person. For those very reasons, pain cannot be the distinguisher between true fulfillment on one side and a hollow existence on the other. Someone lacking its experience to great lengths is no less a person, especially one adept enough to learn life lessons vicariously. Pain cannot be held responsible for the moral virtue of its sufferer, or the gateway to happiness. It can't be fingered as the lynch pin for enlightenment or the keystone to well-being. It happens to everyone, in varying degrees, but isn't the determining factor of appreciation and experience, unless overwhelming a psyche can be labeled as such. Everyone hurts and though few like it, the feeling is much more than just a brooding complaint, a sacred rite into happiness; pain is a daunting inhibitor, a looming punishment, an omnipresent dark god, and a chastisement for crossing limits.

The justification for its existence can, and will, be waxed with the leeway of poetic license, but few would offer the literate's views in the midst of, or before, such experiences of their own. Rather, the supportive phrases are implemented as condolences to others. Pain is never heralded with preceding fanfare. And those who would sing its necessity are likely to have surpassed their trials, only to view the event with as much grateful relief to cloud their judgment as needed to deem the very trial necessary. They feel accomplished, stronger. They feel as though they're better people. Cleansed through fire. But those who appreciate it have typically experienced merely a modest modicum of

pain, or may have simply learned from the excruciation leeches by those around them. Pain can be a contrasting foil to life in minor doses, making food or a partner's touch sweeter for example, but so do a significant number of other non-pain entities, mainly *new* experiences, an ever-broadening array of variety, a combination of physical/mental exertion, as well as abstaining from any indulgence for an extended period. Love does wonders also, though it should be warned that indeed most pain is derived from this almost entirely beneficial concept. Pain will undoubtedly heighten the savoring of life in some small way to a select few, but only when sporadically and briefly sampled, not submergence into the fathomless well that is the depth of human suffering. We wish others this harm because we have suffered, because our path is assumed to be the only path, the condemnation making it easier to wield that blade, hurting with the fraudulent goal of making both them and us better.

Pain may brighten pleasure through contrast, but it is more likely to dull a person into oblivion, numbing wits, feeling, and personality along the way. It scars in great variety, its effects sometimes not even recognized until a peculiar twitch, a frightened flinch, a reluctant approach, or an altered behavior is engrained in a person's core being or actions, rising plain to the surface for all to see. Sometimes after laying dormant for years of repression. An otherwise healthy individual can be destroyed by a single solitary pain, internal or external, accidental or engineered, personal or environmental, but some would have them believe that it is for the best. That the victim will appreciate life. That they will grow as a person. Build character. Those afraid of being victims themselves will spout any bit of nonsense, some of it genuine some of it not, to hide their aversion. They lie to themselves and others to soothe, to placate, but also to boast, to brag of their own conquering of inner demons or outer struggles, to hide, attempting a front of bravery to mask the fear, or to dodge the unbiased eye of pain and its insatiable appetite. And yet I'm still told that pain is a part of life, an intrinsic, inseparable, beneficial facet that we may learn from, grow from, an experience to be well navigated and acutely remembered. I am told that pain is for the best, that I develop through enduring.

After all, whatever doesn't kill us *only* makes us stronger...or rendered comatose, *or* paralyzed, mutilated, scarred, deathly afraid, a shell of our former selves, joylessly defunct, reflexively defensive, irrevocably haunted, aged beyond our years, crippled, single-minded, witless, enfeebled, a lobotomized vegetable, or any combination of physically and mentally incapable otherwise... But mostly stronger.

I fade to consciousness as abruptly as I had left, the blackness parting like a theater curtain. And for just a moment, I forget where I am and even *who* I am out of wishful thinking. But, alas, I am still me, a contemptible cutpurse whose both physical and mental beings are grievously racked, strained to his limits on a tilted table of sorts, waiting for a captor with enough decency to let me go in one way or another. I still can't move, and my neck is too stiff, a general numbness pervading everything, even my thoughts, disallowing me from taking control of anything corporeal at all. Instead I'm a spirit, a ghost, tethered to this life by a deadweight anchor of flesh and bone of which I have no command, denied an afterlife or even simple respite in this realm for the purpose of entertaining the living and outliving any usage I was ever thought to possess. Gods, I

hoped they had determined that I had no use. Though I can't check my limbs' integrity, I infer them to be there as I am secured fast on an incline, strained arms and legs the only real thing that can be used to suspend a body in place. Likewise my captors, I notice, remain unseen. Whether or not they are present matters little to me, choosing to bide their time or even to take a break from the torturous act is their sole prerogative. Me, myself, I am working intensely at scattering my pieces to the fore winds of time, disassembling my mind into the insignificant micro-nothings that I suspect pervades a body's passing. I'm trying to will myself into disassociation, release the bonds that hold my coherent thought and divide the multitude of memories into particles of which I believe to be reabsorbed back into the wellspring from which all life drags itself from. I'm attempting mental dismemberment, letting go of that which I once held dear, finding no purpose in myself or the actions I once took, deliberately succumbing to general apathy so that I may finally shuffle loose this mortal coil.

Yet I fail. On the contrary, in fact, I'm growing stronger, growing aware, a damnable presence of mind filling my capacity to the brim as I become confoundedly more alert. I'm becoming more conscious of my surroundings, my body, the pain. I feel my weight hanging stiffly on the rack, the cords digging constrictively into each respective, restraining limb. I feel the dank air hanging like a cloud of judgment, an embodiment of the stifling dungeon of which I'm imprisoned. And I feel my defiance hanging tenaciously by a shred, the resoluteness of eventual escape overshadowing any other desire, even for revenge, the act seeming misguided and hollow. I simply want to get out of here, nothing more. And nothing less.

A door slams. I hear it distinctly, halting all my functions at the obtrusive noise. As does everything, it seems, the entire world focusing on the scraping just audible in the corridor. A mild wave of panic, if panic can ever be considered mild, sets in at the thought of more interrogation. Calm collectivity flies briskly out the door, but I wrestle instinctively to keep my wits about me, attempting to analyze the pattern. I *must* do this! Old, no young, or do the steps indicate power? They are measured, steady. Or was that just an interruption? They're coming. Um... heavy, no light-footed! Intent: unsure, exploratory... Casual? No. Determined? Gods! He's right on top of me! A creaking portal sets my body tense, mind frozen in its tracks. The footsteps, likewise, cease shuffling to a stop just outside my peripheral, an excruciating moment of doubt and fear as I realize I am being scrutinized. Head to toe, I feel the unseen gaze, perusing, probing, scanning the wretched form spread thin on a device constructed specifically for pain. Head to toe, I feel vulnerable, on display, at the mercy of any whim of depravity constructed by a maligned bystander. Head to toe, I feel a shudder overtake me, rattling the teeth in my head despite the warmth of stagnant air, the shivering accompanied by my shallow hyperventilation ruining any plans of faking unconsciousness, or death.

I hear a blade unsheathed. And it is my only point of interest as the man circles the rack, its thin edge reflecting the cooling torches, cutting the gloom as easily as I envision the edge cutting my skin. I tense unwillingly at sight of the weapon, a stiletto hovering close, too close, to be an illusion, the flat of the blade angled just right. My panicked eyes lock on themselves in the polished sheen of deadly metal.

“Greetings Din.” a man gravels, slicing the tension with a surprise.

My eyes whip to a new focus, poring over the weathered face in reaction, recognizing naught of the kindly demeanor that peers right back. I do not know this man. A sensory familiarity tingles the edges of my mind, true, but I can’t recall anything in this moment, the shock of heart-felt warmth so soon after cold-blooded torture too jarring for a reeling mind to take. I stare speechless, but make a pathetic whimper when he motions at me with the blade that is a step closer. Although my eyes shut tight in anticipation, they fly open as a twanging snap occurs once, then twice, somewhere above my head and I spill to the mossy stone like a rag doll, as a heap of refuse dumped idly off the back of a cart. Reflexes, alone, keep my face from slamming forcefully into the surprisingly moist texture, an aching shoulder taking the brunt of the collision. It pops terrifyingly, a moment after a spasmodic jerk recoils within the other arm, which had up to that moment bordered painfully between in and out of socket. Rolling to my back, I breathe deeply, trying to outlast the pain that shoots freely up and down my weary body, a trick of the eye bringing the low ceiling even lower to bear, within an arm’s length from my nose. I see nothing of the kindness I glimpsed earlier in that blessed man, but feel a lessening constriction upon my ankles and I know him to be removing my bonds.

“Who are you?” I mouth, uncertain if my wonderings are actually being spoken aloud, the throbbing in my head so great. “And how do you know me?”

Hands which had previously been massaging new life into atrophied joints stopped suddenly, just long enough for his words to echo a few times in my mind. “I’ve known you a long time, just as you knew me long ago.”

“What does *that* mean?” I manage. “You been watching me?”

“For a time, yes.” he says, resuming his work, gripping my knee with a firm gentility and bending it over and over. He flexes it methodically and, with care, forces the knee up until a dull pop resonates in my hip, a rush of tingles slowly replacing the initial agony.

He answers the question more fully after both legs can support weight again, helping me to a shaky stand after many moments. “My Order has taken an interest in you” the grating voice begins, “and we, naturally, sought to ensure our investment hadn’t... run amok.”

“Investment?” My tongue tastes bitter sour. Grimacing, I excise the shivs, one at a time, from under my nails.

“Yes, investment.” he affirms, a degree of authority becoming evident despite the guttural crackle of age. “The Order endured your insolence for quite some time. Though it helped your cause that you did so for personal wisdom.”

I stare blankly, unsure of what to do or say, unsure of what the Hells was even going on. I have half a mind to bolt for the door, comforted by the thought that, even in my current

state, I could most likely bowl over this old man. But a condemning curiosity holds me back, as always. And that's when I recall where I had seen him. The dark skin, the receded gray pate, the man was an echo from my past, just with a few more wrinkles at the eyes and deeper lines connecting the corners of his mouth to his nostrils. The same tan robes, the same stooped posture. He has the same mottled skin that belied youthful, inquisitive eyes.

The stranger coughs agitatedly, filling the silence.

"You're the old man that ran that library!" I exclaim, "That one I used to break into as a kid and read 'till the sun came up!"

"I'm a practitioner." he declares, eyes penetrating my gaze, face hardened with an obvious attempt at patience. "And it *wasn't* a simple *library*."

Briefly, his pupils turn to vertical slits and irises become yellow as the sun. Cat eyes glare out from behind the mask of a decrepit old man, startling me backward until I pressed eagerly against the wall. And for one odd moment, I felt that I recalled another companion, one that whiled away the hours during those days, one that stared at me incessantly from behind sleek black fur.

"Come" the man's gruff voice clips the very thought, acting as if he hadn't just scared me into soiling myself.

I do as commanded though, prying myself from the hard stone, falling into a light trot behind his measured gait. As we pass the rack, though, I stop to reacquire my weapons, the hookblade, the jeweled dagger, both of which are aligned neatly to a surface's edge. They were aligned with other tools lain neatly in a row, tools that had most likely been intended to be used *on me*. "Bastards." I mutter, holstering the dagger and peeling the vest back to find a place for the meat hook. In doing so, however, I drop an item, one which falls slowly through the air, flitting in the wake of the man's robes to alight on the floor at his feet. My rescuer plucks it gingerly by the shaft, smoothing the quills from base to tip with two fingers, the fop's red feather contrasting literally everything in the drab room.

"Where did you get this?" the practitioner asks, holding the quill aloft between us. His eyes are fascinating, entrancing, inescapable, showing a broad range from kindness to authority, while simultaneously terror-inducing. Presently, they are narrowed, squinting at me with similar lateral pressure. I discern that he is practiced in discerning truth.

But I lie anyway. "A gift." I shrug, "From a man I once ran into." My eyes won't shut, so I look away, working my arm in large circles to restore full mobility to an aching socket.

"Are you familiar with the Phoenix?" he spouts, a surprising bit of trivia forcing my attention to meet his gaze.

I bumble with the thought at first, but the collaborative recollections slowly weave a story I'd seen or read in my studious youth. "Yes." I begin, confidence building with each passing syllable, "Wasn't it like a giant, mythical bird that caught fire?" I look at him hopefully.

He doesn't return the hopefulness. "Not quite."

My rescuer just stands there, feather in hand, seeming to mull over a process, unblinking gaze seeing beyond the enclosing walls. He makes a motion to pocket the thing, but ultimately hands it back to me, gripping my eyes with his and clasps my hands around the crimson quill.

"If it was a gift, then keep it." he says in all solemnity. "For protection. It will probably serve your path much better than my own." The practitioner releases me pensively from both grips in turning to the door.

"And just what do you know of my path?!" I spit with too much ingratitude, a bit miffed that someone, anyone, presumed to know it better than myself, which wasn't much.

He turns slowly, head affixed to shoulders. And I feel a knot of regret welling before he even begins to speak.

"I know that your greatest conflict is internal," he says. "That every day of your life is a constant struggle. I know that you hate beyond words, but surround yourself with others, of whom you put behind the largest of barriers. I know that you sleep in the gutter, and that your next meal scurries about your feet, but only because of low aspirations. I know that you have been pushed to the very limits of your comprehension, and are yet to be pushed even further to limits that you have no knowledge of." The practitioner's voice lowers, his round brown head bowed in what could be described as remorse. "You are adrift without foundation, broken without repair, flawed in ways only yourself can remedy, but you still have a brilliant young mind." A sigh. "You have great potential to do great things," he laments, "but lack either the confidence or motivation to do so." His gaze transfixes on my own once again, whatever sadness he felt abandoned where he last saw it on the floor. "You are undisciplined and immature to a fault" he states, eyes excavating my brain through my ocular cavities, "and you meet not even your own standards."

To signify he was finished, the practitioner once again turns his back, but this time exits the room, trailing a small introspective figure whom laps at his heels like a lost pet. As master and child, we continue silently throughout the corridor, my rescuer stopping to inspect various things in small antechambers of which he makes bemused sounds of interest, "hmm"s and "ahh"s at contraptions, concoctions, and others of which I can't define. He scowls at a device looking distinctly arachnid in nature, metal legs erupting from a geared thorax, and groans at the presence of a spice rack filled with various substances of which I don't recognize. In that same room, I see a chunk of phosphorescent stone similar to what I had witnessed in Aran's resurrection, crumbling

bits of angular shards chipped off and a jar of powder besides it all. I exhibited a desire in touching the debris, black powder and needle, before being harshly turned on by my guide and ushered away from the workbench.

At the end of the main corridor, opposite from our origin, the practitioner unbars a latch and walks out onto the top step in a flight of narrow stairs overlooking a domed room. A room that is dimly illuminated by a mass of small glowing pinpricks focused around a central altar. A room of which I am well-familiar. At this point, I know for certain where I am, without a shadow of a doubt. My knees wobble and my injured hand flares fresh with phantom pain, metaphysical condolences for the digits I almost expect to see strewn about the floor. Sensing the immediate discomfort, though, my guide broke silence, becoming subsequently enraptured by the harrowing story that was to follow. With me in tow, my having been convinced by an unnecessary concern for abandonment, my rescuer investigates both the central gem and the partially collapsed tunnel, seeing first-hand the horrors of which I described.

“A gigas.” the man whispers only to himself, my presence superfluous in cowering behind a fallen caber.

The whole scene generates an eerily disquieting fear within me, even had I *not* been accosted by an animated giant, or had my hand mutilated by a magical trap. The clay golem produces no arcane fire in its final resting spot, torso buried unseen under mounds of wood and soil, feet clad in iron sticking out at awkward angles, but I sense an unseen power, a kinetic energy. I had from the very moment I awoke. This place still carries a bad vibe, only lessened, subdued, dormant. Only in witnessing the spectacle of the fallen golem, only in seeing the gem-trap open and ready for more takers, more fingers, only after reliving the previous night did I begin to feel the need to break free of this prison once again. The temporary relief of *not* being tortured had ridden its course, and has only brought me so far! I was placated after being released, the act of some mysterious old man, after being imprisoned for an indiscernible amount of time, plenty satisfied to accompany him in his... search. But the threat of this place still reeks violence and mal intent, a subjection I had no taste for. Where were my captors, the noblebloods and temptress, and more importantly, could I trust the practitioner in my defense should they emerge? Just how long *was* I in their ‘care’ and who exactly was this old codger I was blindly following?! And just what is he *doing* here?! *It’s not a damned tour!* I fumed.

But before I was lost completely to hysterics, before I forsaked my better judgment and berated my rescuer, before I lost it in the confines of the enemy’s den, my guide beckons me with a single word and we head back from whence we came. Thankfully, we leave the burial tunnel and the domed pit with its eye-shaped altar, leave the dank passageway and antechambers filled with mysteriously foreboding materials and gizmos. We leave the torture room, leave the racks with their ropes and array of glistening blades, the rats with their corpses, leave the stink with its mold and gloom with its darkness. We leave all that behind, including a small chamber with seats arranged in a circle, a small oil lamp burning low on a table, a pile of coppers piled high next to a handful of amulets of similar design as we scale a sturdy ladder leading to a door in the ceiling. We leave this behind in

exiting the closet from which I had eavesdropped and we leave the mansion, a burned husk of its former glory, as we traverse the front lawn.

In doing so, in opening the thick double-doors to the meticulously cultivated lawn, in stepping beyond the opulent home half-immolated to the ground, I see the broad light of mid-day smiling down upon us all, *everyone* who is gathered here. I bring my bandanna across a single eye, as I try to surreptitiously duck behind the practitioner.

“You can’t do this!” a tall man in finery barks at us, his eyes burning fierce behind a gray beard. An aggregate of graybeards surrounds him in fact, each glowering holes through my skull.

Raziel is among them. “This one burned my house to the ground! Don’t tell me that *that* is justice as well!” he screams bloody murder. I can sense the desperation within him, a foreboding sign of one losing a battle.

My host responds. “As I understand it, *she* set the fire.” He motions at the tattooed temptress, standing bound and gagged between a pair of intimidating, tan-robed figures off to one side. With her lovely mouth shrouded in a bestial muzzle and manacles restricting both hands behind her, it was difficult to imagine the woman frothing for my blood, nor the kiss that followed...

“Preposterous!” the rich oaf puffs his chest in repose. “She merely apprehended that ARSONIST after he committed the deed!”

“She has betrayed our Order and committed offenses which endangered this sector, if not the whole city!” the practitioner retorts. “Nothing in that is acceptable. You’d be wise to view her as a threat as we do, *and to pray* we do not deem you a collaborator.” he snips, curtailing the sentence with a snarl.

Bristling intensely, the gaggle of noblebloods stands speechless in castrated rancor.

“Furthermore,” the practitioner continues, obviously relishing in the efficacy of the exertions, “we would appreciate your utmost cooperation when you are each... interrogated... regarding the slew of illegal devices and ingredients found in the recesses of THIS private home.” As the last three words flew disdainfully from his mouth, my host pivoted on a heel and sent his robed arm in a wide arc, a grand gesture that revealed an inner contempt for the bourgeois but also a complicated band of tattooed runes. *He* had the same markings as the temptress. Who *were* these people?

“After all,” my host finishes, “I can’t turn a blind eye to your supplying this woman with contraband.”

My ex-captors blanch with fright, color draining from individual faces as quickly as if they had each been spontaneously gutted, their lifeblood leaking invisibly to the ground.

We leave them to anticipate their futures as the practitioner leads us onward in road's direction.

“And you.” he says, turning on me abruptly once we are well out of earshot. My heart catches in my throat. “You take care of yourself, huh?” His face shows no sign of emotion, a general disregard taking over in my cold dismissal. His features read as a calculating somberness, eyes wilting but dry, the way you might look should you be forced to put down a beloved pet turned rabid. For some reason I feel tainted, unwanted.

And with that simple statement I am left behind, flabbergasted at the man's brevity, the withering codger ambling off towards the architectural husk of a scorched palatial estate, inaudible drama unfolding at its base. In the background, a scuffle breaks out amid the noblebloods, undoubtedly a dispute over shouldering blame. Fists are launched by some while others make attempts to restrain. In that same instant also, capitalizing on the distraction, the tattooed woman makes her own attempts, but at freedom. Before she slumps, subdued into the awaiting arms of twin robed guards, they administer some kind of spark to her neck's nape, the wardens proving ruthlessly efficient. I am barely cognizant of any of this, though, my focus honed on my host's bobbing, freckled head, the curious little man hobbling away in that decrepit gait. He's leaving me with so many questions, so many concerns. He's leaving me alone with my doubt and confusion, my pain and remorse. He's leaving despite my ignorance of holes torn wide in the fabric of my world, leaving despite my need for guidance, for clarity, a mentor to help with my decisions, an experienced hand to direct my efforts. He's just plain leaving.

“So that's it then?!” I exclaim, my voice cracking from the strain, seeming weak and broken in the scattering gust of warm air pressing firmly from the west. “What the Hells just happened?!” I shout over the rising wind, channeling open frustration into the demanding question. I am exhibiting a bit more insolence than I probably would had he been standing directly beside me, but I just don't care.

My words have no effect. The aged man continues his stride seemingly ambivalent to my pleas. But just when I thought that the rising winds had consumed my voice, that he had simply been shielded from my plight and deaf to my desperation, the practitioner froze in his pace, the weary, soul-crushing weight of the world evidenced in his hunched back. He turns to me, and through a miracle of acoustics, the gravelly voice rings clear in my mind despite distance and the flurries of loose sand licking at our faces, stinging the eyes to slits.

“You have questions.” he says coolly. “That's the way of it sometimes.”

Chapter 18: Reprisal

The sand is warm between my toes, a contrast to the air which is surprisingly crisp and cool for mid-afternoon. The dirt, coating my naked torso in cloying camouflage, clings tenaciously to my form from sweat alone. The sweat of fear. It is gritty, particularly in my hair and pits, but at least I don't glisten in the dim light afforded by the blankets of dark clouds rolling in. At least I don't stand out against the maze of clay walls of which I'm crouching. Deep rumbles shake the earth and sky, reverberations felt more than heard, like the gutturals of a giant, and I can't help but feel it is the subtle provocation of something greater than myself. Like a God clearing his throat, urging me to refrain from my present course. These are sounds I hear over the din of my own thoughts, my own inflections, while the rest of me listens intently for the noises of others. I dig my sandals further into compacted soil, bracing in anticipation as the rhythmic clink of metal on metal approaches unseen from around a corner, one of many well-outfitted guards I've viewed during the last quarter sandglass. With every bound, I hear scaled layers of armor slapping against itself, a ferrous carapace growing impossibly loud as the man sprints finally into view and past. My dark silhouette shrinks firmly against its spot, eyeing the glistening halberd polished to perfection, sharpened to a razor's edge and wielded by a muscled grip. My own ambition had already cut me off at the palm, but this man's weapon could do far better. I breathe relief in seeing his departure, peeling away from cover to get a view of the guard's origin. I knew not where he, or any of the garrison, had been scurrying to but it was advantageous to someone breaking into the palace grounds, though my initial time of flitting amongst ramparts memorizing their positions and timing seems to have been utterly wasted.

The Gods' supervisory murmurs are slowly becoming an insatiable tantrum, the wind picking up, clouds of terrestrial dust mirroring billowing that blots out the sky. Aran's storm had finally shown and it was, indeed, a force to be reckoned with, the resulting damage from another devastating sand assault as unpredictable as the hearts of men, themselves. The heavens continue to rage, but my mind is made up, the intrusions of some invisible and benign overseers mattering little to yet one of the city's rats, tethered to terra firma, forced to carve out an existence. Another crackle of thunder rolls in from the distant mountains and shakes the earth violently, but instead of quaking with the rest of the city's denizens and the buildings they cower inside, I simply take opportunity to make a break-neck dash for the next line of cover.

It is in this manner that I proceed, continuously dropping from view, checking over my shoulder, ducking into doorways and finding hiding spots where the average eye would find none, avoiding the heavily armed and armored at all costs. Once, I hide behind a full-length tapestry that extends to the floor. Once, I find refuge amid organic refuse that had once been King Mathias' breakfast. Twice, I think myself a dead man, having been caught in the open with nothing to shield myself and another when a guard had been too still and silent to be noticed, my salvation in both instances being the limited peripheral vision offered by protective helmets. You can't stab what you can't see, so I manage a bit of back-track maneuvering to circumvent these areas, side passages coupled with fancy

footwork allowing for entry deep within the compound's defenses. A harrowing experience to be long remembered.

Mathias' bedroom was previously unknown, but I simply parallel the main passages in the search, pools of darkness collecting in deep corners providing adequate contemplation areas when necessary. Where to go? Where to head? Trying to think like an insanely opulent and paranoid boy-king whom I'd never met is unbecoming of my facilities, so I rely mostly upon following a trail of riches that decorate passages he was most likely to travel. In doing so, I stumble across several guard stations and posts, nearly all of which are empty, but an even greater boon presents itself in the form of a set of indescribably royal doors in the heart of the compound's second story. Lighted on either side by twinkling braziers, the massive set of reinforced planks are gilded with yellow flourishes of swirls and spirals, gold leaf and vine patterns embossed with exquisite craftsmanship. The floral design is inset into the gentle contours of the rose-colored wood, accenting the gentle twists and curves of the natural grain without appearing too gaudy or rustic, a work of art in itself. It, like many things here, was fit for a king, and both the carpet runner that ended at its threshold and the position midway between servants' and guards' quarters gave the distinct impression of a room in which Mathias would while away his time often and at leisure. I peek down both sides of the intersection where hallways converge, and even manage to eke an impromptu hiding spot behind a decorative shrubbery as a pair of guards walk towards from beyond, their lethality taking my attention away from small-talk regarding a riot-something-or-other.

When the coast is clear, I spring into action, dropping to a single knee at the door after performing an extraneously unnecessary feat of athletics, rolling to a halt a hand's breadth from the gilded leaves. That simple act of whimsy is just one of several indications of a change within me, my exponential increase in awareness of my surroundings. Down several corners of the hall, headed away, the conversation of the patrol continues unabated. Somewhere else in the compound, the echoing cries of some distant commotion reaches far in its travels to find me kneeling there. The carpet feels plush, though well trodden, against my leg. My skin, seeming to have become hypersensitive, even feels different, somehow detecting the difference in temperature from one side of my body to the other, little hairs trapping what little moisture there was to be had and holding it close to flush skin. All five senses on high alert, I can almost *smell* the weather, even *taste* the atmosphere and the barometric drop. I imagine I *feel* the palace moving, that I can *hear* the wind whipping fiercely at the building, though I knew this to be impossible due to the room's distance from the outside. I *see* the effect that this is all having on me, that I'm aware in more ways than physical, that my body as well as mind is alive. That's the word to best describe it: *alive*, the world seeming ripe for harvest, a jewel to be plucked, a well-formed pearl hidden in the confines of an oyster, an available and tangible happiness finally revealing itself to me. And somehow, it all seems achievable should one play their cards right. At this very moment, I feel I am playing the very best I could with the hand that I had been dealt, no other scheme shining as brightly as what I had in store. No other course of action bestowed the freedom and versatility this plan would allow me. Looking at my physical hand, I wriggle the remaining fingers with a flurry of motion, my speed still apparent in two functional digits and a thumb, my stare

being one of an awakening self awareness and not of self pity, my gaze seeing potential and not a handicap. Between here and the palace's encircling wall, my entire demeanor had shifted drastically; my own attitude and behavior feeling foreign even to myself... but for the better.

I take pleasure in whipping out the picks, feel elation as the tumblers align, and stifle a squeal of joy as the King's royal door swings open to reveal a private chamber. In breaching is personal safe, his cocoon, stealing into the personal rooms of the city's most powerful and dangerous figurehead, I violate so many of the rules I previously thought to have existed, rules against risk, rules in concordance with and reinforcing my own personal views on the status quo. They were social guidelines that had emerged and made sound logic at the time, ones that I had adopted as deified doctrine years ago. I was throwing all that out the window and yet, in doing this, I feel empowered and unstoppable, encouraged by both my body's physical reaction to unparalleled sensation, as well as my abrupt and sudden emergence from the metaphysical confines of a closed mind. I now embody the brash invincibility of a purely unfettered, untroubled youth, swinging their newfound gaze upon a fresh and unexplored world to decide what it was they would conquer first. As of today, I am a juggernaut of my own destiny, a herald of my own fate. Quickly, I lock the door behind me.

Understanding that I probably have little time to spare, I still busy myself in exploration, inspecting the King's windowless bedroom with the appraising eye of a potential buyer. I am dwarfed by high ceilings and the stretch of hardwood floors, the audacity of so much headroom, if intended for a single person of normal stature, seeming quite pretentious. Everything was huge, unreasonably expensive. So much so, in fact, that the grandeur of such lavish luxury falls short of the realm of Godhood only by the presence of a chamber pot, of which I soiled just for truthful bragging rights. A hand mirror catches my attention immediately thereafter, the smoothly reflective oval lying enticingly atop a side table. I hadn't seen my own image in ages, but the face that looks back at me seems not my own, at least not what I thought I had remembered. Dry, almost scaly, tan skin gazes back at me, a taut and constricted face baked by the sun. Deep pitted eyes pock a visage of mild surprise, the likes of which is intensified by brown penetrating orbs staring directly into my own. I look like the Hells themselves, a refugee, but I discount a nagging feeling of recent familiarity as I turn the silver frame away with a bit of mild disgust, refocusing my efforts on the task at hand. No personal weapons of defense were to be found amid the ordered belongings, not a blade in any of the drawers of solid furniture, nor a shiv along the contours of the pillowed bed. A sole dependence on escorted protection, revealed. I take note, scanning for items of further interest but quite honestly, there's not much to look at, the first impression of amazement at an immaculately opulent quarters yielding in the face of detailed inquisition, and waning at the lack of substance. The polished surfaces of unused spaciousness, the sterilized capacity of focused necessity, belie this room as a refuge, not an entertainment center, the enclosing four walls devoid of anything even slightly detracting from life in general, boredom in specific. A large bureau, made of imported materials and finely-crafted with the honed artistry of an entire kingdom, stands vacant and beautiful along the perimeter. Surface unadorned of nostalgia or keepsakes, its contents empty save for a few sleeping garments, the piece lives up to

absolutely no expectations, its function as a practical utility not even being taken advantage of in its abandonment. It, like everything else in the room, is there to flesh out the décor, to occupy space, to give false appearances to an otherwise empty chamber. To keep the king company in his solitude. I swirl, taking it all in, the taste of opulence determinedly bitter in regards to the invisible boundaries put forth by each bit of evidenced wealth. It's as if small barriers surround the furniture, the vases, the ornate tapestries, any and all idols to wealth, a precision coldness enveloping their calculated angles and expensive contours, rejecting interaction, repelling touch, their purposes engineered as being aesthetically pleasing and nothing more. A room of untouchable beauty. An entire palace of isolated treasures. And it is surrounded by a destitute populace of increasing desperation. Indeed, I am beginning to comprehend the humorless practicality of a sheltered, affluent man, was beginning to fathom the depths of paranoia, the draws of a hermetic lifestyle. I am peeking past the inwardly-focused shell of an overwhelmed boy-king, glimpsing the fragile construct of a single man's attempts to block out the entire world, to encase himself in a gilded tomb of isolation. Mathias is as insulated from the city as rumor depicted, and at least half as damaged.

But, that's what I was staking my life on.

My keen hearing determines an approaching sound, a distinct thumping occurring at disciplined intervals, a march that sent minute vibrations throughout the floor. Judging from the weight of the footfalls, there were at least three times as many armored soldiers as the two I overheard in the hall, the ones that had tromped across that same carpet not half a glass ago. These are in such tandem though, rhythmic perfection and timing, that it is easy to mistake the small army for a single being, a pet behemoth at the disposal of a man who I imagine centers the defensive cluster. Superb training and conditioning had produced at least six representatives of an elite fighting force, and I simultaneously wondered if their infallibility extended to the rest of the unit, and if their loyalty could indeed be purchased by the nobleblood council members.

A key finds the door's lock, metal on metal echoing hollow in the solitude, the squad having ceased its march just outside the reinforced barrier of shielding double doors. Of which, swing inward, the cascading light of a comparatively well-lit hallway flooding the opulently barren chamber and enshrouding a lone figure in an iridescent halo. Moving stiffly, impulsively, the form scuttles inside, barring the heavy entrance upon arrival with great effort, clattering the key nervously upon the seal in removing himself from whatever perceived threat nipped constantly at his heels. It was indeed a man, not some scared little boy that hearsay made him to be or that his own actions inferred, but a man who strides timidly about the room, concerning himself with a multitude of items from multiple positions. He inspects the room much as I did before, but with surprising hesitation despite the methodical scanning, as if a cerebral checklist opposed primal fear as a dominating motivation. It is when he gasps, having encircled his bed to find the reeking chamber pot, body frozen in a stiff terror, that I slip an arm easily around his throat, the other drawing a single drop of blood at dagger point so he would take me in all seriousness.

“Scream and you’re dead.”

I don’t need to see his face to know that it has degenerated to a quivering puddle of moisture, his body racked with convulsive, but silent, sobs. Streams of fluid drip cold on my forearm as the king of this fair city heaves a quiet wheeze, chest deflating like a bladder, hands gripping my vice-like hold with an almost imperceptible pressure. I let another few moments pass, let the shock of mortality slip quietly away as his life’s slideshow finishes its revelations, let the body’s shudders still themselves in acceptance. I try to judge the amount of time it takes a man to overcome the initial panic and to finally allow himself death.

And then I let him go.

“We need to speak.” I say, taking a large step back and squaring my shoulders before Mathias has a chance to whirl around.

And he does, blanched under a sheen of tears, snot, and sweat, a contrasting dot of red just under his jaw-line, of which he prods with a shaky hand. His pallid face wrinkles in a grimace, hairless chin becoming dimpled in a pathetic expression of pain, a feeling as foreign to him as poverty.

“W-who are you?” he whispers, attempting to simultaneously meet my demands of both silence and conversation.

I look down my nose at him, summoning an air of authority of which I don’t possess, imitating figures of whom had heckled the growing process into the adult I knew myself to be, ghosts of my past that had commanded respect and obedience over the years. People whose judgment was final, and had at one time or another filled me with fear. I pretended the king was covered from head to toe with odorous, stinking filth when I said:

“I am the leader of the Thieves’ Guild. You can call me Hanse.”

No one says a word for quite some time, both of us making our very different glares at very different people from very different backgrounds. But, despite the awkwardness and the lack of common ground, we share a thread that bound us to that moment. We are both wrestling with this information for the first time. At first, I don’t think the lie has found purchase, that the useless words had slid as easily off his back as a water fowl’s. The royal visage remains blank, void, prone in its immobility, an accusing and vulnerable stare. But something wonderful happens.

“What can I do for you Hanse?” he breathes heavily, features immune from the infectious condescension that is tell-tale evident in one who is simply humoring another. King Mathias is not being placating nor biding time for betrayal, but is genuinely prepared to parley with me.

“Your life is in danger.” I say.

“I-I understand.” he stammers, shrinking further from my pose of rigid superiority.

“Not from me,” I hasten, “but from others. Have you had recent contact with the nobles? Any conversations, information, messages?”

“They’ve formed at the gates. Th-they say they’re petitioning change... that action is demanded and necessary.”

This is all news to me, but I assimilate the information quickly, weaving my tapestry from all available sources. “They’re the ones you must look out for! They vie for your power! Your wealth! The nobles are a threat to you!”

“But why?” Mathias whines, appearing more impotent and child-like than even the most derogatory rumors on the street could do justice.

“Because they think you’re weak.” I had calculated the statement to ignite his strength, a passion within, and am not disappointed to see a flicker of anger pass briefly over his cherubic features.

“How do you know this?!” he speaks fervently in a hushed whisper, almost demanding of the man with the knife, exhibiting a bit of the burning resolve instilled in all royalty. I just knew that he had inherited more than just riches.

But I set my jaw, forcing anticipation and defining strength, quelling the kindled fire of which I refuse to be engulfed by. Just as I had laid the dialogue in place for him, establishing dominance is equally important, the staged conversation but a facet of divulging through meted chunks of information. After all, feeding the man through an indiscernible mixture of half-truths comes second to control. Leverage as an art form. Deception at its finest. I command his focus with my eyes before continuing.

“That fire in the northeast quarter? I have done you a service. Just as I will continue to do so, for as long as you choose.”

Mathias stands in rapt attention.

“I recently ‘attended’ a council meeting of several influential families.” I pause dramatically. “I *heard* them speak ill of you, about your kingdom. I *heard* them discuss their plans for it, about decisions that they, themselves, are to make in the near future.”

Mathias is entranced.

“If you value your life, your well-being, you will believe me when I say that it is the *nobles* who stand to profit from your usurpation, that your own abilities are rivaled by the collaboration of the wealthiest families. That you are opposed in information, gold, power, and sheer numbers. They plan on stealing your authority right out from

underneath you, on purchasing the very guards you have trained to protect. I know names, know faces, of those who would take this from you, and” I pause to great effect, Mathias’ lip trembling in anticipation, “am willing to offer my services.”

“What can I do?!” the king exclaims, forgetting my initial instruction, exhaling panic in a pleading manner, eyes boring into me as if I had just sentenced his execution.

“Listen to me very carefully.” I say, returning absolutely none of the emotion.

Chapter 19: Duties

I'm wet, cold, and miserable. Had the torrents of rain drenching the city not been essential to biological life I would also be annoyed, but instead, I tentatively plod across the streets with a stoic expression plastered on my face, haphazardly plowing through collecting pools of water that refuse to be reabsorbed by stamped earth and cobblestones. The wind picks up, causing airy spray to fall in sheets as the unseen force whips its way amid the network of architecture. Waterfalls cascade off rooftops and eaves, cutting rivulets to the gutters below. Briefly, I wonder if any chunks of masonry will erode away, the city finally crumbling under the pressures of nature herself, and if there will be enough coppers to bribe the tribes of homeless urchins to sweep whatever debris the city becomes after the passing storm. "Well, that's *their* problem." I think aloud, my demeanor soured by the moisture greasing my feet in their worn sandals, toes becoming little wrinkled prunes. "This whole city needs a bath." I trudge on through the inclement weather, certain of gaining a fever before the gales let up and already feeling the tickling sensations of suppressed sneezes building inside my skull. I look up at the dark clouds pissing their majesty upon us all and don't know whether to curse or praise the water in its flight, splattering cleanliness upon my features and rinsing away layers of grime. The air is fresh, though a cloying moisture fills my lungs, a thorough cleansing that would even purge my insides.

I continue in silence. Though that isn't particularly unusual, it's all the more evident since I'm flanked on either side by clusters of people. Amazed at both the change in temperature and humidity, they collect in the streets just as the water does, cooing at the sight and cupping their hands to receive an aqueous offering from the sky. Drinking, bathing, the general public is out in droves, experiencing the beneficial oddity for what it was and taking full advantage of their good fortune. Canteens are filled and mothers furiously scrub their resistant children. Of which, were obvious in desiring to join their playful friends stripped bare in the flooded street, creating waves, splashing each other, and stooping low to simulate swimming in less than a foot of water. Several men can be seen smoking pipes from open doorways, the old or infirm looking enviously upon the young. Women seem to be preoccupied with laundry, while their husbands lay about in the crooks of window frames or staring out from hammocks facing the gentle rain, enjoying both the sights of a refreshed city and the sounds of the gentle pattering against clay and stone.

I lean heavily into a door to force it open, the poorly cobbled planks of wood scraping the floor, the action producing a terribly shrill squeal heard even above the dull roar of the heavens' weeping. I shake whatever tears I can from clothing, blotting my face with a shoulder, turning my head about to survey the room. A man sat at a solitary table, head bowed in prayer, mourning an empty cup between arms which held his head aloft. He seemed harmless enough, so I waltzed directly up to the bar, meeting the accusing glare of a monstrous bartender, frozen in place with a filthy rag penetrating the rim of a filthy cup. Gerd's face is sliced cleanly in a number of places; darkened bandages hiding much of the damage, though I'm convinced that a man of his constitution would bounce right

back from any abuse. He leered aggressively with a look that would have given me chills if I hadn't already been shaking from the cold.

"I'd like a drink." I say boldly, unphased by my deservedly icy reception, "and pour yourself one as well."

He does as requested, the red bear never able to turn down a drink, though his eyes never leave my own, staring daggers that would eviscerate anyone less confident than myself. As he produces two frothing mugs of swill, I toss a coin to the table, an open challenge of which I know the result.

"You're money's no good here." Gerd sneers, an unusual defiance festering in his words.

He slams the drink in front of me, spittle as well as beer-head speckling the table. An unsettling moment passes. The rain continues to pour outdoors, the only noise for several moments being the howling of a hungry storm and the torrent of assaulting water droplets. The red bear still grips both cups as if to tear their handles free, and I think he will do so until I toss a heavy sack betwixt us, handfuls of metal shards cascading carelessly to the counter in a gleaming avalanche. His eyes twinkle with lust for the luster of several hundred coins.

"Then what the Hells am I supposed to do with *your* cut of the gold?" I exclaim with mock frustration, throwing both hands in the air and rolling my eyes rabidly.

I witness the strength draining from him as quickly as I've seen him down mugs of ale, the wobbliness in his knees evident in the way his slack shoulders teeter back and forth. Heavy hands find places to support his bulk against the bar, moist eyes unable to tear away from the sparkling fortune piled at his fingertips.

"Wh-?" is all he can manage to articulate, blubbering lips becoming entangled in a mass of red bramble he calls a beard.

"I've got a new job." I say, beaming with minimal pride.

The barkeep's gaze finally meets my own.

"I'm now the head of a Thieves' Guild and employed as a royal spy!"

Gerd gives me a dead fish stare.

"Yeah, I know!" I continue, feeding off his enthusiasm. "Essentially, I keep doing what I'm doing, hire a few underlings, and report a few times a season to Mathias (who's fairly reasonable by the way) about the movements of the nobles. He's got the coin and I've got the time so I figure: Why not?" I gesture, palms upturned. "He needs a thumb on the city's pulse, being as that he doesn't ever leave the palace, and I could use a decent meal

with a pair of new clothes. Now, I just need to buy a few hands as operatives... Know any?" I question, tossing a sincere look his direction, eyebrows perked for reception.

The big man looks simply flabbergasted, visibly wrestling with the information as if my monologue had been some clever riddle he was having difficulty deciphering. A bit too much alcohol, perhaps? Maybe. But, before too long, he snatches a coin and tests its integrity with his teeth, the stamped disc proving the stronger despite a massive crunching I hear emanating from Gerd's jowls. He begins working a huge mitt against his cheek in disbelieving response before deciding it was high time to hide our cache of genuinely proven loot, the first of many, as we begin a long and serious talk.

Being in the employ of a king would certainly have its advantages, but being discreet with my fortune would be an unprecedented hurdle in my near future. I am willing to accept the new responsibilities to myself and those I cared about with the utmost of humility, the utmost of care, but it would be in starting an organization, *my own* organization, a collective of thieves no less, that would prove the most challenging. It had been a torturous road in achieving my victories, however small they were, and blundering through the caltrops of blind happenstance proved just as harmful as good. But, all in all, despite the suffering, despite the mistakes, I can now consider the idea that it had mostly been worthwhile. Life rarely gives us what we want, at least not openly or immediately, but at times we are allowed a pivotal moment in which we can affect our surroundings, improve ourselves, have fresh experiences, or learn new things, I know that it is important to rise to the task. There are many ways to live, but we are almost always afforded options, the opportunities and decisions made in a lifetime drastically altering the outcome in ways we'd rarely imagine. I've paid dearly for my ignorance and strive for clarity on a day-by-day basis, the errors of a past long gone resonating in harmony with a future yet to come, old regrets fading in light of new ways in which we can test our mettle. Doors open just as windows close. People die as others are instilled with greater purpose. Rain often comes when we most need it, as the persistence of humankind continues through the trials and tribulations of simple survival. It is insulting to believe that we are flawed in ways that only we ourselves can remedy, but it is a simple truth that we must embrace to find any form of humor in this world.

After all, humor and insult are distinguishable only by perspective. And from someone else's perspective, this is probably all rather funny. How we got here. What we've been through.