

Show Notes

Mina is given an unwelcome decision to make by an even more unwelcome visitor, and we learn more about the death of her father. With a decision reached, Mina and Cadmus start to lay their plans, but they are interrupted by an atrocity no-one could have predicted.

Links

Transcript

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1L--J0_zsmOtoxNXIOwcJS77KRDxbEqduNjomCRWI8xo/edit?usp=sharing

Ranks of peerage: <https://debretts.com/peerage/ranks-and-privileges-of-the-peerage/>

Mechanics

SCENE 25: The Visitor Returns

Chaos Factor 9

Altered Scene: Altered (the visitor is a magical projection)

Mina: Mending

FATE does V know who Cadmus is? (Likely) yes

FATE does V know about the wedding plan? (50/50) no

DESCRIPTION Verdict on death of the Whisperer: naturally aromatic

EVENT What does he want? Event Focus NPC Action (The Underpipes) Carry Riches)

1. The trail of the Infernal powder X
2. Something she found there
3. Take something down there
4. Get something out of there

Leverage? Praise News

SCENE 26: Decision time

Chaos Factor 8

Altered Scene: altered (innkeeper throws them out)

EVENT: how does Mina think Alexis was involved in Baron Montisario's death? Intolerance the Intellectual

FATE: murdered by 'lone gunman'? (50/50) Yes

SCENE 27: Prepping for the Underpipes

Chaos Factor 7

Altered Scene: Interrupt NPC Positive (Machine Cultists) Praise Fears

FATE Certes? (likely) No

FATE Key? (50/50) Yes
1d6: 1 Ankhra (terrorist attack on the Monastery of Thrice-Blessed Ankhra)
FATE Attackers at the scene? (Unlikely) No
FATE Suicide bombers? (50/50) Yes
FATE Survivors? Yes
FATE Describe attackers? (50/50) Yes
FATE: is Cadmus willing to return to the Underpipes? (Likely) Exceptional Yes
How did Cadmus enter the Underpipes? Triumph Tactics (below the Blood Pits)
How did Cadmus find out about the entrance? Overthrow Misfortune
Entrance description: Gladly Young
FATE: Did Antiope escape? (50/50) Yes

CHAPTER 10 Atrocity

TEASER

Mina stares at the visitor. At this elusive, enigmatic, malign presence who has managed, since his recent, unwelcome arrival in her life, to turn pretty much everything to shit. She's lost her home, she's lost her job, she's lost her sense of certainty in the world. She's been jumping at shadows, fearful for herself and for the future of her House. All because of him, and whatever screwed-up scheme he's working.

And now here he stands, in her room, poring over her designs. An invader in her private space once again, stating by his very presence here that she has no privacy. No agency. No freedom.

The parallels with her cousin's machinations are not lost on her, of course. Both of these men seem to think they can simply use her as they wish, a hapless pawn in their clandestine games. Both these smug, self-satisfied bastards seem to think she is nothing more than a tool to be used for their benefit.

Well, no more. She's been tangled in the intrigues of others for long enough, and she's sick of playing by their rules. Time to cut the knot. To flip the table.

Mina Montisario strides over to the visitor, draws her pistol, and shoots him, point-blank, in the face.

INTRO MUSIC/ VOICEOVER

Hello and welcome to The Lone Adventurer, an actual play solo RPG podcast with me, Carl White. I will be your narrator, your Game Master and your guide as we follow our hero, Mina Montisario, on her journey into the unknown. For this game I will be using the D&D 5e ruleset, as well as a variety of other systems, tools and tables, as they take my fancy.

A word of warning; the following scenes may contain mature themes and disturbing imagery. Listener discretion is advised.

The adventure continues.

RECAP

Last time, on the Lone Adventurer, Mina woke to discover the identity of the new Spymaster, and it's the last person she would wish it to be; her cousin, Alexis Montisario. But the bad news didn't stop there; the identity of the Whisperer's murderer was revealed to be the Unseen, a shadowy organisation of shapeshifters. Alexis announced his plan to stave off impending disaster; a marriage of allegiance between Mina and the Duke of House Toreth. And when she gets back to her room at the Missing Link, things go from bad to worse.

SCENE 25

The arcane bullet passes straight through the visitor and blows a five-inch hole in the far wall. Brick and plaster dust rain down, then a furious voice calls up the stairs, "I thought I said no more explosions?"

"Sorry Mrs Caelia, no damage done" Mina calls down, and walks straight through the image of the visitor. It fades, wavers, then reforms, an eyebrow raised.

Mina ignores him, fishing what looks like a metallic scarab from a coat pocket. She whispers to it, and it begins to glow green. She places it on the wall, and under her guidance it starts to stitch the hole closed, extruding sticky threads of brick, plaster and paint.

With the work underway, she turns and fixes the visitor with a scowl. "So you found me. Now what? More threats? Or just come to gloat at the loss of the Whisperer?"

"Oh dear, I *have* come at a bad time, haven't I?" the visitor's projection shrugs. "No matter. When I last called, I presented you with an offer, Miss Montisario. You chose not to take me up on that offer. But, to your credit, you did not alert your handlers either. No compliance, but no betrayal either."

"And so you killed the Whisperer. Congratulations." The bitterness in Mina's voice surprises even her. She had not fully appreciated until now how keenly she felt his loss, but it's true; the Whisperer has been a fixture of House Montisario for as long as she can remember. The world, her world, seems a stranger, scarier place without him.

The visitor shrugs again. When he speaks, it is almost as if he is speaking to himself. "The Whisperer is no longer on the board, that much is true. Actions have consequences, including inaction, and now we are where we are. A time of change. New risks and opportunities emerge, to be mitigated or seized as they are identified." He smiles, refocussing his attention on Mina. "And that, Miss Montisario, is where you come in. You and Devotant Cadmus here. Or should I say, ex-Devotant."

Cadmus speaks up, alarmed. "You know of me?"

“Indeed we do. Perhaps Miss Montisario neglected to mention, but we are very well-informed. Well-informed enough to know, for example, that the Whisperer died at the hand of the Unseen. Perhaps you have heard of them.”

Mina is about to snap out a retort, but stops herself. She had naturally assumed the visitor was behind the Whisperer’s murder, but that’s not what she’s hearing here. And Mina senses something else; weakness? “Enlighten me” she mutters, probing the extent of the visitor’s knowledge. Not of the Unseen, but of her.

“Shapechangers, Miss Montisario. An organisation bent upon infiltration of the great powers. Deadly in the extreme. I fear that if House Montisario has earned their enmity, the end is surely near.”

Mina snorts with derision. “Yes, I imagine you’re all kinds of cut up about that. The fall of House Montisario, orchestrated by this “Unseen”, with your support. A marriage made in heaven. Or hell.”

The visitor shakes his head. “You misunderstand, Miss Montisario. The Unseen are no allies of ours. They pose a threat to all of Kyras, ourselves included.”

But Mina is only half-listening. She is still processing the implications of the visitor’s reaction, or rather lack of reaction, to her comment about marriage. She’d been looking for any flicker of response, but he failed to register the comment at all. Which suggests to her that he knows nothing about her cousin’s plan. What does that mean? Is his reach into the House of Whispers compromised? Are his claims of omniscience just so much smoke and mirrors?

The visitor continues, oblivious. “Which brings me to the reason for my visit. The last mission the Whisperer assigned you was in the pursuit of machine cultists, and the infernal powder they received. The source of that powder remains a mystery, but we have reason to believe the Whisperer’s death was linked to it. Which likely means the Unseen were behind it. And we believe more is being moved.”

“You entered the Underpipes in pursuit of it, and emerged unscathed. Which is more than can be said for most who venture down there. So, I come to you with a new offer, Miss Montisario. I would like you to return to the Underpipes, and complete the mission you began. Locate the source of the Infernal Powder, so that we may neutralize it.”

Mina stares at him, agape, for several seconds. “You are actually insane, aren’t you? Even if I believed you, which, for the record, I do not for one instant, what makes you think I’d go back down into that tangled den of lunatics?”

The visitor smiles. “Three things, Miss Montisario. Firstly, I believe you to be a woman of integrity. You wish to protect your House, to avenge your spymaster’s death, and to complete his last assignment. This undertaking gives you the opportunity to do all three.

“Secondly, I will offer a reward upon successful completion of this mission. I will provide you with a choice; I will either provide you with the answers you seek, or I will allow you to walk away, freely, with no further obligation.

“And thirdly, if you do not do as I ask, I will publicly reveal that the Unseen were behind the Whisperer’s death, and the other powers of Kyras will turn on House Montisario like a pack of feral dogs, tearing what remains apart in a desperate desire to be spared a similar fate.”

“So, there it stands. I offer you a choice, Miss Montisario. Identify the source of the Infernal Powder. Or do not. Action or inaction. And the consequences thereof. Choose wisely. I bid you a good day.”

And with that, the visitor vanishes.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

What was that Mina was saying about freedom and agency?

This can be a feature of games run with the Mythic GM Emulator; at times it can feel as though the world is in permanent smackdown mode; that the poor PCs are being continually beaten down and battered by forces beyond their control. Particularly as the Chaos Factor rises, things can spiral out of control, and for that last scene we were at a Chaos Factor of 9, the highest possible.

But, although Mina was not exactly in control of that scene, there were a number of positives. She was given valuable insight into the potential limits of the visitor’s knowledge. Perhaps he’s not quite as infallible as he claims to be.

And she now also has another path to take, an alternative to the route offered by Alexis.

It’s an interesting change from where we found ourselves at the start of chapter 8, when all lines of enquiry looked closed and forward momentum seemed blocked.

If this was a game being run by a live GM this would be akin to the PCs being offered a sandbox to play in for a while, and when the GM saw that the PCs were getting stuck, and were unsure how to progress, they introduce plot threads that lead into the next part of the adventure. Now Mina has a choice of where to take the adventure; the GM has basically said “pick between a social intrigue scenario or a dungeoncrawl.”

Mythic never ceases to amaze me in its ability to emulate the unpredictability of a game master, both in the minutiae of small decisions, and in the way it shapes stories at a more macro level.

Of course, Mythic is not operating in isolation; the questions I ask, and my interpretation of the responses, are integral to the process. I suppose that is much like the interactions in a good gaming group; done well, the emergent narrative of a group RPG is the result of a sort of storytelling feedback loop between the GM and players. No one person wholly guides the story. The same is true here; although I have a lot of input, and Mythic cannot function without me, in the end Mythic can still take things in very unpredictable directions.

There are negative consequences for Mina selecting either path presented to her at this point, or for refusing both and choosing some other option. But that's no bad thing; consequences keep things interesting, and make choices hard and meaningful.

I'm not going to comment on the mechanics of that scene, save to explain how I arrived at the visitor's proposal.

I asked the Event question: What does he want? and drew an Event Focus. That was NPC Action, and the NPC I drew was the Underpipes. Remember, the Character list is not limited to just people, it can be places too. The event description was Carry Riches; something to do with riches carried in the Underpipes.

A few alternative interpretations of this occurred to me, so I summarized them into four options, rolled a D4, and the trail of the Infernal Powder was the one that came up.

I mentioned that there were some positives in that scene for Mina. I think on balance, there were enough to warrant nudging the Chaos Factor down to 8. Let's see how long that downward trend lasts.

SCENE 26

"And on top of everything else, we're homeless again!"

"It's hardly that surprising," Cadmus reasons. "You did blow up your room, Mina. Again. I think perhaps it's for the best. I'm not sure how much longer the Missing Link, or Mrs Caelia, could have withstood the level of excitement you brought to the place."

Mina grins in spite of herself. "I suppose there were a fair few explosions. But it does leave us with a bit of a problem. Where now? We could probably take refuge at the House of Whispers. That would keep us safe from the visitor's prying eyes, probably, but I've no desire to have Alexis constantly looking over my shoulder."

"Another inn, perhaps?" Cadmus suggests. "One with a slightly less highly strung innkeeper?"

Mina shakes her head. "No, I don't think so. The visitor showing up at the Missing Link, and knowing all about you, just goes to show that there's no-where we can hide. So maybe we shouldn't even try. I think it's time to go home, to the Rookery."

As they cross the city, Mina considers their options. "We've been presented with two demands, and I can't say I like the sound of either of them. The more I think about it, the more, an arranged marriage to Tristan Toreth sounds like a scheme designed to benefit Alexis and Alexis alone. And that's even assuming the city's most eligible bachelor would be willing to marry several rungs below his station."

Mina is not exaggerating. Duke Tristan Toreth is young, handsome, and athletic. Since the death of the old Duke, his father, several months ago, he is now the youngest head of a

great House by far, and society speculation over possible brides has reached fever pitch. To date he has kept everyone guessing. Even Mina, who has been ostracised from high society ever since the incident, is well aware of the young duke's cachet.

Nor is she exaggerating to point out that any wedding between her and the Duke would be a considerable mismatch. Even before her father's death and her own fall from grace, she had only been the daughter of a Baron. And now she was not even that. As Duke of his House, frankly, Tristan could do significantly better.

But she has learned through bitter experience not to underestimate her cousin. If he believes such a match is possible, it probably is, though his means for securing it are likely to be highly questionable. He had been called away before providing her with any further details, but she can use her imagination. Blackmail? Bribery? Anything's possible.

Cadmus interrupts her speculation. "You said before the visitor interrupted us that Alexis was responsible for your father's death. Surely you don't mean that he was the killer?"

Mina grimaces. "No, he would never dirty his own hands. And of course I have no direct proof of his involvement. He's far too careful for that. But I don't believe for one minute that the man who killed my father was some deranged malcontent, acting alone, as was claimed. It was all too convenient; my father was in the way, you see, preventing the prosecution of war on ethical grounds. A war that ultimately was waged, once he was dead, and the rest of his family disgraced. A war that made Alexis, among others, very wealthy indeed." The bitterness is plain in her voice; this is a wound that has never healed. She glances over at Cadmus. "A story for another day. Suffice it to say, I have very little desire to do anything that is likely to benefit Alexis, even if it is supposedly in the interests of House Montisario."

"Which leads us to unsavoury option number two. After our narrow escape, and your own experiences down there, I have no desire to return to the Underpipes. And frankly, I have no desire to be doing the bidding of the visitor. I don't respond well to threats, and I'm not at all sure we can trust a single word he said.

"But one thing he said is undeniably true. The Whisperer put me on the trail of the Infernal Powder for a reason. If there's a chance that following that trail can lead me to his killers, then I think I have to take it. Cadmus, I think I have to go back to the Underpipes, but I know what happened to you there was beyond awful. I can't ask you to go back there..."

Cadmus smiles, grimly. "Mina, there's nothing you can do or say that will prevent me from accompanying you. And I think I may be able to help get us down there undetected."

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Awesome, it turns out Mina is Batman! I wonder if she'd been to watch Zorro before her father was murdered before her eyes.

Nearly everything in the preceding scene is Mina speculating. I did ask the oracle was "how does Mina think Alexis was involved in Baron Montisario's death?" The answer to this was

“Intolerance the Intellectual” which led me to the conclusion that the Baron was pushing for peace.

But the important thing here is the wording of the question. I didn’t ask “how was Alexis involved” but “How does Mina think he was involved”. When posing questions to the GM Emulator it’s important to try and remember how you would ask questions of a real GM. You’d never ask “who is the secret Big Bad Evil Guy”? But you might ask “Based on my character’s backstory, who do I think the Big Bad Evil Guy is?”

Same thing here. The GM Emulator is revealing parts of the world that sit just outside of the player’s control or knowledge. I suppose I could argue that this is PC backstory territory, and that I could just make this part up. And that would be a legitimate approach. But I didn’t have a clear picture in my head of why Mina thought Alexis might be involved, and so I figured the GM could pitch in, just like I might do in a group game.

The important thing to remember, though, is that this is pure speculation on Mina’s part. She has no proof, just profound distrust and dislike of her cousin. At this point, we have no way of knowing whether Alexis, or anyone else, really was involved.

This scene highlights another clever aspect of the Mythic GM Emulator design. Even though there was no mechanical event that dragged the story in the direction of the plot thread “Come to terms with father’s death”, the simple fact that this thread exists keeps it present in the fiction, and encourages me as a player to explore it. It serves as a reminder to me of what matters most.

Nothing went horribly wrong for a change in that scene, so the Chaos factor drops again, down to 7.

SCENE 27

As they head across the city towards the Rookery, weaving through the bustling market crowds, Cadmus explains how he originally entered the Underpipes.

“As you know, it’s no simple task to enter the Underpipes. Quite apart from the fact that entry is technically illegal, the entrances themselves are either well-guarded, or well-guarded secrets.”

Mina nods. It had only been by chance that she had discovered the pool entrance beneath the Temple to Brahn, or the grating in the Toreth Palace cellars. She is wary of using either route again.

“Well, once I decided I was going to walk the Underpipes, I needed a way in. I had been offering Ankhra’s blessings to those poor souls incarcerated in the Blood Pits, and one of their number, a gladiator named Antiope, offered me knowledge in exchange for aiding her in her escape bid.”

Mina has heard of the Blood Pits of course. Located near to the Iron Spire, the Pits are deeply contentious. Many adore the thrill of gladiatorial combat, and see the pits as just punishment for the criminals that find themselves there, forced to fight for their survival and their freedom. Just as many consider the Blood Pits to be a barbaric throw-back to a less enlightened age, and work tirelessly to see them banned. Regardless, at least for now the Blood Pits remain a weekly fixture in Kyras calendar.

"There's an entrance beneath the Blood Pits?" Mina asks, and Cadmus nods. "Yes. within the shrine to Ghorra, there's a hidden entrance that leads to a pipe. From there it's a long, cramped crawl, but that pipe leads into the tunnels beneath. Antiope and I were able to find our way into the Underpipes that way..."

Whatever else Cadmus had been about to say is cut off, as a tremendous explosion rocks the whole street. Some distance ahead a plume of scarlet flame erupts into the sky, and a cloud of dust and black smoke follows in its wake. Panic spreads through shoppers and merchants alike.

Mina stares up at the explosion's aftermath. "Did you see the colour of the flames? That was Infernal Powder!"

But Cadmus is already running, heading towards the site of the explosion, pushing his way through the press of bodies heading in the opposite direction. "It came from Singer Square! Someone has attacked a temple of the Seven!"

And not just any temple, it turns out. By the time they reach Singer Square the target of the attack is obvious; what had once been the Monastery of Thrice Blessed Ankhra, home to Cadmus' Order, is now mostly smoking rubble. Small fires still burn, charred bodies litter the once-idyllic square, and the wounded stumble through smoke and debris, bleeding and shell-shocked. It is a sight of unmitigated horror.

Cadmus spends the next several hours tending for the wounded, first using his magic, then when that is spent, his skills as a medic. Mina provides what help she can. As they work they attempt, and fail, to process what has happened. This loss of life is utterly senseless; an attack on the Healers of Ankhra utterly unthinkable until now. Who would do such a thing? And why?

Mina receives her answer as they bind the wounds of a young novice. "I saw them as I was leaving," he says, voice trembling. "They wore metal masks, they carried barrels up the monastery steps and inside. No-one thought to stop them- why would they? I thought them a curiosity, nothing more. But then..."

Mina and Cadmus glance at one another. Machine cultists. The destruction of their airship only delayed their plans. Why they should target the monks of Ankhra, of all people, is a mystery, but one Mina swears to herself she is going to solve.

"Cadmus," she says, hesitantly. "I understand if you feel you must stay here, to help your Order rebuild..."

The Devotant shakes his head firmly, his eyes blazing with an expression Mina has never seen on his face before. He looks furious. Vengeful. “No, Mina. We’ve done what we can here. We need to find the people that did this, and see to it that they never perpetrate such horrors again.”

BEHIND THE SCENES

I had intended for that scene to simply be a chat between Mina and Cadmus that revealed how he had accessed the Underpipes. But when I asked if the scene was layered in any way I was informed of an Interrupt. Interrupts in the Mythic GM Emulator can significantly alter the way a scene plays out, and introduce unpredictable elements into both the story content and structure.

In this case the Interrupt Event was NPC Positive. Something good for one of the NPCs on my list. I asked who, and was told: Machine Cultists. And what was so good for them? My Event description was Praise Fears.

Once again the meaning of this one didn’t come easy. I was tired by this point, so I took my own advice from Chapter 8, and let the question percolate by going to bed for the night. Sure enough, I woke up with the answer crystal clear in my mind. What does Praise Fears mean in the context of a mad cult intent on stealing high explosives? The celebration of terror, that’s what. Terrorism.

So who would they attack? I decided that as adherents to something called the Great Machine, they would be most likely to attack one of the competing religious orders, one of the Seven Keys. I’ve still not provided much information about them, as I only want to introduce game lore when it’s directly relevant to the story being told, but suffice it to say for now, there are seven objects of religious devotion variously known as the Keys, the Singers, and the Colossi. We’ve encountered a couple so far; Ankhra represents Life to its worshippers, and Brahn represents death. Two very different religious orders have grown up around these two. There was also a brief mention of Ghorra in that last scene, who is worshipped as the embodiment of war and conflict.

I figured the most likely target for the Machine Cultists was Certes, the Key representing Nature. But Mythic disagreed. Not Certes.

I then asked if the target was in fact one of the religious orders. Perhaps the target was political instead. One of the Great Houses perhaps? Or maybe a Guild?

No, Mythic informed me, it was definitely a religious target.

So with Certes removed from the list I rolled a d6 for the remaining Keys, and the answer was Anhkra.

I’m quite pleased that it was; not only does it tie the story back to a pre-existing group that we’ve had a bit of remote visibility of, but now Cadmus has real skin in the game. This just

got very personal for him, assuming it wasn't already after the whole locked in a box thing. A vengeful healer. That could be interesting.

My follow-up questions established that the attackers were no longer at the scene, that they had been suicide bombers, and there had been some survivors, one of whom had seen them. I also asked if Cadmus would be willing to stick with Mina in light of this atrocity. It was perfectly reasonable to think that he might feel compelled to stay behind and help his brethren recover. But Mythic had other plans in store for Cadmus. When I asked if he was still willing to return to the Underpipes I got an Exceptional Yes; not only was he willing, he was now highly motivated.

I then returned to the original purpose of this scene; how did Cadmus kind the Underpipes. Based on what we've seen so far, I decided to make entrance into the Underpipes difficult, even forbidden. That helps explain how no-one seems to know about the factionalism and conflict that has developed down there, and why the place isn't full of tourists and explorers.

I think this Behind the Scenes section has gone on long enough, so I'll let you take a look at the shownotes if you're particularly interested in how I arrived at the location of the entrance.

You may have noticed I switched the order of the interrupt event and the planned conversation about way Cadmus accessed the Underpipes.

Strictly speaking an Interrupted scene should completely alter the planned scene. The Mythic Deck rules have this to say:

"Interrupt scenes represent the unexpected. This scene should be something very different from the expected scene. An Interrupt scene is treated like an event. It's essentially a Random Event that we are treating as the basis for the next scene."

But I figured that as this scene was originally about filling out some backstory, rather than new events, there was no harm in combining the two. And for the sake of narrative coherence, it made more sense to have the conversation get interrupted by the event, rather than take place after it. Where the order of Mythic responses has little material effect on the outcome, I feel quite comfortable changing that order to whatever works best to serve the story.

I think on balance my characters had more control this scene than loss of it. Sure, there was an awful terrorist attack, but my party now have a clear plan of action, and are determined to see it through and put an end to the evil of the Machine Cultists and their weapons dealers. Chaos Factor goes down to 6.

Next time, Mythic willing, we return to the Underpipes.

OUTRO MUSIC

You have been listening to the Lone Adventurer, a solo RPG podcast, played, written and performed by me, Carl White.

If you've enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a 5 star review on iTunes, or telling your friends. That really is a huge help.

You can find shownotes at the loneadventurer.podbean.com; I include any links mentioned on that site, as well my interactions with the Mythic GM Emulator and any mechanics information. The story may continue in next episode of the Lone Adventurer.

Thank you for listening.