

Show Notes

Mina wakes to discover the identity of the new Spymaster, and it's the last person she would wish it to be. But the bad news doesn't stop there; the identity of the Whisperer's murderer could spell doom for House Montisario, and the new spymaster's plan to deal with the situation puts Mina right in the very last place she wants to be.

Links

Transcript

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YhGRF-ZUfINL8-ea2Mu3LSE9C4gMv-3O9Z5O1vaK4jY/edit?usp=sharing>

Surprise: <https://slyflourish.com/surprise.html>

UNE (Universal NPC Emulator): or:

<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/134163/UNE-The-Universal-NPC-Emulator-rev>

Mechanics

SCENE 22: Cousin Alexis

Chaos Factor 8

Altered Scene: No

Who wakes her?

UNE privileged politician, comparable power, motivation: work the world

Demeanor inquisitive

Bearing request

Focus fame

FATE does she know him? Exceptional Yes (cousin, Male/ female/ non-binary: male Alexis Montisatio)

FATE: do they get on? Exceptional No

Mina Punch: miss

FATE does he accept it was murder? (Likely) Yes

FATE is his lackey a soldier? (Likely) Yes

Donjon Name Generator: Theny Veray

Male/ Female/ non-binary: nonbinary

Why the welcome? Expose Intrigues

FATE Shapechangers? (Very Likely) Yes

FATE Captured? (50/50) Yes

FATE Alive? (Impossible) No

SCENE 23: The Reveal

Chaos Factor 7

Altered Scene: Interrupt (NPC Negative) Truce Anger (Cadmus)

FATE are shapeshifters a known faction? (unlikely) yes

FATE criminal? (50/50) Exceptional Yes
Event how does Cadmus know of the Unseen? Struggle Opulence
FATE did Cadmus grow up elsewhere than Kyras? (50/50) Yes: Ligzara (Tanth)
FATE: is it the same as what Cadmus saw? (Very Likely) Yes
What does Alexis want? Assist News

SCENE 24: Processing

Chaos Factor 8
Altered Scene: Interrupt, NPC Action (The Visitor) Inspect Home (In Mina's room)
FATE is Duke Toreth fat, old and ugly? (50/50) Exceptional no
FATE does Mina believe Alexis is responsible for her father's death? (50/50) yes

CHAPTER 9: Cousin Alexis

TEASER

"Mina? Mina, can you hear me?"

The voice seems to be coming from a long way away, and from a long time ago. It is so familiar...

There is concern in the voice, but Mina's instinctive reaction is distrust. Resentment. Enmity.

She blinks awake, the world swimming back into focus. It takes Mina a moment to make sense of what she is seeing. She is in a study, lying on a sofa, sunlight filtering in through half-drawn curtains. There is someone leaning over her, silhouetted by the sunlight. The figure leans back, and she sees him.

"Ah, Philomina, you gave us quite the scare..."

Her fist misses his jaw by some distance, the wild punch easily avoided as the tall, slender man simply stands, calmly, and steps back from her reach.

"...but it seems there is plenty of fight left in you yet! Thank goodness, the healers have done their job well."

He smiles, revealing perfect teeth. In fact, everything about the man seems perfect; his hair, his clothes, the handsome features, the easy, confident posture; everything about him suggests refinement and culture. A man born to power, and to leadership.

Mina swings her feet to the floor, ignoring the ache in her ribs, and glowers up at him, fists clenched.

Her voice is tight with barely suppressed emotion when she speaks.

“Why am I not surprised to see you here, like a vulture over a carcass, Cousin Alexis?”

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 constructed Barbican, a steel defender, and Cadmus swore to stand by her. But the Devotant had shocking news; the Whisperer had been murdered. With all other avenues seemingly closed, Mina was left with only one option; to return to the House of Whispers. But she and her companions were attacked as they entered. Attacked... and defeated.

SCENE 22

Alexis Montisario's smile transitions faultlessly into a look of deep sorrow and sympathy. There is not a hint of insincerity in it. He bows his head.

“You have my deepest condolences at the loss of your former employer, Philomina, dear. The Whisperer's death is a genuine tragedy. An unforgivable trespass against our House, and one that shall not go unpunished. I will see to that personally. Even now...”

“You can stow the fancy speeches, Alexis,” Mina snaps, rising to her feet. “You don't need my vote, remember? Now, what in the Wars of the Song was that “welcome” all about, and where are my companions?”

The easy smile is back, as quickly as it left. “Ah yes, of course, please forgive me.” Without apparent signal, the door opens. A soldier in House Montisario livery steps in at once, hand on the pommel of his sword.

“Captain Veray, would you be so good as to fetch my dear cousin's companion? And her... equipment?”

The captain nods and within moments Cadmus is shown into the room. From the way he is nursing his wrists, bindings have just been removed. A moment later a guard enters, carrying a large sack, which he dumps unceremoniously on the floor before leaving. Mina

opens it, retrieving her pistol, then running fingers over the bent and broken metal body of Barbican. As she does so a series of fine runes, carved into the metal, flare into life, and the steel defender begins to self-repair.

Alexis raises his hands, open palmed, in supplication. "I must most sincerely apologise to you both for your treatment. But you must understand, in times such as these, we can make no exceptions. Particularly in light of the somewhat unique circumstances..."

Mina knuckles the bridge of her nose. "Alexis. For once in your life, will you kindly forgo the thirty-minute word salad and just GET TO THE BLASTED POINT?"

For the first time, Alexis Montisario's perfect facade is breached, if only for an instant. As quickly as it slips, equilibrium is restored, the apologetic smile almost instantly masking the flash of genuine anger.

"As you wish, Philomina dear. Let me speak plainly then. The House of Whispers has been infiltrated by shapeshifters. Beings capable of both altering their appearances and faultlessly adopting the personas of trusted allies. And, in the guise of a trusted servant, of administering a pathogen that killed the most heavily protected man in Kyras. As acting Spymaster I needed to confirm you were who you purported to be."

The smile is back, this time with just a hint of raptor behind the eyes. "Was that sufficiently succinct?"

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Poor, Mina, she and her little crew were absolutely demolished by the encounter that closed out the last episode. A total party kill, and it wasn't even close.

There were three reasons that happened the way it did. Well four, really. Let's go through them.

Firstly, when Mina and co arrived at the House of Whispers, I asked the Mythic oracle if they were in for a hostile reception. I had been thinking along the lines of an antagonistic desk clerk, or perhaps a new boss giving her a dressing down.

"You're a loose cannon, Montisario! A maverick! I got the mayor's office breathing down my neck..."

"Screw those pencil-pushers, chief, I get results!"

"You're off the case, Montisario! Turn in your gun and shield!"

You get the idea.

But as it does so often, Mythic had other ideas. The response was Exceptional Yes: they were in for a VERY hostile reception.

I drew an event and got Ambush Stalemate, which led me to the conclusion that the building had automated defences that could be activated to restrain intruders. It didn't take much rummaging through my monster books to come up with suitable antagonists; a suit of animated armour, a gargoyle and two rugs of smothering constituted a deadly encounter, and seemed suitably thematic as a fantasy security system.

The second reason for that wipeout was surprise.

Surprise can be pretty devastating, with surprised combatants getting no actions at all during the first round of combat, not even reactions, while the enemy cheerily hammers away at them. That's especially dangerous if the enemy know what they are doing. But we'll come back to that in a moment.

When I checked the statblock of all of my monsters for this combat, they each had the False Appearance trait. While they remain motionless, they are indistinguishable from a normal rug, suit of armour etc. To my mind that meant the party had no chance of detecting them, and so were automatically surprised, no check. That seemed fair, in the circumstances. They got to act, to the best of their ability, in that first round, and my PCs did not.

Which leads me to TPK reason three. These monsters knew what they were doing.

They made the optimum moves to take the party down, playing to their strengths and exploiting party weaknesses in a way that made them MUCH more dangerous than they might at first appear on paper.

Now I'd love to claim credit for that piece of DMing skill, but the credit does not lie with me. It lies instead with Keith Amman, the author of a book I recently picked up called *The Monsters Know What They're Doing*. Keith has exhaustively worked his way through the entire *Monster Manual*, working out optimal monster tactics based on each of their statblocks, in a way that frankly completely blows my mind.

I can't recommend *TMKWTAD* highly enough. It does something I thought impossible; makes the boring *Monster Manual* monsters interesting. And scary. It's a fantastic tool for any DM, but especially for the solo DM, because it provides an optimised monster AI. Here is what this monster will do first, and second, or in this circumstance or that one. I've immediately picked up the sequel, which covers the monsters in the other 5e *Monster* books.

An example; when I picked that Animated Armour I'd considered it just another thug, that would use its multiattack to do a double slam each turn. Then I read the entry in *TMKWTAD*, and realised the Animated Armour's multi-attack specifies 2 melee attacks, not slams. Melee attacks. That includes Shoves. Or Grapples. And if it shoves a target prone, then grapples, then the target has a speed of 0: it can't get up. Subsequent attacks have advantage. Combine that with the rug of smothering, which adds the Restrained condition if it hits and an ongoing 10hp a round damage, along with any damage the armour dishes out on top, and the effect is absolutely lethal. Particularly when all the setup for this deathtrap takes place in a surprise round in which the PCs can't do anything at all.

And finally that takes me to reason 4. About the time I reached the realisation that I'd potentially created an unwinnable Kobyashi Maru for my party, I decided that this was fine. All part of the story. If the party were to be defeated, so be it. The important questions to answer were why, by whom, and what would happen next? Death was boring, and also not contextually likely. They were being restrained. Why?

To find out, I first determined who Mina met with by using UNE, the Universal NPC Generator. There's a link in the shownotes to that tool. I ended up with a crafty politician, who she knew very well and didn't get on with. That sounded like family, so I decided on a cousin.

I then asked why the welcome, and was given Expose Intrigues. Shapeshifters sprang to mind, and Mythic agreed. I sometimes double-check with Mythic on things like this, but I probably shouldn't, and just go with my gut. I liked the shapeshifter idea, and would have been disappointed if Mythic had said no. Anyhow, the enemy now has a face, or rather, lots of faces.

So I've added Shapeshifters to my Character list. Time to move on to the next scene.

SCENE 23

Mina sits, heavily.

Cadmus, who has been impassive up until this point, takes a step back, his face ashen. "Blessed Ankhra, you're... you're talking about the Unseen, aren't you?"

Alexis raises an eyebrow. "Indeed I am. I confess, I'm surprised you've heard the name, Devotant. Their existence is not common knowledge. Do you mind telling me how you came to learn of it?" Though the question is impeccably polite, the acting sypmaster's voice carries the unmistakable subtext that if Cadmus does not care to share what he knows with Alexis, there is a very skilful, very unpleasant man in his employ who would happily repeat the question in a small cell, somewhere deep below this building.

Cadmus looks conflicted; at once afraid, angry, and ashamed. He takes a deep breath, doing his best to calm his emotions.

"I... I was not always a Devotant. I grew up on the streets of Ligzara, in Tanth. I lost my parents when I was very young, and I did what was required to survive. I ran with a street gang. Petty theft, pickpocketing, burglary. I'd probably never have left Tanth if not for... Some of the older kids took me on my first dip... pickpocketing... and something went wrong. The man we tried to rob caught us, and there was a fight. He was stabbed, and died, right there in the alley. And that's when his face, his whole body changed. One minute he was a fat old noble with a beard, the next it was smooth, thin, the skin sort of white, translucent..."

The devotant shudders and closes his eyes.

“We fled of course, back to our hideout in the city slums. We had no idea what it was we’d killed, but we’d heard the whispers, we had our fears. We hid, but it did no good. One by one my friends vanished, or they changed. It was either run or die. I ran. I’m not sure I’ve ever truly stopped.”

Mina stares at the Devotant, horror-struck. After a moment Alexis shrugs. “You always did have a thing for collecting waifs and strays, dear cousin. Regardless, yes, that is our conjecture; that somehow House Montisario have earned the ire of the Unseen.”

Mina bites her lip, working all this through. “But why...”

Alexis completes the thought for her. “Why did they not simply kill the Whisperer and replace him? Why did they take the risk of sending an assassin to instigate such a grisly murder, risking capture and exposure? Why don’t you ask them yourself?”

He presses a button on the underside of the desk he is leaning against, and a section of the far wall of the room swings open, revealing stone steps spiralling down into darkness. Alexis gestures towards it. “Please, after you. I insist.”

Mina and Cadmus lead the way, eventually reaching a heavy, iron-bound door. It swings upon before they reach it, revealing a small, hexagonal chamber of cut stone, with a circle of glowing arcane runes at its center. Manacles, embedded into the floor hold a figure locked in place, though the pale-skinned, smooth-featured figure is quite clearly dead.

“You killed it?” Mina asks, but Alexis shakes his head. “It killed itself when it became obvious capture was inevitable. It is bound like this to prevent reanimation, destruction or extraction of the body. It may yet be able to provide us with information.” He turns to Cadmus. “Is this what you saw in Ligzara, Devotant?”

Cadmus nods slowly, unable to take his eyes from the thing. “Exactly the same. Perhaps a little smaller, but maybe that’s because I’m bigger now...” He is lost in the past, reliving old, deep terrors. Mina reaches out and grips his arm, then stares at Alexis. “Why...”

Once again, her cousin predicts her question. “Why show you two this? Two, and believe me, I mean this with all due respect, dear cousin, two outsiders?” Mina bristles at the subtle emphasis he places on the word. At what it implies. Alexis, apparently oblivious, continues, “A fair question. If news of the Unseen’s involvement were to get out, it would be the final nail in the coffin. But I have decided to bring you into the fold. Into the inner sanctum, as it were. At this point finding agents I can truly trust is... problematic. Whilst we have had our differences, cousin mine, I like to think we have always trusted one another.”

Mina snorts. “About as far as we can throw the palace of the Arch-Dominar. What...”

“What is the purpose of this olive branch I offer?”

“Will you *please* stop doing that” Mina fumes. “It’s infuriating!”

Alexis offers a sincerely apologetic smile. Mina doesn't buy it for a second. "Dearest Philomina, you always were an open book to me. Forgive me, please."

She desperately wants to punch him in his oh-so-sincere face, but manages to resist the urge. Barely. Instead she says, "I'll say it again, Alexis. Stop getting off on the sound of your own voice, and get to the damned point before it dies of loneliness. You never do something without a reason. Usually self-serving. What exactly do you want?"

The expression on her cousin's face is, for once, unreadable. Which makes Mina very nervous. At least when he's displaying an emotion, she can be reasonably sure he's experiencing anything but what he's displaying, probably the exact opposite. This absence of tell is disconcerting.

"Dearest cousin, times have changed. Subterfuge has failed, and the House of Whispers lies open and exposed. We face an enemy whose motives are unknown to us. Dangers grow in the shadows where my predecessor walked. They will continue to do so, and if we fight, blind and lost in the dark, we will lose.

"All this intrigue, this cloak and dagger, what has it ever really achieved for House Montisario, but the creation of new enemies, when we should have been focussed on forging new friendships? It is time for us to leave those twilight paths behind us and bring House Montisario into the light. To win the hearts and minds of the people of this good city, to rebuild old alliances, and to retake our rightful position as the principal House of this magnificent city. We must change the rules of the game, Philomena."

"Pretty words, Alexis. But even if that were all true, how would you intend to achieve all that?" Even as the words leave her mouth, Mina is struck by a sudden, horrible thought. No, surely not...

Alexis smiles sadly, apologetically, but Mina sees straight through to the raptor's grin behind the facade. "Why, isn't it obvious, dearest cousin? We shall win the hearts of the people by publicly redeeming House Montisario's most wayward sister. We shall win allies by re-establishing one of the oldest inter-House bonds, and in so doing, forming a power block that none will dare stand against. We shall change the game by offering your hand to the Duke of House Toreth."

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Well, as Mina would say, bugger.

Just when things seem like things can't get any more complicated for Mina, something like this happens. She's probably looking back on that climb from the Underpipes with fond, happy memories, at this point.

Often when I create a scene I'll do all the mechanical part first, and then write it all up. For this scene I didn't do that; I asked the oracle questions, then wrote until I needed another

answer, and repeated. So I was as much in the dark about what Alexis was planning as anyone else, right up until the final oracle question. Man, he's an absolute cast-iron shit. Which is to say, I am, because I made him up. But if it's any consolation, I probably hate him just as much as Mina does. Which is to say, there's a tiny part of me that really doesn't hate him at all.

The marriage idea came out of three things. Back when I first created Alexis using the Universal NPC Generator, I got several indicators as to who he was and what he was up to. I was told he was a privileged politician, with a motivation to work the world. Ambitious as all hell then. His demeanor was indicated as inquisitive, and he had a request for Mina. I had no idea what that was, but it had something to do with fame. I figured all that would come out as I played, and blimey, did it ever.

The second thing that happened to really cement the idea was the final question of the scene: what does Alexis want. Assist News, Mythic told me. That left me stumped for a few minutes. Did he want her to become his press secretary? That didn't seem like much fun. More thinking to be done.

I said the wedding idea came from three things. The third was one of my dangling threads. We were briefly introduced to House Toreth a while back. If you've read the show notes you'll know I rolled a fair bit more background for this Great House than I used at the time, and what I rolled intrigued me. But there was no direct link into the story at the time, so House Toreth never made it onto my Lists. But an important rule of creating connected solo narratives with random oracles is to link your threads. If there's a way of tying threads together, particularly the loose ones, that is always going to serve your story well. So, I tumbled the three elements of assist news, fame, and House Toreth together in my mind, and in one beautiful instant everything sort of knitted together.

Sometimes, rarely, when you're playing a solo RPG, an idea like this will emerge from the random fictional threads you've laid, and literally blow your mind. When this one surfaced it was so perfect, so right, it gave me the most amazing tingles all over my scalp and up and down my spine, a phenomenon that Google informs me is known as Autonomous sensory meridian response, or ASMR. Or, much more accurately, a brain orgasm. A wonderful little Google rabbit hole, if anyone's felling cognitively frisky.

The wedding Alexis has planned for Mina was not the only surprise in that scene. We got a Cadmus origin story.

The scene opened with an interrupt, negatively impacting Cadmus, with the description Truce Anger. That was going to take some interpreting, so instead of rushing straight into it, I first established that the shapeshifters were a known faction, and got an exceptional yes when I asked if they were criminal in nature. Seriously spooky dudes, then.

So I came up with a suitably spooky name, the Unseen, and asked how Cadmus knew them. The answer was struggle opulence. Perhaps he'd been born poor? From there the street urchin story pretty much told itself, and linked back to the truce anger prompt. Loosely, admittedly, but sometimes it pays not to be too literal, and just go with a feeling.

A quick sidenote, on the topic of there being nothing new under the sun. Following that scene I did a quick Google search, just to check that the name Unseen wasn't widely used by something else, and there it was: the Unseen, a secret criminal society of shapeshifters based in Waterdeep, in the Forgotten Realms. Either I once knew that and plucked it from my subconscious, or great minds just think alike. But what the hey? If it serves the story, in it goes, and to hell with whence it came.

Now, all this talk of matrimony actually leaves Mina in a potentially tricky spot. Because, like all the best (or worst) villains, Alexis might very well have a valid point. What if the way to save House Montisario really is to stop all this fighting in the gutters, and instead to reach for the stars?

I have added the wedding to the Thread list, Duke Toreth to the Character list, and removed Innkeeper Caelia and the Whisperer. The Chaos Factor goes back up to 8. Let's get back to it.

SCENE 24

"He's a snake! A self-serving, power-hungry, back-stabbing snake!"

Mina has been raging like this the whole way back to the Missing Link, and doesn't show any sign of slowing down soon. Barbican, fully repaired, marches silently along behind her, or as silently as an automaton constructed of steel parts can march. Cadmus, who has wisely kept his own counsel up until this point, decides to speak as they reach the front door of the inn.

"Mina, what he said, your cousin; that a union between House Montisario and Toreth would solve the problems you face; was he right?"

"No! Well, maybe. I don't know!" Mina throws her hands in the air in frustration. "You never know with Alexis! I have no way of knowing if he genuinely believes this marriage idea will work, or whether it's just some scheme. The only thing you can ever know for certain with Alexis is that he's out for himself. Whatever he's up to, he intends to come out on top. For all I know, he could be behind the Machine Cultists, or the Visitor, or the Whisperer's murder. He could have hired the Unseen himself..."

"You really think so?" Cadmus asks, horrified, as they climb the stairs.

"No," Mina concedes. "Well, maybe. Oh, I just don't know what to think! This is what he does! He ties you in knots, has you second guessing yourself until you doubt your own sanity!"

She pauses on the landing, and turns back to Cadmus. "I'll tell you what I do know. I don't think Alexis is taking any of what's been going on seriously. The work the Whisperer was doing. His assassination. To him that's all a grubby inconvenience, something standing between him and what he wants. Now, it's possible this plan of his could work, if I was willing to go along with it. Which, just to be perfectly clear, I am not. But it's equally possible that

he's badly underestimating the trouble House Montisario is in. Or that he knows full well, and that he's playing some other game..."

Cadmus shakes his head sadly. "Such hatred within your family..."

Mina smiles, though it looks more like a snarl. "You have no idea," she says, looking back at Cadmus as she opens the door to her room. "In addition to every other terrible thing that bastard has done, Alexis Montisario is responsible for the death of my father."

But Cadmus is not looking at her. He's staring past her, into her room, at the man leaning over Mina's desk, studying her blueprints.

The visitor looks up with a smile. "Miss Montisario, what a pleasure to see you again. I trust I haven't called at a bad time?"

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.

POST SCENE CREDIT