

We all have inner demons. Some of us just hear them louder.

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It was the witching hour, when all save the watchmen were asleep. They arrived in shadow, cloaked in darkness and fog. A grey miasma drifted down back alleys and abandoned streets, extinguishing all in its path: lanterns, lamp lights and lives. A drunk rolled in his sleep as the mist floated over him, tossing and turning as if in a terrible nightmare. He gave a quiet cry and shuddered once before falling limp, his life essence drain from his body. The shadows continued on.

They drifted deeper and deeper into the city, passing through lonely courtyards and markets. They were quiet as the gentle night wind, but where the mid-summer air was hot and humid they were deathly cold, their passage marked by a rime of frost over the windows and stones. Still they continued on.

In front of the palace's gatehouse the shadows paused, weighing the best path to their objective. Despite its palatial appearance, the shadows knew this was deceiving, its walls and halls well patrolled. The shadows did not fear death for they were never born, but they did fear failure. It had been slow, the absorption of several servants and one lowly guard into their midst crucial to gaining the intelligence needed for this task. Patrol routes and hidden passages were laid out, every nook and cranny of the palace known to them.

They sensed it, a change in the watch shift. Tired guards were replaced by fresh ones, the former moving from their posts before their relief took position. An opening. The shadows took advantage of it, slipping through the screen of guards and darting into the dark corners of the inner courtyard in a whisper of wind. No one was the wiser.

The shadows knew that their task had only increased in difficulty, the chance of a nocturnal servant or guest raising the alarm only growing. There was a reason they had waited till now to strike, and opportunity seldom waited long.

Though a cracked window they slipped into one of the palace's wings, brushing over a resting dog and ending its life in a single breath. The fire it had been resting by guttered out, the coals turning faded black as all heat was suck from them.

The shadows passed halls filled with priceless art and artifacts, a single one would have made a peasant wealthy for life. They ignored it all, the idea of wealth forever lost to them. Up

gilded stairs they floated, their enveloping fog pausing at the top as they reflected on their stolen memories. *Left.*

The shadows turned, hurrying now as they were in the most populated area of the palace. They ducked into a crevice too small to hide a mouse as a pair of guards walk quietly by, careful not to disturb the sleeping guests. Only once the two Fae turned the corner did the shadows resume their journey, their silent whispers growing louder and louder in the Void.

*There.*

Ahead was a door, larger and more decorated than the others. A guard stood at attention besides it, clad in armor and armed with spear and sheathed sword. A dim candle flickered on a shelf next to him, bathing his left side in a reddish glow. The shadows halted just outside the circle of light cast by the candle, hidden in the darkness. They weighed their options, the growing hunger to succeed driving them raw. A hundred choices flashed through its minds before they settled on one. It changed.

Rising out of the murky fog was a shadow of a man, its clothes and skin made of smoke. No features graced its face, no eyes or lips marred its ashen mask. In its hands was held an incorporeal bow, an arrow of Nothing resting on its blackened string. The shadow drew it back with a creak of rotting wood and let the arrow fly, its obsidian tip flashing in the candlelight. It flew with a terrible truth, the guard's first warning his heart being pierced, his armor useless at stopping something that *didn't* exist. He fell lifeless, a black poison flooding through his veins. The archer of smoke collapsed back into shadow, the flickering memories of the slain guard filtered through the collective conscious of the shadows. Childhood pleasures, youthly romances, old fears and past glories were discarded like leaves in the wind, leaving only those memories worth anything to them; battles, duels, and the knowledge of five hundred years worth of war.

The shadows slipped beneath the door through the narrow crack, forming into physical smoke on the other side. There were three of them; the prior archer, a figure armed with twin blades and a hulking brute with massive cudgel clenched in his onyx fists. Eyeless faces scanned the darkened room, taking in the shape of the furniture and walls. An open window blew in a cool wind, disturbing their billowing cloaks and ashen clothes. As one they drifted towards one half-open door, the shape of a sleeping figure could just be seen. The scent of perfume filled the air; lavender and honey. The sleeper shifted in her bed, tossing dark brown curls across white sheets. The shadows' hunger gnawed at their essences, their prey so close, so helpless. Just a little closer and they'd...

A new scent, one of sweat and pine sap. The three shadows turned and met the face of an unknown Man smirking at them.

“Hello there.”

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The trio of shadows hissed in surprise, their featureless masks going taut as if stretched in an agonized scream. They leaped into action, enraged at having their hunt disturbed. The massive shadow with its club of smoke charged forwards with a deathly bellow, whirling its heavy weapon as effortlessly as a twig. The Man grinned and met the shadow, a blade as black as night flashing from its sheath. The Man ducked under the shadow's swipe. The marble column next to him shattered into a hundred pieces of stone from the impact of the shadow's club. The beast roared, and swiped again, this time turning a thick cabinet to splinters as it tried to kill this unexpected newcomer.

The Man pressed his own attack, his blade flashing and hacking at the shadow's form. Razor edge bit incorporeal flesh, wisps of shadow and ash falling in the sword's wake. The brute roared again, this time in shock. No mere blade should have been able to harm it, his form perfect and untouchable. It felt something then, a feeling it had never known until that moment. It was fear.

Now desperate to finish this newfound danger, the brute redoubled its efforts, demolishing everything in its path to end this battle as quick as possible. The Man kept smirking, a maddening thing, and refused to be slain, juking and jinking around every attack and charge. He was everywhere, a slash here at the brute's leg, a stab deep into the monster's side, bit by bit weakening the massive shadow until it collapsed unto itself, dissolving to a cloud of dust and ash that seemed to fill the whole room. The two remaining shadows did not let the defeat of their comrade to check their attack, the swordwielder charging at the Man while the archer took aim at their original prey. The shadow-archer pulled back on his bow with all his unnatural might, aiming at the twisting tangle of sheets and let loose. The arrow flew true.

The distance was slim, the air still save for the sounds of battle raging. In a heartbeat it sunk deep into the silken white folds of the sheets and vanished, lost within its target. The archer shrieked a banshee's wail in triumph towards the night's sky, stretching forth its dark clawed hands to receive the blessings of its master and the power of its prey.

From underneath the bed sprang up a young woman, her dark hair like a banner behind her as she rose. An outstretched hand and whispered word and fire came to life in her grasp,

whirling and growing until she could no longer contain it. She unleashed the spell onto the shade of an archer, its form evaporating into dying smoke as it shrieked in pain and horror. Like a moth caught in the flames it writhed and rolled, curling up in blackened nothingness as it faded away in brilliant light. Faith Alathir nearly spat in contempt as it vanished.

Hilary Flint blocked his foe's swords, their void-black blades like serpents fangs as they aimed themselves at his heart. The shadow had the advantage of speed and dexterity, weaving in and out of arm's reach, and searching for that perfect opening. It never had the chance.

The shadow's every strike was blocked or parried by one of Flint's, the latter's defenses unbreachable. The alarm had been sounded, the noise of battle having woken the palace and drawn the attention of the guards. Even then the shadow could hear the clanging of armored warriors, their labored breaths as they raced towards its prey.

The shadow abandoned all hope of defeating its Human foe, instead turning towards his original objective. Faith unleashed another burst of fire, the spell missing the agile sword-shade as it crawled across the floor like a spider or corrupted insect. The shadow released its swords, allowing them to return to smoke before drawing a dagger of liquid obsidian from nothing. It leaped like a panther, dagger outstretched and aimed at his prey's fluttering heart...

An infinite pain filled the shadow's belly, a greater agony than it had ever felt in its former mortal shell. The searing heat of a thousand suns burned its way through his muscles of smoke and bones of ash, drawing forth a scream of terror. Was this what his prey felt as he sunk his claws through their innards, spilling their wet guts onto the ground as their eyes begged for mercy? This sense of his own demise, a primal emotion that had been denied to him for so long. Terrifying. Glorious.

Hilary Flint twisted his sword deeper into the failing shadow's form, wisps of smoke fleeing from blade's bite. All at once the shadow evaporated, its remnants fading to nothing as it died.

The sound of guards hammering down the door to the suite broke the damned silence, the shouted alarms of their commanders as they tried to ascertain as to the health of their charge.

"I'm fine," Faith said loudly. "The intruders are eliminated."

That had a certain ring of truth to it; whatever they were, they were certainly not alive in any sense.

The Captain of the Watch, a taciturn looking Elf by the name of Belial glanced coldly at Flint. The veteran Elf had never bothered to hide his disdain for the human, going so far as to spread rumor that Hilary Flint was secretly an agent for the tribes and surviving neo-kingdoms that humanity had managed to defend in this Post-Arrival world. The fact that a sizable number of courtiers and other guards believed the Elf was of little concern to Flint; Faith was.

“Are you alright, your highness?” The Captain asked. Faith nodded and looked a bit pale. Going to bed a few hours earlier only to be woken up for a fight for her life would have shaken anyone.

“Yes,” she lied. “I’m fine, thank you. Our attackers have been dealt with.”

The captain almost laughed at that, barely reigning in his arrogance before it insulted his lord’s granddaughter.

“With all due respect, your highness, we cannot be certain that these... things won’t make another attempt at assassinating you. We should move you to safer quarters immediately.”

Flint *did* laugh at that, all eyes turning towards the half-dressed Man with the ebon black blade. His dark hair was free of its usual ponytail, his unshaven face and gold-flecked eyes lending to his moniker within the court: The Wolf.

“What’s so amusing, *Scathariath*?” Captain Belial asked, his sword-hand clenched tight around the hilt of his blade. Flint ignored the insult.

“If you think there’s a safer place to put her then you’re even more ignorant than I gave you credit for. *There is no safe place*. Not here, not anywhere. Anywhere there’s shadow, anywhere there’s even the slimmest pool of darkness those things could be lurking. And in any case, I don’t think you’ll have to worry about them returning.”

“Why, because they know our guards are here?” The captain asked.

“No,” Flint replied, jerking his thumb towards his chest. “Because I’m here.”

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The night spoiled and no one able to return to bed, Faith called for tea and cakes to be brought up. The armored guards waiting outside her suite's door searched the servant girl's tray before allowing her entry, going so far as to ignore Faith's protests at such necessities. They however, answered to their Captain and her grandfather the Prince. Only once the tea was poured and tiny cakes served upon salvaged human china did Faith allow herself to relax somewhat.

"What were those things, Hil?"

Flint took a sip of his tea, the drink infused with willow bark. Once she saw how covered he was with bruises and cuts she immediately ordered a healer to add the medicine to his teapot. It was a habit of theirs, to make different pots of tea. Faith drank the real leaf, imported through the Dark Zone at great expense for House Alathir-Tel's personal use. Flint preferred to stick with tea brewed from the needles of white pines, a source of constant ridicule and mockery by the more refined members of the court. Flint, as always, ignored their pointed whispers.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" He asked.

"Ghosts? I believe in the gods, and that my ancestors watch over me from the Blessed Lands. But if you're asking if I believe in superstition and peasant folk tales then, no, I don't."

Flint cracked a wry smile, picking up a biscuit and nibbling on a corner.

"You should. Us humans, we used to believe Elves and other Fae were the stuff of fiction and flights of fancy; look how wrong we were. Those things, they're like nothing else on Earth. They're nothing. They just *are*. They have thousand names in a thousand tongues. The princes of Ind call them Preta or Rakshasa, those along the River Danube might label them Strigoi. Here, they're Shades.

"Once, long ago, Darkness reigned. All the universe was covered in darkness beyond reckoning. No light existed in that empty voidless vacuum, nothing existed in endless depths. It was pure. It was perfect. The Darkness gain sentience and in doing so realized a terrible truth: this was the extent of its existence. It would exist forever in solitude. This Darkness went mad with this revelation, tearing itself apart as it fought to come to terms with its fate. From this unleash of power came energy, and from energy, matter.

"The Darkness realized what had happened but by that point it was too late; clouds of burning gas condensed into stars, and worlds and one of them became Earth. It watched in sick horror as molten rock cooled and turned to stone, vapors condensed into water, and molecules began to shape themselves. Plants came first and their growth spread itself across the world and

through the seas. And it was good. Then the creatures of the water came forth and spread through the seas. And it was also good. Then the creatures of the land came forth and spread throughout the lands. Amongst them was Man.

“Man was wisest and canniest of the beasts and he alone held the gift of fire. The Darkness spied Man and saw an opportunity, a chance to undo that one terrible mistake. He came to the First Man and his mate and offered to make them higher than all beasts, to give them dominion over earth. Taken by his honeyed words the two agreed, each eating the seeds from a nearby tree to seal the pact. It was a disaster.

“Man lost his ability to speak with the beasts and was drive from the forest, forced onto the fields to suffer the labor of the fields. From that point onwards the world of Man and the world of beast was forever split, each unable to understand the other. Raised as he was, Man became like the Darkness, his heart plagued with hate and guilt. The Darkness taught him the art of bronze and iron, guiding him to a future where Man destroyed itself and the world with it. Likely the Darkness would have succeeded, our world getting smaller and smaller and our weapons becoming larger and larger until the latter could obliterate the former. But then, something unexpected happened.”

“Our Arrival,” Faith answered quietly.

“Indeed. In many ways, the Arrival of the Fae might have saved our species from self-annihilation; your invasion driving us back two thousand years technologically. Your existence is even more anathemic to the Darkness than us. It created us, but you? You’re intruders, pests to be dealt with.”

Faith paused to consider his words. It had been a century since the Arrival, the Faerie races carving out their own territories and kingdoms from those of Man. She hadn’t even been born then, carried through the Passage in her mother’s womb. She grew up listening to the stories of her elder sisters and parents and their struggles during the Wars of the Fae. They spoke of Human weapons capable of wiping out cities in a single burst of fire, of handcrafted plagues manufactured in hidden laboratories. Millions of Fae lost their lives in those first desperate months, billions of Humans with them or in the famines that followed. Both sides had lost so much in the destruction, their cultures a mere fraction of what they had once been.

“These... Shades. Are they sentient? Capable of thought or reason?”

Flint smiled tiredly at her words, saying. “Yes... and no. They’re beasts, albeit cunning ones. There is no reasoning with them, the only thought on their minds being the destruction of

their prey. And they are excellent hunters. They skirt from shadow to shadow, vanishing in one only to appear behind their target in another. Those who are slain by them are stolen, their mind and soul obliterated and consumed. All that they once held dear or fear, gone, replaced with cold hunger and malice. They are nothing the likes you've ever seen. They're not very many mind you, it is a taxing thing making something out of nothing. Energy equals mass times acceleration squared still means something here on Earth... I think. Truth be told I'm not too sure anymore. When you've seen fire breathing drakes and fought against spriggans in the ruins of Detroit what is in the realm of possibility becomes rather hazy. Imagine it, Faith, a creature that can steal your memories, taking the worst and best of you and using it for its own grim ends. You're not just fighting a monster, your fighting every single thing it has ever killed."

"And these Shades," Faith asked. "Does this Darkness control them?"

"Only distantly. To believe that the Darkness has a physical form is to fail to grasp its true shape. It is Nothing. There is no mind, no body, no soul. It merely is. No. Its Shades, its servants, are but tendrils of its power. It bargains, makes deals with those desperate or blood-thirsty enough to agree to its demands. For a price, the service of his vassals are at the command of others. But it's a terrible price indeed to pay. If we want to find whoever did order this attack, we'll have to follow the trail of bodies."

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They rose early the next morning after a few fitful hours of sleep, the first hints of rose-fingered dawn stretching over the eastern horizon. Despite the wishes of the guards Faith insisted on seeing the carnage inflicted by her attackers for herself, her grandfather's warriors only acquiescing after she agreed to an escort. More than a score of armored guards followed in her wake and worked to clear her path, throwing away any chance of being invisible in the press of people. Peasant and townsfolk bowed embarrassingly towards her as she passed them, her face becoming flushed with red. She was the first born on this New World, her birth proof of her race's ability to not only thrive but prosper in this new and foreboding world.

Flint had dressed in a form of half-armor, a chestplate of dull, steel scales with mail sleeves and boiled leather vambraces. It was by Elvish standards crude and plain, but for a Human it was more armor than most families owned. Only an Oathsworn warrior to a lord or thane could afford a mail hauberk, most men settling for a shield and perhaps a simple helm for protection. His sword was sheathed at his side, the scabbard decorated with silver glyphs in an ancient Fae tongue. A targe was slung over his back, the leather face unadorned except by the



scars of prior battles. The few times she'd seen him use the shield it had been brutal affairs, Flint using it more as a bludgeon than a defensive weapon. She had tasted that last bandit's brains on her tongue...

"How many dead did the watchmen say, twelve, fifteen?" Flint asked. "It's not perfect but it's better than nothing. More likely than anything whoever summoned those Shades will have already fled now that they know their pawns failed them. If they were clever they'd have covered their tracks sufficiently that any remaining clues are dead ends. We'll just follow the route the Shades took through the city until we reach a point where there are no more bodies... or a hell of a lot more."

"Pardon?" Faith asked.

"How do you think you go about asking for help from the Darkness? Knocking on its door? Nah, the truth is a hell of a lot more grisly. If we're fortunate, another corrupted soul will have taught him the necessary summons. If not, well... let's better hope you don't mind losing your breakfast."

Some fifty minutes later and more than a mile away from the palace the pair and their escorts entered one of the poorer districts, the homes shoddier built and worn than those in the well to do areas. A whore and her customer had been found dead in a back alley, their deaths the initial reason for further investigation. What the local peace officers found led them running for the Royal Guards and Faith.

The first thing she noticed was the warehouse itself, a tall six story structure built of brick and weathered wood. Above its front door hung a peeling sign. *Verona and Co. Importers and Wholesalers*. The second thing she noticed was the rotting stench that wafted from the building whenever the winds changed, the smell like that of molding bread and putrid meat. She nearly vomited on the street then and there, and even Flint had to light a hand rolled cigarette to mask the smell. The sounds of retching and the telltale wet splatter of a lost breakfast told her someone was less fortunate.

"Lieutenant. If- if it pleases you, open the door."

The junior officer, looking a little green about the gills nodded and ordered a sergeant and several privates to break open the lock and the chains wrapped round the doors. A few blows with a hammer and the lock was broken, the chains quickly following suit. The doors were flung open and a wave of eye watering rot filled everyone's senses. More vomited onto the dirty streets

and even Faith puked in her mouth before she forced herself to swallow. Flint merely spat in distaste.

“Told you so.”

The light was good enough that they didn’t need to step inside and if she wanted to be honest, she didn’t think she could order any of her guards to do so. There, starting just a few feet inside the doorway was a mountain of dead rats. She did not use the word lightly, the pile of vermin high enough to block out the light of the first three floors. Those at the bottom were in the later stages of decay, bits of bones poking out of dried skin. Others were fresher, ballooned with rot gas or else squirming with fat maggots. A cloud of flies burst from the open doors and spilled out everywhere, getting in Elves’ faces and in their mouths. Faith swore she felt one land in her ear before flying off to gods know where. Flint stepped forwards, closer to the mountain of decay than anyone else.

“Elves would be too conspicuous, their kin wondering where they’d gone. But vermin, who’d care about their absence save for the rat catcher? For most, whoever our Mr. Faust is, he has done them a public service. Trinity, that’s a lot though isn’t it?”

Faith nodded weakly as she wiped her mouth with a sleeve.

“Small animals have weak auras. You’d need a great deal to equal that of a few Elves,” she said.

“Uhuh, rate of exchange isn’t all that good. Maybe a hundred pigs for every human, a thousand sheep and ten thousand for a rat? Best guess, maybe a half a million rodents rotting in that pile there. That’s roughly a small village worth of aura. ‘Bout what I’d expected from what I’ve seen.”

“You’ve seen this sort of thing before?” Faith asked incredulously. Flint nodded, pointing towards the towering pile of carcasses.

“Twice. Once along the shores of Superior and the other up in the mountains to the East. Whole village butchered, not murdered. We’re talking entrails strung like bunting through orchards and piles of heads and limbs, wells filled to the brim with dead, sightless children. It wasn’t goblins, it wasn’t Fae, it was bloodweavers. The first two times they’d been human but

this one, I fear some Elf might have gotten his hands on how to deal with the Darkness. That opens up a whole other bag of shit.”

“And how do we deal with this?”

“Nothing. Just watch out for suspicious behavior, missing animals or people. On one hand, a city has a lot more eyes and witnesses to spy your work than some dark forest. On the other hand a small village or hamlet would notice if its animals had been disappearing for some strange reason. What you got here is the mad amalgamation of Jack the Ripper and the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Twelve murdered and half-million rats killed. At a guess he killed each and every one personally, slicing open their bellies and tossing them aside. Must’ve started doing it on the upper levels once the lower ones got a little too fleshy...”

“And just how did he manage to catch so many vermin? A rat catcher couldn’t kill that many in hundred years.”

Flint laughed and spat again, the smell making his eyes water.

“As I said, Pied Piper.” He paused again to think. “You Faustian assassin is a mage of sorts, one with considerable talent and reach. I suggest to find out the tabs of every single magus currently in the city and check which ones have left since last night. Bring those in for questioning first and then any with affinities for beasts. I’d also recommend you do it quick, before he tried to slip away. He might try to pretend he had an alibi but don’t be fooled. I can smell a rat when I see one.”

Faith almost laughed at his joke.

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Six hours later, a wave of protest from the local mage guilds and Faith was pouring through a list of possibilities, a rather grim and disturbing list. At least a half-dozen mages had left the gates of the city before dawn, four of them taken into custody and brought back as politely as one could with chains around their limbs. The other two were unaccounted for and represented the most likely suspects. Another fifty or so mages had been brought in for questioning, some with airtight alibis while others had the flimsiest of excuses. Flint sorted through most of those.

“Sure, he’s lying, but not because he’s a murderous son of a bitch,” he said about one mage, a reedy looking Elf with a lame foot. “He’s lying because he’s cheating on his wife.”

When she asked Flint how he knew that his reply was simple.

“Caught him hilt deep in some other Elf’s wife. He was just lying to protect your oh-so fragile ears. Blessed may they point.”

She punched him for that one, not that it did much good.

Most of the others were also excused, enough witnesses that they were safely considered not the suspect. Only about a dozen remained as possible candidates. Faith was about to conduct another round of interrogation when Flint told her to call the whole thing off.

“They’re not here. And they’re not our two fleet ones either. Our assassin isn’t in the city.”

Faith turned to look at her guardian, surprise in her voice.

“What makes you so sure? We’ve combed every nook and cranny of this city, even washed it with search charms to make sure no mages are hiding where they can’t be found through physical means.”

“How many portals to the Dark Zone does this city have?”

“Three. Why do you... oh gods....”

“Exactly,” Flint said. “While we were watching the gates he slipped away into the Zone. But that’s almost to our advantage. As long as he’s in there he’s trapped; he’ll have to come through one of those three portals if he wants to leave the Zone. Place guards at each of them and screen every single being who passes through. That’ll keep him pinned in the Dark Zone and give us time to flush him out.”

“But, Hil, the Zone is strictly neutral. Its denizens will not tolerate an armed intrusion into their city.”

“That’s why we won’t be using your guards. We’ll use my men.”

“Will they be loyal?” Faith asked.

“For enough coin they’ll be. Most of them have lived in the Zone for their entire lives, the real world is just a jaunt now and then for them during work. Give me ten thousand crowns and I can get a hundred swords and ten guns. That’ll be enough to deal with whatever comes our way or find any piece of information available.”

“*Our way?* You don’t actually expect me to come with you into the Dark Zone? Isn’t that exactly where the person who tried to kill me likely is?”

“No. Of course not, what sort of man do you think I am?”

Six days later she found herself in the Dark Zone, and hated every moment of it. The air stank of sewage and every sort of foul smell imaginable. The sky was a burnt grey while the rain fell black with soot and ash. The people moved about with a frantic, wary air, as if afraid that any moment now a blade would find itself wedged deep into the kidneys, murdered for a few copper coins. Faith could understand the reasoning.

For next week Flint and she traveled from tavern to tavern, dropping by houses of ill repute to find old comrades of his and persuade them to join. Some he managed to cajole, others he threatened either with physical violence or blackmail of the foulest sort. Most, however, joined for a portion of the gold, which said a great deal about the sorts of men Flint called friend. They in turn probed every single other tavern or whorehouse they didn’t visit, drinking and whoring and occasionally asking questions as to who might have tried to kill a prominent Elf. At the end of the week Faith had begun to question the success of hiring such men. It was only on the seventh night that any results came in.

A scrawny rodent of a man, with narrow teeth and beady eyes arrived on the doorstep of the house they were renting, asking to be fed before he was willing to divulge any details. He went through three plates of food and four mugs of beer before he considered himself sufficiently sated to speak.

He said that whispered along the loading docks of the Gate of Eternal Silence that an Elf had been spotted trying to get passage through a portal other than the one they’d went through. This of course was a fundamental law of the Dark Zone; whatever gate you went through, every other gate would only lead them back the way they came. It was this fact that allowed the Dark Zone to prosper. Merchants and brokers from across the world could meet face to face and swap information and goods even though they were separated by oceans and mountains back on Earth. The fact that all gates led to the one they started from prevent the Zone from being used as a backdoor into other territories for conquest. The second detail the spy gave them brought Faith to attention.

“She was a Dark Elf.”

“One of the Dark Kin? How, Who? My Grandfather’s spies would’ve known if one of our cousins was in our city. It’s impossible to hide their corruption.”

“Well this one did, sweetheart. You couldn’t tell the difference. Not that you could to begin with; all you knife ears look the same to us.”

From the back of the room Flint swore quietly. Faith turned to look at him.

“You know who she is, don’t you?”

Flint nodded.

“Aye, I do. She’s part of the Seven, the leaders of your Dark Kin in this region of the world. I’ve taken their coin in the past. Blood doesn’t stain gold I’ve found, though their religious tendencies make things a tad... hairy.”

“When’s the last you’ve dealt with them?”

“Five or six years ago. That was before the Eighth Grain War and the Badland Raids. It was quite a long time ago...”

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*(Dark Kin Territory, Castle of Forever Night)*

*They were of an inhuman beauty, with long graceful limbs and pale skin that seemed to glow in the dim halls of their fortress. Their midnight hair fell down their backs in cascades of perfume locks, their bodies garbed in swathes of dark fabrics and ebon armor. All wore gilded daggers sheathed through belts or silk sashes, an eternal reminder of the ever-present danger their positions represented. They had murdered their predecessors to reach their posts and knew well that their underlings schemed and plotted to do the same. Vigilance and paranoia was the price for the pleasures and power awarded to them.*

*They were seven, each sitting at a tall curving bench in a half-moon shape. The table was made of solid black stone polished to a mirror shine, their ornate thrones carved and decorated according to the tastes of its owner. Behind them was a grisly tableau done in living iron, the final work by the master sculptor Yethalin the Mad. It depicted the first days of their Arrival to*

*this New World when they fell upon the helpless ranks of Humans in orgies of bloodlust and destruction. The burning of the topless towers of Nova Eboraum, the slaughter of a thousand cities and more all amalgamated into one perfect piece of art.*

*The figure standing below them was not of their race but bore the same aura of their kind, a sense of rage and lust of pain. It was a Man, hidden though he was by his concealing suit of armor and tattered cloak. Each piece of his armor was different from the next, taken as they were from a separate foe. Some bore the crude marks of man's childish crafts whilst other came from their lesser, misguided cousins. But his helm was of Dark Kin make, cold and cruel and shaped into the stuff of nightmares. A leering grin smiled at the Seven, the steel mask shaped into the face of some shade-wraith. A crown of razors topped his head while a battered rifle was slung on his back. In his hands was the sheathed sword, its battered leather belt wrapped round the mouth of the scabbard and the quillons.*

*"Do you know what your task is?" The center figure asked, voice as cold as the winter's chill. The masked man tilted his head slowly, the creak of mail and leather filling the deathly quiet space.*

*"Yes. To intercept the convoy and leave nothing but carrion. Your foes shall be mine until they draw their final breath."*

*"Very good. Here's the advance of your pay." She tossed a small silk pouch that jingled with coin towards the human killer who caught it without effort or glance. "Begone, Scathalichth, and do not return until you succeed."*

*If the human took insult at being labeled a rat he did not show it, instead turning about on his heel with parade ground precision and strode out of the hall, more wolf than man.*

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“As I said, long time ago. I thought she was slain in the Night of Blades but I guess I was wrong. Wouldn’t expect her handiwork in all this.”

Faith glared at her guardian, too angry to speak but at the same time desperate for details.

“What’s her name? Who is she exactly?”

“Morgana. Just Morgana. That name alone means a great deal in certain... esoteric circles. From what I know she started off as a slave, lowest of the low. Killed her guards and led a slave rebellion for several years until her former masters offered her a pardon and a job. She took it and sold out her comrades in arms. Tortured most of them personally. The stories say it took over a century for them to die. Still has a few hanging in her skeleton closest, just organs and nerves now, begging for death but can't due to the lack of bones or muscles.”

“She sounds like a lovely Fae...”

“My first meeting with her was when I was part of scavenging crew in the Windy City. Little did we know that she and her clan set up shop there as well. Imagine being woken up in the middle of the night by swarms of blood drinking bats and insects that size of birds. I saw men being eaten alive, drained dry of their blood as they screamed for mercy. She killed an entire village of the course of a winter, using their dead and living as fuel for her fires.

“She's gone up the ranks since then, made it all the way to one of the Seven. Deadliest one in most people's books. But why she'd have it out for you or even how she slipped into Avalon I have little clue. If anything she'd be going after me, what with the botched assassination on that one rival of hers...”

“So where exactly do we sit, Flint?” Faith asked. Flint shrugged and bodily picked up their spy, tossing him out the door before slamming it shut.

“The game's changed overnight, scout. We're not dealing with a one off murder or a jumped up necromancer trying to get high on power. We're dealing with a Dark Elf, they eat intrigue and deceit for breakfast along with eyes and glasses of blood. Likely she's six steps ahead of us and the only thing we got going for us is that she's trapped here in the Zone. Problem is, if she so chooses she can wait here indefinitely biding her time until guards waiting at the portals invariably mess up. There's thousands of Dark Kin here, many of them her allies. To be perfectly honest, it's likely that she's already sending killers here right now to deal with us. Heh.”

Faith half rose from her seat, worry in her eyes.

“What's so funny?”

“She called me, ‘Rat’ that's ironic coming from her, what with her grand sacrifice of vermin and such...”



*“Flint.”*

“What? Ah never mind. Come on, we need to get going.”

He was about to open the door when the first four inches of an ax embedded itself in the door’s thick wood, a muffled snarl as its wielder tried to free the heavy axe head. Flint jumped back and swore, pushing Faith against the wall opposite.

“Fuck it, I hate it when I’m right...”

The ax fell again, this time carving a wider gap in the wood of the door. Flint drew his sword free of its scabbard and picked up his targe, muttering something about sod and soldiers. The sound of multiple voices in the hallway reached their ears, their various accents and tongues hinting at a rather motley collection of mercenaries rather than one source of blades. That was either very good or very, very bad.

“Any ideas?” Faith asked.

“Just one,” answered Flint. “When the first bastard makes his way through scorch him for me, will you? I’ll take it from there. Just be ready to sprint after me.”

“You’re not thinking of fighting them, are you?”

“Maybe...” he said coyly.

“You’re gonna get us both killed,” Faith insisted, wincing as another ax blow punched through the door. “Surely there’s an exit somewhere we can use. A window, a chimney, anything!”

“Barred, too small, and yes, there’s an exit, it’s just through all those bastards outside. My plan is to fight my way through them and carve a path for you.”

“That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard of.”

Flint spared a half-second to glance in her direction.

“Fine. Next time we’re surrounded by people who want to kill us, I’ll be sure to let you decide how we escape. But right now, I’m the one calling the shots. *Me*, not you. *Me*. And I says we fight our way out.”

The falling axe finally managed to break through, the ugly face of some human lowlife peering through the gap in the door. Flint turned and threw a knife hidden up his sleeve, the slim dagger catching the thug in mouth. He fell back choking on his own blood, his tongue transfixed by the knife.

“You mind, you bastards?” Flint shouted over the wailing man. “We’re having a conversation here!”

“That was a good throw,” Faith said softly. Flint dismissed those words with a wave of his hand.

“Nah, I was aiming for his eye. I give the idiots five more tries before they manage to break down the door. Hey, idiots! The lock is on the left side, you know!”

“Flint!” Faith hissed. “Why are you helping them?”

He gave an unashamed shrug.

“Sooner or later they’ll batter down that door. I’d rather get it done and over with sooner.”

Sure enough, five swings later the door flew open on its hinges, three or four mercenaries all clamoring through the entryway for a chance to attack. Faith acted before he even had to speak, words of power floating over her tongue as she released a burst of fire at the tightly packed foes. The effect was instantaneous, their dirty clothes and crude armor catching light as easily as dry tinder. Skin and flesh melted under the intense heat, turning both man and Fae into crude, wax effigies that dripped like tallow onto the floor. Those closest to Faith died rapidly while those furthest away merely suffered fourth degree burns. The whole hallway rose up in one fervent scream, a half-dozen languages all crying out for their gods and mothers in a chorus of agony. Flint swore again.

“That was a mistake. Oh, Holy Trinity that was a mistake...”

“What?” Asked Faith. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“You know that phrase about how you shouldn’t throw rocks in glass houses?” Flint asked, desperately looking for a new exit. “Well, somebody forgot to write one about flinging fire around a boarding house.”

A pause. The cheery crackle of burning wood as the hallway caught fire and mildewed wallpaper burned. Faith sighed.

“I’m going to kill you,” she said quietly.

Flint turned towards a blank wall and started hacking away at it with his sword, ironically doing to it what the thugs had done to the door only a few minutes ago. Faith, with no weapon other than a slim dagger stood there with hands on her hips, silently cursing how she got mixed up in all this. Outside the window some screamed fire, and the cry was taken up. A crowd quickly began to form, both of horrified onlookers and eager looters who hoped to steal everything that wasn’t nailed down. And they brought crowbars for in those cases.

“Anybody down there with weapons ready to kill us if we make it out,” asked Flint as he was busy chopping away at the wall. Had it been any ordinary sword his blade would have dulled to uselessness long ago. She had never seen him sharpen it once. Faith took a quick peek out the barred window.

“No one that I recognize.”

“Good,” replied Flint, still hacking away, the hole in the wall growing bigger and bigger as the flames grew higher and higher. “For a moment there, I thought we were in trouble.”