Swords, sorcery, blood, and destiny. A bored young noblewoman is weary beyond words of her life of tedious parties and petty bullying. She thinks she's found a chance to rebel when she dances with a mysterious man in black at the Grand Dukes' ball. Little does she know she'll get far more than she bargained for, when she's drawn into the blood-soaked saga of the bastard children of the dead god of murder.
The Grand Dukes' Ball and What Happened There

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And the Lord of Murder shall perish.
But in his doom he shall spawn a score of mortal progeny.
Chaos shall be sown from their passage.
- Prophecies of Alaundo

Kythorn, the Time of Flowers. 1367 Dalereckoning.

The four maidens, adrift in a sea of fluttering voile and lacy drapery, mounted the steps to the Grand Dukes' ball in Baldur's Gate. Pherenike fidgeted with the blue stone on her necklace, then realised what she was doing and dropped it. She looked around at the scene, curious and interested, taking in the violin music and the feathers and jewels and frippery, the bards and politicians and the Flaming Fist captains in civilian garb, their swords peace-banded to scabbards as they sipped red wine.

Many of lower social status were already here, and now four trumpets sounded in Candle Balduran's honour. Four were the best one could hear short of being a Grand Duchess herself rather than simply the daughter of a three-times-elected Grand Duke. Candle's family claimed to be descended from Balduran himself, and even if that wasn't strictly true they had been noble and rich for enough generations to believe it. Candle swept into her grand entrance, head held high, and as part of her entourage of three Pherenike slipped through in her wake.

"Lady Candle Balduran!" Candle deliberately paused at the top of the stairs, raising a gracious hand to the masses below. She lifted the trains of her red and purple gown. She stopped at exactly the right angle for the lamplight to catch her holy symbol, a diamond and glass pendant in the shape of Siamorphe's divine chalice, encrusted with gold and rubies. Siamorphe was the goddess of nobility, preaching the rightful rule of those with birth and gold and might. As both a priestess and a noble, Candle had all those things in great abundance. Calculating her pause to a nicety, Candle moved onward to take her place at the head of the ball.

"Lady Yarrow Blaine!" Yarrow tossed back her golden hair, almost the same colour and thickness as Candle's, and smiled and waved to the crowd in almost the same way as her. Tall and athletic, Yarrow could out-dance any dancing-master you could find in the entire city of Baldur's Gate. She'd been Candle's closest friend since they were children together, and despite her family's troubles she had birth and beauty to spare. Her family was, if anything, even older than Candle's, with holdings in the Undercity that dated to before Balduran the explorer turned his tiny home harbour into one of the richest ports in Faerun.

"The Honourable Livia Hellebore!" Livia was a quiet sort, bookish and gentle like Pherenike herself. She was a difficult girl to get to know closely, for she was so shy. Candle considered Livia a little beneath them, since her parents were immensely riche but also nouveau. Her mother was a sea captain who'd proven tremendously successful in half a hundred rich voyages, and her father was a talented mage and even better investor. Livia was slender to the point of emaciation, small-boned and fragile looking in a much-petticoated green dress that looked far bigger than she was. Her gaudy, thick jewellery seemed to weigh her down. Masses of emeralds and jade bound her russet hair, and a huge clawlike gold and green ring struggled to stay on her left hand. Livia nodded and blushed slightly at being announced, and moved on as quickly as possible if she wished not to be noticed.
"Mistress Pherenike Medomai!" On Pherenike's turn, she smiled and briefly paused, doing her best to look like she belonged there. Which she did, at the moment, but she hadn't always. Although the Medomai family had lived in Baldur's Gate long enough to be respectable, Pherenike's father Demetrius worked for Candle's father. Lately, his trading on his own account had prospered almost as much as his paid work. The Grand Duke Balduran was his patron and it was vitally important to keep the relationship strong, even if Demetrius was now closer to a secondary partner than a hireling.

When Demetrius and Pherenike were invited to dine one night with the Grand Duke and his family, Candle had for the first time seen something in the daughter of her father's servant that marked her worthy of notice. Perhaps it was the Medomais' new prosperity, or perhaps it was that Candle saw Pherenike's looks as an adequate foil for herself, dark locks and pale skin as a background to set off her extravagant red and gold beauty. And so now Pherenike was a socialite trailing in Candle's wake, wearing a deep blue divided dress Candle had helped her select, the blue and silver necklace clasped about her neck reminding her of the bond they shared. All four of them wore the same necklace, in four colours to match.

The formalities concluded, the four ladies swept into the fray together. As a coordinated group, they made more of an impression than any one of them could make on their own, even Candle. Candle was the undoubted leader, but she gained strength from having followers. The dancing proper had not yet started and the wine and canapes freely flowed. Pherenike knew that none of the four of them would eat anything; it was unwise for a lady to do so in public, and one had to watch one's hips.

Madeline Castellas had no such pretensions. Pherenike watched her with maybe a little envy as she happily took one of the candied almond tarts, festooned with glittering tendrils of spun sugar. Madeline was older than Pherenike, well into her mid-twenties, the daughter of a wealthy merchant. She was fat. Pherenike could have used euphemisms and said pleasantly plump or similar, but it was hard not to look at Madeline and think unkind phrases like really let herself go or was her mother a beluga whale or doesn't she know how she looks to other people. Madeline was also very tastelessly dressed in bulging pink silk that did her no favours whatsoever. But it would be awful to be cruel to her. Pherenike knew Madeline a little bit, had seen her on the fringes of parties ever since she'd been a child, and Madeline had always been kind in a distant way. Now the tables had turned and perhaps Pherenike was her social superior these days.

"Madeline Castellas is an eyesore," Candle clamped a hand around Pherenike's upper arm rather tightly, whispering in her ear. She pulled Pherenike to join the others in a corner, where they were somewhat hidden behind a tessellated pillar with glittering mica tiles. "I need your help, Pherenike." She pried open her gold-embroidered chatelaine bag for just a moment, showing a flash of a small perfume vial. Pherenike suspected the liquid inside wasn't perfume. "It disintegrates silk. We need Madeline to believe it's good for her. Write her a love letter from Conradin - Darling I give you this love-gift, dab it on the beautiful skin of your shoulder tonight, you know the sort of drivelling sentiment I want."

Conradin Cordenstein was here tonight; Pherenike had seen him in the crowds. He was a Flaming Fist captain at only five-and-twenty, who'd achieved it through blood rather than any kind of ability. His family and Madeline's had long been tied together through business, and rumours still floated of an impending betrothal between their two heirs. Madeline was supposed to pine after Conradin, while he'd been heard comparing her to a pig in public.

"Madeline's never been anything but kind to me," Candle returned. "She's insolent to me," Candle returned. "The Castellas are jumped-up peasants who deserve to know their place. And besides, the joke will be on Conradin too."

It was tempting. Candle had hosted an intimate gathering with her friends, Conradin, and several
other eligible society men. Pherenike had danced with Conradin, foolishly walked out into the hanging gardens with him, and found that made him feel entitled to force his tongue down her throat. She was still fiercely angry at how long it had taken him to understand that her no was serious.

Candle brandished parchment and pencil at her. Yarrow and Livia were covering for them, concealing them on either side of the pillar, around an ornamental fern. "Do it, if you love me," Candle said casually. And there was the implied threat below her words: *if I drop you, you will return to the nothing that I plucked you out of.* "You'll need something to write on. Rest it on Livia's back."

Livia gave Candle one mute look of protest, but let the parchment fall against her priceless gown anyway. Pherenike picked up the pencil. One of her secondary abilities from her studies was a good hand to imitate others’ writing, a talent that Candle made her use a lot more than her real expertise. She knew Conradin's writing from a letter he'd sent her after that disaster. Penmanship, grammar, and even basic spelling were absolutely awful - and the sentiments in it had been worse than disgusting. She'd never written him back.

As Pherenike wrote, she looked up for a moment at a crowd just now entering one of the lesser doors to the ballroom. These didn't merit the formality of announcement. A family of six, happily joking with each other and goggling at the chance to look at high society, a pair of plump rosy-cheeked parents and four girls holding each other's hands. Pherenike never had the chance to have a family like that. Two old men leaning on canes, finely dressed in red-and-blue checks in the florid fashion of sixty-odd years ago. Behind them was a young man who stood out from the whirling crowds, wrapped in a thick black cloak, different to the bright colours of everyone else. He had dark skin and piercing dark eyes, and seemed to meet Pherenike's look coldly, as if he could see right through her.

Pherenike finished the note.

"Yarrow, get this to some servant trying to help Castellas stuff her face some more," Candle ordered. Yarrow took it up and quickly departed.

Candle did like to test all three of her friends, and it looked like she'd designated them all a special role in this prank. Disintegration, Candle had said. The potion would melt Madeline's dress off her in a crowded ballroom. She would be completely humiliated. Madeline would blame Conradin, if she believed the note, and so he'd get a well deserved punishment. And if Madeline traced it back to the true culprit - she'd never dare any repercussions, because nobody would ever go against Candle Balduran. That applied even more so once people understood what Candle was capable of.

Pherenike's despairing eyes met the stranger's again. Was he looking at her, or something else in the distance? Or was he merely short-sightedly squinting at something five feet away? She didn't feel like she could look anyone in the eyes at the moment. The man in black moved forward, his glance shifting as if he were carefully taking inventory of all around him.

Yarrow whispered in a servant's ear, slipped her a handful of coppers, and the bottle and the note rested on the corner of her tray. Smiling cheerfully, Yarrow walked back to her group. "You have a new admirer, Pherenike," she whispered. "The man in black's watching you."

"Riff-raff, no doubt. He was never announced," Candle said.

"There's a blue emblem on his shoulder," Yarrow said. Pherenike quickly turned her head for a brief look, then back again. The small flash of blue was the only part of the stranger's clothing that wasn't black. *Maybe he thinks it's a masquerade ball missing a stage Mephistopheles or he's a bard who forgot to take his costume off,* Pherenike thought sarcastically; but he pulled off the look well. "I
know that's the Blue Shale merchant house," Yarrow explained. "They're Sembian. One of their representatives, Albescu Demirci, is here in Baldur's Gate to trade. This man is a bit young to be the lead, but I heard the merchant has a son. Only an adopted son, though, and his father's a widower," Yarrow gossiped. An adoption would make someone of lesser status in Candle's and Yarrow's view, Pherenike knew; circumstances such as remarriage, a trueborn child, or even a change of mind could intervene.

This was Yarrow's special skill, to talk and hear and gather information about anyone who was worth knowing anything about in society. She was cheerful and bubbly and not particularly bright, but she was an excellent listener with a better memory for minute details of other people's lives than anyone who'd tried to teach her history dates had ever suspected her of possessing.

"Some people don't know their place. You can do a lot better, Pherenike," Candle told her. "Even if you wish him removed by the guards, just say the word..." That seemed drastic and silly for someone who'd only looked at her, and even that was only a probability rather than a fact. Pherenike shook her head, and Candle became quickly distracted as the perfume bottle and note reached Madeline. Candle dragged them onward to get a better look.

Madeline read the note carefully. Conradin was on the other side of the ball, amidst a thick crush of people, and didn't look back at Madeline. Madeline smiled - she had rather a nice smile, genuinely warm and gentle - and tenderly touched the potion vial.

Then she dabbed it on her shoulder, and the liquid began to eat away at her dress. Candle smiled, and all Pherenike could think was that she looked like a lynx baring its teeth at a triumphant kill.

The man in black was near Madeline. Pherenike looked at him again, as if her gaze couldn't help falling on him. He saw what was happening to Madeline's dress - perhaps even before Candle had seen it, surely before Madeline herself saw it. Then Madeline must have felt it and looked down, distress starting to appear in her face and red colouring of panic and shame mapping itself first over her neck, then crossing to her face.

And that was when the man in black stepped forward.

"Did someone call for a magic show?" he asked in a strong, carrying voice, and people immediately stepped away from him to stare. He whipped the black cloak from his shoulders, flapping like a giant bird of prey, and flung it over Madeline Castellas. Then he cast something, and the cloak changed to a rainbow of colour and patterns, wrapping over Madeline to replace her old dress. That was real magic, not stage magic, Pherenike could tell; a transmutation spell. But it passed muster as a spectacle with the crowd. He took Madeline's right hand gently as if to thank her for volunteering, then reached behind her ear with his left hand. A bouquet of flowers seemed to burst out of Madeline's ear, colours matching her transmuted gown. He handed it to her with a bow. Madeline, uncomfortable with the spotlight, blushed with her hands full, hiding behind the huge bouquet.

Then the man in black stopped a servant offering boiled imported Shou duck eggs, stole several, and juggled three of them fluidly. All eyes were on him now. He saved Madeline, Pherenike thought, and let her get out of everyone's attention. She didn't dare look back at Candle. She could sense Candle's tangible rage, almost feel her vibrating with fury that someone - a nobody - had thwarted her joke that was never really a joke, her piece of precious cruelty.

The man in black seemed to make the eggs disappear in a flash of light. A flame came into existence on his right hand, then he mimed throwing, and his left hand lit up as if he'd sent fire from one to the other. It was probably some sort of flashpoint hidden in his gloves, skill rather than spells. He repeated the trick twice more so that you could tell how it was done, then theatrically blew out the fire. It wasn't particularly good stage magic, Pherenike thought; there was no way this was planned.
But he managed to pull the act off with banter and a cocky grin, and a presence that called all eyes to
him. A deck of cards seemed to appear from thin air in the palm of his glove. He shuffled and
juggled the cards in mid-air, then thrust the ace of spades into his mouth and seemed to chew it up.
He pulled the same card out of his sleeve, intact and back in place.

"Some knife throwing is in order at these events," the man in black announced. The cards
disappeared into his sleeve and were suddenly replaced by a sheaf of wicked-looking black daggers.
"One needs an aesthetically striking volunteer for this - a pretty lady who stands out from her
background. Such as, the lady in red."

The direction of his cold eyes was obviously on Candle Balduran, who was around no other lady in
red. Normally, Candle didn't tolerate other ladies who imitated her signature colour, and perhaps,
Pherenike thought, she was now regretting this. The crowd all naturally stared at Candle, and the
force of their expectation to play along was tangible.

Pherenike had to look at Candle as she made her move to the man in black. Candle's fury was
masked for now, but no less visible to those who knew her well. She was icily livid, and there would
be a terrible vengeance for this outrage. But Candle offered her right hand to the man in black, who
lifted it up and got her the crowd's vulgar cheer, and he asked her to stand against a plastered wall.
She was clearly visible in her red and purple gown, standing out like fire against her background.
Candle stood very still.

The first knife landed by her ear. She clearly wasn't hurt by it. The crowd clapped at the man in
black's skill as he outlined Candle Balduran in daggers. One slip would mean serious injury to her
and probably death for him. Pretty sure that accidentally stabbing a Grand Duke's daughter gets you
hanged, even if you didn't know she was a Grand Duke's daughter. For those in the audience who
didn't know Candle, it was an interesting death-defying act; and for those who did know Candle,
perhaps they too fantasised about Candle's death.

If Candle were dead, we would be free from her tyranny and endless demands, Pherenike thought,
and felt appalled by how dark that thought was.

Candle's outline sprouted in black knives around her. She kept completely stiff with a false smile on
her face below her blonde curls, as beautiful and still as a porcelain doll. It looked like the man in
black had one last knife left, and he threw it to land by her right wrist.

The audience clapped. It had been just an act, after all, which had ended in no disasters. Candle
pulled herself away from the wall, and they could clearly see the pattern of knives in her shape. The
crowd gave a new cheer at the skill of it. The man in black took his bow, then gestured at the crowd
to ask them to give Candle even louder applause. He couldn't have hit on something that would
anger her more if he'd tried; Pherenike knew Candle hated vulgarity. She took it with a stiff smile,
standing straight-backed and glaring at her friends with eyes like steel-blue nails.

Pherenike thought that she, perhaps, was the only one who'd seen that the last knife had done
damage after all. The man in black had made a jagged rent in the sleeve of Candle's expensive gown.
Judging from his skill and what he had seen Candle and the rest of them do, he had probably done it
on purpose. Candle held her arm so as to conceal something so embarrassing as a tear, but Pherenike
knew she would extract a price for that as well in time.

Pherenike's glance briefly fell on a man in a white greatcoat at the back, who stood out for having the
same grim look as Candle at the performance, where everyone around him was cheerful. His iron-
grey hair, cropped short like a soldier's, contrasted with his jet-black eyebrows that narrowed in an
odd fury.
Then the man in black retired. There was a long moment of confused silence. And then the real bards who'd been engaged for the evening came out, dressed like gilded peacocks, and set up their instruments for a whirling dirge about a pirate who'd died for love of a siren in a storm in the Trackless Sea. It somehow wasn't as sensational or as entertaining as the preceding act.

Pherenike looked for Madeline Castellas in the crowd, but couldn't see her anywhere. Madeline must know what had nearly happened to her dress in front of everyone; she'd likely called for her carriage and left as quickly as she could. The bards changed their tunes to dances for everyone, and Candle took her place to open the ball. Candle would have to endure the rest of the night for the sake of keeping her social position, and so too would Pherenike.

Pherenike grabbed a goblet of full-strength wine from a servant's tray, and drunk it off as if it were nine-tenths water. Then she took another one. It helped, a little.

She went out to the ballroom floor, somewhere at the bottom. Pherenike danced mechanically, moving from partner to partner as the tune progressed. She barely knew any of these men, and all of them seemed to have the exact same chinless expression and gooseberry eyes as they tried and failed to spin her without treading on her feet. She didn't realise herself that all the while she was unconsciously looking for the man in black, until an unexpected turn found her face to face with him, with her hand against his.

His look at her was full of nothing but contempt, and Pherenike found herself dying of shame inside. The man in black knew very well what she and the rest of her so-called friends had tried to do to Madeline, and she deserved that dark look.

She had to do something. She'd always felt that no matter what she did on the outside for Candle Balduran, all the endless blather about hairpins and powder and gowns and finding exactly the right combination of accessories, all the vapid parties and vicious gossip and waste of valuable wines, Pherenike was still herself underneath it, a woman who thought and read and had a mind of her own.

He man in black looked like the very touch of her contaminated him. Pherenike spoke first. "You were right," she said.

"You're clearly an accomplished transmuter," she said. She placed her palm against his and circled around. He was also an accomplished dancer, she thought, but she wasn't going to embarrass herself by telling him so. "Yet they applauded your stage magic more."

"Both require significant effort to attain," he said. His hand placed exactly the right amount of pressure on her waist as she spun around.

"People don't judge by effort. They judge by flash and entertainment and lies," Pherenike said. "I've known scholars who worked on papers for ten years, and then people would rather read a broadsheet about some ridiculous masquerade ball than vital advances in the field. They prefer what's showy and gaudy." Her thoughts, and maybe her eyes, drifted to Candle Balduran in her red gown and shining jewels. Then she looked back at the man in black, because she didn't want to waste this moment. He was only half a head taller than her, with messy dark hair swept back from his face. Bronze freckles dotted his cheeks.

They passed back and forth by each other's right shoulder. In this part of the dance, they needed to watch each other closely to know where to go. Of course, his act defined showy and gaudy - even though it was skilled improvisation - she thought. "I didn't mean you," Pherenike added.
None taken," the man in black said. His voice was like honey and gravel, scraping across her like the smirk of a cheshire cat. "Feel free not to believe me, but I'm actually a shy and retiring sort." The violins changed their melody, and he reached to touch her.

Holding his hand, Pherenike realised she actually felt alive for the first time in ages, and free from Candle Balduran's constant pressure for once. She felt both like herself again and like something more than herself, as if she were changing into something new and strange. She felt the heat that burned between their hands to be a living thing of fire, growing and shifting and crackling with birth and destruction.

She felt as if she and her dancing partner were the only real people in the world, and all the crowd around them were nothing but parchment and cinders.

Then her next partner grabbed her roughly, and she progressed through the rest of the dance with her head in a daze.

A galliard's phrases sounded next. The floor was cleared, waiting for pairs of couples to take up the challenge. Ignoring Candle Balduran completely, Pherenike stepped up to the man in black and offered him her hand. "Do you know the volta step?" she asked.

One-and-a-bit dances with the same man hardly marked you out as a slattern practically throwing yourself at his head. Of course, if the one dance involved the volta step, that was a little more questionable. The volta needed close physical contact, absolute trust between partners, and a flying leap into the air.

They pulled it off. The man in black was barely breathing hard. Well. He has stamina, Pherenike thought. She supposed the wine she'd drunk and the exertion of the dance were causing the pink flush she could feel in her cheeks. Parts of her hair had come loose and free around her face, and she couldn't bring herself to care. She kept the same partner for the next dance, a lively reel from the Moonshae Isles that led to more strands of hair swirling across her face. And the one after that.

Then Yarrow Blaine grabbed her by the upper arm, and she and Livia pulled Pherenike back into the crowd.

"Candle said to come and get you," Yarrow whispered.

"Are you drunk? You look drunk," Livia commented. Pherenike scraped some of the sweaty strands of hair back from her face and glared at Livia, about to dismiss the pair of them from daring to interfere with her.

"Candle wants to go home, so she said to tell you she ordered the carriage," Yarrow said. "She said to say that she asked Conradin to take care of you and see you home if you want to stay longer. She told Conradin she thought you'd had too much to drink."

Pherenike looked for Conradin Cordenstein in the crowd, and felt chilled as she saw that he too was watching her. He started to make his way over. His idea of taking care of a girl with too much to drink was ... well, Pherenike didn't particularly want to guess or further their acquaintance to any extent whatsoever. He grinned at her, and she thought she saw a leering wink from him.

"Candle said you can either come with us, or go with Conradin," Yarrow said. "I always thought Conradin was quite sweet looking, like a brindled puppy. I used to have this one blue-nosed mastiff that reminded me of him ... " Sometimes it was hard to tell if Yarrow really was that genuinely silly, but this time she actually sounded sincere, not sarcastic.
Just as Candle was very sincere about her threats.

"Fine. I'm coming with you," Pherenike said, and grabbed her heavy wrap. Her brief attempt at social defiance was over, a rebellion stillborn in a mess of blood and broken bones before it could live, and she was going to face Candle. Her stomach felt heavy as lead inside her as she went out.

The Balduran family carriage was highly distinctive. It was festooned with the family's coat of arms and the roof was elaborately carved to present the ship and the leaping stag that symbolised the house, the doors and decorations painted a bright red. Pherenike sat in the darkest corner, trying to take up as little space as possible, and waited for the storm. It wasn't like there was anything she could do to prevent Candle noticing her.

"Do you want all Baldurian society to know you're a whore?" Candle's voice cut her like a whip. "Move, driver," Candle ordered her coachman.

"That's unfair, Candle," Pherenike said grimly. Candle was her supposed closest friend. She should know that there'd never been anyone. "We were all wrong tonight. I was wrong to write that note." Pherenike hoped that blaming herself most of all would salvage at least some of Candle's ego. "I'm glad the joke on Madeline didn't work."

"And, Candle, the Blue Shale man made you look good," Yarrow jumped in, talking quickly and nervously to try and calm her friend down. "He made sure you got a lot of cheers. Surely he picked you because of how beautiful you looked, standing out from everyone else. Everyone loved the act ..."

"He wanted to humiliate me and I will never forget or forgive," Candle said. "Balduran will never do business with Blue Shale; neither will Blaine nor Hellebore nor Medomai. I know I can count on you all to make that happen, and make the Demircis leave town with their tails between their legs."

"Perhaps you'd like to explain to us all why you were practically fucking a strange lowlife lickspittle on the dance floor, Pherenike?"

_"I chose you above your threat of Conradin, and I'm not convinced I made the right choice,"_ Pherenike thought. _"Why so bitter about a slashed sleeve, Candle?"_ she said. _"The dishevelled look is fatal this season, everybody's about to do it."_

That line would only annoy Candle more. She didn't follow fashions or even set them. She stood apart and distinct from everyone beneath her, and that in her view was everyone in Toril.

"Without me, you and your father would be nothing." Candle's cheeks were actually red with rage, in the lamp-lit glow inside the carriage. Pherenike watched her go at it with the detached emotions she'd use to watch a bad bard perform. "Peasants. Muck. Bankrupt and selling your mouth to sailors at the dock. Which profession you display considerable aptitude for."

The carriage was nearing Pherenike's house, which happened to be closest to tonight's ballroom. Pherenike knew there were always refreshments in the inlaid cabinet in the middle of the carriage seat. She conspicuously poured herself another goblet of wine.
"Oh, it decides to be a drunken sot as well." Candle laughed devilishly. "You'll love it when this hits
the broadsheets the next morning. You might need to move to the outer Horse Plains, or somewhere
equally remote and filthy. Or else get on your knees and sincerely apologise to me, right now."

Pherenike decided to do neither at this stage. She calmly upended the goblet all over Candle's skirts,
dark purple wine soaking through red brocade to white silk petticoats in irreparable stains, and let
herself out of the carriage while Candle was still squawking in disbelief.

She opened her own gate with her key and slipped inside the back garden. The Medomai house was
small and modest, though it had a fine garden. It also happened to be in one of the best locations in
Baldur's Gate, for it had been in her family for generations. The house was completely black in the
night. Her father Demetrius kept regular hours and their housekeeper Sarah insisted on sleep from the
eighth bell to dawn as a condition of employment. They were innocently expecting Pherenike's
return with a story of cheerful frolics and upright socialising with the respectable youth of Baldur's
Gate.

How to face her father in the morning? *Father, I have ruined for life your relationship with your
patron the Grand Duke Balduran, and we might as well leave for the outer Horse Plains tomorrow,
for my life here is over.*

Or perhaps she could think of something. Candle would never have worn that dress again anyway
after the man in black slashed it open, so maybe what Pherenike had done was forgivable. If she
went to Candle the next morning and told her how sorry she was, that might help. Even better, she
would go to Candle's father and mother, who seemed to like her well enough, and beg that
Pherenike's misconduct should not reflect on her father Demetrius, who had absolutely nothing to do
with it.

Pherenike went up to her room on the second floor, lit a candle, and threw aside her necklace,
Candle's necklace, symbol of their friendship. She took down the pins in her hair, letting it fall loose
around her shoulders, perfumed with magnolias.

"Candle's nothing more than a bully," she said to herself, aloud. "I finally stood up to her." And
she'd met a handsome stranger who must surely hold her in in double contempt, first for yielding to
Candle over the note and then a second time for bowing to her threats and leaving on command. She
wished she could see the man in black one last time, talk to him. She'd felt something with him,
something more intense than she could remember feeling for anyone. "He'll probably think I'm a
spineless coward for leaving, but I had a really good excuse."

"Maybe you could let him hear it," came the answer outside her window.

Pherenike dropped her hairbrush with a clatter. The head of the man in black appeared above her

"It's all right," Pherenike managed. She slowly crossed over to the window. He clung to the thick
boughs of old ivy that covered the house, rather precariously.

"I wouldn't normally ... " he tried to explain. "But that is a very distinctive carriage." He looked at
her, studying her face intently. "I thought there was something. Did you feel it too?"

She had. Pherenike gave him her hand to help him inside, not that she was much help. They stood
facing each other in her bedroom, in the half-light of a flickering candle. Something between them
burned like fire.
Chapter End Notes

Can you spot the Bhaalspawn? justiceforalanabeck drew some amazing art for this story!
Livia Hellebore went straight to her secret cupboard under her bed and took out a salt pork pie, three dried apples, a leg of ham, a loaf of honey bread, and a jar of blackberry jam. She set them out on her table and started to eat. Her stomach had clawed inside her all night until she couldn't resist the pain any more. She shovelled the jam on to the loaf of bread with her bare hands and licked her fingers. She broke open the pork pie and alternated bites of it with the bread and jam. She gulped down the apples, seeds and cores and flesh all at once, and gnawed on the entire leg of ham like a starving wolf. She could at last eat and eat to her heart's content, until she finally felt full.

When she was done and only the leg of ham was left half-chewed, Livia took an innocent-looking bottle from her mirrored potions cabinet. It was only a saline solution, water heavily weighted with salt. An emetic. She forced it all down in three deep gulps.

Then Livia was on her knees in the garderobe, vomiting up everything in her stomach. She couldn't afford to put on any weight. She had to be thin and beautiful. Candle sometimes called her hamster-cheeks, and it sounded like a cute compliment and was a cruel insult. Candle couldn't have anyone around her who was imperfect. Livia would never survive without Candle.

Candle was going to destroy Pherenike for what she'd done tonight, and Livia would participate. Candle liked her friends to do her dirty work for her. Livia wasn't sure whether she pitied Pherenike, or hated and loathed her almost as much as she hated Candle. Suddenly Pherenike had joined their group, disrupting everything, and to add insult to injury Candle treated her much better than she did Livia. Pherenike had good blood, five old generations of landed Baldurians behind her. More than that, Pherenike had presence, a silvery remoteness to her like the moon, qualities of elusiveness and mystery. Looking at her, you felt that Pherenike could choose to slip into a secret enchanted chamber inside herself at any moment and lock the door against all intruders, and Candle acted like she needed to woo and win her over. Candle treated Livia like a lowly worm under her feet, even though Livia was far wealthier and more accomplished. Candle literally ordered Pherenike to use Livia as a table, last night, and Pherenike had done it.

Livia opened her book. All her studies and there was nothing she could do against Candle Balduran, Candle the priestess, favoured and protected by Siamorphe. She couldn't touch Candle. She couldn't harm her, however much she wanted to.

_I wish to see Candle Balduran dead_, she begged into the night. Livia clenched her fingernails so tightly that she left white half-moons and bloody cuts on her hands, and imagined that she was looking at Candle Balduran's dead body in a coffin before her.

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Madeline Castellas walked into her quarters, her sanctuary. Everywhere, she could hear the soft sound of falling waters, from the many fountains that softly worked in her suite. Her rooms were a garden brought gracefully inside, where there was no distinction between courtyard and house. As open to the air and sun as possible, her walls were overrun with pink and white rambling roses over her walls, twined with late-flowering purple clematis. She passed by the piquant musk of her rosemary and mint and the sharp citrus of her miniature orange-tree, by her sansevieria upright and thickly succulent in its pebbles, by her pond covered with yellow and white water-plaintain flowers.

Over her bed was a portrait of three children playing in the woods. It had been painted at her grandmother's country lodge. Madeline, Livia, and Conradin had all spent happy summers in that lodge, roaming the woods and imitating different bird calls and tracking deer to watch them drink
from quiet streams. In old times, the three of them were close friends, and you would have thought nothing could break them apart. Then Livia left Madeline for Candle Balduran's sake and bullied her on Candle's whims, and as for Conradin - well, Madeline still hoped that he remembered whom he used to be, the kinder self Madeline thought that she'd known. She and Conradin had been all but promised to each other from the beginning. They had been each other's first kiss, although at that time they were both too young to even understand the significance of a kiss.

Madeline pulled the cloak off her body. The magic trick had reverted, causing it to go back from a rainbow of showy colours to just an ordinary black cloak. She supposed that the stranger would want his cloak back, and she needed to return it and thank him. Below the cloak, her pink dress was in tatters, mostly dissolved. She shuddered at the thought of that happening to her in front of hundreds of people at the ball, staring at her, cruelly mocking her.

Was it Conradin who sent her the note, that vial which almost destroyed her? Madeline all but ripped off the last fragments of her dress and changed to her nightdress. She would like to think Conradin was innocent, that someone was using his name. Sometimes it was a good idea to be paranoid in Baldur's Gate. Could the stranger in black have been both the one to set up and the one to rescue? Unlikely, since he was new in the city and would not have the knowledge. Still, Madeline thought that although she owed the stranger a great deal it was worth it to be concerned with his knives. What kind of person brought weapons to a dance? And he might not be as good with them as he thought he was, which was another dangerous thing. Madeline had seen the rent in Candle Balduran's sleeve, just before Madeline escaped the ball and slipped away. There was another consideration in there. Did the stranger do that deliberately to Candle, because even Madeline had realised that Candle was offended rather than flattered at being used in his act? And was it out of some bizarre sense of revenge - was the note sent by Candle and Livia and their friends, trying to hurt Madeline once more just because they knew they could?

In any case, Madeline owed kindness for kindness. That was the only way to get by in life. She would ensure the cloak was thoroughly cleaned and pressed, then return it to its owner with sincere thanks. He worked for the Blue Shale, Sembian merchants, and shouldn't be difficult to find.

The man in black was surprisingly, brutally aggressive, but Pherenike knew how to respond to that. She'd soon have him under her and surrendering. She pretended to yield, to let him in, and he grinned as he pressed on with his attack.

She moved two of her blue pieces in the air, frowning in contemplation, and then he knew he was under serious threat. Fourteen blue and fifteen black pieces all bobbed in the air between the two of them, fighting each other for dominance.

The game was cvass, a sort of three-dimensional checkers. It could be played by mages of any skill level, from a beginner using it to refine their fine control to an experienced wizard who wanted to practice concentration and strategic thinking at the same time. A simple cantrip made the pieces float in the air, but the difficulty came when you had to maintain many small objects at the same time and selectively change their positions. Although magical manipulation of objects wasn't Pherenike's main field of study, the strategic finesse of the game appealed to her.

Gods, it felt good to be using her brain. She'd started out taking the game none too seriously, then quickly realised the man in black played for keeps. He favoured deceptive but ultimately dramatic strategies, trying to lure her with feints then topple her with overwhelming, ruthless force. She had to out-trap him by creeping toward his flanks, subtly building her resources to make a fleet of captures in one fell swoop. It was a close match and she had surprised him as often as he'd done her.
Three blue pieces surrounded a black at three different angles. That knocked that piece out of the
game, and left her in an excellent position to start a final massacre.

"Forfeit," Pherenike said. She was wearing only her shift now, barefoot and sitting close to the
lamplight for heat.

He took the earring out of his left ear and added it to the pile. His Blue Shale pin had been the first of
his forfeits, followed by gloves and boots.

Pherenike could see and feel his intent study of their game. If he failed to understand her design, he'd
make a futile attack on her left flank. While a lesser player wouldn't be capable of noticing it, all the
moves he could make were delays of the inevitable.

Then he moved two pieces downward. It was an elegant picture. He did understand, after all. It was
the setup for Cattaciapelli's finish: a grand sweep of the game, the pieces going down one by one in
masterful symmetry. If she held on to her concentration, then blue would cascade like a waterfall
over black, dancing and sailing his pieces away like the pattern of a folding fan. He intended to go
out with style.

So Pherenike made a good show of it and let their pieces fly off the stage.

She gave the man in black a meaningful look. They'd both known where this night was going
practically from the first moment he'd come over her windowsill, especially after she'd suggested
making the game of cvass more interesting. *Candle Balduran is going to socially destroy me
tomorrow, so I might as well travel the full measure and really scandalise Baldur's Gate,* Pherenike
thought. She wanted this man, wanted him tonight and right now, above all did not want to let him

"You owe me a whole string of forfeits," she breathed, draping herself over him. His cheek was hot
next to her face. "If you're good, I might just reciprocate."

He captured her hands to stop her fiddling with the laces of his shirt, and kissed her fiercely. She
hadn't realised, before, that it could feel like this, a wanting fire surging in both of them, so very
different to Conradin's awful wet fumbling. He kissed her as if he wanted to know her, map each
feature in memory, conquer her or be conquered by her or both of the above.

"Douse the lamp," he asked, his breath hot and voice low and rough, "it's traditional for these
events."

"I don't know. I'd like to see you," Pherenike said. She sounded like a wanton, she knew, but it was
ture - she wanted to know what he looked like under all that black, run her hands and eyes over skin
and flesh. One of her hands escaped to try and untangle his shirt again. "Come on."

"This figure is all pasteboard and padding. You'll be disappointed," he warned. She felt a hidden
laugh ripple in his mouth as he kissed her again.

She didn't yet move to do anything to the lamp, still hopeful. "Don't be silly. Take it off."

"Then try this one." He sounded slightly more serious, and he manoeuvred her body around to
temporarily stop her explorations. "My real job is lieutenant-captain in a merchants' auxiliary. Comes
with various unsightly pieces of scar tissue."

He didn't say his job in a way that sounded impressive, and it probably wasn't. The likes of Candle
Balduran would say that the Blue Shale auxiliary had much lower standards than the actual Sembian
military. Still, that didn't matter to Pherenike, especially not right now.
"Most men brag about their scars even if they got them doing something stupid," Pherenike said. Conradin Cordenstein was revoltingly proud of a duelling scar that she knew for a fact from Yarrow Blaine he'd got by being shoved into the edge of a pigsty out the back of the Three Old Kegs tavern. *It's probably not that bad,* she thought, and it was on the tip of her tongue to say it to him, but she didn't care, it wasn't important, and she extinguished the oil lamp's flame by cupping her hand around its air supply and giving it a burst of breath to kill it.

Darkness fell, and they moved much more quickly then. Pherenike felt him put his arms around her from behind, where she was still bent over the lamp. Even with the sudden blackness blinding them both, he carried her to her bed without missing a step. She helped him fling off his shirt, then heard the clink of his unbuckling his belt. His hands slid under her shift, drawing it up and over her head, and then all forfeits were completed and they had nothing but bare skin to explore.

*Pherenike's previous experience of naked men came from classical statues and admittedly half-remembered anatomy texts. She couldn't be clinical about this, not now. Her fingers explored bare skin and found some of the scars he'd referenced, a long cicatrix across his back and a patch of bubbled skin on his ribs as if from a burn, but she understood he wouldn't want her to focus on that, so her hands just lightly brushed over the rough parts and kept moving. She could feel he was aroused against her, the unfamiliar piece of protruding flesh against her right thigh. She was both excited and nervous, unafraid and yet trembling. She wanted to talk as well as touch him, kiss him, do more and go further.*

"You're different," she told him. His mouth was in the place where her chin joined her neck, his hands pressing the soft skin at her waist. "You stood out from the first. You defied them all, you broke all the rules."

"I won't give in again," she promised. "I poured a goblet of wine down her dress, in the carriage." His laugh was dry, quiet, and gravelly. She felt his chest move with it. They kissed again, even more urgently this time. Suddenly she felt herself lying on her bed, her back against her satin-covered quilt, his warm body pressed insistently against her. Something new to her was beginning.

She broke off what she was doing to his neck, tasting the salt of his skin on her tongue. "Wait. Have you done this before?"

And he paused, his hands burning on her skin as if it were a struggle for him to hold himself back. "Yes," he answered. Which made her wonder who and why and when, and whether she should feel jealous, which was probably unfair since until tonight he hadn't known she existed. He might have understood, because he clarified. "There's no one in my life at the moment."

"I haven't, yet," she admitted. Gods, she wanted to more than anything else she could remember wanting. His arms were loose around her, his hands supporting him on her bed, the fire and desire in both of them undeniable. But - "Will it hurt?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Good question." He sounded like he wasn't entirely sure himself. "It's probably a, ah, combination of individual variance and bards milking sensational romances for all they're worth," he said. "We don't have to, if you don't want it. There are other things we can do."

"I want you ... " she said. She sat up in bed, twining her arms around him, pressing her naked bosom against his chest.
"Come on." He lifted her off the bed, so they stood upright, still locked in an embrace. He supported her with his right arm around her shoulders, and his left hand slowly, tantalisingly trailed down her stomach to between her thighs.

It felt good but different, very different to touching yourself, unpredictable and rough. His fingertips were callused, the nails trimmed to a practical brevity. She shivered as he touched her, first gently then more roughly, more powerfully. With their faces pressed together, she could feel him studying her, learning where and how hard to touch. Evidently, he learnt fast.

Pherenike could feel herself opening, her body begging for more of him. Then she shuddered and pressed her face into his shoulder, overwhelmed and undone. *This - she thought. This is what I want -

Damn Candle Balduran to the Nine Hells and damn this whole city.

"Burn it all down," she said. Her fingers dug hard into his shoulders. She all but forced him backwards.

"Strike the city from above and turn it into one giant inferno," he suggested. " - Ow!" He lost balance and fell supine on her bed, and pulled her down with him on purpose. His hands slipped to her hips and he guided her.

It was easy, like this, with her on top and directing. Pherenike adjusted quickly to new sensations and felt in control, felt some weird sense of power over him. She could tell that rolling her hips *that way* excited him more, and he breathed out a heavy tattoo of gasps. His fingers tightened around her, sinking into her flesh.

"They can all go," she continued, breathlessly, "Candle and all the rest of them, they don't matter, get rid of them."

He joined her dark fantasy. "Break Toril into pieces and dance on the ashes. There's nothing worth keeping."

And, in her empty life of parties and cruelty, Pherenike had to agree. This was the first time she'd felt alive in a long while. *Yes,* she breathed, and words vanished out of her, swallowed up in a burning inferno in the darkness. He was fire and she was fire and they came together without mercy or pity or surrender, alight in a blaze that wholly devoured them both.

The morning sun shone fully on Pherenike's face when she woke. A breeze blew into her room from the garden, and she could smell the thick sweet scent of her father's late-blooming hyacinths wafting in. She looked across to see if the night before had really happened. The man in black was still there beside her. He was fully dressed already, sitting over her covers. If he hadn't been there, she might have wondered if it was all a dream about a fantasy lover, a dark man who swept her off her feet and into increasingly acrobatic bedroom adventures. No, she would have known it wasn't a dream, from aches in muscles she wasn't accustomed to use, strangely pleasurable aches, and the dampness of her sweat and other things. But she was glad nonetheless that he had stayed with her.

Pherenike got out of bed on the other side, not bothering to try and cover herself, revelling in the appreciative look in his eyes. She took clean water from the ewer and cleaned herself, splashing water between her legs.

Leisurely, she looked for a new shift in her chest of drawers, then looked happily back at him. "I
realised I don't even know your name," she said. "You don't even know mine."

"I supposed you'd end the suspense at some point," he said, smiling.

"I'm Pherenike. Four syllables, accent on the third. Remember that, since you might need to scream it in ecstasy later." She blushed at her own daring. "Pherenike Medomai. It means victory."

"Kovacs. It means blacksmith," he said. "Not as good as victory."

"Kovacs Demirci," she said. The other name slipped out of her. He didn't say anything in surprise that she knew his family, but suddenly there was a stony cast to his features that she hadn't seen before, as if he were uncomfortable with how much she knew. She kept chatting casually, making her explanation. "It's good to know your forename. My friend Yarrow told me your family name."

He frowned slightly. "What else did your friend Yarrow tell you?"

She wanted to be honest with him, and there was no harm in repeating Yarrow's summary. "You're an eligible Sembian merchant representing Blue Shale, the adopted son of Albescu Demirci, widower." She held her clean shift up against herself, and made a mock-curtsey with it, sweeping her skirts.

Kovacs nodded, and his face became a little less stony. "That's true enough. He's my uncle by marriage. My mother's sister was - I mean, his sister-in-law gave birth to me. I'm a bastard in the original sense of the word." Despite the dry sarcasm in his voice, it was clear that he was telling her something important, something personal.

"Your real mother, what happened to her?" she asked. It was a sad story - an illegitimate child taken in by the mother's sister.

"Never knew her. She died a day after I was born."

"It was the same for my mother," Pherenike said. She'd died in childbirth. Pherenike glanced at the picture her father had hung on her wall. It was only an amateur's daub, made by one of her mother's friends. Both Pherenike's parents had her colouring, pale and dark-haired, but she didn't really look like either of them; her father Demetrius liked to say that she took after his mother, her paternal grandmother. But while it was a sad story, it was also well in the past. "You're from Sembia," she said. "That's interesting. I've never been outside Baldur's Gate, except for some of the outlying countryside. Not even to Nashkel." Nashkel was the gateway into Amn, their neighbouring country. Intermittently, threats of war rumbled, but in the end the Amnians cared a lot more for trade than they did for invasion. "I live in a port city and I've never even been on a ship."

"It's overrated." Kovacs swung his legs off her bed and walked over to her, as she pulled on her stays. "We're migratory birds. We left Sembia a long time ago, and we've never been the same place more than three months at a time. Damara, Aglarond, Thay, Halruaa, Calimshan, the Moonshaes, Chult - name a trade route, and we've plied it."

"Going somewhere new every time. It must be exciting," Pherenike said. She wondered what it must be like to constantly journey onwards, from isolated Damara to cosmopolitan magocracy Thay, to Halruaa with its magical skyships and the hot rich jungles of Chult. It would be an adventure.

But Kovacs shook his head. "The more you travel, the more you learn that nothing is different. It doesn't matter where you are, because the people are always the same. Petty, corrupt, dishonest, malicious, greedy bullies, clawing after coin and status and survival like flies tearing up rotten meat."

"Not everyone's like that. You're not like that," Pherenike said.
He gave a short dry laugh at that. "You don't really know what I'm like," he said.

"People would be better if they just stopped doing what people like Candle Balduran wanted every time," Pherenike said. She took a blue day dress from her wardrobe, a simple but fresh muslin. "Why do people always do what Candle Balduran says? Just because she's rich, noble, beautiful, probably going to be the next High Priestess of Siamorphe ..."

"I think you answered your own question," Kovacs said, a twist of amusement in his left eyebrow. Then his expression changed to slight concern. "Wait, her full name is Candle Balduran? As in, the Grand Duke? So, trophy wife or ..."

"She's his daughter, actually," Pherenike said. "And, yes, I'm sure she's very pissed off at both of us, but you don't have to care about her and I'm working on a plan - " She broke off, hearing a strange noise.

"What's that?" Kovacs looked at the top of Pherenike's dressing-table, where something rattled and danced in the corner of it. It was the blue stone in Pherenike's necklace, moving of its own accord to try and get her attention. It had started to heat up, too, and had even begun to melt the marble below it. It was clearly burning hot enough to kill. Candle must be very upset.

"It's a message," Pherenike said, and grabbed the chain with her fingers wrapped in a handkerchief. The chain was hot, but not as unbearably so as the stone, and it started to calm down with physical contact and evidence of the beginnings of compliance. "Candle gives these to her friends. Yarrow, Livia, and me. They're tied to her own necklace. She's sent for me. I think I should go."

In the night, it had seemed so easy to defy Candle and fantasise about burning her and everything she stood for down. In the morning, that melted away and Pherenike had duties to attend to.

"I'll come with you," Kovacs offered. Pherenike asked him the obvious question with her eyes. "Did I mention my father was a merchant?" he said. "He'll be none too pleased I pissed off the Grand Duke Balduran's daughter without even an attempt to fix it."

"I thought you were in favour of destroying the whole system," Pherenike said. "I don't despise you. I couldn't, Pherenike thought. She took him down the back stairs and out of their gate. "You can protect me from the rough Baldurian streets," she said. A proper lady shouldn't travel unaccompanied, particularly when witnessed by others. Pherenike stretched a point when she walked alone to her studies at the nearby library, but otherwise she needed company.

Especially good company.

"You'll be much better than Sarah's Elly," she said.

"Sarah's Elly? Who or what is that?" Kovacs asked.

"Our housekeeper's eight-year-old niece," Pherenike said. "Prone to picking her nose, fidgets, and makes it abundantly clear at every moment that she would much rather be with auntie in the kitchen, thieving cream buns."

"Say no more."
Some old gossips might not consider it strictly proper that she was walking alone with an unrelated man, but Kovacs looked respectable enough, and Pherenike enjoyed taking his arm and feeling the fresh wind on their faces, teasing her hair and billowing through his shirt.

The city of Baldur's Gate was already bustling, woken up though not yet at its height of activity. The smell of the morning fish markets snuck up behind your nostrils with a nail-studded club, brutally bashed them over their metaphorical heads, emptied their purses, and stole their boots for good measure. The fishers had brought in their morning catches from the docks, crabs and herrings and kippers and lobsters still relatively fresh and in good condition, and conscientious housewives and servants were out in full force looking for a good bargain.

They bypassed the fish markets, walking through Watchmakers' Lane and its cheery, intricate displays of shining gnomish crafts, which seemed to interest Kovacs as if he had an eye for such mechanical devices. He asked her plenty of questions about the streets and their histories, so she shared what she knew. He even asked about the sewer drainage, the system that Grand Duchess Velsen had started work on ten years ago. Pherenike wrinkled her nose; streets that stunk less were always a good thing, but she didn't particularly care whether waste went underground into the old city or straight into the sea. She noticed that Kovacs spoke Common with a carefully indistinguishable accent, nothing in it obviously Sembian, as if he'd worked hard to conceal the markers of where he grew up.

They passed across the temple district, by the Water Queen's House surrounded by shining seawater flowing through a series of dams, then over the stately austere walls of Helm's temple, the god of guardians. Gond's silvery bells sung out in perfect rhythm. Siamorphe's temple shone on their horizon, ornately decorated in far too much shimmering beaten gold on red that made it look like someone had eaten and vomited gold leaf over raw pork meat.

Siamorphe's temple to nobility wasn't actually where Candle Balduran had her personal quarters, but it was well on the way.

"What an eyesore," Kovacs said. "I knew the moment I saw the holy symbol on your friend's chest she was trouble. I hate gods in general, and Siamorphe is one of the worst. Goddess of all noble arseholes. She's a snobby, authoritarian, short-sighted, kakistocratic bitch."

Pherenike laughed, slightly nervously. "Don't talk like that, or at least don't stand anywhere near me in a lightning storm. I prefer Oghma, myself." She liked to light a candle at the temple of the Lord of Knowledge every so often, and slip a few silvers in the offering box. She'd worked hard to be accepted as a scholar at Oghma's library, one of her favourite places to sit and read in. Her mother had worshipped Deneir, Oghma's scribe and younger brother, the patron of both learning and art.

Kovacs actually wasn't too far off the mark as far as Siamorphe was concerned, though. Siamorphe seemed to value birth more than she did anything else, and it was no wonder a man born as Kovacs was saw her as short-sighted and unjust.

"All the gods are bullies writ large," Kovacs said. "Worship me, or I shall smite you, because I have power and you do not."

He was the first atheist Pherenike had ever met. Most people had no such daring. "Too bad. I was thinking of taking you to a Sunite art exhibition," she bantered. As Sune was the goddess of love, such exhibitions were often very interesting.

They crossed the bridge near Siamorphe's temple, nearing Candle Balduran's sanctum. Pherenike's necklace was faintly warm, urging her onward. Usually, Candle entertained guests at one of her father's several mansions, or at her official suite in Siamorphe's temple proper. But Candle's real
Apartments were a luxurious chateau just beyond the temple, set within a ha-ha boundary and surrounded by thick green beech trees shivering in the wind. The outside looked unpretentious and the interior was breathtaking beyond belief, furnished in flawless red and gold with priceless *objets d'art* drawn from across Toril. Pherenike felt as if a single teaspoon in there was more than her father's net worth. Candle kept her personal quarters tightly guarded and warded them personally. As far as Pherenike knew, only two trusted servants and Candle's three friends were ever permitted to set foot there.

Candle gave Pherenike the necklace the first time she asked her to visit her real home. Pherenike knew the necklace was protection from Candle's divine wards. So Pherenike put an arm around Kovacs' shoulders, figuring that close physical contact would share the necklace's passport with him. The gesture felt amazingly easy and natural. Kovacs simply leaned into the touch, and Pherenike felt that they fitted together so effortlessly.

Beyond the beeches, Candle's front door was set at the end of a mossy path, an old dark green growth over bricks that were now a weathered red-brown. The door was only an expanse of oak panels, with no need for a handle or knocker on the outside. Pherenike's necklace hummed slightly, and the door opened of its own accord.

The moment they stepped over the threshold, Kovacs caught on fire.

Pherenike shrieked. The door slammed shut behind them, sealed and impossible to escape. Kovacs dropped to the floor. Pherenike thought frantically of the necklace. She ripped it off her neck, without undoing the clasp, and grabbed his burning wrist and tried to wrap it around him. But it didn't seem to do anything to protect him from this pain and torment. As he flailed, he flung the necklace aside with a harsh crack when it hit the wall.

Candle came running in. She saw the burning man on the ground.

"Demon!" she screamed. Something she saw before her made her terrified beyond belief. Candle's face turned paper-white. "What are you?"
Death, Crowned in Flames

Candle didn't hesitate long. She called to Siamorphe's glory and gestured to the heavens. A targeted pillar of white and gold fire speared into Kovacs' body from above. He screamed in agony.

Pherenike tried to call out to Candle to stop, to beg both of them to just stop, but nothing came out of her mouth but a dry whistle.

Kovacs snatched at a heavy red velvet curtain, as if he wanted to roll in it and dampen the flames. He ripped it from its rings and threw himself forward on the ground. Then he suddenly changed tactics and threw the curtain over Candle, blinding her. She flailed to get free from it. One of Kovacs' black throwing-knives came to his hand and he stabbed her through the curtain. Then Candle flung it and him off her, her side bleeding. She placed her right hand over her holy symbol, Siamorphe's chalice. Violet light shone around her as her wound closed of itself and even the blood disappeared from her gown. Candle was a powerful priestess, and she stood in her place of power.

Candle called to Siamorphe, and summoned shining chains that looked like they were made of light from empty air. The chains bound Kovacs before he had a chance to get up, holding him down. Candle prepared to call another divine flame from the heavens to strike against him. She would kill him.

Then Pherenike hit her on the back of the head with a priceless Shou vase inlaid with cinnabar and opals. Candle crumpled to the ground. The chains disappeared. She was only injured, not dead, gasping in hurt and shock that her own friend Pherenike would betray her. Hate shone in her cold blue eyes.

Kovacs forced himself up, and bowled into Candle on the ground. He held her down with his weight. His burning fingers met each other around the soft skin of Candle's throat.

Candle tried to choke words out as she was strangled. Pherenike backed away, horrified, not wanting to look at her horrible blue protruding eyes. Kovacs held on grimly, his body smoking and badly damaged. Parts of his skin were charred black, parts red and peeling. Bizarrely, his eyes looked gold instead of their normal dark green, as if they glowed with an inhuman fire from within him.

He hung on. His hands tightened. Candle croaked something. Then Pherenike heard the bones of Candle's neck give way and snap. Candle's face was suffused with blood and her purple tongue hung out of her mouth. She was still, inanimate, the life gone out of her body. And with her death, the power of her wards also ceased. With a groan, Kovacs fell to the ground beside her. His eyes were closed now, the inhuman yellow colour no longer visible.

She had chosen a man she'd only just met over the one who called herself her best friend, Pherenike thought.

And what is he? she wondered. Candle's wards had gone out of control the moment he had breached them, as if they recognised an unspeakable threat in him. Is he really some kind of demon? He seemed so human last night. Barely conscious now, and near-mortally hurt.

She dragged Kovacs to the shallow end of Candle's personal pool at the other end of the apartment, ignoring the burning pain in her own hands as she touched still-smoking clothes and flesh. She pushed him in. The water covered most of him and he still shallowly breathed, his eyes closed.

There had to be some treatments around here. Despite Candle's role as a priestess, healing the rank
and unwashed masses wasn't exactly her self-considered role in life, and even the general run of the rather-less-than-mendicant patrons of Siamorphe's church got little personal attention from her. Still, there must be some physics in her quarters. Pherenike gathered fine linens that would do for bandages, a soft white paste in a vial painted with comfrey flowers, and a medicinal tincture, then rushed back to Kovacs. The water washed gently over him where he lay.

His clothes were badly damaged, but as Pherenike peeled his shirt from his skin she noticed they weren't as damaged as he was. Absently noticing some black marks that spiralled across his skin below the burns, she spread the worst of the wounds with the comfrey paste and covered them with bandages. She saw a few stark old scars between them that looked like they'd been painful. He needed a healer who actually knew more than some half-remembered hints from her old nurse. Except they'd just murdered a rich and powerful priestess of Siamorphe in her own sanctuary, and no one would offer to treat him. She tilted his head upwards, placing it on her lap. She tasted a drop of the tincture herself to check that it was nothing unexpected or dangerous, then put the lip of the bottle to his mouth. He woke slightly, glanced up at her, and then his mouth worked to swallow it down.

It seemed to help, a little. He slowly came back to consciousness. "Shirt," he asked, pointing. He heaved himself up to rest on his elbows. He couldn't put it on without a lot of help.

Black tattoos all over his torso, Pherenike thought. A Sembian design? Something he didn't want others to see, because he was holding his shirt as if he needed to cover himself. She should have some idea of what the markings meant; the shapes looked familiar even half-hidden by damage and bandages.

Then she read the sigils for what they were, and her stomach turned. *Bindings. You'd put these sigils on inanimate objects, to keep them in your possession and alter them at your will. Putting them on a person ... is like making them a slave.* Kovacs covered his marks, grimacing. "Take me back to her," he asked. Pherenike half dragged them back to Candle's body.

Maybe he hoped that she wasn't quite dead after all, Pherenike thought. Oghma help her, part of her hoped that too. Maybe they could somehow talk about this.

Or maybe there was definitely no life left in Candle Balduran's corpse. Kovacs let Candle's cooling wrist go, with no pulse there.

Then he began a spell, reaching into the Weave for a much stronger casting than those Pherenike had seen him use at the ball. He held his hands to Candle Balduran's head and dust suddenly took her. The corpse dissolved, from head to toe, leaving nothing behind but dust on the floor that spread out in the breeze from the windows.

"She was a priestess," Kovacs muttered, offering some kind of excuse to the horrified expression Pherenike knew she must be wearing. "Can't risk anyone from her temple finding her or worse." Divine resurrections from violent death, Pherenike knew, were sometimes given as miracles in great extremity, although such incredible power was so rare. And now, with the body disintegrated, there was no chance at all.

"She'll be missing," Pherenike whispered. "Her parents the Grand Duke and Duchess will miss her."

"I don't see why they'd miss her. If she were related to me I'd feed her poison - or drink it myself," Kovacs said. "Sorry," he added, not particularly apologetically. "Let's say - she ran away from some reason." He looked at Pherenike. "I know you can do handwriting. I saw you at the ball. What would she write?"

"A lover perhaps. An elopement," Pherenike said, thinking aloud. Candle generally didn't discourage
rumours that credited her with more lovers than any individual could possibly maintain without dropping dead from exhaustion. She seemed to think it made her more desirable. She'd had a few recent flings that Pherenike knew about, but none of the men had been able to keep up with her before she grew bored of them.

Kovacs collapsed in a chair while she found pen and ink and scroll. Sound like Candle. You knew her well enough. Pherenike matched the loops and whirls of Candle's elaborate writing. Dear Mummy and Daddy, I know you'll think what I've done is shocking, but I had to follow my heart for once. I used to be cold and cruel and vicious to other people since I wanted to take over Siamorphe's temple, but now I've realised that love is the most important thing of all in life. Don't search for me, since my sweetie and I will long since be handfasted in joy and far away to our honeymoon. Her pen shook, and she had to tear and burn two drafts in the fireplace before she finished. It was taking too long.

"She'd take gowns and jewellery with her for a lover, wouldn't she?" Kovacs said. He was looking stronger, sitting upright without help. Candle's mixtures must have been excellent quality. "And the curtains wouldn't be damaged, and that vase wouldn't be broken. Can you clean up?"

They'd been here for so long already that Pherenike was terrified that someone else might walk in, a servant or even Yarrow or Livia. She dragged a carpetbag out of the depths of one of the closets and filled it with Candle's favourite gowns and jewels, several changes of underthings, and the curtains and the shards of the vase. At the last minute, Pherenike spotted her own broken necklace as well, and shoved it into her chatelaine pouch. The area was as clean as she could get it. She looked at Kovacs. "Are you all right to move?"

"I'll be fine." He got to his feet, although he still looked pained. His face was almost normal-coloured now, the burns on it faded. He ran his hands over his clothing, drawing on a transmutation cantrip to make them look halfway normal and not like he'd just been fighting for his life. "Just get me to our lodgings. I'll tell you where we're based."

He wasn't fine at all. They had just managed to walk out the back of Candle's home when Kovacs started to stumble and had to lean on her to stay standing. He gave a look of bitter resentment; at first Pherenike thought it to be directed at her, then realised it was more toward himself. She took them through two back streets, as obscure as she could manage it at this time of day, trying to stay in the shadows so people wouldn't see how badly he was injured.

I helped you kill my best friend. I think that means I want to protect you.

"Your tattoos," Pherenike said. "I understand what they mean. It's actually my specialist field." Kovacs tensed up and groaned, looking horrified beyond his injuries. "I study historical glyphs and sigils." Her theoretical library research was her favourite aspect of her studies. She found great satisfaction when she could trace back the meaning of a symbol through thousands of years of changes and evolution and finally pin it down, or learn to write in ancient and bizarre scripts that almost no one else cared to read. Mastering so many different scripts and their unique styles was what gave her the ability to imitate anyone's writing that she cared to. "I know they're binding symbols. Someone out there has the power to control you," Pherenike said. That form of binding was perhaps even worse than the likes of Thayvian slavery, because at least a slave could attempt to run away. "Who did this to you?"

"Who do you think?" Kovacs snarled.

Pherenike was about to complain that he was so rude to someone who wanted to help him. Then she realised that he literally couldn't say it, whether he wanted to or not. She thought about it. He wanted to burn down the system, but he worked for his father instead. A man must eat bread, he'd said, but
she suspected now that there was a lot more to it.

What kind of father, even an adopted one, would place binding tattoos on their own son? Pherenike had vaguely noticed some stretch marks over the lines; it was clear he'd received the tattoos even before he finished growing. What was so special about him, that someone was willing to do something so evil in order to control him?

"Incidentally, are you a demon?" she asked point blank. He shook his head, laughing a bit. "I believe you. Last night was good and all, but I'm pretty sure you're not an incubus." The line was too light-hearted for the situation, but she hoped some humour would distract him from some of their problems.

"You set off Candle's wards," she continued. "You didn't expect that to happen, but you still have an idea why they they hurt you in particular."

He nodded once, still saying nothing.

"And you still aren't planning to tell me," Pherenike said, exasperated. "Be uncooperative - I'll find out another way."

"I'll introduce you to Tirzah," Kovacs said, leaning his head on Pherenike's shoulder. It was a woman's name. "She's my second. I trust her absolutely." This Tirzah, whoever she was, obviously knew far more of Kovacs' secrets than Pherenike did. He spoke of her affectionately, and Pherenike beat down a stab of jealousy. "She'll enlighten you, as it were."

They reached the point where Pherenike thought it was safe enough to hire a public fly to drive them back, as if they'd gone much too far in some sort of revelry the previous night. If Kovacs passed out on the street, it would certainly attract attention they did not want at all. He leant against the carriage door and seemed to fall asleep.

The Demircis leased a large house in the harbourmaster's section of the city. Pherenike and Kovacs walked in through the servants' entrance, past an overgrown garden full of topiary gone wrong. In the hallway, there was an ogre in armour waiting. He was probably something like part-ogre, part-orc, maybe part-human as well. The huge greatsword strapped to his back looked like it weighed more than Pherenike did. He wore the Blue Shale symbol on his right shoulder, and on his sword's hilt as well. He had orange skin, large protruding yellow tusks from jaw to chin, and coarse black hair mixed with wide streaks of grey, tied back into a bun. No, wait, not 'he' - she was a woman. Oh. This is Tirzah, Pherenike thought, and understood.

"Tirzah, this is Pherenike. She saved my life," Kovacs said. "Fill her in."

"What, a second one?" Tirzah said. "Another girl just stopped by in a carriage, asking for you. Wants to return your cloak. This is not normal. What's in the Baldur's Gate water? You should go for the carriage girl. She's better looking, great childbearing hips ... " Kovacs made an obscene gesture at Tirzah, and she laughed, a low and rollicking bass boom. "Go get yourself cleaned up, idiot." He walked into the inner room, slamming the door behind him.

Tirzah turned to Pherenike. "Seriously, thanks for saving his arse from whatever he did. Feels like I spend half my life trying to stop this numb-skulled pillock from doing stupid shit, and the other half patching up the broken pieces."

"Is he going to be all right?" Pherenike said.

"Don't worry your pretty little head over the likes of him. Believe me, he's come through worse."
Tirzah stretched idly, her thick muscles rippling below her armour.

"We have a lot to talk about," Pherenike said. "He said you'd fill me in, he said you'd tell me everything, about what he is and those markings ..."

"Everything means a lot, kid. Come out to the Low Lantern with me. We'll booze it up and talk."

The Low Lantern was a moored hulk in the docks. It looked too battered to ever sail again, but there was a half-orc bouncer with a nail-studded club standing outside it. Tirzah cheerfully brought Pherenike in and had her stumble down the stairs. In the bowels of the ship they saw a drunken party still going on, as if it had run all night and most of the morning and probably wasn't ever going to stop. Pherenike knew she'd lived a sheltered life; she'd never been anywhere like here, thick with the smells of smoke and alcohol and old vomit. She saw ragged old sailors, card games played with the clink of coin and daggers thrust through latticework tables, a man stroking the bars of a cage that contained a stirring giant spider the size of a greyhound. Was the middle-aged woman in the dirty purple petticoat and nothing else a prostitute? Was that black lotus being smoked over there? She'd never seen or smelled black lotus before; it was highly illegal and extremely addictive, but apparently quite popular for the underclasses of Baldur's Gate. She tried not to stare too much at anything.

Tirzah was quickly getting to know Tirzah's habits. She swore like a sailor and cheerfully punched people as a way of greeting them. She ogled the plumpest barmaid and tried to pinch her bottom. Pherenike tried not to show that the thought of being seen just in the same room as the half-orc made her blush. Tirzah attracted a whole bunch of attention. But, eventually, the novelty of an armoured half-orc died down. Pherenike could understand there was some method to Tirzah's madness after all; she'd made people stare at her until they were then bored at the sight. Now, the other drunkards largely ignored Pherenike and Tirzah as they sat in the corner over a bowl of Saeloonian whisky. It smelt like it could kill a horse at thirty paces. Tirzah drank deeply and wiped her hand across her mouth. "Not bad, but could use more kick to it," she complained.

"I didn't come here for your booze reviews," Pherenike said. Tirzah gave her a bit of a dirty look, then laughed as if she was amused to find she had a spine.

"First tell me who the hell you are," Tirzah demanded, and Pherenike started her explanations.

She realised, of course, that the half-orc mercenary was a fighter, probably a killer. This could be dangerous if Tirzah thought that she was somehow untrustworthy, as if she'd spill any of the secrets she'd learnt. Pherenike's hands unconsciously wrapped tighter around the handle of the carpetbag at her side, the bag that could convict her of murder.

"You have to tell me what's going on," Pherenike said. "I've become part of this whether I wanted to or not." But she wanted to, she thought. She'd seen her lover brave and impassioned and now vulnerable, and she needed to know more.

Tirzah lit up a foul-smelling pipe - strong tobacco, probably, not black lotus. She blew a stream of blue smoke out her nose as she started her tale. "I work for Albescu Demirci, we all do," she said. "He's the official leader of this branch of Blue Shale. But some of us, we're loyal to his son instead."

"I saw ... some divine wards go crazy when they felt him," Pherenike said, trying to keep the description as vague as possible. When you killed someone, you didn't want other people to know. "Is he human?"

"Mostly." Tirzah took a long drag of her drink. "I met Albescu about the time he got married, back in Sembia. He sold mage scrolls, I was in the mercenaries' guild. He scored a wedding to the daughter of a Blue Shale bigwig, all arranged by marriage broker. Larisa was her name. She'd a younger
sister, Lavinia, and couldn't bear to be without her, so the two of them set up housekeeping with Albescu. It turned out Larisa couldn't have kids. Albescu didn't care much for having an heir, so it got to her more than it did him. The Blue Shale network that Larisa bought him was enough for him.

"Then Larisa's sister got knocked up outside the bounds of holy wedlock. She never said who did it. Maybe it was strength, or maybe she was too scared to tell. But it was pretty easy to figure he wasn't human. Lavinia died a day after she gave birth, and Larisa begged Albescu to let her call her sister's brat her own. I always thought she was a weak type, but Kovacs thinks she did well enough by him. She's been dead near nine years.

"So there's Albescu, left with a kid with power. By then, he's a Blue Shale bigwig himself, with his own group of followers. And he thinks, why should it be his son and not himself. He binds Kovacs to obey him, and he thinks he's got it covered that way." Tirzah sighed. She lowered the whisky, and looked straight into Pherenike's eyes. "But why should we follow Albescu, when his son's the one with the real power?"

"What powers?" Pherenike asked. She didn't think 'nearly getting killed by Siamorphite wards' was much of a special ability.

"Healing, among other things," Tirzah said. "His father made damn sure he can fix himself fast. He won't necessarily be unscarred, but he'll be hale and hearty again in no time, you just watch."

That explained why he hadn't died at Candle's hands.

"So you want to set him free," Pherenike said. "I agree with that, of course. You don't need to explain what those tattoos mean - sigils happen to be my specialist field. How are we going to remove them?"

Tirzah quirked a heavy brow of black bristle, and spoke even lower and more seriously than before. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

Oh. Pherenike slowly began to understand, watching Tirzah's face, the realisation gradually dawning on her while Tirzah's cold look told her that she was exactly right. Spells became inactive with the death of the caster. Pherenike had walked herself into a plan to murder Albescu Demirci, a man she had never met. Dry-mouthed, she nodded.
A Fishing Trip

_Uktar, the Rotting. 1358 DR. The Time of Troubles. Nine years ago._

Their god was dead. Tirzah was standing on a mountain and the stones were suddenly ripped from under her feet and she plummeted down, down miles of empty space she hadn't even known was there.

In the Time of Troubles, the gods were cast down from the heavens to walk as mortals. Now the god Bhaal was extinct. The Lord of Murder himself was dead. He was killed far away from them, at the black Boareskyr Bridge. His blood flowed into the dark swirling waters below, staining them permanently with his bitter poison. He was slain by the upstart human Cyric, who stole Bhaal's divine portfolio and ascended as the new lord of death.

Tirzah felt a hollow place with jagged edges in her soul and body, her purpose in life torn brutally out of her. She had served Bhaal loyally as a warrior, and now she had nothing left. Her master Albescu was far worse off, since he had been a high priest, powerful, a Deathstalker. That power was now stripped from him forever.

But he was still a resourceful man. From the earliest time he had worked with Tirzah, Albescu had ordered her to spar with him and never hold back under penalty of death. She was part-ogre and part-ore, her blood making her stronger than any five men of other races put together, and Albescu Demirci was one of few humans who could even start to keep pace with her. He also had formidable arcane skills in his own right; as far as his public face was concerned, he was a hedge-mage merchant who sold scrolls for a living.

Before his death, Bhaal ordered his priests to provide him with women. Albescu spared his own wife and used her sister for the purpose. At the time, he thought that Lord Bhaal's plan was to choose and elevate a new demigod from among his sacred offspring, and so he adopted and trained his son in hopes that he would be the one.

Now Bhaal was simply dead, and there was no such hope.

But there were living children, many of them, with Bhaal's divine spark still in them even though the god was dead. Most were young children, born before the Time of Troubles. Some were newborn babies, conceived by Bhaal's mortal form. One cow was still gravid, heavy with her unborn godchild. Albescu had ordered Tirzah and her guards to find and capture the children. If Bhaal had foreseen his own death, perhaps the children were part of his divine plan. And what better way to bring back the true Lord of Murder than with murder? This was why Tirzah followed Albescu - he was a man with ambitious plans.

This hidden temple of Bhaal was underground, below the Sembian city of Ordulin. Bhaal's mundane services for the departed could be given on the surface, but the darker side of the Lord of Murder had to be held as a dead secret. Bhaal's death had collapsed the heart of this temple, leaving it dark and rotting from the inside outwards, the altars quiescent instead of humming with living power and bloodthirst.

The children were imprisoned in the cells below. Some wet-nurses and women were locked up with them, so they would live long enough to serve this purpose. Tirzah ordered her squad of guards to round them all up, bring them to Bhaal's altar without leaving even one behind.

One of the women rushed at Tirzah with a shard of broken pottery in her hand, trying to fight. Better
to fight than lie down and die, but stupid to fight stupidly. The cow gave them exactly what Tirzah needed.

Tirzah cut the woman down herself, cut her in half with her greatsword, and the blood spattered her face and armour. The other cows and calves shrieked in terror, and fell submissively along with the guards to be taken to the altar.

Tirzah plucked the first screaming baby out of a wet-nurse's hands. She handed it by the feet to Albescu. He placed the child on the altar, and brought his knife down. Thick red blood spewed from the child's throat and ran over the skull with twelve tears carved into the altar. The symbol of Bhaal, soaked with blood. The baby's hands and legs punched the air helplessly, then all movement stopped. The cries and screams in the air only became louder.

Then it happened. The dead body began to dissolve into golden dust. The children were only containers for Bhaal's divine essence, and when they were dead they were nothing, not even corpses. Albescu tried to capture the dust in his bloody hands, but it slipped through his fingers. The blood ran in rivulets, creeks, streams across the altar, but instead of awakening Bhaal's divine favour as in the old days, there was nothing. The carved eyes of the skull remained blind and empty.

Albescu killed the next child, and then the next. Kill enough, and perhaps the weight of such a bloody massacre would awaken the Lord of Murder. The cows and calves understood what would happen and tried to run, but the guards caught them easily. They slew the women where they stood, no longer needed to carry or care for the children. Albescu opened the pregnant woman with his dagger, and her womb collapsed on itself as her unborn child died for Bhaal's essence. The altar was steeped in blood, divine blood, Bhaal's blood.

They had killed them all. Not just the altar but the floor, the walls, and all robes and armour were covered in blood. The room was quiet, except for the guards' breathing and the squelch of blood underfoot as they shifted position every so often. And the altar, Bhaal's sigil, was unawakened and quiet. Albescu studied it. He touched his hands to the sculpted hollow-eyed skull and the sharply carved tears underneath the blood. He prayed in a whisper, the same ritual words over and over again. Bit by bit, his voice rose to a hoarse painful scream. His frantic prayer echoed around the blood-soaked walls. All the divine essence, spilled in a place of power, and none of it brought back Bhaal. Albescu's shrieking voice broke into nothing, and he was silent.

Later, Tirzah would remember and think that this was the beginning of Albescu's betrayal. He felt grief and anger that turned to despair, and then fell to treachery. He began to hate their god Bhaal for dying, and became faithless and false to their cause.

"What about your kid?" Tirzah asked, the only guard to dare to speak up to Albescu Demirci in this state of rage. She knew it was a stupid question. They were so fucked that one more dead godspawn couldn't make a blind basilisk's worth of difference.

Albescu studied the altar in silence. He took a long, jagged breath. His voice was still hoarse, but he was calm as the grave when he answered Tirzah. "It's obvious that this failed. There may be other ways. I will hold Kovacs as a test subject."

Albescu's cold face looked like it was graven from iron as he met the eyes of each Bhaalite guard in turn. "We served Bhaal loyally, and we have nothing left. Leave this place separately. Conceal yourselves. Say nothing of this night, and travel far from here."

—

Pherenike somehow made it back to her house from the Low Lantern, safe and quiet. No one,
probably, yet knew that Candle Balduran was even gone. She sat in Sarah's kitchen and pretended to read while the housekeeper baked some fresh bread, the smell of it filling the house.

"Far'nick - " Elly, the housekeeper's niece, never pronounced Pherenike's name right. It was one of her many bad qualities. Pherenike groaned. The little girl, or possibly little demon, ran in with white streaks of cream covering her left cheek and chin. "Far'nick, you've got a gentleman caller in the parlour and he brought cream buns and said I could have some - "

"I'm coming." To bribe Sarah's Elly to go away, Pherenike happily told her she could have the entire contents of the brown paper bag.

"You're looking well," Pherenike said softly. Kovacs moved and breathed easily, and there were only fading marks on his face if you knew what you were looking for. He'd changed his clothes into a black and brown suit made of heavy, rich fabrics. "Tirzah said you healed, but it's not like you don't have scars ... "

"I can't always get rid of marks, but nothing stops me from fighting," he said. Kovacs took off one of his gloves, grasped a throwing knife, then made a deliberate cut across his right palm. Blood flowed. Then he looked at the wound. Pherenike thought she saw a trace of that strange yellow glow again, behind his eyes. The cut seemed to seal itself together, his skin rippling and bubbling over itself. She understood that he was showing her this for a reason, that he was trying to let her know him. It sent a chill down her spine to watch flesh and skin knit together with such inhuman dexterity. Kovacs wiped the blood from his hand with a handkerchief. The skin was unbroken, as if he'd never been cut. "Tell your friend Candle she was less effective than my father."

He called him father. But the man hurt him. "What do you feel about him?"

Kovacs briefly raised a hand to his face; his fingers lightly brushed his chin. He paused for a moment, shaking his head. "No one's ever asked me that before. What my father wants is, for the most part, understandable. But it's less than pleasant to be an obstacle in his way."

Pherenike stood, and shook out her skirts. "You're new to Baldur's Gate; you haven't seen it properly," she said, loudly and brightly. "We should rent a fishing boat on the waterfront and show you the harbour. I hope you're up to carrying the picnic hamper."

There was a brief, annoying bustle as Sarah worked around them to help them out the door. "You'll return our mistress long before sunset, mind," she lectured. Kovacs seemed amused. "She's a true lady born and bred, not like upstarts like that Livia Hellebore. The Honourable, they call her, when all she has is gold and the Medomai have owned this house five generations! There's to be no funny business and I will be telling Master Demetrius."

"My intentions are honourable," Kovacs lied, and had the audacity to kiss Sarah's hand. She giggled as if she liked it. He'd somehow managed to convince Sarah that he was an entirely eligible, respectable, and above-board prospect.

*Your intentions are far from honourable ... or at least they'd better be,* Pherenike thought. *I have some pretty dishonourable intentions myself.*

Kovacs didn't show any surprise at the weight of the hamper, and they went out. The Kythorn days were long, almost on the summer solstice, but even so they didn't have much time. It was already well into the afternoon.

It was a beautiful day in Baldur's Gate, with bright sunshine shining a gold path on the waters. She and Kovacs were two of many boaters, one of the pleasure-parties taking advantage of the long day.
Many travellers to Baldur's Gate chose to see the city this way, and many hobby-fishers regularly sailed out to lay their lines.

"Ever fished before?" she asked. Kovacs wasn't managing his oars very well.

"Actually, no. I get seasick." He did look slightly green under the bronze cast of his skin. "Like the common cold, it's not something that any known form of mundane or magical healing can cure."

"Then we're a pair of amateurs. Lucky I didn't really bring food in that hamper," Pherenike said.

The contents of the hamper set a dark pall over the day. She appreciated that she hadn't had to spell it out for him, that he'd kept pace with her. In the hamper was Candle's carpet-bag, stuffed with stones. Evidence that could see both Pherenike and Kovacs hanged before the Flaming Fist fortress.

They rowed out to a deep point in the harbour, in the cold murky waters that were the legacy of the River Chionthar's path to the Sea of Swords. The sun beat down on them, glinting on Kovacs' freckles. His hands were tight and tense around the smooth ash wood. They waited until they were in relative isolation. Then Pherenike heaved the carpet-bag over the side of the boat and it immediately sank below the dark waters.

They'd gone about it all in the wrong order, Pherenike thought. Slept together; learnt his first name; killed together; and she still knew hardly anything about him. She took his arm, leaning into him, wanting some physical contact for comfort. She studied the harsh line of his chin and the small trembling muscle at the corner of his mobile, quick mouth.

"You should be pleased with Tirzah," Pherenike said. Her hand played with a small pebble at the bottom of the boat. She threw it into the water and watched it skip three times before sinking. "She told me enough to start to see what's going on, but I could tell she kept plenty of things back. I understand there's a sort of need-to-know basis in such adventures. Need to know or not, Pherenike would most certainly be researching and finding out. "Can you tell me how you know her?"

"She was always somewhere in the background, but my father asked her to train me when I was about thirteen. She's the sort of person who teaches you to swim by throwing you in the deepest part of the lake," Kovacs grinned mischievously. "I learnt a lot. Once she thought it was a good idea to throw me into a nest of carrion crawlers with a lamp, some oil, and a dagger." Pherenike knew from reading illustrated bestiaries that carrion crawlers were giant, many-legged white worms that lived underground. They were utterly blind, but still deadly. Their faces were all red teeth and gums and no eyes, and their bite froze humans and animals where they stood. This left the crawlers free to eat their victims while they were still alive. "I learnt that oil was a good way to set them on fire, and if you cover yourself with ash they can't smell you well enough to attack."

Well, one of Pherenike's tutors once gave her a blind passage of Germanicus to puzzle through without a crib, but that wasn't exactly the same.

"What was it like for you, up here?" Kovacs asked.

"Let's put it this way - I thought my embroidery frames were a terrible punishment, but they have never tried to eat me," Pherenike said. "I used to mess around on boats and go fishing with my grandfather, my mother's father, but he's been gone for a long time. I had a series of governesses and tutors for music, deportment, astronomy, mathematics, magery, and history. One of my language tutors was an Oghmite, who got me into the community of scholars. I had to pass an extensive viva voce." She had to prove that her study of historical sigils was genuine, deep, and involved original research that made a meaningful contribution. Facing a board of six learned senior Oghmites had been a worrying prospect, but she had done the work and gained in confidence as the verbal
examination progressed. You had to prove yourself in order to enter the gates, but once you were there, the other scholars became helpful and even playful in the shared pursuit of knowledge. Kovacs seemed genuinely interested in knowing more, understanding experiences so different from his.

"I was going to apologise for dragging you into all this," he said. "Had a whole prepared speech and everything. You didn't ask for this; you're not from the same world."

"Don't forget I saved your life, not the other way around," Pherenike said. If you'd asked her before to fight even a baby carrion crawler, let alone a dangerous and powerful priestess in her own sanctuary, she'd likely wilt and run away. And yet she had entered this strange dangerous world with a Shou vase smashed to the head, and would continue in it. "My studies have practical implications for your situation," she said. "I could even make a copy of what I remember of the sigils, take it to someone with more expertise ... "

With a slight stab of guilt, Pherenike realised that her knowledge even now wasn't what it should be. She'd slipped; since Candle Balduran had taken her up, she'd spent much less time in the library. She'd felt her mind slowing down, focused on their social activities and the right shade of petticoat to wear, and hadn't stopped herself. Until the man in black had blazed into her life like a lightning storm, bringing down the rotten tree-trunks in it with a searing white fire - and he killed Candle.

"Don't copy and don't take it to anyone," Kovacs said roughly. "Promise me that." He didn't let up his intense look until she agreed. "The more people who know, the more likely they will betray me or worse. I need him to think he's in control."

"I think you shouldn't be afraid to seek help," Pherenike said. "I'll help you."

"What do you want in return?" he asked. The oars moved restlessly between his hands, turning them back toward the docks.

A strange question. "Do I have to want something?" Pherenike asked. She could have turned it into a joke, suggested they discuss payment options in a bedroom, but she felt like it was more serious than that.

"Everyone does, in my experience," Kovacs said. "Tirzah lost something that mattered a great deal to her, and she thinks I can help her get it back. Shalilah - you've yet to meet him - wants to change the whole system. Do you want to change the world?"

"It's not right for people like Candle Balduran or Conradin Cordenstein to own everything," Pherenike said. She nourished that flame of anger and outrage she felt, that thought of why should we do what Candle says and bully the people she wants to bully just because she's rich and noble, or why does Conradin assume that any girl is his for the taking just because he's a well-born Flaming Fist with more muscles than brain. "I thought that I could never change anything, so I went along with others' power. Now things are different."

"Burn it all down, if you will," Kovacs said, and echoed and understood her own earlier words.

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The sun rose in Baldur's Gate, a gentle and rosy dawn. Conscientious people were awake at this hour, while the less conscientious and more hung over remained lazy and slumbering. Livia Hellebore, an early bird, pretended to sip from her teacup, while it remained as full as ever. She was alone at her breakfast. Her mother was away on yet another voyage, as usual, and her father occupied with his own concerns, also as usual. Before her, there was a plate piled with soft white rolls more air than bread when bitten, a bowl of melted imported Maztican chocolate, sliced peaches
in fresh cream, and yellow kedgeree and fried kippers and piping hot toast in a bain-marie in case her father deigned to join her. And, as always, none of it would be eaten.

One of the under-maids brought in her copy of the day's social broadsheet, ironed to a smooth crispness. Livia took it up, knowing she'd be expected to discuss it at great length with Candle, Yarrow, and Pherenike. (Or maybe not Pherenike, any more. Two days since the ball, and Candle had been surprisingly quiet about what suitable revenge they were to wreak on Pherenike. Perhaps the girl had managed a sufficiently abasing apology to be forgiven, even though Livia committing the same offence would have had no hope at all.)

Livia's eye was caught by a piece of puffery on the lower right-hand corner of the broadsheet. It was a bold sketch of a pair of balance scales, black and morbid-looking. Below it was the title Hopeless Cases and a simple request for readers to write and place their problems into some hole-in-the-wall in Bakers' Lane. Not a salubrious location. It was likely some petty thief's idea of intrigue, or con artist's attempt to suck coin out of the already desperate. Hopeless cases indeed, Livia thought, for she knew the feeling of hopelessness more than anyone. Annoyed with herself for failing to read in a methodical manner, Livia returned to the top and forced herself to concentrate on each gossip item in turn.

When she came to the fifth item on the list, Livia dropped her teacup. The fine china shattered in her saucer, splattering her silk and lace morning-gown with ugly brown stains. She didn't care.

_Elopement of C.____B.____. One of the brightest lights in our social scene vanishes with lover! Daughter of G.____D.____B.____, this fine lady has reportedly been carried off by a secret beau to her honeymoon. Details of broken hearts to follow!_

Livia half walked, half stumbled to the window. She needed to move, needed to be somewhere to breathe fresh air. She held the paper crumpled up in her hand. She hung out of her tower, staring unseeingly at the dark green shapes of basilisks and serpents and minotaurs carved into the topiary in the garden below.

_Candle is gone._ Her breath scraped backwards into her like cold vomit being swallowed, over her tongue, her teeth, pouring ragged into her throat. _She left. Candle is gone_, she thought again.

Livia reached up a hand to touch her necklace. The green stone was cold and quiet. It was a gift from Candle that let her summon Livia as if she were a dog. Oh, yes, Livia understood very well that the necklace was not a friendly gift but a collar, even if the likes of Yarrow Blaine feigned to believe otherwise. _If Candle's family search for her then the link between the necklaces might find her if she is still wearing her own_, Livia thought. _I do not need to rush to show this to her parents. Doubtless Yarrow and Pherenike will not have the wit to do so._

She thought, _who was it?_ It wasn't like Candle never kept secrets from her dear friends.

Once Candle led Livia on to believe that Georg Ilverwhist was in love with her. He was clean, handsome, sensitive, not entirely stupid. He would have been suitable. Livia could have become his wife and at least tried a new role, even if she ended up hating it as much as her despicable present. Then Candle won Georg for herself. She dashed Livia's hopes to the ground, laughed at her, and two tendays later arranged for Georg to leave on a diplomatic posting to faraway, barbaric Aglarond. She had tired of him and broken him, and he had no eyes for anyone else. Livia was older than Candle; maybe she would be an old maid, sitting here in her tower for eternity, picturing Candle Balduran dead and longing for it over and over.

Livia carefully unclasped her necklace. It was still dead, quiescent, uncomplaining. Created by Candle's divine magic, she'd never been able to hope to change or ruin it. She held the stone still in
her right palm. Gripped by a dark impulse, she chanted a simple cantrip to illuminate magic. The arcane casting should have simply flowed around Candle's divine magic like water sloughing off a duck's back.

Instead, it penetrated through the necklace as if there were nothing left in it.

If the existence of the caster ends, so too does their work.

Livia tried a different cantrip, a locator cantrip. And a third, and a fourth. The same result - nothing. She touched her face and felt herself giving the grin of a corpse, her teeth visible in her skull and her mouth stretched around them as if it had been pinned back and locked in place.

There are many reasons, Livia thought. Candle isn't as good as she tells everyone and it stopped working of itself. Candle left for somewhere far away, too far to sustain the casting. Candle chose to end her own casting, knowing it could be used to track her down.

Livia slowly fastened the necklace back around her neck, her fingers ice-cold, too cold to feel the clasp.

She remembered her dearest wish. I wish to see Candle Balduran dead.

She supposed: If that has happened, then I am finally free.

She went back to the table, rang the bell, ordered second helpings of everything for breakfast, and sent swift messengers to her dear friends Yarrow and Pherenike.
A Tea Party

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alturiak, the Claw of Winter. 1358 DR. The Time of Troubles. Nine years ago.

The winds were fierce against the trade caravan that winter. Kovacs, his head full and sticky and consumed with fever, hazily felt them shake and batter the outside. He was tightly wrapped in a nest of pillows and blankets within the caravan, burning in sweat and coldly chilled by turns. He couldn't quite sleep and couldn't quite wake up. It worried him that his father would come and grab him, drag him away to training that he wouldn't be able to do when he couldn't even sit up in bed, but he could never hold onto any thought for long and nothing had happened.

(He wasn't his real father, he always said that, but that was what he called him.)

His mother read something aloud to him. Her voice was cool like water but he couldn't understand any individual words, not with the buzzing like golden flies in his head. Why flies? And why golden? he vaguely thought to ask himself, but he couldn't follow the thought any longer.

Was it bad water or gone-off meat or staying out in the cold? He didn't know what he'd done to cause this. Why was he the only one who was sick? That didn't make any sense. The golden flies buzzed louder. He tried to say something, tried to ask his mother to keep reading because her voice was a thread that tied him to something real. Only a croak came out of him, or maybe not even that. He didn't know if his body was listening or could listen to him any more.

He felt his mother touch his face. It should have been comforting, but he could hear her blood beat under her skin. Her veins were too close to the surface. Something wanted to hurt her, and he didn't want that something to be him. Maybe it was his father. Something inside him felt like it was either screaming or laughing at that thought.

He felt like he was falling into rushing dark waters, beyond the golden flies. And then, beyond the blackness, there was something hungry with sharp vicious teeth, something that wanted to swallow the world. It gnawed at his guts from within, a horrible empty void that nothing and no one could fill. It was a nightmare he felt he knew many times over, and he surrendered to it and finally saw a merciful nothingness.

Later, in days after that, Kovacs knew he was actually getting better when he started to recognise the passing of time and make out individual words his mother was saying. His head hurt and the inside of his mouth felt like cotton, but it was a more normal sort of hurting. His limbs felt stretched out, as if he'd grown too fast, but when he staggered upright and compared himself to the caravan frame he hadn't changed much. He was starting to eat again, broth and stews and even bread, and he kept wondering when his father was going to come in and accuse his mother of letting him mangle.

He wasn't malingering. He was trying to get up and out as soon as possible. It was a victory when he could stand up for minutes at a time without collapsing, and he got himself out into fresh air and something of the last winds of winter before spring.

He hadn't been travelling by caravan for long before he was ill, but he'd liked it. They had lived in the Sembian city he was born in, but suddenly his father sold the house and shop and moved into a Blue Shale trading caravan. There were stories that the gods had been thrown down from the heavens to walk as mortals and divine magic was all but ruined and wars and rumours of wars
crossed Faerun from north to south, but what relevance did they have to a small merchant family? Kovacs had taken quickly to their journey and had started to learn to drive and ride before falling ill.

His father seemed to have dealings with a lot of messengers these days. Kovacs snuck around and listened when he could, but didn't pick up much. The most significant thing he heard was that someone and it sounded like someone frightfully important, and also frightfully secret from the way it was whispered was dead now.

Well, people died all the time, he thought, even though his mother didn't appreciate it when he made that kind of remark.

He also learnt from listening that the caravan's destination was now Ordulin, a place his father knew well. They would find some product there - Kovacs didn't know what that was, either. His father's business wasn't generally considered to be his concern.

Kovacs knew what was expected of him, so he went back to training to fight with Loran, one of his father's guards. He spent time copying arcane scrolls and trying to memorise the patterns they made in the Weave. He played cvass with himself and lost, set one accidental fire with a cantrip, and managed to clean it up well enough to avoid detection. It wasn't that his father punished him when he messed up or fell behind. Instead, his mother would be blamed for babying him, and she would suffer.

He supposed it was an effective method of making him obey, and that was why his father did it.

His mother told him that he should be grateful to his father, for taking him in and adopting him as his heir, for constantly keeping track of him and making him spend almost every moment learning. But he was mostly grateful that it was her that he shared blood with, never his father.

If he was meant to grow up strong, he'd be strong enough someday to leave and take his mother with him, he planned.

He had no knowledge that three-and-twenty-days before a god was slain at Boareskýr Bridge, and that everything in his life had already changed beyond repair.

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Livia's friends came dutifully to her green parlour in the afternoon. Yarrow cast herself down on Livia's Chessentan sphinx-fur chaise-longue and actually wept. Pherenike, in an old-fashioned though flattering purple dress that Candle would have disallowed for being too close a colour to Siamorphe's insignia, patted her shoulder.

"I can't believe she's actually gone, and didn't even tell us about him," Yarrow cried. "I miss her. We might never see her again."

"She only eloped," Livia told her, cool and collected. And you fail to remember how she ground you beneath her feet, Yarrow, she thought, that you were ever her handmaid and never the bride. "Undoubtedly, she will recover her reputation and return in glory to outshine us all one of these days."

"Thanks, Livia. You're so sweet." Yarrow pressed Livia's hand like it was a lifeline. "It's so good of you to invite us and comfort us and everything." She wiped her eyes, marking smears of powder on her face. She had likewise smeared the sphinx-fur she was weeping on; Livia might have to use the chaise-longue for kindling when she was done.

Although Yarrow Blaine was about as mentally negligible as a houseplant dropped on its head as a
baby, she had her uses. As Candle had long employed her for, she was always adept at knowing who, what, where, and how in the latest society gossip. Livia got the story out of Yarrow between her sobs. Candle had failed to meet her luncheon appointment, and so it was assumed she’d received a better offer; when her confidential servant came in the evening, she found Candle's note of a better offer indeed.

It seemed out of character, Livia thought, for Candle to leave without securing revenge on a defiant flunkey of hers. Pherenike had nothing to add to Yarrow’s recital.

"... And I'm so sorry she's gone and I wish I'd gone over there to talk to her, and maybe meet him, and try and stop her from doing it." Yarrow finished her story, sniffling again.

"You look lovely today, Yarrow," Livia lied, which seemed to offer Yarrow a little comfort. Yarrow wore yellow figured poplin and her own necklace from Candle, which was an appropriate costume to mourn their friend's absence. Pherenike's neck, on the other hand, was conspicuously bare. Livia decided to act as if she had not noticed.

Livia ran her fingers over the pendant on her own neck, taking satisfaction again in its blank inaction and lack of any actual power over her. "I'm glad that we're wearing our necklaces - we are remembering her," Livia said. "I think Candle removed the power in them when she left, in case someone traced her through hers. But I want to re-enchant them so that the three of us will still always be together ...
"

She carefully looked at Pherenike out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to see this reaction. *The dress is wrong; the necklace is missing; is there something to that?* And Pherenike did not disappoint; she touched her neck, flushed, and looked worried and confused.

"That sounds wonderful," Yarrow said. She looked up at Pherenike, and kindly made herself the one to notice. "What about you, Pherenike? Why aren't you wearing yours?"

"I'll bring it next time," Pherenike promised, but she spoke a shade too quickly. *Very interesting*, Livia thought.

"It's sad you two had that fight before Candle left," Livia said, exploring and probing again, like a delicate needle plunging into a frog's body for a mage's supplies. "It must feel terrible to have her leave you on such a sour note. You never saw her again?"

"We would have made up, I'm sure," Pherenike said. Again, she spoke slightly too quickly, and her chest rose up and down with fast breathing. "I planned to apologise to her. And then apologise to her parents if that didn't work out."

There was really only one thing left to needle Pherenike about, still as innocently as possible. "Speaking of things working out, you were getting along awfully well with the Blue Shale man at the ball. Have you seen him since?" Livia asked.

But Yarrow jumped in. "I have," she said. "He and his father are really working to get around, I think. They were in the Green Dragon coffee-shop this morning to meet other traders. They have furs from Vaasan ice-bears, among other things. They need a middleman. My father talked - " Yarrow's father, ancient as his name was, could never afford to miss out on any knock of opportunity, whether it came pounding at his door or feebly fluttering a hundred miles beyond his window. "Do you think it would be so wrong to guess that maybe Candle would have forgiven him, too, if she were still here?" Yarrow asked.

"You never know," Livia said, smiling sweetly. She glanced back at Pherenike, but the girl had used
the delay of Yarrow's ramblings to shut herself off again. Pherenike had drawn that door across her inner self, was once more remote and composed as the moon. "But, really, Yarrow, an adopted son is hardly an eligible parti no matter how well he dances." Pherenike was still expressionless.

"Yes, he isn't bad, though I didn't try him," Yarrow agreed. "The Sweet Goat is much better, I think." Lieutenant 'Goat' Sugersson of the Flaming Fist, commonly called Sweet Goat, was Conradin Cordenstein's inseparable friend and Yarrow's steady beau. The little romance was sadly handicapped by the fact that neither Goat nor Yarrow had a bean to rub together. "People always say adoption is just another word for bastard. If you saw them together, you'd know what I mean."

Yarrow nodded cheerfully. "His father should really dye his hair. They would almost look like brothers."

Livia rather masterfully led the conversation into other channels, on the Grand Duke Ros Hehir's planned festivities to honour Sune and the Grand Duchess Velsen's newest construction proposals. And all the while, she wondered:

**Candle disappeared from her sanctuary, warded only to her and a few trusted friends. One of her friends is now missing that ward. Pherenike, my dear, what are you hiding?**

When her friends were finally gone, when Yarrow's inanities and Pherenike's evasions were finally removed neck and crop while still presenting a civil demeanour, Livia could relax. She rang her personal maid, Margery Forrest, to fetch her a pair of jeweller's pliers.

Margery had served Livia long and well. She was a tall, thin, dour-faced woman, all heavy bones and grim raven-like look, with a knack for doing hair and staying silent. She had a cast in her right eye and she was flat-footed, two qualities that probably formed the reason why Candle Balduran had not poached her. Margery loved the clink of coin more than anything else in life, and knew she could get more of it with Livia than from any other sources. The two of them fully understood each other.

Margery returned with the pliers, knowing her mistress well enough to ask no questions. Livia took off her necklace and wrenched at the clasp until it was broken.

And that simple preparation was all she needed. She had best give her friend a little more time. Livia bade Margery to gather a list of all jewellers in Baldur's Gate, arranged by closeness to Pherenike's district outwards. She read leisurely in her tower for the rest of the day, sipping on spiced apple and cinnamon tea and eating rosemary biscuits.

In the morning, Livia first called on the Grand Duke Balduran's mansion, where all was in much disarray. She convinced the Duchess to allow Candle's personal maid Delcia to come with her, where - *I am dreadfully sorry for all the trouble, but one knows how easily things become displaced in a crisis, with all sorts of people trampling about*. Livia had lent Candle a new kirtle, since after all they were both the same size and dear friends and frequently shared costume; she wished to recover it from Candle's home.

Delcia took her to the front entrance, where a mechanical lock had been hastily created to replace Candle's pretentious sealed door. Delcia still wore the plain grey bracelet on her right wrist, which would once have been her servant's passport through Candle's wards.

It already looked dustier and lonelier than Livia remembered it last, even though it had been only a few days. Sunlight streamed in from the bay windows, setting brilliant blinding light over everything. Then Livia realised that the red velvet curtains were gone from their hooks.

"Did you take the curtains to clean them?" she asked Delcia. The maid looked puzzled.
"No, ma'am. They were gone when I came here. Perhaps she grew sick of them, like she did with the Lantanese blinds." Livia didn't specifically remember that particular one of Candle's temper tantrums, but Candle always had a unique way of ensuring that friends and staff around her felt it when she was displeased with decor or circumstances or anything else.

Curtains are an odd thing to take, if eloping, Livia thought.

As Livia focused on the ground, she saw footprints and scuff marks on the dusty floor, suggesting that many had already tramped through. The Grand Duke had asked the Flaming Fist to carry out a search. Livia looked at the ornaments on display on Candle's mantelpiece, cataloguing them with her memories, and frowned as she saw the cinnabar Shou vase was missing. Yes, it had been there, between the Koryan jade sculpture of the moon archer and the opalescent candelabrum carved out of a single, magnificent vein. Livia approached the mantelpiece. She saw the faint marks of where the Shou vase used to be, and saw also that the two surrounding pieces had been moved as if to cover its absence.

She asked Delcia about it.

"Why, yes," Delcia said. "Now you mention it - I hope it wasn't one of those Flaming Fists who took it. All sorts of common riff-raff have come and gone from here. My lady Candle was always very proud of that vase. She acquired it for a song, when the Liu estate went out of business. I must have dusted it ten thousand times, and she'd make me do it again if she saw the least little speck on any of its sticking-out bits. Perhaps she couldn't bear to part from it and took it as her dowry."

Candle did not take it; she would not have disguised it if she had. An additional odd thing. Livia looked carefully but saw nothing else missing. Delcia took her to Candle's bedroom. Most of the wardrobes and drawers were open. Livia saw a stamped box to the side of the left wardrobe, sealed with the mark of Candle's souter. She asked Delcia about it.

"Those must be the new red court shoes she ordered," Delcia said. "I worry that she didn't take enough shoes. She must have been in love - I mean, she must have been sadly distracted. We all hope that she's safe and happy, my lady."

And just imagine Candle surrendering new footwear, Livia thought, and a grim smile outside her conscious control spread itself across her lips. She wrested herself back to the present, and pretended to search for the borrowed kirtle. They decided that Candle must have taken it with her, to remember her old friend.

Livia could just picture the scene. Candle, waking, anger still burning livid in her, summoning her false friend by her leash to deliver an abject apology, demanding her to kneel at her feet. And then ... ? A heavy vase as a possible weapon; curtains damaged in a confrontation; new slippers abandoned? Livia's imagination gave out on her at that point, but she had seen enough. She returned Delcia to the Duchess, then visited jeweller after jeweller with her maid Margery in tow.

"I have broken my necklace, and need it repaired as soon as possible for a ball," she explained. "You see the craftsmanship is difficult; have you seen anything like this of late?"

All replied in the negative, including Auric Goldwright, the fine dwarven smith who had made the necklaces in the first place. Livia would then think up an excuse to move on with her maid instead of giving up her broken clasp. After six visits, she told herself that it was undoubtedly all a mare's nest. One disdains to wear a necklace for many reasons, particularly contempt for the one who gave it; the necklace and the ward do not have to be broken together. At her side, Livia's maid Margery expressed no surprise or bafflement in her plain features at her mistress' actions.
The seventh jeweller was a gnomish artisan in a street Livia would never usually have visited. However, his business was clean and well-kept, the neatness of his shopfront a pleasant contrast to the straw-strewn farrier's and overstuffed haberdashery on either side of him. Within, the jeweller had selected his pieces to display carefully and minimally. Looking at his work, Livia wondered if she had discovered an underappreciated vein of ore, and therefore made her morning not a complete loss.

"Why, this is similar," the gnome told her, looking up with his glass fixed in his left eye. He was an ugly creature, with a hump on his back and a white scar on his ebony cheek, near his right ear. His hands were very clean, the fingers long and wrinkled. "I recognise Goldwright's work. With respect to you, my lady, surely send this to him; he created it and will do the best work. Though he is expensive, he is fair."

A strange jeweller, to so frankly recommend business to a competitor. But Livia didn't care for that. At the words, this is similar, her heart beat faster.

"But Goldwright is so far across town, and I am so fatigued." Livia fanned herself. "You have seen a similar piece of late? Do tell me, for I would consider purchasing it, if the owner is amenable."

"How funny. Only yesterday afternoon, I received one like this, but in blue. It was sadly battered - it grieves me when people do not take care of their possessions, my lady." The gnome jeweller shook his head. "As with you, I suggested Auric Goldwright, but the customer insisted. My apprentice and I were up all night and finished our work early this morning. Would you like to see it?"

Livia looked at Pherenike's necklace, newly and neatly mended. There was no mistake. This was Candle's present to Pherenike, given as a key to her sanctuary. Livia strove to detect the extent of the damage, but the jeweller had done his work well enough that she could scarcely notice. She gossiped with the gnome to find a little more.

"There was just this blue one, no red one?" Livia asked. The gnome shook his head. "And the customer's name?"

He hesitated a breath before answering her, but must have decided it could do no harm. "Ah. Pherenike Medomai. I know her well. In fact she is my dear friend," Livia said.

Livia took an uncut emerald from her purse and placed it on the jeweller's table. "Tell me, would this pay for Pherenike's repair?"

The gnome turned it over and looked at it with his glass for a long while before answering. Livia pouted with impatience; he should surely know the gem was worth far more than his minor mending. "Five and four-tenths times over, my lady," he said.

"Then take it and place it to Pherenike's credit, for I wish her to treat herself as a name-day gift. Tell her that her friend Livia wishes her to select something beautiful," she said. "And as for myself, I would like to consider a bracelet. Do you have anything set with beryl, or perhaps blood opal? Send it to the Hellebore estate in the north-east quarter." She saw that the gnome recognised her surname as one of the richest in Baldur's Gate.

Livia negotiated with the gnome jeweller for a quarter of an hour, commissioning him to make a stranded red spinel bracelet with matching earrings. And he might as well send her broken necklace to Goldwright, if he so recommended, and take a small five-percent fee for carrying out the commission.

She next showed herself at the wizards' guild. She exchanged spells with her peers, listened carefully, and signed her name to promise a great deal of gold to support the new apprentices' halls to
be built. They might name a wing after her.

And at the back of her mind, she wondered: *Will I receive an innocent thank-you from a friend, or a guilty knowledge that there was far more to it?*

Livia was out of her tower more often than in for the next several days. The wizards' guild, the social whirl, and the design of several new dress ensembles highly occupied her time. She would return home late at night, sometimes to receive notes of an increasingly fragile-sounding tenor from Pherenike regretting her absence. Livia judged a goodly time to allow Pherenike to twist in the wind, and one day allowed herself to be at home when she called. Livia dressed for the occasion in one of her new pieces, a cherry-red brocade gown to match a strand of rubies about her throat that her father had given her, her hair bound with scarlet ribbons like the style Candle Balduran had once affected.

"Thank you for your kindness," Pherenike began boldly with, sounding resolute and innocent though her cheeks were pale. She wore, Livia noticed, the necklace she'd had mended, with a dress so dark blue it might as well have been black. "Of course my name-day is not for a while ..."

"The seventeenth day of Nightal. You will be one-and-twenty," Livia said. "My dear, you're practically a child."

This should have been the opportunity for Pherenike to politely reassure her friend that she was hardly old. Truthfully, the difference in their ages was not so much. But Pherenike did no such thing.

Livia rang for Maztican cocoa and madelines, served with drizzles of clover honey and a bowl of lemon cream. She sipped her cocoa with steady hands, noticing that Pherenike did not seem to trust herself with the delicate cup. They waited in silence until the maid left them.

"I know all, I'm afraid," Livia said.

It was precisely what Candle Balduran would have done. Livia did not, in fact, know all. But all she had to do was feign more than she knew, and others would rush in to confirm it all for her. Just like Candle had often done. *Thank you, Candle, for giving me such a kind opportunity,* Livia thought.

Pherenike took careful control of herself. Her hands barely shook, but her face was white to the lips. "Then what will you do?" she asked.

"I want your help," Livia said. She licked her lips. "Can you lend me your father's keys, long enough for me to copy them?"

"I won't betray my father," Pherenike said.

"Your father is a decent and honourable man, well trusted by the Grand Duke. It is he that I fear," Livia said. She leant in and spoke confidentially. "There are credible reports that Balduran is involved in smuggling of the worst kind. His daughter's absence or no, such a thing is nothing short of criminal. If you lend me those keys, I will be able to find out. Should Balduran be innocent, nothing will happen. Should he be guilty, you will have done the right thing. Either way, your involvement will be unknown - and so will certain other matters."

The Grand Duke Balduran controlled a large proportion of the ship traffic into and out of Baldur's Gate. It would be alarming if he was *not* smuggling anything, and Livia had heard her fair share of
rumours. She waited for Pherenike to consider. The girl must realise that she had no choice. It was either Livia, or else the Flaming Fist would be told of a woman with a grudge and a passport through Candle's wards.

"I will give you the keys for an hour, no more," Pherenike said. Her voice croaked midway between the words, giving in. "And should any harm come to my father I will speak out and denounce you, no matter what becomes of me."

"I accept your terms," Livia said. She poured some more cream into her cocoa. "Now will you try the madelines? They are very fine, and I so like to please my friends."

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Chapter End Notes

'Golden flies' - Kyn also used this apt metaphor in her awesome Baldur's Gate fics.
Correspondence from a Hopeless Bard

Mirtul, the Melting. 1362 DR. Five years ago.

Kovacs showed his cards and cursed his bad luck jovially. He brought his beer glass to his mouth again and laughed off his loss. The slave trader and the family man gambling with him moved in, sensing weakness.

The Lake Mulsantir tavern was about as high-class as you got in Surthay province, a low-slung, dimly lit oaken building with sturdy timbers and barstools worn smooth by long years of sitting. Gamblers in it minded their own business, especially when the well-connected were milking a newcomer for his last copper and then some. Kovacs knew that the conjurer's arrow the family man wore around his neck wasn't a mage ornament, but a sign he was connected to one of the major criminal bands that ran Lake Mulsantir's underground, where blood relatives dominated. This one called themselves the Red Arrows.

Kovacs grinned easily, and suggested another game. As he dealt, deliberately sloppily, his sleeves went close to the slave trader's face. The man sneezed loudly. Kovacs picked up his cards and didn't bother to hide the tell that he had given himself a poor hand. His losing would help avoid the suspicion that he was cheating. He still wasn't very good with sleight of hand, and his father had harshly punished him for trying to learn something so impractical. How little he knew.

The slave trader and the Red Arrow believed Kovacs was what he appeared to be, the naive son of a rich country farmer seeing a city for the first time and indulging in games and wine. Kovacs hoped his background coming from the sticks was enough to hide any deficiencies in his accent. He'd shaved his head and given himself a fake tattoo of a red dragon on his cheek, to pass for a native Thayvian. He was fond of that red dragon tattoo, as he thought it made him look both tough and interesting at the same time. He thought about making it a real tattoo, one he'd chosen for himself, but reluctantly decided it would make him too easy to identify.

This mission wasn't one his father had sent him on. He did this for himself. For every murder that his father ordered from him, he balanced the scales on his own account.

Kovacs lost his game, to the slave trader's great benefit. The slave trader sneezed again and wiped his eyes, but was still keen as a carrion crawler at feeding time for another game. It was so late that most of the other gamblers had left for the night, leaving only a dedicated old drinker alone in a corner and a few scattered pockets of dice-players. Kovacs offered to raise the stakes, and the Red Arrow man topped him, risking still more coin. He must have assumed the slave trader's victory was pure luck, and it was his turn to bleed the young farmer.

The slave trader made the deal. Kovacs grabbed at his cards too soon, colliding with the trader, and again the man sneezed. The sneeze gave Kovacs his chance to make arrangements.

A night ago, Kovacs, with short-clipped hair like a commoner and no obvious tattoos, had bought the slave trader's cook a lot of drinks. He'd masqueraded as a kitchen apprentice that time. His master wanted to treat the slave trader to dinner, he claimed, and needed to know what foods he liked. His master also needed to know what foods to avoid.

The slave trader was badly allergic to citrus, and Kovacs had soaked his sleeves in lemon juice before coming tonight. He could tell that the slave trader hadn't picked up on exactly what caused his sneezes, especially since he wasn't particularly suffering from them. Yet.
The slave trader had excellent cards. Once more, he claimed a great deal of coin, both from Kovacs and from the family man. The Red Arrow man was reluctant to part with his gold, annoyed and bitter. Almost to a powder-keg of a breaking point.

And that was when Kovacs, pretending to be drunk, bumped into the slave trader, and the cards he'd slipped into the slave trader's cuffs fluttered over the table.

"Oh, I say," Kovacs commented.

The slave trader paled. "Not mine!" he cried. "Swear to Kossuth, not mine! They were planted!" He must have suspected the Red Arrow man of the deed, for he wasn't even looking at the naive farmer.

The Red Arrow man stood up, and three of the dice-gamers came to flank him. He clearly had connections. "The game is done," he said, and returned Kovacs' last stake to his part of the table. He beckoned to the slave trader. "Come outside with me."

"Adrastos, tell them I did nothing wrong!" the slave trader pleaded to the bartender. He sneezed again. The Red Arrow sneered, probably thinking that the constant sneezing had made a lovely cover for the cheating. The bartender shook his head, staying out of it. The slave trader looked horrified. "Do you want me - why would you do this to me?" he pleaded. The Red Arrow laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, and marched him outside the tavern.

Kovacs faded into the background. When he judged it appropriate, he weaved his way out of the tavern as if to take a drunken piss. He saw the old man drinking steadily in the corner get up and follow him.

The slave trader's body lay on the ground, his pockets empty of coin. He'd been stabbed several times with great prejudice and was dead, his skin rapidly cooling in the night. Kovacs rifled his pockets for what he really wanted, and luckily felt parchment crackle.

"You killed him purposefully, but not directly," the man said from behind him, and Kovacs tried not to show any surprise that the other had suddenly declared himself.

He turned around. The old man's flesh seemed to melt down in the darkness, and he became a formless man, a dark grey mass of featureless scales. This was a shapeshifter, a doppelganger. Mirrorkin. They could read minds, shapeshift into any form desired, and were much stronger and faster than any human.

Kovacs was pretty surprised they hadn't already conquered Faerun.

Nonetheless, the doppelgangers were a recent acquisition of his father's. They had been somehow impressed enough by Albescu Demirci's magical abilities to fall in line and serve him. Kovacs still couldn't tell the individual differences between them in their normal forms, though he knew there had to be some, so he didn't know this one by name.

"I know my father sent you to watch me," he said. The power his father held over him was woven into his body, into skin and blood and bone, but it wasn't a very subtle power. "Feel free to report everything to him." The doppelganger would probably do that anyway, so it was best not to sound reluctant.

The doppelganger cocked its head in the dark. "You kill outside your father's orders," it said. "That makes you a good killer."

*I'm the son of the god of murder.* "I'm told it runs in the family," he said. The doppelganger continued to watch Kovacs, as if it were waiting for something. "Since you're here, you can make..."
Kovacs walked into Bakers' Lane in Baldur's Gate. The place was misnamed, with not one baker in the vicinity. If there had been, he'd probably have bought some more cream buns for purposes of malicious and premeditated bribery. If there were a more obnoxious, inquisitive, and regrettably energetic child than Sarah's Elly in existence, he'd never had the misfortune to meet them.

Kovacs loosened a brick from the left-hand wall in the lane, and quickly drew the small sheaf of letters there into his cloak. There were few people on the street at this hour and he doubted anyone had observed him. As the sun began to rise, he walked through an alleyway near the docks and started to read.

In each city they travelled to, it was Kovacs' habit to advertise in broadsheets his father was unlikely to read. With several variations, he asked for hopeless cases and pointed readers to somewhere to deposit letters. It was his way of balancing the scales.

The answers he got normally fell into four categories. Liars; fools; those beyond his help ... and, finally, those who could actually use his rather specialised services. He tossed three letters immediately.

The fourth also looked like an immediate throwaway, based on the first sentence. Dear Hopeless, I am in love with a woman with whom I have never spoken. The fool should grow a spine. But the second sentence was a lot more interesting. And I think I am dying from poison, yet it is poison that no one is giving me in food or drink.

Kovacs read on. He noticed that the writing became more spidery and tenuous as it went on, as if the writer was indeed exhausted.

My name is Gio Valleta, I am a bard, and I live with my mother in the Street of Face-Shapers and Mask-Makers, in west Baldur's Gate near the temple of Tymora. I fell in love with Rowan, the lady next door. She is the daughter of the herbalist Rampion, and though he never permits her to leave his dwelling, I see her atop her roof garden, amidst vines and flowers as beautiful as her, and she sees me. This is aided by our exchange of two gnome-made telescopes. We began to smile, then to wave, and then we began to share letters by the simple expedient of throwing them back and forth. She wishes to leave her father, but fears he would violently respond to one knocking on her door to ask for her hand. Still, I would have sought to meet him, if not for the poison.

I pray to Tymora it is not poison. But I have visited the priest many times and there is no sign of organic disease. If it is poison, then that too is a great difficulty, for I eat and drink nothing that is not shared with my mother, and she is as hale as ever. If I were not ill in bed, I could rescue my love, but I feel my strength dwindle by the day. The letters from my love are all that give me hope. I sleep with them each night under my pillow. I fear not only for myself but her too - should my frail life-line come to an end, perhaps there will be no escape for her from her wicked father. Not to mention my aged mother, who has no one but me, and who promised faithfully to deliver this on my behalf. The case is truly hopeless.

Is there any help?

Kovacs thought it was obvious how he was being poisoned, but the rest of it was interesting. There was no time like the present. Kovacs scanned the other letters, found nothing else suitable, put them
back in his cloak, and walked westward.

He was thinking of Pherenike. It had only been hours since he'd last left her, climbing down her window again. He didn't want to think of leaving Baldur's Gate behind, leaving her. She was different. He'd felt something, some spark, the moment he first saw her. She was the only one of her friends who even tried to stand up to their leader's bullying. She had changed, defied her bully, and, unexpectedly, perplexingly, invited a stranger climbing up her window into her room and her life.

Then she saved his life. With a Shou vase to the back of the head.

He hadn't much to offer her, tied as he was. His father allowed him a long leash, but that was only because he knew well he could tug on it whenever he desired. All he had was a small cadre of supporters from among his father's followers, who might well choose to betray him, except maybe for Tirzah. Pherenike had offered to help him, but as vividly intelligent as she was, he still couldn't imagine her succeeding against the forces arrayed against her.

(If he was not just a good killer but also what Shalilah thought him, then he would have something to lay at her feet indeed.)

Pherenike knew about the markings - he hadn't needed to tell her. It was almost a relief that someone else knew, someone outside their world. But Tirzah had refrained from saying the words 'spawn of Bhaal' to her. She didn't yet know what kind of monster he was or the things he had done.

He wanted to keep Pherenike a secret from his father, if he could. She might take that as an insult. But to care about anything was the best way to lose it, especially if Albescu Demirci knew you cared. She would be used to hurt him. That was how his mother had died.

Kovacs took his time finding Valleta's home, wandering past the temple of Tymora then exploring the surrounding streets.

He saw a shabby sign for a herbalist's shop at the bottom of a high building, with wide windows all covered in leafy curtains. As if very few people actually lived there. The rooftop was a garden lush with plants in many colours, long wide black leaves that glinted with purple trails along their edges, blood red and violent violet flowers erupting like pustulent diseases, and gold smears of blossoms among dark green bedding. Kovacs stopped as if to admire it, as likely many passers-by did, but saw no gardener emerge. He considered the other houses around it, taking note of one where an energetic-looking old woman was out sweeping her steps. This one also had a clear rooftop balcony, susceptible to viewing the herbalist's garden. As he passed the woman by, he saw a subtle gold flash in the woman's wall: three gold-coloured shamrocks embedded as decoration. Symbol of Tymora, goddess of luck.

He asked the woman for directions to the temple, falling into a Sembian accent almost heavy enough to be a parody. She looked taken aback that he hadn't been able to find it on his own, but took pity on a foreigner.

"Thank you." Kovacs swept into an exotic-looking bow. "Madam - my lady - "


_One identified._ Mistress Bonavenna Valleta watched him with narrowed, rather beady and observant eyes; she was hardly the fragile, aged dependent that her son's letter had portrayed her as.

"... Or it seems I don't need to bother with the temple," he added, gesturing at the herbalist's. "Is he any good?"
Only a shrug from Mistress Bonavenna Valleta. *You get what you pay for,* she seemed to say with her look, *and I have work to do.*

The inside of the herbalist's shop belied the shabby exterior. The richness of the roof garden was in here, blooms and packets arranged in abundance. It was large enough to browse through several long corridors of shelves and feign interest in the many different plants Kovacs couldn't name. Customers flowed in and out, marking it as quite popular. A young apprentice with a pimpled face handled people's coin. There was no figure in evidence who looked like they could be the wizard Rampion.

Kovacs was surprised to recognise Madeline Castellas, walking openly in the door with a boy carrying a basket by her side. Now there was someone who understood plants. In the few times they had chatted since the ball, he'd discovered that Madeline was painfully shy. Talk about gardens was about the only thing to draw her out of her shell.

A risk, but a calculated one. Kovacs walked up to the apprentice. "Do you know what compound would smell like aniseed and honey, a little like rosemary but sharper, durian but sweeter? Something that leaves a byzantium purple residue behind?" he asked loudly. There had been a distinctive smell clinging to that letter, and some dark purple residue where the writer had rested his right hand, as if from some oil he'd been exposed to.

"Not particularly, sir," the apprentice stuttered. Kovacs mimed a shrug, and ordered a ready-made pomander.

He turned to see Madeline watching him, her expression suddenly fixed and rather suspicious. He pretended to notice her for the first time. "Perhaps you would know," Kovacs began - innocently, which he was in this particular instance. "An acquaintance scented a letter so; I wanted to emulate."

Madeline glared. "Come and look at the holly," she said, her idea of intrigue amateur and highly obvious. She asked the boy with her to go and gather her usual order. "Do you realise that's a rare and extremely dangerous poison?" she said under her breath, when they were relatively isolated. She was clearly suspicious of him; Kovacs approved of her instincts.

"Not until now," Kovacs said. "Would you take a look, and check there is no mistake?"

He tore off a portion of the letter with the residue on it for her, on the margins rather than including any of the writing. Madeline sniffed, and examined the parchment closely to see the small traces of purple. She paled. "Where did you get this?" she hissed.

"Business acquaintance from Silverymoon," Kovacs lied. "Evidently, not one with the best of intentions."

"You're lying," Madeline said immediately. She flushed red, then turned pale. "Silverymoon is too far north for this to grow." Fear had started to catch up with her, as if she started to realise that playing with poisons and accusing potential poisoners of lying was a bad idea.

Kovacs was impressed with her acumen. He did not want to have to kill her to preserve himself, though he would if he had to. "Can you be discreet?" he asked her.

"No," Madeline said. "You need to take this to the Flaming Fist." Honesty shone through every pore in her sweating face. It was a rare and interesting quality.

"Time is short and a man could die while they attempt to investigate," Kovacs said. "Do you happen to know Gio or Bonavenna Valleta? It's important." He didn't add, *To you as well.* It was worth a shot in the dark - if Madeline was a usual customer, she might well have met some of the neighbours.
"Yes, she lives near here. I've seen her when I came. I met her ten years ago when I was on the flower committee. She was a Tymoran and of course she taught us all how to roll dice properly ... But why?"

"Call on her as a friend," Kovacs said. "Ask about her son, and borrow his gnomish telescope. Doubtless he'll let you see through it. Take keen note of what there is to see. Don't stay past the eleventh bell under any circumstances."

If the boy confides that he wrote to 'Hopeless', perhaps she will see it as attempted altruism. She had best not spoil my game, but there will be others she will know nothing about.

Madeline nodded, half confused, and Kovacs steered her out of there before she could start to think again.

—

Baron Baalimar Blaine, head of a noble Baldur's Gate family so blue-blooded you could bottle it and sell it as ink, ordered another wine from his cellar. To the Nine Hells what it did to his gout. With a greedy wife with a tongue like a meat cleaver who threw rivers of coin after gambling, and a brainless daughter who threw similar rivers of coin after hair-ribbons and shoe rosettes, no wonder he was a ruined man. In truth, the Blaine family had begun their decline long before Baalimar was born, and would likely continue it after he died, when the title and heavily mortgaged scraps of property would fall into the hands of a distant nephew, another wastrel who made his home in far-off Chult.

"A highly ancient name, I'm told," his dining companion said. Sembian or not, Baalimar was quickly coming to the conclusion that this Albescu Demirci was a civilised man of wealth and taste. And just enough gullibility to spread some of that wealth around, ha! That deal on Vaasan furs had been very accommodating to Baalimar's needs. "Both parts of your name have long been in the family?"

"Yes, we're positively infested with Baalimars," Blaine said, glancing up at one of the hideous ancestral visages affixed to the wall. Damn portrait was so blackened with smog and dust from the years that it couldn't even be sold. Depicted one of the many ancestors from Baldur's Gate, trying to scowl fiercely at painted enemies. "Damn nephew of mine's called Jonathan or James or some other damnfool modern name. Breaks tradition." It wasn't only the boy's name that broke tradition. Unlike the golden Blaines, he'd inky black hair and a black mind to match, falling into the filthy practices of long-banned religions and fleeing the continent twenty years ago. "Not that I give a damn - I'll be in the old family vault by the time he inherits the lot." And it's not even a lot, he stopped himself from saying at the last minute. "Yarrow - tell Ellsworthy to hurry up with that wine," he told his daughter. She sullenly got up in a flutter of yellow frippery, wasting his substance on such stuff.

Yarrow had gone all sulky on him before, asking that he not do business with the Demircis in the name of her friend Candle Balduran, that piece of spoilt stuck-up baggage who'd eloped. The idle hussy certainly had poorer blood than the Blaines; she'd held her head too high and came a cropper as a result.

Baalimar had only laughed in his daughter's face. "How many times did your mother drop you on your head, you stupid wench? I won't do the whim of some empty-headed chit, and certainly not to please a poxy slut who ran away." That, he hoped, had given the jade something to think about.

Unfortunately, Yarrow wasn't at her best tonight. Baalimar Blaine's daughter was commonly named one of the most beautiful women in Baldur's Gate and countless artists painted and sold her portrait in every fashion establishment in town, but what use for that if the only lover Yarrow had was a worthless Flaming Fist wastrel known only as Sweet Goat, whatever that name meant? If Baalimar could, he'd sell her to any remotely eligible buyer and pack her out of his house as soon as conceivable. Even to a foreigner. In fact, the further away the better. Albescu Demirci from Sembia
was a widower and wealthy enough, and Baalimar wasn't a particularly picky man.

"A family vault. Do you ever show its history to outsiders?" Albescu Demirci asked Baalimar.

"Eh? Oh, it's new, hardly worth seeing, scarce over a hundred and twenty years old. Forget why we stopped using the old one. Full, I imagine," Baalimar said. He eyed the tusked bodyguard Albescu had for a servitor, somewhat nervously. Huge ugly orcblooded woman with untamed eyebrows like a boar, scaly orange skin like a newt, and a damn big sword on her back. They should pass a law against letting brutes of that kidney through the city gates at all.

"Is the old vault on the north-western parcel of land?" Albescu Demirci indicated a spot on one of the ancient family maps Baalimar had shared with him. Damned if Baalimar could make head or tail of them himself. No one went down to the old Blaine landholdings below the old city. He couldn't pay to maintain them, he couldn't find anyone who wanted to take them off his hands, and he might as well hold on to them in order to keep his status as landowner.

He'd an idea this Demirci fancied himself something of an archaeologist. Figured out the correct area quickly, reading the old map and its chicken scratches better than Baalimar could do himself.

"Somewhere there; only explored it a few times m'self, as a lad. When the old legs carried me a bit better," Baalimar said, slapping his gouty knee and getting a sharp sting travelling up his thigh for his pains.

Somehow, Baalimar found himself giving a guided tour of the damn place to Demirci and his pet ogre. Orc or ogre, whatever she was. His daughter Yarrow declined, worrying about getting her hair dirty. You got to the old estate through the east part of the city, going down to where Baldur's Gate used to be a small fishing village. Practically had to dig your way through to reach the outskirts of the old city. They called it the Undercity, a buried wasteland where nobody went any more. Muddy, damp, and wretched.

"I expected that the river leaked into the silty soil," Demirci said. His ogre walked ahead of them with a lit torch.

"You mean the place is a boggy mess," Baalimar said, then inwardly damned himself for lowering the value of it.

"A boggy mess is exactly what I'm looking to rent," his companion replied, showing no consternation as his boots sank further and further into the mud. "Parts of the River Chionthar's flow are trapped under here, in the bowels of the old city. The water is seen as useless. But, with the right gnomish patents, it's possible to extract the fresh water and benefit the entire city. Should you go to war with Amn again, you'll be willing to pay high prices for fresh water within the city gates."

Foolish that the fellow should tell him so damn much, Baalimar thought. Maybe he'd had too much wine. Or maybe without the gnomish techniques Demirci had under his control, the land would be useless anyway. And everyone knew that the orange-stinking Amnians saber-rattled from time to time, a damnfool people with coins stuffed up their collective arse, but nothing ever came of it.

"This is it - the old family vault," Baalimar said. He wouldn't have recognised the crypt if not for the torchlight gleaming from the carvings on its walls. The stone was shaped to look like a house made of bones.

Demirci moved purposefully to it, as if he cared for a tour. Baalimar dug out his large ring of ancestral keys from below his doublet. The lock was practically rusted off; any key would've likely worked, and the main reason why no thief had come in was there was nothing worth stealing. Baalimar opened the door and stood back as a cloud of fouled air rushed out at them.
Maggots squirmed over the rotting stone floor. The ogre held her torch high and the light passed over the wall carvings, visages and inscriptions of Blaines long dead mixed with imagery of skulls and tears and suchlike. Baalimar knew that in the old days, some of the less respectable gods wielded more power in Baldur's Gate. The old Baldurians and his own ancestors sometimes welcomed gods of death and murder and chaos. Nowadays, you'd never see an open temple to Mask, god of thieves, or - even worse! - Cyric, the Mad God, who'd only even come into power in the Time of Troubles nine years ago. All the most respectable funerals nowadays were carried out by Helm's temple, or if the person was particularly religious, by their own sect.

Something creaked in the darkness beyond. Baalimar practically jumped out of his skin. Terrified, he saw something like a ghost - a wraith rising in a cloud of dust! The ogre stepped aside and he covered his face. He felt it blow across him. But it was nothing more than dust, he hoped. He felt nothing worse than the gravedirt around him.

"In ancient times, I suppose they would have tested your legitimacy to be here by a blood seal," Albescu Demirci's cold voice broke in. "But, in modern times, we're civilised."

"In ancient times, I suppose they would have tested your legitimacy to be here by a blood seal," Albescu Demirci's cold voice broke in. "But, in modern times, we're civilised."

Baalimar patted his hands over his face. Somehow he'd caught himself against some stone scrape along the way, for he felt something wet on his face. He stumbled forward, not willing to be left behind. Gods dammit, maybe he'd drunk more than he should have after all. Baalimar caught himself against a square stone structure in the middle of a crypt, an empty slab big enough for a human to lie there. It was covered with edged grooves as if to drain some liquid away. An odd fancy, Baalimar thought.

They went deep into the old Blaine crypt. The inscriptions became cruder, with more and more grinning skulls. Sketches of a rough tower of bones, a clenched gauntlet, and a skull surrounded by tears appeared on the charnel-house walls. The tears were rust-red, as if they had once been drawn with blood. More and more skull motifs, with and without the tears.

Demirci and the ogre paused by a far wall covered in chicken scratches. The ogre singled out some lines and shapes with a grimy black fingernail, and Demirci nodded in reply. Baalimar squinted. It took him a bit of time to catch on, but he understood what the other two were chatting about - a map of the way the old Blaine holdings and the Undercity used to be. Well, if it was useful for what they needed to know about the Chionthar water flow, so be it.

Demirci was saying some words of praise for how impressed he was by the ancient crypt, which he certainly should be, being a foreigner of highly ambiguous breeding. That damn well ought to translate into a generous offer to rent the Blaine Undercity properties and let loose their damnfool gnomish experiments.

Baalimar yawned heavily, and hoped they'd turn back soon. He felt like he was about to go into a dead faint then and there.

—

The plant related plot thread was definitely inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Rappacini's Daughter'.
Shalilah, the shapeshanger, mirrorkin, monster of mankind's nightmares, watched the human. He could read what passed through Kovacs' mind. The human made some effort to shield, but he lacked most of the mental discipline of the man he called father. His thoughts exploded, fiery and chaotic, leaping from possibility to possibility, while his expression was sullen and his temperament icy and calculating.

He had arranged for the death of the slave trader. "Since you're here, you can make yourself useful. Change into him," Kovacs ordered.

Shalilah and his people, his small and diminished tribe of doppelgangers, had sworn to serve Albescu Demirci. That meant watching Kovacs when ordered, but not necessarily obeying commands from him.

Still, there was more to Kovacs than the merely human. He was a good killer. But was he also what Shalilah needed?

Shalilah transformed into a facsimile of the slave trader. Kovacs checked where the slave trader's own horse had been stabled - it was already stolen, as expected - and gestured to Shalilah to get on his own steed.

This had been the weakest part of the plan, Kovacs' thoughts told Shalilah. In human terms, he was not yet fully grown and might have had some difficulty passing himself off as an emissary for the slave trader carrying his papers. He tried to look older than he was by the way he carried himself, drawing on his training to look like a man who could fight. Now he could act the bodyguard to Shalilah's slave trader, walking beside him.

"You can read my mind to get the lines you need, right?" Kovacs said roughly.

Shalilah could. "You need a better mental shield," he hissed. "Albescu will be displeased." Shalilah felt Kovacs control his instinctive shudder at that thought, pushing it down to a dark place at the bottom of his mind.

They went to the military administrator's post. Two days before, the slave trader had purchased a consignment of captured prisoners, taken too close to the Thayvian border. Shalilah held the papers Kovacs had stolen.

"Forgive the late hour," Shalilah said, and introduced himself under the slave trader's name. "The Tharchion is suffering from insomnia and wishes to be entertained. I therefore need to collect my purchase immediately."

There was rush and bustle, and not a few greased palms required. But soon enough they were off with the slaves. The administrator had even judged that one guard was insufficient, and sent two of
his own soldiers to support them.

Shalilah would have seen little value in these slaves, except as food. They were a travelling caravan, consisting of four gnomes, three humans, two horses, and one elf. They were apparently part of a circus, a human form of entertainment for the young or easily distracted. When they had slipped too close to the border they were seized by Thayvian soldiers, framed as spies, and sold as slaves. Shalilah easily read their minds and saw little that he considered of value. Even the circus horses, pulling the caravan that held the chained slaves, were worn down and tame, of lesser quality to any of Albescu Demirci's animals.

They were not, of course, really going to the Tharchion's palace. The human guards had only just begun to be confused at the route when Kovacs left Shalilah's side, walked silently behind one of the guards, and wrapped a garrotte wire around his neck. The man died quickly and efficiently. The other guard noticed the sudden change from his seat driving the caravan. Kovacs cast a spell, setting a brief flash of light around the man's head and shoulders to make him a clear target, and shot him with a crossbow. The steel pierced through his neck. He had barely screamed out before he died.

Shalilah helped Kovacs quickly fling the bodies inside the caravan, on top of the slaves. They must escape the city. Kovacs rode the circus horses hard, seizing the reins, and Shalilah kept pace with him on his own scared beast. The poorer quarter of Lake Mulsantir was scarcely walled at all, and Kovacs led them through a rough area badly maintained. The caravan shook on the pebbled ground as if it were about to fall apart. But they left the city behind, coming out into the wilderness, on the road that left Surthay and led into free Thesk. They were alone, unfollowed. Kovacs slowed.

"That's all I needed you for," he told Shalilah. "Return to my father. He expects me by the tenth bell and I will be there." He tried to let the arrogant tone of his voice make up for his lack of actual authority.

Shalilah nodded and feigned to depart, but in fact stayed behind a nearby ridge. For he was curious about this good killer. Kovacs freed the slaves from their shackles. They were almost as afraid of him as they were of their enslavers, for the blood on his hands and the dead bodies he had thrown to lie with them.

"We have a bargain," he told one of the gnomes, the leader of the circus. "I have time until a bell past dawn. I expect you to follow through."

And this was for what he had murdered three people in cold blood, Shalilah thought. The son of the god of murder wished to learn stage magic. And so the circus gnome taught Kovacs petty tricks used to entertain human children and sleight of hand.

"You don't have much time, so you'll need to practice this on your own," the gnome told Kovacs. "Remember what I tell you and the steps of the techniques. And I'd wash that silly tattoo off my face at some point if I were you."

Card-shuffling, ball-juggling, fire-flashing, misdirection and concealment. The tools of the trade of a circus gnome. Kovacs stayed the rest of the night and rode away as promised. Shalilah transformed himself to an eagle, and soared above him to return to the Blue Shale caravan.

Albescu Demirci forbade his son this kind of impractical magic, and he had gone behind his back and killed for it.

He was a good killer. Shalilah was beginning to think that this one could be exactly what he was looking for.
Madeline had every reason to be concerned about what she had seen in the roof garden through a gnomish spyglass. Tell Bonavenna that her son is being poisoned? She thinks he is only malingering, lovesick, she is old and this will hurt her. Rampion's herbs were famous, provided that one meant famous within a very specific and limited circle in Baldur's Gate. Most knew about Rampion's private roof garden and his still more private greenhouses. Coming to Baldur's Gate just five years ago, Rampion had established himself well. Other gardeners were positively green with jealousy over the way he'd cleverly purchased a building where he could directly tap into the Baldurian water supply, ensuring that he extracted enough and some to spare of the flow every day. Madeline identified and admired the exotic plants in the roof garden through Gio's spyglass, and there was nothing to be concerned about there except her own envy and desire for seedlings.

But the plants were not all there was in the roof garden.

Bonavenna had remembered Madeline, and greeted her like the noble sponsor that she'd been in the past. Madeline felt like a guilty traitor as she asked about her son. Then Madeline went to see the ill Gio, and found the young man lying pale in bed with hectic flushes in his cheeks, a faint purple. It only took a few questions from her before he talked freely as a friend. He loved Rampion's daughter, Rowan, who was only to be seen walking in the roof garden.

I had no idea that Rampion had a daughter. It can't be right to imprison her.

Madeline saw Rampion's daughter in the roof garden, tending to her plants. She adjusted the gnomish spyglass. She watched a tall thin woman, beautiful and dark, snipping off vines and watering the flowers. Then she saw something else. She saw a white butterfly flutter through the garden, landing on the stamens of the brightly coloured blooms, hovering around Rowan's shoulder.

And then, for no obvious reason, the butterfly dropped dead out of the sky.

It was as if the daughter of Rampion the herbalist had absorbed poison into her very body, tended dangerous plants so long and so well that her skin extruded their deadly brew against all that came near her. And spread poison upon the very parchment she wrote on, transmitting her blight to others.

So Madeline made her excuses, hearing the eleventh bell ring out from Tymora's temple as she did so. I know this plant. The more time exposed, the more likely. She gabbled something to Gio about not sleeping so uncomfortably with those letters under his pillow, and hoped the man would listen.

She returned to Kovacs Demirci. This changed what she thought of him, and not necessarily in good ways. He saved her the night of the ball and he was right about Gio Valleta's danger. She wished to like him as much as she reasonably could, and yet something about him felt cold and wrong. Madeline couldn't put her finger on what it was. Kovacs didn't seem like a fortune hunter, not like the confident, poor, good-looking men who thought Madeline an easy way to add to their coin and humiliate her behind her back. He'd accepted her thanks as if he had not even expected them, and talked to her straightforwardly about her garden, more like he would talk to another man.

Madeline told him what she had seen as sharply and quickly as she could.

"As you suggested earlier. Tell the Flaming Fist," Kovacs said. She was surprised that he proposed
the right thing to do so quickly and easily, then felt ashamed of herself for being surprised.

And so Madeline went to tell the authorities of the poisoning plot against Gio, and Rampion's cruelty to his own daughter that imprisoned her and suffused her body with poison. She was let in to see a Flaming Fist lieutenant, a red-haired man with smoke-stained fingertips and the smell of expensive cigars clinging to him, who looked as if he had Shou or Koryan blood from his face.

"A herbalist grows plants," he said, when Madeline had finished. "And a man treats his daughter in the way that he chooses. I think we're done here." He sent one of his men to usher Madeline out, making no bones that he considered her a ridiculous woman with a ridiculous story.

Which left her, Madeline thought, with no choice but to rely on Kovacs Demirci - and help by herself however she could.

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If the Baldur's Gate Flaming Fist were anything like the typical run of city guards everywhere, Kovacs thought, he wished Madeline luck with her wild story to the Flaming Fist of a woman so used to poison that she spread it in her very breath and a strange illicit plant. Or rather, he wished her no luck at all.

Kovacs hitched the grappling hook to the next windowsill and scrambled quietly upward. In the darkness, he stayed obscure, wearing dark brown that faded into the colours of the city at night. So few people looked above. He swung himself over the wall into the roof garden, catching his breath. The plants here were harmless, all of them shades of black and grey in the dark. There was a trapdoor on the ground. Kovacs tested it; the lock was on the inside, and fastened tight. He took out the tools he'd brought, and quietly set about removing the hinges. He could hear no sounds of movement from within.

He reached for the Weave. This spell didn't give him true night vision like an elf or doppelganger, but he could sense the threads of magic in the air that changed colour and texture in subtle ways, responding to the structures around them. It also came in useful to identify arcane wards and traps. Kovacs stepped cautiously through Rampion's hallways. Overpowering scents came rushing at him through the cracks in the doors. With only two actual inhabitants, the whole place was a gigantic greenhouse.

Kovacs forced open the lock of the first door on the right. Lamps hung above a hot and humid field of plants. The smell rushed fiercely on him, and he understood that these were a trap. The very fumes that emanated from them were dangerous. He could feel them damaging him as he breathed in, running hot and red over his skin. But, unlike a normal human, he could heal most wounds. His power rushed through him without his deliberate choice.

It would have been interesting to invite Pherenike, if she was willing to come. Maybe another time. He didn't want her to be hurt, but her company would have been nice.

The lamps were also a serious concern, he thought. They weren't natural, and they didn't draw from the Weave either. Looked like Baldur's Gate was lousy with gods and their servants.

After walking by five doors, Kovacs finally smelt the same residue that he had on the scroll, only far more intense. He felt his lungs burn, and the power inside him quickly respond to it in turn, a cycle
Then he stopped moving. He could hear the sound of breathing. At the far end of the room, a person slept amidst these poisoned flowers, this heavy and fatal scent. A woman, he thought, with long tangled hair that wove between the vines as if she were part of their growth. Her breathing was steady and regular, sounding truly asleep. That could be feigned, but she did not stir as if she heard or saw the intruder.

Kovacs closed that door very gently. Hardly any time left. Rampion's work had to be kept away from these poison-growing rooms, since he himself lived a normal life, not suffused with a poison so grave it crept into letters he wrote and caused insects to drop dead in a moment.

The first floor above the shop was finally clear of plant matter and heavy smells. Kovacs threw down a bag of chalk dust, which settled and clung to the different surfaces. Sticky residues in that corner, probably leading to kitchen or dining-room. The white dust clung to that particular floorboard at an odd angle, showing it was lifted slightly. Certainly a spot to avoid. He picked the lock of the door next to the floorboard trap and walked into the herbalist's study.

A table with ledger-books on it; beside it, a wooden cabinet with very fine silver locks. Kovacs dropped one of the things he'd brought beside the table, as if he'd been careless, and picked up one of the ledger-books. Probably that was for the normal business and Rampion kept more interesting materials in the cabinet. Those locks were custom built under a gnomish maker's mark, very fine and elaborate, with not just a key to them but also a set of tiny turn-locks and switches.

Kovacs followed the fire with a swift, calculated blow and the wood splintered. Loudly. He had just enough time to gather up the cabinet's contents.

It was Rampion himself who came on the intruder first, although there was the sound of another set of footsteps not too far behind. The herbalist saw a dim figure in the dark, rifling his well-locked cabinet. Rampion shouted wordlessly and prepared an attack.

So Kovacs threw himself out the window. The drop was twice a man's height; a normal burglar would have risked broken bones. He took the landing in a roll. The cobblestones made a painful bruise but fell short of the shattering of bone, and his power forced itself through him to get him up and away.

Rampion rushed to his front door and tried to pursue his robber, but Kovacs had long escaped through the nearest alleyway by then.

Back in his father's house, he burnt every stitch of clothing he had on, read through Rampion's papers, and stored the poison in a non-reactive ceramic flask at the back of a drawer.

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Madeline Castellas regretted that she hadn't warned Bonavenna Valleta, hadn't told Gio. Gio would
have refused to believe her, that the woman he loved was responsible for slowly poisoning him. And his mother was old and vulnerable and would be hurt, but because the Flaming Fist were useless she had a right to know.

After a sleepless night, Madeline packed plants from her own supplies, remedies against poison. Charcoal dust mixed with calcium salt and water to absorb toxins. Syrup of ipecac to induce vomiting. Burdock and dandelion to purify blood. She'd heard of concentrated angelica and senna and willow bark used to treat this poison, but as far as she knew it was always fatal if the quantities were large enough or the exposure long enough. She called her family carriage to take her, and told the coachman to drive away and retrieve her later.

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"Whatever possessed you, lady?" Bonavenna cried out, and dragged Madeline inside the door with a surprisingly strong grip. "Thought you were him, damn his eyes! I nearly spilt your brains over my doorstep!"

"I came to help Gio ..." Madeline offered. She eyed the mace very nervously. She hated all violence, and had experienced little or none of it. "Perhaps you can put it down and we can talk about it? Please?" she stuttered helplessly.

"Too damn late!" Bonavenna cursed her. "They stole him, this morning! Note on his bed, held him to ransom! My boy will die if I bring the Flaming Fist and he'll die if I won't. But they can't and shan't get the better of me!"

"Tell me," Madeline pleaded, trying to keep her distance from that mace. Bonvenna swore, using language Madeline had never expected such a respectable old woman would know. She thrust a poor-looking note into Madeline's face, written with a sloppy hand.

*How dare you invade my sanctuary, Tymoran! We have paid you in kind. Your son is mine. Come alone to my garden at the ninth bell and do not tell any other living soul, or he will die. Rampion.*

"Of course I didn't invade anything," Bonavenna said. "My son is gone; perhaps he climbed the rope his own self, cack-brained Beshaba-cursed fool! I thought it a harmless, silly romance, mostly in his head. And my own neighbour Rampion turns out to be my enemy -"

"You didn't invade Rampion's sanctuary," Madeline said slowly. She hoped to calm Bonavenna down by speaking as hesitantly as she could, and Bonavenna seemed to start to listen to her. "But perhaps someone did. Someone else who knows of this. A man called Kovacs Demirci. He knew Gio was being poisoned. He warned me."

"Ahhh," Bonavenna sighed. "Gio gave me a sealed letter to distribute a few days ago. More fool I, didn't read it! No doubt my idiot son picked one of those damn travelling mercenaries - no better than bandits, of course - to ask for help. Wait. I remember. Tell me, is Demirci a Sembian fellow, rather short, dark skin, freckles, bird's nest of hair?"

Madeline nodded. Bonavenna swore again. "Well," she said, "short of the bloody Sembian showing his face again, I have no choice. Tymora help me. Tymora help us all."

And then Madeline saw something like power gather about Bonavenna's face, strength beyond human strength in the way she lifted the spiked mace. Madeline remembered that once Bonavenna
had been a priestess of Tymora, and a renowned one at that. Her prayers, it seemed, still potently drew on the goddess' might.

"I'll come with you," Madeline said. She was terrified and felt her knees knock together under her dress, but it was the right thing to do.

Bonavenna sighed. "Gio used a telescope for that jade before," she said. "Come up to the roof with me and I'll confess to Rampion that you showed up of your own will. Don't want him to think I told you on purpose."

The city bells rung in the ninth hour of the day. The herbalist's shop was closed and, all of a sudden, the familiar building was horribly sinister. Madeline clung to what she believed in. All violence is abhorrent. All that lives is holy. Seek peace, give aid and comfort, and do not slay or harm another feeling being ...

They walked up to Rampion's doorstep, praying to save Bonavenna's only son. Bonavenna called on her goddess Tymora to protect them from poison and inspire them with luck, and Madeline suddenly felt more hale and hearty than she had been. Bonavenna carried an innocent looking knitted bag in many colours, which contained her mace, while all Madeline had were her poison remedies.

The front door opened for them, as if drawn on a string, then promptly shut and sealed behind them.

Bonavenna and Madeline were face to face with the herbalist Rampion, and his beautiful daughter Rowan.

And, at their feet, was Gio Valleta. Or at least his head, which was all that they could see. Gio's body lay inside what looked like a gigantic plant, like a fly-trap the size of a man. Two thick, translucent leaves were closed over him, trapping him in some thick jelly-like substance. He lay with his eyes closed as if he slept, or rather was unconscious. It was monstrous.

Tendrils of Gio's cocoon spun from Rowan's body, as if both the trap-plant and Gio were outgrowths of her.

"What have you done with my son," Bonavenna said, the words all flat and run together. The wrinkles on her face were drawn so deeply that they were black on her skin.

"Don't waste my time. You know why I did it," said Rampion. He gestured to his daughter Rowan. The woman raised her hands. To Madeline's astonishment, a dark vapour seemed to form above her hands, as if it were oozing out of her skin.

Then she blew into the air, and the dark smoke wafted toward Bonavenna and Madeline. Madeline couldn't identify the smell, something like seaweed and mandragora. Bonavenna smiled grimly. "Tymora will shield us from poison," she said.

"But this isn't poison," Madeline heard Rampion say. She tried not to breathe the foul air in, but it was too hard not to. The strange scent filled her nose and she swayed on her feet. She felt dizzy, the substance filling her brain.

No. Not poison. Sedative. She struggled to stay awake. It was a losing battle. Beside her, Bonavenna struggled too.

And Madeline could smell something else, faintly. Was it smoke? Her eyes were bleary. She couldn't stay awake. She had guessed Rampion would wish to use her as another hostage, as a noblewoman. She'd hoped to help but perhaps she could not.
"This would have happened anyway, Bonavenna," Rampion's voice said. "Your son was willingly lifted up to our rooftop this morning. He belonged to us all along. A fine revenge, is it not? Your burglary only caused us to step up the timing."

Madeline couldn't hold out any longer. She felt herself fall, but she couldn't feel any pain. She passed out.

There was nothing like making an entrance at an appropriate cue. If it was overly dramatic, Kovacs didn't give a damn.

"Talonites," he complained, as he appeared from Rampion's stairs. "Can't even give credit where it's due, let alone write in a decent prose style." He threw down one of Rampion's papers, deliberately crumpling an image of the goddess Talona's holy symbol, a bilious purple triangle with three teardrops.

Talona was the goddess of poison. Her followers seemed to spend most of their time contaminating wells for fun and infecting people with exciting new variations of the plague. Once, she willingly served Bhaal - and that alone was enough not to recommend her.

"To noble Talona the glory the will of the exquisite Lady of Poison be done our great glorious plan to our deadly vengeance and Her incomprehensible might and sacred rite fulfilled ... " Kovacs quoted in disgust. "Did Talona ever meet an adjective she didn't like? Don't blame Mistress Valleta for the burglary. I thought leaving a Tymoran medallion behind might piss you off. This morning I went back to Tymora's temple. It's funny how everyone has a story to tell." Sometimes divine wards gave him trouble, as in the little incident with Candle Balduran, but he was normally able to walk into public areas where priests tried to drag in any poor sucker with coin to spend.

Kovacs had a throwing knife palmed, and wore a scarf soaked in ammonia that covered most of his face. It probably wasn't protection against most of the things Rampion and Rowan could throw at him, but it would look like it might be.

He was holding the attention of Rampion and Rowan; the herbalist looked pop-eyed and almost purple with rage at the desecrated symbol.

"I think she's recognised you now," Kovacs said. The old Tymoran priestess was still upright, panting, holding a glowing golden mace in her right hand. "Twenty years ago, Bonavenna of Tymora was a powerful priestess, albeit less of a healer and more of a head-banger. She fought a young Talonite, Ravelling, who sought to poison a Baldur's Gate well. Ravelling was taken by the Flaming Fist, and it was thought he drowned while attempting to escape prison. Long years later, he regains a place in Baldur's Gate society. And with an accomplice, he traps Bonavenna's son. Ravelling tries to have his revenge - and tries to complete his original scheme on a grander scale." He deliberately laughed loudly. "You lost the first time. A dog returns to lick up its original vomit."

"Kill them both, Rowan," Rampion said. But then Bonavenna was on the woman with her mace.

Kovacs threw the knife in his hand. It pierced Rampion's shoulder, but he seemed to feel no pain. The Talonite priest smiled as if it even gave him pleasure, and moved forward a lot faster than Kovacs expected.

Rampion hit Kovacs in the stomach, barrelling into him with augmented strength and speed, and as he hit Kovacs felt a sick sense of decay build under his skin. Priests and their powers. Candle Balduran was worse, he thought, and went for another knife. He slashed open Rampion's cheek. Rampion smiled savagely with an open grin, called out to his Talona, and the drops of blood from him turned to acid as he shook them across Kovacs' skin. A neat trick. Rampion's blood burned, and
he was a lot stronger than Kovacs, far stronger than his skinny frame ought to be.

Filled with windbag prayers of the goddess of poison.

Kovacs went suddenly limp, and Rampion's own strength worked against him. He fell off balance. Kovacs got the upper hand and slammed Rampion's head into the floor. Then Rampion rolled aside and slashed his fingers across Kovacs' eyes. The nails must have been poison-tipped. They burned and blinded him. The two of them rolled across the floor, gouging, groin-kneeing, trying every possible dirty trick to win. Kovacs felt the wooden floor at his back. He still couldn't see. Then he kicked what must be the cocoon, soft and yielding.

He knocked Rampion over and tried to hold him down. With his left hand, he groped to make a slit in the cocoon. It felt like cold jelly gushed out of it, burning Kovacs' skin. He could blurrily see now, blood and acid clouding his sight. Rampion was coming up again. Kovacs ducked a blow and hit Rampion hard in the sternum, a spear punch. His enemy fell over the cocoon.

Kovacs forced Rampion's head and neck down, over the slit, deep into the jelly. Rampion couldn't breathe. He tried to kick with Talona's strength, but the blows were easy enough to avoid while he was down. The jelly surrounded Rampion's head, sticky and forcing his skin to bubble and burn with some transformation. He kicked feebly as it filled his nostrils and mouth, and then his movements all stilled. Kovacs kept holding him, to make sure.

Rowan screamed. She flung Bonavenna aside from her, and the priestess didn't get up. Kovacs could see a little better now. He wiped his eyes with the side of his hand. The smell of smoke was stronger in the air.

Rampion had made this woman into living poison, where insects died rather than land on her. She slept amidst plants with fumes that burned. She'd ensnared his enemy's son for his sake.

Rowan screamed her rage and pain again. With the scream she blew black smoke, black seedlings from her skin. A heavy poison, dark and blinding. Kovacs aimed a knife and heard it miss, thudding into the wall behind Rowan. Then he heard the sound of wood grinding against wood.

It was a smokescreen. Rowan opened a trapdoor in the floor. If she didn't want an immediate revenge for Rampion, there was only one other thing she could want. Kovacs heard the sound of a splash.

"Shit," he said.

He shook Madeline Castellas, none too gently. When the shaking didn't work, he held a lit flame under her nose. That made her stir. Rowan's black smoke was dissipating. "Forgot to mention I set the greenhouses on fire upstairs. And added a little Lantanese black powder," he told her. Any minute now there would be firework bangs, timbers beginning to collapse on each other. "Get out." Even if she didn't understand any of that, basic common sense might be enough to prevail with the heavy smell of smoke all around.

Kovacs threw himself down into the open trapdoor. He fell into rushing water, deeper than his height, in a dark passage with metal bands against the wall. He held on to one of them, understanding it was designed for a person to go through this watery tunnel. The intense burn of Rowan's poison filled the air around him.

"You're not Rampion's daughter, are you? You never were," Kovacs said, throwing a taunt in the dark. He'd seen their body language, her anguish when she knew Rampion was dead. "You were lovers, weren't you?"
"You murdered him," Rowan screamed, "and you will be the first ..."

"You let him turn you into a plant," Kovacs said, "vegetation. Not much of a compliment. Perhaps you should find some friendly priest to change you back."

"Never. I am living poison, I am a marvel of the true goddess. I lie amidst deadly plants and they nourish me like my sisters. Poison is steeped into my bones, bound into my hair. My breath slays man and beast alike. A drop of my blood in water lays to waste a town. Rampion made me powerful. The least I will do is carry out his destiny," Rowan said.

Kovacs gripped the second staple, pulling himself forward in the dark water. Near impossible to see. He tried to reach for a spell, for enough stillness in his mind to glide along the Weave and let it give him what he needed. He felt Rowan try to fling out her poisonous fumes, burn his lungs and skin with every breath he took. It even infected the cold waters around them, equally painful on his legs and feet below the water line. Except he wasn't entirely human himself, and his power surged to heal the damage just fast enough to let him move onward.

His abilities were a gift from a death god. They let him fight, but never stopped one inch of the pain.

"You can't bring him back. He died failing Talona. You'll have to live without him," Kovacs said. Third staple, fourth. He was closer to Rowan, close enough that he could see her dark silhouette, flailing in the Baldur's Gate sewer. "Talona probably sentenced him to an eternity of torture under her thumb."

Rowan drew in a sudden breath. "My poison should have destroyed you long before now. What are you?" Rowan said. It looked like she tried to be rational for a moment, holding on to a platform in the middle of the waters.

"It doesn't matter," he heard Rowan say in the dark water. "I want to carry out his wish more than anything else. He made my body poison, my blood and flesh and bone, and I will see that all of Baldur's Gate perishes."

Kovacs felt himself smile in the darkness. "Funny you should say that. People who ask that tend to end up dead."

"Her blood is poison. If she dies here, the waters fill with death and run to all of Baldur's Gate. Death and destruction on a massive scale."

"That's an interesting idea," Kovacs said, "but not for the greater glory of Talona."

Destroy that bitch and all the other godlings, he thought. Balance the scales with one more murder of one that Faerun will never miss.

Kovacs flicked open the cap to a simple bottle of oil with one hand. The oil fell over the troubled waters, in a single thick film of fluid. Then he reached for another spell. It was a cantrip, similar to a cvass game, to raise and move small objects. It was simple enough. The oil was liquid, not solid, harder to get a handle on, but he moved the oil until it coated Rowan's body. She no longer touched water.

Then he threw a lit tinder at her.
The oil caught on fire. Rampion had made his lover Rowan part plant; she burned well. Fire cleansed the poison. It turned out that water and a grease fire did not mix well at all, and clouds of steam rose around her. Rowan burnt to death screaming, and the child of Bhaal watched and smiled.

Kovacs hauled the smoking corpse onto a slab of stone above the water. If he'd left her there, she might have contaminated more of the plumbing. Behind him, from the trapdoor where he'd come from, a burning plank of wood fell down and hit the water. He heard the sounds of shifting timbers coming down in flames.

Some little time later, Kovacs pulled himself up from another sewer grate, downstream and a decent distance from where Rampion's house had been, and tried to wipe some of the green slime off his clothes. The Flaming Fist and the firefighters had managed to arrive, and were dousing what remained of the blaze. So he strolled back to them.

While the Fist hadn't believed Madeline's initial story, they had been more willing to listen to an informant this morning who gave them Ravelling's name and reminded them of his history. They'd been slightly later than Kovacs calculated, but better late than never.


"What happened?" Gio asked, his voice slurred. His arms and neck looked to have a greenish tint, where the cocoon had covered him.

"Never mind that. You're alive and that's what counts," Bonavenna said. "My boy! Foolish boy! How could you ever?"

They had hardly noticed him coming close. Kovacs spoke carefully, surely. "I killed Rampion," he said. "I drowned him in your cocoon. Then Rowan tried to poison the water for all of Baldur's Gate. I burnt her alive. The Fist should collect the body and have a wizard dissect it. Your lover is dead, her house is ashes, and soon you will be nothing more than human again."

Gio closed his eyes. He let out a long shuddering sigh. "I loved her," he said weakly. "The least I can do ... I'm sorry, Mother."

And suddenly wicked thorns sprouted from Gio's green skin, as his arms were wrapped around Bonavenna's neck. The cocoon had begun to turn him into the same kind of creature as Rowan. He was embracing his mother to death. For Rowan's sake, he would get the revenge she and Rampion had sought in life. Cuts opened on Bonavenna's skin, close to her veins.

Then the throwing knife thudded into Valleta's neck, and he dropped like a stone. He still had enough blood left in him to spill red on the cobblestones. His fingers tried to pull the knife free from his carotid artery, but he only spilt more blood. He died there, his face startled, with the half-formed word Rowan on his lips.

Gio Valleta betrayed his mother, and had deserved to die. He'd had a choice and made the wrong one. Bonavenna's eyes were furious and she cursed Kovacs for her son's death. Madeline Castellas looked as pale as if she were about to faint again. But she refused to faint, and rather chose to try to comfort Bonavenna.

Of course there was much to say to the Flaming Fist, who had only seen the aftermath of Rampion's and Rowan's destructive plot. But the papers Kovacs had stolen were useful evidence, and as they hauled up Rowan's body they began to see that she had certainly not been human. Madeline
Castellas was most certainly the expert on plants and poisons, and as a noble she was not without influence. Although Kovacs caught her looks of dislike toward him (and why, for he had likely saved her life? Squeamish, or interestingly strange?) Madeline was scrupulously fair in her recounting of events, noting that Rampion and his supposed daughter had poisoned and kidnapped Gio, then tried to murder Bonavenna.

Were three entries on his balance-sheet worth that look of fear and loathing from Madeline? He thought they were. And something in Kovacs respected such a look, for he knew what he was and a worthy opponent should recognise that in him.

He’d go see Pherenike that afternoon, Kovacs thought. Perhaps he should bring her some flowers.
Albescu Demirci's business in Surthay was concluded. He'd sought out the last of the still-living Bhaalite priests, raided their sanctuaries, and extracted a series of Bhaalspawn deaths from his son. They were just pawns in a dead god's scheme, helpless to change their fates. Kovacs felt as if their dust clogged his throat and he could not speak.

The caravans were on the road to the Thaymount Citadel, rising high on dark mountains. Kovacs took his dinner, roast-burnt dough filled with mincemeat and cheese, and sat alone in the dark, on a grassy hill close enough to observe the caravans. Some doppelgangers flashed into their true forms while they talked around one of the fires, while Tirzah armwrestled one of them that had changed itself into a giant ape. Poor ape. Madwin Maergrim, an indistinct-faced human who served his father as spy and lockpick when needed, rolled dice against Garmon, an archer they'd hired in Aglarond on his way to flee multiple accusations of murder and rape. He was also their new cook.

A hand gripped Kovacs' left shoulder in the darkness. He had a knife in his right hand in a moment and stabbed backward, only the stranger evaded the blow.

"It's me. Shalilah. Stay still. Hear me out." Kovacs knew better than to face a setup like this. He'd walk back to the campfire.

"No setup. No trick," the doppleganger said, reading his mind. "You are a good killer."

He seemed to really like saying that. Kovacs didn't get why.

"Show me that you are a good killer," Shalilah said. "There is a mission. I want your help. In return, I will show you how to shield your mind. And there may be other rewards too."

"I don't particularly want you to turn into a naked copy of the Simbul," Kovacs said. The Simbul, the Witch-Queen of Aglarond, was an exceptionally powerful and beautiful sorceress with, according to certain popular depictions at any rate, long silver hair and a penchant for scanty clothing. But something about flesh-eating shapeshifters was deeply offputting no matter what skin they wore.

"Come or stay," Shalilah said. "Be what your father wants you to be. Or take another opportunity to balance the scales."

More mind reading. Learning the trick might well be worth it. Kovacs stood up. "Tell me what you want," he said, and knew that he'd already made the decision.

They rode down a deceptively narrow valley in darkness. Shalilah took Daffodil, a wide-bodied mare who was the gentlest they had; almost nothing could startle her, not even a horseflesh-eating doppelganger. Daffodil was slow but painstaking, picking out a route that Shalilah seemed to know the general outlines of. Kovacs gave his own gelding his head and trusted him to follow Daffodil as best he could.

"Now is the best time," Shalilah said. "Be distracted. Notice as much of your surroundings as you can. Open your mind. Count pebbles, leaves, hairs in the beast's mane."

Of course he knew how to watch his surroundings, Kovacs thought. It was the basis of how he fought. He'd never win on brute force, so he watched the territory and people's tells until he sensed a weakness. Then he'd stab it to the heart as hard as he could.
"Enumerate it," Shalilah corrected him. "Try to learn something, if you can."

A blatantly provocative line, Kovacs thought, not wishing to be manipulated into it and wishing to let Shalilah know he understood his basic-level attempt. He counted like some old herbwife would tell an insomniac to count sheep. Slips of rough terrain under the gelding’s hooves, the approximate shape of angles and corners and roughnesses on the ground. Stars in the sky, the Maiden's Ewer, the Green Ray, the Crown of Horns. Astronomy counted as useless knowledge, something his mother had told stories about in stray spare moments. No. He wouldn't think about that. That memory belonged to him and him alone. He counted faint black lumps of trees in the dark night, the moon a quarter-sliver. As he counted, he found his breathing slow of itself. That made him understand, a little. Split a mind into the part that enumerated and the part that reasoned, and it diverted your enemy from the real side of you.

"The mind is a house with many windows," Shalilah said. "The open window is the surface of a mirror. Bland but impenetrable. The closed windows open to many rooms, so that if one is plundered another can be saved."

For every number, associate a training motion. Physical and verbal memory. That should work, Kovacs thought. One, a thrust up and under the ribs. Two, feint and duck. Three fingers around the hilt of a throwing knife. Kovacs felt himself sinking into a rhythm. Multiple calculations at the same time, like bending two numbers around each other or manipulating completely different pieces of the Weave, turn clay into fire and invoke it into an inferno. He let himself work something below the surface, shape a hidden trick in his mind.

He heard Daffodil scrape by some overhanging leaves. The leaves now hung in front of Shalilah's face, between him and the horse's head. Suddenly, Kovacs took his light spell from the Weave. A blinding ray instantly bathed Shalilah's eyes - and doppelgangers, normally living by underground waters, had very sensitive eyes in their natural form. Daffodil didn't turn a hair, and Kovacs' grip on the gelding's reins reminded him not to react, but Shalilah shuddered a bit in the saddle.

Pity. Kovacs had hoped he'd fall off.

"You need more practice," Shalilah said. He didn't seem to take the test as an overly aggressive attack, and probably he'd seen it coming in Kovacs' head. "It is a start."

"Thank you," Kovacs said. Reasonable courtesy, without showing weakness.

It didn't occur to him at the time that Shalilah might need him to know this for reasons of the doppelganger's own. It should have.

The narrow path was a shortcut into a valley between two mountains, bleak and mostly stone and scrub. There was scarcely any sound to be heard, not even small animals scrabbling or insects buzzing. The mountains on either side were steep, as far as Kovacs could make out in the dark, and even in daylight it would likely be difficult to find this small path. Then Shalilah led them under a thick overhang of rock, that turned into a narrow black tunnel. A part natural, part engineered passageway that smelt as if it had not been used by people for a long time. Kovacs heard wings fluttering, and a bat flew into Shalilah's face.

Shalilah grabbed the bat out of the air, and began to eat it while it was still squirming. Kovacs could hear the sounds of gulping, slurping, and the cracking of bone. Luckily he couldn't really see it. Once you'd watched a doppelganger eat for the first time, you never wanted to see the sight again. And you'd be sick at the thought of eating anything yourself for ages afterward.

Daffodil tranquilly walked on through the black cave as if nothing was amiss. The gelding was more
skittish at the confined area, so Kovacs stroked his neck and made reassuring noises.

They emerged from the tunnel after some hours, and suddenly Kovacs could see the faint lights around the Citadel above them. This was a secret passage of sorts, a shortcut. The capital of Thaymount was perched high on a mountain, faintly illuminated with mage-lights and fires. It looked deceptively close from here, Kovacs judged, but they were nearly at the foot of its mountain.

The path widened out into grassland, softer under the horses' hooves. Trees, short and scrubby, marked the landscape. Kovacs catalogued them in his mind, building a mental map of the scenery. There was the sound of a trickle of water. The horses had long since slowed their pace, tired as the earliest blue light of dawn began to creep into the air.

"Leave them here. Their scent will carry," Shalilah said. They dismounted, tethering the horses by the stream. Kovacs took the oats from the saddle-bags to feed them.

"Unlike you, I don't read minds. Care to give more information on where we're going?" Kovacs said.

"The less you know, the less another can peel it from your mind," Shalilah said. "You will see. This is an old part of the Citadel, no longer used by humans. A refuse-place for rubbish. The water will disguise your scent. I hope you can swim."

They followed the stream for a mile or so, which brought them closer to the foot of the Citadel's mountain. The source of the stream bubbled from some underground spring or lake within the mountain. Shalilah pointed to it, and suddenly leapt in.

Kovacs took off his boots and dived after Shalilah. He wouldn't die by drowning; he was born to be hanged. The doppelganger swam expertly, of course. Shalilah's powerful limbs suddenly sprouted fins as he forced his way through the water.

They surfaced inside the mountain, swimming against the current. Shalilah inclined his head as if to listen carefully, then gestured a direction to Kovacs. They moved quietly forward, staying submerged except for their heads. The water smelt clean. The cave was very dark, only growing more so as they went in.

"A little progress," Shalilah said. "Your father keeps his mind like iron. He is much stronger than you, at present. You want to kill him, don't you?"

Kovacs had the common sense to say nothing. Besides, there were certain geases his father had laid on his tongue.

"Tell me about your mother," Shalilah said. "Or rather, you don't need to. You already have."

And, at that, common sense flew out the window. "Fuck you," Kovacs said.

"What's that expression, not with a ten-foot tent pole? Absolutely not. Humans are disgusting, soft, perverted, and insensitive," Shalilah said. "Tell me what you remember of your mother. How did she die?"

Then of course unwanted memories came flooding into Kovacs despite his wishes. He refused, he
wasn't going to think about the half-complete cry and the sound of something wet splashing on the
ground behind him - Better memories at least, let it be listening to her flute under the orange tree in
the old garden -

"You cared for her, but she gave you none of your power." Shalilah sounded vaguely confused now,
a part of Kovacs that wasn't overcome with rage noticed. "Isn't that rather weak of you? For us, an
egg hatches to the whole tribe. I've always found it pathetic how humans obsess on and venerate
their brood-bearers and inseminators."

Let him just call him pathetic. Along with Kovacs' fury came the start of clarity, from some other side
of him, calculating and observing. Shalilah was trying to make him lose control, let his red-hot anger
spiral into a destructive outburst that gave everything in his mind away. Kovacs wrenched on to the
most complicated arcane equation he knew and tried to think of four rows of a crystal matrix at the
same time, while his fingers dug painfully into the mud, buried pebbles cutting into his skin.

"Humans aren't the only pathetic ones," Shalilah said. "Regained control. I thought you had some
small potential. Come further in with me. Stay quiet."

Not the only pathetic ones, Shalilah said. It was hard to tell with doppelgangers, but the set of
Shalilah's head in the water looked tense and angry at the state of these people.

"Our gods are dead," Shalilah whispered. "It happened a long time ago. Most of us seek for
something to replace them. And that is how we become pathetic."

Kovacs' eyes followed the doppelgangers bearing offerings to the centre of the cave, which was
shadowed, the fire in a wide circle around it. He squinted and saw a wooden chair, human size, old
and damaged. Pathetic indeed. There was a presence on the chair. The doppelgangers bowed to it
and knelt down to approach it. They crawled through the dusty cave on all fours, scraping their
chests across the ground like worms. They brought it tribute. Most things were thrown aside, but
some seemed to be sorted. Then some of the doppelgangers would pause where they were and sway
on their knees.

The figure on the wooden chair - a bizarre throne, human rubbish used like it was an emperor's seat
of power - was probably no doppelganger, its shape and texture different to its eager slaves. It could
be a doppelganger using its powers, but somehow Kovacs doubted that. Its form and features were in
darkness. It seemed to bend down and stroke one of the kneeling doppelgangers, a creepily intimate
gesture. Kovacs squinted at it. That wasn't a hand. More like a tentacle.

The thing on the throne shifted its position. The firelight caught it enough for Kovacs to see its face.
Dark blue and wet and smooth, with tiny black eyes buried under ridges. No nose. Four long
tentacles extruding from its mouth, wrapping idly around the head of its follower, squirming inside its
nostrils and groping up into its brain.

Kovacs' blood chilled. He knew what this creature was, and he'd never seen one before. He should
not be seeing one now. It was an illithid, a brain-eater. They called them abominations. Aberrations
from a distant plane, unimaginably powerful and utterly alien. They controlled people's minds. They
ate memories and souls and even if people survived them, their minds were so damaged afterwards they might as well be a vegetable. He'd never want to live like that. One illithid could take down an army by forcing thralls to kill the rest, and then devour all their brains in a grand feast.

So Kovacs did the only possible sensible thing and turned to flee back the way they'd come. If the illithid hadn't seen them yet, they might manage to live.

Shalilah caught his shoulder from behind. The doppelganger's powerful grip thrust him underwater, where he struggled silently. Shalilah's hand wrapped around his neck, tightening over the pressure point on his artery. He tried to kick back, but the water was all around him and the doppelganger's strength was like iron. His vision blackened and he felt himself lose consciousness. He felt himself drown.

When Kovacs woke, cursing Shalilah, he was lying on a rough floor. He couldn't move, not even to open his eyes. His flesh tingled, as if he was under some sort of spell or command. Everything smelt of brine and week-old fish at a bad market. He cursed himself for not seeing it coming, for not asking Tirzah to come with them. She would have just killed the illithid with her sword. She wouldn't have done this. He could feel that he'd been stripped of clothing and anything he could use as a weapon. He was completely naked. He hated that. The tattoos of what he was - somebody else's property - were written all over his chest and back, even if most people couldn't read them, and he felt utterly vulnerable. His father wasn't the only person who could use them against him.

But he had just enough sense left to realise the implied message in the tattoos. If his father wasn't trying to use them to call him back, then Shalilah must have given him some appropriate excuse. Or even the truth. This was another test, of sorts.

Kovacs felt the cold force penetrate his mind. He wanted to get up - no, it wasn't him, although he had wanted to before. The alien force controlling him from the inside out told him what to think and what to do. The illithid. As he rose, standing barefoot on dusty rock, he felt something around his neck. A collar. It felt like it was made from something organic, twisted fibres that were slimy and wet on his skin.

The illithid had him open his eyes. It watched him, physically distant, twelve feet away. And yet it was close enough to pare away all the layers of Kovacs' mind and see his innermost self. The tentacles moved up and down from the illithid's mouth, twisting in patterns that felt unnatural and impossible, like it communicated with another world. It would devour and destroy him in a whole new way.

Kovacs felt his own hands move, against his will. The illithid impaled his mind on a stake, like twisting a spear in an already open wound. It stripped his barriers down one by one, peeling him like an onion, like an unthinking child would take the wings off a butterfly, all that he was laid out bare and raw and trembling before it.

The marks on Kovacs' skin were physical, tied to flesh and blood and bone. The illithid's form of slavery went much deeper, flaying open his mind and soul. He wanted to scream, but his mouth was not his own. And there would be no one who would save him.

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Pherenike had heard nothing from Livia, nothing about Grand Duke Balduran, ever since she had lent her father's keys to her. Maybe there would be nothing to hear, she hoped. Maybe Grand Duke Balduran had done absolutely nothing wrong and there was nothing to hide. Livia knew what Pherenike had done, or at least had a good idea - and Pherenike did not want to be hanged before the Flaming Fist fortress. She especially didn't want to see Kovacs hanged before the Flaming Fist.
She understood Livia's feeling of hating Candle. She'd felt the same.

_Let Livia use me as a cats'-paw if she wants to pursue Candle's father, _she determined. _She will find that Balduran was never so bad after all, and she will stop this the moment she realises that she can do anything she wants now._

_Let this attack from Livia fall upon me, not on him, _she thought. She understood how others would see it. She was the one who had a grudge against Candle, not Kovacs. She was also the one who walked up to Candle's door and foolishly thought the wards would be fine. It started with her mistake.

She was reading a treatise on ancient Halruaan sigils at the moment, a rare scroll that she couldn't take out of Oghma's library. It didn't offer much help so far on how to remove them from people. And she needed to find out what, exactly, he was.

And somehow cares and worries flew out the window when she was actually with him. They went out; danced; took the spinning swings in the centre of the city until all Pherenike's hair fell down wild about her face; made sport of their neighbours and didn't care if they were being made sport of in their turn. She took Kovacs to the Sunite art exhibition that she'd threatened and it was ... educational. Not to mention inspirational. She'd made sure to tell him where the jobbing gardener stored the ladder, so as to make the way up to her room less perilous. But it wasn't only about their ardour in the bedroom. She could talk to him like she couldn't talk to anyone else. Quips that would have been too dark to say to Candle or anyone in society suddenly came out of her mouth when she was with him, and he took them and returned them in the same measure.

He'd certainly been making an effort. He never came empty-handed to her house. There would be some small thing for Pherenike, never expensive enough to be scandalous; cream buns as a perennial source of bribery for Sarah's Elly; compliments on the cooking and offers to lift heavy objects for Sarah the housekeeper. Kovacs even had a lengthy conversation with her father Demetrius, where he'd asked many more questions than he answered. After unfolding about himself for almost an hour, her father told Pherenike what a good conversationalist the fellow was. There was a bit of a calculated feel to it all, but it felt flattering as well. Pherenike knew she had to keep her wits about her when dealing with Kovacs Demirci - and she happened to love a challenge.

By now Pherenike recognised his footfalls on the doorstep, the pattern of his knock. She hastened downstairs. Kovacs handed her a bouquet, delphiniums and blue asters and white calla lilies. She let Sarah take the flowers and go bustling around for a vase and water to put them in.

"Flowers stink. What did you bring me?" Sarah's Elly asked querulously. Her right forefinger was still excavating the depths of her nose. Kovacs made a pair of foreign coins appear from behind her ear, two small iron triangles with Iriaeban-style inscriptions and stylised unicorns on them.

Sarah's Elly studied them intently and even bit one, as if that would show her if they were real.
"How much are they worth? Are they a copper or are they more than that?"

"See if you can hold on to them first. I can make them disappear with a wave of my hand," Kovacs boasted.

Pherenike was getting used to the sleight-of-hand. If you didn't watch the elaborate gestures but tried to catch what was really going on, you stood a chance. Kovacs' hands never touched the pair of coins on Elly's palm. But as he made a mystical-looking gesture, they suddenly and silently flew upward into his sleeve.
Then, in his other hand, he juggled two coppers in the air, shining bright and new. Kovacs threw them to Elly to catch. She bit those, as well, and seemed pleased enough with her newest bribe.

" Came to ask if you'd care to come out to a play. The hired carriage is waiting." He glanced at Sarah. "Take a night out on the town," he asked her, "break a few hearts and crush a few skulls with that rolling pin of yours."

"I don't take late nights," Sarah corrected him. He already happened to know that fact very well, Pherenike thought. "You certainly can't go without a chaperone, so Elly will go with you. Bring them both home by the tenth bell or we'll send out the Flaming Fist." It was most definitely an idle threat; Kovacs had won her over to trust him.

Elly nodded. "They always sell oranges at plays," she said, "you can buy me some." She blew and popped a casual spit bubble.

As Pherenike leaned on Kovacs' arm to be handed into the carriage, she took the opportunity to reach into his sleeve and feel his arm. There was a stone covered with felt, attached to a length of thin cord. She thought she'd figured out the trick. The coins were iron and that stone was a lodestone. Instead of using a basic arcane cantrip, the lodestone called iron to iron and the felt prevented the clink from being overheard. Then the string made coins and lodestone alike disappear up the sleeve. Kovacs grinned as if he understood the exact dishonourable intentions she had on her mind at that particular moment, and was amused.

"You don't get to sit next to her," Elly corrected Kovacs. "I'm your chaperone, and that means I watch out for im - improper be'viour from you and Far'nick. If you want to kiss her, you have to pay me a silver piece each time. Or an orange. Or a cream bun."

"The profession you're thinking of there isn't chaperone, kid," Kovacs murmured. Pherenike felt like the line went over her head; she might ask Sarah's Elly later what he meant. That child's moral development was extremely backward, even though they sent her to Helm's free school once a tenday.

"What did you do today?" Pherenike asked Kovacs. The carriage rolled smoothly over the cobblestones, the only discomfort being Sarah's Elly's unnaturally sharp elbows in Pherenike's ribcage as the child constantly fidgeted and struggled to look out the window. She seemed to be trying to catch a glimpse of every stray dog on the street.

"Consulted Madeline Castellas about a gardening problem. Some plants were getting entirely out of hand," Kovacs said.

"She does love her gardens," Pherenike said. She'd never really got to know Madeline, and she had reasons to feel rather guilty about that. Candle had persecuted her and Pherenike had participated, and surely Madeline must know about some of her actions - even though Madeline might have been a better friend to make all along. "Do you like gardening?" she asked him. She didn't particularly like it herself; her father Demetrius was the one who loved their garden and spent all his leisure there.

"I don't think so. Hard to grow anything in a trading caravan," Kovacs said. "When we had a house, my mother grew fruits and flowers, but I didn't pay attention to it at the time. I suppose I should have."

"She's dead, isn't she?" Pherenike said. She guessed he meant Albechu Demirci's wife, who'd adopted him. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. It was a long time ago," he said. "Have you seen the players before? It's a new show,
though they've been here for a while."

She hadn't; but apparently the troupe specialised in sardonic stories with political intrigue, so she was looking forward to it. It was the sort of thing that Candle would prickle at in case the actors were daring to mock her somehow, while Yarrow would fail to understand any of it and look nervously around at everywhere but the stage so she could laugh when everyone else laughed. Livia would probably have liked it, but Pherenike refused to think about her at the moment.

They stood in the middle front to watch, in the midst of the crowd, with a good view of the stage. Sarah's Elly was expressively bored at the top of her voice and was only quieted by sucking endless oranges, which she threw on the ground when she was done with them. The players were a band of exotic tieflings, with a clever costume design that suggested the classical past but used the utmost simplicity of cut and line. The dialogue was sharp, its biting barbs made vague enough to apply to a wide range of local politics. Pherenike heard a black lotus joke from a fat tiefling with a large false moustache, aimed at Candle’s father, Grand Duke Balduran. It reminded her of Livia's accusation, *Balduran is involved in smuggling of the worst kind* - but, really, the joke was in the worst possible taste considering Balduran's circumstances, and Pherenike was glad that the plot swiftly moved past it. The troupe threw in a complex mistaken identity plot of at least three sets of twins and chains of characters' lies that had most of the audience reeling with a combination of laughter and confusion.

The intermission bells sounded. For a moment in the surging crowd, Pherenike recognised Captain Conradin of the Flaming Fist, ostentatious in his bright red uniform. She could see several other familiar faces from society, but no one she really knew or wanted to greet.

There were public gardens outside the theatre, full of market stalls, ornamental hedges, and the odd pickpocket. They walked past a new iron statue of the Grand Duke Balduran, set next to an ornamental fishpond. His expression made him look like he was suffering from a bad case of haemorrhoids.

Kovacs shook out an empty handkerchief from his sleeve, then suddenly a silver coin twinkled in it and went to Elly's sticky hands. "Go wild, within reasonable limits, at the stalls," he said. "Whilst embezzling a certain amount appears to be one of your anticipated and accustomed perquisites, don't go too far." Elly, confused, stuck her tongue out at him with a *I-don't-have-to-do-what-you-say-if-I-don't-understand-it* expression. "Specifically: I expect change. And I expect you to take your time. Understand?"

A silver coin was riches for Elly. She scuttled off before anyone could change their minds and be more sensible about giving it to her.

"It's quite a sad story, underneath the clever lines," Pherenike said. "Adelson should abdicate from his role as the prince."

"But it's obvious that he's become the kind of person he despised in the first place," Pherenike said. "He should flee with Deuterianna like she wants; he'd be much happier."

"Does anyone ever chase after happiness?" Kovacs said. "Power, revenge, pride, greed, hedonism, sloth, rage - those are more likely motivations."

"Happiness is the sort of reward one is supposed to get by *not* pursuing it," Pherenike said. "It's like how you only get presents from Ilmater at midwinter if you were good because you wanted to be
good - not if you were good because you wanted presents." She slipped an arm around Kovacs' shoulders. They were protected from most casual glances in the night air, under the shadow of a yew hedge. "Or, more likely, the presents were from Sarah and my father all along, and it didn't matter what I did."

I'm happy now, she thought with a sudden sharp sting in her heart, despite everything. It was rare for her to feel so alive and enraptured at the same time.

"Whatever it is, it's transient," Kovacs said. "Everything is."

I want to help you, Pherenike thought, set you free and find out what you are.

She kissed him, in the shadow of the yew hedge, running her hand along his cheek, toying with his earlobe. His cloak wrapped around them both as he held her, his arms warm around her shoulders and waist.

Then the moment was broken by Sarah's Elly running up and squawking. Annoyed, Pherenike drew back. "What do you want?"

"Cap'n Condradin Cordenstein of the Flaming Fist saw me with you and wanted to know where you were," Elly told her. "So I said you were under the yew hedge because that's where my friend Addie says all the courting couples go to get dizzy. She's one of the orange-sellers. Then he started coming this way. And he gave me a whole silver coin all for myself."

Damn Condradin. His kissing her at that party of Candle's had been a very unpleasant experience, and Pherenike had hoped that he had finally gotten the hint by now. She was most definitely seeing someone now, and it was and would never be Captain Condradin Cordenstein.

"I don't believe you," Pherenike said. "No one would give the likes of you a whole silver."

"Believe what you want. See, here it is." Elly brought out the silver piece in her hand to show off. Pherenike instantly snatched it from her and placed it in her own purse, then carefully sealed it up despite all of Elly's protests.

"Consider it a tax," Pherenike said. She was being remarkably restrained, Pherenike thought, under the circumstances. She damped down the urge to strangle the little brat. She glared at Kovacs and wished he wouldn't look so much like he was snickering.

Elly stamped her foot. "You're s'posed to reward me with another silver for being honest to you," she said.

"With your entrepreneurial spirit, I'm sure you'll think of something," Kovacs said. "Doubling your coin in five minutes flat - a new record."

"It's not if she doesn't let me keep it," Elly sighed.

"Serves you right," Pherenike snapped.

That was when Condradin interrupted. "Mistress Pherenike, I've come to rescue your reputation," he said loudly. "Surely you know better than to let some - some foreign bastard drag you to this ... disreputable place under the yew hedges."

Elly stood there grinning like a ghoul, and vacantly stuck her finger into her nose again.

"Do you need me to ... take care ... of this stranger for you?" Condradin asked, his hand on his sword.
Pherenike didn't want a confrontation. Conradin was supposed to be an excellent duellist, and he was very tall and strong. She laid a hand on Kovacs' arm, under his cloak. She didn't need to say anything for him to understand her plan - and she appreciated his quick grasp of a situation more than ever.

"Of course I'll come with you, Captain," she said, completely docile and demure. She moved toward Conradin, who looked momentarily like a stuffed mullet in his surprise. But he recovered quickly and grabbed her arm, somewhat roughly.

"Glad you're being so sensible," Conradin said. "You can't let the insolent fellow take advantage of you like that. I know it's been some time since you and I talked - and I suppose the damned postal service failed to deliver my letter to you - but I have to say, I've had a hard time getting you out of my head." He smiled down at Pherenike as if she ought to be flattered. "You played hard to get, and I like that in a girl. Now we don't have to play games. And you have nothing to worry about. If you've heard any rumours about me and that fat sow Madeline Castellas, they were all false."

"I don't understand, Captain," Pherenike sweetly muttered. They were walking back into the torch-lit crowds, into the main area. She subtly steered Conradin on the path she'd taken out, back toward the Grand Duke Balduran's statue.

"You were all over me in the hanging gardens, before," Conradin said. Pherenike remembered that entirely differently - it had been difficult and very annoying to fend him off. "I'd show you but we are in public."

"We make a handsome couple to them," he said. "A hero of the Flaming Fist - that is to say, one of the city's humble protectors - and the beauty of the season. Candle chose you well. We should be together."

"You flatter me exceedingly," Pherenike said. "Don't talk about me. Where did you get the scar on your cheek, Captain? Was it a very dangerous battle?"

And he was off like a Calishite-bred stallion in the Dukes' Race. The chance to talk about himself visibly puffed him up and distracted him. "It was a duel, an affair of honour," Conradin began, "only it ended up as one man alone against ten vicious enemies ... " Pherenike inwardly laughed. It was from the edge of a pigsty outside the Three Old Kegs, at least according to Yarrow Blaine, and either way Conradin was a useless condescending braggart. She felt a heady sense of daring and triumph mixed with her anger at him for his wretched entitlement.

They approached the iron statue of Grand Duke Balduran, walking close to it. Combine one iron statue with one strong lodestone on a length of cord, recently abstracted from one's beloved's sleeve, and add an ornamental fishpond - and it was an effective recipe to see rid of an unwelcome suitor.

Pherenike aimed the lodestone at Balduran's boots. She kept hold of the other end of the cord. The lodestone caught on to the iron statue, and the string tangled in Conradin's boots midway through his last boasting syllable.

"Leave me alone. If you didn't understand me the first time, I hope you swim with the fishes!" Pherenike said.

A few scattered in the crowd around them actually cheered, as if this farce was part of the theatre act. One of the bystanders rushed up and put a hand on Conradin's shoulder as he slowly clambered out.
"If this drama continues, noble hound, you'll steal rightful attention from our play," he said. Pherenike belatedly recognised him as the male lead, a tiefling with bizarrely coloured hair and many earrings in each pointed ear. "Should a lady express her opinion with the force of gravity, you should take it seriously. And now to the true performance anon!"

Pherenike found herself caring nothing for the crowd around her, and even the play only seemed a little thing. She met Kovacs' eyes across the crowd and felt his admiring glance, felt his look sweep across her like leaping flames. He was amused and impressed. There was respect mixed with that tribute, and the compliment of trust. Kovacs had believed she would successfully rid herself of Conradin, and had stayed near to wait and watch for her. No one else mattered. Like iron calling to iron, Pherenike crossed over to meet him again. She felt alive and happy to be with him, and damn everyone and everything else.

Unfortunately, Sarah's Elly interrupted again. She coughed so loudly and unpleasantly one wondered if she was about to leave half a lung behind her. "You can't kiss her like that without paying me at least a dozen cream buns," she accused.

In her father's wing of the Hellebore tower, Livia crept up behind him in his study and placed her hands over his eyes. "Guess who."

Philippe Hellebore lay down his ink pen. "Dinner already?" he asked with surprise. "I swear it was only an hour ago."

Livia looked at the chaos and rapidly breeding dust bunnies all around the study. There were no less than three scattered trays on her father's table, with the remains of various meals taken up to him. She would have to have a very strict word with the servants. Prospectuses of various investments and reports from his agents were scattered all over his desk, mixed with noxious shag tobacco from his pipe, the odd arcane scroll, and dog-eared announcements from the wizards' guild.

"You mean it was yesterday, Daddy," Livia said, "but I shan't be dining here today myself. I'm afraid I came to ask you for a great deal of coin."

Her father nodded cheerfully. "There should be a bag of platinum in the second drawer ... "

"No. Much more than that," Livia said. "I have a venture in mind that may well pay off, but it needs investment." She sketched in her plan with a few brief sentences. "I also signed up to sponsor a new wing at the wizards' guild."

Her father shuffled through his papers. Soon, a light spread across his face. "Ah," he said, "with the market the way that it is, we should certainly sell the Songbird mansion in the north-west quarter at this point. It will realise a profit and should be enough for the time being. Let me know when you need more, my dear."

Livia knew her plans would make some dents in even the vast Hellebore holdings, but if successful she'd see a return on investment. And not all returns, she thought, had to be exclusively in coin.

"Thank you, Daddy," she said, and dutifully kissed the back of his head. Her father was already bent over his papers again, reading and calculating and muttering to himself.

"Send Markos in when you see him, will you? I am waiting on his report of the price in silks; Clytemnestra has promised a good cargo of them in the Kraken," Philippe Hellebore asked her, now barely aware of the other person in the room or that she was his and Clytemnestra's daughter. It was
always the same. Livia showed herself out.

"... And therefore, with this sulphuric solution in a base of ethanol distilled from fermented barley, one drop turning blood red is sufficient to identify even the faintest trace of black lotus," Livia finished, to a willing audience in the wizards' guild. Although the head count was not particularly large, she recognised enough prominent faces who would talk about this and carry her message to others. "I give my formula freely to our guild and beyond, that they may use it for the betterment of all of Baldur's Gate. Any who wish it may claim the receipt from me for nothing."

Carefully, Livia let a drop fall from her vial over the pale pewter plate with the barest trace of black lotus on its surface. The sudden dramatic change to red was clearly visible on the material. She received dignified applause from her audience, followed by interested whispers at her choice of subject matter.

"And further than this, I have funded two hundred vials of my potion to be made by guild apprentices, as a gift for the Flaming Fist who keep our city safe," Livia said. "We must end the scourge of black lotus in our families and in our city. This is more than merely magical research. It's about protecting the whole city of Baldur's Gate."

Another susurrus of applause rewarded Livia for her generous announcement as she stepped down from the lecturer's platform. It came off well, she thought. Alchemy hadn't been Livia's main field of study for some years now, but analysing complex alchemical equations was a relaxation she still enjoyed, a far simpler exercise than her true field. For the effort she'd made for this potion, Livia had first bought other wizards' proprietary efforts to analyse their components, then made some small innovations of her own for greater sensitivity and cheaper ingredients. Her real innovation, of course, was to offer the recipe for free rather than keep it a trade secret. Now everyone would use her version, and be grateful to her for it.

And the illicit trade in black lotus was very much an in-demand issue of the day ...

Livia accepted her congratulations and shook hands with her fellow wizards rather mechanically, suddenly feeling the nervousness of speaking in public that she'd kept down with excitement. After the attention on her faded, she took the opportunity to examine the other gimmors and devices on display, considering which were interesting and which not in the least. She wrinkled her nose delicately at a mouse skeleton pinned to a board with colourful wires strung through it to represent the major muscle groups. Notes about the necromancy involved were attached.

"Fit for a child's toy," the man beside her said. "One should learn about the operation of muscle and bone by studying the bones themselves, not foolish shortcuts. It's written in the angle of the joint, in the ratio of cartilage to weight. More dissections would have helped this one." He passed a hand over the mouse. The coloured wires instantly snapped and withdrew like worms fleeing into the ground. Then Livia saw the mouse's bones move smoothly, move with such fluidity that it seemed the animal was alive again. Even with only bones, the mouse ran exactly as a real mouse would, calling its flesh and blood into her imagination just by the pattern of motion. The spell the man used was simple enough, but his power and control in it were something else, something interesting. He snapped his fingers and reverted the mouse skeleton back to its previous state. "Pardon me. Your speech strongly impressed me. Albescu Demirci," he said.

His face was somewhat familiar to Livia; she'd seen this man before. Perhaps he had interested her then, too. His age would have been difficult to tell if not for his iron-grey hair, since his face was mostly unlined and his stance was poised and fluid, like a duellist or soldier. He was a tall man with a gaze of steady, piercing blue, eyes the colour of an icy lake. He didn't seem to blink very much, if at all. His clothes were made of good material, unobtrusive but lasting, and belatedly Livia recognised
the blue emblem on his white surcoat. Blue Shale. This man had been in the crowd the night of the
Grand Dukes' ball, the night Pherenike flirted shamelessly with his adopted son. Bastard son, if
Yarrow was to be believed.

"Livia Hellebore," she said. "I saw you at the Grand Dukes' ball. Your son danced with my friend,
Pherenike Medomai. Are you a necromancer?" While that school of magic had a poor reputation,
there were a few in the wizards' guild who saw past the stigma and considered it a serious subject.

"Hardly. I used to work among the living a good deal. Nowadays I could call myself a trader and
historian," Albescu Demirci said.

Something more like a travelling tomb-robber, no doubt, Livia thought; an adventurer who plundered
crypts in hope of stray coin.

"I've noticed that black lotus has received much attention in this city of late," Demirci continued.
Livia resisted the temptation to take the credit she well deserved. Thanks to Pherenike, she had
access to Grand Duke Balduran's secrets, and she had not even needed to forge any evidence. She
had assembled and sent her information to a friendly broadsheet writer she had previously used to
spread gossip, and the rest was easily accomplished once the first article was published.

Balduran controlled - or had controlled - a great number of ships and traffic. It was no surprise he
had been tempted by black lotus, the most profitable cargo of all. The locked account-books Livia
had got her hands on had provided ample evidence. He was condemned by the public, and he would
be brought down.

"You have excellent timing," Demirci complimented her, smiling. He had good teeth, of a flashing
whiteness and uniformity, and the only other striking thing about his smile was its sense of a row of
milky ice floes that hid most of their unfathomable depths.

"It was a fascinating topic," Livia said. She briefly mentioned a technical difficulty she'd had with the
reagent. She noticed with pleasure that the Sembian merchant answered her back in the same vein,
showing genuine understanding of her work rather than a false pretence of a conversation. He is
interesting and intelligent, and Candle's grudge against his son is expired with her.

When the well of conversation about sulphuric solutions was long since drained, Livia tried to keep
up her part of the small talk. "I'm also well acquainted with Yarrow Blaine, Baron Blaine's daughter.
You dealt in ice-bear furs with him?" she said.

"It was a very uninteresting transaction," Albescu Demirci demurred. He brought out an oval yellow
stone from his coat to the palm of his hand, a highly polished piece in amber. Faint grooves and
markings were carved in it. "Items such as these are what I came to the guild to discuss."

It was an ioun stone, Livia knew. They were rare and precious, often made by ancient Netherese
magic, created when the laws of magic were entirely different and men and women lived in flying
cities in the skies and created incredible firestorms that laid entire continents to waste. With the
original caster long since dead, the ioun stone lost its power, but the structure carved inside it could
be reharmonised with the Weave by a new mage. Few wizards of power did not dream of possessing
their own ioun stone to bond to them, floating around their heads and bestowing its many gifts.

"What do you think it does?" Livia asked eagerly. One could not tell what an ioun stone did without
activating it, although some claimed that they could be analysed for clues. Others claimed that the
ioun stone's power was less in itself than in the wizard bound to it, and to different masters it was
dramatically different anyway.
Albescu Demirci chose not to pretend that he knew more than he did. "A mystery always intrigues us," he said. "I suspect it will be worth the wait to find it out." The stone slipped back into a velvet bag.

He touched Livia's hand in a brief, formal salute, his skin cool and dry, and they both walked on through the guild.

It only then occurred to Livia that the ioun stone the merchant freely displayed was probably the least interesting of his magical artefacts. She moved through the wizards' guild, continuing to enjoy her triumph, and thought that she would have no objection to conversing with Albescu Demirci again.
The illithid forced Kovacs to move his hands. He recognised the pattern forced from him as an illusion spell in the Weave. It was his own memory that the illithid used, his studies with his father. The illusion gathered around the illithid's shape, but felt as fragile as a soap bubble, not holding somehow. That was probably Kovacs' fault; he didn't particularly like working with illusions, preferred touching something that was real and present to manipulating airy nothings. The illithid forced him to keep trying, happening upon his light spell.

And for a moment Kovacs saw more of the illithid's features than he'd ever wanted to. It was of short stature compared to a human, shorter than he himself was. Buried in the horrible blue wetness of its tentacled face was a dark scar, carving out a deep ridge in its face. It had closed its small eyes immediately after forcing the light spell from Kovacs, looking like a child squinting in the glare of the sun. A bizarrely vulnerable image.

His arms moved against his will in yet another casting. Maybe because of some skerrick of Shalilah's lessons, some part of him was still able to think about what had happened, even though he had no control at all over anything and an illithid's slave collar around his neck.

His father didn't actually want him dead, despite all that he'd done to him, Kovacs thought, so if and when the illithid killed him Shalilah would probably die too. Of course, revenge wouldn't do him the slightest bit of good at that point.

The illithid seemed to give up on illusion, and forced Kovacs into a transmutation spell. This one he knew very well indeed. The arcane magic settled around the illithid, and touched and merged with its moist inhuman form. It started to change not just the appearance but the shape of the illithid, spinning and twisting patterns in its flesh.

Then the creature allowed him to stop. It seemed almost satisfied. It made him kneel, then, and a doppelganger approached with a flint stone crudely shaped into a knife. The doppelganger scraped the rough blade across the top of Kovacs' head, shaving him. His hair had only just grown back from masquerading as a Thayvian. He wasn't permitted to move aside or cry out when the blade cut him.

Arcane magic and a shaved head. Illithids had powerful mind magic, but the Weave was supposed to be beyond them, at least according to unreliable bestiaries' accounts. Kovacs had an idea of what the illithid planned, confirmed when the next doppelganger dropped an old red robe over his head. It was too large for him and he was practically drowning in its hood. It smelt of dust and a strong hint of decayed corpse, probably the previous inhabitant. Clothing was clothing, Kovacs supposed, even if he'd be executed for masquerading as a Red Wizard when he wasn't. At least that would be better than having his brain eaten by tentacles. The doppelgangers forced boots that didn't fit on his feet, then added a few cuts to his sleeves that showed off pieces of his tattoos climbing down his arm. Red Wizards traditionally gave each other magical tattoos, though few would go to his father's extremes in that line.

There was something the illithid wanted, and it could only obtain this through one who could use arcane magic and pass as a Red Wizard.

It watched Kovacs, checking what the doppelgangers had done to dress him. Apparently it was satisfied, for it forced Kovacs back into his transmutation spell. This time, he was allowed to finish. The illithid forced him to shape its flesh until it resembled a flesh golem, a magical creation that...
looked like it was made out of human corpses stitched together. Grotesque and effective.

And then the two of them walked together out of the caves, and up the long road toward the Citadel, capital of Thaymount. The illithid forced a slow pace on him, often stopping as if it were the one that needed rest. The blister on Kovacs' right foot kept forming, popping, healing, and then reforming itself over and over again. He was aware of the pain, aware of the sight and smells and textures and noises around him. It occurred to him that he was separating his mind as Shalilah had taught him, even while he was a helpless prisoner inside his own head.

Kovacs noticed a large number of Red Wizards as they drew closer to the city, all converging in one gathering. There must be some reason for that, he thought. The guard at the gate gave the flesh golem some scrutiny, but it only seemed to make them think him a true Red Wizard, one of many. He was all but shoved into the Citadel by a taller Red Wizard behind him, who loudly complained in a nasal Surthay accent about the dust on his feet and bemoaned the abundance of monkey-brained simians around him.

Some sort of gathering. Some sort of gathering that was scheduled - how much time had passed? barely after Shalilah had trapped him. This was certainly planned, and Kovacs kept his eyes open as widely as the illithid would allow. Watch the environment. Wait for vulnerabilities.

The flock of Red Wizards joined up with yet more of their kind. They massed together at the top of the Citadel, past a more heavily guarded gate and into a vast hanging garden. Musicians played flutes and guslis under trees. Magical exhibits and stalls sold everything from plenitudes of potions to scores of scrolls and oodles of orreries, even other golems of varying materials, from clay to adamant.

Red Wizards covered every inch of the ground in their convocation. A few wizards looked curiously at the flesh golem, but the illithid seemed to make them lose interest.

Kovacs caught the powerful smell of someone frying chili bites over there, oil and flour rolled with pork and Thayvian red chilis on an iron plate over a hot fire. His stomach rumbled. He hadn't eaten for almost a day, or more depending on how long he'd been out of it, and he was thirsty too. He tried to think to the illithid that it had taken his body out and the least it could do would be to buy him dinner, but it didn't seem to notice or care.

Red banners with a griffin emblem hung over the palace in the centre of the gardens. These must be the Tharchion's private grounds. Thaymount was one of the richest provinces, and it showed in the luxury and scale of this place. The illithid walked Kovacs' body around as if it knew exactly where it was going. Toward the back, there were faint sounds of howls and roars and a certain stench that grew more noisome as they approached, and the sounds also grew louder. It seemed the Tharchion kept an exotic menagerie of beasts of every kind, magical and mundane. Lions from Chult and tigers from Calimshan. Caged rocs tearing into human corpses on beds of straw. Giant spiders chittering, their long limbs rubbing loudly against each other. A fishpond with shining gold carp and dark silver eels; a tank with a sahuagin confined in it, beating thick glass walls rhythmically with her strong fists.

The marine section, apparently. The illithid walked on. Two soldiers guarded an entrance, sentries for something still more valuable that lay beyond, but suddenly they froze stiffly in place, eyes looking like they were popping out of their heads. The illithid had reached out and taken their minds.

And suddenly Kovacs felt the presence of yet another hostile invader in his mind, bearing down on his skull as if it wrapped a steel band around it.
Something in the tank was big and powerful, more powerful than the illithid. Except that it couldn't get out of the tank. It was the Tharchion's prisoner and prize, just as Kovacs was the illithid's.

The illithid forced him to walk to the tank. The new hostile buzzing in his mind only intensified. Golden flies inside his head, Kovacs thought, and wondered where that thought had come from. Given the kind of creature this was, it would be lake flies, probably, the tiny black darts that buried themselves inside the soft skin on your toes and any other cracks in your skin.

The illithid made Kovacs raise his hands, near enough to touch the glass. And still more foreign thoughts spilled inside his head, breaking like a tidal wave over him, drowning him.

Aboleth. That was the word for this kind of creature, a vast mass imprisoned in a still vaster tank. Another creature they called an abomination, alien and abstruse and impossible to explain, ancient and powerful, a creature that never belonged here in this plane. It was almost all brain fibres inside a gigantic eel-like body, with incredible telepathic power. Kovacs saw flashes, painfully detailed memories thrusting themselves inside his head of how this had all come about.

The Tharchion thought he had isolated the aboleth away from influencing others by placing it in this remote guarded corner, but he was wrong. The aboleth read every single mind that passed within a mile of this place, seeking for a way to escape from its tank. Once, it felt the presence of an illithid, this illithid, who desired to eat the biggest brain it had ever seen in its life. Almost at the same time, it felt the presence of a strange mirrorkin, a master shapeshifter, a doppelganger strongly defiant and unlike the rest of its kind.

Shalilah. Through the aboleth, memories of Shalilah's mind forced their way into Kovacs'. He wanted to know, and the aboleth understood what had happened.

The doppelgangers' gods were dead long aeons ago. Shalilah burned with fury at the fate of his fallen people, who grubbed at the feet of anything that looked like even a pitiful replacement. Albescu Demirci, arcane spellcaster. A lone illithid, a weak deformed castaway by the standards of its own kind. They should have no gods. There should be no gods.

Shalilah was not seeking a good killer. He sought a god killer.

And in the son of the god of murder, Shalilah thought he had found someone.

Kovacs descended into the aboleth's memories and understood that it too was a freak of its own kind. That explained how it had been captured by the Tharchion. The aboleth was not a full aboleth, but a mixed half-kind, weaker than most aboleths. Yet another child of Bhaal, conceived when a human deity forced possession of an aboleth's body and completed a rape. The birth killed the aboleth that carried the child, for bearing the offspring of the god of murder meant a bleak and bloody death to the bearer. Through its vast mass of brain fibres, the aboleth held all the ancestral memories of its parents, stretching far beyond Bhaal's violation of both of them.

Aboleths remembered titanic upheavals of ocean floors and vast nightmarish eruptions that blanketed all the waters in black ash. Aboleths remembered the slow lingering deaths of planets as distant stars burnt out and died. Aboleths remembered other universes, where they travelled through the stars in wet ships. They landed in deep dark waters and lived on, unending and immortal. Aboleths never had gods in the first place. They were too ancient and powerful to need them, remembering the long dark times before the first gods even existed. The knowledge burnt through Kovacs' brain, leaving him reeling and all but catatonic. He was an ant in the blaze of the sun, a single blade of dry grass in a firestorm, a grain of sand in the vast depths of the ocean.

And yet for all its infinite memories and cold, experienced intelligence from generations past, the
Aboleth could not leave its tank. Air was poison to it.

The illithid had forced Kovacs to open a small hole in the tank, transmute a section of the glass to a soap-bubble and pop it. Water slowly dripped out of the tiny crack, and the illithid moved up to slip its tentacles inside. At Kovacs’ gesture, the flesh golem form melted away from it. The illithid would never need it any more. When it consumed the aboleth's brain and took all its power and memories, it would need no petty deceptions.

Kovacs had a vague inkling that his own usefulness would be ended at that point, too.

The aboleth tried to flee the illithid, but in the tank it had nowhere to run to. The tentacles seized the aboleth's thick smooth skin, probing and piercing for vulnerabilities. It found a way to slip through. The illithid began to feed.

The aboleth's brain was a feast, a delicacy to be slowly savoured. The aboleth knew it was being eaten from the inside out.

Kovacs revealed himself to the aboleth, showing everything that he was. The same golden power ran through both Kovacs' red blood and the aboleth's pale veins, both the ant and this megacetus of the infinite ocean. Children of Bhaal, conceived in rape and forced on their parents. Born to be hanged. Doomed to lead short bloodthirsty miserable lives.

He couldn't even try to lie. All he had to fight with was the truth. So he let the aboleth see into him, bringing the painful parts into the forefront. The aboleth lived in the Tharchion's cage. Kovacs was his father's property. He persuaded the aboleth to remember what it was. Endless pain, imprisonment, and isolation from its own kind. They were much the same. They both felt the pull toward ending it all. It was a logical solution to what they were. Kovacs hadn't been able to do it, not with his father, not with his abilities, but the aboleth could.

And, Kovacs tempted the aboleth, it could take down the enemy along with itself. That would be fun.

The illithid's mind was tangled with the aboleth's. It sensed what the aboleth was doing and began to pull back. But it was too late. The illithid's control over Kovacs faltered, and Kovacs cried out a spell to transmute the water in the tank to suffocating black clay. The aboleth convulsed in its death throes. The illithid, losing all command, was pulled down with its victim. The lights in the aboleth's consciousness slowly blinked out to nothing at all. The illithid collapsed in a boneless heap, dead and already starting to rot.

He'd successfully manipulated an aboleth to commit suicide. Kovacs felt himself smiling as a familiar power rushed through his veins. He was the god of murder's son, and death was in his blood.

And then there were shouts and the sound of running feet. It looked like you couldn't murder the Tharchion of Thaymount's prized zoo exhibit without attracting notice, and somehow Kovacs doubted they'd listen to any explanations he might offer.

When in doubt, set things on fire. Kovacs invoked clouds of flame all around him, magnifying and multiplying the blaze as much as he could, hiding himself in smoke and blinding, crackling fire. Let them wonder how many invaders there were, let them have a care. He could afford to be reckless, risk the fire burning him, feeling pain and letting his body heal itself. Hostile Red Wizards and soldiers surrounded him. He ducked spells that flew his way, conjuring up a thick cover of smoke.

Somewhere in the crowd came screams. And then Kovacs saw a giant winged shape rise above them all. It was a great eagle, carrying a sword in its talons. It flew above Kovacs' fire and, as it landed
next to him, shifted back into Shalilah's form.

Kovacs wasn't about to thank him for showing his face again. The doppelganger picked up his sword and went to the illithid's body, as if he were completely unconcerned about the enemies all around them. "The kill is yours," Shalilah said. He hacked off the illithid's head and held it up by a tentacle. "You must take it."

Call him crazy, but Kovacs thought the idea of carrying around a gore-dripping decapitated head was completely pointless, disgusting, and impractical. But Shalilah was working a plan, and he took a chance. He quickly looped one of the tentacles into the belt on his robe and carried on casting fire around them. He doubted he'd last long.

Then there was another surge through the crowd. A clay golem was pushed to fall flat on its face, temporarily smothering the flames where it was. Riding its back was Tirzah, blood-soaked and calling a battlecry, whirling around with her greatsword, death every time she struck. She saw Kovacs, waved cheerfully, and went back to cutting down Thayvian soldiers.

Now that, he could work with.

"Shapeshift back," Kovacs ordered Shalilah. "Free every beast in the menagerie that you can. There's a sahuagin, she should damage them somewhat. We'll fight our way to the gate. Keep them confused."

He concentrated on Tirzah, and called on the Weave. Shields sprung up around her out of the air, a series of spinning silver discs that confused the eye and enemy spellcasters. He could give her a burst of energy through his spellcasting, inhuman speed that she translated into even more strength. She fought in the midst of the dancing flames and didn't give a damn.

Kovacs took up a sword from a dead guard and went to Tirzah's side. He could now hear roars mixed with the shouts and spells. Shalilah must have been making headway with the cages. He heard shouted commands from the Tharchion - or some general - to take the spies alive for interrogation. Good. Wrong assumption.

Nothing Kovacs could do with the Weave could really challenge Red Wizards, masters of a thousand spells. Except they didn't know that. So he kept up the fire and went on defence, shielding himself and Tirzah when he could and dodging when he couldn't. He stuck to Tirzah's back like glue, using the sword when anyone slipped past her. These guards could have used training like Tirzah had given him.

Tirzah gestured to him in adventurer's fingerspeech, pointing the way out. Kovacs saw the sahuagin out of the corner of his eye, lifting a Red Wizard above her head and throwing him at another one. Then she went down under a soldier's sword, and he didn't see what happened to her after that. At least she got some of her own back on her captors. A roc bit a chunk off another Red Wizard's shoulder, interrupting her spell. Lions and tigers ran rampant through the Thayvian's gardens. The crowd was thinning out. The chaos had certainly broken them down.

A thorny hedge erupted around Kovacs and Tirzah. It was too thick to rush through, trapping them. Tirzah swore and started chopping at it.

If Shalilah was listening in on his thoughts again, he had a good one, Kovacs considered. He pictured what he wanted Shalilah to turn into as openly as he could.

Then he heard the cries. "The zulkir! Szass Tam! Oh gods, it's him, run!"
It was enough of a distraction for Tirzah to shoulder her way through the thorns, blood dripping all over her as she forced her way through and left a gap for Kovacs to follow. She cut down a guard and Kovacs stabbed a Red Wizard in the back who'd turned to watch the spectacle.

Political rumours said the Tharchion of Thaymount and the zulkir Szass Tam had a power struggle, where Szass Tam wished him gone and replaced with a better puppet. Kovacs had no idea what Szass Tam looked like, but he didn't need to. Szass Tam was the zulkir of necromancy, a lich, a decayed corpse that preserved its existence through dark magic. He just looked like a skeleton, and one human skeleton didn't look very different to another. Add robes with the zulkir's insignia and that was all Shalilah needed.

Of course, at least some Red Wizards were smart enough to see through that game. Kovacs and Tirzah ran for the exit. The zulkir suddenly seemed to teleport away. Soon after, Kovacs could see a small mongoose in the grass, running swiftly beside his feet.

Tirzah produced a pewter bottle stamped with red paint from her bandolier. Kovacs recognised the alchemy symbol. Good move. As soon as they had a little distance to spare, Tirzah ripped out the cork with her teeth and threw the bottle on the ground. The potion exploded in searing fire and smoke, screening them from pursuit for a few moments.

Three horses were tethered to a tree behind the gates. They mounted and fled for their lives. It seemed Shalilah had researched a shortcut, an old secret path away from the Citadel. Their enemies fell back, particularly when Tirzah fired crossbow bolts from her mount.

They were back by the illithid's caves, and couldn't hear signs of pursuit any more. Kovacs slipped off the exhausted gelding and loosened the tack. He flung back the hood on his borrowed mage's robe. He ripped at the collar around his neck. It was slimy and decaying and parted easily at his touch. Doppelganger brain tissue twisted into a ropy circle, he realised in disgust. He threw it far away from him.

As soon as Shalilah dismounted too, Tirzah punched him in the head. It knocked him down soundly. She went to put the boot in as well.

"That's enough," Kovacs commanded, but he grinned at Tirzah. She was larger than life, strong as an elephant, twice as tough as her own thick hide, and she'd just fought a battalion of Red Wizards and their guards to rescue him. The grin was a sort of shorthand, so that he didn't have to tell her, 'Kind of glad I'm still alive and you're here, although I'd never say that out loud, since you'd most likely punch me for being soppy.'

"Should punch you next for doing stupid shit again," Tirzah said, but she desisted from treating Shalilah as her personal chew toy.

Shalilah groaned and winced as he got up from the ground. "Victory. Not good killer. God killer. But we need to finish. We must finish. Bring the head with you. The head of their god."

Shalilah's people were free. He had wanted that from the beginning. Shalilah hauled Kovacs into the cave and had him heft the illithid's head, showing them that it was dead at Kovacs' hand. It seemed that the credit for killing the illithid went a long way with the doppelgangers.

So a long line of doppelgangers passed by Kovacs and Shalilah, speaking unknowable phrases in their own tongue. First Shalilah would exchange words with the doppelganger as it passed, then it would genuflect before the illithid's head on Kovacs' belt. Then, unexpectedly, Shalilah took a long dagger and slit the next doppelganger's throat. He kicked the body aside and the line seemed to move on nonetheless. Kovacs wondered why, but he would not choose to intervene with doppelgangers'
practices among their own kind. That and he doubted he would have won. Then he figured it out: the ones Shalilah killed had the dullest eyes and spoke the slowest, when they could still speak at all. The illithid had damaged their minds too much for them to do anything. They worshipped it as a god and let it hurt them until it was killed.

By a god killer. He could be that god killer, for Shalilah and his people. Let these doppelgangers be his and his alone, only pretending to serve his father. When the time came, he could use his allies to kill Albescu Demirci. And set himself free at last.

---

The back of the rented estate in Baldur's Gate had a private courtyard, a plain sandy floor hidden behind tall hedge and walls. All the Blue Shale delegation had been using it as a training yard, and a place for Shalilah and his people to look like themselves.

Kovacs was fencing with his father.

Give him his due; Albescu Demirci practised what he preached. He'd spar and train himself to the edge, obsessively muscular and fit. Kovacs still couldn't afford to hold anything back, couldn't slip or falter. Swords and spell-slinging against each other, the consequences of one blunder devastating.

Mostly for Kovacs.

His father had an almost unbeatable advantage. They were connected to each other, bonded by the trails of markings on Kovacs' body. The connection went both ways, but all control belonged to Albescu. Kovacs couldn't even exploit it to annoy him. He'd tried. Every move he made, cut and thrust or spellcasting, his father could predict the twitch before it happened.

So there was a threefold purpose to this. Albescu to keep in condition; his underling's skills to be tested; and his slave to be humiliated in front of an audience. The old lion flexing his claws, showing that he could rout any challenger. But Kovacs had a game of his own.

They crossed the training ground, swords matching each other, both wielding right-handed. Still in the regular sequence, predictable, warming up. Then his father struck the first unexpected blow, and it began.

Albescu was also the one to start the verbal interrogation, advancing comfortably with blade in hand. "The gazettes say you're helping the Flaming Fist with their inquiries in a case of a Talonite poisoner."

"That's certainly one way of putting it. If they had anything on me, they'd have locked me up already." Kovacs pressed an attack while he could. He switched to his left hand, which his father would take as a slight sign of surrender.

"Who are you planning to poison?" Albescu reached for the Weave now, entwining powerful spells around his sword.

_You_, Kovacs thought, but couldn't say it. It probably wouldn't have worked anyway. His father was the type to regularly take trace amounts of various toxins at meals, building up a gradual immunity. "I'm open to suggestions. Not in this city, though." Madeline Castellas would undoubtedly see it as her sacred duty to report if she recognised symptoms of a plant she knew. Kovacs called a mirror-
shield to his right hand, gathering the threads of the Weave together to protect himself.

"Do you think the Grand Duke Balduran is about to fall?" At Albescu's will, blasts of concussive force hit Kovacs. They broke his shield, and he couldn't dodge them all. He felt a slight twinge in his muscles: his father exploiting his weakness, manipulating him at will. His father rarely used that, preferring to win by himself as much as possible.

"I've heard the rumours about the black lotus trade. Went to a play that mentioned it," Kovacs said. The only penalty for that was a cold look of disapproval. His father disliked theatre on general principles, but accepted some man-about-town socialising if it achieved their goals.

There was a burning pain in his cheek, sliced open. Kovacs suddenly called fire around his father, but it barely singed him. Albescu cast to draw the oxygen away and starve the blaze, all the while never missing a beat of the swordplay. "Interesting that you played the fool with his daughter. Then she left. And suddenly he too falls," his father said.

Hadn't quite got away with that, then. His father wouldn't know exactly what Kovacs had done, but he correctly assumed he'd fixed his mistake of antagonising Candle Balduran.

"You asked me, but you sound certain he will," Kovacs said. That note of insolence drove Albescu to switch hands, moving in with his left.

"A woman called Livia Hellebore saw Balduran's doom coming. She is a rising power in Baldur's Gate. When you see her, be on your best behaviour," his father said. Kovacs reached out for the Weave, transmuting the ground under his father's feet to treacherous mud, trying to trap him or better yet make him slip.

Dirt annoyed Albescu, as did many things. He punished Kovacs with another pull against the tattoos, shattering his spellcasting. Kovacs stepped back, forced on the defensive. "Know her?" his father interrogated.

Pherenike had mentioned the name briefly. Kovacs thought he matched it with one of Candle Balduran's followers, that night, a woman in green who was gleeful immediately before it looked like Madeline would suffer. "By reputation," he answered truthfully. He matched his father blow for blow, giving no more ground.

"Pherenike Medomai?" Albescu threw. Damn him.

But Kovacs didn't miss a beat, refused to flinch or falter. "Bored rich girl," he replied. He told as accurate an estimate as he had of Demetrius Medomai's income and its sources, knowing if he were caught in a lie it would be both pointless and disastrous.

To his father, the Medomai household had nothing whatsoever of value, and so would be left alone. His father's accounting didn't include such intangibles as a woman's wicked grin when she pushed a waste of oxygen into the fish pond, or a light touch on the wrist as they looked at a book side by side.


The tempo of the sparring match increased again. His father spared no more breath on conversation. He hit Kovacs hard with a slash to the chest, soaking his shirt with blood. It hurt, but he kept fighting. Spells met shields as they both called on the Weave. A slight push to the left had Kovacs reeling even as his wound closed up. He could feel his father's triumph, prickling under his skin, through the bond forced on him. The doppelgangers around them watched every beat of it.
Kovacs tried to quell a gust of fierce wind from his father's hands, but it threw him back. He fell on his knees. A desiccation spell hit Kovacs' skin, damaging him more. But he picked up the sword again. He rushed forward, ignoring the pain, trying to cut Albescu just once. But his father easily knocked him aside, using his absolute control of Kovacs' body, making his fall look comical and clownish. Kovacs rose and threw a spell, transmuting the air around Albescu to arsenic smoke. It made his father step back for a moment, before he quelled the gas by joining it to dust in the air. Then they rejoined their battle with swords. Kovacs winced as a cut laid his upper arm open to the bone, but kept standing. Let them all watch this, all his father's servants, his own chosen cabal of allies amongst them.

He'd lose in the end. He always lost. But the art of the game was getting up again.

—

In the hole in the wall in Bakers' Lane, another sheaf of letters written to the man who asked for hopeless cases. Four missing children, more than average. Kovacs still tasted blood in his mouth. It would pass.

An illiterate scrawl was next, the parchment dirty and the writing large and blotched from an unpractised hand.

**Dear Sirrah or Marm:**

_Dont know if its mine place to speak out but house is desprit. Master has 3 grandorters. Eldest 14 youngest 6. Flaminge Fist dont do nothing. We know who took them. Bastid dad. Cause they nomes no one cares. Find them if you can._

It gave a street to visit. Now this was better, Kovacs thought. There were possibilities in this story.

It was a respectable house in the corner of a painfully respectable lane. Throughout the clean street he saw walls and roofs falling apart but still whitewashed within an inch of their lives, curtains heavily patched but thoroughly rinsed, stone steps scrubbed in careful hard labour each morning. The house noted in the letter looked more prosperous than those around it, with fruit trees and flowerbeds in the garden and smoke from a chimney, the walls solid-looking and a bright brass doorknob decorating the front. But it was less cleanly kept, with scattered leaves on the unswept path, messy in a way that suggested something terrible had happened only recently.

He knocked on the door. A tall human woman in a grey smock opened it and practically swept him inside. She was stronger than her spare limbs suggested.

"You'd be Hopeless, then? Come in and be quiet. Wasn't expecting something to actually happen. Chrysanthemum, that's the oldest, reads those social broadsheets and sweeping up their room I saw those black scales stand out - " The woman sniffed heavily. There were black and red marks around her eyes and she looked sleepless and miserable. "No one helps. The damn Flaminge Fist wouldn't, Benjy tried and what happened to him - he's upstairs, Mayfield's looking after him - and the master's beside himself, in his shop to get enough together for a reward. He'll pay well if you bring those innocent lambs back. Five hundred gold, all proper and on the nail. You one of those travelling mercenaries?"

Kovacs didn't answer. "You haven't said who you are," he said.

"Me? It's Morgy. Maid of all work. It ain't important," she said, sticking out a grubby hand anyway. Morgy's handshake was firm, warm and dry. Kovacs studied her. She was maybe in her thirties, with olive skin and a hooked nose, her thick dark hair swept up into a straggling bun. Below her smock
she wore mismatched patchwork stockings in bright colours, red and violet on the right leg and orange and yellow on the left, above old brown men's boots. An odd and individual costume.

Indifferent mezzotints and washed-out watercolours hung at irregular intervals around the walls of this sitting-room, at about chest-height for a human. The mantelpiece, also set low, was decked with cheap china geese and raccoon figurines, mementoes of festivals or travels. There were three small plush armchairs, two footstools, and two human-sized chairs scattered around. And the inevitable icon of Garl Glittergold, head of the gnome pantheon, soaked with the wax of recent votive offerings. It was very much a gnomish house, and unusual that it had a human servant. Most humans would disdain the post.

"Who are the granddaughters?" he asked. Morgy threw another flood of disjointed information at him. Chrysanthemum, fourteen; Orchid, ten; young Tulip, six. He checked that Morgy meant human years. They were the three half-gnome daughters of Mayfield, who was the master's daughter. Mayfield took up with a human, a rich wizard, but he was cruel to her. With her youngest daughter just a baby, she went back to her father's house. Morgy had worked for the house two years at that point - it was good coin, she said, and the master was a kind man - and from then onward she helped bring up those poor children, who'd had such a dreadful time with their bastard of a father. At first, the master protected the children carefully, never letting them go out alone, hiring a Tormtar priest to lay wards about the place, but lately that sort of thing had died down. That turned out to be a mistake. Six days ago, the children disappeared.

Kovacs detected no signs yet that the woman consciously lied, but people were so rarely as they seemed or worthy of trust.

"At midnight, he snatched the three of them out of their beds," Morgy said viciously. "I should have known, should have heard his wicked feet tramp in, should have felt his cursed self harming our girls. Gods damn me and lay me in ice! We went to his mansion, but no sign. We told the Fist, and they said as they were his kids they weren't doing nothing. Then Benjy went with a sword -"

Benjy was apparently the children's uncle, Mayfield's younger brother. A foolish young man who'd tried to fight, and been badly beaten for his pains. He was presently confined to his room.

"Carrying three gnomes at once sounds a bit difficult," Kovacs said, and Morgy gave him a suspicious look. "Might I see the room they were taken from?"

The children had all shared a room, with a shuttered window that opened straight out into the garden. There were no blatant signs of a struggle. Morgy had cleaned since then, swept the floor and made the beds, she said, hoping when they came home at least they'd have some things nice like they'd always been. Some clothes were piled on top of a solid chest-of-drawers, clean but messily folded. Someone had pinned fashion pictures from the broadsheets to the plaster walls; with surprise, Kovacs noticed a black-and-white ink sketch that resembled Pherenike. Probably was meant to be her. There was a framed chromo of Yarrow Blaine, too, gaudy in over-bright yellow, with her name on it. Looked like the gnome girl dreamt of a wealthy glamorous world that would reject her without a qualm. A bookshelf along the right wall was piled to the breaking point with children's tales and toys, painting-sets and metal puzzles. The highest part of the bookshelf held a pile of social papers. Kovacs looked at the topmost broadsheet and recognised his own advertisement, as Morgy had said.

He tested the shutters. They opened with difficulty, the wood bent and damaged. He found the scratches on the outer panels. Forced, not unlocked. The window was just large enough for a human to crawl through; they'd probably been proud of how much sunlight the children got.

"You know how to use a sword?" Morgy demanded.
"I'm carrying one, aren't I?" he said.

"Just because you've got one don't mean you know to use it," Morgy said darkly, and Kovacs smothered a laugh.

"No one in the house heard anything. When you discovered they were gone, did you smell anything?" Kovacs asked her. He guessed that the maid was the most likely to wake the children in the mornings.

Morgy looked blank, then nodded. "They were all gone and the beds weren't made like they're supposed to do themselves. That's how I knew something was wrong. Shutters were flapping open. I remember I smelt something like wet paint, like Orchid with her little models. 'Twas like paint and treacle pudding, mixed together."

Kovacs traced a faint blue stain on the plaster. According to Morgy, the children wouldn't have left willingly or quietly with their father - or anyone else creeping in their window in the middle of the night for that matter, she added scathingly. "Sounds like alchemy," he said. "Propagated ether gas, to make people unconscious. I've seen it used." It was difficult to use, easy to get the dose wrong and kill instead of knock out, but he didn't say so.

"You a spell-slinger too? Wizard?" Morgy asked.

"Can't really call myself a wizard," Kovacs said. He used the Weave to fight, not study. He examined the scratches in the shutters. With a small pin, he plucked at something embedded deep in the crack. A fragment of yellowed, chalky fingernail, bloodless even though it was a substantial proportion of a human nail. Difficulty to carry three gnomes without help. Given this and the strength on those shutters, help from something that was not a person? "I need to see the mother before I go."

Mayfield turned out to be a small fine-boned gnome, ebony-skinned with pale yellow hair, who normally worked as a bookkeeper for a nearby tallow merchant. She tended to her wounded brother and had not much useful to say beyond her hysteria and fear. It seemed her life with the wizard hadn't been pleasant.

"You think you can help?" Morgy asked, sending Kovacs out of the door.

"Nothing's promised," he said.

"Good. Better not to overestimate yourself," Morgy said. "You find out where that bastard's keeping them, then take me with you when you get them. Understand?" She glared at him out of light topaz-coloured eyes, her hands tight around the broomstick she held as if she wanted to give herself splinters.

"I would be glad of the assistance," Kovacs said.

—

Madeline Castellas poured out the tea for her old friend, perched on a comfortable old brown blanket. Livia's face was hidden in shadows under a pale sunhat with a huge, floppy crown, but she looked like she was smiling. Behind Livia Hellebore sat her lady's maid, Margery, hands folded in her lap and looking like a raven in her black dress. No, more like a statue of a raven, for she was so still. Margery had always been like that, since Madeline could remember, and Madeline could remember a long way back into Livia's past.

They were picnicking on a country estate belonging to the Hellebores, just outside the Baldur's Gate walls. It was a recent purchase, from an old family that Madeline had known quite well. Their
difficulties hadn't really been the Hellebores' fault, and as far as Madeline knew they continued well enough. It was a warm summer's day and summer bellflowers shone in the grass, covering the way to the stream in blue and purple waves. The rills of flowing water chimed behind them.

It was like childhood, recaptured. Back then, the picnic would most likely have been Madeline and Livia and Conradin, the three of them in the sunny side of a clearing, innocently throwing hoops or playing battledore or clambering up the trees to see if they could see deer. Conradin was sweet and funny as a child, Livia timid but mischievous.

After bearing witness to the dreadful tragedy of Gio Valleta and his mother, Madeline was glad to be out on something so innocent. Livia must have changed. They'd grown apart; Livia befriended Candle Balduran and helped her torment Madeline; now Candle was gone, eloped, and Madeline didn't much want to think of the Baldurans in their sorrow. Candle was cruel but no one was all bad, and no one deserved ... Madeline didn't wish to dwell on it.

Livia seemed now to wish for old true friendships, and Madeline felt the same.

"I would like to extend that summerhouse," Livia said, waving at the building not far from them. It blended well with the country, with honeysuckle vines trailing around walls and rooftop. "Pavings all around, horses' stalls, extend the dining room, and add a second floor. A sort of rustic hunting lodge."

Madeline would not have done it; it would spoil the delicate birches and cut across the lovely stream, adding an unnecessary and ugly structure to the peaceful scene. But it wasn't her place to say, so she only nodded.

"But my steward tells me the water is a problem," Livia sniffed. "It is bitter, apparently, and won't support the labourers or their supplies, let alone my future guests. I have seen animals drink from it, and yet humans promptly vomit. I asked three farm hands to try it and none of them could hold it down. Perhaps I should make punch from it for a ball. Only a joke!" she said, and giggled at herself.

"Pine and poplar and beds of cilantro planted by water help to purify it," Madeline said slowly. Livia's description sounded a little familiar to her.

"Cilantro I will consider. Pine and poplar would take far too long," Livia returned. "Thank you for the hint. You may offer me good advice again, my friend."

Madeline looked down at her tea, watching the liquid swirl around in her cup in the light breeze. Should she try and help more? Perhaps Livia exaggerated and there was nothing amiss but a little dirt in the stream. Perhaps she was foolish and would be of no help at all. Or perhaps, if she provided aid, she could even convince Livia of a better way forward.

"Would you like to walk by the stream?" she asked Livia. "Perhaps we would find something, something overlooked. I do not know if I can help but I would be willing to try ..."

"That sounds delightful in any case," Livia said, and this time her red smile was clear and unhidden by shadow.

Livia walked deeper into the woods behind Madeline, controlling her impatience. The bellflowers and grass seemed to sway with Madeline as she passed, bending gently around her skirt. This was Madeline's setting, all dirt and prickers and unforgiving sunlight beating down on the complexion. Madeline's heavy homespun dress in brown and green suited her much better than a ridiculous pink ballgown. She could have passed for a peasant, which was fitting. Livia was also very plain, dressed up like childhood days in cream-coloured cotton and the largest hat she could find. Knowing that
Margery too hated sunlight and its side effects, she'd graciously sent her maid back to the carriage.

Madeline also happened to have relevant knowledge about plants and woodlands and streams and their doings, and Livia liked that she served her ends so obligingly.

It felt as if they walked five miles uphill in the heat, but Livia supposed it was really much less. Madeline took her to the spot where the stream gushed out of the ground on the hill, falling into a shining rock pool before continuing in a more regular flow. Madeline sat down and started to take off her shoes and stockings.

Livia drew the line at actually bathing - in a dirty bitter forest stream, how utterly uncivilised - and pretended not to notice Madeline's conduct. Madeline waddled barefoot into the pool, the water soaking the hem of her skirt. The stream rushed around her. She paused, lost in thought, and Livia relaxed on the banks. It was better to wait than to walk, and the patterns of light against stone were really quite beautiful, like the glitter of fool's gold.

Then something changed in only a moment. Livia stifled a gasp. The water seemed to change shape. Something rushed up, like a sudden fountain. It flowed upward, but instead of falling back again it seemed to take on a particular shape. Soon it looked that a woman made of flowing water stood in the stream, her form taking on a blue and brown solidity. A water-spirit. A naiad.

"Do you petition my grove?" the naiad's voice rang out, tinkling and bubbling like a flute soaked in water.

Madeline bowed her head. "We come humbly and in peace, lady," she said. "You have made the stream bitter but only to our kind, and so we thought there was wrong that must be righted."

"They have already stolen trees. They have already forced metal measures into my bed. They seek to harm me," the naiad said. Livia fixed her eyes on her. The naiad's features constantly seemed to flow and drip across her face, but she had the look of a beautiful woman, a slim straight nose and wide cheekbones, under long dripping hair like weeds. Livia tried to look into the naiad's eyes, silver one moment then brown the next, changing swiftly to blue and then green.

"We are sorry," Madeline said. She had a gift for sounding absolutely sincere. "We did not know of you. Now we do, and we can help."

"Yes," Livia agreed. "I would not have tried to build my summerhouse if I knew about you." Actually, she had guessed about her. It was nice to know that she could get her way even without using her own magic. "I will leave the stream and the woods free, lady." Not just the naiad smiled at Livia, but Madeline also gave her a beaming grin, joy written across her fat face.

"The waters will be sweet if you keep your promise," the naiad said.

"And there is a favour of you I would beg, lady, for the sake of your stream," Livia said. She strove to keep her voice level and musical, gentle and silver-tongued, as she brought the naiad and Madeline over to see her point of view. "In place of a summerhouse, I would like to bring seeds and grow living things. I would share life that will support your stream as your stream delivers life to it. Spider lilies and senna and milkvetch and wintergreen; astrakhas and cloven-foot and sweet witch's rue. I am a wizard and we would both succeed with alchemical ingredients ... "

A naiad's magic would gift potency to all the herbs Livia had named. Some of them were deadly, but only in the wrong hands.

"And I will send any creature you wish to swim in your waters and befriend you," Livia offered.
She'd grant the naiad a fair exchange. "Man or beast," she said. She could sense the slight stirrings of craving in the naiad, almost greed, an empty black crack in the creature beginning to form and demand to be filled with gain. Her gaze didn't leave the naiad's eyes.

The naiad nodded her lovely head. "It is done," she said. She seemed to dive upward, like a dolphin striving to reach the sun, then dissolved backward into a hail of droplets. Madeline looked startled and soaked. She shook her head heavily, moving slowly out of the water.

"Peace, Madeline," Livia said. She offered her old friend a hand, and Madeline grasped it firmly. "This stream will be a swimming-hole, a place of friendship."

It might possibly also be a place of drowning. Naiads tended to forget that their friends could not breathe underwater like themselves. But if a beast did not do the trick, then probably a handsome stablehand with no family would do just as well. Madeline still looked bewildered.

"It is all good news, Madeline," Livia said. "Forget it and come with me, old friend."

"Thank you ... for letting me help," Madeline muttered. She pulled on her shoes as if in a dream, then allowed Livia to take her hand and move her back to civilisation and the carriage waiting for them.

The squirming bundle of flesh, hair, and bone filled Kovacs' arms. It was trying to lick his face.

One year old; male, gelded; reasonably trained for the indoors; a terrier, small and white, with short curly hair. He'd selected the dog from a Baldurian breeder, fed it a few times with its caretaker, then arranged to collect. Ever since he'd found out what he was, Kovacs was glad that animals seemed to like him well enough provided that he fed them. It wouldn't have surprised him if they fled him out of instinct.

He knocked on the Medomais' front door, the dog still under his arm. It gained the instant approval of Sarah's Elly, who grabbed and petted immediately; not so much the housekeeper herself, who looked grimly in the direction of the dog's paws as if she were thinking of mud tracks on her floor. A misstep on his part, but not an insurmountable one. He hoped Pherenike would like it.

"The mistress isn't at home," Sarah said. She seemed to mean the social at home, rather than the literal.

"It's most probably her monthlies," Elly chimed in. "Is the dog for me or her? I'll call him Spider."

"It's for her. It could be protective," Kovacs said. Such protection would consist of ankle-biting and loud barking, but it was still something. And Pherenike was, perhaps, lonely.

Sarah reached into her apron pocket. "She said to give you this, if you called." She handed him a sealed letter. Kovacs made his exit and quickly unsealed it on the doorstep.

Only two words from Pherenike, black ink clear and large and straggling in the dim light. Please come.

So he went up through her window, and saw her weeping on the bed. Pregnant? he wondered, for a rather scared moment. It was unlikely, he hoped; after their first time, he'd taken to chewing mule
root, supposedly reliable enough. Kovacs went to her, held her in his arms as she sobbed uncontrollably. He awkwardly patted her on the back.

Pherenike tried to speak a few times, then finally managed understandable words. "I killed him!" she burst out. Kovacs didn't stop or alter the rhythmic movement on her back, holding her close as her tears soaked his cloak.

"Who did you kill?"

"Grand Duke Balduran. He's dead, he killed himself, he cut his own throat in his study, and it was all my fault - "

Kovacs took in a breath. He hadn't been forward on the news. This was important. "Wouldn't that have likely been because of the black lotus rumours, not - " Not his dead daughter.

"It must have been because of the black lotus rumours and that was my fault," Pherenike sobbed. "I knew him, a little, he was kind to me, soup sometimes got caught in his moustache and he'd comb it looking into this small mirror and Candle and I used to wink at each other when he did it, when I was a child he gave me a book of poems after I recited a story and patted me on the head. The Duchess teased him about his heart and tried to make him lose weight, and he liked his riding in his park, and he gave Candle everything she asked for and he cared about her ... "

It sounded like she'd hardly known the man at all, Kovacs thought. Pherenike's reaction was probably what most people would have felt, but he himself felt nothing. Black lotus users knew what they were getting into and chose to be stupid, though Faerun was better off without the stink of black lotus traders. He held her gently.

"It was me. Because of Candle," Pherenike cried out. Kovacs said nothing at first, waiting for her to slowly explain. She told him about Livia Hellebore's blackmail over Candle's death, and that she had given up the keys to Balduran. She'd made a gift of the evidence of his black lotus smuggling.

"Why didn't you tell me this?" Kovacs asked. He could have solved her problem before it happened. Granted, from Pherenike's reaction now, she wouldn't like his methods of problem solving. Killing spoilt society women wasn't one of his usual bad habits, but there were exceptions he was willing to make. "Shit. Livia Hellebore." Underestimated, he thought bitterly; the woman in the green dress kept quashed by Candle Balduran had turned into something far worse. "She's in bed with my father. Metaphorically, I mean. Not sure to what extent. If he's got something on her, I can find it out."

"She doesn't know about you," Pherenike said. "Only me. It shouldn't be you."

"It'll be all right," Kovacs lied to her. She clung to him, still shedding tears, and he patted her hair.

"The worst thing was my father, afterwards. He was so cold," Pherenike said, after another burst of sobbing. "He's never smuggled himself, he's innocent, but when I told him he didn't feel anything. Even though he and Balduran were partners. He talked about the adjustments he needed to make to his arithmetic. He judges risk and insures ships and carried an extra decimal point to account for confiscated smuggling-ships ... "

*That's a sensible thing to do about things you can't change,* Kovacs thought. He could have distracted Pherenike with a kiss, used fiery arousal to make her forget, but in a strange way that would have felt base and shabby, like cheating at cvass. *If nothing else, Livia Hellebore made you cry like this. She deserves to die.* She'd blackmailed over murder; she encompassed the death of the most powerful man in the city; she was dangerous. He didn't say anything, only held Pherenike. The soft skin of her brow rested against his neck.
"Thanks," she muttered, after a while. "Sorry to leave a puddle on your shoulders."

The night had crept in outside, staining everything black and quiet. "Don't be," Kovacs said. She had wept herself to exhaustion. They lay down together, gently, with her in his arms. Pherenike was falling asleep, breathing more evenly, the tear-tracks drying on her cheeks. In a strange way, this was more intimate than Kovacs had ever been with someone before, even though they were both fully dressed. He'd have gladly stayed with her all night, only resting.

But he felt a familiar fiery pain run up his arms, on the inside of his skin. His father summoned him through the tattoos, and they would only burn more strongly until he arrived. Pherenike was entirely asleep, so he pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck, between her skin and her hair, smelling her magnolia perfume. Then he let himself out the window.
"This child will be the death of me." She felt like a prisoner in a tower, confined to her room. She was three months with child. There was no mistake about that. She remembered the day, the date, the black walls closing in on her when she was dragged underground. After, there was horror, and a man who was not a man. The nightmare clawed itself inside her head, the parts of it she did not remember lurking below her conscious mind, and she would wake screaming.

The man sat on her bed while Lavinia paced the room, her wild black curls tossing against her shoulders. "Think of how fortunate you are to be here," he drawled. "You set a morally depraved example to my household."

Lavinia whirled on him, her fists clenched. "You did this to me."

Albescu Demirci only gave a faint, sleek smile. "Would you prefer I selected your sister?"

"I hate you." Lavinia turned on her heel, marching by the edges of the room like a caged hound. She had not told what had been done to her. She had no words for it. If she defied her sister's husband, then Larisa would pay the price for it.

Her sister thought - imagined - that the child came from choice. That Lavinia had somehow had a love in her life. In the markets, Lavinia sometimes exchanged glances and words with Tamas, a bright-eyed tinker's apprentice, but the match might never have been possible even had it gone beyond talking and looking. And now she was pregnant, and everyone thought it her fault, and the man who had planned her violation sat on her bed.

"I feel sick," Lavinia said. "It hurts me. I feel this child will kill me. I wish for some tansy tea, or silphium, or even a long dagger to pierce myself and destroy it now. I would gladly throw myself down the stairs, or starve myself, or drink poison. Anything to be rid of it. My sister wants a child, but she would forgive me and help me. She loves me more." She did wish it, more than anything. Destroy the child forced on her, growing inside her like a parasite.

Albescu shrugged. In a single swift movement, he stood. He crossed over to Lavinia, standing inappropriately close to her for a brother-in-law, and captured her upper arms in his hands. He held her almost hard enough to bruise, restraining himself on purpose, delivering a warning.

"If you tried any of that," he said, coldly and deliberately, "it would never work. He ensured this child would not be easily rid of." Albescu talked of the 'He' with intense reverence. No mortal was He. He was the monster. "And if by some mischance you ever succeeded ... that would mean your certain and very slow death."

He deliberately loosened his grip. His eyes were chips of pale ice, so cold they seemed to burn in his eye sockets. Lavinia slipped away from his hold and fled.

Then Albescu turned to the open doorway. "Bloch," he said to the man standing there. Lavinia jumped. She had not even noticed Albescu's confidential valet, and shivered. Perhaps Bloch had been there, silently watching, the whole time. Likely he had, and that frightened her. The man gave her the creeps. Bloch was mute, with ropy scars on his neck as if his vocal cords were once slit through. Other than that his complexion was perfect, of a milky white colour like he came from far away. His face was as flawless and purely beautiful as a marble statue, and he was exactly as
unnerving as such a sculpture granted a malevolent, inhuman life. Bloch moved as quietly as a worm slithered and had long flexible limbs that always reminded Lavinia of a spider. "There is a cup on the right-hand corner of my work table," Albescu ordered. "Heat it and bring it here."

"I don't want it. I shan't want anything," Lavinia said. Bloch ignored her and left.

"I did not say it was for you. It's a flaw to be greedy," Albescu said.

"Then leave me alone." Lavinia knew Albescu wouldn't go just because she asked it. He would only leave when he was finished with her. "For all I hate you, you have nothing to fear from me. I'll keep to our bargain. Speaking of which, you should not be here in my room."

He only watched her pace, letting the silence grow still more uncomfortable. It was a game Albescu played with her, one he was sure to win. He was the sort of man who treated even something as innocent as checkers as an opportunity to sharpen his mind and put people in their place. In old times, Lavinia played against him since she was better than her sister. Now she regretted every moment of every day she had spent in Demirci's house.

She'd wanted to leave her father's household, not because they hated her or she hated them, but because she wanted something different. She dreamt of adventures like a bard's song, heroes fighting treacherous shapeshifters or knights saving ladies in distress, silly childhood fantasies of something more in her life that would never happen. When Larisa accepted the marriage-broker's arrangement with a scroll-selling merchant, Lavinia chose happily to go with her sister. The man that came with the bargain was handsome in a wintry way, though dull and cold and distant, but that wasn't her concern. She and her sister spent most of their days together like old times. They grew and sold fruit in the markets, a small profit, but all their own.

"Did you spare her because you actually care for her?" Lavinia asked, her voice shaking. "Or did you only want to hurt me as well?"

She thought that she saw the tiniest of muscles twitch at the corner of Albescu's left eye, but it was gone in a flash. "Perhaps I'm indifferent to your concerns either way."

"You wish you were indifferent," Lavinia hissed. The way he visited her proved he wasn't indifferent. She didn't know or want to know what devils pursued his black soul. Then Bloch was there again in the door, a teacup of steaming liquid in his right hand. "Go ahead. Take your medicine or whatever it is," she told Albescu. He took the cup and dismissed Bloch with a slight inclination of his head.

"It's for you. I'm a generous man," Albescu said. He held it out to her, a boiling yellow-brown liquid that still bubbled. Lavinia shook her head. "Don't refuse too soon. It's exactly what you asked for. Tansy," he said. His white smile was brutal.

Tansy tea could rid a woman of an unwanted child. Or kill her. But Lavinia would rather be dead than many things.

"Take it. See what happens," Albescu said. "See if He will protect the child at your expense. See how you will be punished for sacrilege. See if you will die and spare yourself." He held the tea out to her. He offered it freely, waiting and watching what she would do, his breath coming slightly too fast as if it genuinely aroused him to see her choice.

Lavinia wanted to hurt him. At least let her leave some mark on him. She snatched the cup from Albescu, then threw the boiling liquid over him. It left red burn marks on his face and dripped over his clothing. It must have been painful.
But Albescu Demirci only spoke an inscrutable word under his breath. A prayer to his dark god, for he was a high priest in secret. In a moment, his skin turned from red blisters to its usual light shade, and even his clothes showed no stain. He was powerful, powerful and dangerous and cruel above all things.

She should not have been surprised. It was Albescu who healed her when it was done. She remembered in flashes, a dark underground temple with grinning white skulls in the walls. She couldn't bear to think of all of it, but she could still see the glowing golden eyes above her and feel the dark weight forcing her down, a man who was not a man. He bit her cheek down to the bone, savagely drawing blood, licking inside the wound with his tongue. After, Albescu closed that wound and all the other damage on her and inside her, repairing her in the puddle of sticky blood around her, healing everything but the thing that mattered. She carried the seed of a monster.

She would die from this, and no one would ever know what she could have been or done in the world.

There was nothing she could do to hurt Albescu, Lavinia thought. Nothing that mattered. He moved purposefully toward her now, apparently satisfied and amused with the choice she'd made. She heard the grind of the fragments of the cup, crushed under his boots. He must have planned to torment her this way all along, Lavinia thought; prepared the tea in advance. He might have lied all along about it being tansy. She had no way to tell.

"Leave me," she said weakly. He wouldn't.

"Don't beg," Albescu said, and pressed her back toward the bed.

—

It was the middle of the night and, in Kovacs' opinion, this little tourist trip down to the ancient Undercity of Baldur's Gate could have waited for a better hour. Not that anyone had asked him. They were a small group standing in the midst of dirt-packed walls, his father, Madwin Maergrim the lock-picker, Tirzah, and Kovacs himself. Two torches lit up the underground room. The place smelt damp and rotting, and a stone door bearing the carving of a skull awaited them at the end of the passageway.

"You were right about Balduran, and I was wrong," he conceded to his father. "You think Lady Hellebore killed him?" He deliberately inflated her title.

"Don't play the fool," his father said impatiently. "Balduran killed himself in preference to the end of a rope or exile."

"It sounds she's a dangerous woman, if she anticipated his fall," Kovacs pressed on. "Or prompted it, as you hinted. You want me to investigate her? I have a few promising sources."

His father shook his head. Kovacs wondered if he'd overplayed his hand. The torch Albescu carried flickered over the shadows on his face. "Enough distraction. Do it," he said.

"You know this won't work. It's never worked before," Kovacs said. He rolled up his right sleeve anyway.

"Try it," his father said.

So he slashed open a line of blood down his inner arm, long and shallow, and pressed the wound to the sealed stone door with the emblem of the skull surrounded by tears, staining it red with blood. The blood of Bhaal's child might once have awakened the power in the ancient ruins, but the god
was dead and it did nothing. Kovacs let the edges of the cut knit together again.

"Next?" he said.

Albescu took hold of the Weave around them, a powerful complex transmutation. The earth around the stone door shifted in position. The doorway creaked and bent as his father forced the building to adjust itself without collapsing, warping and shifting without breaking.

The door swung open. A puddle of ankle-deep water soaked into the room, making the dirt muddy. The stench of foul water was overpowering. They could hear faint splashes beyond the darkness. The splashes didn't stop and in fact became louder.

"Inhabited," Albescu said. "Curious. This was sealed centuries before the god's death. Whatever it may be, I need it gone. Kovacs, Tirzah - clear it out."

"Like old times, kid." Tirzah grinned, drawing her sword.

They went into the darkness, filthy water sloshing over their boots. The air was foul but just breathable. The splashes became louder. Kovacs waited a half-second longer, then summoned a blinding set of magelights all around them. He heard satisfying squeals. Then he saw green faces, red-eyed, with too many teeth and clammy limbs.

His sword sheared off an arm from one of the creatures, which bled pale green blood. Tirzah swiftly decapitated one. Another flung itself at her waist, and she wrenched it off and flung it against the opposite wall. Its bones cracked satisfyingly against stone.

The arm was still moving, writhing on the ground. Its owner peeled herself up. It looked like tiny fingers poked themselves out of her bleeding shoulder. The arm was growing back, regenerating. Kovacs spat out a fire spell to cauterise the wound. She screamed in pain and he was able to finish her.

"Trolls. Water trolls?" he said. The creatures were powerful enough to grow back almost anything they lost, but fire sealed the wounds and ended their lives.

"Think they're called scrag. These lot are shorter than usual," Tirzah said. She advanced on the muddy ground, cutting the trolls apart with her sword. "Must not be eating enough."

"What do you think they've been eating?" Kovacs said. He let Tirzah take point, using his fire to seal the wounds she inflicted. The trolls howled and fell.

"Something tells me the answer's going to be, 'Aren't you glad you skipped dinner?'" Tirzah said. The trolls came in waves, not stopping despite Tirzah's force. They stepped into the water of some kind of underground lake. Cold fingers from the depths suddenly grabbed Kovacs' ankle. He sliced at the wrist and kicked the troll to bring it up, stabbing it to the heart. They were being lured in deeper, and undoubtedly these creatures were much better swimmers than they.

Kovacs squinted ahead into the dark. There was some sort of building across from them, a black structure resting on still-solid ground. He reached into the Weave for a different spell, ice rather than fire, and froze the water into a wide bridge. Simple transmutation. A troll tried to strike him and he drew a new section of heavy ice to materialise on its hand, weighing it down enough to divert the strike. Then he cut deep into the troll's neck. It fell with a grunt.

Tirzah stepped on to the ice bridge, shaking the water off her boots. The surface held. It was slippery, but the trolls were worse off. They tried to clamber on but she kicked them off, spitting them on the edge of her sword.
"You still smell like flowers. That girl again?" Tirzah said. They advanced along the ice bridge, the magelights shining on the path, clearing out the waves of trolls. "You think she could actually be useful?"

"You didn't tell her much," Kovacs said. His sword cleaved down to split a skull. He kicked the troll's corpse back into the waters.

"It's a need-to-know basis. And, what, you want her to think you're a monster?" Tirzah said. "If she's bright enough, she'll figure anyway." Three trolls rushed her on the ice, looking larger than any of the other ones. That meant they just about came up to Tirzah's waist, and didn't stand a chance.

Something tugged at Kovacs' cloak from behind. He shrugged the cloak off rather than let it strangle him, and stabbed downward through the folds. He grabbed the bloodied cloak back as the troll burned.

"You've been almost chipper lately," Tirzah said. "Told you getting your ashes hauled would work wonders. Just use protection - I'd make a crap fairy godmother."

"Piss off. Don't you have some floozy here already?" Kovacs and Tirzah were just beyond the ice bridge now. They stood on semi-solid ground; it was still very muddy, but the ground here was solid enough to support the still-standing building.

Tirzah probably was the closest thing Kovacs had to real family left. His father didn't count and neither did his half-siblings - very much not.

"Don't get mad that I'm better with women than you," Tirzah said. Which was, Kovacs had to admit, pretty true. I guess I'm picky. There's only one I really like.

A whole crowd of trolls rushed them, making a last desperate stand. Some seemed old and slow, and others were young and small, children. All trying to kill the intruders, desperate even though it meant their own death. It looked like the building behind them was their focus. Kovacs and Tirzah waded their way through the bloody slaughter, clearing the way through. They passed through rough dwellings, piles of old bricks and heaped mud used as shelters. There were pieces of raw meat, dripping with blood, hung up on sticks. No, not sticks; no trees grew here. They used bones. Illuminated by Kovacs' magelight, the meat bled a pale green and was flecked with overlapping scales. Totally isolated here, it was pretty obvious what these trolls ate to stay alive - each other.

"Feeling hungry?" Tirzah grinned maliciously.

"Have you ever tasted Baldurian sausages?" Sarah's Elly had, with probably intentional spite, suggested them after the play. Kovacs pinned down one of the last living trolls for the kill. "These trolls missed a business opportunity. People here would flock to buy fried troll fingers instead of cat bowels. Remind me to have Garmon bake some product samples."

And now, they could actually see the large building before them, with his magelights dancing around walls and roof. It was a human made structure, tall and wide, cracked and bent by age. Both Kovacs and Tirzah easily recognised the skull surrounded by tears, the sigils carved into the roof and walls. They fell quiet. Tirzah was reverent - and Kovacs stayed silent only because he respected her.

They were by an ancient temple of Bhaal. This was exactly what Albescu Demirci was searching for. The trolls had fought desperately to keep them from this place. A wounded troll reached out for their ankles as they stood on the steps, a final desperate attempt to stop the invasion. Kovacs muttered another fire spell, and the troll sizzled into death on the threshold.
Crumbling stone statues lined the walls inside the temple. The remains of precious metals glittered above and around them, embedded in the rotting walls and high ceiling. Once, Bhaal was worshipped and venerated and served richly here. But long centuries ago, even before Bhaal's death, the people of Baldur's Gate chose other gods and forgot their hidden Undercity.

At the end of the temple's chamber was a high throne. It was meant to have symbolic weight, Kovacs knew; the metaphorical throne of Bhaal, not meant for anyone to actually sit there, not even a high priest.

There was someone there. Kovacs called on the Weave, and painfully bright light lit up the troll on Bhaal's throne. He was larger than the others, bloated like a toad, swollen with water and wind. He sat uncomfortably in the stone seat. He didn't flinch at the light against his piggy red eyes, which were set deep in his face below pouches of green fat. On his head he wore a crown of sorts. It didn't fit him well. It was a circlet of thorns, the spikes digging deep into his head. Blood constantly ran down his face as a result.

The troll said something. Kovacs didn't understand a word of it. A high-pitched, susurrant language. Tirzah yelled something back, seeming to stumble over the words and rephrase the same thing several times. The troll answered her. Kovacs stood there, holding his sword and waiting for the parley to be done. Tirzah looked down at him.

"What, you mean you don't know this obscure patois of Old Trollish from a culture isolated for centuries? Educated gentleman my arse," she said. "Anyway, his Old Trollish is crap too. Bloody dialects."

The air around Kovacs and Tirzah suddenly grew even colder. The temple doors blew inwards, moved by some powerful unseen force of chilly wind and lifeless air.

And then the wraiths began to attack.

The ghosts of slain trolls, their spirits unquiet even in death, swirled around their murderers and reached out with deathly frozen claws. Mere mundane weapons had no chance of even touching them.

"He's activated a powerful artefact with his own blood," Kovacs said. "Controlled them while they were alive; controls them while they're dead. And, incidentally, we can't hurt wraiths with our weapons while they can feast on us. Shit. Looks like by killing them all, we gave their leader much more power."

"We're definitely doomed," Tirzah agreed.

The ghosts of the trolls descended. Even one cold touch from a wraith could steal heart and courage from a fighter, leaving them broken and permanently damaged. Kovacs felt their dead claws reach for him.

Tirzah sheathed her useless sword and instead lit a pitch-soaked torch. Kovacs cast a spell, and fire lit up around the edge of his sword. The wraiths recoiled. Undead creatures couldn't be hurt by ordinary weapons, but they had a grave fear of fire.

The battle was joined. Kovacs and Tirzah fought back to back, carving out a circle around them with the fire they wielded. Even as one wraith was beaten away, there were a multitude more to take its place. Tirzah swung her heavy torch like a club to beat them back and Kovacs' blazing sword drew intricate patterns in their deadly dance.
"Talk to him again," Kovacs said. "Taunt him about the fact that his toy controls people - and that he hasn't even tried to use it on us."

Tirzah grunted. Embers from her torch drew a glittering path through the air. "You want me to translate something more complicated, maybe teach him about Cyric the Usurper's lack of common sense or Thayvian politics?"

"Just do it."

Kovacs felt the first wraith slice through him - probably the first of many. This kind of power didn't hurt you on the outside. It drained what was inside you, life or energy or even soul. *If I even have a soul, which is unlikely.* He could endure most physical hurts, but the wraiths cut far deeper. The cold sapped at him and made him wish to lie down and sleep in the cold, sleep forever. He kept fighting.

Tirzah called out to the troll on the throne. The troll reached up a hand to the circlet of thorns on his brow, his face suddenly excited with ambition. He used his power to reach inside their minds, the minds of the first outsiders for hundreds of years to trespass to his ground. Two powerful outsiders, who would make fine toys for this king of a petty domain.

Kovacs let him in. Tirzah did the same. Suddenly they communicated mind to mind, no longer a need for spoken language. The wraiths temporarily stopped their attack, the crowd waiting for their master to take his new servants.

Like any connection, this ran both ways. Kovacs felt the bitter resentment among the wraiths. While they lived, they'd been forced to fight and eat each other. Now they were dead, they still hated each other. And, more than that, they hated their master.

*Go take your revenge,* Kovacs encouraged them. He too hated this petty king troll, who'd fed and gorged himself on others' bones and blood, crushing those beneath him only because he could, waiting like a swollen spider in the centre of the web for prey to be brought to him. Kovacs set his own mind against the troll's power, first seeming weak enough to draw him in, and then bringing down a trap of steel and fire.

For hundreds of years, these trolls were utterly isolated, turning inward and preying on each other. Kovacs and Tirzah had been through the world, travelling and fighting a thousand different enemies. There was no competition. Particularly if you'd had years of lessons from a master mind-reader to make yourself a sharp-honed blade. *Thanks, Shalilah.* Tirzah lent Kovacs her strength, standing by his side. They surrounded the troll, along with the souls of the slaves he had abused and mistreated. He tried to flee, but there was nowhere to run to. In the mental landscape he was no longer large and plump with blood, but rather small and white-bellied and weak. He was only one against a multitude, and he could not stand.

And it so happened that the circlet of thorns on his brow was an artefact of Bhaal. It and Kovacs' blood called to each other, two remnants of the same dead god. It was easy for Kovacs to reach out and stop it, end both the flow of blood across the troll's skull and the temporary power it bestowed on him.

Then the wraiths were free to devour their master's soul. Kovacs let the strength of the circlet of thorns expire, and the ghosts and their newly-dead enemy vanished into whatever afterlife awaited them.

The troll's body lay slumped on the throne. With the death of its bearer, the circlet of thorns had no power. It had fallen from his head and lay on the floor. The temple of Bhaal was utterly quiet. All about it was dead.
Tirzah wandered over to one of the statues that was still standing, studying it in Kovacs' magelight. It was a robed human woman, made in an old-fashioned and blocky style of sculpture. "That's Belsharin," she said. "Mistress of Zhentil Keep. She was a great favoured of Bhaal."

The next statue to Belsharin was just a pile of rubble, and then there was a male elf shown with lopped-off ears. "Not sure about him. Some priest or Chosen, perhaps," Tirzah said. Then a dragon rider who’d razed towns in Bhaal's name; a princess famous for spreading his faith; and a pair of armoured knees that still stood while the rest of the statue had long crumbled. Favoured servants of Bhaal, god of death, selected killers and murderers and conquerors in his name.

"You should have been told earlier," Tirzah continued, abruptly. "He was still alive when you were young. You could have known him as he was then, in the height of our faith before he fell. Our god Bhaal was powerful and magnificent. He wasn't a mindless mad thing like Cyric, only interested in carnage with no purpose. He won his throne as a god by his cunning. He played knucklebones for his portfolio and lost. They made him choose last and he still chose best. He was disciplined, creative, intelligent. Calculating and impetuous, intense and austere. Ambitious and glorious."

"And a rapist," Kovacs said.

"Regrettable, but necessary," Tirzah said. "I met her once. I mean, the woman who birthed you. She wasn't so different to you - wild, spirited, tongue jointed at both ends."

He'd never felt anything for a woman he had no memory of. His mother, her sister, had missed her, but he'd only pretended to look sad because of her.

"Albescu thought you'd have to fight to be a demigod, at first," Tirzah said. "Probably thought that meant rich rewards for him even then, damn his eyes. But he wouldn't have you trained by one of us, in case we'd show favour. So he chose a Blue Shale know-nothing."

"Who was also expendable," Kovacs said. He'd had no affection for his sword teacher Loran, a cold man whose main interest in life was getting drunk on his days off, but the man had taught him fairly.

"He was a fool." Tirzah dismissed him. "When I got you, you needed someone better."

And without her, he would have had no one in those bleak days. They had both grieved an immense loss at the time. Tirzah had forced him out of the depths of a black cliff, dragged him away from the edge of a falling world. She wanted him to understand what the loss of her god had meant to her, understand how that fall had turned everything she served and thought she knew upside down.

Kovacs crossed to the troll's throne and picked up the fallen circlet of thorns, holding it in his gloved hand. It was dead with its owner's death, but he could tell that like an ioun stone this could be reactivated. Let another wielder place it on their head and allow the thorns to pierce them, drawing blood to feed it, and it would bestow a lot of power. "Extremely valuable artefact," he said. "We'd surely be rewarded for bringing back such a prize."

Tirzah's eyes glittered. "In the right hands it'd be worth more than a fortune," she agreed.
Kovacs said the words of his disintegration spell. The circlet of thorns crumbled into dust. He blew the remains off his hands. They were agreed that it would never fall into his father's hands.

"Looks like we're done here," he said.

—

Pherenike woke up alone. She wiped at the gunk clotted around her eyes. Had she made a fool of herself? Yes, in some ways. She ought to have stood up to Livia, ought to have asked for the help she needed before. She and Kovacs should have worked together. But there was nothing she could do now, regret Balduran's death though she did. It was no weakness to care for other people's lives.

It was early in the morning. She called impatiently for Elly, who tumbled down the steps with a dog by her side. She'd go to her jeweller's; she wore Candle's necklace, the one she'd had him mend. Let her show a braver flag than she had the previous night.

They walked down the streets together, the dog seeming to find every available mud puddle on the street to bathe itself in. Pherenike was obliged to keep whisking her long skirts away from its dirty paws. Elly had a piece of old string tied to its collar, but seemed in poor control of it. It was a gift; apparently its name was Spider.

"I know I'm going to regret asking, but why Spider?" Pherenike said.

Elly wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I thought that if I was a drow matron in the Underdark, I'd have a pet spider and call him Rover, just to confuse people. Before the spider ate them all. So I called the dog Spider."

"I do regret asking."

Elly skipped on by Pherenike's side, looking maliciously up at her. "So when are you going to tell Kovacs you hate dogs? I'll tell him if you don't want to."

"I don't hate dogs. I just ... don't especially like dogs." Pherenike sighed. She'd limited experience with them but did not like it so far. The dog was noisy, messy, and according to Elly a ferocious ankle-biter. "I'll tell him eventually."

She had a strong impression that Kovacs liked animals; he tolerated Elly, after all. The dog was probably because he himself liked them. *I'll make a reasonable compromise*, she thought. *When we marry I'll allow him to have a dog as long as he's responsible for it and it doesn't sleep on our bed.*

She'd need to spend Livia's gift, left for her at her jeweller's. She hated Livia's blackmail, Livia finding she'd had Candle's necklace secretly mended and knowing what she'd done. But if she did nothing with the credit, Rociard the jeweller would become suspicious of her too - the last thing she needed. She would be defiant until the end and make use of the gauntlet Livia threw down. Perhaps something for Kovacs; although he dressed fairly well, he seemed to value material things little, but a gift with meaning might matter to him. An earring, perhaps, or a cloak-pin. He seemed fond of that black cloak of his. The jeweller would probably assume she was buying for her father.

Pherenike turned into the jeweller's street, a plain and unpretentious place. Master Rociard was a craftsman in a humble location; she'd discovered he worked well and to good quality, and was obscurely glad that even though Candle had asked her several times she'd never told the secret of where some of her lovelier ornaments came. He'd certainly never want a dog trespassing in his clean workshop, so Pherenike told Elly to wait outside.

Though his door was open, Rociard wasn't at his workbench as usual, but flitting around, picking up
and putting down his displays and wiping off imaginary dust with his sleeve. Unusual; Rociard was a serene gnome, who'd normally sit to avoid the hump on his back paining him, working in his tray, his jeweller's loupe embedded in his left eye below his ebony brow.

"Mistress Medomai," Rociard stammered, almost taken aback to see her. Surely something was wrong.

"Are you all right, Master Rociard? Is there anything I can do?" Pherenike asked. He seemed shocked all over again at her question.

"Dare I ask for help?" Rociard ran a hand over his bald head. "You are a noble who knows magic. May I trouble you with a personal matter? Or should we forget that I said anything so ridiculous and unprofessional?"

"I'll do what I can, though I'm a librarian at best," Pherenike said. She was no real mage, not like Livia or even like Kovacs. But lately, she'd done things differently, and she was willing to follow a new thread as far as it took her.

"It's my granddaughters," Rociard said. Pherenike had not even been aware he had grandchildren. "Their father is a noble in the wizards' guild. He kidnapped them and will not let us see them again. The Flaming Fist refuse, not even with a reward promised. And I - My housemaid tells me she hired some mercenary, that Hopeless advertisement in the broadsheets. But who knows what this man is, or whether he'll demand pay and do nothing!" Pherenike remembered 'Hopeless' herself; she'd only skimmed rather than read the broadsheets lately, but those black scales were very striking. "I do not ask you to put yourself in any danger. Please, only go to the guild and talk to the man if you can. His name is Casimir Durante."

Pherenike gave her word to help. Who would not have done? She would visit the wizards' guild today, this very hour. Setting aside any thoughts of errand-running, she went out to Sarah's Elly. The girl had been talking to a stranger, giving him directions to somewhere; the man flicked her a copper coin and left, the dog growling at him all the while. Pherenike sent Elly home with the dog, saying that she was only going to Oghma's library from here, and set off on an adventure.
To Side with the Strong

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hammer, Deepwinter. 1359 DR. Waymoot, Cormyr.

His mother was dead, and he was a monster.

Kovacs fantasised about killing his father. He couldn't say it, but he fought like he wanted to kill.

Not that it made any difference. His father held him in such contempt that he only used his right hand in this training session, blocking every strike of Kovacs' sword easily. He taunted Kovacs that he had nothing, was nothing, had no power despite his monstrous blood.

Kovacs flung himself to the ground to duck a strong blow. By now, with the winter sun almost directly overhead, the frost on the ground had softened to black mud, stepped in and stepped over hundreds of times. Kovacs scraped a handful of it in his right hand, rolled aside, and threw it at his father's face. Dirty tricks, literally.

But as much as Albescu hated dirt, he was actually pleased about the technique. Kovacs felt the sick sense of his father's approval, burning in the tattoos on his body. The markings were fresh, some of the scabs not yet healed. He could feel what his father felt and ordered, mapped and forced on his skin. Approval was shame and everything else was pain.

Kovacs launched himself at his father again, sword in hand. He struck as if to kill. His father blocked it, and blocked again. Thrust, feint, cut over. Kovacs at least wanted to see him bleed. His father met every blow. Kovacs' swings became more and more wild and desperate, almost untrained. Since his father had so much understanding of exercises and standards, let him find something he couldn't predict. His last trainer Loran said that an untrained idiot with a sword could kill just as easily as a master, and it was hard to defend against a know-nothing because they couldn't be predicted.

Loran himself was dead now, of something he couldn't predict.

Kovacs let himself go, using all the strength he had, never striking the same angle twice. He was countered once, countered twice. Then he was as awkward as possible, iron blade slashing at his father's waist. The counter came again, but this time it was his father who miscalculated.

Kovacs didn't feel anything at first, but he'd dropped his sword and something was wet on his hand. Then he fell to his knees and the pain hit him. He screamed, wailed like a dog. He couldn't think of anything else but the pain. His hand gushed with blood and he'd three stumps in place of fingers. He'd been maimed, broken. His fingers were in the dirt and he grubbed around for them. They lay there like ashen sausages, separate from the rest of him, bleeding into the mud. He groped for them with his finger and thumb, desperate, losing so much and now feeling this unbearable pain.

Something inside him burned like fire. He raised his head and howled, as if something inhuman forced its way out of his throat. He touched his own cooling flesh and a strange painful power surged inside him. Gold light and dust flowed out of Kovacs' hand in place of blood. A searing burn swept across his hand. As the light faded, he closed and opened his eyes. He flexed his left hand, seeing three red scars at the base of his fingers. They were rejoined to him, skin and flesh made one. He stared at his own hand like he'd never seen it before. Smooth and dark and faintly freckled on top, lighter and calloused on the underside, like normal. If not for the scarring, he wouldn't believe what
had happened. He reached for the sword's hilt and his fingers obeyed him, curving around it. The blood on it was already dry and flaked away on his touch like dust. He dropped the hilt again, his hand stiff and feeling nothing.

Kovacs looked up. His father was pleased once more. His father bent down and took his hand for himself. It wasn't to help his son get up, only to look closely at what had he had done. He studied the scars, ran a fingernail across where his own blow had fallen. He satisfied himself that what he saw had happened.

"It's about time. You have some power after all," he said. He released Kovacs' hand, letting it drop, but Kovacs could feel his father's pressure curl up within his body, refusing to let him rest or run. He forced Kovacs to rise, the markings on his body making his muscles move and unwind. Kovacs hung his head, looking at the ground. He clenched his fists, uselessly.

"This needs testing," his father said. "Follow me."

Kovacs walked behind him, back to his father's caravan, going into the darkness.

—

Captain Conradin Cordenstein of the Flaming Fist slammed the door of his lodgings so hard it sent rattles everywhere. Not that it mattered to his roommate the Sweet Goat, who continued a set of one-handed pushups while naked on the floor. They were inseparable friends and comrades, captain and lieutenant, sharing carousing, adventure, and whores between them.

Lieutenant Sugersson - much better known as Sweet Goat to his intimate friends - looked up. "All right, Conradin?" he said.

"We'll attend the trade dinner at the Sailors' Hall," Conradin said. Those jumped-up foreign merchants refused to understand where they didn't belong. "We're going to take that Sembian bastard for a ride."

The Ride was a Baldurian tradition among young bloods of the city. As officers of the Flaming Fist, Conradin and Sweet Goat couldn't be seen to break the law - but, as nobles, they could certainly bend it a little. It was a prank, really. A much-overdue introduction to some of the traditions of this great city.

In the Ride, the unlucky victim, usually the drunkest out of a set of companions, or the loser of more bets than he could pay, was bound to the underside of a carriage. The driver then selected the muddiest, wettest streets possible to drive through. The victim only suffered serious injuries if they fell off, or if they were tied low enough to scrape on the ground. Otherwise, they just got all the bruising, shaking, mud, and the unrelenting feeling of being about to fall at any moment. No one ever wanted to go on the Ride twice.

"The one who danced with your Pherenike?" Sweet Goat said casually. "I liked his magic tricks. How the devil did he fit those flowers behind Madeline Castellas' ear?"

"He used magic," Conradin said irritably. He liked that Sweet Goat had called Pherenike his. Got that part right, at least. "Cheating bastard. You know what they did to me at the play?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure you're about to tell me," Sweet Goat said, too innocently. Damn his eyes; a man deserved sympathy from his best friend if he couldn't get it from anywhere else.

Conradin indicated his water-stained uniform with a scowl. "He forced the girl to dunk me. Tempted to send the fellow my laundry bill, damn his eyes." He wouldn't. He had the feeling the Sembian was
one of those mocking bastards, who acted like they were better than anyone else for spinning some pretentious sentence or cracking some stupid pun, and such a letter would only give him ammunition.

Sweet Goat peeled himself up from the ground and started towelling off his sweat. "Forget her. Let's hire Laney from down the docks tonight." By which he meant that Conradin should foot the bill. Laney was about as cheap a whore as it was possible to get, but she'd a warm wet mouth and worked hard to earn her coin. "Or, if there's anything in society, let's get Yarrow and Livia. Pity that Candle's gone. She was a fine-rigged ship, even if Yarrow's the one for me." He smacked two of his fingers with a loud false kiss in the air.

Yarrow Blaine was the Sweet Goat's steady girl. Conradin had no idea what his friend saw in such a whore. Give Yarrow enough to drink and she'd part her legs for all and sundry, mostly the Sweet Goat though. Candle Balduran hadn't been much better than Yarrow was, although somehow you'd never have contempt for a lady as powerful as she was. Conradin and Sweet Goat had always known which way their bread was buttered and did exactly what Candle said. Livia Hellebore was a mousy little thing, an emerging old maid only short of a couple of pet cats, probably growing cobwebs on her long neglected hymen. Not her. No. Pherenike Medomai was the one for Conradin. She was pure, different to all the others. He'd always prided himself on his ability to tell when a girl lost her virginity, and Pherenike was saving herself for him. Conradin wasn't the poetic sort, but Pherenike somehow reminded him of a star, with her pale untouched skin and midnight black hair. She had a distant shining quality that made him long to seize her out of the skies and bring her down to the earth he offered her. He was noble and handsome; Pherenike was noble and beautiful, and the only heiress to a very tidy fortune; there was nothing in the way of them but that Sembian bastard.

And after getting the Ride, he'd lose some of his damn cocky pride.

"Yarrow for you," Conradin agreed. "Make her get us both invitations for that dinner. I'm told the Blue Shale lot's been given a place. We'll show the damn foreigner where he belongs."

Sweet Goat nodded, the light of prospective mischief gleaming in his eyes. He grinned, giving Conradin his instant fealty. "I'm your man. It'll be fun."

Livia heard birds singing outside her window. It reminded her that she was awake and ready at a virtuous, efficient hour. Candle had favoured late nights and late mornings, complete with every anti-hangover spell Siamorphe had to offer her favoured. She'd needled Livia for her eyelids drooping in parties that lasted from dusk to dawn, taunted her about rising early like a common servant. Livia, look at your eyes falling on the floor! Do you need a nurse to carry you to bed? For the gods' sake, Livia, the ninth bell is not even a little bit civilised; I suppose my chambermaid is familiar with the hour, but I am most certainly not. Every gibe came accompanied by Yarrow's mindless laughter, loyal cack-brained Yarrow cheering Candle on in everything.

Candle is gone. One of those who hurt me is removed. Two to go.

Livia made herself think of happier things, of her power. She had encompassed Grand Duke Balduran's death, held a man's life in the hollow of her hand and closed it as if to crush a hummingbird's fragile eggshell. She had not even used magic to achieve her end, only her mind. And used Pherenike.

With Balduran's death and the Duchess' retreat from the city to her Waterdhavian family estates, there was no longer anyone to enthusiastically pursue what had become of Candle. Ironically, Livia's actions had ensured Pherenike was somewhat safer for her misdeed. Best to keep her in her place, and try to prevent her from coming to that realisation.
For now, Livia had other fish to fry.

Livia gave her orders to Madame Heidelgild, the finest dressmaker in Baldur's Gate if one assumed her expensive prices were correlated with quality, for a new autumn ensemble. The Time of Flowers was done with; the full fires of summer were upon them, and soon enough the year would chill and grow old and die. Livia would wear reds and golds, a match for her russet hair, the colours Candle once used to fix all eyes on her.

"Yarrow, would you be a dear and fetch my hairpins?" Livia asked. A few strands of hair had fallen out of place as Madame Heidelgild's seamstresses fastened one gown after another on her. Yarrow obeyed, somewhat less energetically than she would have done for Candle. "What do you think of this creation?"

"It looks lovely on you. They all do," Yarrow said. Her efforts, Livia thought, were pitiable.

"Which is best?" Livia mused. "The bell sleeves or the flute sleeves? The Shou dragon silk or the Cormyrian brocade? I might choose to order all the dresses and save myself the trouble." One of the seamstresses tucking up a petticoat let her over-eagerness show, dropping her work to stare hopefully up at Livia like a dog begging for scraps. Clearly, the girl needed better training on how to concentrate on her task at hand. "And what of you, Yarrow? Will you buy the gold samite sewn with pearls? It would be just your style."

By now, Candle would have bought Yarrow something - a bone to her own particular pet attack dog. Livia would refrain from such things. If Yarrow chose the dress anyway, she would be dunned when she couldn't afford it, and if she chose nothing, she would be shamed for her poverty. Everyone knew Baron Blaine was heavily in debt he stood no chance of redeeming. Sometimes couturiers and milliners gave Yarrow their work in return for wearing it, since she was one of the city's famous beauties, but Madame Heidelgild had no need for such advertisements.

Yarrow shook her head and looked down at the ground.

"Well, I think I shall just select the dragon silk, the brocade, and the latest Luskan model," Livia said. "Flute sleeves at the wrist will be more modest and suitable. And you should tell your black-haired servant that if she stops her work to gawp at every customer's stray comment, she's apt to stick someone with a pin. Come, Yarrow. I wish to get some jewels reset at Goldwright's to complement the gowns, and we are almost late for the salon."

Livia encouraged Yarrow to try on necklaces and jewelled headpieces she'd never be able to keep. She was amused by the sadder and sadder hangdog look that grew on her friend's face.

A dinner for the Umberlant tide festival, farewelling the last of the winter ice. Mussels and merchant sailors and pale blue gin. Livia had always liked mussels; when her mother was on one of her rare shore leaves, she'd buy mussels steamed with onion and vinegar from a stall by the docks and eat them with her daughter and her first and second mates.

Livia was a popular young lady, here with her friends. She'd grown apart from Madeline, who was shy and fat and undesirable, and felt flattered and excited to be invited to join Candle and Yarrow. They were a duo of golden goddesses, confident society beauties, the toast of every gathering and the centre of every dance. It was an incredible dream come true that they had chosen to make Livia the third of a new trio, helped her choose gowns and jewellery, drew her in to also be the cynosure of all eyes, desirable and flawless. They were three best friends, here at this festival, sitting together and making easy witty conversation with their neighbours.

Livia filled her plate with mussels and ate, not consciously thinking about it, enjoying the taste and
the faint memory of pleasure it sparked.

"I've heard hamsters have astounding cheek pouches," Candle Balduran said from across the table. "I wonder how many mussels a hamster could fit in there?" Livia glanced up at her.

Yarrow, at Candle's right hand, was fast to follow the lead. "Ask Livia," Yarrow answered. "Like you said, she's got cute hamster cheeks, right?"

Livia dropped her fork to her plate with a clang, and coughed to cover it up. Her cheeks were red, though the old couple on either side of her kindly pretended not to notice, and she hated their kindness.

After, Candle gave her lecture in private, reflected in an enamelled dressing-room mirror. Livia supposed she should be grateful it was private, at least. Candle could look like a seraph and she could also look like a demon: burnished golden hair and eyes like pieces of blue fire. They were a a blue not like lifeless ice or lapis lazuli but living, incinerating, aflame with conquest. Yarrow's face was strong and set like a marble statue as she backed Candle up, both of them doubled, their real incarnations and the mirror's reflection equally beautiful and terrible.

"A proper lady doesn't eat in public," Candle said, her voice low but incisive, like a long iron needle cutting through skin. "Do you want to look like Madeline Castellas? Because you will if you keep stuffing your face. If we invite you to be with us, the least you can do is act like a lady."

"She isn't really a lady," Yarrow said, "your parents are just traders, aren't they, Livia?" Yarrow had one of the oldest family names in the city and a noble title by birth. No wonder she had that golden beauty and the trick of raising her head just so, the way she walked and danced so lightly as if she stepped on some rarefied form of air that common people could never reach. Candle was the same, an ancient name and generations of ancestors in judgmental portraits lining the walls of her father's estate. All Livia's family had was gold, and that couldn't buy her a grandfather, as the saying went.

Candle smiled cruelly at Livia from cherry-red lips. "But our cute little hamster-cheeked Livia can be more than she is," she said, "if she listens to our advice. We're trying to help you stop eating gluttonously, Livia, dear. Say thank you."

"Thank you," Livia said, obedient and good, surrounded by flawless pitiless masks laughing at her in the glass ...

"Here in Baldur's Gate, we pride ourselves on the fact we do not muzzle our mages like Amnians," Livia announced to the salon at large. People listened to her; what she said was pleasing to her fellow mages and natural philosophers. "Our freedoms of trade and inquiry are our strengths. Is not the art of philosophy to first understand boundaries, then pierce and break them once they are known and no longer of use to us? We should allow no restrictions to philosophy but that which naturally exist, and then we discover these and seek to mend them. I think that the present Grand Dukes exercise overmuch caution and mistrust, allowing petty prejudices to stand against what is Art."

Then she smiled, subsided, and gracefully listened to the others. A listener was often much more valuable than a speaker, provided she was an intelligent one. It was already being spread around that Livia's alchemy was excellent, and she had access to new growths of particularly potent herbs on one of her estates. Thanks to the naiad. She must visit and ensure the creature was satisfied with its bargain.

Wizards, alchemists, philosophers, broadsheet-writers, and bards. It was a gathering where Yarrow was about as out-of-place as a kitchen skivvy at a ball. Like that dreadful little nosepicker of
Pherenike's - what was her name? It didn't matter - before a Grand Duke or Duchess. This salon was another punishment aimed at Yarrow: dresses and jewels she could not afford, intellect she couldn't even try to keep up with.

Livia acknowledged the necromancer Casimir Durante with a cold nod - best not to be too familiar with Durante, nor allow him any liberties in public - and bestowed a warmer greeting to Durante's patron Regan Rocheford, a white-haired invoker of strong standing in the guild. A man of power and ambition, who outlined his newest plans for improving Baldur's Gate's defences. Rocheford, it seemed, had brought an additional guest: Albescu Demirci, the man who casually showed ioun stones as the least of his wares. Livia rather looked forward to talking with Demirci again. In this room full of people she already knew, timeworn and familiar petty faces of petty people who talked endlessly and yet had never put any of it into practice or achieved anything of note, Albescu Demirci was perhaps the most interesting person in the room.

The salon conversation sparked and spun, the clever people of Baldur's Gate batting around ideas like air-balls. "Yarrow, what do you think of Marisol's latest pamphlet, and how it compares to Besant's? I swear the two are like a red dragon and a fire giant; both creatures of the same origin, but one of ground and one in air," Livia said.

Yarrow looked at Livia helplessly. She hadn't read either one.

"Like the dragon, Marisol singes," the broadsheet writer Jabez chimed in - he was on Livia's side, and had helped her bring down Balduran - "and yet like the giant, Besant hunkers in behind fortifications and throws stones. One must be besieged out and the other made to dissolve in the ether. I side with neither of them."

"I see Yarrow more as a Besantian," Livia said. "She's apt to stick faithfully as Fido." The allusion flew over Yarrow's head. At philosophers' gatherings, the standard for jokes was generous; this one made a hit.

"It reminds me of a song - " Audelaine the bard called across the room. He was a half-orc, ugly and lumbering but with a quick vicious tongue, who made his appearance part of all his best jokes. He stood up, crookedly applied lipstick to himself without a glass, and then pulled on a blonde wig over his bald head. He was a terrible parody, a joke. He began to sing his verses: a mix of highbrow references to the abstract philosophy of nobility, and lowbrow parody about a brainless blonde beauty who bored anyone remotely intelligent to death.

What society parody worth its salt didn't have such a cautionary tale about a woman who followed the rules a little too well, until there was nothing left inside her head?

Livia watched with a smile, beautiful but brilliant, accomplished russet-haired wizard rather than vapid flaxen dancer. She had, of course, bestowed Audelaine a gratuity beforehand and suggested topics for him. Perfection was achieved in great and small alike.

Yarrow slowly began to realise the nature of Audelaine's parody, especially the side-to-side flick of his yellow wig, the fidgeting hands twined around each other, the tripping dance steps made grotesque and lumbering. And she had no supporters in this gathering. Yarrow had no gold to be a Maecenas tolerated as a patron, no wit to win acceptance by a ready tongue. She fell back, eyes on the floor and hands stiff by her sides, while Audelaine sung his final verse to appreciative applause. Here, she was the outsider, the mockery, the joke.

The conversation shifted into more channels that Yarrow couldn't follow. Regan Rocheford inevitably brought out his latest device, showing off, the work no doubt mostly the brainchild of his lackeys and apprentices. This time it was a tiny silver insect.
"I believe automatons are underrated when it comes to the defence of our city," Rocheford said. "The lack of natural movement is their chief weakness, but this is designed after a Netherese creature preserved in amber, a construct once both organic and arcane."

And with that boast, Livia thought, Rocheford had given away that the likely source was his guest Albescu Demirci, collector of Netherese ioun stones. A merchant who knew the rare and truly valuable. A merchant who understood organic constructs extremely well, from his power and animation of a mouse's bones.

Rocheford snapped his fingers, and the thing sped into the air, buzzing loudly. It looked like there was a silver stinger on the end. Yarrow, taken by surprise and already suffering, let out a squeal as it flew toward her.

Livia took the opportunity for another game. She fixed her eyes on Yarrow. "Look out!" she called, her voice all friendly concern, and she made Yarrow look back at her. She reached for her power in the Weave, subtly, invisibly. Yarrow was weak-minded and exposed and helpless, so very helpless without Candle by her side. So Livia tugged on her friend's strings. Yarrow wanted to get away from the silver insect, but, confused, she stayed in its path.

"Don't let it get in your hair," Livia said, and intensified the fear that emanated from Yarrow in terrified waves.

Yarrow cried out hysterically. "Don't let it, don't let it touch me - help me!" She still could not bring herself to break Livia's gaze, could not escape her doom. The philosophers and scholars watched her cowardice and foolishness, and thought she got what she deserved.

Then the silver insect flew into her. It tangled in the long strands of her golden hair. Yarrow screamed, get it out get it out, ripping and tearing at her elaborate braids, all her dancer's poise and grace lost, no elegant lady any more but a trull in a tantrum.

Livia's lips curved into a soft smile at her enchantment's success. Of all the mage schools, enchantment was the most subtle and difficult to master. It wasn't like summoning simple fire or moving a plain object through air. You had nothing tangible nor simple to hold. Your only palette was the endless complexities of another's mind, your only tool your quicksilver wit.

Few people knew that Livia's true specialty was enchantment. Even fewer understood how powerful she was at it. The best enchantments were those no one even knew had happened.

Livia glanced at Casimir Durante's face; himself a lapdog of Rocheford, he was delighted to see another humiliated. Rocheford watched the success of his new weapon with a cool amusement. And then, beside him, was Albescu Demirci. Something in Livia had not wanted to look at him first, but she'd known that she wanted to see his reaction. Demirci was expressionless, interestingly expressionless, she thought. He was difficult to read but he knew enough for his gaze to meet hers. His unblinking eyes were on the puppet-master rather than her toy. Livia felt that Demirci was the only one in the room who had seen her flex her power, the only one who had witnessed some of her true gift at magery. Somehow she felt no resentment or remorse over what she had given away.

Livia remembered the Grand Dukes' ball. Candle Balduran humiliated Madeline Castellas, and Kovacs Demirci chose to aid Madeline, chose the weak above the strong. Would the father make the same mistake as his son?

Albescu Demirci stepped in to quell the hysterical screaming. He cast a simple ice spell, freezing moisture in the air around the silver construct, making it immobile in Yarrow's hair. She stopped screaming as it stilled. Demirci levitated the construct back to its owner, Rocheford.
"You're overwrought. Sit down," Demirci told Yarrow. She stumbled over to a sofa.

And Livia saw it. Yarrow’s stumble was not wholly because of her fright. Demirci called on the Weave, a necromantic spell, his abilities subtle enough to tweak the muscle fibres in Yarrow’s legs and spine against her will. Yarrow was graceless and boneless, forced so subtly that she wasn’t aware of it herself, walking ridiculously. *He sides with the strong, not the weak. Good.* Yarrow collapsed in a heap and buried her head in her hands on the sofa’s arm. People discreetly ignored her and carried on their conversation.

They'd played a game together, Livia and Albescu Demirci, and which of them had won didn't matter. Demirci paid Livia the compliment of a detailed question on an alchemy missive she'd written, and they talked of the tools of their trade. For now they were satisfied with conversation as shallow as ripples over the pond, their true meanings resting below the surface.

"Demirci here's a man of many faces - mechanics, not just tomb-robbing," Rocheford said. "He's renting Undercity properties from Baron Blaine; thinks his gnomish devices can extract enough fresh water to supply the city in case of a siege."

"But you're a foreigner, Demirci," Casimir Durante chimed in. "The Grand Dukes can't give you a patent to supply the city water; it's against regulations. You need a business partner."

"I'll look for investors another day," Demirci said, as if he were completely unconcerned. Livia read it as a show of his strength. She wouldn't be surprised if Demirci were genuinely indifferent to this venture, that his water rights would neither make nor break his fortunes.

"It's been charming," Livia told them, "but I ought to take my friend Yarrow home. Poor thing."

Livia stroked Yarrow's hair as the girl rested on Livia's sofa. It was the sort of gesture of comfort Candle might have made. After hurting someone, make them believe that you were the only person who could cure the wound, and they loved you all the more.

Yarrow raised her head. "I'm sorry I got so scared ... " she apologised. "I've been so sad lately. I feel like crying all the time." She paused, wiping away more tears. "Are you sad Grand Duke Balduran's dead, Livia? You never said anything about it."

_Damn her._ Livia prayed her face was carefully expressionless. Yarrow the nitwit had actually asked her a question that threw her off. She’d make her pay for that. "It was a sad thing, but he smuggled the lotus," Livia answered.

"I liked him anyway," Yarrow said defiantly. "And now he’ll never see Candle again even when she comes back and that’s just so sad. He laughed a lot and he wanted us to be happy. I liked him better than I like my father. I don't care if it's wrong. My father just drinks too much and yells at me all the time for wasting money and going with the Sweet Goat. Balduran was nice. I miss him a lot. And I miss Candle."

She sobbed some more. Livia resumed stroking her hair. "You're stuck with me now," Livia told her. "I need you, Yarrow ... please tell me you're happy with me."

And Yarrow raised her head, innocently, and gave Livia reassurances and promises to be faithful to her until the end.
'His mother was dead, and he was a monster.' - similar line used in thisiswhyishouldntwritefanfic's excellent 'Relative Innocence' series.
The black glass cliffs before him fell in a dizzying, impossible span. Clouds and fog gathered below Kovacs as he looked down. He couldn't see the cliffs' base through the caps of billowing grey and white, and he heard the faint hoarse screeches of rocs flying below him. Rocs were gigantic black birds that would be too large to fly if they weren't borne up by magic. They were death omens, with brutal black beaks and carrion on their breath. It was appropriate.

This part of the Moonsea was wild, almost utterly without people. The land was torn to pieces by vast ancient magical battles that scarred the ground beyond repair. These black glass cliffs were one such scar, the cliff faces varnished to polished obsidian, the ground cleansed of all life and inhabited only by magical beasts such as the rocs, who didn't need to eat to live but feasted on the dead when they could.

If he took one more step forward over the black glass cliffs, Kovacs thought, the chilly winter wind at his back as if it urged him on before it was too late, it might even be enough to end a creature like him.

His mother was dead, murdered, and no one but him even minded that she was gone. He was a monster, made to serve the purposes of a dead god. Now he was only his father's tool. He had a power, and it was worthless. It only meant that his father could hurt him again and again and never worry about permanently damaging him. He was tired of hurting.

He'd made up his mind to take one more step, and let the black glass cliff finally break him and leave nothing behind.

"You should try it," came a voice from behind him. Kovacs turned and cursed, saying the foulest words he knew and feeling a certain delight in mouthing them, even if he couldn't do anything but speak.

His father had followed him. He'd heard nothing. Of course he could be traced through the markings on his body. He felt them, slightly warmer than the rest of his skin, flinching with a dull throb of pain. It looked like he had nothing that was privately his. Kovacs looked down over the cliff.

"Consider it," his father said. "If it works, you'll die and be free of me. If it doesn't work and you recover, you know what will happen to you."

More pain. Worse pain, if that was even possible - no, he'd seen too much already and didn't doubt that it was always possible. Kovacs folded his arms and cursed again. Through the connection to his father written on his skin, he felt nothing but a calm indifference from him, waiting and watching to see what he would choose. For now, he was free to move either way, step either forward or back. He envied his father's damned control, cold inside as if nothing could or would ever hurt him.

Kovacs looked down one last time at the black glass depths. Then he took a step away from the cliff face.

His father approached him, then. "Good choice." He placed an arm around Kovacs' shoulders, as if they were only going to walk peacefully back to their camp. "Father, I'm glad I didn't take any stupid risks," he added, a mockery of what he thought Kovacs should say.

"Well, I never play dice unless they're loaded, son," Kovacs answered back. "What you did didn't
His father shook his head. "Incorrect," he said, almost cheerfully. "It mattered a great deal. Too bad you'll never find out, son." The words made Kovacs stumble in his way. Could he make the choice again, could he run back to the cliffs and do it after all? But then he felt his father's presence inside him, mapped deeply on his body. He'd never let his son escape now, never let him change his mind. His father tightened his arm around Kovacs' shoulders. He patted his cheek gently, and Kovacs tried not to flinch. It was always worse when it came with a parody of affection.

"You need occupation," his father said thoughtfully. "More training, I think."

The black glass cliffs became invisible behind them as they travelled down the hillside together. Soon, in place of shining obsidian, brown winter grass crunched frost-heavy under their boots. Behind him was worthless, and before him would be worse.

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Krilpur hastened up to join Kovacs at his table, at the back of the tea-house outside the wizards' guild. The doppelganger's current form was likely borrowed from one of the guild servants, a thin vigorous woman in a dust-stained apron with a strawberry birthmark covering most of her right cheek. Krilpur sat down in front of Kovacs, most likely on time to their rendezvous to the exact instant, and looked like he was absolutely bursting with interesting things to tell. Technically speaking, Krilpur wasn't a he any more than any other doppelganger, especially in such a shape, but he imitated Shalilah and preferred 'he' in Common.

Krilpur was young for a doppelganger; he'd served the illithid until Shailiah rescued him, a youth of the tribe and so mostly untouched by it. He had the appetite for work of a beaver in dam season and the personality of a golden retriever, if you ignored his disturbing enjoyment of eating the flesh of other sapient beings. Set him a task with a definite goal, and he'd get it done quickly and assiduously while revelling in his hyperefficiency; if you set him to find his own way, he'd flounder around and find absurd ideas of busywork for himself and generally take a meteor-hammer to others' carefully laid plans. It was definitely better to keep him busy.

"Sir, I've confirmed that the wizard is indeed holding his daughters," Krilpur said, "and I placed you on the list with a booking for next Thirdday."

What the Nine Hells - Krilpur tended to do this, spill vaguely disturbing information without context; probably a side effect of being from a mind-reading people. "You'll have to tell me more about this list," Kovacs said.

In a few rambling sentences, Krilpur described what he'd found.

Kovacs pushed aside his plate of salmon scones; he wasn't hungry any more. "I really shouldn't be surprised," he said. "Faerun would be better off without him."

The wizards' guild was strictly forbidden from experimenting on people. That of course created a great clandestine demand to do so. Casimir Durante's daughters were merely gnomes, and he cared only for what they could do for him. He was selling them to the highest bidder in the guild, booking times and sessions for them to be used.

Krilpur nodded, unperturbed. "Quite," he said. "Will this be similar to the case of the Loviatan child-slave ring in Calimport? That was very creatively settled, sir."

"What's the name on the list?" Kovacs asked him.
"Bilal Balakumar, a human wizard who appears to resemble you, based on my best judgment. I have appended both my rough sketch and Balakumar's personal address from the member records so that you may inspect before infiltration." Krilpur handed over a sheaf of papers from his apron.

"Is this Balakumar at least a man?" Kovacs asked. Last time Krilpur had been sent to find a suitable identity for disguise, he'd perfectly matched on stature and complexion - but not at all on gender or hairstyle.

"Yes, of course, sir. I have remembered to be culturally sensitive. Most humans have a strong gender identity as one of two binary options, such as depicted in *The Duke of Dellioria's Daring Dove* by Endolynne Markett. I wrote it in my memorandum book on purpose." He wasn't being sarcastic. Since Krilpur's abilities only gave him people's surface thoughts at the time he was around them, he liked to take written notes in a classic copperplate handwriting he was rather proud of. He studied human fiction a good deal, and seemed to devour the sort of love stories that starred a duke and a humble dairy-maid and ended with the wedding-bells of the old temple never having rung out a blither peal.

"Do you have a copy of the full list?" Kovacs asked.

"Fourth paper from the top, sir."

Kovacs read through the names in Krilpur's writing. He grinned viciously to himself as he did so. "You've done well," he praised. "Extremely so. Just get me a sample of Durante's own writing."

Krilpur puffed up his shoulders in a cheerful pride.

"Of course, sir." The doppelganger pulled one final form from his apron. "I also prepared an expenditure report for my bribe-money, where you'll need to counter-sign by the red line in triplicate ..."

Kovacs impatiently scribbled his mark. He left a few scattered coins on the table to pay for the meal, and left quickly. He thought he'd seen a familiar figure in a blue cloak, crossing the street on the way to the wizards' guild. Either way, he felt like spying out the damned territory for himself, and seeing this Casimir Durante in person. This was worthy of balancing the scales.

Pherenike paced carefully through the depths of the wizards' guild, in the metal-floored private laboratories. Although she'd visited the guild library a few times, she'd only been in the laboratory once before, a brief tour with Livia that she hadn't paid nearly enough attention to. Most of the laboratory doors were marked in some way; she'd seen a list that showed Durante's on this floor. She read the sigils and codes - a crown and a forded river, Regan Rocheford, how pretentious - and advanced.

She heard someone *tsk* behind her. She turned with a sharp shock, only to recognise Kovacs. In his nondescript clothing, not carrying any obvious weapons, he could have explained himself away as anything between servant and noble.

"I looked through the guestbook and saw someone on a pass signed by Livia Hellebore," he said. "Funny, I don't see her anywhere near here. Forging an entry chit - I'm so disappointed in you."

"And you?" Pherenike stepped closer to him, challenging him back. "I know you're not a guild member either."

"I had an urgent message for Regan Rocheford. Something about the arsenic getting mixed up with the powdered bat guano. Heads would roll, literally. They let me in." Kovacs told his convenient lie with easy grace and a crooked smirk. "Were you going to tell me?"
"Yes, which is a lot more than you ever did for me," Pherenike said. However he'd come here, she was glad she wouldn't be alone. "I'm looking for a wizard called Casimir Durante."

Kovacs stared at her. He looked concerned for her - as if he knew. "What do you have to do with Durante?" he asked.

"I see you've heard of him," Pherenike said. "He kidnapped my jeweller's grandchildren." She turned and moved forward, passing by two more irrelevant laboratory doors. She paused at one over-elaborate sigil: a skull, over an armadillo covered in heavy plates. Casimir arises from a root word meaning destroyer, and he's a necromancer at that. Durante only means enduring. And there was a monogram for C and D below it, just to top it off. She put her fingers on a white stone marking the centre of the door. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kovacs raise a hand as if to stop her, but he was too late. His hand swept forward and touched her wrist, just as the world around them swayed and changed and warped, and suddenly she was dragging him along with her to somewhere else -

They were nowhere near where they'd been. They were in a small stone room, surrounded by closely pressed walls. The walls looked to fold in every direction around them, like a maze. Even though they could see, there was no visible light source. At least the air was breathable.

Pherenike placed her palm over one of the stone walls. She thought she felt something, a sort of tension, as if it responded to her. "Sorry," she said. She'd gone half-cocked on an adventure, and ended up trapping them both. "If it helps, I think I've read about this spell."

"In any case, I don't think he'd keep them in the labs here," Kovacs said. "A risk, even with this kind of protection."

"I didn't think so either," Pherenike snapped back. "I just wanted to talk to him. Find something out. And why would you ... " She stared at him, thinking how familiar he seemed with the case. "You're Hopeless?" she asked. "That advertisement in the broadsheets. It only started since - Was that you all the time?" Her eye had been drawn to the stark balance scales and the strange request for cases beyond anyone else's help. It seemed quixotic, bold, to seek out the desperate and fight to retrieve a gnome's grandchildren from a necromancer. It couldn't possibly be part of his work for Blue Shale. "Why do you do it?" she asked.

"I think I'd go mad if I didn't," Kovacs said. "If I didn't do something other than the things he tells me." For a moment his voice sounded raw, making a confession of something he really felt. "Besides, I turn a profit. It's not altruism. Play the games no one else will, and some of the prizes get interesting." His tone was light and cynical again, back to normal.

"You should tell me these things," Pherenike said. "Now you're stuck working with me. And literally stuck, too. We're not on Faerun any more. It's a small artificial plane in the shape of a maze, and if we can solve and visualise the maze that should be enough to get us out of here." She'd read about the spell, yes - but certainly hadn't been exposed to it in practice. She frowned as she touched the wall again. It had seemed to almost respond to her before, as if there were a sort of presence inside the stone. Could she hear something, something that wasn't their own breathing and the whisper of dust as their boots disturbed the stone floor?

"Look, you know Durante is going to end up dead," Kovacs said, letting more seriousness slip past him. "Do you truly want to be there?"

That spelt it out baldly. An intention to end a man's life, like Balduran and like Candle. He dealt easily with death, killed quickly and willingly, and had likely lived with blood and violence as a matter of course for a long time.
"They hang people for kidnapping, I suppose, though he is their father," Pherenike said. She knew she was trying to justify it to herself. "Has he hurt them?"

"Their mother left him for a reason. I doubt she protected herself, but she protected them," Kovacs said. "He's selling them to other wizards." Pherenike knew her horrified shock must have been written on her expression, but Kovacs continued brutally, a savage grin splitting his face. "Livia Hellebore's on the list. This gives us something on her, if nothing else. I'm on the list too, under another name."

"But you're not ... you're going there to kill him. And bring them back," Pherenike said. She was vaguely aware that she'd described those tasks in entirely the wrong order of priority. "In that case, I'll help you."

He nodded. "It's one of those wait-out-the-back-and-someone-blindfolds-you-in-a-carriage arrangements," he said. "It'll show me where they're kept. We can work from there."

She looked up, to the turning passageway ahead of them. It slowly came into view.

Not human. Not remotely human. Dead decaying flesh held together with metal cables. One leg was a heavy iron boot, the other a fleshy part of a corpse, so decayed that it looked like melted wax. Cloudy blue eyes that stared in only one direction from a dead face. Clawed iron hands extended in front of it, heavy and vicious. Seven feet tall, it was made from human corpses. It was creepily obvious that it was made from several human corpses, crudely fastened together with black wire and metal nails. A flesh golem, an automaton, animated by complex arcane magic.

"Necromancers," Kovacs said. "So that's what he used to abduct them. Something like this broke the shutters, then he threw in ether gas. Easy enough for a golem to carry them away." Pherenike felt Kovacs draw on his own magic, as the thing inched closer and closer. He called out syllables and gestured for a powerful fire spell.

It fizzled. Pherenike felt as much as saw Kovacs' spell dissolve into the stone walls. The maze soaked up any invaders' magic, drawing it to build yet more corridors and turnings upon its twisted layers of rock.

"Magic is dead here," Pherenike said. "It'll drain everything that you do and use it to bind the walls closer together."

Kovacs wasn't wearing a sword, but he drew a long dagger from his sleeve. "I'll keep it busy. Get us out of here." He stepped away from her. The golem seemed unsure about which direction to go. The dead blue eyes still didn't move, couldn't track them by sight. Then it took another dreadful step toward Pherenike.

Kovacs flexed his right hand, and fire ignited over his glove. Not real magic - stage magic. It was effective here. The automaton turned its head, though its dead eyes still didn't move. Sensing living heat, perhaps, in this cold dead place. It changed direction, and closed the distance on Kovacs.

Pherenike put her mind to understanding this maze. She felt her heart beat faster; they were in danger. Her lover was in danger. The automaton attacked him. Kovacs closed on it, the long knife in his hand, and ducked under a blow from its iron fist. Pherenike felt as well as saw it hit the wall. The
force of the blow was enough to leave cracked ripples in the stone, enough to shatter a human skull in one clout.

Kovacs was faster than the automaton, and scored a line across the dead creature's flesh with his blade. It barely bled, a thin ooze so dark red it was almost black. He couldn't kill what was already dead. His cuts weren't even delaying it.

Pherenike concentrated on the maze's corridors. They twisted and turned like the channels on a walnut shell. Like a human brain. There was a sense of utter isolation. She felt the nothingness beyond them, trapped on an alien plane.

Take the left turns, and mark off the dead ends when you find them. Like an unravelling ball of red string, wound unerringly around the trails of a labyrinth. Pherenike felt her breathing slow. She seemed to merge with the maze, becoming one with it. Solve it, and you get out of here. I hope. I wish. She saw the automaton's iron claw shear through the air, passing far too close to Kovacs' shoulder. He laid open another slash across the automaton's chest. His sequence of black slashes formed a twisted cross there, each one deeper than the last.

Kovacs fell back, in easy range of the automaton's blows. It attacked with a grim unrelenting force. Then he ducked under the extended arms and moved even closer. He held the creature in a parody of an embrace. He pressed too close for it to react to him.

"Magic might be dead here," Kovacs said, "but I'm looking at a giant seven-foot exception." He thrust a bloodied hand deep inside the creature's chest, inside the wounds he'd made. Then Pherenike felt him release his disintegration spell. His magic merged with the automaton and cut through the dead flesh. The decaying skin and blood and bones dissolved into dust. The automaton fell in a set of metal parts, each one still moving. Kovacs kicked one of the claws away as it inched its way toward him on the ground, twitching like a metal centipede.

And, at that moment, Pherenike felt the understanding of the maze flood through her. She understood this place. She understood how to reach home. And so the walls dissolved around them, and once more they both stood outside Casimir Durante's laboratory.

With company. Apparently they'd been caught with a hand in the metaphorical biscuit jar. Annoyed wizards and guards, buzzing around them. Pherenike gave Kovacs a meaningful glance and got the slightest of nods in return.

"Well, I never!" Pherenike attacked before anyone else could. "What an outrage! You complain all the time that no one funds your ever-so-valuable research, and this is how you treat a possible sponsor? I will certainly rethink! And while I'm at it, I and my colleagues at Oghma's library will have a very serious conversation about your interlibrary loan privileges. I'd like to speak to your senior."

Take on enough of a tone of outraged nobility, and you could get away with practically anything. It was probably Candle who'd taught her that trick, Pherenike thought. She extracted a promise that Durante would send a signed and sealed apology, and left in simulated high dudgeon, Kovacs slipping along quietly in her wake.

She let herself weaken after they were out of there. She and Kovacs could have been killed, or trapped in that maze until they starved to death. Lesson learnt: don't touch possible magical traps. She knew now what had happened, what was happening, to Rociard's grandchildren. It was horrifying to think of. Kovacs didn't compliment her in words for getting them out of the wizards' guild, but she leant on his arm and felt his warmth.
"I want to help," she said. "Tell me what I need to do and I'll be there."

"Talk to the jeweller," Kovacs said. "Don't give him false hope. Tell him how long until he can expect to hear again. And don't tell him who I am."

She nodded. There wasn't much to say. They were nearly at the carriage stands. Since the maze, the skies had clouded over; drops of rain began to fall in a grey shower, soaking her mantle. "Will you be at the trade dinner at Sailors' Hall?" Pherenike asked. "Maybe I'll see you there."

"I'll be there with my father. Mostly business, but we could conceivably fit in some pleasure as well." Kovacs' face was serious as he met her eyes. He touched her cheek with a gloved hand, so gently that it felt like a kiss. He smelt of the charred remains of his fire. Then she left him behind in the rain, stepping into a small hackney and away.

The gnome's granddaughters were in the back of her mind, but the time for that would soon come. Pherenike dressed in front of her mirror, preparing to meet her lover, smiling slowly at her reflection, a faint pink shine on her cheeks. She dabbed magnolia perfume on each wrist in turn, the sweet-scented drops cold on her skin. She wore a creation of flimsy pale voile, the colour of the moon in winter. The gown was high-necked, with soft translucent organza revealing her collarbones. A low waist clung to her hips, bound with a belt in silver fillet. The folds of the long skirts finished just above the graceful curve of her ankles, clad in cobweb-thin silk stockings. She took on a touch of the barbaric and bizarre through earrings once dug up from an ancient Maztican tomb, bluestone and copper and feather above the black coils of her hair. She left it loosely bound, some locks falling free around her face, and reached for her pearl comb. Once, it had been a pearl necklace inherited from her mother, but Candle had sneered at the old-fashioned setting; she'd had it refashioned into an elaborate comb, loops of pearls around a blue-streaked cobalt mount, and it had passed inspection while Candle's sneers became edged with envy. She pinned back her hair with her mother's pearls shining on the top of her head, thinking of dancing in Kovacs' arms again.

Would Mother approve of him? Pherenike thought. Probably not. She'd always imagined her mother as staid and conservative as her father. Perhaps she was wrong. After all, her mother had worshipped Deneir, the god of art. Like Pherenike, she'd been a librarian. But other than those bare facts, her mother was a daub of crayon on the wall, dead when she was born, a woman she'd no memory of. Pherenike slipped a light wrap around her shoulders, and tripped blithely to meet her fate at the dinner.

The hall buzzed with sizzling oil-flames and loud chatter. Yarrow Blaine was by a tall centrepiece festooned with grapes, peaches, and apricots, which had been elaborately trimmed and threaded on fine wire to look like ships in full sail. I never really liked you, even when I thought Candle's world glamorous and exciting. We never had much in common and half the things I said flew over your head, Pherenike thought. But Yarrow was good-natured and usually cheerful; at least she was better company than Livia, these days. Yarrow didn't turn to look or greet anyone else. She was busy, the red splash of uniform beside her representing Lieutenant Sugersson of the Flaming Fist, Yarrow's Sweet Goat. He casually ruined the display, ripping off grapes and laughing about it, trying to feed them to Yarrow while she playfully squirmed in his arms. The two of them were steady lovers, though neither had enough coin to scrape together a marriage. At parties, the Sweet Goat would ply Yarrow with enough wine that she could scarcely walk without falling over, then use the excuse to take her away. Pherenike didn't know what Yarrow saw in that lout. He was Conradin's equal in stupidity and maybe even in malice. But now Yarrow was laughing, giggling, pulling the Sweet Goat into an impromptu frogs-legs dance on the wooden floor. His broad back knocked half the remaining fruit ships on the centrepiece over, though neither of them seemed to care.

If Sweet Goat was here, ten to one so was Conradin. Another person she didn't want to see.
Pherenike's eyes raked the guests for the only one she wanted to see, who wasn't here yet. She knew Livia was already present, even if she didn't want to give her the satisfaction of staring at her. Livia stood out in a dress the colour of antique burgundy wine, with scarlet ribbons blazing brightly in her hair. Livia was almost a princess here at this dinner in Sailors' Hall, Captain Hellebore's daughter and heiress, first among merchants through her father's trading. She stood by the fireside and held court, surrounded by a never-ending stream of petitioners.

It felt as if the room was full of hidden serpents, monsters who sometimes wore the guise of mortals, Pherenike thought. Captain Conradin Cordenstein and Sweet Goat, who didn't understand the meaning of the word no. Cheerful Yarrow, who just as happily giggled when she innocently danced and when Candle had her help humiliate someone in public. Livia extended a red-gloved hand to a middle-aged merchant, who made her a ceremonious bow. Pherenike felt sick. *Would you kiss the hand of the beautiful woman in red if you knew she signed up to test her magic on kidnapped children?*

Then she saw the Demircis, father and son, entering together. The crowd seemed to instinctively draw back from them, granting them space. Pherenike looked at Kovacs' father with some curiosity. It was the first time she'd seen Albescu Demirci. No, not the first time, now she had a chance to study him. Pherenike remembered the man with the white greatcoat at the Grand Dukes' ball, glaring with a cold fury at his son. Now he looked ordinary enough, a tall olive-skinned man with iron-grey hair and the straight-backed bearing of a duellist, thin-lipped and light-eyed. Seeing them side by side, both walking with a fluid prowling stride like two tigers, she was struck by Kovacs' resemblance to him. No wonder Yarrow and everyone assumed he was Albescu's bastard. Kovacs was shorter and darker, but otherwise anyone would have guessed them as father and son. But there was no blood between them; it must be the shared language of gesture and expression, learnt from environment. The two men split apart from each other, as if they'd nonverbally planned the exact moment between them, and merged into the crowd. *Soon*, Pherenike thought.

Livia allowed yet another greybeard trader to kiss her red-gloved hand. She spoke courteously to him, as she'd done to everyone else in her receiving line, the same empty polite phrases over and over again while she mentally rehearsed the public speech she would give to this entire room. She was excited rather than frightened at the challenge. Her blood thrummed inside her and her smilies were more ready, her cheeks lightly flushed even beyond the fire's warmth. She met the merchant's eyes fearlessly, speaking in a voice pitched to make him feel like her attention was solely on him, and he left satisfied. Then the next bowed to her, a young blond man trading on behalf of the Barrelbale holdings. She'd be courteous enough for him, but she had no time for a puppy of a fortune-hunter. Livia pulled back her hand as the boy grasped it slightly too long, and allowed herself a slightly frostier tone. Her throat was growing dry. The crowd around her seemed endless, and yet she had to allow them all attention and make each feel important to her.

Livia's eyes caught someone familiar, far away from her. She recognised the white surcoat and blue sign of Albescu Demirci, of Blue Shale. A servant approached Demirci with a wineglass, and she envied him the refreshment for a parched tongue. Demirci placed two long fingers over the glass before it was even a quarter full; a restrained man, carefully abstinent. Livia sensed that he was accustomed to being in control of himself and his surroundings. Perhaps it was that trait that appealed to her. She thought Demirci's pale eyes met her glance, but she couldn't be sure at that distance. He said some quiet words. A few moments later, the servant made his way over to her. Livia gratefully took the wine for her dry throat.

She was fresh and ready to deliver her speech, standing in her father's stead. Philippe Hellebore hated public speaking, but Livia had lately discovered that she did not. She'd crafted and memorised a short speech, pithy without anything that went too deep, praising Baldur's Gate and the advantages that lay in its trade and those that were gathered here tonight. Livia flattered her audience until they
were lulled, then took a sharp left turn into the threats that beset them. She briefly addressed the dangers of falling into Amnian tyranny (Just think of how they restrict their mages! But for this audience, address other factors - ) and finally the degradation and shame of black lotus, weakening their city and rotting it from within. She allowed the disgust she genuinely felt for such degenerates to empower her speech, casting an enchantment without any use of the Weave. In most of the faces around her, she was successful. Almost all eyes were on her, the traders brought to congratulate themselves on their success and self-righteousness by the power of her words. She ignored Pherenike's still pale-faced look and Demirci's son's cynical twitch of an eyebrow.

"Let us stand for law, discipline, and strength," Livia finished. "We soon elect a new Grand Duke. We will choose rightly this time."

She took her seat. The applause was satisfying. I did it without my magic. I will be successful. Another stream of people approached her after the formal dinner, offering congratulations and compliments. Most of the words and forms were flattery as empty as a pasteboard decoration, but that did not matter. What mattered was that they felt compelled to offer tribute to her. The servants cleared away the tables, and the hired musicians struck up the beginnings of a dreadful cacophony as the country-dancing portion of the evening began.

Albescu Demirci sipped from the same glass he'd had earlier, the volume of wine scarcely lowered. He too chose the role of observer rather than participant in the dance. He watched Livia watching him, and coolly waited for her to make the first approach. This man, Livia thought, would at least not give her meaningless puffery. Even if he criticised, it would have force and thought behind it.

"What did you think?" Livia asked him bluntly. She lifted her chin and waited to learn her fate.

"I think," Albescu Demirci said, "that I speak to a future Grand Duchess."

The musicians' cacophony clammed louder than ever before, but louder still was the beat of the ambition Livia had not yet revealed in public, the ambition she had not dared to tell others until she was certain of support. Nakedly, shorn of any pretence of meekness, Livia wanted to be elected Grand Duchess in Balduran's place. This man had understood her, had looked into her inmost self and fathomed her goal. Livia met Albescu Demirci's eyes and saw her own image in their depths, both of them mirrored in each other's gaze, an endless series of icy reflections. What she saw intrigued and interested her, and she stepped infinitesimally closer to him.

Pherenike ducked under the line, escaping the dance for the moment. Livia all but killed Balduran and she abused it for her speech, she thought, sickened by the changes in her former friend. She saw Albescu Demirci was deep in conversation with Livia; Kovacs had earlier said they had some kind of business together. It didn't make her think better of either of them. Yarrow danced with a man with a thick head of blond curls. It seemed her Sweet Goat had abandoned her for the moment. Pherenike had only danced with Kovacs once tonight, and that was only a brief circle-step before changing partners yet again. I understand that he doesn't want him to know. Especially if I find another way to set him free. Pherenike's hand brushed her reticule for a moment. The sound was unfamiliar, a crinkling as if of paper, yet she hadn't placed any papers in there. She unfastened it and saw the note that had been slipped inside.

The west side-door, in two dances' time, Kovacs' handwriting read. He was good - too good; she hadn't detected him place the note and it was already late. Pherenike palmed one of her earrings, then wandered back as if she were looking for it. She slipped out of the west side-door and followed the edge of the hall. The silver full moon shone in the darkness and a gnome-made lamppost flickered with a pale green light over the cracked cobblestones.

Pherenike heard noises around the corner, but not somebody waiting. It sounded much more like a
scuffle. She ran toward it. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the alleyway. She saw the two
Flaming Fists in their scarlet dress uniforms - Conradin and Sweet Goat - and the third figure
struggling between them, blinded and gagged by Conradin's cloak wrapped around his face and
arms, trying to get free.

"Let him go!" she shouted.

Conradin sputtered something, something ugly and incoherent, more noise than words. She didn't
understand him. Then he turned on his victim and suddenly slammed Kovacs into the wall, head
first. Pherenike cried out.

"Goat, silence the slut!" Conradin ordered. His friend loped up to her. Pherenike started a scream -
just let someone hear and it would be all right - but then the Sweet Goat was on her, too fast and too
strong. She saw Conradin slam Kovacs' skull into the wall again. Kovacs' body fell limp as if he
were mortally wounded. Then Goat's fist came toward her temple, too quickly to dodge or even to be
afraid, and her world went black.

Everything jolted around her, and her hair was loose around her shoulders. They'd taken her mother's
pearls. Those physical sensations were all Pherenike noticed as her shattered mind reached back
toward consciousness. Then she remembered. Conradin. Kovacs. He can't be dead, he can heal. I'm
in a carriage. She smelt wine-breath, too hot and close to her face. The Ride. They tie a man
underneath and ride low. I heard Conradin and Goat brag about it before, at a party with Candle.
Everyone laughed and I didn't think about it. Pherenike felt thick fleshy hands pressed against her,
heated skin pushing her down. Conradin held her face between his hands. He grasped her cheeks,
his shoulders forcing her back into the seat so she couldn't move her arms. She could smell the fumes
of what he'd been drinking and see his broad features too close to her face, coarse and contorted at
this distance and angle.

"You can hear me." Flecks of warm spittle hit her face as he spoke in rage. "I was wrong. I thought
you were pure but you were with him the whole time - you filthy whore. You snuck out to be with
him. I'd have offered to marry you."

Conradin looked deranged, insane. Beyond him, atop the open calash, she could see Sweet Goat
driving the pair of horses, deliberately wildly. She felt the harsh jolts and bumps travel up her spine
and shake her bones like a dog with a rat in its mouth.

Maybe this was a form of power, Pherenike thought. This mad, desperate man screaming at her,
kidnapping, breaking the laws he was supposed to uphold as a Flaming Fist. Had Candle held
something like this in mind when she'd selected Pherenike, the power to draw men's eyes and drive
them to frantic, appalling actions? She wanted none of it and hated all of this. She needed to get
Conradin off her, make him stop touching her.

Her nerveless fingers, flailing, brushed over the hilt of Conradin's belt knife. The handle was
embossed with the Flaming Fist's sign in gaudy gold, the edge sharp and cutting in spite of the rich
inlay - as he'd always boasted, demonstrated on helpless apples and mince-pies. Pherenike felt as if
the knife leapt into her hand. Conradin's hands groped lower, bruising her chest, shaking her. She
stabbed, not knowing where she was striking. But the knife plunged into flesh well enough. He
jerked and cried out, and the knife burst free from him. His fist came toward her. She stabbed again,
somewhere around his chin, and blood gouted out. Conradin gave a cry more like an animal than like
a person. He fell to his knees. She stabbed and kept stabbing. Across his mouth, into his neck, his
chest. It felt like a nightmare, a bloody haze, controlled her. Pherenike knelt over Conradin, his body still and his face white and terrified. Warm wet heavy blood painted her pale dress in thick black stains.

She smelt something burning below them. She saw Sweet Goat turn from his seat. First horror and then anger swept across his face in the moonlight.

"You murdered my best friend. I'm going to beat you to death," Sweet Goat said.

Something moved under the carriage, under then shaking the sides of it. Pherenike looked down to see a black hand, embedded in the carriage's wood. Smoulder from burning ropes crackled in the night. There was nothing human about Kovacs' eyes, glowing yellow. He swung himself up, climbing, splintering the wood. There was something wrong with his left hand. Those were claws, not fingernails. That was how he was managing to cling on, even climb. The hand was black and scaled and flensed as if all the flesh had been stripped away from it. The claws sunk into the wood again. Then Kovacs faced Sweet Goat, standing between him and Pherenike.

Sweet Goat was supposed to be a master duellist, undefeated champion of half a hundred fights, an expert killer. He dropped the reins and drew a short sword, striking at Kovacs. Kovacs caught the blow with his black hand. It pierced through his palm, but he didn't seem to feel pain. He twisted, and the blade came away from the Sweet Goat's hand. Kovacs made a slashing motion with his right hand, and suddenly the Sweet Goat bled from a tear in his throat. Pherenike recognised one of those black throwing knives, held up Kovacs' sleeve. The Goat's throat was a ragged mess. He'd barely been able to scream before he died.

The horses, panicking, raced faster than ever before. With a jolt, the Sweet Goat's body vanished. It fell to the cobblestones, the neck at the wrong angle, blood pooling below it. Kovacs scooped up the reins.

There were shouts, of course. Cries to stop the speeding carriage.

"You killed him. Good," Kovacs said. He wasn't trying to slow the horses on their frantic pace. If anything, his driving sped up. Pherenike pulled herself up beside him. She involuntarily looked down at that black hand, covered in scales and ending in black claws. She could see now that where Kovacs' wrist ended was a mass of bloody flesh, as if everything but a few black bones had been flayed away. As if he'd had to peel his own hand off like a glove in order to be free from bonds. As if, under his skin, he wasn't human at all. His eyes still glowed with that uncanny yellow fire, the same as when he had killed Candle. He smelt of smoke and burnt rope and blood, so much blood. It was all around them.

He's not a demon. We both slew tonight, and I'm not sorry they're dead.

"Take my cloak and put it on," Kovacs said. He directed the horses, pulling on them, making them leap into a high shortcut. The watch was being raised. 'Stop in the name of the Flaming Fist!' they heard someone shout. Lamplight and torchlight broke out around them, catching up to Conradin's racehorses.

With cold fingers, Pherenike unfastened the clasp from around Kovacs' neck and did as he suggested. She found her movements calm even as her thoughts raced over what they had done. The black cloak settled over the bloodstains on her dress.

They drove toward the docks, Pherenike could tell. Despite only being in the city a short while, Kovacs seemed to know the exact route he wanted. He urged the horses on.
Pherenike felt something thud into the back of the carriage. The horses whinnied in shock. She realised it was a crossbow bolt. The Fist were shooting at them, trying to bring down the murderers of two of their own. Kovacs cracked the whip over the horses' heads and they sped faster.

She felt him reach for the threads of the Weave. Kovacs cast a spell, carefully, precisely. The horses felt it as well. The world seemed to slow down to a crawl. Yelling voices reached her with every syllable uttered glacially slow, so she understood none of it. Buildings raced past them faster than ever before while the people standing there seemed frozen in place. It wasn't that the world had gone slow. It was that they themselves were suddenly faster, magic speeding their limbs and minds more quickly than anyone else. The carriage clanked and rattled downhill, racing to the docks. Pherenike could smell the salt in the air.

"You took Candle on yourself with Livia," Kovacs said. The inhuman golden light was beginning to disappear from his eyes and he looked almost like himself, except for his black hand. "Let me take this one. I hurt you - it was all me. Tell them."

"I'll tell them that you rescued me," Pherenike said. They'd done nothing wrong. It was all Conradin. They could come through this. It would be her word - above two dead Flaming Fists, one stabbed many times, the other with his throat slit -

The calash raced past the livestock holdings, where merchants held cattle and pigs and geese just before herding them on ships. Animals mooed and brayed and barked into the air, as if they sensed something unnatural approach their midst.

Kovacs looped the reins around his wrist and took hold of Pherenike. He lifted her in his arms. Then he threw her down.

It would look to anyone as if he were trying to kill her, flinging her from a moving carriage. But Pherenike felt another spell wrap around her, cushioning her in the air, slowing her fall. For a moment, it felt as if he was still holding her. Then she landed with a sucking sound in mud, all soft and black around her. A pig's face thrust itself against her. People were shouting and running and there were lights nearby.

Pherenike saw the carriage dive downward, out of control, toward the sea. A flurry of crossbow bolts slammed into the wood. She saw flashes as the Flaming Fist rode toward it, carrying torches and arms. At the last moment, Kovacs slashed through the traces with a knife. The horses darted to the side to escape. But the carriage itself wouldn't stop. It ran too fast to change direction or be stopped, and plunged off the end of the pier into the harbour. The carriage splintered and sunk.

She watched the sea. The Flaming Fist came to pull her out of the pig-pen. They shone torches over the harbour, but there was no sign of a dark head breaking the surface. Nothing emerged to breathe from that black water. She'd lost him.

—

'Never having rung out a blither peal' - P.G. Wodehouse.
It was freezing. Kovacs crossed his arms over his chest in the bathing-barrel, the water almost up to his shoulders. They'd made it to a city and a rented house in place of the Moonsea wilds, but nothing had changed. He was in his father's study. Maybe, in the best case scenario, the purpose of this particular exercise was a lecture on how cleanliness was the next thing to godliness - in an extremely abbreviated hornbook. That was unlikely.

He closed his eyes, shrinking back from what was coming. He was exhausted. It felt as if his bones were already ground down to dust and his mind was a hopeless fog. Long hours of busy-work in menial jobs no one else wanted, and his father's servant Tirzah ordered to train him until he collapsed. She was harsher than Loran had ever been.

"You're filthy."

Kovacs opened his eyes to watch his father approach. If after all this time he still hoped to see some trace of mercy or pity in his face, he wouldn't find it. The water around him was already dirty. He stank of stables and sweat and unwashed clothing. He'd been too bone-tired to change or bathe and barely ate or drank. He was kept occupied and supervised so he wouldn't make some other pathetic attempt to end his existence. There was no point to anything, and it was only about to get worse.

The hand knotted itself around his hair and forced his head underwater. He tried to struggle, but his knees quickly buckled. His father didn't even have to use the markings to hold him.

Cold water all around him. He couldn't breathe, couldn't see. His fingers clawed at the wrist holding him down. It didn't do anything, didn't budge the iron-corded sinews.

He went limp, as if he'd already drowned. He lost all his breath. He fought not to inhale the water, not to move.

The hand pulled Kovacs up again and he gasped for air. Then his father forced him under again. It seemed to last longer, longer each time. He spewed out water and begged.

"You don't - you don't want to kill me. You stopped me. You were a priest - his priest. You could heal people, maybe raise them from the dead, but you can't do that any more." The grip on his head only grew stronger, as if he'd said the wrong thing. He went down again.

Some said drowning was a peaceful death but it was anything but. Kovacs breathed in water, and his throat and chest burned like fire. His arms pushed down into the water. Then he felt his body go limp, black spots spreading through his skull. The iron hand above him held him down. He was freezing cold and burning to death from the inside out at the same time. His body forced him to breathe in water again, down his nostrils like streams of sizzling mercury filling his lungs. His world was only fiery pain and he begged for it to end.

Then something else started to burn inside him. Something forced out the water from his lungs, gave him what he needed to scratch and claw a way to survive this. He breathed water and it burned like fire and he didn't die. It only made him want to. His hands clawed the sides of the barrel, uselessly, fingernails breaking and tearing off in more pain. His power took the water into his lungs and
painfully expelled it again, making him drown over and over again without being allowed to die of it.

Kovacs didn't know how many hours it was, how long before his father's endless tests were done. He was left to gasp and vomit on the edge, while his father added to the notes at his desk. He tasted air and knew that alone should be considered a luxury now. When his father lifted him out of the cold water and gave him a blanket, he fought against himself on feeling grateful. Grateful, like his mother had recommended.

He understood what his father was trying to show him. A murderer's son couldn't die by drowning. Born to be hanged.

—

Kovacs surfaced from the black water on the other side of Baldur's Gate harbour. He'd stayed under longer than a human could have done and lived. It would be ironic if the help he'd given them over Rampion made them doubt another death by drowning with no body. He coughed, dislodging water caught in his burning throat. There wouldn't be a body when he died. Just the dust of a dead god.

They hurt her. At least she killed one of them. It was his fault, for letting his skull be crushed by an overmuscled toy-soldier rapist. She'd been magnificent in a way, gouted with blood, a knife in hand. An avenging solar. No, something darker than that, a fury, an erinyes.

It was over. Everyone knew what he'd done and everyone would know he'd done it for her.

He looked down at his black hand. It felt like the claws twitched independently of his will. He tried to focus, to make skin and flesh spread back across it and recover, but it felt like doing that was harder each time he let go.

The black hand was a disappointment to his father, when he'd first manifested it. It was suited for combat - sharp claws and ash-black scales that couldn't feel pain - but not more useful than a sword. Kovacs could feel it striving against him when he fought, or even when he didn't. Sometimes he felt like he couldn't control it at all. It was one of the reasons why he wore gloves most of the time, in case it came against his will and this was the time he wasn't able to force it back.

You want her to think you're a monster? Tirzah had said. She knew what that felt like. Pherenike had seen enough of him to know the monster that waited inside him.

He'd have to leave. Face what he had to face.

He'd left it some time, perhaps time enough for them to hold back on watching Pherenike. He was an outlaw, laying low in the old temple of Bhaal; he'd learnt he was wanted for rape and murder. He tried to move through the streets as if he had nothing to hide, the confidence of an out-of-work bravo seeking whatever hires lay open. His rucksack squeaked.

The familiar hedged garden felt like nothing had changed, though so much had. An oddly chilly breeze for summer ruffled the leaves of a peach-tree, rolling a few small worm-eaten fruits across the green grass. A dog barked around the other end of the garden. Not caring much to risk an additional charge of burglary, Kovacs threw some gravel at Pherenike's window, and retired to the old garden-shed, twenty different possible escape plans simmering in his head.

He'd tried to change his appearance, but he didn't think that anything he could do would stop her from recognising him. It felt like an age before Pherenike came. She was pale, paler than he'd ever seen her, with black and indigo rubbed deeply under her eyes as if she had not slept. That wasn't good, for what he intended to ask of her. To finish what they'd begun. Yellowing bruises stained her
neck and collarbones, marks that should never have been there. She didn't give him time to speak. She rushed at him and held him tightly.

"I thought ... I knew ... It's not as if I hadn't seen some of what you can do ... they never found your body. Maybe some part of me would have known it, or dreamt it, if you were never coming back. I had no way to see you, I had nothing. I thought you were drowned. Don't ever do that to me again," Pherenike said. She spoke into his shoulder and tightened her grip.

"I can't drown. Born to be - I mean, I literally can't drown. If you ever want to be rid of me, decapitation would work," Kovacs said. It worked on almost any kind of monster. "I'm sorry. They harmed you, and they are dead, but that undoes none of it."

"Sweet Goat's real name was Agnethe Ronwaldo Sugersson. They had to say it in the obituary. Who knew?" Pherenike said. "Elly wouldn't stop pestering me to ask about your murderous bloodthirst and gore and exactly how many times you stabbed them. Then Sarah boxed her ears and sent her outside with the dog."

"Don't be too hard on her. I was similar, at the same age. I suppose most children are drawn to blood and thunder," Kovacs said. From the distant yells and barks outside the shed, it sounded like Elly was trying to tutor Spider on fetching.

"I don't care what anyone says," Pherenike said. Her voice was strained but she wasn't weeping this time. He'd always known she could handle herself in trouble. "I tried to tell them the truth. They wouldn't believe me. They wanted to believe Conradin was good. He wasn't, he was an awful wastrel who did nothing useful but borrow money off his family's allowance, just another useless drone fribbling away his inheritance on wine and games. Gods, I sound like Candle. His family are well off, and the Fist banded around their own - they wanted to believe you murdered them. They're wrong. We were only defending ourselves. They were monsters."

"It's hard to claim self-defence after stabbing someone thirty times," Kovacs said. He tried to keep most of the approval he felt for her actions out of his voice, expecting she wouldn't appreciate it.

"I did not stab him thirty times," Pherenike corrected. "And you - you're a wanted man and part of it is my fault."

"None of it is your fault," Kovacs said. "Kovacs Demirci was always something of a legal fiction. Let him die. Enter some nameless hireling of Blue Shale, the next town along." At least he wouldn't have to pretend in public any more that he was his father's son.

He'd been a fool, and he was and would be punished for it. But this was a change, and part of him welcomed it because it was a change.

"The trouble is they don't think you're dead," Pherenike said.

"I suppose I'll have to die in some more spectacular and public fashion, then - " He broke off when she kissed him, with a hungry desperation that he felt in full measure. "I killed someone for the first time and I thought you were dead and I'm as angry as I'm glad, she seemed to say. An aching, feverish need drove them together, seeking each other like lodestone drawn to lodestone. She was rough and intense, and didn't seem to give a damn as her skin scraped against stubble. He devoured the salt warmth of her, sinking as if swallowed by the sea.

He broke off from her when his rucksack squeaked again. He took it off and set it on the ground between them. "I came to ask for your help. You can say no," Kovacs said. He had only her to ask - he'd not be permitted to use Krilpur again. "Livia Hellebore made an appointment with Casimir
Durante for today. She won't be keeping it. She and a few port officials received anonymous
messages about a Hellebore ship, the Corvid, unloading today. With her run for Grand Duchess built
on her anti-lotus crusade, she can't afford to be caught with her own snout in the trough. I want you
to go as her. You've similar builds, and it's not the sort of thing where the real Livia would want
anyone looking too closely at her face."

He didn't know how much time he had left. Finish it now or maybe never.

"I'll do it," Pherenike said, pale and resolute, composed once more. "I said I would, and I want to."

"This is what I need from you." Kovacs stooped over the rucksack. He took out a simple white
bracelet, a set of enamelled links with a single crystal bead hanging between them. "I should have
finished this sooner, given it to you before - but it's too late. I made it myself. I bought the chain and
the bead, but I spelled it myself. It works for you and only you. When you need to, break the bead. It
opens a door in the air that takes you to your bedroom. You'll be alone." He'd considered if an
enemy sought to grab her, follow her - it would protect her and no other, not even himself. "The door
lasts for about four heartbeats."

She slipped it over her wrist.

"Take my familiar with you," he said. "Then I'll know exactly where you are - and where Durante's
keeping his children." A mage's familiar was a companion animal, magically bonded to its summoner
for life. At the time he'd done the spell, Kovacs had figured that an animal whose well-being was
directly linked to his might be safe from his father. "I called her when I was ... lonely, I suppose, a
long time ago. I didn't realise there was an exotic animal stall in the vicinity. And doubtless I messed
up the casting."

Maybe a horse or dog, he'd thought at the time; or a bird of prey or scorpion or giant spider. He
hadn't expected - or wanted - a small furry rodent. "Her name is Tirzah the Second. If she's harmed
I'm harmed, and she's long-lived for her kind, but other than that her special abilities are sleeping
most of the day and eating walnuts."

Kovacs scooped her out of her cage in the rucksack. Tirzah the Second was a small hamster, orange
with black spots in her fur, with sleepy eyes. Pherenike was gentle with her.

"Wait outside the mages' guild. Someone will pick you up, most likely blindfold you," he said. "Do
exactly as they say. When you get there, stay in the same place and wait. Don't go anywhere. I'll
come for you. If you're in any danger, break the bead."

Pherenike hastened to ready herself. Durante's children, kidnapped and sold by their own father,
threw what she had endured in the past few days into a sharp relief. There were far worse things in
the world. The hamster curled itself up on the corner of her bed and dozed while it had the chance.
She and Livia might both be small and slight, but no one would ever mistake one for the other. At
least she could hide most of her face with a scarf, and not look too out of place in the unseasonably
cold weather. Pherenike brushed powder and colour on her cheeks to make them look rounder,
added Thayvian kohl to change the angle of her eyes. A translucent scarf gave her hair a reddish tint,
and she drew on a dark green hooded cloak above it. She gathered the hamster up in a pocket, along
with a file and a paring-knife.

It was the day for the charwoman to come in and take care of the rough work for Sarah, as she did
twice a tenday. Pherenike could hear the bustle downstairs. She liked the thought of routine, some
shred of normalcy despite her ruined reputation and the dread fear she'd been through that he'd been
drowned. Her father and the housekeeper were keeping a far more careful watch on her then before,
but luckily she'd shut herself in her room long enough that they expected her to continue there.
without interruption. She chose her moment carefully and slipped out.

"You know where they are?" Morgy the maid-of-all-work asked Kovacs, walking together through a Baldurian back alleyway. She'd chosen to wear one stocking in virulent green and purple stripes, the other in red and purple patchwork today. A man's duster was flung over her grey smock and her boots sunk determinedly into the city mud.

"Not exactly. Sent a confederate ahead. She's carrying my familiar, so I'll know no matter what wards he uses. And by the way, if anyone asks, I'm your cousin Khalid from Calimshan," Kovacs said. He spoke with the softer intonation and smoothed sounds of a Calishite's Common, using Morgy for practice.

"Feh. I never told you that," Morgy said. "You've a regular sponge-ear for accents. It's a better name than Hopeless, anyhow. Them northerners might think you look the part, but not me." She kept up with him as they went quickly through this back route, aiming for the vicinity of the mages' guild for now. Kovacs knew where his familiar was the same way he knew where his feet were: a connection unhampered by distance, a bond that couldn't be undone with impunity.

"Your aunt sadly married a foreigner. A very poor decision that your family naturally deplored," Kovacs said.

"Folk from up your way that bad, are they?" Morgy said.

"We do a good sideline in legal wife-killing," Kovacs said, and regretted the too-serious tone as soon as he said it. They were papering over an empty space with idle chat, not yet talking about why a servant needed to come to fight a wizard - or what Morgy, perhaps, also recognised in him.

"In Calimshan you can have up to three," Morgy said.

"A sensible man knows his limits," Kovacs returned. He tilted his head. "Feels like they've left the mage's guild. Moving south-east." They tracked as quickly as they could on foot. Kovacs felt for some of the maps in his sleeve. If they were fortunate, his father's archaeological expeditions might have some actual use. Morgy, familiar with the byways of modern Baldur's Gate, gave her best shortcuts.

It was a crumbling villa in the poorer quarter of town, marked by no signs to identify the owner. Almost a tower, tall built but narrowly hemmed in by the houses around it, made from old grey sandstone. Tangled weeds and grasses spread through the neglected gardens of the surrounding buildings and broke through the cobblestones. But the grounds of that particular tower were brown and dead, divided by a boundary line of unnatural, stark geometry. It was as if things invisible to the eye had drawn all the life out of that one garden. They probably had. Kovacs could all but taste a network of wizards' wards in the air, threads of the Weave taut and criss-crossing each other, ready to detect any and all intruders.

Kovacs drew out the particular map he needed. "We're in luck," he said. "I know of an old smugglers' tunnel nearby. Even if it's blocked up, I have some ways around that."

"This don't look blocked to me," Morgy said. The smugglers' tunnel smelt of salt and earth. Modern feet had trampled through it not long ago. It reeked of strong, unpleasant smells: magical waste, sulphur and rotten eggs and used guano, and below that, decaying meat. A few crude traps were laid as protections, but Durante had needed to set up warnings for his own hirelings. The code to them wasn't particularly difficult to decipher, a certain shade of lighter moss on the walls. People usually chose to sacrifice at least some security in the name of practical use.
"Steady on," Morgy warned. At her gesture, Kovacs found the metal edge of a pipe buried in the walls. A single wrong touch, and it would spew flame forth. He stepped cautiously past it.

They crossed by a black pond, where the smell of rotting meat was far worse. The pool seemed quite deep, and filled with all sorts of waste. Kovacs stepped over a trace of white bone. A skull, small and mostly intact, almost seemed to shine in the darkness.

"'Speriments on monkeys, and things of that kind," Morgy said.

Durante clearly indulged in literal burying of literal bodies here, Kovacs thought. "Yes. A monkey's skull, no doubt," he said.

A few steps further. Kovacs could feel the tangled threads of the Weave, bound together in a dangerous knot. Another form of protection. He saw the hulking shape come out of the shadows toward them, walking on slow, regular steps that rang heavily against the soggy tunnel. There must be some signal that would stop it, but he saw nothing obvious. It was similar to the automaton in Durante's hidden plane, the mixture of dead flesh and metal guarding his laboratory. Kovacs manifested fire on his hand again, expecting it to turn its attention on the strongest heat source, but the golem still made straight for Morgy. He tried to slow it down, sweeping his sword through its side. The maid-of-all-work didn't try to run away, stood her ground as the metal claws targeted her. The automaton swung.

Morgy punched it in the face. The metal mask crumpled. Kovacs swore he saw sparks fly from it. The automaton fell back like a cockroach twitching on a pin. Before it could rise, they seized an arm each and dragged the golem to the pond. He couldn't help but notice Morgy's strength, handling the metal like it was nothing. They let the automaton sink in as quiet a demise as possible.

"Why a maid-of-all-work?" Kovacs asked.

Morgy brushed her hands on her smock. "I guess half-humans like us know each other, so there's no more sense in hiding," she said. "My powers don't work just like that." She snapped her fingers, which echoed in the cave.

Durante had placed a locked door beyond his golem. Kovacs turned his attention to the tumblers.

"There's a fire in you. I was wondering - part dragon, part fire giant?" he said.

"Neither. I'm half jinn, half kitchen-boy," Morgy said. "I run on wishes and orders. Can't do hardly anything for myself."

"That's inconvenient," Kovas said. He reached for the bolt on the other side of the door, with a tiny pair of pincers in hand.

"Don't know exactly what you are," Morgy said. "You got a tail with a pointy end on it under that cloak? No? I can see some fire there, but not like me. Some other inky fillings, some binding to keep you hidden. Black fire? A black sun? Never mind, that sounds daft. I give up."

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you." He couldn't tell her, and he was relieved she hadn't guessed. The bolt slid back quietly, muffled by frequent use. Kovacs held the door open. "Ladies first?"

"Ain't no lady," Morgy protested, and conspicuously wiped her hands on her smock again.

"You could make people call you lady, if you wanted. Do you want to be free?" Kovacs said. There was probably some sort of loophole or spell to help her; unlike him, she wasn't a prisoner. "I've known worse ladies."
But Morgy shook her head decisively. "I ain't educated like you, and I'm too old a dog to learn me new tricks. I choose who I work for, I get my three meals a day, and I'm happy to cook and clean and sleep when the house's kids aren't getting kidnapped by complete bloody bastards. I'm here to save 'em, then go back to my quiet life. I've seen how you are; grim and dark all the time. Would you be any less gloomy if you got free?"

She was perhaps overly perceptive.

"Spare me the homily on how all contentment comes from within," Kovacs said. "In my particular circumstances, the answer to that question is an emphatic yes." He silenced himself, particularly since she wasn't paying attention any more - and since they neared their goal.

They stepped on planking instead of the rough stone of the cave. A set of wooden steps wound upward through the darkness, pointing to a trapdoor. The heavy padlock on this one was more elaborate, bound with spells as well as steel. But it was still cheap stuff, nothing Kovacs hadn't seen before, and the trapdoor swung open.

To a storeroom with a squadron of no less than six automatons, advancing on them.

"You think you can win this one?" Morgy asked.

"Odds aren't pleasant, but I've some tricks up my sleeve. Any suggestions?" Kovacs said.

"Say, 'Morgy, I wish for you to protect me,'" she said.

"Morgy, I wish for you to protect me. If you can make it quiet, or - the potion-cabinet on the left wall. Try to make it look like ... "

"No promises. Get down - and cover your eyes."

He slipped back down on the stairs. The golems raised thick stone and metal hands, unwavering and almost indestructible. They advanced on the intruder, a thin spare woman in bright knitted stockings.

Then Morgy exploded. Her body burst into soundless, glaring flame, so bright it was white even against Kovacs' closed eyes. There was no noise, only the rushing of air. When the afterimages finally faded, he dared open his eyes. The automatons lay in piles of dripping metal and charcoal dust on the ground. The potions-cabinet had been blown open and blackened. He waited a moment, but there was no sign of Morgy. So he went onward and upward into Durante's laboratory.

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The servant, an old woman with a face gnarled and brown as a walnut, didn't even try to look under Pherenike's hood. Unusually, she drove a small, closed hackney from the mage's guild by herself, smoking an evil-smelling pipe while she did so. The fumes of it even reached the inside of the carriage, or maybe the smell was just the decade's worth or so of filth encrusted on the floor and doors of it. Pherenike felt as if she would never be clean again.

The hamster twitched in her bag. She held it; the small warm weight of it was somehow reassuring. She was left alone in Durante's domain to find her way. She'd been given a wardstone hanging from a chain, and instructions to find a door. Pherenike tested some of the other doors she passed by, only to find them locked. Then she let herself into a small room off the narrow hallway, with a lamp and no windows, a table and a chair and a bed.

The girl was ten, and looked much younger. Her shift was dirty. Her eyes were closed. A thick grimy chain ran between her right hand and the bedpost.
"Please wake up. I've come to rescue you." Pherenike put a hand on the girl's shoulder. The child whimpered in fear, as if she were trying not to scream. Pherenike lifted her hand and froze for a moment. What could she possibly say or do in a place like this, a child treated and sold like a dog?

"Your grandfather Rociard sent me," she said, trying not to stutter. "You're going home. To him. I'll get you out of here, I promise." The child's wide black eyes cut her to the heart. "My name is Pherenike. Are you Orchid?"

The nod was a long time coming, but it came.

"Can you help me, Orchid?" Perhaps the familiar would seem comforting to the child. Pherenike slowly let it out of the bag. Orchid didn't seem to mind, watching the small furry creature. "I'm going to set you free. Can you watch the hamster for me? She belongs to a friend." Pherenike drew the file she'd brought. The metal cuff was fastened to a thin section of the wooden bedpost, below a large knob. The hamster seemed to more or less know what to do, and nestled next to the child. Orchid slightly moved to stroke its fur. Pherenike sawed through the wood, splinters in her hands. The small nail-file perhaps wasn't the best tool for the job. Heroic ballads made such things sound much easier than they were. She wouldn't give up, couldn't, and pulled the last splinters loose. Durante's walls seemed to close in on her, trapping her. She couldn't stay here. She had to get the child out.

Durante's wardstone got her this far and no further in this house of horror. Pherenike studied it. Grey stone, with a blue design crudely painted on it. Most spellcasters only used such runes as pretty patterns to copy. They didn't need to spend years studying the language and its intricate layers of meaning when they could easily use the power.

Such knowledge was only for librarians and scholars. And this was well within Pherenike's studies.

She read the rune twice over. Then an idea seized her like sheets of lightning in a storm, as if black skies were suddenly irradiated with glowing fields of white and gold. For half a minute she forgot the gnome child entirely, so radiant was the possibility. Then she came back to earth. Pherenike was the sort of person who was rarely without something to write with, so she spilt ink on the stone, drawing subtle channels, navigating a maze of spells and vicious counterspells, adding to Durante's drawing and changing the rune's meaning as she did so.

This wardstone would open up every room in this house for her.

Pherenike picked Orchid up. She was much lighter than a human girl would have been, weak and half starved. Probably best to find some sort of back exit. She went down the stairs, feeling the weight of the child gradually heavier and heavier on her. She stopped suddenly at the sight of another automaton, clay and metal and human flesh, a dead body held together with large crude stitches. She was afraid it would attack them like the other golem, but the fleshy head only hung in place, quiescent. Pherenike looked into a pair of cloudy dead blue eyes. Then she heard the low hum of a man's voice - not Kovacs'. She had to hide. Before the golem had a chance to change whatever passed for its mind, Pherenike forced herself inside the door next to it.

She was in a large storeroom, glass and ceramic vessels lining the walls. A magelight triggered as she stepped over the threshold, glittering all too brightly between the glass vials. She closed the door behind her and put her weight on it, afraid that they would find her. The voice - two voices, both low - drew closer.

"It'll be all right," Pherenike whispered to Orchid, although it was much more for her own benefit than anything else.

Then Orchid screamed, the noise shattering. Pherenike whipped around to see what she'd seen. It was only a man in a dark cloak, coming in through the storeroom's other door. Kovacs, following his
Kovacs held up his hands, as if to convince the girl he meant her no harm. Orchid opened her mouth for another scream. Then suddenly a bright red handkerchief unfurled from Kovacs' sleeve, unexpected enough that it surprised the girl into silence. He let the handkerchief flutter in the air as if it were empty, then suddenly it bulged with two orange balls and an egg. He let that be the excuse to slowly walk toward them, juggling the three objects in his hand. Stage magic seemed to calm Orchid's fear, though the situation was anything but a joke.

"I couldn't do anything else - " she started back.

"You're an amateur. Follow my orders. I normally try not to get people who work for me killed."

He'd needled her pride. "I don't work for you, I work with you - "

"I'm sure it's nothing," a man said.

"Yet you're leading us in nothing's direction, my dear friend," a second voice said. Pherenike recognised the mellifluous open vowels, self-consciously harmonious, of Regan Rocheford of the wizards' guild. She'd sat through a few too many of his talks, where he presented very little substance with a great air of mystery.

"Only making certain. It's wise to take care," Durante answered.

"You make excellent efforts to make certain," Rocheford said. "I hear you're entertaining Mistress Hellebore today. Those who attempt to play both sides generally fall between two stools and make a sorry end, Casimir."

He sounded a little bitter. Regan Rocheford was one of the most prominent senior members of the wizards' guild, with few committees and pies that he didn't insert his well-fleshed thumb into. He'd early thrown his cap into the ring to replace Grand Duke Balduran, and Pherenike couldn't imagine he was best pleased about Livia declaring her rival candidacy.

"Nothing could be further from my mind. I'm your man," Durante said. "Chrysanthemum!" he snapped. Pherenike raised her head in surprise; that was the oldest girl's name. "There was a noise around here. What have you seen?" Durante asked harshly.

"It was me, Father. I screamed. I want to scream all the time because of the pain you have given me." The voice was rusty and gravelly and didn't sound at all like it belonged to a fourteen-year-old girl. Pherenike didn't understand; she hadn't seen Chrysanthemum. She'd only seen the golem -

Pherenike's thoughts seemed to stop in pure terror. What had Durante done to his own daughter?

"Be silent, or I'll give your body to orcs," Durante said. The rusty, gravelly voice didn't say anything more.

"A faulty automaton," Rocheford said. "If this is the best you can do … "
"She's only a proof of concept," Durante said. "The weakness of automata is that they can't think for themselves. With this technique, you'll get both thinking and fighting; take convicted criminals and force their minds inside golems, and this city will have an unbeatable defence. All thanks to you, of course, Master Rocheford."

"If they perform no better than the one in your laboratory I shall be far from impressed, considering it was destroyed by a mere librarian," Rocheford said.

The men's voices mercifully faded as they walked away. Pherenike knew her dawning horror must be written on her face. She hoped Orchid had not realised that the monster they'd seen - that thing made from corpses and metal, with a living soul somehow forced inside it - was her sister.

They cautiously opened the door. The golem looked nothing like a gnome girl; the dead body it had been made from looked human, a dough-faced dead man with a shaved head and those horrible cloudy blue eyes.

"Chrysanthemum." Kovacs said her name. "Can you walk quietly?"

"I don't know." The words, spoken by a dead man's body, sounded like rusty nails being hammered into a person's neck. The voice had the moisture of something dead and decaying and the echo of old iron filings.

Both her feet were mostly metal. Kovacs whipped out a chain of coloured kerchiefs knotted together, with the same theatrical air of a stage magician, as if to set himself aside from the wizard who had done this obscenity. He bent down and tied up Chrysanthemum's feet, muffling the sound with cloth.

"Soul, body; body, soul," Kovacs muttered. "One of my few accomplishments in arcane theory. A soul, rich and strange, that which distinguishes betwixt person and monster, that which lives unstably in the body and transmutes after death, the chief bearer of countless mutilations and wounds and scars, that which to a priest is worth all the jewels in the world and to a merchant is not worth one clipped copper. A body cannot live without one; and one cannot exist without a body." He looked directly at the golem's eyes and spoke far more clearly. "There are two of you. You're only half yourself, aren't you? There's another Chrysanthemum here."

"I know that," the golem said, in her painful scratchy voice, as if she wanted to shed tears but the dead man's eyes were dry. "I can feel her. Parts of her. She knows things I don't. You're holding my sister. I know her face and I can't remember her name. Tell me her name!" The last sentence was spoken far too loud.

"She's Orchid," Pherenike whispered, prompting her. The golem quietened.

"And it was your father who did this? No one else?" Kovacs asked. Chrysanthemum nodded; he seemed satisfied.

"Best chance is the cellars," Kovacs said to Pherenike, quickly and quietly. He told her how to find them. She understood he meant to go alone, looking for the rest of Chrysanthemum; that circumstances compelled him to trust her with the girl and the half-souled golem, despite his anger with her.

"And Tulip ... ?" Pherenike asked. The youngest of Durante's daughters; only six. They needed to find her as well.

"I wouldn't worry," Kovacs said, and actually smiled.

The golem that housed Chrysanthemum moved achingly slowly, her feet quiet in their improvised
slippers. Durante was here, not to mention Rocheford; Pherenike prayed to any god out there that they would not come upon them. *Then Durante dies. After all, it's the only way to free his daughter.*

The cellar door creaked as she pushed it open. Pherenike's blood froze in her veins but she rushed through anyway. Orchid pushed her way out of Pherenike's arms, and she let the girl go to stand on her own feet, breathing hard and relieved to lay down the weight.

"Tulip!" Orchid called, rushing forward. Pherenike squinted; gnomes could see in the dark but humans couldn't. Then a fire erupted in a lantern, carried by a tall spare woman in mismatched clothes. She wore a man's duster over mismatched striped stockings so gaudy that a person might blind themselves in sheer self-defence. She looked like a celestial sent from the heavens. She was carrying the last of Rociard's granddaughters, and must have come to save them.

"Don't speak, little one. Ain't out of the woods yet." The woman jerked her hooked nose up at Pherenike. "The confederate? Well done. And - "

"I know you. I wish - " the golem began to say, but as fast as a spreading fire the woman bounded up the steps toward her, as if she knew instantly what had happened.

"Don't say nothing more. I'd cry my eyes out and do no good, lamb. Needs a real wizard. Hope that Hopeless is up for it." The woman glanced at Chrysanthemum and touched the automaton's hand. "Be brave a moment longer. We'll get your sisters free and return. Come," Morgy told Pherenike. There might have been a tear in her eyes, but she doused her lamp and couldn't be clearly seen.

They left the automaton behind on the stairs. Pherenike understood well what Rociard's servant planned to do. If Chrysanthemum couldn't be saved, at least the two younger girls would be far away from here. It was a dreadful calculation. But Pherenike picked up Tulip nonetheless and followed the half-jinn's lead down the cellar steps, away from Durante's house.

And as they ran, they began to hear the explosions of a magical battle. Kovacs was found, and he was in terrible danger.

*Two wizards. Well - Durante was expected and he was going to end up dead anyway, Kovacs thought, the split-second after they'd found him. The taller and wider man was Regan Rocheford of the mage's guild, his famous snowy white beard curling from his chin; the second was Rocheford's rat-like sidekick Casimir Durante, ordinary enough a man to pass in the street.*

Certainly time for some of the more lethal tricks up his sleeve. Before they could get a good look at him, Kovacs uncapped and flung a potion. Tirzah's favourite recipe. It exploded, creating clouds of blinding smoke everywhere. He sensed a pair of powerful arcane protections in the Weave, both raised in an instant. Let them anticipate an attack from another spellcaster.

He was close-range to them before the smoke cleared, and plunged his sword into Durante's stomach. It wasn't a lethal wound. He didn't intend it to be. Durante had to die, but if he did so now then the soul in the golem would have nowhere to go. He'd pay his price in a very specific way, after some painful lingering first.

Rocheford opened a silver door in the air with a click of his fingers. He stepped out of it twenty feet away, safely removed from the fire, and uttered a single syllable. A cloud of silver appeared in the hallway. Tiny flying automatons, small with sharp stingers, massed out of thin air.

Kovacs conjured up another lot of smoke. Confusion; distraction. The mass of automatons bloodied
his cheek and arm. He kept moving. He knew these things. He'd helped his father retrieve their prototype from a Halruaan museum.

At some point, Durante had installed plumbing in here. Kovacs gathered water from the walls, then flung it at the steel insects. Another twist and his spell turned water to ice. They couldn't fly with such a heavy weight on their delicate innards, and dropped out of the air.

Kovacs felt insubstantial webbing broil out of the Weave. It rippled all through the passage and settled on him. This wasn't meant to hurt - it was meant to stop him from escaping. A sign of confidence. Then Rocheford changed a single syllable of his invocation, and tendrils of a sticky network erupted in a vast mass from his fingers. It was almost impossible to avoid the stuff.

Kovacs flung another bottle to set off more clouds of smoke. He threw off his cloak and manipulated it, calling the fallen automatons to assemble in a rough simulacrum. The cloak lurch forward with the rough shape of a body inside it. Rocheford saw the shape of a man coming through the smoke in his direction and hurled a bolt of lightning at it. The searing purple flash destroyed Kovacs' imitation in a moment. The lightning bolt ricocheted against a mirror on the back wall, flung back at a tremendous pace. Kovacs hit the ground, struggling in the sticky webbing.

Rocheford conjured a wall of flame. There was no dodging it. The only advantage was that it seemed to burn the webbing. Fire filled the passage and spread no further, perfectly executed to avoid setting the place ablaze. It hit Kovacs before he could do anything to protect against it. He felt his flesh burn and char and he could smell himself cooking - like pork barbecue. It wasn't enough to take him down. Kovacs flung a throwing knife to where he remembered Rocheford's last location, hoping to at least disrupt his spell. The movement was weak and erratic but there was more left in him than that.

Rocheford took the time to renew his own protections. Kovacs cast a quickly-muttered spell to send a new fire through his seared veins, making time run slower for him than everyone else, speeding through the world. The smoke had cleared. Kovacs forced himself forward, sword in hand, suppressing the burning pain. He struck at Rocheford, lunging for his stomach.

Rocheford stepped aside through a silvery door, calculated to reappear in some inconvenient location behind his enemy. Kovacs had anticipated that; he was no fool. He turned on his heel and unleashed all the arcane resources he could draw on at Rocheford. He battered Rocheford's shields with searing fire and tearing winds and raw magical power. When he had done all he could, he called on the most powerful spell he had: a harsh casting that used all the strength of the Weave to turn your enemies to nothing but dust. The same he had used to disintegrate Candle Balduran's corpse.

He expected it to at least seriously injure Rocheford, if not destroy him. But Rocheford was still on his feet and even smiling. Then a hand grabbed Kovacs' ankle from behind, and pain ripped through him.

It was Casimir Durante on the ground, casting some necromantic spell. Couldn't really blame him for trying. Kovacs kicked him in the head and heard a satisfying crack. He turned back to face Regan Rocheford, hands raised to gather what threads of the Weave he had left.

But he had fatally underestimated Regan Rocheford, the invoker. Rocheford towered, glowing with power. He held surging lightning bolts and fire and blinding magical force at his command, and it was plain that he'd barely started to use his spells.

Kovacs knew this kind of power was what he had to face against his father. He was the only one among his allies who could use the Weave. And, like his father, Rocheford blazed with power and...
might, a dizzying tower of binding threads and tight-bound contingencies, cascading one on top of
the other on top of the next. Kovacs' mouth was dry. He didn't have anything left in him to contest
that storm.

This was what it meant to confront a master arcane spellcaster: someone who could hold not a few
but a thousand threads in mind and manipulate them with a sure touch, someone who bent the
Weave to their will and called not single flares but lightning storms at a whim. Kovacs felt his pitiful
tatters of spell-protections unravel.

Then from behind him came a crushing blow of magical force. It flung Kovacs to his hands and
knees. His sword clattered to the ground. He fought to raise his head.

And for the first time his enemy spoke to him. "I know what you are," Regan Rocheford said.

Chapter End Notes

'The Priest telleth me that the Soul is worth all the gold in the world, and the merchants
say that it is not worth a clipped piece of silver.' - Oscar Wilde.
They ran through old smugglers' tunnels, carrying the children. Pherenike slipped and nearly fell into black clinging mud that smelt like offal. She trod on something that splintered like bone, but didn't look down.

She saw light in front of them at last, natural sunlight shining through a chilly wind that felt like freedom. Surely this was close enough.

"I have to go back," she said.

"You mean it's him you want to save." Morgy hitched Orchid down. "Take your chance, then. Do what you can for ... " She didn't finish. *For the girl painfully trapped inside an automaton's body.*

Perhaps killing Durante would not be enough to unmake such a thing. Perhaps the best gift to someone so broken and badly treated was a quick death. Pherenike tried to stop thinking such a terrible thought. She took down the hamster, which had quite cleverly clung to her shoulder throughout, and put it in Orchid's hands. "Look after it," she said.

"Say it," Orchid said.

"You gotta say it," Tulip chimed in. "Say, 'Morgy I wish for' - " She stuck a small, chubby fist in her mouth and halfway grinned around it.

"Then say, 'the thing I'll need most in the next hour'," Orchid said.

The gnome girls seemed to know exactly how Morgy's magic worked. What strange adventures must have they known, raised by a maid who was half-jinn? Pherenike said the words, feeling slightly silly, willing to take a chance. No matter the consequences to her wish.

Morgy handed Pherenike a silver box that she seemed to have drawn out of thin air. It looked antique, with intricate patterns of Calishite design tracing its time-smoothed surface. Pherenike opened it a crack and saw only what looked like soot, a mess of black dust and cinders.

She ran back nonetheless.

—

"... A paid creature of Mistress Hellebore," Rocheford finished. "No doubt she's lurking behind, a little coward. Blame me for Casimir's indiscretions and have her hireling make enough noise in his attempted assassination to summon the Flaming Fist. I trust you realise she did not expect you to live. Would you like to tell me everything you know of her plans, in hopes I'll spare you?"

It was a fairly rhetorical question, since a set of golden bands were tightly wrapped around Kovacs' body, including one which gagged him.

"She calls herself a wizard and thinks she can buy a Grand Duchy with coin. She should return to using her intellect on buying hair-ribbons and casting a good appearance in the social broadsheets," Rocheford continued. A hint of scarlet had come to the centre of each of his pink cheeks, the colour of wet raw beef. "If she thinks to try her fine soft hand at blackmail, this is Casimir's mess - and his
insurance policy brings her down along with all the others. If she is still here I will show her what it means to be an archmage. But doubtless she abandons her servant as the craven she is."

"Isn't there some ball that would grace your presence better than playing with these edged weapons?" Rocheford clenched his right fist. His magic slammed Kovacs to the ground. "You don't frighten me, enchantress." His lips smacked wetly together. "You will sign your name to a withdrawal of your candidacy, and I'll allow you to walk away. If you're particularly compliant, I will consider releasing your pet assassin."

"Why shouldn't I agree immediately, faced with an angry archmage?" Pherenike said sweetly, and walked forward.

She got about ten feet away from Rocheford before her hood slipped, and he recognised her face.

"Stop," he said, and reached for a spell. Four translucent walls erupted around Pherenike, imprisoning her inside a cube. "I've caught a different fribble of society. The librarian who destroyed one of Casimir's automatons. Or was it indeed that manservant she brought with her?" Rocheford smiled under his white moustache, like a wolf baring its teeth. "Did beloved Livia give you private lessons?"

"We know what you did in this house," Pherenike said. "You can't afford to let us live."

He dropped the walls around Pherenike to prepare a fire spell. Pherenike flung Morgy's silver box on the ground, knocking off the lid. It was nothing more than a large amount of black soot, jammed into the limits of the box, rising as dust into the air. Rocheford paused a moment to see what kind of spell it was. He assessed it as no danger to him.

"Like a game of cvass, Pherenike thought, and reached for the cantrip she used to levitate the pieces. This time Morgy's soot and cinders were her target. Pherenike raised the dust particles. Her mind leapt and extended to a thousand tiny particles in the air, ten thousand. She forced them together and crammed them inside Regan Rocheford's mouth and nostrils. His mouth was open on black suffocating dust, and he couldn't speak his spell. He couldn't breathe. He gestured for a wind to save him. Pherenike bent to the air currents but did not yield. She could feel the path of the wind in the dancing particles of dust, and redirected the dust into its passing hollows to continue her scheme. The soot pressed deep into Rocheford's throat, choking him.

Kovacs was mage enough to dismantle his bonds the moment Rocheford was distracted. He felt Rocheford call on contingencies in the Weave, reach for that silver door again, and sent back Rocheford's own spell of tangled webs to hamper him. He kept Rocheford busy with enough small, sudden pinpricks to tear apart his concentration, while Pherenike crammed his nose and throat with black soot.

Rocheford died of suffocation, tottering first to his knees, raising a desperate hand to point at Pherenike. His face was a livid purple-black, almost as dark than the dust that filled his mouth and nose. He fell. His heart beat for the last time. Kovacs laid a hand on his neck to make sure.

Pherenike had killed a man. It was the second time she had done it. She wasn't sorry; she had only to think of what Rocheford had countenanced under this roof to stop feeling any regret. A white-hot
fury in her chest still burned her. Only then she noticed the body of the other man in the room, a dark
wet red stain across his stomach, and saw that his chest still moved faintly up and down.

Kovacs hastened to his feet, already moving as if there was no time to lose. "Bring the automaton
here," he ordered, without even looking back. He disappeared in the opposite direction.

The automaton came slowly behind Pherenike. "Father," she gasped, laying eyes on Durante's not-
quite-dead form. She went over to him without prompting. She fell to her knees beside her father,
though she did not touch him. Durante did not open his eyes; he was a dying man.

Kovacs returned swiftly. He held a young gnomish girl wrapped in a coarse blanket. She looked
restlessly into the distance, her face and shoulders covered by her long white-blonde hair, hopelessly
tangled and unkempt. Pherenike saw she was a pretty girl, with delicate ebony features and wide
brown eyes. The automaton stared at her own body, a terrible loss written on that corpse's face. The
other half of Chrysanthemum seemed to understand, and raised a frail hand in her direction. Kovacs
carefully placed them together, the girl and the machine. He arranged them for Chrysanthemum's
living hand to touch the automaton's metal one, two halves of a divided soul staring into each other's
eyes. He himself sat between Chrysanthemum and Durante's body, partly shielding Durante from
view.

He gestured sharply to Pherenike to join them. She came next to the girl, not knowing what to say.

Kovacs addressed Chrysanthemum-in-the-golem, looking straight into the corpse's blue eyes. "The
golem's going to die," he said frankly. "When that happens, you have somewhere to go." His eyes
flashed down to the joined hands. "But there's a catch - I think you have to want it to happen."

Pherenike felt it. Shimmering, fading magic held the soul in the golem, soul so fragile and damaged
that a stray breeze might dissolve it into nothingness. Only a strong act of will could change that fate
and grant her life.

"I felt some of what they did to her," the golem said, in her harsh dead voice like a mouthful of rusty
nails. The other Chrysanthemum seemed unable to speak at all. "The potions. The spells that burned.
And they ruined her, ruined me. I will not feel that again."

She wants to die, Pherenike thought, chilled to the bone.

"You recognise her?" Kovacs pointed. "Pherenike Medomai. She's developing a habit of saving my
life. You had her picture on your wall."

"Oh," the golem said. Chrysanthemum-on-the-ground's eyes seemed to widen, and her mouth moved
as if she wanted to speak but could not. The golem continued, speaking as if she recited something
from memory. "At the Balduran's Feast ball. On the twelfth night of Ches, hosted by the Duchess
Balduran. Mistress Pherenike Medomai was the toast of the evening, a previous unknown blazing
brilliantly in our high echelons. Where did Lady Candle make this discovery, we all ask. Mistress
Medomai's dress was a midnight-blue charmeuse silk styled with an unusual spiral skirt, an
embroidered bodice with a squared neckline falling to long tapered sleeves. She wore a silver and
chalcedony necklace and an ornate lapis lazuli brooch set with clusters of pearls - That brooch was
Grandfather's work," Chrysanthemum explained.

"You have a good memory," Pherenike stammered. She had no idea what to say, and so took refuge
in banality. "I don't remember what I wore that night." It was only a glittering blur now, with
scarcely form or substance to it; her first days with Candle, just a few months ago. "Your grandfather
asked me to find you. You need to go back with him," she told Chrysanthemum. "He might take you
to a dance, if that's something you want."
Tears sprung to Chrysanthemum-on-the-ground's eyes. Pherenike winced at the misstep she'd made. "I can't. I'm ... not fit. It's not right," the golem said. "Not after what Father did. The first time he hurt me, Mother left him. Now there's no escape for me. I'm spoiled, just a thing to test spells. It hurts. Let me go."

Pherenike had no idea what to say. Moments ticked by, moments where Durante's life ran down. Both halves of the girl would die when her father did, his foul magic ended, unless she chose for her soul to flow back into her body.

Kovacs spoke urgently. "There was once a donkey with knobby knees, a cat too old to catch mice, and a half-blind dog. The master planned to sell the donkey for glue, drown the cat, and poison the dog. The three animals were outside the window and heard his plan. They knew they were useless, yet they made a plan of their own. 'Anything is better than death', the donkey said, and they agreed to become travelling musicians. They left the farm that night and found a deserted cabin, where they found some dry old provisions to eat. Little did they know it was a robbers' haunt. The brigands came upon them in the darkness. The donkey kicked the leader, the dog scratched and bit in the dark, and the cat had glowing eyes. Thinking they were attacked by ten men and a demon, the robbers fled and left their plunder behind. And so the musicians prospered."

"It's a Sembian story," Kovacs disagreed. "My mother told me, and she should have known."

"That's not true. It's a gnomish story," Chrysanthemum corrected. "My mother told me, and she does know." And she seemed to relax at last, her mind in a happier memory.

"Good. About as good as we're going to get," Kovacs said. "Keep thinking of that. Don't look."

He reached behind himself and slit Durante's throat in a single smooth movement. Pherenike barely saw it happen until the blood gouted out in a puddle underneath him. Then Pherenike felt the currents of the Weave change and turn. Durante was dead, and with him the cruel magic that had placed his daughter's soul in a thing of metal and dead flesh. The automaton lost the spells that kept it animated, and could no longer hold Chrysanthemum's soul. Would she dissipate into nothingness too, or -

Even as the corpse fell in its metal cage, the grip of the living hand to the metal one tightened. The girl's body breathed in, and life seemed to flow into her. Chrysanthemum let go, and the next moment the ruined golem clattered down beside her. The two halves of her soul had reunited, and all was well. Or at least as well as anything could be in the circumstances. The girl stood up, shaky but on her feet, looking down at her own hands. "Mother -" she said to herself. "Want to go home. I think I'm still in two inside. Will it always feel that way?"

Kovacs' face was expressionless, the knife still in his hand. "Take her to the others. I'll soon catch up. It would look better if they killed each other."

Pherenike was in Rociard's kitchen. Someone had made tea, and a grey old cracked cup steamed between her hands. The place was in disorder; pictures and hangings taken down from the walls, with light spots marking their absence, furnishings missing, kitchen cupboards emptied, new packing-cases gleaming brightly. Mayfield was upstairs with her three children, reunited. Rociard was trying to say his thanks all over again, which was awkward. They had killed two men and the harm Durante and Rocheford had done could not be remedied. Pherenike did not want to think or
talk of it. The sooner any of this could be forgotten would be better.

Kovacs cut through it with, "Morgy mentioned a reward." He'd adopted a Calishite accent that flowed around him as easily as drawing on a glove, Morgy passing him off as a countryman of hers. Rociard agreed readily.

Gratitude could be infinite and impossible to respond to, but a sum in jewels was concrete and comprehensible. Far easier to treat this as a transaction that could be placed behind them.

"Of course I don't want or need any - " Pherenike said.

"My time and risk is not worth nothing. Neither is yours," Kovacs said. He split Rociard's gemstones into four small piles on an empty tabletop. "You never know. Sew these into a hidden pocket, perhaps, and have them to hand if you ever have need." He sent one pile to Morgy, one to Pherenike. "There was a fourth who helped. We'd not have got in without that." The last two shares disappeared somewhere in his cloak. "I'll need the hamster back."

"I'll fetch her." Morgy disappeared upstairs.

"I believe I also owe you a commission I shan't be able to fulfil," Rociard told Pherenike. "Your friend Mistress Hellebore's nAMEDay gift. I will return the balance to you."

He'd said Livia's name with bitterness. Did he know that she had nearly harmed his grandchild?

"You should keep it. Livia Hellebore owes you far more than that," Pherenike said.

"I won't deny it shall be useful at this time." Rociard had more or less slipped back into his usual personality, the precise, dry artisan. "Likely you haven't read her latest broadsides."

Pherenike glanced quickly at a discarded broadsheet on the table. It was a transcript of a speech delivered to a public hall by a Grand Duke candidate. Livia had chosen to raise the spectre of Amnian invasion and play to people's lowest fears. She stared at Rociard. "I had no idea you were ..."

"Born in Athkatla, and my daughter and son as well; my wife lives there still," Rociard said. "And there are few gnomes here to boot, and I cannot risk some friend of Durante assuming that I am to blame. Indeed I am to blame, for I have nothing but congratulations and goodwill for what you have done. We leave on the next caravan. I have many cousins in Athkatla, and they have written casually to me of a fifth cousin who is a mind healer without magic. Perhaps that is what my grandchildren will need. In these troubled times, Amn is a far safer place to lose oneself. I wish you well."

Morgy shook her head, appearing back beside them. "Hard for me as well, Master Rociard," she said. "Amn might be full of gnomes, but it's not kind to magic nor my kind of people. The Gate's been my home thirty year. I'm sorry."

"No apologies required. It would have been necessary to retrench anyway," Rociard said. "You'll command an exceptional reference from me. Anything within my power."

"Perhaps we could also help with references," Kovacs said, with a meaningful arch of his eyebrow directed at Pherenike. "And finding work. Apply to the Medomai house; the housekeeper Sarah's not as young as she was and surely by now she should have someone staying in to do the rough. You might also mention you've brought up three girls and have a high opinion of parental discipline." He was clearly asking to be kicked in the ankle for that one; Pherenike restrained herself for the time being.
Rociard looked at them, his head tilted to one side like a curious bird. Pherenike, then Kovacs, and back to Pherenike. "And I apologise, Mistress Medomai, that you were troubled with my burdens at such a difficult time for you. I read an item of what you have endured - but I hope that the tale was ...
"

"Extremely exaggerated and false," Pherenike said, with a tone like frosted glass.

"We will be gone inside three days, caravans permitting," Rociard said. "I'm beholden to you. May Garl Glittergold shine on your path."

Out of doors, Pherenike shivered in spite of her cloak. The sun was setting. It was cold, too cold for the season. Her father would complain about the risk to his garden, among the other things he'd felt the urge to complain about lately. She took Kovacs' arm, glad to be alone with him again.

"I can't tell you when you'll next hear from me," he said suddenly. "If anything happens, do nothing rashly. Find Tirzah if you need something."

Pherenike clutched her cloak tighter to herself. She hadn't asked what had happened to him, what he'd done or what was done to him, between that night they were taken by Conradin and when Kovacs had come again. "Are you all right?" she asked vaguely, phrasing it poorly. What she meant was more like You can tell me and I want to help, and she hoped that some of it came through in tone and body language.

"Things are a bit hairy for me at the moment, but nothing I've not handled before," he said. He peeled his familiar down from his shoulder. "Will you do me a favour - look after the hamster for me? Just keep her in her cage and don't let Elly's dog near her. I wrote some short instructions; it should be straightforward." Kovacs passed her a tightly coiled scroll, as if he'd planned and expected she'd agree. He hadn't been wrong to do so.

She kissed him under the stoop of an old pub, trying not to think of it as a farewell of any kind. She touched him as if to impress herself on his body and mind, a memory that couldn't be altered. They could have stayed here, rented a room overnight and told some garbled lie and probably be assumed to be some rich wife and her lover taking advantage of a husband's absence. But they both had places they must return to, and parted.

—

"I walked to the library. I have done nothing wrong, and don't deserve to be interrogated like a prisoner," Pherenike declared.

"Auntie Sarah sent me to the library to ask," Elly piped up. She flanked Pherenike's father, grinning with high amusement at the grand ticking-off directed at someone other than her. "They said you weren't there. Someone's not told the truth!"

Her father was as stiff as a stick where he stood, his features stern as an etching-plate. Demetrius Medomai was a man who'd rushed from youth to middle age and would look an indefinite forty-something for most of his life. He had been equally staid and stiff with the same plain face and receding hair from his daughter's birth to the present day.

"You cannot possibly wander alone. I was too lax with you; even wandering alone with Sarah's Elly was not fit," he said. Pherenike glared at the little brat. "Something tells me I do not wish to know what you have done today, only that it was shameful enough for you to lie about it."

He had been as cold when he'd told Pherenike that his partner Balduran was dead. She was chilled
by her father's mood then as she was now, confiding nothing in him.

If Regan Rocheford had burnt her to a crisp after all, would Demetrius Medomai show the same stoic coldness as for Grand Duke Balduran's grave? One daughter, written off as a dead loss in this quarter's accounting.

"Are you with child?" her father asked suddenly.

Pherenike could shake her head honestly. She felt a surging anger at being backed into a corner, shamed, treated like an infant.

*Today I killed an archmage who deserved to die.*

All her life, she'd been willing enough to work with the governesses and tutors her father hired, to sit in her room and read, to be the plaything of his patron's daughter. She wasn't the compliant daughter any more.

"You were imprudent," her father lectured. "I was the same. I let this outlaw - this monster - into my home, and he violated you. I was also a fool. Don't think I underestimate my role in this. You'll behave very differently from now."

"I'll go to the markets tomorrow, and perhaps the library as well," Pherenike said. "I am not ill; I'll have errands to run."

"You'll never be able to marry," her father said - showing his need to bolt the stable door long after the horse had been sold, resold, and finished its life in a glue factory.

"I'm a librarian. I don't need to marry. Don't believe what you hear - Kovacs never harmed me," Pherenike said. She felt her cheeks growing warmer, bitter words forming in growing clusters on her tongue. She gathered herself together. "If he'd asked, I would have said yes."

"I loved your mother," her father said, as if he pleaded with her. Pherenike swept upstairs. It was nothing she hadn't known already. Her father kept her mother's portrait in a chief position in his study and had never acted as if marrying again tempted him.

"Don't blame yourself for me," Pherenike aimed backward at him. "You have never done anything wrong - you're too careful for that. Too careful to get your hands dirty when Balduran smuggled black lotus, too careful to even suspect your daughter's misdeeds. Therefore I ask that you do not waste your time on me."

She left him behind at the bottom of the stairs. He made no effort to stop her.

Elly followed her into her bedroom, after some time. "I saw your bag moving," she said, her finger in her nose. "I didn't tell. Is it a pet? Is it from him? I want to see."

"It's a hamster."

Elly studied it. "What will you give me if I don't tell that Kovacs the Outlaw probably gave it to you? 'Cause you wouldn't take care of something like that for anyone else," she said.

It might have been the attempted blackmail, the nose-picking, or those things on top of everything else that had happened that day, but Pherenike lost her control. "You will stay out of this room and you will keep that dog outside. If your dog hurts the hamster, I'll burn it to death."

Even if Elly hadn't suddenly looked afraid the threat was genuine, Pherenike would have recoiled...
from herself the moment she said it. "No. I'm sorry," she said. "Of course I would never do that. Just be careful. I'll buy you and Spider some treats at the market tomorrow. Go to bed."

Albescu Demirci worked through his accounts in the room he'd chosen for a study, docketing and filing parchments and scrolls, a fire at his back. The better for him to seem hidden and intimidating in shadow while his guests were illuminated. Since so few were admitted to the house to begin with, it was rather wasted effort. A more sensible lamp-light shone on the papers themselves with a steady blaze.

Kovacs approached him. "Present for you," he said, and laid a signet-ring on the table. His father held it in the light; he should have recognised it. "It belonged to Regan Rocheford of the wizards' guild. He saw himself as a Grand Duke, before his underling Casimir Durante turned on him." The Flaming Fist would also find a third body, a man burnt to death beyond recognition when Morgy found Tulip, not that it particularly mattered. "He was a powerful enemy to Mistress Hellebore. I thought you'd take an interest."

This was just bargaining, an endless cycle; Kovacs doing something to compensate for his recent failures, waiting to see to what extent his atonement was accepted. It was luck rather than intent that Rocheford had been there and Pherenike had killed him, but one took such happy accidents where they fell. His father studied the signet for some moments further, drawing out a silence.

"Tell me, have you involved yourself in politics before?" his father said. He laid the ring down on the desk.

"No. It's too filthy even for something like me," Kovacs said.

His father's expression was unreadable, an almost formless blackness with the light behind him. "Take that as wise advice," he said. The tone of voice was vaguely self-congratulatory. "Still, you've earned a night off. Use it to rest up. You'll need it."

Kovacs turned to leave, dismissed. But one last question called him back.

"That girl. You could have fled before anyone saw you, but instead you gave up your name to murder two Flaming Fists," his father said. "Did you rape her?"

His father could compel him to talk, but not to tell the truth. And he didn't care about the answer, only to needle him. Kovacs didn't reply.

Chapter End Notes

The folktale used here is known as 'The Musicians of Bremen' in our world.
Marpenoth, 1357. Yhaunn, Sembia.

She was preserving quince while a man was being done to death.

Larisa Demirci called orders in her kitchen, boiled pots full of steaming water, chopped fine crossways slices at a tremendous pace, measured out cardamom and mace and saffron with thorough precision. Not a speck escaped her. It was hot, sticky work, with one pot going off after the next, and she and her maidservant were red-faced and exhausted when the last amphora was sealed with beeswax.

How to create the best quince preserves in Sembia was a family secret. It had gone from grandmother to mother, mother to daughter, sister to sister. When Larisa was first married, she and her sister Lavinia planted the quince trees in the garden together, both of them happy and expecting to be fruitful like the trees.

Lavinia was dead and she had no daughter to teach. But, like all mothers, she'd never wish her child to be other than himself. From the first moment she held the baby in her arms, he felt like her own, her world revolved and upended to settle around a small helpless scrap of humanity. He was Lavinia's as well, her sister's wild black curls bouncing on his head and her quickness written again in his eyes. Lavinia died in blood and horror, stick-thin with her arms and legs almost nothing but dry protruding bones, fighting and clawing for her life until the last moment, not even wanting to hold her baby. To remember that was painful, so Larisa tried to recall the good things and be grateful. She loved her son; there was much to be grateful for.

It was likely almost time. Larisa slowly moved to the cold-chest, where she had cinnamon pancakes and some fine sheep-milk cheese. A small cool spread would be well, simple but plentiful. She set out the things, feeling no particular hurry. The sunlight from the window shone on her bare arms, burnishing the small black hairs on her skin to a coppery gold. It was warm and comfortable. She was startled out of her reverie by Dana behind her, the maidservant starting up with a jerk from the chair she'd sunk to.

"Sounds like they're home!" Dana called out. She looked worried; there was a reason for that. Albescu liked to say that no one in his household should be caught napping.

"It's all right. You boil the samovar, and I'll serve them." Larisa wrenched off her apron, ran a cool cloth over her face, and hurriedly brushed down her hair. Her husband preferred a careful appearance.

He had taken Kovacs to an execution in the city square today. It was a murderer: a merchant youth who had killed his own uncle in a bloody quarrel, angry that his financial frauds had been discovered. Larisa shivered at the ghoulish thought of it. The streets were not safe with such people about. She would not wish to see such a sight; it was not fit for women. Albescu said he wished their son to show a strong stomach, and not to be weak as she would have him.

Father and son knelt at the low table. Larisa set out the things for them, in brightly painted bowls edged with gleaming copper, once a wedding present. Kovacs sat up straight and looked sharply ahead, in the guarded wooden-faced posture she so often saw from him around his father. Be grateful
to him, she'd tell her son; she privately thought Albescu had too high expectations.

If he's to be my son, he will live up to it, Albescu said. Kovacs was born a nameless child and would have to fight his way through life. Few men would have so generously adopted an illegitimate child and still fewer would make that child their sole heir. Kovacs was raised with the advantages of a prince, tutors for modern languages and mathematics and sword-trainers and lessons in the Weave from his father. All the advantages that Albescu himself had never received.

It would be better if it was just the two of us away from Father, her son had once told her, but that was impossible. Be grateful to him, for he means to benefit you, she told him.

Albescu held her to strict account for any signs of weakness he saw in their child, but Larisa yet had much to be grateful for. Few Sembian men would refuse to put away a barren woman; few would treat a childless wife and her sister's fatherless son as Albescu had. Her husband was generous with housekeeping money and funds for her garden, with his only condition that she kept accurate accounts. Larisa would dwell on gratitude, a dutiful wife and mother.

She brought out two piping hot tea-bowls, fresh from the samovar. Kovacs didn't touch his until after Albescu raised it to his mouth, imitating his father's gestures as best he could. Sometimes he couldn't resist creating an exaggerated mockery, but today he was calm.

"Tell me what you saw," Albescu said. Larisa knew this was meant as a memory exercise; testing their son on recollection and observation.

Kovacs reeled back the facts of the case the crier must have recited before the execution, with only a few stumbles, then pulled two cinnamon pancakes to himself. "And a girl with smallpox scars in a stained blue mantle slit the purse of the mage ten feet in front of us," he added. "He petted her dog and didn't feel it. She was quick."

Albescu frowned. "I thought you would at least show you can bear the sight of death, but clearly you were more interested in stray dogs," he said. That was a sore subject ever since Kovacs caught ringworm from smuggling an alley cat into his bedroom. Albescu had killed the animal; Larisa hadn't quite had the heart.

Kovacs shook his head, looking slightly puzzled. "I think I have a strong stomach, Father. I didn't feel anything out of the common. There was a lot of blood ... ?" he tried. "I read that you can tell how long someone's been dead from whether the corpse bleeds. There was a man who claimed he'd only just found his brother's body, but they cut him and he didn't bleed. So they proved it was the brother who did it."

Larisa shook her head and grimaced in the background. Like Lavinia, Kovacs was inexhaustibly active, insatiably curious, and interested in a great many things, which was a gift, but she sought to let him know that his journeys into these morbid areas weren't right. He'd managed to give her nightmares with a tale of a man who seemed to die in an ordinary way after complaining of a headache at a banquet, but in fact his wife had hammered a long narrow shoemaker's awl into his skull while he slept, and this was found when they dug up his corpse.

Albescu sighed, as if he'd expected something more and was disappointed. "You will learn better, or so I hope," he said.

And in the meantime, the wheels of the cosmos turned outside that small Sembian dwelling. In a few short months a god of murder would be done to death by a humble mortal at Boareskyr Bridge. Few spectators would watch that god being done to death, but everything would change.
Some short instructions for hamster care. Some perfectly straightforward instructions for hamster care, Pherenike thought, and studied the scroll again. It was densely written, and stretched longer than her armspan when unrolled. As if.

A familiar was supposed to come from a spiritual bond between a mage and the animal that truly represented the most intimate traits of their character. Kovacs was dangerous, conniving, quick-witted, smug, impulsive, resourceful, cynical, and world-weary. The hamster was tiny, furry, and made squeaking noises. Probably, like he'd said, he messed up the casting somehow.

She was in the marketplace with both Sarah and Elly, making a reasonable concession. She'd been generous in the matter of cream buns and a butcher's bone for Spider. A large crowd surged back and forth. Sarah was at a cloth-merchant's stall; she couldn't see her in the crush. Pherenike sought a relatively open area and consulted the scroll again. Extra straw; walnuts; lettuce; apples; hard biscuits; the occasional dried cricket. It seemed like the small creature had a vast appetite. She glanced over the next piece of advice. She hadn't known before that hamsters could catch the common cold.

Elly came running back through the crowd, straggling brown hair flapping around her face, the dog barking at her heels. There must be something going on over there; some street entertainer, perhaps, or unaffiliated preacher. She barrelled into Pherenike. "Come quick!" she said. "He's been caught here - I want to see! 'Specially if there's blood - "

Pherenike, at the back of the crowd, glimpsed the man in black. She forced herself forward, heedless of jostling elbows and heated bodies like a furnace. There was no mistake. Kovacs had come here, run to ground in the markets on their most crowded day, caught in the thick of a mass of people who saw him as an outlaw.

A commanding voice broke through the chaos, cold and forbidding as an ice floe suddenly piercing the sea next to a ship. "Leave him to me."

Kovacs cut down a Flaming Fist soldier who faced him, then lunged at another in bright red uniform. The man's face was vaguely familiar to Pherenike - she'd seen him at the markets before, keeping the peace. His sword flashed against Kovacs' for a brief moment in the noonday sun, then he was down as well, his helmet scarlet with blood. A crossbowman took sight from a nearby building. Kovacs used a market-stall for a shield, clearing a space with his sword. A bolt slammed into the wood by his head. Kovacs took aim with a crossbow taken from the dead man at his feet, and he did not miss.

A commanding voice broke through the chaos, cold and forbidding as an ice floe suddenly piercing the sea next to a ship. "Leave him to me."

"So it comes to this, Father," Kovacs said. His voice rang out boldly in the tumult.

"You're a murderer and an outlaw," said Albescu Demirci. "It falls on me to put you down. I disavow granting you my name. You were never kin to me."

"I'll murder you too before I'm done," said Kovacs. There was a scattered impression of an unreal scene like chess-pieces, black knight drawing on white king. Two paper dolls whirled together in the wind, flying without resistance to a burning conflagration. There was no time to think. The battle was fiercely joined. Father against son, swords clashing in a midst of onlookers. Kovacs' blows seemed wild and wide, his father clipped and precise, gaining the upper hand.

Pherenike ran forward. Kovacs' father couldn't cut her down in broad daylight. She saw her lover...
drop to one knee, forced down. She'd fling herself in the middle of the fight to protect him.

But someone grabbed her from behind and held her sternly. She struggled in the uncompromising grip. A hand shoved in her mouth stopped her from speaking, an orange hand with black claws. Tirzah. Pherenike struggled in her grip but she did not yield.

*He trusted you*, Pherenike wanted to shriek, *he cared about you and you stand to watch his death like it means nothing!* Tirzah wrenched her away as if she would stop Pherenike's eyes as well as her tongue, but out of the corner of her eye she still saw it, all of it.

Blood spurted, staining the cobblestones. It was as if Albescu Demirci wanted to erase his son's face from existence. He surely struck deliberately at cheek and forehead, eye and ear. Kovacs became unrecognisable, his face a red battered thing. He blocked some of his father's blows, but his movements became slower and slower.

He could heal himself, but he had limits. She had seen him vulnerable to Candle, to Rocheford. He was going to die here, and there was nothing she could do about it. She struggled against Tirzah, who wrenched her away from it all the more. Pherenike heard the heavy drop of a sword falling to the ground.

Kovacs was knocked to the ground, on hands and knees. His mask of blood dripped on the stones.

"I do justice this day," Albescu Demirci said. He raised his sword above his head, as if he wanted all to witness. A stray beam of sunlight caught it.

He brought it down on the back of Kovacs' neck. The head fell in one blow. There were stray cheers. One of them sounded not unlike Elly. The child was a ghoul, the sort of child whose best idea of entertainment was going to a public execution with her da and her equally disgusting younger siblings. She was only eight and didn't really understand; Kovacs found coins behind her ears and juggled for her; she didn't matter -

He was dead and that was all that mattered.

Pherenike stilled in Tirzah's grip, staring daggers at the murderer. She would kill him if no one else would.

Albescu Demirci walked past Pherenike on his way from that place. He knew who she was. He stepped closely to address her.

"So you are the one," he said. "Be grateful. You have no idea what a depraved monster my son was." Then he looked upward, addressing Tirzah. "Dispose of her," he said. Pherenike saw his clean white back.

Somehow Tirzah dragged her swiftly away from it all, away from where Sarah was probably trying to follow. She threw her into a small closed carriage for hire.

"Of course that wasn't him, you twit," Tirzah said. "It was a friend; a friend who isn't even dead. What did Kovacs tell you?"

*I'll have to die in some more spectacular and public fashion*, he'd joked. Pherenike folded her arms and looked away. "He said if something happens, don't do anything rash and talk to you. He should have been more specific."

"And here you are," Tirzah said. "Fair's fair; he's a twit too. But he wasn't needed for this plan; didn't know until too late in the day. He's safe enough in the Undercity."
So they were working in the old part of Baldur's Gate. Tirzah had given her information, let this slip with intent. *He's alive - alive for me to be annoyed at,* Pherenike thought. That was the important thing. *Beshaba's own luck, damn it all.*

"He wanted you to be told," Tirzah said. "Come dig him up tonight. You're a librarian who can murder an archmage with a cantrip. That's someone you want to keep on side." Pherenike had the impression this was Tirzah's way of saying that she approved of her.

"His father said to dispose of me," she said. "And he meant by that ... ?"

"Albescu meant me to do exactly what I'm doing: take you home, kicking and screaming," Tirzah said. "The amount of kicking and screaming, that's up to you. If he wanted me to kill a noblewoman in broad daylight, he'd use clearer commands. Dispose of her, take care of that, let's hope an accident happens to him - forget it. If you want someone murdered, you need to spell it out. Back in Sembia Albescu told me to take care of this merchant's wife while he was doing a deal; I had to ask whether he meant drown her in the quarry or escort her to dinner."

Pherenike managed a weak smile at the weak joke.

"Here. Might come in useful." Tirzah fished a small canvas bag tied with a grubby piece of string out of her breastplate. She handed Pherenike down from the carriage and walked in with her despite her protest.

Part-ogre part-orc warriors didn't often walk over the Medomai threshold. Pherenike's father was tempted out of his study, at first unable to say anything at the sight.

"I think this belongs to you," Tirzah said, with a tusked grin. "Don't worry. I'm actually a very respectable person." As Tirzah was well over seven feet tall with a large sword strapped to her back, Pherenike had no doubt that nobody denied her respectability. "It's Sergeant Tirzah. Of the Blue Shale auxiliary. Pleased to meet you."

"I think my daughter has had more than enough to do with Blue Shale," Demetrius Medomai said. Pherenike was sure that Tirzah wasn't in the least intimidated or impressed by him, but she chose to leave. For the time being.

As far as Baldur's Gate was concerned, Pherenike's lover was dead. So be it; she'd act like it. She had felt that loss today. She flung herself on her bed. She unstrung Tirzah's bag; it held nothing more than five walnuts.

Watching the hamster, alive and moving, was the surest proof that Kovacs lived that she could ask for, short of he himself in front of her. If he died his familiar would perish too. She fed the small creature; walnuts were one of few things that seemed to take Tirzah the Second out of a sleepy complacency. Pherenike couldn't resist picking her up and holding her close to her cheek, feeling the warm active twitches underneath her smooth fur.

At least the hamster was happy.

—

Livia Hellebore studied a new clockwork design, made smaller than ever before by some clever engineering techniques and materials. She would have found this tour through the open house in Gond's temple much more attractive if her mind were not running on other matters. Gond, deity of inventors and artisans, was a useful being to keep mollified.

Someone had accused a Hellebore ship of running black lotus. The nerve of them! And Livia knew
full well that her formula erred on the side of positive identification. It had seemed such a good idea at the time, except when it could possibly ruin her. She had personally investigated the matter, found no evidence of smuggling anything more serious than a few cases of duty-free Lantanese cigars, and ordered the captain sacked nonetheless; where there was smoke there was most likely a serious fire in the hold.

She had missed a rather important appointment with Casimir Durante. The next day, it came out that he and his patron Regan Rocheford killed each other in a workshop above a basement full of corpses. It was a terrible scandal. Had Livia been present, she might have been drawn into their fight, or worse, caught. Common people wouldn't understand the nature of her bargain with Durante.

Had the accuser known of Livia's connection to Durante, and - in a way - saved her? Or was it mere coincidence? Albescu Demirci's name came to her mind. Perhaps Durante or Rocheford had let something slip to him; they had bargained together. Perhaps he had purposely drawn Livia away. Perhaps he knew that she had bought Durante's daughter for a time to practice enchantments on. Livia told herself that if Demirci despised her, then she had lost nothing. Her actions had been to advance the cause of magical knowledge, and if he could not appreciate that then he was not the man she had thought him.

*The man I hope that he is,* whispered a traitorous part of her. Powerful and strong of will, an ally, the first man to look into Livia's face and understand the depth and breadth of her own gifts and ambition.

She was in want of an ally like that.

A whirl of excited gossip had turned in Gond's temple when the Widow Lysander, always overexcitable even after cheerfully burying four wealthy husbands, had come fashionably late to the exhibition. Demirci, father of the outlaw Kovacs, had executed his own son in the marketplace, removing the stain on his honour by his own sword.

(Livia had her own ideas about the likely events of that night after the dance in Sailors' Hall, knowing Conradin and Goat reasonably well. Her principal emotion was a malicious amusement at the scandalous mess Pherenike had landed herself in.)

Livia walked into the sunlight below a great glassed window. She looked out into the sea rolling against the harbour. The artisans' bevelled prisms on the edge of each sparkling pane sharpened the light to its purest strength and warmth. Outside, it was dreadfully cold, but in this vista surrounded by glowing gold she was warm and well-lit, like a red-jewelled adder luxuriating in sun above stone.

She turned. Her gaze fell on the man she had been thinking of. His white robes were unstained and untouched, fresh and well-cut around him. He walked with the smooth sure step of a successful duellist. Livia extended her hand to Demirci; allowed the Sembian merchant to greet a future Grand Duchess.

"I've heard you acted the hero in the town square," she said.

"It had to be done," Demirci said. He showed no expression that Livia could read on his face. And so she decided to push a little, and ask the question that doubtless no one else would dare.

"What did it feel like to kill your own son? Your adopted son," she added. Livia was determined to be the only person in Baldur's Gate to believe Kovacs was not Albescu Demirci's bastard, unless the man himself claimed it.

"Cathartic," he said. "He was always annoying." They were confidential and intimate, under a field
of sunlight. *He would not say this to another person*, Livia thought, and was pleased.

"Your campaign for Grand Duke is rooted in such law and justice," Demirci said. "Administered with neither fear nor favour. I can be an ally to you, and so I've come to make you an offer of my hand."

He'd said it so briskly. *Swept me off my feet, I suppose*, Livia thought. A proposal of marriage.

"Our interests are aligned," Demirci continued. "You must deliver on your promise to protect the city from war with Amn. Through my gnomish patents, the purified water from the Undercity will be your stock in case of siege. I offer you strength and stability at your side, and all the public excitement of a society wedding." Demirci - she should perhaps call him Albescu - took Livia's cold right hand in his, holding it with a restrained confidence and strength. She felt hardened fingertips and a coiled potency in tendons and muscles. Livia sensed once more that this was a man fully in control of himself and his surrounds, a form of power that she would claim for herself. People would see Livia as merciful and gentle against a backdrop of such iron strength. She looked up through her eyelashes into Albescu's face, meeting his steady eyes in a face that could have been made from marble, chiselled and harshly masculine.

"Of course, what I offer is a political alliance," Albescu said. "I've been widowed for nine years, and I'm quite content; I would not distress you with physical attentions. You're free to keep your integrity. I think that I have read you correctly."

Livia looked into the distance. Albescu's voice was complacent, showing another trait he knew they had in common. Livia was virtuous. Alone among her so-called friends, she had never debased and degraded herself in filthy lust. Ambition mattered more to both her and Albescu than some pitiful fleshy fumblings, like the way Pherenike was brought down to the dirt.

"I understand," Livia murmured. "You'll have to ask my father. I've always been fond of dragons-blood rubies." Her father would agree to anything Livia wanted, although he would sharply scrutinise the settlement. She was by far the wealthier of the two of them, but what Demirci had to offer was - interesting. "Is Demirci a noble name in Sembia?" she asked.

"It's an extremely common name in Sembia. Which is why I chose it," he said, his mouth tilted in pride. "I made myself what I am. I had no help."

"Hellebore at least has some history," Livia said. "I will keep my name, and you can retain yours if you wish."

"Gracious of you."

"It is, isn't it?" She wanted to carry it off with a high hand; but she felt her fingers flutter to her throat, her pulse beating quickly and warmly.

"I would be honoured if you would dine with me tomorrow at noon," Albescu said. He pressed her right hand as if to publicly claim her as his; then left her in the sunlight, a Grand Duchess in waiting, a woman engaged for the first time.

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Pherenike held the dark lantern at midnight in a place she had never seen: a paupers' graveyard, where beggars and hanged men and suicides and anyone without coin were buried on unhallowed ground, left to sink and rot in a peat bog at the edge of the city.

There was a plain wood coffin that someone had sealed with pitch. Kovacs and Tirzah dug it out of
Then the body changed shape into a form that was manlike but not a man, slender and androgynous with silver-grey flesh, an almost featureless face with split nostrils and small black eyes, about of a height with Kovacs.

Shapeshifter. Doppelganger. Flesh-eater and man-stealer, a bogey out of fables.

"Shalilah. You're looking shorter than usual," Kovacs said.

"I've lost some flesh," Shalilah answered smoothly. His voice almost sounded human, except that it was utterly bare of accent or modulation, and hesitated on its sibilants with something like a snake's hiss in the background. "I'll regain it. It's too bad you don't approve of eating librarians." He stood back, folding his arms. Tirzah kicked the coffin back into the boggy mess.

It occurred to Pherenike that this shapeshifter had cut down three Flaming Fist men without a second thought. Not all Fists were like Conradin; these had been ordinary men guarding a marketplace, doing what they thought to be their duty. But, if it really had been Kovacs, he would only have been fighting for his life, and it was clear the whole scene was planned by Albescu Demirci, so he was the one to blame.

"I never have," Kovacs said sharply. He looked to Pherenike. "Tell us about Livia Hellebore."

"Her mage speciality is enchantment. She's gifted, but her abilities were never as strong as Candle's." Livia was accomplished in every sense, rarely seen without a book in hand, but Candle's divine gifts from Siamorphe let her triumph no matter how hard Livia studied. Pherenike spoke what she knew about Livia, and as she did so realised how little she'd understood a woman she'd thought of as one of her best friends. "She can't look at a person and see their every thought written like a book, no enchanter can do that - " Pherenike had been on the receiving end of a sharp lecture on that topic - "but she can sway people to her will and see inside them."

"He's targeting you and your people," Kovacs told the shapeshifter. "Are you prepared?"

Pherenike had read that shapeshifters like Shalilah were able to read minds: stealing thoughts as well as shapes, able to flawlessly usurp a person's life after feeding on their memories. She looked at the strange man - was he a man or a woman, or neither? - and deliberately set her mind to think in High Viklund, a sharp-thorned language from old carvings on the Norheim Isles.

"I am. We will take heed," Shalilah said. His head turned to Pherenike. She held the lantern steady as she met his hooded eyes, almost indistinguishable in a face as flat as the back of a mirror. "A strong mind," he said. "Even I'm not old enough to know that human tongue."

"You are my ally; I've taken the cause of your tribe," Kovacs said. "I expect you to treat her as my kin."

"And you would like me to tell her everything?" Shalilah said. "I can speak what you cannot. I know all about dead masters." He spat the word like a curse, the first time emotion had slipped into his even, inhuman voice.
"It's about time," Tirzah added. "Good place for it, too."

"You can tell me what you want. I can protect my own mind," Pherenike promised.

"I can't tell, but I can show you." Kovacs held out a mud-encrusted hand to her. "Come with me."

Chapter End Notes

'Dispose of her, take care of that, let's hope he has an accident' - Mitchell and Webb sketch 'Needlessly ambiguous terms'.

Tirzah took the merchant's wife out to dinner and they both had an excellent time.
Kovacs appeared at the door of his father's study in this house, which was at the bottom of a long flight of stone steps. It was a cellar so deep that no sound inside it could be heard on the surface. It might have started life as a prison, not too long ago. The fiery pain on the inside of his skin didn't stop. He was out of breath, fresh from sparring. He stumbled down the steps, drawn toward his father, expecting punishment or experiment or both.

His father wasn't alone. There was an orcish man - no, not a man. Call him a boy; he was taller and bigger than Kovacs but not yet grown, likely part orc and part human, dressed like a labourer's child. He stood within a rough circle of red clay on the ground and beat what looked like only air with his fist. The clay, no doubt, was shaped in the sigils that imprisoned him here. His body bore the marks of Albescu Demirci's attentions.

"This is a child your age," Kovacs' father said. "His name is Bruno. He was raised in the dregs of these streets. Do you know what he is, son?"

Forget playing whatever game this was, Kovacs thought. "He's someone in a rage," he said. His father gave him a shock of pain; he staggered.

"He's the same kind of monster as you," his father said. "Your brother, in a way."

"You fucking freak, I never saw either of you in my life, I swear it." The half-orc boy kept banging on his prison walls. Some other poor bastard of the dead god Bhaal. The same condition, and now the same man. Kovacs couldn't help a curious look, pacing around the boy. Of course it was nothing like looking into a mirror. He was tall and bulky with a low-set forehead, three or four bristling black hairs poking out of the grey-green skin of his chin, and small tusks sprouting toward his nose. The lower half of his breeches was saltwater-stained, like a dock worker's, and his boots didn't fit him properly. He was badly frightened, stinking of fear and piss, and he'd split his knuckles against his magical prison.

"Bruno, you were born with power," Kovacs' father said. "I'm going to widen your prison."

The red clay changed shape on the ground, spreading across the floor. Kovacs whirled when he felt his father's touch on his back, but he couldn't resist the push that sent him forward on his knees. He was inside the prison. He got to his feet. His elbows hit back against air that felt like glass.

"Bhaal liked to encourage competition," his father said. The name of Bhaal always was weighted with that bitterness when he spoke it, these days. "Let's make it a fair fight. Give up your sword, son. And no magic."

His father's hands reached inside his circle and stripped Kovacs' sword belt from him. Bruno stood facing them, fists still clenched, unsure what was happening.

"You'll fight to the death," his father said. "Bruno, if you win, there's a reward for you. You can take his place, and become my son. Would you like that?"

Kovacs raised his fists. "Trust me, being his son is no picnic," he told the other boy. "There's a reason why he doesn't have a real son."
"Like Sune's balls! You're his son all right, you bastard - " His face suffused with rage, Bruno rushed at Kovacs. Kovacs sidestepped, avoiding him. He should be fighting back, he should be fighting harder - or he shouldn't be fighting at all.

He hadn't fought like this before, not for real. Bruno grabbed his neck and shook him like a dog catching a rat, and it was so fast and painful he couldn't escape. Bruno slammed him into the barrier, hard. At least one of them had gotten the hang of things.

Kovacs wrenched his arms forward and drove his nails into Bruno's skin. He scratched as deeply as he could and the grip slackened. Kovacs rushed forward and struck his knee into Bruno's groin.

Bruno fell over him, pinning him down below his weight. Kovacs had a throwing knife in his shirt but couldn't reach it. They rolled over each other, trying to kick and punch and pull any vulnerable part that presented itself. It was sordid and dirty and drawn-out, like a bar brawl between beggars. Kovacs got in a good hit and Bruno's mouth bled. Bruno wrenched down Kovacs' wrist and put his knee between it and the ground. There was a crack. The arm was broken.

Bruno grabbed Kovacs by the collar and threw him backward. His skull hit the ground. He saw stars, but he was still moving, crawling up again. He'd learnt something from his father about how to ignore pain. His own power rose inside him, too-slowly mending the ruined arm.

Kovacs pulled the throwing knife and stabbed with his off hand. It tore into Bruno's knee. Bruno flung him off with a cry. The knife flew across the ground. Bruno backhanded Kovacs heavily, and went for the knife himself. He managed to cut his own fingers as he stabbed Kovacs' shoulder. Kovacs was close to him, too close for the stab to be a deep one. He bit down and ripped. A large chunk of Bruno's ear came off. Kovacs spat the bloody ear into Bruno's eyes, trying to hit with his good arm. Bruno scratched Kovacs' arm with the knife, painful but not deep enough. Then Bruno wheezed as a stray blow hit him hard in the neck. He lost breath, his movements weaker. Kovacs hit him and hit him again, beat down his skull against the stone ground. There was a dull crack, and Bruno was still.

Kovacs looked into the boy's suddenly slack face, kneeling over him. Around them, the red clay of the circle melted into sludge. Part of Kovacs was joyous in a way he'd never felt before, ecstatic and exultant like he had never before known raptures like this.

He was the son of the god of murder. This was what he was made for. A tool to accomplish death. Part of him wanted to retch. He looked away from the dead boy. His father's hand twisted in his hair, then, and forced him to stare down at Bruno's blank eyes, spattered with blood.

"Look well upon this, son," his father said. "You're not a person but a monster. The same will happen to you."

Kovacs didn't understand, at first. Then he saw flecks of golden dust, gathering where Bruno's blood had been. The dust spread. It crept along the boy's body, replacing flesh and skin and bones with itself, leaving empty fabric and boots behind. He was dissolving into nothingness. The golden dust crept through Bruno's still-bleeding ear, tusks, nose, eyes, hair, all of it decaying and disappearing utterly.

"When a real person dies, they leave a body behind. Their soul endures and can be forced back into its clay by a strong enough priest. I have done it myself," his father said. "But you're only a monster. On death, you become nothing. You are nothing."

"Just a monster," Kovacs repeated. Dust slipped through his hands. There was nothing but a few tattered clothes left now. No one would know that murder had been done here.
Now there was nothing left, his father pulled Kovacs around to face him. He was still on his knees, looking up at his father. "A monster who needs to learn to guard his tongue," his father said, and only tightened his grip.

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The dark waters of the underground lake lapped around the oars of the small boat. Pherenike looked up at the caverns of the Undercity, the parts of Baldur's Gate that were ancient long before Balduran the explorer was born. Kovacs had said nothing, taking her to this place, silently rowing her through the darkness. The only source of light was a faint magelight below them, clinging to the boat's prow for direction. She thought she saw shadows of crumbling buildings rising out of the waters, tottering and fragile as a child's sand tower, but she could not be sure if they were phantoms or real.

They alighted on a pale silvery sand. Kovacs seemed to know his way in the dark. They crossed the threshold of a still darker building. The walls would have hidden them from any watchers. The magelight returned behind them, shining on decaying carvings in the stone walls. Pherenike saw skulls crossed with tears. She looked at the rising walls of the galleries, the stretch of the nave. This was a temple.

Old gods, the gods of bloodier and long-forgotten days in Baldur's Gate, memories and ancient ways suppressed in favour of brighter things. Yarrow's family dated back to this time. Pherenike remembered holding an antique neckpiece, almost too age-blackened for anyone to understand the design. Made from nothing more than coloured iron, coated in greasy soot from centuries of age, it was nearly valueless. It had been a chain of skulls, each set on a backdrop of rusted tears, heavy to hold and too heavy to wear, and so it was useless for their masquerade costumes. Yarrow had set it back into the ancient ironwood trunk with a laugh. These symbols were almost the same.

Statues of men and women stared down at them from the inner arcades, their upper halves fading into the darkness above, many of them already crumbled and fallen. They passed to the chancel wall. Kovacs illuminated a set of three carvings burnt and scarred deep into the wall, carvings intended to last through the ages as long as the building stood. She saw one figure man-size, covered in black scales and spikes; one hulking giant, stretching above the limits of the magelight; and the third a formless mass, as if caught in the very moment transmuting between one shape to the next.

Three figures, figures from stories of death and blood and murders done to please a terrible god. Kovacs stepped up to the wall and stood next to the first carving. The dark figure was almost exactly his height, and he mirrored its stance. His eyes stared into her face, willing her to understand, waiting to find if she would flee, waiting to find if she would see nothing but a monster inside its own lair.

He was half a god. A god hated and loathed by all the so-called upstanding and righteous deities, a god considered a pariah by all civilised states. Small wonder that Siamorphe's wards had burned him so. The god of murder's son.

She knew this. Perhaps something inside her had known for a long time. She took a step toward Kovacs.

"It's all right. I'm an Oghmite. Of course I've read the prophecies of Alaundo," Pherenike said. Alaundo was probably the most famous of Oghma's favoured, a long-dead man whose predictions had passed into legend, the vanishingly rare case of a prophet considered to be utterly accurate. "Baldur's Gate is close to Candlekeep; that's the best place for Alaundo. That's where he lived the last part of his life, that's where they store his original texts. That would be interesting to read.

"I think I remember what Alaundo said. The lord of murder will himself be murdered. Before his death, he will sire mortal children," she recited. "Death will follow their birth. Death will reign in
their wake. They will slay each other and send the Realms into bloody war."

She flung herself across the rest of the distance, into Kovacs' arms. She wrapped her body around him, covering all she could, as if she could shield him from this. She held tightly as if she'd never let him go. She heard him laugh once, perhaps in relief or triumph. He pressed his face to the side of her neck.

"Is this where you're staying now?" Pherenike asked.

"Yes."

"Take me there," she asked.

Kovacs breathed a slightly puzzled breath. "It's just a place to sleep that's slightly drier than average. A dump," he said.

"Take me there," Pherenike repeated.

Past cracked stone stairs, a small room on an upper floor that was slightly less damp than the main nave. The faint glimmer of magelight showed a writing-desk, a rickety chair, sacking in the corner, a cracked jug and a bedroll. She only saw it for a moment; Kovacs put out the light, leaving them in darkness.

She clung to his shoulders and kissed him, over and over again, fierce kisses over his closed mouth. She won him over to kiss her back, letting her in.

"I'm bleeding," she said, "is that all right ... ?" She wasn't pregnant; she knew he was taking something. She felt sharp pain as if a cat's claws scratched her from the inside. Usually she'd be curled up in bed with hot compresses and willow tea from Sarah, feeling sorry for herself. But it hurt a lot less when she was touching him, tasting sharp sweat and faint smoke on his skin.

"Think so," he said, his mouth tracing hers slowly and deliberately, his voice a low buzzing hum against her skin.

"Stand up," Pherenike said. She broke from him just long enough to pull up her dress and adjust her wool belt. "Stand and hold me." She wanted something intense, wanted all of him.

She flung herself at Kovacs. He grunted but took all her weight on himself, her arms around his neck, her thighs lifted above his waist. She reached to touch the bare skin below his shirt, holding with one hand, loosening with the other. He bent his head to her collarbone, his teeth lightly skimming across her skin. He took her then, staggering around as their jagged paces split and countered against each other. He swore when he almost lost balance, found a wall to hold her up. The stone brick was damp and cold and rough against Pherenike's back. She could smell fouled water and the salty copper of her own blood, and the sharp musk of arousal and sweat. She flung her head back in ecstasy while his hands tightened around her thighs. She wanted to feel marks impressed on her skin, reminders, memories. Her hands tensed and her nails dug into Kovacs' skin. Unbalanced by a sudden change of direction from him, she scratched him, tearing into flesh. She buried her face in his hair, kissing the top of his head, whispering sweet nothings mixed with ragged calls to continue at all costs.

Hot sweat had passed to a lukewarm dampness. She lay on top of him on the bedroll, breathing heavily, her fingers touching the small hollow at the edge of his lips.

"You'll need to wash my blood off your hands," Kovacs said.
She nestled her head between his neck and shoulder, shifting aside the collar of his shirt, touching as much as she could. "I'm sure you've been scratched by worse."

"Yes, but I don't seek it out."

"Fine," Pherenike promised.

He captured her hand in his own, bringing stained fingertips to his mouth. "You're a dangerous woman," he said, and it wasn't without a hint of approval.

"Stay with me," Pherenike said, into the darkness. "Rest. I can remain a while longer." She passed a hand over his eyelids, smoothing back stray strands of hair. She too drowsed a little, the pain in her not gone though receded. This was far from the only blood shed in a temple like this. She tried not to think of where she had to be. At last she felt Kovacs' breathing turn even, dimly in the haze of her own half-consciousness.

He shifted position, moving them side by side. She tried to cling to his body warmth nonetheless. Then Kovacs' hands joined around Pherenike's neck. She tried to get free, to say something, but he started to squeeze. She reached out, able to touch his face. Her fingers brushed closed eyes. He was still asleep. The grip on her neck became stronger. He strangled her - exactly as he had done to Candle until she died. Pherenike scratched desperately at Kovacs' face, and he let go of her with a jerk. She felt him move as if to reach for a weapon to grab.

"Pherenike?" he said.

"You were asleep. I think you were asleep," she said.

"How? What's up?" he asked, sounding less sleepy by the word. "Is it time ... "

"Probably past time," she said. She felt for her cloak on the floor. "Did you have a nightmare? Do you dream of Candle?"

"No," he said, sounding slightly puzzled.

"I never dreamt of Candle," Pherenike said. "But since Conradin and Sweet Goat, then the nightmares started for me. I dream I'm still soaked in Conradin's blood. I can't stop stabbing him, over and over again, even after a tide of blood drowns the floor, rising high. What's in your nightmares?"

"Nothing I care to remember. Dreams always are tedious to other people," Kovacs said. "There's something wrong - are you going to tell me what it is?"

"You strangled me in your sleep."

"I what?" Kovacs sputtered, and suddenly summoned his magelight as a blinding glare. The light was dazzling. He studied Pherenike's neck carefully; he didn't seem to notice any fresh bruises. "Not sleep-walking, I suppose. Sleep-strangling. We'll have to add that to the bestiary. Let's not sleep together again."

"In a literal sense, I presume," Pherenike said. "Don't say it should be in a bestiary. You're not - you're a person. And if you think you're a monster, then it sets ridiculously low expectations on your behaviour; that can't be a good thing - she thought. But she didn't have quite the right words to express it aloud.

He didn't answer. Pherenike gathered herself together, ready to leave this place. He'd stayed mostly
dressed and didn't have much to do.

"Sleeping Kovacs isn't very effective," she said. Maybe this place, giving himself to dreams in a buried temple to the old god of murder, was a bad influence on him.

"Small mercies." He waited impatiently for her to adjust her cloak.

A godson, subject to a prophecy. Doomed to be slain by one of his brothers and sisters. Unless he becomes the last child of Bhaal alive, and what does Alaundo's prophecy say then? Does it say anything at all? she wondered. A son of blood and death and murder.

"Candle wasn't your first," Pherenike said. "How many people have you killed?"

"I'm not sure." He caught her look. "What qualifies as murder? Killing them yourself? Ordering or manipulating their deaths? Aiming blows in the dark while trying to escape, and never looking back to find what happened? Once I convinced two Calimport slavers to turn on each other, each believing the other had stolen a prize from them. One used a knife, the other a slow-acting poison. I was surprised that actually worked; I thought I'd have to mop up the survivor myself. I don't know how many I've killed."

"Are there any you regret?" she asked.

"About half," Kovacs said. He didn't elaborate.

She thought of another question. "Did something terrible happen to your previous lovers?"

"Far from me in both distance and thought. Why do you ask?" She looked at him until he got the idea. "... I can see how that's a pertinent question," he admitted. "It's been a peripatetic and preoccupied existence. I could boast about my vast experience of women across two continents and at least four discrete geographical regions, but what I would mean by that is: Tirzah occasionally dragged me to a brothel."

Pherenike made a face, letting him take her back to the dark lake. "And she's not going to do that any more, is she?"

"No, dear."

A cold damp mist, invisible to the eye but not to the skin, shrouded the black water. It only grew colder as they neared the surface. Pherenike stared at snow falling gently but surely out of the skies, a dazzling white blanketing the streets under the moonlight.

"This isn't right," Pherenike said. "It's impossible weather, for this time of year. It's summer. Have you ... ?" Perhaps she would start to see the supernatural behind every street corner, now she was walking next to a half god. Perhaps she ought to see it.

The summer snow fell nonetheless.

"He wasn't a weather god," Kovacs said, in rather a final tone. "I'd offer you my cloak, but you're wearing it."

Pherenike intended to give him his cloak back, but only if he explicitly asked for it. She wasn't going to say that it smelt like him: brimstone and copper for magic tricks, laundry soap, and a fir and juniper scent he sometimes used. "It's a good cloak. I like the pockets in unexpected places," she said. She held his arm, nestling closer to him.
They skirted far from the glimmer of a fire on the street, where beggars with nowhere else to go gathered to try and warm themselves, a group of huddled black shapes casting darker shadows over the white landscape. A terrible night; no one should be out in it. The walk was lonely. She parted from Kovacs at the corner of her street, shaking snow from the hood of her cloak.

Kovacs hadn't gone more than five paces away when a snowball hit him in the back of the shoulder. A dog barked.

"Magic! It was a magic trick!"

Sarah's Elly rushed forward, practically blue with cold. She clutched the dog to her chest as if he were the only thing that kept her from freezing to death.

"I saw Far'nick put a bolster in her bed and I knew!"

Kovacs put a hand on her shoulder and steered her to the back of a house, underneath a pipe frozen solid.

"You want to give me coin not to tell," Elly said.

Kovacs sighed. "I suggest you give up blackmail and try something less hazardous, like tarrasque hunting. And not standing out in the snow for - what, half the night?"

"Since two bells after Auntie Sarah went to bed," Elly told him. "Spider needed to go out so I got up and thought of checking Farnick. He's a good boy. How much coin are you going to give?"

"None," Kovacs said. He found a wicker juggling-ball in the depths of a pocket; he cast a spell to summon fire in the middle of it. "Here. Hold the top and it won't burn you." The magical fire would slowly consume the wicker fibres until there was nothing left but the copper tip; warmth while it lasted, which wouldn't be very long.

Elly looked into the glowing fire, holding the dog with one hand. Spider wriggled and snapped at snowflakes, gloriously enjoying this experience in his short life.

"Or I could turn you in," she said. "I'd get to see another real execution, like the time Da took me and Dado and Shill to see a hanging. He bought us pickled whelks and small-beer and the hanged man kicked like mad for ages." Elly sounded about equally entertained by the man's slow death and the whelks.

"Same for my father," Kovacs said. "I think he thought it was character building."

"I'd get a reward, five hundred gold pieces and buy my own carriage and hire a boy to drive it," Elly said longingly. "I like coin. No one likes me, 'cept for Spider. Auntie Sarah feels sorry for me, Farnick tells me off, and you were only nice to me 'cause you wanted to get Farnick."

"Then what are you going to do?" Kovacs said.

Elly heaved a sigh, stopping herself to take her time, running over some deep thoughts. "You gave me Spider. I s'pose - " she said longingly. "I'll not tell that you're not dead. Most folk wouldn't believe me anyhow, and I've got to get Spider warm in the house again. G'night, not-Kovacs."

Kovacs saw Elly turn and run back. Later, he would have good reason to remember his last sight of the girl and her dog, running in the snow.
Kovacs was dressed like a wealthy man's son and stood in the back of a party as if none of it had happened.

Behave, his father had ordered; fit in with Baron Goliad's younger son and Mage Mirrum's twins; gather information and possible favours for trade.

He knew his father's control had limits. He could force Kovacs to speak but not to say particular words. So Kovacs stayed at the back of the gathering, watching silently.

He wasn't impressed at the party. It occurred to him that he'd read about more parties than he'd attended, but he hadn't missed much. A fire, a dispirited musician twiddling the same flat tune over and over again, too many people crowded in a stone room stifled with heavy tapestries covering every inch of the walls. A group of liveried servants scuttled back and forth with enough food and small beer to satisfy the most vicious of gluttons. The girls had colonised the north corner as their territory, talking shrilly while some of them tried to get up a dance with each other.

The Baron's younger son starred in a drinking contest by the fire. His name was Valiant Lychgate, and Kovacs almost felt sorry for him. He was a fleshy though muscled boy, with cropped black hair and flushed jowls popping out of his face like a pair of brandy balls. His friend at his side, a taller youth with an oversized nose and the enthusiasm of a toady born for the role, led the others in a shout of engagement for Valiant to down another flagon of small beer.

Kovacs still had nightmares about Bruno, the half-orc boy staring accusingly at him across a black ditch, a tar pit that buzzed with golden flies somewhere in its deepest blackness. But he wasn't allowed to sleep much, anyway.

He hated everyone in this room. They wouldn't understand. They grinned and vomited from too much small beer and compared embroidery frames. They could all die and he wouldn't feel anything.

A boy in a loose servitor's coat carried too many plates at once, awkward through the crowd. Valiant called him by name, Jermin, and his crockery rattled precariously as he turned. "Bring the drinks to me!"

Jermin approached. He looked afraid of the Baron's son, hands twitching and plates rattling. Valiant snatched a flagon from him and drank about half of it straight. "That's better. That's all you're good for. Don't go, Jermin. Jermin the Vermin, that's funny." It was the type of humour best suited to drunkards and four-year-olds, but the toady by Valiant's side pretended to clutch his chest and half cry from hilarity. "You still remember your High Damaran, Jermin? Translate the battle of the mighty Iathscar?"

Kovacs saw the red flush appear in Jermin's cheeks. The servitor turned away. Valiant deliberately stuck out a leg, and Jermin fell. Two of his plates smashed.

It was a loud noise that people in the room couldn't help but notice, but the moment after they turned back to whatever they were doing. Something like this had happened before, and they knew not to interfere with Valiant's amusements.

"You'll pay for these out of your wages. Or with your hide," Valiant said.

"He's the one that insulted you, isn't he?" one of the other boys said. "The one forced on you."
"My mother's companion's baby brother," Valiant said. "Just a servant. My father's since put Mother away, with good reason. She let a pebble sit with rubies, sharing my lessons. Now he's in his proper place."

"Abys satha nole," Jermin said, picking himself up from the ground. The red bloomed in his cheeks now. Jermin fluently said a long string of words, none of which Kovacs understood; his own education was all in modern tongues. But he understood what this was. A High Damaran poem, probably spoken ten times more fluently than Valiant could manage. Very stupid of Jermin.

Sometimes you couldn't resist doing the stupid thing, the defiant thing, because something inside you knew that if you didn't then you were a slave on the inside as well.

Valiant backhanded Jermin across the face. Jermin stopped the recital, his mouth bleeding. Then Valiant bunched Jermin's shirt in his thick fist and held him over the fire. He got the swift apology in Common that he wanted, then made the servant pick up the shards of porcelain with bare fingers.

Kovacs did nothing - yet.

He traced Jermin; his mother ill and sister exiled, the job in the Baron's kitchens all the boy had. He caught Jermin sneaking a book in the library when he was meant to be sweeping, asked him questions about it, and didn't tell. Not only that time, but the other times they met as well.

Maybe this was something like friendship. He'd never been able to have friends his age before, first from his father's constant training and now thanks to more recent times.

"I want to play a prank on Valiant," Kovacs said, asking for Jermin's help. Jermin gave it.

A day later, Kovacs stood safely on the other side of a tall building, watching a rotten plank tumble down to the ground after he'd pushed it away. Valiant Lychgate fell down to the streets with a helpless scream, which ended in the silence of a corpse. The accident of a daring boy who'd stepped on the wrong piece of wood. No one would ever know the truth.

Kovacs had found something, something to balance the scales. He was supposed to murder. He was forced to kill Bruno, some labouring kid who'd done nothing. He'd chosen to kill someone who truly deserved to die, someone who should've taken the other godspawn's place. A death for a death.

He went to Jermin, expecting their friendship to only get better now Valiant was dead, wanting to tell someone of his new theory to balance the scales. But Jermin, who'd helped him lure Valiant there, was ashen-faced and remorseful.

"I thought it was just a prank. You murdered him," Jermin said, white to the lips. "I didn't know. I can't tell - they'll hang me as well. But you're a monster. Leave me alone."

Kovacs waited, stunned into silence. Jermin was just being stupid, he told himself. Just not very familiar with death, not yet. He'd be back.

He wasn't, but by then Kovacs and his father were moving on to a new place anyway.
What is the nature of a god?

A god is an animating principle, an immaterial being which exists outside space and time. A god is adjacent to and yet overlaps with the mortal plane. A god is a being that coalesces from the formless figures of the manifold needs and desires and forces that shape the lives of its worshippers, that which arises from the mortal and yet everlasting sparks of soul that cry for mercy.

What happens when a god dies?

To kill a god may well be to become a god. When Cyric, a mortal, murdered the dread Lord Bhaal, he became king of death and lies and tyranny and madness. When Helm, god of guardians, slew Mystra, goddess of magic and his former lover, great Ao appointed a mortal hero to take her place. When the mortal adventurers Bhaal and Bane and Myrkul slaughtered their way to the Gate of Jergal, god of the underworld, they did not have to slay Jergal, for he willingly renounced his power to them.

What if a god dies and cannot be replaced?

Doppelgangers are a created race. Unlike other beings on Faerun, they were not born of chance and nature 'twixt the rising ape and falling angel. They were made to yearn for a god, made to worship their creators. But their creators caused their own extinction through invoking a terrible war. The children they had made to use as tools were left with nothing to worship. Shalilah's people were scattered and alone. A void was left in them, a void that prevented them from seizing a destiny of their own. This void drove them to follow illithids and mortal spell-weavers as false gods. Shalilah saw the degradation of his people, and resolved to fight back. They needed no gods. There should exist no gods. A god killer to purge all Faerun should be found.

What are the remnants of a god?

A god may leave part of their power within mortal vessels. Lord Bane sired a single half-demon son, imprisoned within the bowels of Zhentil Keep. Myrkul was rumoured to place a fragment of himself inside an artefact called the Crown of Horns. Bhaal sired many offspring before he perished. Did these gods know their death was prophesied, and for what purposes and hopes did they commit their dark deeds?

And if the god is not dead?

Perhaps a small piece of a god, trapped within a mortal form, is a sign that the father is not truly gone. Albescu Demirci lost his faith in a dead, impotent god, but the remains of that god's power are not discarded.

Do not forget the gods that are not dead, but lie sleeping. Quiescent while the globe moves without them, slumbering in astral spheres, their divine responsibilities taken up by others. Old gods out of step in a changing world, gods who chose to sleep aeons ago and relished their quiet peace. Over time and decay the sleeping god becomes a shell, their power gradually siphoned by sister and brother deities or dissipating into nothingness. Perhaps the sleeping god has left behind some echoes of its divinity, some sleeping giants under Toril's roots in the mortal plane that lie dormant like the
rest of the deity. Unless disturbed, the sleeping gods shall lie on unencumbered until the end of the world.

—

It snowed all night. Some time in the icy cold morning, Baron Baalimar Blaine, father of Yarrow, died of a heart attack in his bed, most likely brought on by the cold snap. He was found by his wife on her return from an all-night gambling spree.

The three maidens forced themselves into the Medomai sitting-room at the ninth bell. Livia's bright ice-bear furs tastefully stopped just short of overlapping a new bracelet on her wrist. You could see that bracelet coming a mile away. All that saved its ostentation from complete tackiness was the exotic design. Five dragons-blood rubies were studded through a circle of heavy gold. Five slender gold chains ran out from the bracelet, each doubled up to join on both sides of a ring on Livia's fingers. Each of the five rings was topped with a design that looked like a sheathed claw in gold, covered with its own small constellation of glowing red stones. It was the sort of bracelet that nobody could wear while doing anything practical whatsoever with that hand.

Yarrow, in rusty black mourning that looked hastily flung together, and Madeline Castellas, lurking shyly behind the other two, were much less well-dressed.

"I'm engaged to be married. Celebrate for me!" Livia said. "Or don't; I've really got too much to do. A wedding to plan, blankets and fresh parsley and hot ale to deliver to those in need in our city, and an election to win. Still, I suppose it's difficult to time true love!"

It was a bad time for this household. Morgy had only just begun working for Sarah, and Elly had run off somewhere this morning, provoking a disorganised search. A new household with a missing child set off terrible memories for Morgy, even if it was likely Elly was only up to some mischief, playing with the dog or frolicking at one of the impromptu Baldurian snow-parties that sought to make merriment out of a mystery.

"I'm sorry, Yarrow," Pherenike said, choosing to focus on Yarrow's mourning. *I'm not really sorry; your Goat was a monster. And he technically wasn't your fiancé, so you shouldn't be wearing that -"

"It's for my father," Yarrow said. "And for Goat too - that matters. He was murdered and - "

It occurred to Pherenike that Yarrow's glance was full of dislike directed at her. After all, she was the only one still alive, and the only one left to blame.

Livia cut Yarrow off, her voice slicing cleanly to silence her as readily as Candle once commanded. "My fiancé has avenged both your Goat and Pherenike's virtue," she said. Her eyes and the challenge they flung down didn't leave Pherenike. "I'm wedding Albescu Demirci."

Pherenike smiled, slowly and calmly, and if it looked a little like baring her teeth Livia pretended not to notice. "You're well suited to each other," Pherenike said, with absolute sincerity.

"He's really not that old - " Yarrow interjected. Livia silenced her with a raised hand and a glare.

"I prefer a sensible man to an overgrown puppy," Livia said. "I've come to redeem your ruined reputation, Pherenike; I need handmaids at my wedding."

*And keep your enemies closer*, Pherenike supposed. "This isn't a good time. We're searching for Elly," she said.

"Elly who? That little nosepicker of yours?" Livia said. "She's probably run away to the docks. That
was where you said she came from, isn't it? I thought the line about it you told Candle was fatally witty. The mother the beefiest, brawniest fishmonger in the docks, able to chop a shark in two with one hand while lifting her skinny little husband with the other; the girl the oldest of a litter of six, each one filthier and worse-behaved than the next, with a whole new speciality in a lengthy list of disgusting habits."

Sarah was in earshot and looked as if every word was a dagger to her. Pherenike regretted her tongue. "I didn't mean it like that," she said.

"Livia ... " Madeline Castellas said softly, and Pherenike was grateful beyond measure that someone, at least, tried. "Perhaps we should return when the household isn't in distress?"

"My mistress should go with you." Two tiny spots of red shone in the centre of Sarah's cheeks, and the formal epithet was worse than any insult could have been. Livia seized Pherenike's arm and all but pulled her into the streets.

"Come on, Pherenike; it's been some time and we must talk secrets." Livia offered her the place at the top of the carriage with her, in the open air, where the wind stole their words and whistled around them to make them inaudible to outsiders.

Pherenike made the first move. "What would you say," she said, "to a paper in Casimir Durante's handwriting, listing your name and signature among those who used his services? By which I mean, you bought a child, Livia. And I hope you have read of the bodies retrieved from Durante's cellars."

Livia flushed red. "If you know so much you know I never did," she said. "You have no idea how difficult it is to find subjects to advance the cause of magical study. It's not like I was going to do anything perverted to the girl; I'm a woman. Baldur's Gate needs to allow its mages more latitude - though now perhaps is not the most propitious time to promote this. And besides, she was only a gnome."

Pherenike raised a hand to slap her; she couldn't help it. But Livia grabbed her.

"Temper, naughty," Livia said, with great effort to stay calm herself. "What would you say if I owned two beautiful necklaces, one retrieved from the depths of the Baldurian sewers? No? A diver's lucky find, then, I suppose? You know you are far worse than me, and consorting with outlaws doesn't help your cause. Just a word to the wise."

Pherenike laughed, as if there was nothing any more that Livia could do to hurt her. "Truly like Candle," she said. "Say 'Flee, all is known' and they do indeed flee, being sure to tell you all you never knew before."

"I'm better than Candle," Livia snapped. "I'll be the first of us to get married, and I'll be a Grand Duchess. And you shan't forget what I can do." She looked meaningfully at Pherenike; she must have thought of casting a charm before she thought better of it. The wise enchantress showed as little of what she could do in public as possible.

"I'm told I have a strong mind," Pherenike said. "I wouldn't if I were you."

"Dear friend." The carriage below them slowed. Livia leant across and kissed Pherenike on the cheek. "There might be some amusement in these little games. Come on; we need you measured by my dressmaker. I'll have you all in pink. I'll be in red, of course."

From power games to only a dressmaker. Pherenike took her place a step behind Livia. Did Livia really know what she was getting into? Albescu Demirci considered himself potent enough to tangle
with gods and prophecies, and those closest to him believed him a dangerous enemy. Livia Hellebore considered herself able to tangle with the destiny of a city-state, and thus far the bettors set fair odds to her candidacy. Perhaps it was a match indeed.

Kovacs waited in the dark by the shore, alone with the soft tides lapping in and out over the sands of the old temple to Bhaal. He brought the wooden flute to his lips. The song he played was a Sembian folk ballad, about a water-spirit who drowned young girls. He was out of practice, but as he played on, the fingering and tone slowly came back to him.

One legend said that Bhaal shed twelve tears on his journey to godhood, representing the humanity he had to give up. Three for land, three for covenants; three for play and three for love.

Kovacs had given up all ties to land long ago. He remembered the house in Sembia and his mother's garden, but he knew well it wouldn't be there any more. He was rootless, with any place as good as another. The wooden flute was the only thing belonging to his mother that he'd been able to keep, hiding it from his father all these years.

Three for covenants. He'd made promises to Tirzah and to Shalilah that he intended to keep. He could fight a battle with Tirzah at his back, or more likely vice versa, and neither of them would have anything to fear.

Three for play. The useless things that his father forbade him from. Stage magic, this flute, reading books that weren't fighting manuals, the ability to bat ideas and fantasies and jokes through the air, as light and insubstantial as sea spray. Without those things, he'd be less human, a black-clawed creature who only knew how to fight.

And three for love. He hadn't expected to think of that. Anyone you cared about was a hostage to fortune. He'd thought he learnt that much from his mother. He played on, though he stumbled briefly on a note.

He'd not go through that again. If his father thought of remarriage, he was much mistaken. He'd play the one card he had to play.

"Funny weather for this time of year," Tirzah said.

"Now that's original conversation. Have you also been following the horse-races, or watched any good plays?"

Tirzah aimed a soft punch at his shoulder; he ducked. "This temple was abandoned, not destroyed when he went. Wonder if that makes a difference? Having you here, and the funny weather - you'd best keep an open mind."

"The cold isn't an advantage or disadvantage to us," Kovacs said. "Harsh on the entire city, of course, but since when do we care about that?" He doubted his father could, or would, cause this snow. Weather systems and their vast complex forces were the purview of gods far more than mages, and his father had never served a god of snow. What was the name of that northern one - Auril the Frostmaiden, cold and ruthless, fickle and vengeful.

"Meditate," Tirzah said.
She'd always had more of a mystical bent than Kovacs. A battle was at least half mindset as far as she was concerned. Tirzah lit up a particularly pungent piece of black tobacco in her pipe, smoking quietly. "Don't write it off. You might unlock something," she said. "You've power here. Open your mind and see what comes in to fill the blank spaces."

He and Tirzah sat together, her smoke swirling warmly in the air. They had done this many times before, neither of them much for talking just to hear the sound of their own voice, falling into a companionable silence.

Kovacs closed his eyes, palms relaxed on his knees. He slipped inside blackness, emptiness marked only by breathing. He didn't try to stop the chance thoughts that came to him, letting pictures and pieces come and go without conscious thought, some merging and some separating. He felt himself descend into the markers of the past that surrounded him. Faded etchings in the ancient city that he'd briefly passed by without a second thought reassembled themselves before him like a scroll unfurling. Together, they told a story he had never learnt before, unless in some childhood myth that revived itself in dreams.

The old gods were more primal, primitive and simplified. Sea and earth, winter and fire. Death overarching. Once there was a god of snow and ice and eternal winter, far older than Bhaal and the Dead Three. He made giants in the earth, giants created from a fraction of his being to stalk the mortal world. After long millennia, the god grew tired, tired as the earth shifted and summers were born and the world no longer existed in constant cold. The old god slept quietly, while his daughter the Frostmaiden slowly drew his power away from him. He rested in the astral plane. His giants, echoing his power and his dreams, became sleepers under the earth. One such sleeper rested under Baldur's Gate.

Some stray spark of Kovacs' father's magic, grinding through layers of buried stone and earth, breaking barriers and draining long buried waters, had breached more than he had intended. He woke the sleeper under the lake.

No. Not yet awake. The sleeper only barely stirred. Even that small stirring was enough to let parts of the giant's dreams leak out into Baldur's Gate, bringing the winter that was all the sleeper could remember of his long-dead world.

The divine spark called to another divine spark, instinctively, like lodestone to due north. Kovacs felt drawn deeper into its undertow, pulled down through levels of darkness. He fell next to a giant eye, closed, the eyelid dusted with ice.

The eye began to open.

He broke from it, and fled back to his own mind. He flew to his feet, shaking.

"You were right. Save the I-told-you-sos and don't expect flowers," Kovacs said.

Livia had dispatched her three handmaids, giving orders to her coachman to return them to whence they had come. She could trust Madeline for her flowers. Her desires for the ceremony were modest: to be admired, envied, and loved by everyone in the city.

Livia was exactly on time to dine with her fiancé; she did not tolerate unpunctuality in others or in herself. They had much work to do. She gauged his understanding, speed, attention to detail. She supposed Albescu did the same to her. They sat in an airy workroom, open to a pallid sun filtered through large clerestory windows, at a modern beechwood table designed more for genuine work
than aesthetics.

Papers; political strategies; all that was necessary for a merging of common interests. Livia wrote replies to groups she hoped would support her candidacy in her own hand, merchants' fraternal leagues and prosperous harbourmasters and priests' colleges, making promises pushing the limits of what she could reasonably keep and avoiding contradicting herself as much as possible. Suggestions from her fiancé sharpened her wit.

He's an interesting choice, my dear, her father had said. I suppose I always imagined you'd choose someone ... mature, perhaps, and staid. He seems sensible and respectable. You've always had an intolerance for dirt and disorder. I remember as a child you'd scream for your nursemaid to be beaten if your beans so much as touched your frumenty.

She'd asked her father to refrain from ever discussing such charming reminiscences with Albescu. The two men might be close in age, but her doddering father was older and most certainly looked it. You couldn't compare an aged, scatterbrained old man whose favourite room was his study with a warm fire, to a virile duellist who cut down outlaws in full view of the city.

Albescu was good looking, but not like the common run of dough-faced society men called attractive simply for lacking any deformity, features and fashions so blandly indistinguishable that you could barely tell one from the other. Albescu had a harsh, distinctive face that one couldn't easily overlook or forget. He was handsome in an ascetic way. His startlingly black eyebrows stood out on his face, giving him a a bird of prey's look above sharply defined cheekbones and a strong jawline. He wore a meticulously trimmed beard that just covered his upper lip and chin, more peppery than his hair. His clothes were fastidious without mindlessly following butterfly trends, white furs over a well-made doublet blazoned with Blue Shale's icon. There was more than a touch of the exotic and interesting in both his appearance and accent, the slight Sembian burr giving his voice a curious attraction without falling into incomprehensibility.

In the corner, Livia's maid as chaperone sat over a piece of ugly knitting; she never looked up, not that there was any impropriety for her to see.

"I presume Baron Blaine died owing you money," Livia said. "He sponged on all his acquaintance; I've long known better than to lend him or his daughter the smallest copper."

"He offered me an opportunity to refinance some of his loans, after I signed the rental contract with him," Albescu said. "I took it. The debts far outweigh my payments."

So the Undercity properties are important to you, Livia thought. I can't imagine that purified water is your only goal.

That meant Albescu administered Yarrow's estate. Much time would pass before the new Baron, Yarrow's wastrel of an uncle (or was he a cousin?), could return home; Livia had heard gossip that he fled to Chult twenty years ago, a hair's width away from arrest for religious practices of a highly unsavoury nature. The title of Baron and the passage of time did much to ameliorate such defects.

"Yarrow is one of my handmaids. For the ties of long friendship," Livia said. "I'll need her for the ceremony." Let Yarrow drink the bitter wine she had earned to its very dregs, until there was no fun in her any more. "After that, your interests are united with mine, and I shan't want you to lose on your bargain," she told her husband-to-be. It slightly unsettled her to use that description of him, even only in thought, the encroaching pressure of perhaps giving a part of herself away.

She added the last full stop on an anti-lotus position paper to the Guild of Tea-Drinkers. The rich betrothal bracelet was everything she'd asked for, shameless and sumptuous and glorious, but it was
admittedly difficult to write while wearing it. "By the way, have you traded in lotus yourself?" Livia asked, tapping her pen against her cheek.

"Long enough ago and in small enough amounts that it won't matter," Albescu said frankly, rather than trying to fob her off with a lie. Livia was excellent at telling when people lied. "I don't turn down profit, but I despise the stuff and the imbeciles who take it. They're pathetic fools who choose to give up any control they ever had for a few moments of a sickly-sweet dream."

Livia fully agreed with him. They shared the same contempt for those who could not control their base appetites. They both sought power above fleeting, decadent pleasure. She could respect this man, and she would soon know far more of him. He'd come to Baldur's Gate for more than just to be her ducal consort.

The two worked steadily and precisely, sealing off the last part of the correspondence. It would be sent to Hellebore clerks for sorting and duplication. Livia had dotted absolutely her last i for the day; one achieved success with steady regularity rather than a racehorse collapsing on himself for the sake of a single victory in a training race. Albescu rang a bell for refreshments.

A limping man pushed a trolley. He wasn't your usual image of a cook, with facial scars giving him an evil air. The strong fiery smells wafting from his covered plates were tempting; Livia realised how hungry she was.

Since Candle's death, she'd felt more like she could eat. But was it ladylike, delicate? Would he think less of her for it?

The cook withdrew with his empty trolley, the dishes and two goblets of blood-red wine all placed at the same time in Tethyrian style.

"Goose breast?" Albescu asked with an easy air. Livia accepted the slice from the point of his knife. It had been fried in a mixture of oiled flour and saffron, turmeric and paprika. The smooth white flesh had been cooked to exactly the right turn.

The small dishes were tempting to her. Devilled quail eggs stuffed with slices of pickled cucumber; tiny open pastries holding roasted lamb striped with white garlic sauce and fresh mint; braised calf's tongue in gelatine, flavoured with bay leaves; honey-glazed pear halves carved to look like carnations, tingling with cinnamon and aniseed. She wished to sample a little of everything and did so, feeling alive and enjoying the pleasure of new spices and sensations.

"Is this Sembian cuisine?" she asked.

"Garmon is from Aglarond," her fiancé corrected. "He's an excellent cook. A foul man with fouler habits, but unable to indulge them since my son's carelessness shattered his leg." There was a certain sarcasm in the anecdote. Livia wondered why he would tell her this. "I have a staff loyalty problem. You specialise in understanding where people's thoughts and impulses truly lie."

"It's far from a simple problem, but that's what makes it interesting," Livia said. "To understand, to push, to press - to amplify the small levers, suppress the chances of turning - I've always been fascinated by that form of the Art." And if he offered her test subjects, so much the better. "Your own forte is more in other shapes of manipulation?"

"With the living and the dead; with stone and metal and water; in combat with malefactors," Albescu said.

He certainly seemed to know a lot about anatomy, but he might name himself a transmuter rather
than necromancer. Certainly a powerful man, whether adventurer or tomb-robber. Or however he would choose to describe himself.

"What of your Undercity water?" Livia asked. "Do you have any demonstrations?"

"Indeed." He summoned the same servant again, this time with a crystal goblet containing only water. "This originated from the stagnant pools of your old city. Test the distillation."

Livia cast a spell like she'd use in any alchemy preparation, diagnosing, testing for purity and material. Her use of the Weave was careful, structured. No one could have faulted her spell for lack of thoroughness or precision. The contents of the goblet were nothing but pure water. In fact, it was far purer than most water, with no insignificant traces that she could detect.

She brought the goblet to her lips. She didn't like the taste; perhaps she was accustomed to less purity. In any case, someone of Livia's social position rarely drank water unmixed with wine or beer.

"Would you drink to my ingenuity?" Albescu said. He offered her the still untouched wine.

Livia knew he owned patents to gnomish devices. But if his own magic was behind this, then no arcane casting she had ever heard of could purify water on such a scale. Even divine magic of that power would be rare if not nonexistent. Very interesting. "I prefer iced wine, on most occasions," she said.

He obliged with a simple transmutation, from water to ice. With attention to detail, Albescu shaped the ice into small ships like those in the Hellebore coat of arms. As a recent grant, the image had been mostly designed by Livia's father, a ship tossing in the Baldurian harbour with red flowers blooming around the border. The servant poured wine from a silver pitcher, added the ice, and left them to themselves.

The twin goblets carefully touched. The wine was unexpectedly bold and full-bodied; even diluted, Livia tasted a harsh tang. She liked it far more than a sugar-sweet surfeit.

She gestured to the outdoors. "Is the summer snow also your fault?"

Albescu gave her a wintry smile. "You know, I suspect it might be."

Livia stood. "Then you have a task, to be done as publicly as possible," she said. "Bring back summer - my dear."

Chapter End Notes

*Rising ape and falling angel* - Terry Pratchett, Discworld
Lorn lived in the surrounding country to Baldur's Gate, on a rural estate far distant from the city, and had never left the place he was born. He was a simple and cheerful man, who was still considered a garden boy because the three gardeners above him were healthy and well. Not yet one-and-twenty; fair of hair and brown of skin; firm and strong in teeth; fine large muscles that could crack walnuts with a slight flex. Most of the dairy-maids had lost their hearts to him, but as Lorn tended to lose his voice and flush red while studying the ground whenever he was within ten feet of any woman within ten years of his age, all possible romances were stymied. Lorn had no family, since his mother and father died in an accident on the estate when he was eight. The oldest gardener, a grim and solitary man, practically raised him and taught the boy all he knew. Lorn was a limited lad who'd never set the River Chionthar on fire or even hold more than one idea in his head at the same time, but was liked by the few people he could talk to comfortably.

The past owners of the estate, the only masters and mistresses Lorn had known, had suffered great troubles and reversals of fortune. With a heavy heart they were forced to sell their old family holding, moving to Ulgoth's Beard to retrench. There was scarcely a dry eye to be seen as their tenants and servants waved them farewell in their last journey, many dark packages bouncing like blackberries on the back of their cart.

The Hellebores, a wealthy city family, were the new owners. All muttered gloomily about changes and how unpleasant that would be, and certainly there were foreign servants and surveyors and estate-managers coming in to ask questions and take measurements and demand alteration in the ways folk had practiced for generations.

Lorn had seen Mistress Livia Hellebore, the new master's daughter, thrice. The first was her first coming, where he and all the other servants were bound to greet her and her father with torchlight and loud noise. Her mother, they said, was a great sea-captain, always away travelling to parts unknown. The young mistress was beautiful, of course. She looked a noblewoman bred to the purple, though they said the Hellebores were jumped-up Johnny-come-latelys, not near so well born as the old family. She was as finely crafted as a china statuette. She wore her long red hair held up on her head with heavy golden fillets. That night she was clad in a swishy dress that seemed to change colour between mint and moss in different lights, dazzling as the firelights burnt around her. The second was when Mistress Hellebore talked to the gardeners about her plan to build a new summerhouse, even though a stream had gone bad and folk were troubled it was the land itself, revolting against the new owners. Lorn kept his head down most of the time, but when he did look up he'd seen that the young mistress was as lovely by daylight as she was by torchlight, a soft delicate beauty with skin so fair it almost seemed to glow. They said she was nearer thirty than twenty, closer to old maid than young maiden, but Lorn supposed in her position and so beautiful she was choosy about suitors.

The third time Mistress Hellebore spoke to Lorn in particular, singling him out though he'd no merit to deserve it. She requested a servant to accompany her on a nature walk, a strong young man not afraid to carry a cudgel. She asked Lorn of his background with a familiar tone as if she already knew some of it. His father and mother were once smallholders on the estate, farmers with their own piece of land. Although they were respectable folk who never drank and worked hard all their lives, they died with rent unpaid and left their boy nothing but the set of clothes on his back. Lorn, tongue-tied, did his best to obey the mistress of the estate, though he couldn't help looking at his own giant clumping feet most of the time.

"Is there something the matter with your boots, Lorn?" Mistress Hellebore asked him. Her sweet
voice sounded like she sung a melody he didn't know. "You keep looking at them. Do you need coin for new shoes? I would be happy to tip you the right amount."

Lorn forced himself to look up at her. Mistress Hellebore looked like one of the old paintings inside the great house. He'd been inside the house fewer times than he could count on his fingers, always feeling that even a look from him falling on any furnishings in there would be enough to dirty it beyond repair. Mistress Hellebore wore a gown of soft white filmy stuff that clung to her, topped with a rippling wide-brimmed hat that shadowed her face. Lorn had the vague idea that a hat like that was called a creation, not a plain hat like the maids might wear to temple services. "No, mistress. Nought wrong with my boots and I've done nothing to earn a tip," he muttered.

"A modest and trustworthy man," Mistress Hellebore praised him generously. Lorn remembered to tip his hat and awkwardly bow to her. "Are you this shy in your garden, Lorn? Do you also look at your feet when you talk to roses?"

Lorn didn't understand. He didn't talk to roses, but he did understand how to protect and prune and compost them. For a moment he wondered if Mistress Hellebore was cruelly laughing up her sleeve at him. But it was impossible to think of malice from this lady who looked like she was made from fine porcelain instead of common clay, beautiful like a fairy princess in a tale. And what she had offered him was more than generous and kind.

"I have a friend like you. She is afraid of people, but very friendly to plants and to other such things. I hope you are like her," Mistress Hellebore said. Lorn could hear the sound of the nearby stream, running water. They walked toward the familiar fountain that fed the stream. A shiver ran up Lorn's spine. He had been here before, but had never come close.

"Mistress, that's - that's the pool that's been poisoned to menfolk, they say," he said. "That's the one we don't go near, not round these parts. That's the one they say is cursed and forbidden. Please, Mistress, I'd fight bears for you but I don't think I could fight bad magic."

"Be not afraid, Lorn. I am a wizard myself, and could protect you," Mistress Hellebore said. "It is no longer poisoned; my friend and I made it so. It is friendly."

Mistress Hellebore made a complicated gesture with her hands in the air. Gaping, Lorn watched her real magic. He'd never seen sorcery before. He thought he saw the faint glimmer of lights skimming across the surface of the pool at Mistress Hellebore's whim. He gulped in fear. Please, Chauntea protect them and let them be safe from devils and hell-dwellers and goblins and the like.

And then Lorn saw a woman, no, she was like a woman but not a real woman, appear out of the pool. She was a woman made out of flowing water, with green hair like water-weeds, who smiled at them both. She was a water-spirit, she was magic, but it was magic that came out of a natural place. She raised a hand to welcome Lorn. She was all water, and somehow that seemed different to being made like a regular woman. She was more like a friendly statue of a lady, and so Lorn felt he wasn't completely tongue-tied and hopeless around her. He waved to her, and her water moved and bobbed back at him in a sort of friendly splash.

"This is my naiad," Mistress Hellebore said. "She will help me grow the alchemical ingredients I need, and in return she needs a friend. All I ask, Lorn, is that you bathe here from time to time. Do not tell of this and do not bring friends with you, since that would overwhelm her. Merely visit her, if you are both amenable. Now taste a drop of the water to see that she has kept her promise."

Lorn knew that the bitter water was hard, but it had never slain anyone yet, only made people vomit at worst. And so, worried as he was that it would hurt him, he bent down obediently to the water's edge and placed his hands in the stream. It felt as if the naiad reached out to gently touch his hands,
her watery fingers brushing over his to give encouragement. He tasted only a drop of water from one of his forefingers.

It was sweet water, pure with a hint of nectar. The bitterness had gone. Mistress Hellebore and the water-spirit had saved them. Lorn smiled. It was a tale with a happy ending. He noticed that the grove was bright and blue and green in the sunshine, the woods peaceful and all well.

"Thank you, Mistress," he stammered, feeling that words weren't enough.

"Don't thank me. Only do as I say," Mistress Hellebore replied. "You may walk me back now, Lorn. But do return here on your own."

And so Lorn returned, and kept returning. He'd have his bread and cheese by the naiad's fountain, then bathe in her pool. He'd only take his shirt off, not his trousers, for she was a woman of sorts, but she didn't seem to mind or notice what he wore. Lorn could swim well enough for a human, but he was nothing compared to a water-spirit. The waters moved around him and buoyed him up when the naiad played, and she splashed and wrestled him with her water-body while Lorn splashed back. He soon felt at perfect ease with her. His lunches became longer and longer as he wanted, needed, to spend more time with his only friend. The naiad was smiling and merry and welcoming. Sometimes she spoke to him in a voice full of tinkles and bubbles, and told him strange stories of her underwater grottoes and kingdoms and all the treasures she kept below the surface.

He'd bring the naiad small treasures from the land in turn: an ear of wheat with golden grains, a white wild rose with sweet scented petals to scatter on the surface of the pool, an unusually smooth pebble that he skimmed across the water. It was said that the Gate bore an unnatural winter, but here in the country the summer was long and warm and Lorn knew no difference.

Lorn volunteered to work in the new fields. There was little to do. The naiad's magic seeded and grew strange alchemical plants at impossible speeds, needing next to no human aid. Mistress Hellebore and the naiad had worked a wondrous enchantment together. Lorn marvelled at the milkvetch, sprouting pale white pods pregnant with sticky white juice. He watched stringy senna sprout and tangle from the ground, seemingly growing even before his eyess. The spider-lilies, deep red with long thin petals, looked like the spider legs they were named for, or more fancifully like reaching bones from a skeletal hand.

Each day it seemed Lorn spent longer and longer with the naiad. His duties were light and sometimes it seemed as if all but the hours he spent with her were a dream. The cool water was real, the sunlight on his skin and the naiad's water-lips singing songs. One day Lorn had no proper gift for her, only a dandelion stalk he'd twisted to a ring a moment ago, but she seemed joyous just to see him.

"You give me treasure," said the naiad. Her words bubbled into each other, difficult for him to understand, but her smile was enough. "Come see my treasure."

Lorn let the naiad embrace him, for she had always been his friend. Before he knew it he was in her arms, water brushing his face like a kiss. He felt himself blush, and travelled down with her. The water grew dark. Rock crystals embedded in the walls reflected flashes of sunlight from each other like tiny diamonds, but otherwise all was black. No human had come here before. Further and further down the naiad took him, the water growing colder. The diamond flashes faded away. Lorn tried to pull back, tried to signal that he needed light and air. He could no longer see any light or know which way as up. He begged the naiad. He cried tears into the water.

But she did not let him go.

"Come see my treasure," the naiad had said. Come be my treasure, she meant.
Lorn kicked helplessly. His lungs were on fire though his body was trapped in the cold water. The naiad kissed him with a deadly kiss, and in her embrace he was lost forever. He wanted to scream underwater, but could not. He only thrashed around like an aphid pinned on the thorns of a rose. Slowly, Lorn’s legs and his heart ceased to beat.

The naiad placed her treasure gently in her grotto, next to the moss-covered bones of her last sacrifice four generations ago.

Krilpur hunched over his parchment in the candle-light. He’d carefully scribed his additions to the list of candidates, giving names, locations, and the backgrounds that marked them as possibilities; now he’d scheduled some time for his own interests. Inspired by the golden immortal tomes of human literature created by Madame Endolynne Markett, typically about dukes and dairy-maids, Krilpur dreamt of creating his own. It was his tenth attempt.

Kilprussa the human dairy-maid was thinking of bread, because most humans think of strange things that are not related to what they are doing at the time. Bread was so disgusting. It was a dry dark brown substance that humans made out of crushed grains. Humans then put bread in fire instead of eating it raw like real food. You needed a lot to drink while you ate bread. Flesh was much better.

Krilpur smiled at his own talent.

Kilprussa slashed all the way through Vaakos' bonds with the sharp dairy-maid knife. (Memorandum to self: Investigate what kinds of weapons dairy-maids typically carry.) Vaakos immediately stood. Vaakos had long hair, which is what humans wear when they choose to be women. She was a duke. “Let’s eviscerate the bastards,” Vaakos said. Kilprussa knew the duke would always have a plan. If that plan depended on someone who would always do their very best, then Kilprussa was that person.

Kilprussa followed, and listened to Vaakos’ clever idea. Words clustered up like swallows beating the inner lining of her throat. They were words that she could never speak. Some people are born to shape the world and light infernos of fire. Some people can only follow along in their wake. A duke is not supposed to mind what happens to a dairy-maid. Vaakos smiled at Kilprussa and called her by name, which humans do as a sign of affection. "Your destiny is your own," Vaakos told Kilprussa. Maybe this admirable duke truly minded what happened to the dairy-maid, just as the dairy-maid faithfully served the duke.

Then there was a sound; someone came in, so Krilpur hastily hid his manuscript under other papers and folded his arms above the whole lot.

It was Shalilah, leader of the doppelgangers. Krilpur stumbled up as promptly as possible. Their minds met and exchanged quick surface thought: *Come at once. Danger nears. Yes, sir.*

Krilpur assembled with the others. They took on human forms, agreed-on shapes that matched names on a registry for Blue Shale. Merchant soldiers, indistinguishable hirelings. He recognised each member of his tribe flawlessly, exchanging thoughts that flew between them like lightning.

Shalilah made the most nondescript human among them, of almost exactly middle height, mud-coloured hair, middle-brown skin, and similar features to a potato. It fit him. Shalilah was certainly the oldest among the doppelgangers, and the strongest by a great measure. None of them knew anything about his past or the clan he originally hatched from. Shalilah had found and taken a small clan of shape-shifters as his own before he and Kovacs had rescued Krilpur’s tribe. Shalilah’s mind
flashed like electric fire, but his depths were unplumbed and unknown.

Krilpur had designed his own shape after the description of the protagonist of the first Endolynne Markett he'd read: a tall muscular human with piercing blue eyes, a prominent thyroid projection, blue-black stubble, and loose storm-tossed dark hair. It drew a certain kind of look and thought from humans that he found rather annoying. Shalilah had recommended trying something simpler next time.

Tyraskor, known as the Mind-Breaker among his people, was another who preferred a larger humanoid shape. His chosen transformation was a half-ore, a smaller version of Tirzah. But despite the intimidating form, Tyraskor was physically weak. He chose such a shape to prevent physical attacks. Tyraskor's own strengths were entirely mental, and frightening even to other doppelgangers.

Then there was Madwin Maergrim, a genuine human, looking prepared to stand in the back and do little in a direct fight. He had clever fingers but scanty fighting skill. He lurked at Tirzah's back.

Krilpur fell in close to Halivur, the closest Shalilah had to a second-in-command. Halivur's human appearance was not so far from her true self: short and thick-built, quiet and disciplined. Halivur of course wasn't a human woman, but something about her natural form and demeanour caused humans who met her to think of her as a woman, and she had no objection to being spoken of as such.

Shalilah crossed, stopping by Halivur. He brushed his fingers across the back of Halivur's hand: intimacy and sharing a thought for limited dissemination. Halivur accepted the order.

Next, surprisingly, Shalilah did the same for Krilpur. The thought was the face of a human with a long neck, pale skin, and dark hair falling over their shoulders. *Chosen-kin*, Shalilah told him. That human was under Kovacs' protection. Krilpur wondered why he was trusted with this. He was loyal, truly and absolutely, but he was far from the most powerful or skilled among their tribe. He swelled with pride that Shalilah had selected him.

Perhaps it was indeed because Krilpur was loyal. He'd known nothing of the world beyond being enslaved to an illithid when Kovacs slew that monster and freed them. He remembered the exact words of recent praise: *You've done well. Extremely so*, Kovacs had said. Krilpur turned his head. Kovacs approached, ready to fight, drawing attention like a spark striking a match. His father summoned him to his side.

"You're not going outside looking like that," Albescu Demirci said. He cupped a hand under Kovacs' chin and drew on his magic. Arcane magic was beyond the doppelgangers' purview, but Albescu knew enough intimate details of anatomy and subtle transmutation to be almost as good at crafting a changed face as a doppelganger. This spell was far from the worst he could do. Krilpur realised too late that he should have looked away, not stared gormlessly at a moment of vulnerability for the human he followed, but he saw the transmutation take hold and set. The face was far from original, which was normal for all kinds of shapeshifting; it was far easier to base on something that existed. Kovacs had been made to look like a younger copy of Albescu's body servant Bloch, pale and symmetrical, except with straw-yellow rather than dark hair.

That particular human creeped Krilpur out, and he himself was a creature out of human nightmares. Bloch was voiceless, with a scar on his neck as if his throat had been slit a long time ago, and he had the rare natural ability for his thoughts to be utterly unreadable. Where Albescu Demirci and Kovacs shielded their minds by training, Bloch's was natural. Krilpur knew from others' thoughts that Bloch was supposed to be extraordinarily comely for a human, despite his unusually pallid skin and grotesque scar, with regular features and a clearly marked bone structure.

Kovacs didn't bother to take a mirror to his new face. Krilpur supposed he felt it as only one
indignity among many. Krilpur understood very well that the person who had saved him from bondage was a slave himself.

That battle would be fought on different ground. For the time being, the humans and Tirzah exchanged swift words on evacuating that part of the city. Then the marching orders came to Krilpur and his tribe from Shalilah's flashing mind. Today, they fought a piece of a sleeping god.

—

They called Livia a brave woman to hold such a bold reception to celebrate the return of summer.

Ice sculptures of bizarre trolls and dragons and giants, slowly melting in the blaze of rich lamplights, shone in Livia's open ballroom. Livia smelt the rich scents of the flowers Madeline had selected: lavender, primroses, clematis, and tuberoses. Some were drawn from greenhouses, some carted from the estates outside the city that had escaped the unnatural winter. Servants passed around red olives and exotic cheeses, skewers of meat and out-of-season vegetables charred above blazing fires for a hot course. She served daring frozen fruit mixed with cold cream for desserts to show the aspects of the unexpected winter that would be missed. Musicians boldly struck up country dances. At the centre of her party, Livia hosted and promised and listened and gathered information.

Livia's party was at the very edge of the evacuation zone, so close that over the white balcony they could see traces and flares of the battle against winter. Siamorphe's temple was absolutely deserted. Livia's spyglass had glimpsed men and mages flaring near to Candle's private house, and she rather hoped that it too would be destroyed in the battle. Albescu Demirci and his men fought the strange sleeper under the earth, the source of the unnatural freezing cold. In the meantime, under Livia's bright lights, her spectators feasted and tripped about the room.

Yarrow could not dance, of course, in her mourning; her place was waiting in the back, looking miserably at those who could, covered in ugly black. Even her golden hair looked dull and mousy.

Livia watched Madeline and Pherenike; Madeline was slowly creeping in on Pherenike's self-imposed isolation on the balcony. Livia intended to have them both for handmaids at her wedding, and so they should spend some time together. Madeline needed to remember that she was the one who had accepted Kovacs Demirci into society, and it had cost her own darling Conradin. Pherenike's troubles were Madeline's fault as much as anyone's. Pherenike was cold and nervous, ice-pale and constantly looking outside for signs of the battle against the unnatural winter. No doubt she desperately hopes and prays that my fiancé will be killed for killing her outlaw lover.

Livia's chief guest to impress tonight was one of the present Grand Dukes. Ros Hehir, high priest of Sune, had graciously accepted her invitation. Hehir was a tall and slightly paunchy man, well looking and upright despite his threescore-and-some years, with dyed red-brown hair and a pleasantly warm smile that reached his black eyes. Livia walked him past her ice sculptures and offered him her best wine - wine she had used careful research and bribery to match perfectly to his tastes. Ros Hehir had an excellent appreciation for art and physical pleasures, fitting for a priest of the goddess of love.

To Livia's surprise, Hehir led the talk directly to financials, asking her searching questions on how exactly she intended her anti-lotus initiative and other proposals to be funded.

"I'll own that I have much to learn," Livia said, softening her voice, looking up at Hehir through her eyelashes. She knew that he preferred male lovers, but like most Sunites he had open preferences. He seemed to consider her charming enough. "I've assisted my father for many years, and you will find that I'm well abreast of the Council of Four's budget statements for the past ten years. Velsen advocated for raising land taxes to fund the sewer drainage system, and that more than paid for itself.
Ridding our city of the black lotus plague will improve profits all around, and therefore increase tax revenue. I also intend to support strengthened Flaming Fist recruitment and funding to the city's defences, which in turn increases employment and prosperity."

Hehir laughed, a rosy flush in his sun-tanned cheeks. "You're still very young for the position. Velsen believes you've a ready mind and you've shown this to me. But it takes far more than that to be a Grand Duke. Did you know that the other two most definitely refused to come tonight?"

*Then it appears I'll have to win them over still,* Livia thought. She did not let disappointment show on her face.

"I came because I wished to give you a chance," Hehir said. "Tell me, why did you host a ball on the edge of a dangerous battle? Why unnecessarily risk your life and that of others? Did your fiancé tell you to do this?"

"It's a calculated risk, and one I chose myself," Livia said. She tried to bite down her anger at being challenged. "My fiancé does not know Baldur's Gate as I do. I have indeed risked this party, for I believe that his strength is enough to bring back summer. And all here will see what he and I can do together."

As they spoke, a flare of bright magic seemed to make its way up from the earth to the sky. It seemed the winter was getting the worst of it.

Hehir borrowed Livia's spyglass to take a long look. He returned it to her without comment. "I suppose it takes a younger person to take grand risks, some of which may pay off. You will be new blood, at least," he said. "I would like to be your friend and assist you. Despite monsters such as Durante and Rocheford, I believe it's been too many years since we elected a wizard to the Council of Four. That your fiancé is a foreigner also makes me think better of you. You are deliberately invoking and overplaying the Amnian threat and I hope to convince you to take a more reasonable position on such xenophobia. It damages us all when we fear and hate Amnians who have settled peaceably among us."

Livia still bristled at his criticism. Small wonder that Hehir took this tack. One of his longest serving lovers, Amancio Navarre, was an Amnian diplomat - probably a spy to boot. And yet she had come to more realisations than, perhaps, Hehir had wanted. Grand Duke Hehir came to her as if he were a petitioner, politely asking her to change her mind. Regan Rocheford's shameful death had left Livia the strongest candidate by far. *He, and others, expect me to win. I will be Grand Duchess and have everything I want.*

But winning the election would be useless if she couldn't convince others to serve her purposes afterwards.

"I hope we have more in common than not," Livia told Hehir. "A single string does nothing; a thousand strings is an orchestra. A city is strong when we work united, toward our selfsame purpose."

"That will do, for now," Hehir said. "I fear I have kept you talking to an old man too long. Would you care for a dance?"

Pherenike stood alone on the balcony, heedless of the whirling dancers, watching the darkness outside. She could barely see any of the fighting now. She was worried, on edge, caught up with her enemy Livia and desperately worried about her lover. *If Albescu Demirci is fighting, then so must he be, and it's unlikely he'll be given the easiest part of it.* She had already worked a tear in her lace handkerchief, turning and pressing the soft cloth between her hands. *I have seen what he can do,* she
told herself. \textit{I will not fear without reason. He will come back to me.}

She heard several soft coughs, and looked across at the interloper. Madeline Castellas' approach was hesitant, gentle. Pherenike forced herself to smile. She regretted how she'd treated Madeline, rather wished she'd chosen her for a friend in place of Candle. Of course, it was difficult to befriend anyone so shy.

"I'm glad to see you," Pherenike offered. "I remember when I was younger, you were always good to us. You made sure we had sweetmeats and comforted anyone who fell over or was teased." In the way of childhood, she'd once thought of Madeline and Candle as impossibly grown-up and mature, able to sit with the adults at parties when Pherenike was grouped with other children, though the difference in ages wasn't really so much.

"I hope you don't mind me saying this - " Madeline said, her face drooping and cheeks and lips almost seeming to tremble - "but I'm sorry for what happened to you."

"I do mind. Everyone has said that to me, and it's very tedious," Pherenike said. Then she softened her instinctive sharpness, tried to avoid shocking Madeline with her bluntness. "It's not the end of the world, I assure you. I mind it most when people use their sorrow for me as a thin cloak for their superiority, the sorrow that delights over a wonderful piece of juicy gossip."

"I should have - Since the beginning I felt there was something dark and wrong in Kovacs Demirci," Madeline said. "I did not speak up in time. He helped me, but the harm he did was far, far worse - "

"He did help you," Pherenike said. "So you turn on someone who helped you so easily, so viciously? He helped you at the ball, he fought the Talonite poisoner - and you condemn him without knowing what happened." It was easy to talk over Madeline, since she hesitated and grovelled too quickly. "This might be why you have few friends."

"He - Kovacs saved my life, so I was reluctant - " Madeline stammered. It was sad to listen to her. "I saw him kill. He killed easily and quickly, without hesitation or mercy - "

"And that's an excellent quality, depending on the person," Pherenike interrupted. "People who are no loss whatsoever - "

"Conradin." Madeline managed to steal back the conversation, tears in her eyes now. "He was kind to me when he was a child. I still cared for him, Livia admitted that it was not his note that night. He was murdered, stabbed almost thirty times, and he deserves at least one person to grieve for him, everyone deserves that - " She broke down before Pherenike's eyes, nose red and cheeks blotchy as she shed tears.

\textit{I would love to tell her to her face that I was the one who killed Conradin, and there's almost nothing I'm happier about,} part of Pherenike thought. \textit{His hands, his breath on me - Conradin was vile and deserved to die.}

"Don't be a fool," Pherenike ordered. "I was there. Kovacs defended himself, then he was murdered by his own father. If you want a merciless killer, look no further than Livia's darling fiancé." What she'd seen that day was not death, but what she knew Demirci capable of was bad enough. "If you had half a grain of sense you'd know Conradin would never have returned to you. He told me you were a sow. If he had wanted you then you would have hated him too - "

Madeline Castellas ran from her, sobbing. Pherenike noticed with distaste that Livia broke from a dance with a minor merchant to comfort Madeline, ushering her away. \textit{I suppose she particularly wants Madeline's excellent flowers for her perfect wedding day.}
Pherenike turned back to the dark city. She would have whispered a prayer to Oghma against danger to her lover, but Bhaal's children were considered enemies to all upright deities, dark creatures doomed to wreak destruction. Perhaps the entire spanning system of the cosmos was decayed and corrupt and rotten from within to without, and should be broken. She could only watch and wait. She saw the unnatural snow fall more thickly than ever before, and rooted herself to the balcony in the cold.

Whether defeat or no - only let Kovacs and his allies not be the sacrifice. Let them all go unharmed in the cold teeth of winter.

The falling snow turned to a blizzard, but Livia had plenty of fuel left to burn. Guests gathered around the heat, drinking hot spiced wine. She congratulated herself for keeping them present and calm and joking into the snowstorm, still walking this razor's edge. Grand Duke Hehir willing to listen to her; Yarrow Blaine put down; Pherenike and Madeline set strongly against each other. That last was important. Livia was one of a tiny few who knew that Madeline Castellas was nothing like as powerless as she acted. She was perhaps even almost as powerful as Candle had been. She had best not try to use her gifts against her dear friend Livia.

The blizzard reached its height. Then came the tremor in the ground. Livia lost control of herself for that moment, then looked around to see if anyone had glimpsed her fear. They were all probably much too occupied with their own fright. The earth and building all rumbled and trembled for a moment, the climax, the peak -

And then the snow stopped falling. Victory. I never doubted, Livia lied to herself. Warm summer winds rushed into the mansion. She used a cantrip to light the wine in her glass on fire and raised it, flames sparkling and reflecting many times out of her crystal goblet.

"To the return of summer! A toast to the hero who brought back summer!"

"And to his lady, our Grand Duchess-to-be!" a plant of hers obligingly called from her crowd of supporters. They celebrated until the rosy dawn brought sunlight and warmth, and even Livia did not object to being awake all night. She stayed awake until the very last reveller had departed, smiling and cheerful, kissing cheeks and shaking hands.

All the while, in the bottom of her reticule, Livia could almost feel the crackling of the anonymous note she'd received less than a day before. She kept it with her because she did not know what else to do with it.

Albescu Demirci murdered his last wife. Apply to Magistrate Karga in the Firinov district in Sembia for particulars. There was no justice in Sembia. He will do the same to you.
Albescu Demirci and Kovacs led the way to the sleeping giant. The plan was to use Bhaal's son as bait, that one divine spark would kindle another's. Krilpur touched the hilt of his sword to reassure himself it was still there. Traditional doppelganger fighting shaped their limbs into weapons, but Shalilah had told them to learn to fight like humans even if they chose not to use it. Krilpur considered himself quite good at it. Ordinary humans were dotted among them in the scarlet of Flaming Fist uniforms, liaising with the Blue Shale auxiliary to save their city.

It was deathly cold. Pale mist swirled around them. This part of the city had been deliberately emptied of people. The temples of newer human gods had been built over the lost barrow-mounds of sleeping giants.

Krilpur stared at a sudden movement from Tyraskor. The Mind-Breaker raised his head like a hound sniffing the air, as if he could sense what was coming and didn't like it. The next moment his figure slipped into the white mists again, and only a flash of the lurking fear in his mind touched Krilpur. Krilpur wouldn't be afraid. He'd faced other battles. He'd seen Kovacs invent and execute quick plans that saved them all, sparking fire and inspiration at the last moment when things seemed hopeless. The cold seemed to sink into Krilpur's bones, weighing down his skin and seeping all the way through to the core of his body. He felt heavy and yet ghostly at the same time, thinner, as if he drew nearer and nearer to the edge of the world. Krilpur picked up on another doppelganger's thoughts, Faliyar, another younger doppelganger, rising and ascending in a gyre of chaos and desperation and fear and cold, a deathly cold indeed -

Then Faliyar's human shape erupted into a pillar of icy cold. It was a frost giant, ten feet high. Even the mind was no longer Faliyar's: touched, taken, and utterly dominated by the incarnation of the god under the earth. The frost giant, creature owned by a god, reached out with an icy claw and cut a swathe through those around. Flaming Fists and fellow doppelgangers fell.

All the others felt the same pressure. Krilpur sought to fight back. The cold beat down on him, twisted and forced its way inside him. He thought of what Kovacs would say. He tried to resist.

Doppelgangers always did bend too easily at the knees. They were made to worship. Too readily, they fell under the sway of magicians, psychic abominations, slavers. There was only one godling who fought for them to choose their own destiny. Shalilah had bound them to Kovacs' fate and his freedom. But the call of the ice god under the earth, so near and so powerful, was stronger than anything else. It overwhelmed Krilpur. Near him, Tyraskor yelled, body shaping and cracking and warping into another ice giant, his will utterly subsumed. Krilpur's bones shifted shape against his choice.

And then frost was all that was inside him, and Krilpur rose as one of many mindless servants of the god of the winter.

Shalilah turned back in time to see the last of his people turn. Halivur had held for as long as she could, which was not long.

This is why, Shalilah thought, drawing his sword, resisting the need to fight his own people. This is why we need a god killer. This is why I fight. There were too many ice giants for only his own
people; some of the humans were also taken by the power of the god under the earth and transformed. The ice-giant-that-was-not-Halivur struck at him. He leapt back, parrying an ice claw with the flat of his blade, playing for time.

Shailiah was old enough that he could no longer remember when he was hatched. It had been an immense number of human generations before, long enough for him to forget half the human languages he'd ever learnt. He had survived to see multitudes of his people die, lived when so many tribes he had run with perished to their last member. It should not have been that way. He had reason to believe that their shapeshifting gift made their kind practically immortal unless killed. Shailiah should not be the only doppelganger he'd ever known to exist to such an age. But again and again, Shailiah had begged entry into tribes of his fellow doppelgangers. He tried to lead his people to victory and survival, chose strategic alliances with powerful leaders, planned for their freedom and very existence. Again and again, Shailiah failed and once more became a lone doppelganger. He was the sole survivor while his people were massacred. Masters took them as slaves and betrayed them, dying over and over in turn. Doppelgangers were destroyed by their need to worship powerful figures who turned on them, destroyed by their weakness and abandonment by their foul creators. This time, Shailiah led two tribes together and they had not perished yet. This time, he had sworn common cause with a half-god bastard.

Now they fought a god who sought to take Shailiah's people from him. Shailiah felt the same icy cold force trying to creep into his own mind, but he was old and canny and free enough to resist. The god had dared to steal his people's bodies and minds and souls away. Shailiah stood by the son of the god of death, fighting his own people against his will.

Today, they would kill a god.

Albescu Demirci was still himself. Shailiah knew he would not care to waste assets in such a way. A moment later, the ground trembled with Demirci's powerful transmutation. Shailiah nimbly jumped aside. The earth parted at Albescu Demirci's will, deep cracks suddenly opening up below the ice giants' feet. The giants sunk to waist-depth in the ground, ground which closed and tightened around them the next moment. They were helpless to harm unless anyone got close to them, and trapped to be unhurt themselves.

"Move out!" Demirci ordered. They left their people behind; there was no choice. They rounded a corner of Siamorphe's temple. The whirling snowstorm began to gather around a central point, a roiling white ball in a tempest. The piece of the god sleeping under the earth woke more and more as invaders drew near to its hiding-place.

The tempest of snow took form into a vast shape, near to the height of the ducal palace. It was a man-shaped thing, though with a strange hunched brow and bent back, that bore a heavy spear of ice. It beat down at the small scattered shapes before it.

"Kossuth, Lord of Flame! Grant me your power - " a Flaming Fist battle-priest called, her long blonde plait lifted by the fierce wind. A jet of flame erupted from the air at her will. The giant's shoulder boiled at the strike that rained down from the sky. A stream of cold water ran down its arm before freezing once more.

Then it roared a breath of ice and snow. The Kossuthian didn't get out of the way in time. She froze solid where she stood, and fell to the ground with a final-sounding clink.

Kovacs raced through Candle's old house, up the stairs to the rooftop. The old wards to it were long gone, of course. He got up on the roof, closer to the giant's head, and conjured fire. The giant was drawn toward him. He aimed his throwing-knives, sinking them one by one into the ice in its body.
The giant raised its ice sword. Kovacs was away the instant before it came down, springing away from the house as it was shattered to pieces, moving to the next building and upward. He ran along rooftops and threw when he could, dotting black handles in the ice-covered body. They looked harmless.

Below, Tirzah and Shalilah chopped at the ankles, trying to slow it. The ground by its feet turned into sticky mud from his father's magic, but each touch of the ice froze it again as soon as it moved.

Kovacs and Albescu Demirci understood the plan without having to speak. The bond between them was open. He could feel his father's every physical gesture, read the patterns he added to the Weave the moment he cast them, and the exact same was true for his father. They could collaborate almost perfectly like this, two bodies able to work as one. Much as they hated and resented each other, the complete concord was utterly effective. Albescu manipulated the ground below the giant's feet, tangling it and altering the angle, while Kovacs used high ground to attack, jumping from rooftop to rooftop.

The giant's form was riddled with the throwing knives. Albescu withdrew, Shalilah and Tirzah the next moment. Kovacs started his end of the casting, in exactly the same breath as his father.

The metal in the knives heated with the transmutation. Fire merged with metal until the daggers became molten. The giant stopped in its tracks and flung its head to the sky in a silent howl. Both Kovacs and his father reached into the Weave for the same spell at the same time, and the whole was greater than the sum of either part. They awakened power and fire and will together. The knives were balls of liquid yellow fire, creating a pattern to be joined together. Threads of molten metal within the giant's body ran between the dotted joints. They formed the lines of a fiery star, running together like veins and arteries within the ice and snow of the body. The radiant light glowed almost too brightly to look.

The snow giant blew apart. Droplets of icewater and molten metal fell from the sky. The afterimage of the star glowed in the air where it had been for a single moment. A tremor passed under the earth.

They had defeated the strongest the sleeper under the earth had to offer. They stood above the land it had protected. Albescu Demirci perceived something of where it hid. He drove at the connection between two divine sparks to find a rough location. Almost directly below where they were, below millennia worth of sunken rock, there was a tunnel. He reached into the Weave and cast silver doors before Shalilah, Tirzah, and Kovacs. They stepped through and disappeared.

In the meantime, the dead Kossuthian priest raised herself from the ground. Her eyes were blue and her skin was iced over. She raised her mace.

Albescu Demirci incinerated her with a gesture. But then her charred bones rose from the ground, reassembling themselves with a thin film of ice over the blackness. She lurched toward him still. He drew his sword and closed in.

Shalilah took back his natural form the moment they fell into a closed tunnel. The air was stale and almost dead. Kovacs summoned a magelight - there was no need to worry about attracting attention. Their presence was already well known. Invaders in the domain of this ancient avatar of the winter god, ants daring to eat into its long sleep.

They passed deeper under the earth in that black tunnel. Walls and floor were coated with a thick, glass-smooth ice that had formed in sheets the height of a man over black rock. Sometimes they saw flashes of white bone under the fields of ice, formed into long spines and gigantic skulls from fantastical animals, too large and alien to be like anything that any of them had seen walk the earth in their time.
Then the ice in front of them began to crack and shift. They ran toward it, knowing they had to reach the end of the tunnel.

And as the ice opened up, white bones rose out of it in a swell of frozen mist. They clacked and clattered against each other as they reformed in the shape of a creature from a cold past. It had a long skull with vast ivory tusks on each side that curved inwards as they grew, almost forming a pincer with each other. Its huge legs were like pillars, tipped with sharp, almost delicate toes. The travellers had never seen a living creature like this. Flakes of frost blew off it as it moved forward, bones creaking and moving together to walk the earth once more. It lowered its tusks and charged.

Tirzah met it with her greatsword. "Go," she offered. She held her ground, matching the tusks blow for blow. Shalilah and Kovacs slipped past her, running down the black tunnel. Before Tirzah, more and more of the bone monsters streamed their way out of the ice.

The ice became a slide. Both of them lost their footing and skidded downward. It was all black for a moment, the magelight lost behind them. They flew deeper into unknown territory.

Then they glimpsed the light of the yellow eye in the darkness, open, waiting. The eye of the giant alone was three times as big as a man. The piece of the winter god's divinity, plucked down and left to sleep so many aeons ago, had begun to awaken. It glared with a baleful glare at the two mites that had toppled into its domain.

"Destroy," Shalilah called. His hand and wrist twisted around Kovacs' right hand, binding them together. They dug into the ice with their swords, getting enough traction to slow their descent. But they couldn't have stopped falling into the giant eye even if they'd wanted to.

They fell into the viscous fluid. There was no way to go but down. They stabbed and cleared with their swords. They hacked from the eye to the brain, fighting only to breathe. Two such tiny creatures could barely hope to do any damage, as a fleck of dust to a dragon.

But Kovacs had destruction inside him. He couldn't breathe, so his power replenished him. His left hand changed of itself, erupting into black scales and claws.

The ancient god of winter was a primal force, almost as old as the beginning of the world, when all of Toril was once coated with ice. Yet still more primal than that was the claw of death.

Where Kovacs touched, he felt flesh decay. He noticed that his black hand did far more damage than his sword, and so he dropped it somewhere in the giant's brain tissue. He and Shalilah kept fighting their way through.

Kovacs fixed his mind on annihilation. His power fed on the death and destruction he was already causing. The decay was enough to create a small breathing space for him and Shalilah. They fell deeper and deeper within the giant's skull as the brain tissue parted around them. The decay spread to cause halls, then caverns of emptying space around them. The creeping ice of winter tried to match with the black hand of death itself, and in the end could not conquer it. Kovacs could feel hungry nibbles taken from the giant's skull, holes appearing and growing, like moths eating away at fabric until nothing was left.

He was a monster. Kovacs opened himself to nothing but annihilation and death, obliterating himself and giving in to the black-clawed creature inside him. Shalilah still clung to his arm, elbow linked to his, but as that elbow grew thinner and thinner until bone, he did not notice. Death spread from Kovacs to the tissues and fibres of the giant. The very skull began to crack and fall into the black caverns left behind. The giant was blinded; in pain; numb of all pain, a gibbering imbecile with no mind left to it; and then utterly destroyed.
Its flesh crumbled still faster as the black-clawed hand swept toward the bottom of the vast skull.

It came to Kovacs to look to Shalilah. He saw his companion's flesh dissolving. Kovacs' destructive power had spread too far, had taken his ally equally to his enemy. He sought to stop himself, to withdraw the destruction back into himself and help Shalilah. They hit the bottom, falling on a cracked and already decaying skull, while above them lumps of rotten tissue and heavy pieces of bone crashed down by them like a series of earthquakes.

"I can stop this. I can reverse this," Kovacs promised. He tried to contain the tide of destruction that he'd unleashed, found that it had swept far beyond him and out of his control. He touched his left hand with his right, willing it back to normal. Nothing happened. He dropped to his knees next to Shalilah. A sickly yellow glow of decay shone around them, sinking into the gobbets of dead flesh and crumbling skull that fell from the heights. He saw Shalilah's body twitch. Coin-size rents in his flesh opened and then widened, dissolving into nothingness.

Shalilah raised his hand, his sword. Flashes of bone shone through his skin. "Sic ... semper deis," he managed to speak. Despite everything, his teeth flashed white in a savage grin.

_Sic semper deis. Thus perish all gods. Remember your promise_, Shalilah meant to say.

Kovacs tried again to reverse the annihilation, to be something different than death's bastard. He failed. Bhaal's power, called into existence, was not easily quelled. He drew what he could inward, let it eat and cut his own flesh to ribbons, but it replenished itself as soon as the damage was done. And still Bhaal's awful power fed on Shalilah.

_One death for one death. A god for a friend._

"Time," Kovacs managed. Just a moment longer; give him one more moment to contain this back inside a mortal shell. But one of Shalilah's legs was now nothing but a thigh bone sticking out of flesh, the other gone to the knee. It ate away at arms and torso, face and chin. Incredibly, he still raised his sword even though his right arm was mostly bone. He turned it hilt first, as if he offered it to Kovacs.

He was in terrible pain. Kovacs understood for what he was asking. He took up the sword from Shalilah's hand, and let his companion finally rest the shaking arm.

He slipped the sword up and under Shalilah's ribs, stopping his heart in a moment. The head stopped grinning in its rictus of pain. The body still dissolved, eaten by rot.

Kovacs looked up. Another piece of the giant's skull fell from on high. He didn't get out of the way in time.

He felt pain in his back when he woke somewhat. All was dark and his limbs numb. He couldn't lift himself out from under this. He lay there, waiting to see if this was enough to finish him.

Then he glimpsed a flickering light like flame, and a release of the weight on his shattered back. Tirzah had fixed a torch into the ground, lifting the piece of rotting bone away, going among the remains of decaying giant in a frantic search. "You pillock - " she grumbled, then saw Shalilah's sword, the half-dissolved remains of smaller bones than the giant's. "Fuck. C'mon."

She hoisted Kovacs on her back, his arms around her neck. She started to climb. The walls weren't really walls. They were rounded bone, parts of the giant's ribs and spinal cord, blackened with decay and falling apart. Lukewarm, foetid water poured down the passageways, the remains of the melting ice, flooding the deep cavern. Tirzah dug her claws in and slowly moved up on the precarious,
Then the silver door opened again, just below Kovacs. His father could always find exactly where he was. He and Tirzah fell through, out into the crisp open air of the city again. He peeled himself up from the cobblestones and managed to stand.

Frozen bodies of Flaming Fists lay on the ground. If some of them were Albescu Demirci's work to prevent witnesses rather than casualties of the ice giant, they would not speak of it. The doppelgangers were returning to themselves. Kovacs approached Halivur and gave her Shalilah's sword. He didn't need to tell her what had happened.

He helped Krilpur up. Doppelgangers didn't shed tears like a human, but when they were distressed, mottled frills puffed up around their eyes. Krilpur's were a deep purple against his light grey skin.

"Forgive me, sir," Krilpur begged. "I let it take me, I couldn't fight, I fell. I was helpless and Shalilah went on. You and he saved us. Forgive me."

"No. I don't forgive you," Kovacs said. Krilpur's frills trembled, but the shock made him stand straighter. Kovacs reached in and clasped Krilpur's hand, joined elbow and wrist, a warrior's grip that meant brothers in arms. "I expect you to do better next time, because I know it's in you."

Kovacs moved among the freed doppelgangers, talking, recognising each of them as he helped them from the ground, acknowledging Shalilah's loss. And if he seemed more like a leader to them than Albescu Demirci had ever been, no one seemed to notice.

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Kovacs glared at his altered face in a shaving-mirror. He was surprised the transmutation still lasted after his injuries. It would wear off eventually, and those who cared to know him would use other means. He knew Bloch's face all too well, and resisted the urge to try to scratch it off. The soft-footed valet was his father's creature down to the bone, secret-keeper and handmaid to his master's every desire. He snipped off a stray thread in the cuffs of the fresh shirt he was wearing, clean of blood and filth. Showing respect in a human way.

"He was a creepy bastard, but a good fighter. I'll set a barrel of whisky on fire for him," Tirzah said. It was the highest praise she would give anyone.

Kovacs went down to the cellars of the rented house. This was the doppelgangers' domain; it had been damp when they'd come and it was still damper now. Moist black earth for the floor, a small shallow lake in the corner, and a large aquarium against the wall, teeming with eels, crabs, and flatfish. They gathered in a circle; Kovacs took a place as if he belonged among them, choosing neither the lowest nor the highest.

In the traditional mourning ritual, they would have eaten the corpse a bite at a time, passed it among themselves that they might share a piece of Shalilah's strength. Since there was no body, they handed around a live eel, which squirmed and fought back as it was eaten one bite at a time. Kovacs took his turn, swallowing a small bite of scales and bitter, oily blood, careful not to flinch at the taste or when the eel's writhing cut his hands. The eel lived until Tyraskor the Mind-Breaker bit off the head, savouring the brains and tongue with loud sloppy bites. Halivur took a more delicate mouthful, still bearing Shalilah's sword in her hand.

The shifting tensions were almost visible. Kovacs waited for the last bite of the eel to be devoured. "Let me tell you of Shalilah's death," he said. He had taken the trouble to master what little there was of the doppelgangers' spoken tongue.
He could have shared thoughts with them, but Shalilah had cautioned him they knew he could shield his mind and lie to doppelgangers. It was more respectful to use their spoken tongue and keep his mind a grey wall, rather than occupy them with thoughts of an outsider that might or might not be true.

Kovacs told the truth, but chose not to say that he himself had slain Shalilah.

"Shalilah walked the ice-path," Kovacs said. He tried to slip into the older way of the doppelgangers' tongue, rich with kenning and description, used only for solemn talk. "Shalilah fixed a will of iron to the glittering brow-stone of the god. Shalilah did not turn back from the deadly wound, from the moon-bite. Shalilah entered the beast-belly through the seat-of-sight. The sword of Shalilah, the biting hone-steel, pierced the god-skull through and through, from top to back. Shalilah would set your path free of tyrants, and to this end met the life-robbery, the death in the deepest earth-wound. Remember your chieftain well."

Silence. Halivur stood straight-backed, hand tense around the sword she held. Tyraskor the Mind-Breaker's light-coloured eyes, nearly white in both pupil and iris, flickered from side to side below his heavy brows. It was clear he considered the time to make his move.

This was the difficult part. Kovacs needed Halivur to take Shalilah's place as the leader of the doppelgangers, and not Tyraskor. But he could not be seen to place Halivur there through strength, as his intervention itself would make her leadership invalid.

"We remember while the star-jewel rises," Halivur said. "And yet with the bite of the cruel sky-flame, our labour calls us. I declare our work continues."

Halivur gave the doppelgangers their scheduling; she changed little from Shailiah's previous orders. Kovacs noted her careful thought behind the small changes, marking her slow and considerate temperament. By undertaking this responsibility, she implied she would be the one to present progress and plans to Albescu Demirci; he preferred to directly deal with only one doppelganger, the one leader of the tribe.

Tyraskor the Mind-Breaker visibly bristled. "Shalilah is gone," he said. "The time is not to repeat the flaws that led to the death. You will send me as liaison to Master Demirci, and he will listen to my words. We will no longer serve in ways that pretend to be human.

"Now give me that human blade," Tyraskor commanded Halivur. "I won't need it, of course. It can be interred."

"I will not," Halivur answered, and Tyraskor took a step toward her.

"Before this is settled, let the human leave," Tyraskor said. "You will not lean on him - and I think he would prove to be a frail weed."

*I fear nothing from you and you know it well*, Kovacs allowed Tyraskor to see in his mind. "I am an outsider," he admitted. "There is a choice, and all of you must make it. Shalilah would say that your destiny is your own, and I say it now. Does any other say it?"

"I say it," said Halivur calmly. "Two descended into the beast and restored our will. Kovacs has a right to stay."

"And an interest in the question," Tyraskor said. "This is my offer. I say that we follow the traditional ways of our people and choose the strongest, not the weakest. I say that we unite with the one most meet for us to choose - Albescu Demirci. All know that his child is both a slave and a
traitor to him. Which of you will serve me - or which will be first to fall?"

Tyraskor fixed his gaze on the other doppelgangers in turn. Most cringed or at least flinched back. They had to. Tyraskor had a rare ability among doppelgangers: to not only sense others' surface thoughts but to impress his own on others, to force himself inside others' minds and rip them open for the information he demanded. Shalilah had considered him highly valuable, and had helped him to study his power.

Kovacs could tell that many quicksilver thoughts flew between the doppelgangers; they said only the odd isolated word to emphasise a point. Tyraskor and Halivur gathered supporters, prepared to fight. Kovacs stood back. If Halivur could not win this through her own strength, there was no point. But Kovacs let his thoughts show, in case any might read them. Tyraskor has destroyed the minds of his own people for fun. If you want him to choose your fate, select him and it will be the last choice you will ever make. If you want your fate to be your own, choose Halivur, he projected.

"I throw for Halivur," Krilpur said suddenly, excitedly, and faced down Tyraskor. Kovacs let his mind fade to opacity. He valued Krilpur's dedication, but not his impulsive nature to dart at any task he saw and ignore those he didn't see. But let this gamble play out. "Halivur for leader. It was Shalilah's own choice," Krilpur said. "As we went into battle, Shalilah gave Hali a private-thought to show trust and confidence - "

Tyraskor interrupted him. "Your brain was half eaten when we found you," he told Krilpur. "How long before I would be able to ... "

"You may try it, and I may try my fists," Krilpur said. It was no idle threat. He was rightfully proud of the fighting skills he'd learnt, and stood gangling and taller than most other doppelgangers.

"You could break one of us," Halivur addressed Tyraskor. "But how many would you break, before you looked upon a broken tribe?"

"I declare for Halivur also," another doppelganger said - Marrulive, level-headed and respected. Halivur acknowledged it. The balance of power shifted, Tyraskor's faction fearing his strength, but knowing themselves in the minority. The consensus shifted without bloodshed.

"I serve you," Halivur said. "A chieftain's purpose is to work day and night for the betterment of our people. We are one tribe. If I fail in my duties, then I invite all of you to judge me." She extended her palm to Tyraskor, fingers spread to the extent of the low-slung webbing between them. "I respect you as Shalilah did. You practice one of the arts of our people to its highest degree. But you must learn to act as one with the tribe."

Tyraskor must have considered overwhelming her with power. But Halivur was strong-willed enough for him to think twice of it, and besides that she was a canny fighter who carried a majority with her. He touched the bottom of her palm to accept his place. Kovacs feigned to be unaware of his demotion and temporary defeat.

He'd made an enemy out of Tyraskor this day. But it was the doppelganger way to follow the strongest and their chieftain, so Kovacs did not fear him.

Halivur spoke or exchanged thoughts with each other doppelganger in turn, her calm and quietness inspiring confidence. Last of all, she came to Kovacs.

She held out Shalilah's sword, balancing it on both hands. It was a long blade, well-balanced. The hilt was made of horn and mother-of-pearl inlay, smoothed and dulled after many years of use, glistening with a faint violet sheen. "You lost your sword," she said to Kovacs. She weighted her
words with a careful significance, as if she constructed and carried an important message. "Take this one."

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Upon the astral plane, the rest of the god of ice stirred as if a pinprick had dug into his flesh, destroying a fragment of himself while he lay sleeping. Were he awake, he might have avenged such a slight with a cold so merciless as to lay continents to waste. Still, the old god did not wake. He slept on as if he waited for the end of the world.

Chapter End Notes

Eel blood can be poisonous; don't eat raw eel at home.
Ravage and Bloodthirst of the Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Kythorn, the Time of Flowers. 1359 DR. Eight years ago. City of Praka, Damara.*

Tirzah chased the man into the back street. He turned with a lighting-fast strike from his drawn sword. She parried, bearing down on him, but he was fast. A real professional.

"Bhaalite," he hissed at her, and she thought of bitterly correcting him. Bhaal was dead and no amount of Bhaalspawn blood spilt could bring back her god. Yet she'd keep the faith that was all she knew, even while around her others crumbled and fell.

He was a good fighter. His sword seemed everywhere at once. Tirzah's much heavier blade was an inch slower than his. He shaved a few threads from her cloak, almost managed a cut across her mail vest. Neither of them bothered to try and raise the city watch; they'd both be arrested for brawling. He was smart enough to take the ground into a narrower street, less room for her to manoeuvre, less chance of outside intervention. They fought in in a lane by the stables, on cobblestones made slick by recent rain, dark and deserted in the night. Boots stamped and cloaks whirled as neither of them gave any quarter.

Tirzah tripped her opponent with a kick. One bad move was enough to kill you in this game. He fell into the horse-trough, then she had her boot on his head before he could get up. She held him there long enough to make sure he drowned in the inch of scummy water, then started to search his pockets.

A Harper pin - signifying a band of well-resourced do-gooders that Tirzah had crossed swords with before - and a set of coded scrolls, sewn up in the lining of his cloak. She set off, leaving the corpse where it lay. She walked past a stack of old crates next to a closed linen-draper's shop.

Suddenly she turned, and grabbed the thirteen-year-old boy hiding behind the crates by his ear. She let go of him as he came out.

"You're not much of a tracker if you get caught so easily," Tirzah said.

"You're easy to find," Kovacs returned.

Showing initiative was probably good for the Bhaalspawn kid, Tirzah thought. He was just one of Bhaal's remnants; useless for bringing him back, which was all Tirzah cared for at the moment. Albescu hadn't killed him with the others on the grounds of not wasting an investment he'd already spent time and trouble on. Now he'd told Tirzah to train him, and keep him busy or else.

"Sirrah - uh, ma'am, I mean?" the barmaid stammered. She was a skinny kid who looked barely older than Kovacs, and had the same nose as one of the bouncers. "Could I ... maybe get you something?"
"Red wine, dry - " Kovacs tried.

"Small beer for him," Tirzah corrected. "And a bowl of soup." The kid usually had a half-starved look to him.

The boy scowled. "Small beer indeed. I'm old enough for many things." He raked a hand through his hair, looking desolate and sleepless.

"I thought I left you sorting through a barrel of second-hand spell scrolls," Tirzah said. They spoke to each other in the Lantanese tongue; that and the noise around was some protection from eavesdroppers.

"I finished. There was only one useful one," the kid said. "I figured out that it was a spell to summon a familiar. So I did it." Something small moved inside his coat. He put a hand to it. "Did you know there was an exotic animal stall in the marketplace two streets down from the house? I didn't. Until I found out today. I probably messed up the spell."

He took out a small furry creature, holding it gently between both hands. "It's a sort of rodent," he said defensively.

"What does it eat?" The thing had large teeth for its size, Tirzah thought - but the size was such that a gnome could've easily stepped on it.

"Insects and carrion - sometimes."

Mostly vegetables, then. "It's a prey animal," Tirzah summed up. Barely any claws and a sleepy, complacent demeanour. Not exactly intimidating in battle.

"It could be useful," Kovacs said. "I named her Tirzah. After you. Because - well, you can see why." The familiar was mostly orange and black. He held it carefully, but looked fixedly into Tirzah's eyes. "I summoned her because I realised I was lonely. There's no one who cares what happens to me. Real people don't want to be my friend. I followed you because I want to get to know you better. You're trying to teach me things, and you don't hurt me like my father does."

He was desperate. Tirzah doubted he'd cry - tears, probably, had long since been seared out of him - but something inside him was frayed to a spiderweb-thin thread. There was a certain cleverness in his appeal, but a deliberate nakedness too, showing his own helplessness.

"I've grieved. These past months, I've mourned someone," Kovacs said. "I wanted to die, but that's difficult for me. Then I started to look outside myself, and I realised that you feel the same way. You might be the only one who truly grieves for him."

He truly echoed Tirzah's own nagging thought. She'd seen changes in Albescu, no longer a priest, that she disliked. Changes that showed his goals to be more profit and power than still fighting for their lord's sake. She'd honestly mourned the death of their god. She watched Kovacs, listening without speaking.

"You and I have no purpose left, no target to aim for. We both know what it feels like to be left with nothing. You know he makes me kill other children. He's experimenting, trying to do what benefits him. He hurts me and he'll keep hurting me. He makes me sleep at the foot of his bed so I don't try to kill myself again. I want you to help me. I'll do anything," he offered.

Damn Albescu Demirci to the worst of the Nine Hells.

"Do you want me to kill your father?" Tirzah asked.
Kovacs put his hand on her wrist. Not to try to restrain her; he knew that would never work. "You're the strongest warrior I know," he said. "But he's a mage. If he won, I'd be alone. Please don't."

"Why aren't you worried I'll tell him all you've said?" Tirzah said.

"Because you served your god with honour. You are not an oathbreaker," Kovacs said. His eyes pleaded with her to make it true. "For better or worse, I am his son. I ask for your help."

"Help is given to those strong enough not to need it," Tirzah said. "The strong survive. The weak die. That's the way of the world." It was Bhaal's way.

A group of warriors entered the tavern. Tirzah stood. She was supposed to be tracking down a precious artefact on Albescu's orders, once said to belong to Bhaal himself. The problem was that there were rival interests in the matter - and they'd caught up to her.

"Good sirs and ladies, you would all be well advised to leave," said the leader of the band, a lanky man in shining silver armour with a piercing voice. Panic spread throughout the inn. The civilians rushed off; Tirzah ignored them.

She seized the nearest intruder and threw him out the window. He flew through the hide curtain and landed heavily on the cobblestones. Two more rushed at her with drawn swords. She hefted a bar table and swept them out of the way.

Kovacs tucked the hamster back in his shirt, then drew his sword. He lunged for the closest one to Tirzah, a man in light armour under a blue cloak. The next moment his sword clattered on the ground, his hand bruised, and the man grabbed him by the collar.

"Hold on - " a woman with an axe called. "This looks like a kid."

"I'm no child." Kovacs drove his knee up into the man's groin. His bones jarred against a metal codpiece there. He recovered fast and took the dagger from his sleeve. He stabbed down into the man's thigh and this time shed blood. The man fended him off, cursing.

"Tyr, Lord of Justice: hold him where he stands!" Blue-Cloak called on his living god. Kovacs' limbs snapped together against his will. He froze in place, and would have toppled if not for the hand on his collar.

"Look at his face. It's Demirci's bastard," the axe-woman said. Arcane light seemed to shine from her face; she'd painted runes on her face, the paint still dripping wet. "Take him outside. Come on."

The battle had moved outdoors. The axe-woman went to help her friends. They needed help, against Tirzah. She faced eight or nine at once and looked like she was winning. Spells seemed to soak into her without doing anything and each swing of her heavy sword cut them back. Blue-Cloak dragged Kovacs along. Kovacs felt motion gradually come back to him, enough at least to move his eyes.

Then he saw her. An old silver-haired elven woman in the street. She was tall and thin, with long pointed ears and skin as smooth as glass. The silver hair that flowed to her waist seemed to glow in the night, illuminating her features with an unearthly light. She was powerful.

Pale streaks of shimmering light flew through the air at her command. They hit Tirzah's shoulders, pummelling her, actually burning her this time. Tirzah swore and cut down a halfling to her left, her sword leaving a deep red cut and about half a jaw left on his face. The silver-haired lady spoke the words of another spell, her voice harsh and deafening and singing something in a tone almost too high to hear. It cut through the air and left Tirzah slowing down, still fighting, but her movements were forced to a crawl. Her enemies moved in like rats seeing their chance to take down a hunting-
Kovacs was almost free, but wouldn't let his captor know it. Then he felt enough of himself to try. Not bothering to wrench himself out of the grip on his collar, he raised his hands and called out his own spell. He'd only lately learnt it but he felt the Weave respond to him as well.

A silver door appeared under Tirzah's feet. She fell through it and disappeared. Kovacs' captor shook him until his teeth rattled in his skull, swearing at him.

"No matter," said the elven woman. "Leave the child be. This is - " She looked at Kovacs. Her eyes were the same silver as her hair, both pupils and irises silver, though she moved her head like she could see as clearly as anyone. "Demirci's son. With this we can negotiate."

She raised her hands again. The Weave worked for her in complex, dizzying patterns that Kovacs didn't have a hope of understanding. Silver light flared around him, ribbons running through the air that became thicker and more and more overwhelming, and he felt the very cobblestones shift and disappear under his feet. The world vanished and he blacked out.

Kovacs had moved Tirzah barely a street away, but they were all long gone by the time she made it back.

—

Pherenike was deep in the stacks in Oghma's library; she knew she could count on the ancient Larsakkian glyphs section to be quite deserted. She looked up and saw a strange man, pale-faced and yellow-haired, walking toward her.

"I know how I look," he said, in Kovacs' voice. She went to him. He wore the new form as if he were deeply uncomfortable with it; human transmutation was supposed to be hazardous and difficult. Most people would have called this a comely face, but it was too cold and symmetric, too different from Kovacs' own grin that was more than half a smirk, his golden freckles scattered across cheeks and nose, and his crooked, expressive black eyebrows. His body language and voice were unaltered. Pherenike would have liked to think that she would have known him from those signs alone.

"You won ... " Pherenike said. The summer air was warm again, even indoors.

"Lost a friend," Kovacs said. "Shalilah."

"I'm sorry." She took him to hold against her body. There wasn't much comfort she could give in terms of old hackneyed phrases, but she could at least draw close, be by his side. She knew allies, any allies, meant a great deal to him. She felt the tension in his arms under his shirt, taut and unreleased.

She had to say it. "Elly is missing," Pherenike blurted out. "She's been gone for days. She didn't go to her parents, she's never come back to her aunt. The dog's gone too. We've asked all we can."

Kovacs drew back from her. Pherenike saw an expression that might have been creeping horror make its way over his face, premonition mixed with surprise. "I saw Elly and the dog, that night in the snow," he said. He paused and spoke more slowly, as if he were trying to work out an answer he hoped would not be true. "She's eight, isn't she? She talked of her da, of her younger siblings. I should have asked - why does Elly's aunt feel sorry for her?"

An odd question.

"It's a sad story, and not one I know well," Pherenike said. She wouldn't normally have told it to
anyone; you didn't spread such histories further than could be helped. "I was a child myself at the
time, and greensick most of that year. But there was someone - he's nothing more than a boogeyman
now. A threat to girls who go outside at night. They still invoke his name for particularly terrible
crimes. They called him the Night Stalker.

"The Night Stalker was responsible for several brutal attacks, I believe, catching attention for their
bloodthirst and quick succession to each other. It wasn't considered right for me to hear such tales.
He was thought terrible even for the Time of Troubles, and that took some doing when there were so
many other awful things that happened. He raped women - " Pherenike finally said it frankly - "and
Sarah's sister was one of his victims. I'm sure the original Night Stalker died or was hanged for other
crimes long ago, since nothing like what he did has happened for years - "

"Oh, I'm sure he's dead," Kovacs interjected, a savage expression on his face.

"He was Elly's true father, so that was difficult for the family," Pherenike finished the story. "For
having no real father, her aunt wanted to take care of her. Her mother married not long after she was
born; the other children are Elly's half-siblings."

"And she lived?" Kovacs said. "She lived - and had several more children?"

"Five more; two of them are twins," Pherenike said. "If you saw Elly's mother you'd not be surprised
- she's built like an oliphant. She'd take on Tirzah in an arm-wrestling contest. She's very strong."

"And she lived," Kovacs repeated, smiling a strange smile. "One in the eye for him, I suppose.
Serves him right. Elly - I think I can find her."

Who was the 'him'? Pherenike thought, and then it slammed into place. Kovacs knows what
happened. The Time of Troubles - it happened when gods were cast down from the heavens to walk
as mortals.

When Bhaal, god of death, crossed the Sword Coast and left death and devastation in his wake
before he was slain by a mortal at Boareskyr Bridge. That bridge is a mere few leagues from
Baldur's Gate.

Bhaal - who sought to sire many offspring to drown the land in blood - came here.

And so, now, did Albescu Demirci come in quest of something -

"Elly is ... like you," Pherenike said. She didn't say it aloud, even in this particularly obscure corner
of the library.

Kovacs gave a single nod. He reached inside a pocket, then, and drew out a sheaf of papers, papers
that he thrust to her to read. They were a small set of letters to Hopeless, ink-blotted and written by
people who rarely wrote. Dear Hopeless, my nephew is missing and he's always been a good boy, I
took him when his mother died. Hopeless, my adopted daughter is gone. My wife is gone, neither of
us have any family and -

Pherenike traced similarities in the scanty stories, sometimes annotated with a line or two in Kovacs'
own hand. Orphaned children or young adults, the product of a sad background, all disappeared
without a trace.

"There will be far more than that," Kovacs said. "Fatherless orphans with monstrous tendencies don't
often inspire concern."

Pherenike reeled, thinking through it all. My own servant-girl the child of a god. What would they
call her, Goddess of Nosepicking? She's Kovacs' own sister, half-sister rather - Kovacs had immediately leapt to understanding what Elly might be and why she was taken. He might even know the exact names of those who had carried out the abduction, might even consider them friends.

She drew back from Kovacs. Her sudden realisation was too strong. *Have you done this before? Have you done this to other children? Of course you have - that's how you know what's happened. It seems you only mind about this because it's Elly -*

His face was stiff, as if he fully understood the dawning suspicion on her face. "He collects them in every town," Kovacs said. "The powerful ones we hunt down and kill. The ordinary ones are imprisoned first. There's a ritual. I should be able to get Elly out just before - "

"You mean you've killed people like Elly before," Pherenike whispered. The bastard children of murder were all supposed to kill one another. In some sick game of power, they were gathered together and - undoubtedly - destroyed.

Kovacs didn't answer; she knew that was a yes. Kovacs saw the horror on her face and he too stepped back, as if he intended to let her run from him or call for help if she chose. He had murdered other sons and daughters of Bhaal and - since Bhaal had died nine years ago - some of them would be as innocent as Elly.

Then Pherenike realised: *No. There's more to you than that. I saw you gently carry a gnome girl in a blanket and talk to her until she could let herself fall back into her body.*

"Your father forces this from you?" she asked.

"I want to break the cycle," Kovacs said. "None of us asked for this. I'm not free and neither are they." *Despise me if you wish,* said his hunted look.

She'd seen the markings forced on his body, binding him to another's will like a slave. Pherenike could imagine some abhorrent ritual in the old temple of Bhaal, bastard children gathered together and slain in mass to fulfil some horrible ritual of power. Whatever dark fate waited for Elly in Albescu Demirci's hands, Kovacs had seen it before and expected it to happen again.

"I'm working to help you," Pherenike said. The seed of her plan had come to her in Casimir Durante's house; if not for that she might never have thought of it. "I need to research and test more glyphs to make sure it won't do even worse to you. When will it be?"

"She'll be slaughtered if we do nothing," Kovacs promised grimly, "throat cut - like a sheep - screaming and crying, and then nothing left of her, nothing but dust - I have seen it, done it, time after time in place after place. There is nothing but us to stand between it happening once more."

"But if we succeed ... *" Pherenike said.

"Then we're free," Kovacs said. "Elly lives."

Pherenike closed the distance between them and took his gloved hands between her own.

"I trust you," she said.

"You probably shouldn't," he replied.

—

Livia's fiancé came to her comfortably after the death of winter, refreshed and bathed and wearing
clean clothes, rather than battle-stained and fresh from the fight. She would certainly have chosen to have him that way; far more civilised.

If she chose to have him at all. In the betrothal contracts, Livia's fortune was entirely secured to herself. *If I marry and predecease him, he gets nothing; I suppose there is that at least.* She did not have to follow through with the wedding if she did not want to. Albescu could attempt a breach of promise suit, she supposed; the ability was in him to calculate the exact value of her settlement to a copper. She would look something of an indecisive fool, but most would agree that all the condescension in the match had been on Livia Hellebore's side, and if she dropped her fiancé it was because she felt she could do better.

She watched Albescu from her tower window; looked down at the confident figure traversing her garden, his back erect and upright.

"Perhaps you could postpone your wedding," her father suggested behind her. "My last pigeon from your mother shows her en route to Maztica. Of course she would want to attend ..."

Livia shook her head impatiently. "That won't be necessary. I've made all the arrangements; it would be imbecilic to postpone the ceremony, and I'd hate to inconvenience Mother." Captain Clytemnestra Hellebore was rarely or never in Baldur's Gate; that was the entire and sole truth of it. Livia had come to exist in the world on a ship halfway between Chult and Calimshan. Her mother handed her over to a wet nurse the moment she landed in her home port, and promptly left on another voyage. It had, Livia thought, practically set the tone for her entire childhood.

"In any case, there shall be a fleet of Hellebore ships in the harbour nonetheless, to honour your day," her father said.

Livia turned from the window. "Do me a favour, will you? Go to your study and enjoy yourself," she told her father. "I know you'd much prefer to be there than socialise anyway. I will see my fiancé myself, in the green parlour. We shan't need any company or interruptions, not even Margery." She repeated her orders to the servant standing by, who scuttled off to advise the butler.

She let Albescu wait for her to deign to show herself. The servant escorted him and left him there alone. Livia judged the time to be enough to be off-balancing; finished proofreading a pamphlet for the mages' guild; cleaned her inkwell; sharpened her collection of pens; tried again to think through how she planned to deal with him; and finally entered to greet the man who had brought back summer.

She'd given orders to furnish the green parlour herself, in shades from forest green to mint cream decor. She'd thought it highly in fashion at the time. The ornaments were exclusively made of or featured Koryan jade, the only exception a family portrait on the wall of Livia and her parents, done by a fashionable painter when she was eight.

Albescu reached for her hand, decorously and formally enough, but Livia refused the gesture. She stood in front of the locked door. He must know there was something wrong.

Livia selected the direct approach. "I think you should read this," she said. Albescu's eyes slipped along the few lines of text, his face as still and controlled as a mask. She didn't care if he kept the note; she had memorised the words. "I take it Magistrate Karga exists, and would provide anyone with a complete story."

"He would; doubtless there was a full transcript," Albescu said. "I killed my wife. There was proof that she betrayed me with my son's swordmaster. Afterwards, I duelled the man in the public square and won. In Sembia, such is the law; a man would be shamed if he did not repay such a slight to his
honour with blood. I know such is not the law in Baldur's Gate. But what would you think of a
husband who betrayed you in another woman's ensquared bed?"

"I ... I do think that behaviour is filthy and disgusting," Livia said truthfully. She'd seen Candle use
and discard men as easily as she did breechclouts, seen Yarrow willingly endure Sweet Goat's
drunken pawing with dirty hands. "I think most of it is filthy and disgusting. But it is not the law here
that you can just murder someone for it."

"I'm willing to adapt to the cultural difference," Albescu said. He must have known that line was
much too flippant, and altered his tone. "My marriage was arranged. It was a financial bargain
between myself and her father. I upheld my side of the bargain and she did not. Disappointed by her
own incapability, she insisted on adopting a child and over-indulged him, and you see what became
of that. She and I had nothing in common to begin with. No thought, no interest, no shared goal. I
could not have had a conversation with her as I'm talking to you now."

"A civil conversation? Is that what this is?" Livia said. She saw Albescu in a changed aspect: as a
dangerous man, danger she hadn't considered when she had thought of releasing it strictly on others.
She noticed once more how he moved like a duellist. He had the smooth sinewy muscles of a young
man, lithe and lethal as a panther.

But I am a wizard in my own right - dangerous too - and he chose me because I am powerful, she
thought.

"I hope so," Albescu said. He fixed Livia with a determined, penetrating look, and she did not detect
any insincerity in him. "You and I have always understood each other. Neither of us are the kind
who take in stray cats. We're both more apt to side with the strong, and leave the weak to take care of
itself. We're willing to do what other people only wish they could, try as they might to cloak their
own incapabilities behind confining rules and squabbles. You saw where my son's treatment of silly
fat cows led him."

Livia thought of Pherenike at that. If Kovacs Demirci were a sensible man, he'd have left Pherenike
to her fate with Conradin and stayed a wealthy man's adopted son; instead, he was dead and his
father prospered. Privately, Livia admitted that it would have been awkward to have a stepson not so
very much younger than herself. Livia thought of Pherenike's scorn to her, that look of impassioned
outrage and presumed moral superiority as she dared lecture Livia about the wretched gnomish
experimental subjects, when Livia knew all the time what Pherenike had done. She wished to
triumph over such a look, and cast her enemies into the dust.

"My wife's deepest thoughts were about making quince preserves," Albescu admitted. "You and I
are colleagues in the Weave. You manipulate minds, I bodies. We appreciate art. Will you forgive an
earlier dalliance with a corrupt, traitorous, empty-headed drab of a woman, and enter into a
partnership of minds?"

Livia would not forgive him yet. At the very least, he had failed to warn her of this beforehand. She
knew he had not lied about the case, considering that she might write to Sembia at any time; he was
not guilty of murder by his country's standards. She felt innately revolted by the idea of betraying
one's husband, with a tutor no less, nothing more than a servant. Disgusting conduct. It was clear that
the son and Pherenike had behaved equally foully.

You are the man who brought back summer, Livia thought.

"I want no further surprises," Livia lectured him. "You'll need to tell me all the other unpleasant
skeletons in your closet."
"Are you picturing five-and-twenty dead wives, hung up in the attic by their hair?" Albescu said. "Nothing of that nature to fear, I assure you. But you're right I play a bigger game than water rights, a bigger game than a mere duchy."

He stepped closer to Livia but did not touch her. Livia was intensely aware of his physicality, his height towering above her, the smell of expensive cologne. Livia looked up to meet his ice-coloured eyes. She consciously exerted her power, trying to subjugate his will to her own. Enchantment gave her the gift to seize a person's mind and lay it bare.

"Tell me everything," Livia said.

Albescu fought her; Livia felt his steely control over his emotions, his thoughts. A truly disciplined - and interesting - mind. She didn't win, but she hadn't expected to so soon. She would have been more disappointed if he had given in. The cut and thrust of their game was almost intoxicating, and she smiled as she dropped the stray threads of the Weave for now.

The air was clear between them.

"The power of a god," Albescu Demirci said pleasantly. He gave away what he'd fought to hide a moment ago. Livia was shocked. It was higher than even she would have thought to aim; higher than she would have so much as imagined on her own. Had she properly understood him? Perhaps she had misheard. She stared. "If you think a duchy is a prize, you should see what I plan to do in the Undercity," Albescu said. "There is an old temple to a god who can no longer claim his place, and I intend to be in the way of a power beyond your wildest dreams."

He bent down as if he would kiss her. Livia rather thought she would resist; that was not in the terms of their bargain. She felt warmth from Albescu's breath. His mouth was dark pink, moistened over the small folds of skin along the lips, the lower lip slightly fuller than the upper. But he did not close; he only put a hand on her shoulder.

"And if you fail?" Livia asked. Delicately, she reached up to touch the bare hand. Callused skin; rather cold temperature; corded muscles carefully relaxed, almost gentle.

"Then there's no clause that says I must lose all else I've gained," Albescu said.

He had already killed something not unlike a god. Livia wasn't inclined to underestimate his capability or power. He took his hand away from her shoulder. He still stood close, a handspan from her, keeping that distance deliberately no further nor less.

"By the way, do you know who wrote that note?" Livia said, somehow finding herself a little breathless. It would almost have to be a fellow Sembian, or possibly someone who'd paid expensively for information.

"I have a fair idea," he said, rather grimly. He tucked the note carefully into his own robes.

"Curious," Livia said. "Not long ago, I received another anonymous note - seemingly in a different hand, about a different subject. The timing of it was very convenient for Pherenike Medomai."

—

His father stormed into the small room in the temple. Kovacs looked up. There were a number of possible causes, really. The magelight his father bore with him was red-hot and blinding. It took great provocation for Albescu Demirci to lose himself to fury.

"The Doomguard's Philosophic Manifesto," his father said, taking up a book from the desk. Kovacs
tried not to cringe; he'd not yet finished it, and it was rare. "You waste your time. I've told you before that such as this is useless to you." Fire appeared in his hand. It swallowed the book, pages and cover crumbling alike, until all was reduced to a few black cinders. He looked around the narrow room's few furnishings. "Where is that rodent of yours? I suppose you left it with that girl. No matter."

He gestured. Kovacs fell flat on the ground. His cheek was flush against damp stone, low enough to kiss his father's boots.

He saw the scrap of paper flung down before him; recognised the hand he'd used to write it in the glaring light.

"Ah. So she told you. That was always a possibility. Will you at least let me tell her, I told you so, before you kill her? Please? I've never had the chance before."

His father laughed, harsh and ill-tempered, jangling and echoing in the stone corners of the room. "Your mother died because she mistook a monster for a child. This one will not make the same mistake."

Burning pain racked Kovacs' body. He couldn't speak. It seared white-hot through him, almost - not quite enough, calculated to be less than that mercy - bad enough to pass out.

"You are nothing," his father said. "The dust of a dead god. You already know what happens. Real people leave a corpse behind when they die. Their souls go to the realm of the one they served in life. You will dissolve to nothing. You have seen it a hundred times. Perhaps I should do it to you this time. Learn what you are worth and what you are."

_I'm what you made of me_, Kovacs thought. Blood dribbled out of his mouth. He'd bitten his tongue and hadn't known it.

"I should have warned you off her instead of vice versa," he grated. "After all, she already killed one old man who got in her way."

He should have expected it to hurt far worse after that.

—

Pherenike, at her desk, looked up from her parchment and the set of designs inked across it. The hamster squeaked in its cage. It looked like it was in distress, its body shaking with what looked like a great pain, standing still and vibrating against the bars. She picked it up in her hands, stroking its fur, holding it close to her cheek. She wasn't sure if that helped or not, but after a while it seemed to calm down. The hamster's eyes closed as if it fell asleep or at least unconscious, breathing shallowly. She caressed its fur for some more time, then gently put it back in the straw.

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to Ishmael_Autolycus, who wondered if Kovacs had a sister in Baldur's Gate.