

# Turmoil

“Gently” persuading the remaining rogues to her cause was demanding of her energy reserves, but it went much more smoothly than anticipated. Extracting information from them had become much easier as a result of their newfound motive to curry favor with Alicia, who now held them under a terrifying witchcraft. They quickly revealed what’s to come might be more complicated than she had hoped for. Supposedly a certain notorious assassin within their underground organization known only by their nickname: The Butcher, took a particular interest in the bounty. Their knowledge on the said assassin is quite limited as the other party often kept to themselves, as such Alicia could only scrounge up a few details. The Butcher seemed to have no desire for money or wealth, but rather in the act of the killing. Unlike other members of the Crown who rely on cloak and dagger or poisoning and carrying out their job on the hush hush The Butcher, quite fitting to their nickname, enjoys to make a spectacle out of their grisly work by flaying their victims and leaving a sort of calling cards or messages out of blood taunting whomsoever that discovers their ‘art’.

*‘Great... Now we have a sociopath on our trail.’*

Because of the highly brutal manner in which they work, The Butcher is infamous even inside the Crown, as their showy scenes of slaughter often attracted unwelcome scrutiny and crackdowns from the local government. Something that the crown wishes to avoid, however they put up with it due their considerable skills. To them, the butcher is a double edge blade. Fortunately for everyone involved, The butcher only seems to pick blue bloods or in other words, people of noble descent or people they think are... different or interesting according to their own words. Meaning they took action infrequently. According to what Alicia’s new ‘recruits’ heard, they were planning to strike tonight, hence their haste to one up the Butcher. A few other details to note were that these men heard from few people who had the opportunity to converse with the Butcher described their voice sounding young, possibly even adolescent.

- *‘We have to deal with this ‘butcher’ first...’*
- *‘...interloper...?’*
- *‘Quite likely...’*
- *‘...threat... eliminate...’*

- *'Right... though we should be careful and secure our escape... We don't know how strong they are or what they can do... The only problem is...'*
- *'...female... human, juvenile... can't flee...'*
- *"'Girl," the word you're looking for is, "Girl". And she has a name, Rosalia.*  
*Even if we deal with them, they won't be last. Unless we take care of that bounty...'*
- *'Use...minions...'*
- *'Minions...? You mean the men we got? Hm... wait a minute... this might actually work...'*

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The disappearance of men hadn't been noticed yet, if they appeared again, no one would raise a question as to where they have been or what they were up to, most importantly they were insiders that Alicia could use to her own ends. Although disheveled and seemingly spooked they managed to return to their lair in the town's underground where they spread rumors, false leads and misinformation. With red herrings and contradicting information, there was an internal chaos that slowly spiralled out of anyone's control. Even informants who usually sold reliable information were caught up in it, everyone was scrambling to gather new leads. The act severely sabotaged the Crown's ability to take hostile actions as their members were lost and confused out in the streets of the town.

Underneath the town however, Araneae were mapping out the labyrinthine waterways after learning several entry points. Through their numbers they covered vast amounts of land and through their efforts new, previously unknown entries and exits. Though some were unusable for a human as the openings were far too small for anything but the hex crawlers to squeeze in or behind one of numerous collapsed tunnels far too treacherous for human safety and access. Each of Alicia's new men had a personal hex crawler assigned to them to relay her orders summarily as well as to keep tabs to make sure they stay in line. Obviously the hex crawlers couldn't enforce her will to the same degree as her but they couldn't know that. Besides the telepathic messages they received from the hex crawlers were anything but natural. As they lacked the library of words and expressions, instead primal transmissions of notions, emotions and instinctual peremptories came in. Though for them, it was as if they were

possessed by some unseen spell rather than the small spiders relaying her words to them.

- "Henrik!"

A name echoed through the besodden tunnels filled with humorous air. Someone called out to a haggard man with weary eyes that were heavy with suspicion. 'Henrik' turned his head around after a short pause glaring at the people who called out to him. As far as the meaning of the word colleague went these people were the closest examples of it to him. They... were once his colleagues, until recently... Of course in a band of cutthroats there was no allegiance except to one's self. His true identity was Merik Hein, 'Henrik' was just an alias that grew on him. He was one of the ringleaders of the Devil's Crown... formerly. He was one of Alicia's new novitiates.

After quickly turning away the people under him he continued to walk, through dark tunnels that he had become so familiar with. His mind was in shambles after what had happened earlier in the day. He and his band got a hold of a lead on a bounty with particularly ample rewards. It was about offing some girl and bringing forth proof of her death, be it her hair, eye, heart or the whole head it didn't matter. Normally he himself wouldn't have gotten personally involved but in order to secure this bounty for himself and his men he took action... and it was the greatest mistake he had ever committed. Given the choice, he would much rather confess to his past crimes and willingly go to the hangman's tree.

Somehow he and some of his men were caught up in some monster's trap. A demon that hid under human skin. At first he thought they were caught up in some other rivalling group's scheme. He soon started piecing together the details of the bizarre circumstance he found himself in after regaining consciousness in restraints. Looking around Hein noticed it wasn't just that his men but also of men who served other ringleaders. People from at least four different factions were present including... another ring leader. The girl who spoke to them unsettled him immediately. It didn't make sense for someone of her stature to capture everyone present just by herself... unless she had accomplices. Until he could gauge their strength, he wanted to avoid antagonizing the suspicious girl. Thankfully the other party appeared to want to talk which meant opportunity to extract information and yet...

Some bumbling idiot blurted out and seemed to foul the 'girl's' mood, being forcefully freed only to have his face plunged into the water on the

floor. In some display of power or frustration... that girl overpowered a man larger than her, knocking him out by stepping on him and later kicking him rather forcefully to vent. In that moment he noticed the monster's extraordinary strength. Dainty, supple leg generating such strength to hold down a grown man. Anthelm, the other ringleader, seemed to lose his temper and patience after the incident... wriggling in his bonds. He could only assume the man that had just spoken out and beaten was one of his. He seemed to have started cutting his bonds on his own, with his men and even Hein's own subordinates started following suit. Earlier he noticed the 'girl' using some sort of magic to create a sitting surface out of the earth without a chant, aria or even a name which meant that she was an extremely capable sorceress. And that blade that she had next to her didn't sit right with him either.

Even his men were becoming agitated, looking to him for when they were ready to cut themselves free. He gestured them gently in denial, preventing them from taking any brash actions, until a disaster struck. Strangely, after being satisfied with all that it wanted from them she moved in to free Anthelm. It was then he attacked that... monster and all hell broke loose. Recounting the events was painful for him. People shivering entombed inside icy prison... their eyes still open, staring back at you through hazy frost. Expressions of despair and desperation eternalized like some sort of nature morte inside an amber.

Anthelm had it the worst, seeing his men die like that in front of him... and then being bound to servitude. He wanted to live... but not like this. For his prideful self, death would have been the preferred alternative. Seeing what that demon that called itself Alicia. Hein chose to live, even if it was a life he would have to spend kneeling to some monster. Perhaps it was a mistake to sell his soul away... he regretted now. When that thing... cast whatever hex on him it felt as if he was forgetting who he was and noticed a voice that rang inside his head. Like two different minds sharing a body. He couldn't make the heads or tails out of it most of the time. It was a whisper uttering some indiscernible things nonstop. It is quiet, almost quiet enough to not notice its presence. But it is there, always scratching at the back of his mind. It told him what to do, what that demon wanted us to do. Incessantly repeating over and over and over and over and over and over... even if he didn't want to do something his mind and body acted before he could even

realize what he was doing, he even felt... happiness from carrying out that demon's orders.

It wasn't him that felt this way, it was the voice inside him. And when he received any sort of direction... that whisper turns into a song... melodious and entrancing, he couldn't resist. There was little concern about what the voice dictated. He was more afraid of not wanting to resist the voice, before every time it sang... when he came to his wits it felt like a piece of him went missing. Replaced by the entity inside of him... How long would it take before he would become a flesh puppet imprisoned inside his own mind? Sometimes in sporadic fits of insight he could instinctively understand what the voice spoke about. Prophetic visions about the end of the known world, coming of some great storm that would devour all life, it was beautiful, poetic... yet terrible. He would have preferred that the voices remained unintelligible. Before now, he was searching for a method to break the spell. The first thing that came to his mind was to slay that demon. Yet it only led to palpable misery. That creature was interested in the reason as to why their lair was called the Devil's crown.

An opportunity presented itself... or so he thought... Devil's crown, a captivating wild flower known for its unparalleled beauty and extreme toxicity. Just touching it with bare hands was enough to put that person into a catatonic state. So notorious was it's deadly poison that it was forbidden to be cultivated even for research by apothecaries. But when handled with care through gloves, it could be ground down into a powder. Their band used the devil's crown extensively for it was one of the most ideal poison for their uses, considering both availability and the ease of concealing it. And once mixed into drink or food it had a pleasant taste, no odour to speak of and was slow to take effect. He had seen what the pure, refined poison of this flower can do. Noblemen and merchants alike died weeping blood on their deathbed days after they consumed food tainted by the flower.

Of course he didn't tell any of this, nor did he have to, thankfully. He was only to present the flower. He had hoped that the devil might unwittingly touch the plant, and if he was fortunate, the poison would destroy it. But that was all water under the bridge. Only despair awaited him...

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Alicia was closely examining the flower that one of more veteran assassins brought before rubbing its petals.

*'I can see why they call it a crown... those petals do resemble a crown of sorts.'*

>Notice. Cutaneous irritation detected. Floral sample contains potent toxic compounds... Damage assessment underway... Avoid contact with oral and optical organs.

⟨Advanced Toxicology⟩

⟨Toxic Tolerance⟩

*'Oh? Toxin reaction from the plant...?'*

>Preliminary analysis complete. Multiple usable compounds identified. Able to acquire novel compounds for further analysis, archival and biosynthesis. Ingest floral sample to proceed.

*'Isn't it poisonous?'*

>Compound structure similar to fungal toxins. System able to identify, isolate and neutralize compounds. Toxin absorption inadequate due to user physiology. The side effects benign. Risk assessment: Compound poses minimal danger to Administrator.

*'The things you make me do... Well extremely toxic to humans but not to me... huh... Well, a poison is still a matter of dose and perspective.'*

Without hesitation Alicia chomped the flower in its entirety. A mellow sweetness spread throughout her mouth. Strangely, the man who brought her the flower seemed to be so baffled by her action that he was stuck in a state of bewilderment, happiness and soon worry. He most probably knew of its poisonous properties...

*'A compassion from an assassin... unexpected, unnecessary... not unwelcome, I suppose.'*

>Analysis underway... Standby...

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Acquiring an unexpected boon, Alicia was in a rather good mood. Out of courtesy she put on her best smile to let her new underling know that she would be fine, to put his mind at ease. Though for Hein it was the most ruthless sneer, mocking his futile efforts to poison her. A great peril had come to this town... perhaps even to the kingdom itself. Walking through the dark corridors he wondered... was it better to stand against or with the crisis... The choice was made for him. For his own survival, he dearly wished for the kingdom's downfall. With such thoughts running through his mind, Hein set about completing his next mission...

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*'While we earned some time... this is only a token fix. If the information I currently have is to be trusted, the butcher won't be discouraged by something like this... But this isn't the last card in my hand...'*