

A ruin like a stone forest blanketed the landscape. The sun shone down through an overgrown canopy of shattered tiles, moss, and vines. In the midst of wide, empty cobble streets and marble courtyards, deer slowly grazed, eating the grass that poked through the stones. Vines wound their way through the once-great city, climbing up walls and sneaking down alleyways. Ancient statues, their features worn away to the barest resemblance of the human form, stood in intersections with birds of all colors perched on outstretched arms or upraised swords. Cracks in the derelict stone were mortared by thick moss that trailed along with the vines, dripping down the drains and into the rotting sewers.

Here, in the under-city, were the creatures oft considered to be more nefarious. Rats climbed along the vines, seeking here and there the dead and rotten. They pulled on the remains of men long-dead, nibbled at the bones of some long-forgotten lord, and fought over the scraps of some animal unfortunate enough to find its way into the tunnels below the wrack.

But even the rats, disease-ridden and cannibalistic as they were, ran at the scraping sound that emanated through the underbelly of a city long dead. A chitinous tapping accompanied the scraping that so terrified the rodents, a sound that few men had heard and lived to tell of.

In this place, dreams had once walked in the light. Now, nightmares crawl in the shadows. Nightmares that take an eight-eyed, eight-legged form. Spinning webs to trap even the most wary of creatures, spiders larger than bears skitter their way through the remnants of glory. As the vines permeate the city above, so do their webs permeate the tunnels below. Their thick hides are scarred, the failure of many an adventurer's sword or spear or arrow marking their bodies.

It was here, in the tunnels below the corpse of a nation, that a solitary flame bobbed slowly up and down. The flame would stop at intersections for a few moments, look carefully down each path, and then head deeper into the city. Soft leather boots tapped quietly on the stone in accompaniment with the bobbing of the flame. Occasionally, the boots would splash in a shallow puddle, and mumbled curses would echo softly off the empty walls.

Rats watched cautiously as a woman slowly threaded her way to a place where she would be able to climb out of the sewers. Unlike others who had come before, the clink of metal did not sound from this human. She had taken precautions to eliminate sound. Few things that she wore would clink together, and the few that did were wrapped in cloth or leather to muffle the noise. Her boots, even, were not of the hardened, waterproof leather that she would have preferred. They were, as aforementioned, soft, as to not rap upon the stone and echo sharply away from the stone.

She did not notice as the rats bolted away, nor did she hear the soft scraping and tapping that the rats knew meant death.