

"I'll offer two silvers and a half a dozen coppers," the innkeeper said superciliously to the short, thin man in front of her. She kept casting surreptitious looks over his shoulder as if afraid to have anyone realize she was speaking with him.

The man disregarded both her look and her tone. He had dealt with far worse from far better people than her, but for now, times were hard. "That, my dear, is a pittance," he said, a soft susurrous of a tenor, sounding as if he hadn't spoken for a week.

Elonius did often go weeks without speaking, away in his manor where he sorely wished he were now. He abhorred cities with every single fiber of his being, from the crown of his silvering hair to the soles of his well-worn boots. The city air was putrid, the sounds exhausting, and the people! Oh the people, like the woman, staring over her beaklike proboscis like a queen examining a beggar.

He oh so hated to play the salesman, but times were hard. He had seen several of his kind strung up at the city gates of Derainth when he came through, young men and old, with tongues lolling out, and a sign to mark them as they are, *necromancer*.

"Madame, what I have here will keep your inn free from not only mice, but bed mites and fleas, mosquitoes and flies for nigh a year," Elonius said. A decade or two ago, he would not have to give such a pitch. His work had always been illegal for time immemorial, but then again, so was prostitution. Elonius had seen enough brothels thinly disguised as taverns with scantily clad women hanging from their eaves to know that that market had not disappeared with a drop of ink and a scratching quill.

"Three silvers," she said shortly. "That's all I'm offering. You saw 'em out there."

Elonius sighed. It had taken two silvers to just get the supplies from the local abattoir, and that did not take into account the hard work of harvesting souls, of weaving shadow, nor threading shade. It had been a dreadful business, as of late. Yet he did not long to be free of it. Instead, he longed to be free of this city. If only he did not have to eat. If only he could pluck spirits from air. Then, he would never have to leave manor, his laboratory, and the world could go on with whatever it was that it did, and it could leave Elonius alone. There would be no need to hawk his wares to seedy inns in shady parts of cities where vagabonds and urchins crowded him up to his elbows.

He wanted this over with, so he acquiesced. "I saw them," he said curtly with nod. He had not recognized any of the men though, which suggested that at least as of now, his supply lines and his customers were trustworthy. Those of his sort that were usually poached were those that worked in human souls, who gathered in graveyards and mingled with malefactors. Those who plied their trade with butchers and dogcatchers were, in general, less sought after.

He had distributed his scripts in various secret pockets in his coat. While few in the world could handle them properly without setting the spirits free, Elonius did not trust the few that could.

There had been seven strung up at the city limits, Elonius had counted. Seven. Someone was hunting them, someone who understood what he was after, perhaps someone who did take umbrage with butchers and dogcatchers. Elonius took no chances.

He filched the script out of the right pocket. If you looked closely, you could seem the dull glimmer of the shade where it was writ. If you had the eye, you might see the soul, threaded through the weft and warp of shadow carefully, into careful runes that would control the shade for a prosaic task. Elonius felt it was a dishonor to the soul, yet even people of his sort had to eat, and scripts for dancing shadows, chess masters, and riddle makers were a slim market indeed. Elonius's mentor, Wilhelm, had made his business with soldiers and spies, yet after the Vassel Convention of 1436, there wasn't a king on the continent who would let it be known he dabbled with that sort of thing.

Elonius bent down, well aware of the woman staring at him as if he had horns, if moldy horns, while he did so. It was unlikely she could see what he was about, what with the dim lighting in the inn provided by a few guttering candles. It was better for the shade, really, all the threads of shadows. Sunlight wore them down to rags like a river carving against a bank. All the same, he was glad that the dark gave cover to him and his motions as well. He did not like people watching his work if he could avoid it. He did not like people.

He carefully spun and folded the script, and then with a breath of life, it shivered into being. The soul, called back from death into the shade, skittered off the floorboards to go chase an ever-present rat.

The woman did not see it, but she heard the squeal of a dying vermin well enough. She handed Elonius his three silvers, and seemed liable to chase him out with a broom unless he left quickly of his own accord. He wished to be free of her as much as she free of him, so before she could even make a motion toward her broom, Elonius was in the streets.

A child was crying loudly, in a keening way. There were more children in the streets than adults several fold over. Derainth, especially the Feringalt district, was a cesspool of orphans and urchins. Feringalt stood between the Hill, where those who had the money to live above the stink made their homes, and the chapel on the bay. Each one of those urchins made spectacular shows of begging to anything that moved, which helped popularize coaches to speed through those slimy streets before any chance of charity to delay the rich from their worship. Feringalt also stood adjacent to the taverns near the wharf, where it was more likely than not, gave origination to most of the beggarly children.

The urchins did not bother Elonius much. He did not look rich. His coat had been patched more times than he could count, and it did not fit well. His boots needed a cobbler, and his shirt, a

laundress. He wore no gold or silver, and his coin purse was likely much lighter than some of those begging.

But perhaps it something else that stayed their light hands. It was well known that those who worked with souls and shade often began to take on a cadaverous look, skeletal with pale skin and eyes that did not seem to see. Elonius always hypothesized that it was simply an effect of working with shadow that feared light and required no food, so likewise, those that worked with it hid from light and did not eat properly, rather than any effect working shade and shadow might have on the soul. All the same, Elonius took pains not to glance at his reflection, afraid of what he might find if he did. He wondered though, if his years at his work were beginning to take his toll, and that is why the urchins did not bother him. They did watch him, however, with wide eyes set in hunger-shrunken face, to cast away any doubt that if he did suddenly sprout gold, even a walking corpse would not be safe from their prying fingers.

He had a few warding scripts, if they did set upon him. But he would prefer not use them. Souls were expensive and scripts were time consuming to make.

With that piercing cry though, he wondered if he could write a script to take away the sound of the city. It could not be that hard, could it? What would it be? You would have to work with shadow, most likely. Bone and flesh would not be much good for catching sound. Could shadow block sound if it were weaved correctly? It could certainly cause sound. Maybe--

He stumbled on the bawling child, a young boy of four or five. At least, Elonius thought it was a boy. Both boys and girls all wore ragged breeches and many of both sexes did not wear shirts. Both had their hair in impossible snarls of indeterminable lengths and grubby faces caked with dirt and grime, and at least in this case, snot and tears.

The child gave one look and then bumbled away hysterically.

Perhaps Elonius was cultivating the cadaverous look.

Elonius could see what had the child crying. A dog--a young one, a puppy--had been run over by a coach, which likely did not stop of the likes of any mongrel, on four legs or two. While the little boy had run off, there was still a pack of children clustered in around corpse. One of group, the eldest by her derring-do of being first to elbow her way to the front, was palpating the corpse with unusual interest, her brow knit in concentration, oblivious to the blood staining her hands.

A recently dead thing had stumbled into Elonius's path. He could hardly let the opportunity go by, even if it were surrounded by children. He had an old script. One that was already fraying and would likely not work outside a moment, but perhaps it would work for his purposes.

Elonius strode toward the rascals. The pack broke up and backed away carefully. The girl, however, stood but kept her place. She looked like she was maybe seven or eight years old,

which meant she was likely years older. Hunger shrunk its participants. "It's ours. Find your own meat," she sniffed. She was a girl. Her voice proved it, although she wore a vest but no shirt.

A larger boy grabbed her arm and pulled her back. She was not the eldest then. Simply the boldest.

Elonius spared no look for the girl, and instead, bent toward the pup. The mutt was young. Her soul was bright. He could see it even in the sunlight, dripping from her glassy eyes. It was an auspicious day. With carefully hands, he threaded her soul carefully out from her heart, winding it around my fingers to make a skein. It was fine quality. A young pup, indeed. A well-behaved little dog that made Elonius see why the poor boy had been caterwauling.

When Elonius looked up, the pack of children had inched closer, trying to see what it was that he was doing. The one who had spoken, the girl, seemed barely restrained by her peers, peering forward as if she could actually see the soul. Elonius pulled a worn script from his pocket and tied the shade around the corpse. Animations, of course, worked best when the soul of the cadaver was left intact, but now was not the time for pretties. He only wanted the children to go away, and if they thought the dog was not actually dead, perhaps it would be enough.

The dog sprung up as the script stuck to the heart of the pup, and it began chasing after the children, nipping at their legs and behinds. The urchins shrieked off in a cacophony, and Elonius strode in the opposite direction. A very pretty soul indeed. He could do good work with it. Souls like that were good for shade work. It would withstand the stretch and strain of intricate runes well. It could hold on its own without bone or flesh binding it. Domesticated souls always worked well.

Human souls, of course, were the best for shade work. Children's souls. The runes he could make with souls of that sort. Well, those were scripts of spies and soldiers, of forbidden things that had once run rampant in war, before the Convention.

They were scripts of a different time, before he had grown contemplative and had thoughts outside of pleasing his mentor. The scripts still floated in his head though, the tight runes thread of life in shadow. He could remember how his hands would ache and his eyes would blur, as he would work days away on a single script, not even bothering to do away with the child's cadaver at his feet.

They were very different days. Now, Elonius made shades to chase mice out of souls of pigs and dogs, the shadows of vermin and cows. It was a different sort of work, but interesting scripts could still be constructed, albeit with more limitations. The complexity of runes could only stretch so far, the length of scripts, contracted. Still though, he could weave what he will, with less likelihood of untoward eyes peering over his shoulder.

Elonius took a languid, desultory path to the inn, lost in thoughts of runes that were impermeable to even the sounds and sights of the city. The inn where Elonius stayed knew well his type. It had a suite of subterranean rooms that had few uses besides for those that feared the light. It was near a large abattoir, and the innkeeper's dogs did enjoy heaping supply of daily victuals, which the occupants of the rooms were always eager to provide personally. The innkeeper even knew to keep his conversation to a minimum as those that work in shadow seemed to have a universal distaste of pleasantries.

No one else was staying in the inn's basement rooms beside Elonius this week. It was as he preferred. He could feel the stress of the day melt off of him as he closed the door behind him and slid into the wooden chair at his table. He set a single, thin candle alight, shaded behind wax paper, just enough to see in the windowless cell but not enough to disturb the shadows.

It felt good to be alone. And he had a new soul. The things he could do with it. What would he try? Certainly not something as prosaic as chasing rats. It should be something interesting, a challenge that would stretch the limits of the soul to her breaking point and create something beautiful.

Perhaps he would create a chess master. It had been such a long time since Elonius had been able to play against anyone of sufficient skill. Runes danced in his head. He could work in shade, although perhaps with bone he would be able to use the soul to its fullest extent in creating its logic. He could focus less on making sure the shade did not disperse the moment he let go with bone, unlike shade, which always needed to be strongly convinced to stay in this world. Bone was more robust as well, to sun and time, many times more so than either shade or flesh. Bone was such an undervalued medium.

A knock on the door signaled the arrival of the innkeeper, who waited a customary five seconds before opening the door a hair and slipping in a bucket of tripe, joints, bone, and blood from the abattoir. He left without a word.

Elonius would think on it while he pulled some shadow and knit it into shade. It was always so time-consuming, but by now, his fingers would work of their own accord. He had been knitting shades since he was barely more than a boy, working under Wilhelm's careful eye.

He pulled the bucket onto the table, already catching vision of shadows in the remnants of life. The innkeeper did well in always providing recent deaths while the shadows still held on. He was always careful to keep his bucket covered as well, so light did not abrade them all away. The innkeeper was well worth his price, and he well knew it. The silver Elonius had earned today would be the innkeeper's as soon as Elonius paid his bill. Elonius would need to sell more if he wished to have food enough for the winter.

There was another knock at the door. The innkeeper could not be back so soon. Even with Elonius's fingers as dexterous as they were, he could be expected to weave all the shadow in such a short amount of time.

Indeed, the knocker did not wait five seconds either, but strode into the room, bold as brass, announcing without fear, "I know what you are."

It was difficult to be even mildly cowed by such a statement, even as hard as times were, when the girl who spoke could likely barely see over Elonius's table. It was the young urchin girl from before, a heavy sack on one shoulder, which she swung onto his table, almost knocking the heavy bucket of meat products off of it.

She did not wait for Elonius to speak or make some response to her threat, if it were one. She did not pronounce it as a threat, but perhaps that was only an effect of her rough accent. "It was dead, you know. I knew when I saw it. Nuffin' don't live gettin' run over. And I checked. It wasn't breaffin' or anyfin'. I could see its brain hangin' out. Nuffin' don't live like that. Nuffin' does." She pulled the chair from the wall to the table so that she could stand on it. Then, she took the young pup from before out of the bag.

It was still quite very dead. It had gone stiff now and the blood had dried. If the girl minded any of it, she did not show. "And I saw you pokin' it, and I know what you must be doin'. I tried to do the same thing, but it didn't work. So, I got another one."

She pulled another body of the bag, this one a large rat that was almost the size of the dog. The rat's head was in pieces as if someone had repeatedly bashed its skull with a rock. This one was not stiff yet, and the body still warm. Strangely enough the soul leaking from its eyes was stretched and torn, as if someone had tried very hard to manhandle it out. "And I tried what you were doin' on this one, and it didn't work. I wanna know why. I wanna know what you do. I want you to tell me." The girl did not demand these things; she stated them with simplicity, as if she had not barged into the room of a strange man with a bag of corpses, or perhaps more accurately, as if it did not strike her as strange to do so.

Her eyes were sunken into her skull with the hunger that pulled her flesh tight across her bones. She had a face that suggested it should be round, with cheeks full enough to pinch. Instead, she looked like someone had painted skin onto a skeleton.

Elonius did not like people. Much less children. He could not understand them. He could barely even comprehend the words the child was speaking, behind her thick accent and slurred words as if no one taught her that some words contained more than one syllable. Yet, she stared at him hard, without fear. She had no fear. Only hunger.

Hunger, he supposed, stole everything in the end, even fear. Elonius could not remember feeling hungry for a very long time. He supposed it was an effect of working with shadow.

"Well?" she demanded. "Are you goin' to show me? Are you a shadesinger or not?"

It was the term she used that shook Elonius to words. "Shadesinger? Where did you hear that term, child?"

"That's what you're called, ain't it?" she said, arms akimbo, evidently trying to make the most of her minute frame. "That's what the stories say."

"Child, how old are you?" Elonius asked.

"Seventeen," she said, with scarcely a blink.

Elonius almost laughed. He had forgotten the habits of urchins. "Child, if you are seventeen, I am four hundred and thirty seven."

Instead of abashed or even skeptical, she looked intrigued.

"I'm not four hundred and thirty seven. Not all of the stories are true, child," Elonius said, shaking his head. "Tell me truly, child, how old are you?"

"Twelve. Or close enough. I don't know exactly when I am, but I will be," she said. "And don't go callin' me 'child.' I have a name, you know, shadesinger."

Elonius suddenly realized what was happening, this child bursting into his room and life. He knew that if he learned her name, suddenly everything would change about this interaction. She would no longer be that urchin from the street. She would no longer be that girl with dead things. She would not be that orphan who tried to pry a soul from a rat. She would be a person, with a name, an entirely different beast indeed.

Elonius quickly interceded.

"What did you do to that rat?" Elonius asked. He did not want to know her name. He took great pains to never learn anyone's name. He had been staying at this inn for far more than a decade, and the innkeeper remained the innkeeper in his mind.

"I tried to take the shiny stuff out of its eyes, like you did with the dog," the girl explained. "It wouldn't come out though. You gotta show me how you do that, shadesinger."

It was difficult to see souls. There filmy, ephemeral, ineffable things that defied description. It was difficult enough to see what you were about when you had worked with countless souls. It became more of a feeling than an actual perception. Yet, this child had just described a soul as "shiny stuff" as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Who have you seen die, child?" Elonius asked carefully, hoping his question did not spark tears. Seeing death made souls easier to see, especially if they were especially meaningful deaths. If souls were shiny stuff, this child's history was writ in tragedy.

"Loads of people. Everybody dies, but thrice as much in Feringalt, that's what they say," she said casually, leaning over the table to look at the bucket. "What's on this stuff, shadesinger? It ain't the shiny stuff. It's somefin' different, ain't it?"

"It is shade, child. Or it will become shade. It is shadow now. It is found in blood," Elonius said. She reached out a hand to feel it, and Elonius caught it. "Do not touch it! You could break them."

"Is that what I did to the shiny stuff?" she asked. "I got some of it out, but it just fell apart."

"That was a soul, from a spirit. Not 'shiny stuff,'" Elonius said.

"How come everyfin' gots two names?" she asked. She was standing on the table now, looking down at Elonius. "How do you stop souls from fallin' apart? What happens to 'em when they do? Can you catch 'em back? Can you, shadesinger?"

"Child, can you please get down from the table?" Elonius said. She jumped down, attempting to flip herself around while she did so. She almost landed, but instead stumbled backward into the table, knocking her skull against the edge and almost sending the bucket down upon her head. Elonius rushed to stabilize the bucket, but she did not seem to notice, only rubbing the back of her head with a slight scowl.

She once again looked up at Elonius, as if she had not almost broken her own neck. She had very clear eyes, even if they sat far back in her skull. They had no trace of deadness that Elonius feared was found in his own. However, if there was anything wrong with his eyes, she gave no indication of it.

"I can't see in the bucket from down here though. Can you show me how to touch the shadows then? Or the souls? What do you do with 'em, shadesinger? How'd you make the dog move? How come it died again?" the girl asked, reaching up for the bucket. She had thin, lithe fingers that would do well to knit or weave.

Wilhelm used to make Elonius weave all of his shades, once he had mastered the art. He had at one time taken it with pride that his master gave him the task for his own projects. However, weaving shadow was not difficult but only tedious, and was something often enough assigned to new apprentices. If the girl could see them as perfectly as she claimed, well, that was half the battle for apprentices. Sometimes they were sent to watch the gallows for weeks or months so that they could properly see what they were working with, but there would be no need for that with her.



It would busy her, if nothing else, since it seemed she would be reticent to leave. There would be no flips off of tables or questions, if there were any luck left in the world to give an old man.

“Sit down, child. Please. I’ll show you how to work with shadow to make a shade. A shade is what you thread the soul into to make the script. The script is what causes the shade, or bone or flesh, to move. You need a shade to keep the soul, or else it just flies away. Sunlight frays the shadow. As does heavy movements. You cannot tug on it, you have to tease it gently,” Elonus explained.

The girl stood up on her knees in the chair, watching Elonus carefully as pulled a line of shadow from the bucket. “Where does the soul go when it flies away?” she asked.

“Do you want to learn what I am teaching you, child, or do you want to ask questions?” Elonus asked sharply.

The girl lowered her head respectfully.

“Here. Take it, child, see if you can pull it gently out to make a skein that I will show you how to weave,” Elonus said, handing the shadow to the girl.

Her eyes seemed as if they were wide as she could make them. A hair more and they might pop from her skull. She held the shadow gently, trying to replicate Elonus’s action as he showed her how to weave.

It may be half the battle to see the shadow, but it became very evident that even with light fingers, weaving was not an innate art. The girl struggled with it, as the shadow would slip from her hands as she was trying to knit it in on itself. She bit her lip and kept working though, and asking questions.

“Why’s it so dark in here? Do all souls need darkness?” she asked.

“Yes, if they are to stay around. In light, they fly away. That is why they must be thread through the shade,” Elonus said.

“So if you bury people, do their souls stay? If you buried ‘em at night?” she asked.

“Child, all souls eventually fade or fly away,” he said.

“Even ones you’ve stitched to shade? In the script?” she asked.

"Yes, even those, especially if they are exposed to light or handled roughly. They are delicate," he said, quickly reaching to alter the position of her hands as she almost tore apart the shadow she was working with to scratch her dust-covered nose. "Easy, child. Do not break the shadow."

"How long does it take for the soul to fade? What about a body once it's buried, at night? How long does the soul keep around? Hours? Months?" she asked, taking his admonition gently enough. She continued on.

The shade was almost done. He took it from her to show her how to finish it. "Here, child. You must take that end of the shadow there. Do you see it? It has to wrap in on itself, so there are no ends. You have to tie it tightly. Otherwise, the shadow will fray," Elonius said, indicating for her to take the two ends.

"Why don't you just make no ends?" she asked. Before Elonius could dismiss it as ridiculous, she took the free ends of the shadow, and pressed them together gently, shading them with the palm of her hand from the light of the candle. She had a small cut on her finger, and she took the living shadow from her own blood to seal the two ends together.

Elonius stared. The shade stood solidly, more solidly than it would if the ends were tied. This was a technique he had never heard of before, but he had weaved as many shades as he had eaten meals in his life. Yet, this girl of eight or twelve or seventeen, or however old she claimed to be, simply came up with a novel technique that no one had ever thought of before, at least no one Elonius knew.

Shades were usually not what limited the lifetimes of script. Souls were much more impermanent than shades. Perhaps that is why no one that Elonius had ever heard of practiced the technique, and it looked like it required living shadow, which would be a nuisance to find if one did not take one's own blood, as the girl had done. All the same, it was startling.

"Child," Elonius whispered in awe.

"I can tie it instead, if that's what you want, shadesinger. I just thought it would work better like that," the girl said. "And my name's not 'child'."

The innkeeper knocked on the door. "I'll get it," she said, bounding off the chair before Elonius could stop her. Elonius stood up.

The innkeeper managed to keep an impassive face, even when being examined by a small girl with bloody hands in Elonius's room. He did not even look at her. However, something in his eyes tightened, as if he suspected what a man of Elonius's sort might do with a young girl.

It would not do. It would not do at all.

“Uh, my young, um, niece, is visiting me. She will need some food,” Elonius said awkwardly, trying to beg the girl with a look to play along. She was a sad-looking sort of thing, even if she were not covered in dirt and blood. “As much food as she’ll eat.” Elonius fumbled for coins in his pocket. He brought out his three silvers, and offered one to the innkeeper.

“Would she be wanting a hot bath as well? The mistress has a copper tub,” the innkeeper said, keeping his eye from the scrawny child.

“Yes, of course,” Elonius said, adding another silver to that offered to the innkeeper.

“And a new dress?” the innkeeper asked.

“Yes, certainly,” Elonius said, adding the other silver with a sigh.

“Can I have a yellow one?” the girl suddenly asked, all wide-eyed innocence. It was very difficult to believe that she was twelve, or almost twelve, as she claimed. It was very difficult to believe that she could see souls and shadow, that she had seen so much death. It was very difficult to believe she was anything more than a very young child, being offered a great kindness that she could hardly believe she deserved.

Elonius supposed it was more likely than not that no one had offered her any kindness in her life, not in Feringalt.

“A yellow one,” Elonius agreed quietly. She ran to Elonius and hugged him, holding him tight with scrawny arms around his middle.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

The innkeeper and the girl left, and Elonius examined the shade she had knit.

It was not particularly well done. It was a first attempt, of course, and not much else could be expected. There were gaps and wrinkles in the shadow. It would likely be reticent to hold even the meanest of souls. Yet, it had no ends. Elonius could hardly feel the bump where she had sealed the ends together.

He would have her try it again, when she came back. He would have her try again and again until the whole bucket was used up. Once she had the knack for it--and that surely would not take too long, as clever of a child as she was--then Elonius would not have to knit shade again. She could come with him to his manor, and she could learn from him.

He paused in his thoughts.

He did not know the girl. He did not know her name. She was an urchin who had seen death, and he was now thinking of taking her into his manor, this child he did not know? He was thinking of pulling her into his darkness? How would he feel if she hung among the seven men outside the city? But could he leave her in the streets? Where she would likely starve? Or else end up in the so-called taverns on the wharf like so many other orphan girls?

Why did he care so much this urchin, this beggar, this rascal? There were thousands of others out there, just like her. Perhaps half would be lucky enough to survive their childhood. But more to the point, he hated people, especially children. What was she to him?

Elonius rubbed his temples wearily, trying to calm his thoughts.

She had thanked him.

Elonius could not remember the last time anyone had thanked him, much less hugged him. He supposed he did not often do much that required thanks. It was an odd feeling, receiving that thanks. It felt as if a thread had been knit between them with that, oddly enough, like a thread of soul.

How come he could not think straight? His thoughts were more tangled than the shade she had knit. He had to think this through logically. He could barely afford to feed himself. He himself sat on that edge of shadow, where a noose awaited him should he stray too far. He could not afford to keep a girl. It would not be safe.

Perhaps, if times were not so hard, and he did not have to sell rat catchers to seedy inns, maybe then, but not now. He could not do that in good conscience, even if she was bright and could likely one day become a shadesinger of unequal merit. It would all be for naught if he could not feed her, if she swung with a noose about her neck.

What could he do for the girl? Send her off after a meal and a dress, with the knowledge he had given her? What would she do with it, this girl who attempted to flip off of tables and followed strange men back to their inns alone?

What was he going to do?

He did not know this girl. He did not know her name, and he hated children. It was not his problem what she did after he left. He had spent his day's work on her. He had shown her what he knew, but he could not be expected to do more. He could not afford to.

Could he?

There was a knock at the door, and Elonius could not help but wonder if that door had seen so many knocks since it was first hacked apart from its tree. It was not the innkeeper. It was not the girl. Indeed, it was not a face he wanted to see.

Linnaeus had been an apprentice to a colleague of Wilhelm's. Linnaeus was perhaps the only one of their sort that managed to keep a decent amount of weight on himself and color in his cheeks. He also had a predilection for garish hues of orange and green, as if to all the more mark himself out from his fellows in gray and black. If one saw him in a crowd, there would be no sneaking suspicion of his working in shadow, besides his eyes. While Linnaeus often smiled, often laughed, often had a fleet of emotions parading across his countenance, his eyes stayed dead within his skull, staring out like empty windows.

"Elonius, my dear old friend! I thought I heard you were in town," Linnaeus said jovially, striding into Elonius's room without invitation. Linnaeus was also an oddity among his kind in that regard as well. He seemed to enjoy conversation and companionship, and was seemingly ignorant that his colleague did not share his tastes.

"Hello, Linnaeus," Elonius said dryly. He did not want to entertain the man. He had thoughts enough in his head without the overbearing man stuffing the inane drivel he often spouted in there as well.

"Looking a little thin, Elon," Linnaeus said, sitting down to occupy the seat where the girl had sat. Linnaeus also had a habit of giving pet names to people who desired none, and commenting on appearances that others would prefer left unspoken of. He picked up the rat that the girl had left carefully. "I suppose times are hard."

"Yes," Elonius said laconically, hoping brevity would hurry the man off. It was really too high of hope in Linnaeus's case.

"Times are hard. Do you remember the good times? Wilhelm and Arrington could turn down the pleas of kings. They would come, on bended knee, bearing chests of gold, for just a drop of their talents, never knowing how hard us apprentices had to work to produce the arts that our masters were supposedly making," Linnaeus said. He also had a habit of what he styled as grandiose elocution that others called exaggeration or simply fibbing.

Wilhelm had worked for kings. He had made money. Elonius had helped him with his scripts. The resemblance to reality stopped there. There were no chests of gold or supplicating monarchs. Kings were more likely to threaten than to plead. And Wilhelm was a genius, and Elonius had merely been his apprentice, if a bright one.

"The things they used to say about us, my dear Elon. We were brilliant, precocious. We still are, don't you think?" Linnaeus asked.

“Linnaeus, we are old men. What you speak of was decades past. By the very definition of the word, it is impossible for us to be precocious,” Elonius said with a sigh.

Linnaeus continued as if he had not heard him. “It was true scripts we worked on then, the stuff to riddle the minds of lesser men, the stuff of legends,” he bloviated.

“Soldiers and spies. Once the scripts are known, any fool can be taught to thread the runes. And if you’ll please excuse me, Linnaeus, I--,” Elonius started.

“Do you remember those runes, Elon, my dear. Do you truly?” Linnaeus asked suddenly, turning toward him with those empty eyes.

“Those times were many dark years past. I do not work with human souls anymore, Linnaeus,” Elonius stopped, thinking of the dog’s soul he had in his pocket. It was a good soul. Perhaps if the shade was a little hardier, it could hold it tighter. Perhaps it could work for a spy. It would of course not be as robust as if made from a human soul, but it might work, if he just changed the runes a little. He could substitute simpler runes here and there. A dog’s soul was already prone to follow. It could work. It might.

“I know that look in your eye, Elon, my dear. You remember as well as I. You remember the feel of those runes, do you know? You remember their strength, the way they held to shade like anchors. None of those flighty souls of pigeons and rats. They behaved the way souls should. It was the way we were meant to be, Elon, my dear. It was who we are,” Linnaeus said.

“As much as I enjoy nostalgia, Linnaeus, I am very busy. If you will please excuse me,” Elonius said, going to show Linnaeus the door.

“Elon, my dear, the king’s wanting a spy,” Linnaeus said suddenly.

“What? That does not make sense. The Convention? The hanged men?” Elonius asked, flummoxed.

“Oh, well, he does not want anyone else having spies nor anyone to suspect he has one. Politics, Elon, my dear, politics. But, he is offering a pretty price, but it seems like few enough of us remember how to weave souls of that sort or scripts of that art. It takes a true genius, you know, with a fine memory, a genius with a higher calling than rat-catchers,” Linnaeus said.

Elonius did not trust Linnaeus in the least. It was hard to trust someone whose eyes spoke so differently than his body and words. If perhaps it were a different time, then Elonius would not have hesitated in sending Linnaeus out on his ear. Well, perhaps not so bodily, but at least make it very clear to Linnaeus that he was not interested in anything of the sort.

Yet, times were hard.

And the girl, he realized distantly. He could help the girl.

But of course that was not his motivation. He hated children. He had not a paternal bone in his body. It was all in terms of practicality. It would not do to keep her to knit his shades. He might be able to get rid of her more quickly with money. Maybe he could bribe the innkeeper and his wife into taking her in. That would rid himself of her, and he could return to his manor alone, not to leave for many years. It would be better for both of them, after all.

“What is his pretty price, Linnaeus,” Elonius asked through gritted teeth. At Linnaeus’s wide grin full of pointed pearly daggers, Elonius was quick to add, “I will not use human souls, Linnaeus. I do not work in that sort anymore. But, I do believe that I can make something work, perhaps something that will not be detected due to its novel medium.”

“There’s the brilliance I knew you had in you, Elon, my dear,” Linnaeus exclaimed. “Two hundred gold, my dear Elon. Two hundred. Imagine the things the pair of us could do with two hundred.”

Elonius looked at Linnaeus, noticing his particular emphasis on “us.” Elonius sighed. With any other of their sort, there would be no mention of collaboration or “us”, but with Linnaeus, everything was different. Linnaeus seemed to prefer to work arm in arm with another, something Elonius and all others of his sort despised.

“I do not know if I can, Linnaeus. I will think upon it. If I decide I can, then I will let you know. I do not know from whom you plan to get your gold, nor do I want to,” Elonius said, so Linnaeus knew this prevarication was not due to greed of wanting to cut Linnaeus out of the gold. Only Linnaeus would think like that, but Elonius had known him long enough to predict the way his thoughts would flow. Linnaeus may think he was the master of human behavior, but Elonius did understand a little. “I will let you know what I decide.”

There was a knock on the door. The innkeeper might have waited five seconds, but the girl did not. She exploded into the room, a ray of yellow in her dress. She had bits of soup still smeared around her face that a roving tongue still made stabs toward. However, she set it to another use, “Shadesinger!”

Her wet hair was in curls and held back by a yellow ribbon. Her hair was longer than he thought, now that it was not in snarls. The dark locks hung against shoulder blades that still stood out from her thin body. The second hand dress was very evidently made for a heavier girl who had regular meals, but perhaps some day this child would fill it. Perhaps her cheeks would one day grow to fill her face, yet already her complexion was less pallid and more rubicund. The rose of her lips contrasted against her nut-brown skin, and now they pressed to his cheek as she jumped and threw her arms around him.

She hopped down from him. While he was small for a man, she was small for a girl, and there was still considerable drop for her. She still had bare feet. She would need shoes. Gold could feed and clothe a girl.

"Who's that, shadesinger?" she asked, turning around to see Linnaeus for the first time. She hugged Elonius's leg, as if trying to disappear behind it.

"My name is Linnaeus, my dear," Linnaeus said happily, either unaware or uncaring of her reaction toward him.

"Linnaeus was just leaving, child," Elonius said, giving a look to Linnaeus in way that might force the larger man to his feet without any real hope that it would. However, Linnaeus did.

"We will speak again, Elon, my dear," Linnaeus said, with a grin that did not touch his eyes.

Elonius sighed in relief as the door shut behind him. He rubbed his head. Could he get a dog's soul to become a spy?

"I don't like Linnaeus," the child said suddenly.

"I do not like him either," Elonius admitted. Elonius did not like him, but he needed him.

Elonius could do it. No one else worked as much with animal souls as Elonius did. Others when they felt their skill had grown great enough always made their transition to of the human sort. During war, it was easy enough to find a battlefield, full of youths with vasty visions of valor, but in times of peace, it was more difficult.

After the war and the Convention, they began hanging around gallows, waiting to peel the soul from criminal eyes. Sometimes they followed around doctors and midwives, hoping their arts of medicine would fail so that their arts of shadesinging could succeed. It was dangerous work though. It was not so unusual for a physician to hang with a sign on his chest.

No, Elonius worked with animal souls now, and that is where he kept his arts.

"We will need to get the innkeeper to get you a pair of shoes," Elonius said. "But for now, I want you to knit more shades. This time, I want you to be very careful. I have a script in mind that is going to be very complex. I will need a very good shade, which I think you can create."

"I'll try, shadesinger," the girl said, going to kneel on the chair and reach for more shadow. "What're you goin' to make? Are you goin' to use souls?"

"Every script requires a soul, child," Elonius said as he searched for parchment, a quill, and ink. This script would require forethought. He needed to plan. He had not done anything as



complicated as this since the old days. He needed to remember. "The soul has to be thread into runes, into the shade. The runes tell the script what to do. Do you know how to write runes, child?"

The child, with her hands full of shadow, looked at him blankly.

"Do you know how to read them?" he asked. She suddenly became very enamored in weaving the shadow, far more than she had been the first time she learned. "Child, do you know how to read anything?"

"No," she said finally. "But I can learn real good, like I learned this." She raised her hands to show him the shade she was working on. It was coming along much better than her first. Perhaps by her fifth, she would produce something workable.

"Work on your shades, child, for now. But, I will show you later at the manor. Runes are the ancient, universal symbols from when life was young. They tell the soul what to do. The more complicated the task, the more complex the runes and the more runes you need to use," Elonius explained as he began drafting the script, runes dancing in his head. "You can use some of what the soul knew in life to craft the script, but a soul is not what it was. It's a form of energy, of force, not of life."

"Where's the manor?" she asked, not taking her eyes off her shade.

Elonius paused in his thoughts. Had he said that? When did he decide this? "It is in the countryside, a few days outside of Derainth. It is what my mentor left me before he passed."

"What're you goin' to do with the dog's soul? Are you goin' to put it back, this time for real?" she asked, apparently not giving the manor much more thought.

"I am going to use the soul for the script. It is a very nice soul, so it will hold the runes well. Meaner, wilder souls do not work as well. They fray easily and break into a thousand pieces. The souls of the young, before they can grow old and dark with shadow of the blood, those are the best souls to use," Elonius said.

"What if they're young AND they see lots of blood? Could you use a soul like that? Do those break? Muddy saw loads of blood," the child said.

Elonius prepared himself. Was this when she would reveal whatever death or deaths that made it so easy for her to see souls? If whomever she spoke of was young, it must be some sibling. But, the name was odd. "Who is Muddy?" Elonius asked with some trepidation before he could stop himself.

"The dog there. Frank caught one of her brothers n' ate him. Sal drowned one of the others. Perry cut the ma's throat so she wouldn't bark at 'im," the girl said mildly.

"But she was still a good dog, and that is what matters with souls. Just seeing blood does not shadow the soul. It is whether the blood leaves marks that will break a soul," Elonus said quickly, relieved. He really did not need to know the child's tragedy. The runes were coming to him now. It could work. He just needed to change a few things from the memories he had. He could do it. Just change this line here and there.

"Where do souls go when they break?" she asked.

"Child, I work with dead things, but I am not a priest," Elonus said. "I do not know, child. I do not know where they go when they fly away either, or if it is the same place."

"Well, can't you send a shade to follow 'em?" she asked. "Can't you make 'em come back and tell you? You can control them, can't you, shadesinger?"

"It is not that simple, child. The shade controls a soul. The shade convinces the soul, in some way, that it is not dead. It helps keeps the soul in this life, so that it will still do the work we say in the runes. The soul does not realize it is dead. It takes a soul of the departed to float away. Even if I wore my soul on my sleeves and you could see my soul as plain as day, it would not leave my body, not until I was dead," Elonus said. "I do not know where souls go."

"I hope it's somewhere nice," she said quietly. "Even for the broken ones."

"Child, let me see the shade you are weaving. Are you finished?" Elonus said. The girl nodded and handed over the shade. "You need to knit it together more tightly, child. I could poke my little finger through some of these holes. The runes have to stick. The soul needs to. Try another."

The girl started again. "If you wanted to, how'd you make the dog live, for real this time? Do you just take its souls and put it one of the shades? How long would it stay?"

If Elonus did not know better, he would think she had some particular attachment to the dog with all her questions as to whether it would live again, and her seemingly purposeful avoidance of his repeated contentions that that was not what shadesingers did. It was more likely she was asking after the soul of someone closer than a dog.

"Child, a shadesinger does not make things live again. I need you to understand that very clearly. Dead things are dead. They cannot come back in any way, shape, or form. A departed soul is very different from the soul in you or me. The departed soul does not remember enough about what life was. There is debate that speaks to the existence of another force besides that of soul or shadow in the body. There are those who question what exactly is the nature of death. All the same, it is the runes that tell the soul exactly what to do. The soul in a script does not

decide anything. This dog is dead. I hold its soul, but it is still dead, and there is nothing I nor anyone can do about that. That is one thing you must understand as a shadesinger. You do not make dead things live. You can only use their souls," Elonius said.

"I'm gonna be a shadesinger, then?" the girl in yellow asked.

She was certainly thin enough to be a shadesinger. However, her bright eyes and smile precluded the darkness it wrought. She had kept that brightness in Feringalt of all places. Perhaps she might keep it as a shadesinger.

"Child, do not weave so tightly. The soul must still go between the weft and warp," Elonius said. "And do not bother me with questions for a moment. I need to think."

The child quieted, and Elonius did think, of a great number of things, only half of which related to the script with which he struggled, changing runes here and there, occasionally rewriting entire lines as he simplified what he could.

What was he doing with this child? What he really intending for her to become his apprentice? How could he do that to her? How could he not?

She set aside her next shade, which Elonius inspected. "You are pinching it at the ends, you see? Look here. It creates distortions in the shade. It will not work. Try again, child."

The child tried again, again, and again, before on her sixth try, she created something usable, quite usable. He had her make one more, just to be safe, and then took the newest creation. "Now watch carefully child, and I will show you how to write the runes with the soul. This is for a very important, complicated script, so I will not allow you to touch the soul this time, but you can watch if you keep very quiet and still," Elonius said.

The child crawled up on the table to look on his work. Elonius cleared off the discarded, lopsided shades of early attempts and the dead animals. He laid down the shade and took the skein of soul carefully and began to tease out the end.

With a steady hand, he began to embroider runes he had not even thought of for twenty years. With deft fingers, he began to write what had never before been tried. With a clear and focused mind, he began to weave what would save his life and that of the child who had become his ward somehow.

He still did not know her name, but she would become his apprentice, as he had been for Wilhelm. They would not delve in human spirits and souls, yet use animals. He would teach her what he knew, and she would weave things that had never been thought of before. Together they would create dancing shadows, chess masters, and riddle makers. They could be happy,

the two of them. In that dance of runes, the world ceased to exist except for the runes, and that dream.

The girls sneezed and blew that future away.

The soul sprung apart in air and shattered. The shade fractured. Something very like cold fire boiled in Elonius's veins, the focus of shadesinging being tempered to hard fury. He turned to the girl without thought and yelled "Do you know what you have done?!? You destroyed everything!"

"I didn't mean to, shadesinger. I'll go make another shade," she said, bouncing down from the table.

He caught her arm and shook her. "The soul is gone! It's too late! I cannot do anything with shade if I do not have the right soul! Do you understand me, child?"

Tears sparkled in her eyes as she nodded. "I'm sorry, shade--," she started.

"Sorry, is not good enough! Sorry cannot put together souls!" he yelled.

"I can find another dog," she started, facing him through the tears now running down her cheeks. She wiped at them with a fist. "You can do it again, I know you can, shadesinger."

"This soul was not just any soul. It was clean, young soul. A rare soul. You cannot find that just anywhere. Can you not get that through your thick skull? You ruined everything." His anger was cooling to ice. He did not scream, but his words were cold. He threw her down, where she fell like a stack of kindling. There was not much to her beside bones.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked, standing unsteadily.

"Go find Linnaeus--," Elonius started.

"No!" she said, both hands going to her mouth. Elonius pounced on the weakness she showed.

"Yes! Go find Linnaeus and tell him that we are going to starve since you broke a soul. Find Linnaeus and tell him that," Elonius shouted, grabbing her shoulder and throwing her to the door.

She sniffed her tears back as well as she was able. "Yes, shadesinger."

"Go!" he shouted.

She left.

Elonius put his hands to his temples. What was he going to do? He could not keep the girl. Not without money. He could not keep himself. He was poorer now than when he started off. He could sell every script in every single one of his pockets, and with the market as it was, he still could not feed two people for a month. What was he going to do?

He had probably been too hard on the girl, but he had been angry. She needed to learn she could not be so careless, not when you worked in souls. She needed to learn so that he gave her a soul, she did not sneeze it away to nothing.

Where could he find a soul? A good quality soul? It would need to be domesticated and young. Could he buy a puppy off of someone? It had been such a particular soul. Another puppy's soul would likely not work as well, especially if it had a sense of that it were to be slain. He needed an instantaneous accident to take a puppy's life where he happened to be. Where would he find that?

Distantly, Elonius realized he was hungry. When was the last time he was hungry? How much time had past as he had worked on the script as the girl had weaved? The girl would likely be starving. Perhaps he could find the innkeeper and get a meal for them. He might have a few more coppers in his purse. It would not be a lavish fare, but if it could feed them, it would be worth it. The girl would have learned her lesson by now. He would have her sit in the corner and weave shades while he found another soul.

He would find another soul. He had to.

"Elon, my dear, I heard your girl crying in the hallway," Linnaeus said as he strode through the doorway without knocking. He was not alone. He was accompanied by a tall woman and a large man that Elonius did not recognize. They looked like a hard sort of people, but with money. Their dark clothes were silk, and gold glittered on their fingers, on their necks and ears.

"Where is she?" Elonius asked, trying to see around the bulk of larger people currently occupying his doorway. The woman shut it behind her.

"Run off, I would presume, my dear Elon," Linnaeus said. "But, I have a little something for you that will help with our little project for my companions here."

"I need to find her," Elonius said, going to push past the trio. Instead, Linnaeus caught him, dangling something in front of him. A soul.

"A soul for our script, my dear Elon," Linnaeus explained, as if Elonius could not recognize a soul.

A soul. That was what Elonius needed, and now it was dangled in front of him, even if under the glowering eyes of Linnaeus's two companions. They were both even larger than Linnaeus, dwarfing Elonius head and shoulders.

Elonius ignored them all and took the soul gently, fingers caressing the pristine, flawless fibers for a moment before stiffening in revulsion. He lowered his voice to murmur, and pulled Linnaeus's ear down to speak into. "This is a child's soul, Linnaeus."

"Oh, do not say you have become so sentimental, Elon, my dear. He was dying anyway. They are enough dying children in the street it does not make any sense as to why anyone would feel the need to do the deed himself," Linnaeus said in a normal tone, brushing off both Elonius and the unstated accusation.

No, he would not do it. He could not. He had the girl to think about

"I need to find her before she gets too far," Elonius said, trying to hand the soul back to Linnaeus, who raised his hands away.

"It is a simple enough thing to find a child, Elon, my dear. She is wearing a yellow dress. You could ask any urchin, and they could point the way for you. Yet, what will you do when you find her, if you cannot feed her?" Linnaeus asked.

"Linnaeus," Elonius sighed, still keeping the soul as far away from him as he was able. He eyed the two dark figures with distaste. He still did not feel comfortable speaking around them, even if it seemed Linnaeus did. "I cannot do this again. I swore I would not. I do not work in human souls, much less a child's, not anymore. I do not know how you got this, but it is a dangerous time to work in human souls. There were seven outside the city, Linnaeus."

"It is in dangerous times that men are most wont to starve, my dear Elon," Linnaeus said, picking at the thread sticking out of Elonius's very patched jacket. "Think of the gold. Split down the middle, Elon, my dear."

Gold could raise a child.

He would find the girl. He would. But first, he needed to find a way to provide for her.

He gave a wary eye to Linnaeus's companions, the men to whom Elonius would sell a child's soul. Then, Elonius set aside this worries and his word--the promises he made to himself years ago when the blood was still wet on his hands--and he got to work.

He took the shade she had made before the last. It was well done enough to work. Then Elonius set to thread the runes. The soul he held in his hand was extraordinary, or perhaps he had simply forgot what it was to use a child's soul. Elonius set complicated runes where he had once

planned simple, just because he knew the soul could take it. He threaded additional instructions, entire lines of new material that he had never thought of before. It seemed the soul willed it, so powerful and pure, asking for more and more. It seemed almost hungry.

The things he could create with a soul like this, far more than a spy. He could weave things that would shake the world or entertain a child. He could create dancing shadows, chess masters, and riddle makers.

He would, but not with a soul like this. No, he would not use such a soul again. He just needed to finish this task, and then he could, with souls of dogs and cats, pigs and birds. He would teach the girl to write beautiful runes out of ordinary souls, bring wonder out of the everyday. The things they would do together, if he could just thread these runes.

The world outside of Elonius drifted away along with any sense of time, leaving only the runes and Elonius's dreams. It was not yet too late. There was still a chance to weave them.

Linnaeus knew Elonius at least well enough not to interfere as Elonius worked, but it did not stop him from exclaiming once Elonius was finished.

"Good God, my dear Elon!" he said, leaning over the script. "This is incredible! These are the runes of another age. And this shade work. Where did you learn it?" The man and woman examined what Linnaeus was staring at, but it was likely as not that they could not see what they were looking at. Or maybe they could. They looked like the sort of people who were stained in death.

The voices shook Elonius, bringing him out of his reverie with a jolt. He felt weak and lightheaded, yet his hunger had subsided somewhat. He felt dirty, more than anything. He longed for a bath, as if he could scrub the residue of that child's soul from his skin. He had not wanted to do it, but he had to. Surely she would understand? Or maybe he did not have to tell her.

He did not have to tell her it was a child's soul.

His head hurt terribly. He could barely move, yet he somehow managed to stumble to his feet. How long had he'd been working on that script? Had Linnaeus and his companions been sitting there the entire time? What day was it? How far had she gone? He would need to find her.

"How do we know it works?" the woman asked.

"Do you want me set the script into action now? It works in shadow. It will not work in daylight, yet it knows its weaknesses, so it will hide in shadow until night. You only need to instruct it to whom you want it to listen and when you want it to report back," Linnaeus explained, as if it were his script. He bent to activate it without asking the permission of Elonius.

Elonius could not summon the will to care. He massaged his temples, trying to bring his thoughts back into the real world. It was difficult. They wandered in runes, tracing that poor child's soul.

"First, do you have the agreed upon payment?" Linnaeus asked, paused in his movement toward activation

The two spoke in whispers to one another, before the woman withdrew a heavy purse. "One hundred gold," she said.

"It was not a boy's soul," Elonius murmured softly, thinking of the feel of the thread. It had been so smooth, so pure. It had lightness in it. A delicate lightness and subtle strength, and a twist like a curl. He worked with enough souls to know it belonged to a girl.

"That, my dear, is a pittance. We agreed upon thrice as much," Linnaeus said.

"It's was not a boy's soul, Linnaeus," Elonius said, more powerfully. "It was a girl's."

"The deal was to have it procured within the day, not nigh a week," the woman said.

"Nigh a week, my dear, it has been four days," Linnaeus argued.

There was a knock on the door. Everyone fell silent. Five seconds later, the innkeeper poked his head in, holding a yellow ribbon. "Excuse me for this interruption, but Revale seems to have dropped this."

"Revale?" Elonius asked.

"I think that's what my wife, Miriam, interpreted it as. Ruh-vail. She speaks with an accent, you know. The little girl," the innkeeper said.

Elonius took the yellow ribbon from the innkeeper's hand. Revale. The innkeeper left without another word.

"As I was saying, what I have here is invaluable and irreplaceable, a lost art, and I am owed at least two--," Linnaeus began to argue but Elonius pushed him to the wall. Linnaeus was much bigger than Elonius, but Linnaeus did not expect to be pushed. Linnaeus still held the script.

"We are owed, I mean, we are owed," Linnaeus repeated. Elonius took the script from his hand and let him go.

"One hundred and fifty gold then," the woman said.



"No," Elonius said, turning away from the group.

"Elon, my dear, you really must leave the negotiations to me," Linnaeus said, putting his arms around Elonius's shoulders. "You are of course going to be compensated fairly for your efforts."

"It was a girl's soul, Linnaeus," Elonius said. Linnaeus smiled, a wide, bright smile of pearly daggers beneath empty windows.

"My dear Elon,--,"

"I know what you have done, Linnaeus," Elonius said.

Linnaeus's smile shifted. "Times were hard, my dear Elon, times were hard. A man must eat. Those others men, they were not my friends, not like you, Elon, my dear. I would never do that to you. We are partners. The others were not. A man must eat," he muttered in a quick undertone, glancing over his shoulder to see if the two were listening.

"I know what you did to Revale," Elonius said, not bothering to lower his tone.

"Oh, the girl? My dear Elon, I am sorry I had to take her early. I do not know what you planned to do with her, but she was needed. With this gold, you can buy other young, pretties, more than a street urchin," Linnaeus muttered, urgently. His arm tightened around Elonius.

Elonius took a different script from his pocket, a common ward of sinew that strung itself around the person touching its activator. Elonius breathed life into it, and Linnaeus fell to the ground cursing.

Elonius turned to the man and woman, who watched Linnaeus under veiled eyes that refuse to give evidence to their thoughts. "I am not selling you this script. It is not what you think it is," Elonius said simply. "That man in a charlatan and a liar, as well as a necromancer. What happens to him due to his many, untoward actions is no concern of mine."

The woman's eyes glittered and the man nodded curtly, stepping aside so that Elonius could pass between them. Elonius withdrew from his rooms and walked up the stairs into the common room of the inn. It was dark outside the windows, but both the innkeeper and his wife were up, busying themselves with cleaning for the night.

"Is Revale alright?" the wife, Miriam, asked as she saw Elonius. The innkeeper tried to shush her with a glance, but she would not have any of it. "Gerard and I heard her crying a couple nights ago."

Elonius shook his head, feeling as if it weighed a thousand pounds. He could not raise his eyes to see their faces, but he did see their feet as we walked toward the door. He saw the wife's, Miriam's, feet turn toward the innkeeper, Gerard. He heard her cry, and he walked past. He walked out the door of the inn. He walked outside of the city, through streets he could not lift his head to see. He walked far out to the countryside where he settled beneath a tree and looked at the script he still held gently in his hand. He looked at her soul, silvery thread in darkness without end.

Then, Elonius did something he had never done before. He unstitched his runes, carefully so that he did not tear or fray the soul. He unthreaded it from the shadow, bit by bit, inch by inch, until he held the skein again of her soul. It was delicate and lovely, indescribable by even the most talented of poets. It was shiny stuff.

The sun was rising; a red light was beginning to pour down through the trees. Already, the soul was lifting out of his palm.

"I do not know where souls go," Elonius said as he watched it float away. "But I hope it's somewhere nice."

By the morning light, Elonius could see soldiers outside the city walls. Half were busy raising a fat man to the gallows, but the others were setting off toward the trees, as if looking for someone.

"Even for the broken ones."