



WINDOWS

❁ on ❁

**CASTLE
MARRACH**





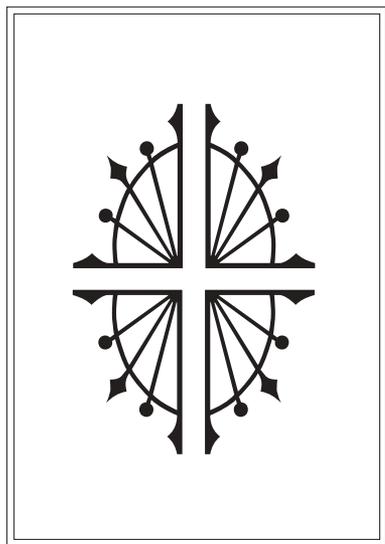
SKOTOS

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windows
on

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Art and Prose ∞

Est Quaedam Fiere Voluptus

by Lisbeth Gessamen (and Ulrich Lang)

It is known that within the walls of Marrach, mysteries unrevealed lie dormant waiting for a watchful eye. From shimmering, dreamlike stones to whispering chasms, all things have their answers to those who would look closely enough to ask.

For example; One still and frozen evening, found scribed on parchment in a dark corner of a corkboard in the lecture hall, an anonymous poem appeared. No special significance was attached to it. It was shuffled eventually to the back of the board.

Weeks later, while winds were ravaging the castle after a ritual to release the demon of the shadowcloak had been performed; the poem was repinned to the front with a cryptic note scribed on the bottom

The following day, another poem, as if to answer the first appeared pinned below. And in the time to come, amidst the winds and shadows, the interexchange occurred over and over with pinnings and posts and repinnings. Castle residents speculated and rumored: Was it an exchange of souls? Shadows? Something other?

All that is known is this: After the winds died down, nothing more was ever posted...

Originally scribed in a feminine and graceful hand:

Love bruises dark. Obscure my soul's lament
rape the heart that wouldst in sin abide;
pleasure in the tender skin of need
that blooms to bruise as deep as it is wide.

Two hearts that bleed as one; our bodies fuse
periphery and shadow intertwined;
The egdes blur. If I e're I could begin,
I'd end in you, surrendering design.

Yet captive to this agony, I mark
to ravage you if only in my soul;
Passion's blade that cleaves the will's intent
My sweetest joy, and yet, the wildest woe.



Queen Vivienne — by Sara Johnson

Pity me, in this I am undone
broken, wandering without a name;
If love enslaves beyond what you would own,
slay me then with what you cannot claim.

A paradox of grace: we're only freed;
When baptized in these wounds that, lifelong, bleed.

Then added, the day of the first great wind in that same hand:
*As in chess, where each move is by rank assigned;
this passion, like wind, blows both cruel and divine...*

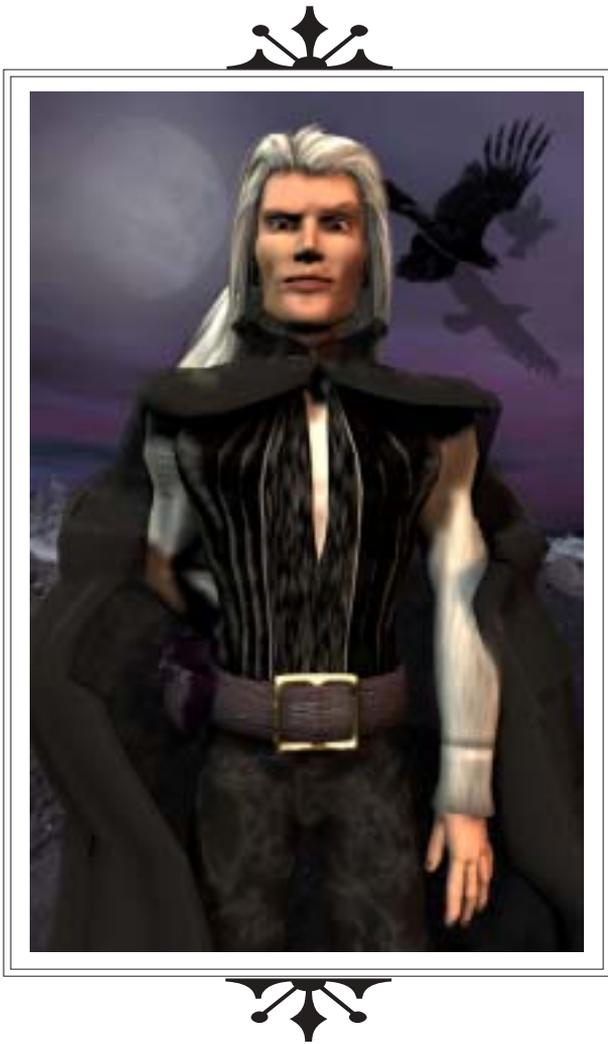
The next day, scribed in a masculine and deliberate hand:
Whether it throws hail or sand,
Whether it cools the blistered skin,
The wind is only this:
What it is.

Then added in a feminine, yet quick and haughty hand:
*None know from whence it comes,
nor know where it would go;
nor know what it might seek,
nor know why it doth blow...*

*but takes a wretched fool with eyes unseeing
to consider wind as **only** being.*

Days later, scribed in a careful deliberate hand:
I sense it day and night
The cry across the spires,
The sound of joy and laughter,
The smell of forlorn pyres;

And when I close my eyes
I hear the echo across the domes,
The leaves upon the wind:
...something wicked this way comes.



Morte — by Heather Hart

Yet in seeing or blind bliss;
The wind remains *what it is*.

Then added in a graceful, unhesitant hand:

*Tis said the ancient mariners
had but for each a name;
and wisdom deep to see within:
Not all winds blow the same.*

*But pray, maintain your folly dark
and to your heart implore;
when your images are scattered —
tis the wind and nothing more.*

**Later that day, after a sullen wind, scribed in a careful
deliberate hand:**

Yet names are naught but fallen leaves
Dead and whisked away
And like those leaves, all wisdom
Is made to fade to grey;

For winds respect no folly
Which all lore may turn fro;
When eaten by cold fire
They fanned not long ago.

Days later, in the same hand:

On and on the fire burns,
Flings ash and smoke wide in the winds;
Stands a lone onyx tower
Alit in flames, a dirge it sings,
And grins, and grins, and grins...

Then added in a feminine and methodical hand:

*Yet if winds lie still and silent
Uncertain where to blow,
dark and barely breathing
waiting wild to flow;*



Simply Vivienne — Gaby Bernier

*And leaves that pale to grey
With the frail names of men,
relent this serenade to fate
Are we not where we began?*

*So if whispered in your ear
You find these answers that you seek
are neither there nor here:
Is it then the wind that speaks?*

*For if the voice beyond your hearing
Mistaken for the wind,
Is the soul that seeks your own:
Then it need never blow again.*

*Sweet tragedy of fate: We're only tamed
when ravaged by these winds that feed our flame.*

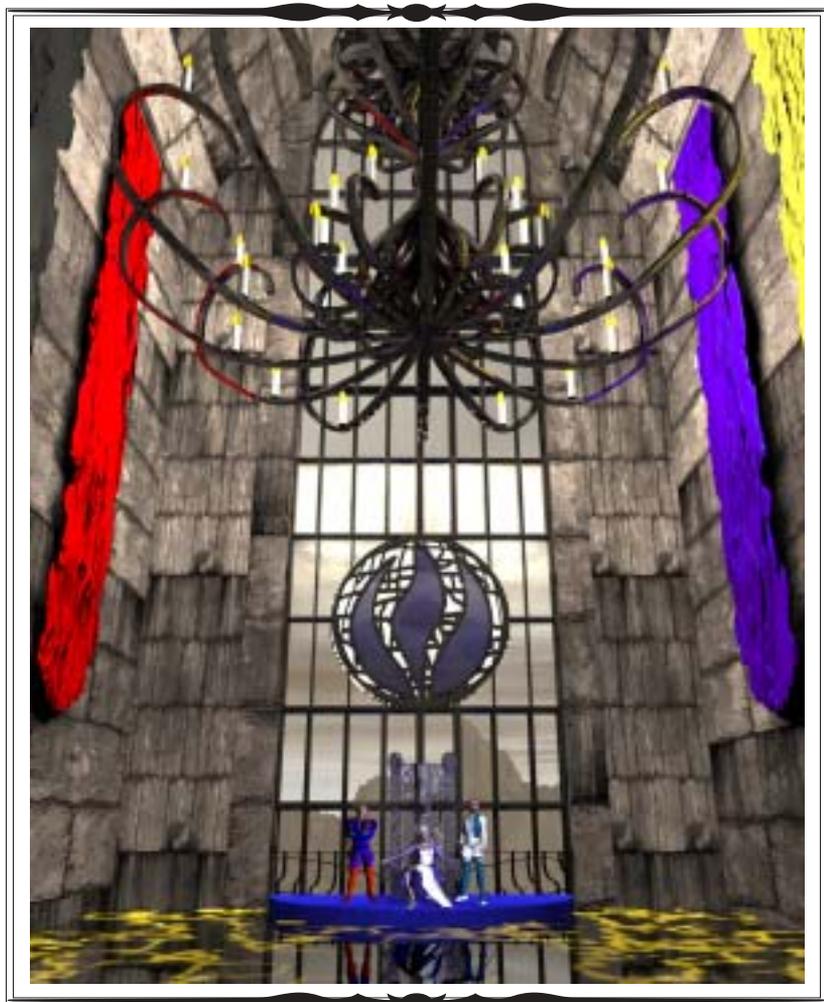
The next day, scribed in a slow and deliberate hand:

So much I can reveal
-if with answers I be tasked-
That for every 'why?'
A 'why not' can be asked

Take that however as you may
My face must stay obscured ;
Veiled by the smoke and ash
Which winds for me procured.

Scribe and Poet, Wise Man-Fool
Noted is your scripture;
Yet in closing, I must wonder
Do you see the picture?

For as the hawk circles the skies;
Mirrored, on the ground the serpent writhes



The Royal Court — by Heather Hart



Then added, in a feminine and lingering hand:

*This ironic wind which upon us has blown
and to all souls that has made itself known;
brings some strange symbioses; dark and yet freeing
I now could consider the wind as just being...*

The last winds blew, and this final post appeared in a masculine hand:

Tempted to answer with three simple words
Yet bowing to the rhyme,
I stand here, smiling, still, and still
With every passing chime;

And while I lack the skill and art
To say what I do feel,
The one thing coming to my mind
Is that this wind is real.

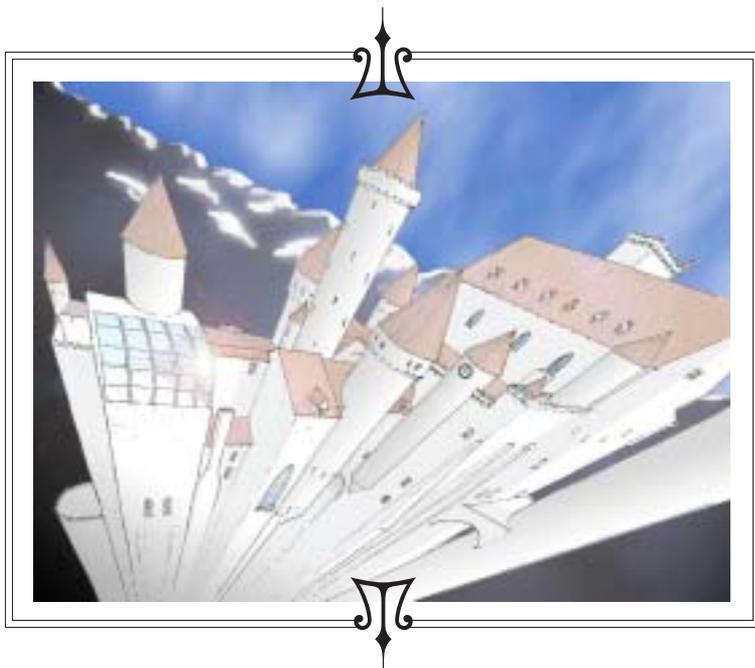
Fleeting like the risen smoke,
I close my words, for now,
Escape me like the wind they do
I leave you with this vow:

Though it only may be seeming;
and only what I see
The wind will always have a meaning
Now, for me.

And as if to answer, this followed in a gentle, steadier hand:

*Words which linger tasting of ash
Borne by the kiss of a flame;
Circuitous trail, the hawk now descends
Beneath this light with no name.*

*Serpent arise, dark mirror of soul,
Breathe your beauty and life into being;
Wretched or not, I surrender to that
which has given the wind its true meaning. ◻*

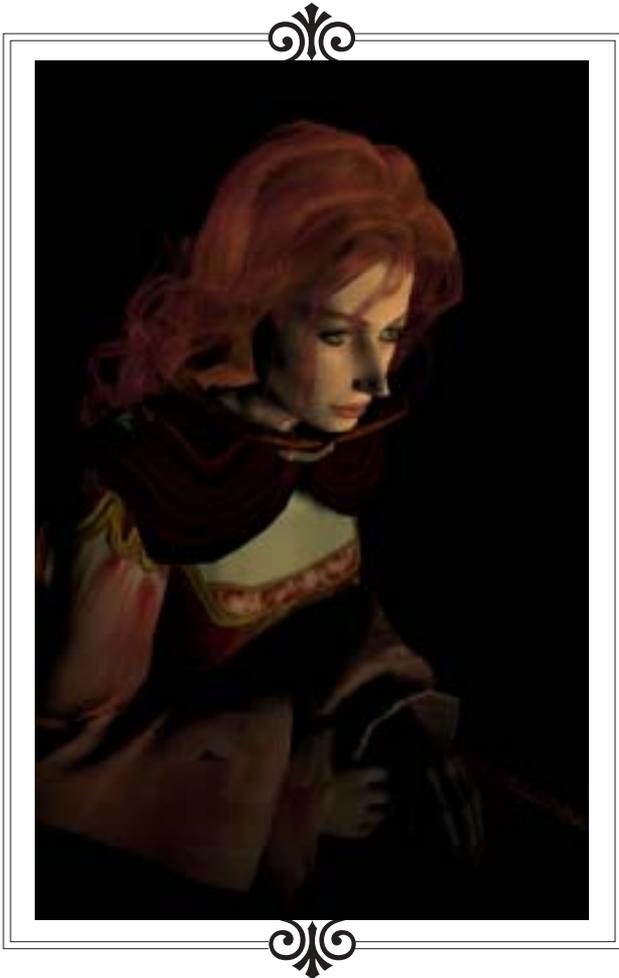


Marrach in the Afternoon — by Michael Blum

The Ghosts' Gavotte

She's beating out a silent measure
And little ghosts dance for her pleasure,
She gives them pretty clothes to wear,
Asks them to dance, if they would dare,
Her favour is her greatest treasure,
So ghosts are dancing for her pleasure,
See the world the ghosts have made,
Where honours' home is on a blade,
Beating out metallic measure,
But law decides who keeps the treasure,
Two baileys high, two dungeons low,
A third for each? She may know.
And in her heart, she keeps her treasure,
Beating out a silent measure,
See them laugh and weep and plot,
And seem to be what they are not,
The ghosts who dance for just her pleasure,
Hoping for a taste of treasure,
When the dance is finally done,
Is there a prize to be won?
Only this, my lady's pleasure,
And this poor ghost steps to her measure

by Pete Darby



Chorus — by Heather Hart

Imagine Marrach

Imagine a woman, which has lost her past
Imagine her memory, that wasn't there to last
Imagine her life stripped from her soul
Imagine that death has taken its toll

Imagine a man, who knows himself not.
Imagine his past, the fights that he fought
Imagine death's grasp almost succeeding,
Imagine then his memory receding.

Imagine a palace, forever in winter's embrace,
Imagine numerous such men and women in that place,
Imagine their days, ideas, the things they do,
And maybe you can imagine castle Marrach too

by Taco Schenkhuizen



Snowblind

You gave me eyes
But only snow to see

You gave me choice
But only myself to be

You gave me legs
But no path to tread

You gave me life
And yet I am dead

by Ulrich Lang



The Ballad of the Winter Ball

by Punzel [Kimberly Appelcline]

It was a cold December night,
And people gathered, all,
In eastern courtyard, near the arch...
Dressed for the Winter Ball.

The seras wore long formal gowns
Of glittering jewel-like hues,
And beautiful bright necklaces,
Soft slippers for their shoes.

The sers were all in doublets gay
And rainbow shades of hose,
Though some did seem to blush quite oft
To wear such dazzling clothes.

Sir Launfaul, the Lord Chamberlain,
Arrived with formal stride
To ope at last the green bronze arch
And let the guests inside.

So many rooms! So many sights!
How to absorb them all?
The floors of polished ebony!
The chandeliers so tall!

The cake made of cerulean squares!
The leaping stag of stone!
The wintry silent garden where
Such ancient trees are grown!

The brilliant starlight shining down
From sky so deeply blue!
And, finally, the Ballroom, where
There's even more to view...

The walls, with silk of icy blue!
The mirrors in gold frames!
And Haerk the Herald, at the door,
Announcing new guests' names.

Musicians played their merry tunes
On instruments of cheer,
And candles glittered all about
So everything was clear.

Lord Sicard, Champion to the Queen,
Swept Lady Amoret
Across the dance floor in a waltz
And graceful pirouette.

The merry Jester Dagonet
His jester's stick did shake
And joked of cookies made in shapes
And dangerous bundt cake.

The lovely Miriela, kind,
A handmaid to the Queen.
The prideful Lady Berthe, clad
In gown of hunter green.

Sirs Alrik, Cyril, Gaudis, all
Respected knights and true.
His Highness the Prince Bertram
With his hair of auburn hue.

So many others! Ladies! Lords!
I list not every name ...
But many much-respected folk
Did lend the evening fame.

But how can all of this compare
To She who entered then ...
When first we saw Her Majesty,
Beloved Queen Vivienne?

She entered as if trailed by stars,
Pale like the winter moon,
And suddenly a silence reigned ...
Musicians stopped their tune.

So tranquilly She walked the room
Up to Her marble throne.
Sir Boreas was by Her side ...
So brilliantly they shone!

Then lovingly She spoke to us.
Her voice was calm and clear.
She told us of Her care for us,
That each of us is dear.

‘There is a greater purpose to
Your presence here,’ quoth She.
And it will be important when
We learn what it may be.

The role that destin plots for us,
She told us in that hall,
Shall bring both succor and release
Somehow to one and all.

‘We cherish each of you,’ She said,
‘... Ourselves at your avail.’
And peacefully She smiled at us,
So noble, lovely, pale.

Then gifts were offered, honors too,
A knighthood challenge set ...
At last there came a moment which
I know I’ll ne’er forget.

When formal speeches had been spoke,
She held the crowd in thrall.
She clasped Her hands together, said,
'There's magic in us all.'

A faint light glimmered 'tween Her hands,
Raised up above Her head,
And then a graceful gesture showed
The truth of what She said.

A sudden silence, so complete
Fell soft upon the night ...
A musical vibrating sound,
Then white and brilliant light.

The mirrors hanging on the walls
Reflected not our eyes ...
No more we saw the stately hall,
But starry midnight skies.

And then Her Majesty the Queen
Did join us on the floor
To dance with Her Sir Boreas ...
More people danced, then more!

Soon all did dance among the stars
Her Majesty had made,
And though the Ball is ended now,
Its memory will not fade.

For how could one forget a night
So famous? Such an e'en!
We danced amid the stars thanks to
Her Majesty Our Queen.





Lament of Remembrance for Love and Honor

(The Sad Ballad of Morte and Martel)

by Lisbeth Gessamen

Twas on the outer terrace cold
Amidst the fog and ice,
We gathered round to witness
The loss of paradise.

Viola dressed in black brocade
Sadly scanned each face
then bravely lifted up her head
determined in her grace.

Twas for her this duel began
though in her, was no blame;
the gentle dove of poetry
whose love each man would claim.

The poet Noddi spoke a verse
To bid his last adieus;
For no one knew the outcome
Of who would win or lose.

The seconds were requested
As Philo passed the swords;
A moment passed to ponder
Honor's last rewards.

And when no reconciliation
Within them could be found,
Morte gazed in one direction
while Martel stood his ground

Morte's silver hair danced in the winds
As he stated forth in pause,
He offered for apology
He would recant the cause.

Martel's dark eyes glinted gold
The longsword he did wield,
He offered thus to stop the duel
If Morte agreed to yield.



But neither would relent their cause
And raised their swords to fight;
Metal cut through icy air
on that cursed night.

Martel was the first to wound:
Morte's shoulder wept in red
But still, would not relent his cause;
Eyes looked on in dread

Charmiam held Viola
Who paled at the men;
But stood there in her quiet grace
And waited for its end.

Morte coldly stared into Martel
And parried past his stead;
Screamed the sword into his leg:
"Rest comes when you're dead!"

Wounded, they continued on
But then events bore strange;
Morte began to stumble round
Something seemed to change.

The swords with fire rang and clashed
And in the dark confusion;
Tears divided Morte's sight
Into terrible illusion.

For suddenly he lunged his blade
Towards Viola sweet, in err;
Mistaking her for his foe,
He blazed with sudden terror.

Viola stumbled in disbelief
Martel gazed helplessly,
Then moved his chest into the sword
Of Morte, for all to see.

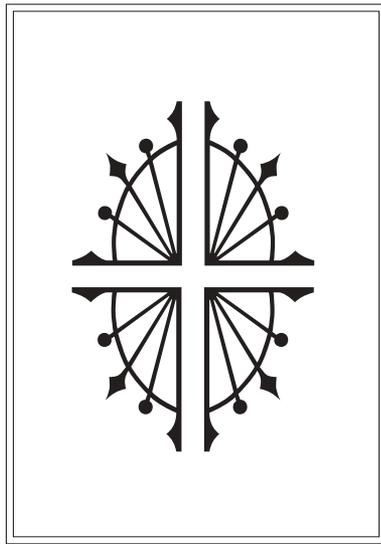
But Martel was not to go alone
For in that frantic quest;
Of blade that cleaved through icy wind
Straight into Martel's chest;

It found purchase in Viola, sweet
And pierced her gentle arm
All 'round gasped in horror
And cried out in alarm.

Martel, in a pool of blood
Morte, drawing his last breath
Viola collapsing silently
their souls linked unto death.

And then, but for a moment
as many later said;
It seemed as though a final glow
filled the air, then fled;

Released that night to spirit
where one was sure to be;
Fate claimed instead love's triad
And drew not one, but three. ❏



The Song of the Shadow

by Punzel [Kimberly Appelcline]

A shadow walks the castle halls
Among the maids and men,
And what the shadow wants of us
The people do not ken.

The shadow searches for its home.
The shadow looks for rest.
The shadow watches for true love.
The shadow is a test.

The shadow holds our memories.
The shadow lives in fire.
The shadow's made of people's dreams.
The shadow is our sire.
The shadow is a witch's fetch.
The shadow's made of hate.
The shadow's smile means icy death.
The shadow knows our fate.

The shadow curses those who grasp.
The shadow's in our head.
The shadow can take many forms.
The shadow's of the dead.

The shadow is a castle guest
Whose birth did not go right.
The shadow watches o'er our rest
In every deepest night.

But all the stories that we tell
About the shadow here
Are only tales around the fire
To help allay our fear.

For no one knows the shadow true.
No one of us can ken
Just why the shadow walks the halls,
or how or where or when.

So watch you, wandering in the night.
Keep near a friend who's true.
The shadow is a mystery.
It's search may be for you.



∞ *Short Story* ∞

Concentric Lights and Shadows

by Ulrick Lang

What passes for night in this place of eternally gray skies has fallen, but the castle cannot find rest. Neither can I. Not anymore. Not ever again, it seems.

Standing up here on the tower, the winds tearing at my garb and hair, cutting into my face with blades of ice, I find solace and shelter. Distance from the people I was brought to be with. People from all walks of life. Beggars and nobles and priests, brutes and hedonists and scholars. But none quite like me. Not anymore. Not after what I have become.



I kiss the winds a final time. Soon... oh so very soon...

I open my eyes and look into the face of the old man. I understand not what and why. Did I fall sick? That must be it, but I neither know the Medicus nor his Apprentice. Weary, I close my eyes.

When I open them again, I once again see the Apprentice's faith. A beautiful young maiden. More than that. Her whole being exudes purity, innocence, humility. A creature beyond this world, an Angel.

Have I died then? It's doubtful. Dead men should not feel pain, but I do. My whole body aches, but the sensation is distant, and what I notice of it I shrug off. All I see is her face.

She brings me to a room and leaves me there, vanishing before I can thank her for anything. It has all the amenities I could ask for, but it's no room of my home. Then it hits me. I have no idea what my home would look like. Faintly, I remember the old man telling me my name - Armander- and that is about all I know for sure. Hazily, a few other things flow into my mind, but none of them discernible or overly expressive.

I will have to worry about that another time. For now, I will need to find something to wear rather than the rags my body is wrapped in now... and something to eat and drink, as I feel I have not eaten in years.

And a sword. I feel helpless without steel by my side.

As they tore at me before, they embrace me now.



A week may have passed, maybe even more. I am in a place I have never been before. A castle of the dead, built of ice and bones and dreams. Almost everyone here has died in some faraway place and been brought here. What for? Nobody knows, and I care not much.

Time flies by. As my clothing gets better and I find a place in this castle, taking up the sword once again, at least during practice sessions, my memory returns, too. I wonder if that is behind me. I wonder if this existence, this place and time, this life really offers a new beginning for everyone?

I have not seen the maiden who saw me to my room again, but I know her name: Lith. A name like an otherworldly wind playing a chime. I am still young-looking, despite my three dozen years, courteous, refined. Women flutter around me, but I have no eye for them, not for a single one.



As their intensity picks up, it feels as if I can see clearly for the first time.



I watch a duel. The combattants are fierce, their hate betraying the love that once was between them. They will fight until one yields, and I know none will. They will kill each other, as part of the victor will die with the defeated.

What must happen does happen, and then she comes to pick up the body of the fallen. She glides in through the door, fleeting as a shadow, fragile and beautiful as a snowflake. A hushed word or two escape her mouth, as humbly luminescent as her whole presence. Few precious heartbeats later, she is gone and all I can look at is the door.

But now I know what I must do. I have purpose, and a forgotten side that knows just what to do. I become what I tried to put at rest. There is no rest, not for the wicked.



The sun breaks through the clouds, for the first time in my months here.



There is a small circular room with a beautiful window in its wall. It's coveted, but largely undisturbed when the door is closed. Everybody is afraid to rouse a couple from their amorous pursuits. My own pursuit tonight is even more noble.

I wrap the scarf around my hand and smash the glass. As expected, most of the shards fall down onto the hidden courtyard near the smithy below. A quick look at the room's cushions shows that no acceptable shards have fallen on the seats inside. In my anxiety, I do not even notice having cut myself as I slink out of the door and close it to evoke the illusion of the room being occupied for long enough.

As if my prayers had been heard, I find a whole shard that fits my purposes. It's long, almost triangular in shape, with a sharp edge. It's all I need for now. Strips of the blood-stained scarf become a handle for my tool which immediately finds a safe place in my belt pouch while I dispose of the leftover strips of cloth by throwing them over the parapets.



Is the sun why all seems so lucid? Or is it something else?



Now to go to work. I must assume that well-known people present danger. They may be of rank, armed, or at least possessing a duckcall to alert Winter Watch and Royal Guard. No, I must be cautious with the selection of my targets.

I did not think it would be easy, but this time, it is. He is an old man whom I pass on an open balcony above the courtyard. After a polite gesture and after he has turned his back on me, I reach for my instrument. I expect my fingers to shake, but they do not.

I am back in my memories. I have come full circle. Then, I had killed out of love for my people. Now, I will kill out of love for Lith.

And so, everything beyond feeling the knife's grip in my hand becomes a blur. Blood vessel to throat to blood vessel. He does not even find the air to say a last word, and before a single drop of his blood hits the floor, I fling him over the balcony's railing and onto the courtyard.

Swift steps bring me a floor lower, to another balcony passage, where under a painted Queen's watchful eye, I see my love come and go.

For now, my hunger is stilled.

For now.



I cannot help but smile at the thought that it is not the sun.



But how would she ever know? Simply falling back on my old ways will never do. There has to be a readily apparent pattern that is on the other hand vague enough not to link the deaths to me.

Again, fate comes to my help. The head of the Garden Society announces that a rare flower has bloomed, a white rose. She willingly offers them to the true lovers of the castle. This time, I think, I will get what I want legally. Of course, I was wrong. 'Tis sweet of me to think of sera Lith, but she is just a girl.

They know her not as I do. No one does.

Once again I resort to the shadows which have become my second home by now. Just as in my memories, I travel by night, the soles of my boots wrapped in cloth to not make a sound when I step across the cold stone.

The lock is too complicated for the hairpin I stole from the sera that fell asleep in my arms. I taint my body, but my cause is righteous and my ends must justify my means. I do it all for you, Lith. I slink off to see if anybody is in the rooms nearby, then violently kick in the door to their little garden room.

I cut off a hand full of the white roses and vanish. The roses take their toll. Their thorns bury in my flesh, blood flows, reminds me of the day I shattered the window. I bleed for my sins. I bleed for her.

Carefully removing the crimson stains of my martyrrium, I retreat to my room to ponder my next steps.



But is the sun not wearing her face today?



I never knew their names, but I remember all their faces. Man and woman, old and young. They all die swift. None ever see it coming, and I do not get sloppy. As the first time, my cuts are true.

But these days, I take the time to place a rose upon their bodies. In between their lips, between folded hands, sometimes half tucked away in their garments. Once again however, the frail creatures I prey upon for her glory manage to foil my plans.

Whether another finds the corpse and takes the flower for their own base vanity, whether it falls off the dead when she lifts them onto the gurney, somehow, she never finds my little gifts. And I wonder whether she sees them at all.

My desparation grows, slowly, but steadily.

Beyond all that, the law is investigating the killings. Not that anybody would trust the Winter Watch to find their own feet, much less a murderer, but I find my freedom of movement limited for these reasons.

I come and I go like the shadow that I have become. I strike in silence and with determination, then I leave my present and retreat. Nobody will ever know it was me.

Nobody but Lith.



Radiant, she appears in the sky above me, and... she smiles at me.



It had to happen, even though I never expected it to.

I was never spotted while doing my bloody work, my holy deeds of the war for Lith's heart. But someone saw me with one of the roses. I am sure they have asked

Roxanne by now, and found out that I was turned away when I asked.

Things look bleak, but where there is love, there is hope. No way leads out of the castle, and no hiding place will be forever. I dodged through secret passages, hid in niches, ate spoiled food uncaring people dropped.

I tire of this hunt.

I tire of what I have become.

But I never tire of dreaming of her. I never tire of the image of her face, burned into my memory like a brand. The feeling of her being near drowns out all the pain and weariness of my body.

Like on the day I glanced her first.



Her face enveloped by a coronal halo, she is an angel of mercy.



The shard of glass in my hand shows me what I care not to see. Between stains of blood and miniscule scratches, my face looks distorted.

A fell mask of a man that once was.

The man I see now, mocking my being from his glassy prison is who I have become. Tainted and bloodstained and scarred. I had to become him in order to move ahead, to march on my dream and conquer it finally.

Or so I had hoped.

The glass kiss the cold stone and as it shatters, so shatter my hopes, and my dreams, and my expectations. All alone I stand here, among the cold comfort of the winds, and know...



I must be dreaming, hallucinating.



I cannot go back to what I was. I cannot go ahead to become what I would be. I cannot even continue on the dark path I slid along for the last weeks... moons even? When did I stop being me and became him? Or have I never been anybody else? Was I just an actor who was unfit of his role and reverted to his own being when he could not deal with his life in any other way?

So many questions, but no time. Not anymore. I am, at least, unarmed, and fully helpless. I am, at least, unable to choose anymore.

Calmly, I turn to face manifest destiny.

The direction is clear, it had been all along, since the day I broke the window in the cupola room. I never tried to kill anybody else, for what satisfaction is in the few heartbeats I could marvel at her ephemeral beauty?



She is with me now, and will be forever. It's true.



Lith, I am coming, coming into your arms.

I kiss the winds a final time. Soon... oh so very soon. As they tore at me before, they embrace me now. As if they wanted to hold me, but after my last step, the last one I could do towards her, there will be no other steps, and I care not for their comfort. Too little, too late.

Pain sweeps over me as my body finally finds the cold stone of the courtyard. I hear my ribs snapping and feel them tearing into my insides, just as almost every other bone in my body gives in to the force of the impact.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear a woman screaming, crying, sobbing, men cursing, shadows gather around me, but all I see is the sky.

Clutching the last white rose tightly in my hand is an afterthought, and yet I pick out the sensation of its thorns biting my skin in final defiance above all the other impressions.

I care not for the shadows, I only see the clear sky, clearer than on any other day I have known, and then the miracle happens: The clouds part and reveal the sun, for the first time since I was brought into this world.

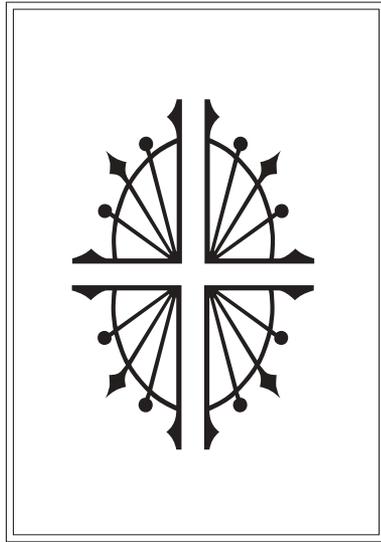
I care not for the words, they are as the murmuring of a stream to my ears. But then I hear the soft, hushed voice say "Excuse me" and I know these are my last moments in this life.

The her face moves between the sun and my eyes, its rais enveloping her in a bright halo... and once again, I am the only one who sees her beauty.



Swift as a shadow, the lithe female figure slinks from the corner of the courtyard where she had stood all along. Unseen, she picks up the rose Armander had dropped before Lith put him on her gurney. A hair needle for a rose signifying such love as hers for him was not the worst of trades.

As she slides back into her unobtrusive corner, she cannot help but smile at the thought that soon, they will be together again....



Throughout all of our fables and legends, there are certain characteristics that are found in a hero. Be it bravery, intelligence, dedication, courage, skill or sacrifice, a hero can always be seen for what they are. However, these qualities are not usually seen till AFTER the fact, and even then the source can be surprising...

The (Not-so) Usual Dungeon Crawl

by Michael Ramirez

“You know,” Prince Bertram mused, “if this happened anywhere else it could actually be quite humorous.”

Chamberlain Launfal quickly rose and faced the prince. “Begging your pardon, your highness, but I see nothing funny about what has happened these past few weeks.”

“Well think about it,” Bertram replied with a smirk on his face, “the courier known for being the best equipped with all manner of tools dying for lack of a mouse trap.”

“I don’t think a mousetrap would have prevented this, milord.” Diana said as she stood from the messenger’s remains, frowning at the blood that had stained her dress. The corpse, or what was left of it, consisted of a few scattered limbs and internal organs, all showing signs of being gnawed on by some sort of animal that most would never believe was a rat, had this not been the eighth victim in the last three weeks.

Diana sighed heavily and continued. “This one is like the others, eaten alive.

What’s worse, rats are getting more and more aggressive. I’ve already treated thirty people for rat bites of various severity over the past three days. I shan’t mention what happened to those people who were attacked in the privy...”

Bertram just smirked again. “Perhaps they are unhappy because all of you in the Outer bailey have been hogging the cheese. Why don’t you just have all the mouse holes plugged up or set the cats loose on them?”

“We’ve tried that, to no avail.” Launfal said. “Whenever we seal a hole or crack, two more pop up, as for the cats...”

“Let’s just say it is lucky they were taught to build stretchers so long ago.” Diana said softly. “I’m still wondering where in the world they learned how to tie a tourniquet.”

“Well they ARE magical my dear.” the prince answered smilingly. “Perhaps if we had the necromancer implant some of our guest’s minds into our feline friends, they might perform better.”

“Your highness please, this is serious!” Launfal replied, just barely retaining his contempt for the young prince, “The newly awakened are growing more and more panicked. Many of them are refusing to come out

of their rooms. Those that do are getting angrier and angrier at the apparent lack of action on this matter. We could have a riot at any time!”

“That is why we are going to solve this problem before it comes to that,” said a poised and confident looking woman as she walked into the scene of the latest attack.

“Ah, Serista.” Launfal said as he turned to face the Queen’s sorceress. “I hope you’ve finally come up with a way to get rid of these despicable vermin.”

“That’s LADY Serista to you, Chamberlain,” Serista replied coldly, glancing disgustedly at Launfal’s bulk, “And yes, I have developed a means by which these rats may be defeated.”

“Maybe she plans to use that icy glare of hers to freeze the rats cold.” Bertram whispered jokingly to Diana, who had to use all of her willpower not to laugh. “They don’t call her the Ice Witch for nothing.”

Though she heard every word, Serista just continued, thinking in the back of her mind what kind of small woodland creature she would have the most fun turning the prince into. “In any event, we will need some more brave souls in order for my plan to work.”

“That might be a problem.” Launfal said contemplatively, stroking his chin, “Most of our brave souls are either still recovering from their wounds or back in the catacombs waiting to be resurrected again. Still, I am having a meeting with all of those who have been here for a decent while. Perhaps those that have lived in this castle for a number of moons might be more willing to fight for it.”

“The question should really be,” Serista mused, “will they be willing to die for it...”



The lecture hall was abuzz with urgent conversation, as Newly Awakened from a few months to over a year old filled the benches and the surrounding walls, cramming into the room until almost no one could move more than a few inches without having to step over or around someone. Just about all the talk focused on the terror the rats were causing, and who amongst them would stand up to fight them.

“But why noooooot?” Umichan whined softly, feeling frustrated that her current convincing had not done as well as she hoped.

“Because I don’t want you getting hurt.” Lobo replied, staring resolutely at Umichan’s watery amber eyes. “If you got hurt, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I can make it worth your while...” cooed Umichan softly as she decided to try a new approach, twirling her blue-black hair around her finger innocently while batting her eyelashes. “You KNOW how well I am at making things worth your while.”

Lobo just shook his head. “Uh-uh, not this time. You’re not prepared for something like this. I’ve fought monsters before. All you’ve done is dueling practices and tournaments.”

“Hey, that’s not true and you know it.” Umichan frowned. “I fought some just last month!”

“Que?” Lobo asked, wondering what she was talking about, then realizing her meaning with a heavy sigh. “Umi...those were POTATOES.”

“Hey, they were walking around and had swords...they count as monsters.”

“Umi, they ran for the hills as soon as we brought out the soured cream and chives! It’s not like they were orcs or anything. Besides, those things have never killed anyone. These rats, or whatever they are, are ripping people apart left and right.”

“Don’t you think I’ve realized that,” Umichan said, sighing. “Lobo, I’m the leader of the Battle Guild. I’m supposed to be brave, someone to look up to. Both the Watch and Duelists have gotten their heads handed to them, literally. Only the Royal Guard and us are left, and you know the guards won’t bother to help us out here. So don’t you see, I have to do this.”

Lobo just looked away. He knew what she said was true, he just didn’t want to admit it. Luckily he was interrupted before he had to.

“Alright everyone, settle down,” Chamberlain Launfal said as he walked into the room, followed by the sorceress Serista. After a minute of climbing over and around all the people in his way, he finally reached the podium. “Now then, as you all are aware, the rat problem has gotten worse and worse. We have tried numerous ways to end this vile threat, but so far nothing has worked. To be frank, I’ve pretty much run out of ideas.”

“That’s not a big surprise,” came a muffled reply from the back, followed by a few nervous laughs.

“Very funny Retri, if I may continue? Anyway, the good Lady Serista has come up with a plan I have every confidence that will work. Lady Serista, if you will,” Launfal said as he carefully stepped away from the podium, watching the crowd for any more aspiring jesters.

“Thank you Chamberlain,” Serista said, as she approached the podium, not really bothering to watch her step over people’s feet. “As some of you may know, I have been working towards a magical solution to our problem. This morning I believe I have discovered it.”

“Ah, you’re turning them into newts then?” came another comical reply.

Serista didn’t reply, but noted who the jokester was for retribution later. “As I was saying,” as she pulled a large pouch from her girdle and opened it, “I have developed a way to help stop this menace. These pendants have the ability, when activated, to protect the wearer from any harm that may befall them, by any means.” With that she pulled out one of the pendants for all to see.

The pendant was in the shape of a silver shield on a golden chain. The shield was delicately carved with what appeared to be magic runes surrounding a deep blue crystal, which seemed to glow with energy. The whole crowd gazed with wonderment at the artifact.

“So, we just put those on, go down into the dungeons of the castle and clean out all the rats?” Umichan asked, hoping the solution to all their problems was simpler than they thought.

“Just how many of those do you have, and how long do they last?” Lobo quickly asked, knowing better than to be so hopeful so soon.

Serista just shook her head. “Unfortunately I cannot say how long they will last,” she replied. “I only had enough energy and resources to create five of them. And each of them only has one charge. I believe it is worth the risk of not knowing their exact duration to have as many as possible. Do not worry though, they will start to flash as the spell runs out, and emit a sound when you have ten seconds left. I am confident they’ll give you enough time to end the threat to the castle.”

“Rule number five of adventuring, never trust a magic item you don’t know everything about.” Lobo snorted.

“You do not trust my work?” Serista answered, glaring at Lobo.

“Let’s just say I had enough experience in my last life to know better than to take any mage fully at their word,” he replied curtly, folding his arms and staring defiantly at the royal sorceress.

Before Serista could reply, or worse yet cast a spell, Umi quickly jumped to attention. “Lord Chamberlain, I request the honor to lead a group of my Battlers into the dungeons and destroy the rats,” she said quickly.

“I appreciate the offer good Preceptor,” replied Launfal, hoping to move the subject to less hostile matters, “but the Winter Watch and the Duelists are very short on manpower. We need the Battle Guild members to help with the general policing of the outer bailey, not to mention fight off any excursions by the rats.”

“But what about the Royal guard and the knights?” Umi asked, worried that her chance to really see action in battle was slipping away.

“They are needed to protect the inner bailey. We’ve already started to have attacks there, and the queen herself spotted one of the larger beasts,” Launfal replied, and turned his attention to Lobo. “This is where I have hoped you would come in, good ser.”

“Que?” Lobo asked, raising his eyebrow.

“I have heard much about your stories of adventure in your past life. I feel at the moment you are among one of the most qualified people still healthy to lead such a mission as this one.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, just a moment there amigo...” Lobo objected, “If you think I’m going to go down there and try to fight those bloody things, then you must have had one of those cursed beers again.”

“What’s the matter?” Serista asked with a condescending smirk on her face, “Scared?”

“I don’t see you charging down there SERISTA. Besides, I’ve seen daggers that had shorter blades than the teeth on some of those bigger ones, not to mention the mouths they got. Hell, they’re still looking for Faer’s arm, not

to mention Harabec's...missing parts," Lobo retorted, not about to let anyone question his bravery.

"So?"

"So? So rule number three of adventuring; never fight anything that can bite off and eat your head without chewing unless you KNOW you can win, and right now victory sure as hell doesn't seem assured to me."

"Lady, ser, PLEASE! Fighting amongst ourselves solves nothing," Launfal pleaded. "Every minute we waste puts us all in greater danger. Ser Lobo, I understand your concerns, but to be honest there not many of us left with combat experience, whether in this life or any other. These are desperate times ser, we need all the help we can get. So please, will you venture forth and free us of these vermin?"

Lobo sighed. He didn't like being called a coward, even if it meant he'd have to risk his neck to prove it. "Ok, say I DID agree to go. Who would go with me?"

"I would!" Umi yelled, just a tad to excitedly.

"I kind of figured that," Lobo muttered, angry that he had just got sucked into letting Umi go into the dungeons. "Alright that's two, who else?"

"I guess I'll go too," came another female voice.

"Huh? Diana...uh, your not much of a fighter you know," Lobo asked, more then slightly confused.

"I know," Diana replied, "but considering what's happened the last couple trips down there, a healer would probably be more then helpful."

"You sure it isn't just because you used to have feelings for Lobo?" Umi asked flatly, her twitching eyebrow the only visible sign of the heinous acts of violence she had playing in her mind.

"No, no, of course not...I just want to help out," Diana replied innocently. "Granted I still care for him...but...its not like you think it is...really," she trailed off and blushed, realizing she might have just stuck her foot in her mouth.

"We're glad to have you Diana," Lobo said as he put his arm around Umi, half to reassure her, half to make sure she didn't act on any of the heinous acts he knew were going through her mind. "Ok, that's three. We have a fourth and fifth?"

"Oy, I'll go" came a voice from the back.

"Dwarf, that you? Where are you?" Lobo asked as he looked around the room, searching for his small friend.

"I'm right 'ere...oof...sorry...pardon me, excuse me," Dwarf muttered as he climbed around and under people till he was able to scamper up one of the benches and rose to his full height, which wasn't much more then three or four feet.

"No offense to the...ser, but I don't think you could be much help on this mission," Serista commented, wondering if the necromancer had had too much ale when he had raised the current applicant.

“But oy can help, really!” Dwarf pleaded. “De knights ‘ave been trainin’ me really well in how to use a rapier, and I made a suit of armor and everything. I really wants to prove meself, so please please please let me go...”

“Okay okay Dwarf, calm down, “Lobo said softly, “If you really have your heart set on risking your neck, I guess I cant stop you.” After Dwarf finished celebrating and sat down, Lobo glanced around the rest of the room. “Well, we have one more spot. Who here want’s to risk it all for fame and glory?”

The silence was deafening, until an unholy yell from down the hall made everyone in the room jump. The slamming of the door made everyone jump even higher, except for the poor soul who was standing in the way of the quickly opening door as it slammed him against the wall and left him an unconscious heap on the floor.

Launfal was the first to regain his voice and speak to the seemingly enraged dwarf. “Mas...Master Quilp, what ever is the matter?”

“What’s the matter? WHAT’S THE MATTER?!” Quilp bellowed, his entire stout frame shivering in anger. “I’ll TELL you what’s the matter! Those damned rats snuck into my workshop and STOLE my vintage ale! I’ve been aging that ale for almost four hundred years, and now it’s gone! What’s worse, they chewed through my favorite beer stein, see,” as he raised what appeared to have once been a delicately carved wooden mug, which now had numerous holes and gouges. “I swear the next time I see on of them rodents I’ll rip its heart out with my bare hands!”

All those in the room stared with amazement or fear at the enraged dwarf. All except Lobo, who just chuckled softly.

“What’s so funny, you blue haired freak?” Quilp snorted, staring at Lobo.

“Nothing much,” Lobo smirked, “just realized we’ve found our fifth party member.”



“Hey, how come he gets two swords and I only get one?” Umi whined, examining the two shining swords in Lobo’s hands as well as the bow on his back.

“Because I used to fight with two swords,” Lobo replied, examining the short sword in his left hand and the long sword in his right, both made of shining metal. “These the best you got Quilp, they seem a little off balance.”

“Your head will be off balance if you even try to insult my workman ship again you lilly-waist,” Quilp said annoyedly. “Those swords are some of my best work, made of some of the finest metals I have around here, not the junk I gave the duelists. They’ll cleave a man, or in this case a rat, in two like a knife through butter. Speaking of butter, where is that little butterball that calls himself a dwarf?”

Diana finished strapping on her herbal patches and bandage holders and turned to face the party. “Last time I saw him,” she said, “he was going

into the inner bailey with the knights to prepare. I swear I've never seen anyone with a bigger grin on their face than he had."

"Ha, I bet he won't last five minutes down there before he runs out crying for mama," Quilp snorted, hefting his large ax on his shoulder after fixing the final clasps on his thick platemail armor. "Speaking of lasting, you two think those leathers of yours are actually going to protect you down there?"

"We're not worried about getting hit, if that's what you're implying," said Umi, sheathing her longsword, "the leather is just to prevent any nicks and scratches."

"Oh, and why is that lass?"

"It's called dexterity Quilp," she smirked, "Maybe you should look it up, since it's obvious your as agile as a drunken ox."

"That's enough you two, save it for the rats," Lobo said commandingly. "We each have our own strengths and we need to work together if we're gonna survive. Now, make sure you have all your gear ready to go as soon as Dwarf shows up."

Umi and Quilp growled at each other for a second then curtly turned their backs on each other and went to opposite corners of the armor. Lobo was already figuring their chances of success, and at this point he wouldn't have bet on them even if he had a few drinks in him.

"'ello, I'm all ready," Dwarf crowed cheerily as he rode into the armory. The rest of the party turned to face him and froze in astonishment.

"Uh, Dwarf," Lobo asked, getting over the surprise, "what in the world is THAT?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean my armor? Oy made it myself from some of the left over bits of cookware and old bits of armor from the knights, and de lance I made from this..."

"No no no," said Lobo as he cut him off, "I mean...why are you riding that DOG?"

Dwarf glanced down at the huge black dog he had saddled and now rode upon. "Oh, well Bounder here is my loyal steed of course. Every knight has to 'ave a loyal steed ya know."

"But you're not a knight you bloody idiot!" Quilp snapped. "You having the gall to call yourself a dwarf is bad enough, but thinkin' you're a knight tears it! You must be the stupidest living being I've ever seen!"

"But...I've been called Dwarf all me life...and...and the knights said it would be ok if I went down there like this, and Bounder and me been practicing and and..." Dwarf replied softly, blushing and fighting back a tear.

"Master Quilp that's enough!" Diana snapped at Quilp and then gazed softly at Dwarf. "Dwarf, I think you look very heroic. I'm sure you'll do well in the dungeons."

"You...you think so?" Dwarf asked hopefully.

“Yea yea,” Lobo said flatly, brushing off the whole incident. “Come on, the sooner we get this started the sooner we finish it.”

As they approached the western courtyard, where they would enter the catacombs and dungeons below the castle thru a crack in the stable wall, they could see a large crowd had already formed.

“Hmm, maybe they’re all here to give us a warm sendoff.” Umi mused as they entered to courtyard to what they thought would be cheers, but sounded more like a funeral. Frowns filled most of the faces in the crowd, there were even a few tears. Some people in the crowd had hopeful smiles on, but they were tenuous at best. Everyone knew that many had already failed on this quest, and their confidence in the latest group of brave, or foolhardy depending on your point of view, was understandably weak.

“Come on everyone,” Lobo crowed, trying to lift the mood, “we’re not dead yet!”

“We all know that, ser Lobo,” Launfal said as he walked up to the party followed by Lady Serista, “but as you can understand, they are all nervous for your safety, considering our current track record regarding this problem. I assume you all have made out wills, just in case?”

“What part of ‘We’re not dead yet’ did you not understand?” Lobo snapped, “The last need we need is for anyone jinx this mission.”

“Besides,” Umi added, “it’s not like we have anything much of value here, so there’s no real point anyway.”

“They are correct, Chamberlain,” Serista added as she walked up and handed each of them a pendant, “we should have every confidence in their success, especially with my magic protecting them.”

“Yea, well these bloody things better work, mage,” Quilp snorted as he worked to put his pendant on, “or I’ll be SURE to haunt you till the day you die.”

Serista just glanced coldly at Quilp and moved back beside Launfal. “You now have everything you need to defeat the vermin, so sally forth and win victory for your...”

A large flash of light stopped Serista’s speech short. When everyone’s sight had returned to them, they saw a kindly looking old woman standing in the middle of the courtyard. Those who had been in the castle for a long while recognized her instantly.

“Hetchel,” Serista seethed, “what are you doing here you old witch?”

“My dear Seri,” Hetchel said smilingly, “is that anyway to talk to a compatriot of the magic arts? Anyway, I have something here for our brave adventurers.”

With that, she walked up and handed each of them what appeared to be a small clip. “I came up with these when I was working on Santo’s glasses to help our deaf guests. When you wear it on your ear, you will be able to hear anyone else who wears one for a few hundred meters through any material.”

As the party attached the clips to their ears, Hetchel pulled out what appeared to be three loaves of bread wrapped in a heavy cloth with a small

pin in each one. "Now these," Hetchel grinned, "are my pride and joy. Just put one next to something you wish to go away, pull the pin, and run like hell because after ten seconds what ever was next to this probably wont be there anymore," she finished with a grin.

"Uh, thanks," was the only reply Lobo could come up with as he carefully put the packages into his backpack. "Well then, we should be going, wish us luck."

The crowd waved to the party as they went through the doors to the stable and into the underground of the castle.

"We shall pray for your souls!" Launfal called out after them.

The whole party quickly poked their heads around the corner. "WE'RE NOT DEAD YET!", they yelled at the crowd and then disappeared again, off to face their destiny.



Unluckily for them, destiny wasn't expecting them.

"Admit it Quilp," Umi growled softly, "you have absolutely NO idea where we are."

"Quit your flapping, you whelp. I'm trying to think" Quilp responded, showing his frustration. In truth, Quilp had been trying to think for the past two bells without much luck. Granted, they had run into a few small rats and dispatched them easily, but they were nowhere closer to getting to the root of the problem.

"Look, Master Quilp, it's ok to admit when you've made a mistake, we all make them." Diana said softly as she leaned against a wall to take some of the weight off her feet.

"I tell ya I didn't make a mistake," Quilp snapped. "I know for certain we're heading in the right direction."

"Yea?" Lobo said smartly, "well I know for certain we've been walking in circles!"

Quilp rounded on Lobo and stared him in his brown eyes. "Oh?" he asked sarcastically, "and how do you know that?"

"Because THAT'S the spot where Bounder did his business half a bell ago!" Lobo snorted as he pointed at a dark stain on the wall next to them.

"See, told ya Bounder would be helpful!" Dwarf smiled cheerfully.

"SHUT UP DWARF!" both Quilp and Lobo said in unison, and then began to argue again.

Umi walked up next to Diana as Dwarf sulked in the corner. "So, has Lobo always been so hard headed?" ,Umi asked.

"Yep," Diana answered softly.

"But you're still in love him, aren't you Diana?"

"Yep," Diana answered quickly, and then blinked when she realized what she had just said.

“You...you’re planning on causing me great bodily harm now, aren’t you?” Diana’s asked sheepishly.

“Yep,” Umichan said flatly as she leaned backwardly, “but I’ll hold off till we get out of this pit, and I can take a nice, hot baAAAAAAA!” she yelled as she fell backwards when the part of the wall she leaned against gave way to reveal another room.

“Umichan! Are you alright?” Lobo called as he ran to the doorway, but stopped short as he saw what was inside, along with the others.

“Nani?”, Umi asked as he rubbed the bump on her head, “What are you all staring at?”

“I think we just found the queen’s secret loot stash,” Lobo proclaimed softly, staring at the huge piles and piles of gold, jewels, and other amazing treasures that filled the large room.

“I told you I knew where we were going,” Quilp said confidently. “Just taking the scenic route.”

“Uh, Master Quilp,” Dwarf asked softly, “but how can there be a scenic route in a dungeon?”

“Oh shut up and get in here boy,” Quilp snorted as the whole group entered the treasure chamber and examine what they found.

“Look at all this!” Diana said, holding up a long and thick gold chain, “I’ve never seen so many riches in one place all my life!”

“Oooh, I call dibs on the bracelets!” Umi called out, already shuffling through the piles.

“Careful there love, some of those larger ones look unstable,” Lobo called out as he did his own inventory of the riches the room held, but something that could have more value then anything there caught his eye. A bone, apparently human in origin, stuck out of one of the gold piles near Lobo’s feet. As he bent down to pick it up, he noticed that parts of it had been gnawed on.

“Wait a minute...”, he said softly to himself. “Quilp, do any of the things in here look familiar to you?”

Quilp poked his head out from behind a pile of what appeared to be silver dinnerware. “Now that you mention it,” he replied, “I think this mug used to be Lord Boreas”

As soon as Lobo heard Quilp’s reply, he drew his swords and began to scan the room for something unseen.

“What’s wrong love?”, Umi asked, wearing a crown two sizes to large, “You look like you saw a ghost.”

“Didn’t see a ghost Umi,” Lobo replied as he began to walk around the outside of the room, “but I smell a rat...”

It was then that the squeaking started, first in one corner of the room, then the other. It filled their ears and caused their hearts to pound. Then came the scratching on the walls, which grew louder and louder till it sounded like the whole room would collapse.

“Everyone to the center of the room, NOW!” Lobo called, rallying his small band before they came under attack.

And attacked they did. Out of unseen cracks and holes in the wall, from above and underneath treasure piles, from every which way, wave upon wave of rats swarmed the five adventures. Some were normal sized, while some were the size of average sized dogs, with teeth longer than a man’s hand. Despite how large or small they were, they all possessed the same blood red eyes, and all were fixed on the intruders who had violated their lair.

“CHARGE!” Quilp and Dwarf yelled in unison, much to the surprise of their compatriots, and rushed headlong into the enemy. Quilp lowered his shoulder and bowled over four rats, then took a large swing with his ax and decapitated two more, grinning all the while. Dwarf surprisingly had just as much luck on his charge, as the sight of a small person riding a big dog must have startled the rats. Dwarf successfully speared two of the larger rats with his homemade lance, then dropped it for his rapier and began to hack his way back to the group.

“Quilp, Dwarf, get back here!” Lobo cried as he desperately parried first one then another sharp bite from a giant rat before running it through with his short sword. “Dang it, where the heck are they all coming from?!”

“You’re asking me?” Umi called out, struggling with her own rat problem.

“Look at it this way,” Diana grunted, bashing a long fanged rat with her staff, “we don’t have to go looking for them anymore.”

“That’s not...very...comforting!”, Umi yelled as she gutted her opponent and charged after another.

For twenty minutes the battle raged, with two rats joining the fray for every one that fell. When all hope seemed lost however, the wave of rats suddenly stopped. The room was filled with an eerie silence, the panting of the victors, and the corpses of three score of the giant rodents.

“Is...is that all of them...” Umi panted softly.

“It better not be,” Quilp muttered, “I’m still mad.”

“Quilp, you’re ALWAYS mad,” Lobo retorted weakly as leaned against a pile of gold, but winced when he leaned on his arm.

“Oh, Lobo your hurt,” Diana said as she rushed softly to his side, “let me take care of it for you.”

“Oh Lobo, let me take care of it for you,” Umi muttered sarcastically. “You know I can do that too you know.”

“Sure you can dear,” Diana said flatly, “I’m just better at it.”

Umi narrowed her eyes, “Are you saying I can’t take care of my man?”

“No one’s saying that Umi,” said Diana, who tried and failed to keep the edge out of her voice. “And to be honest...I’m getting tired of your jealous accusations.”

Umi stared right into her eyes. “In that case, make me...”

As Umi and Diana continued to argue, Lobo noticed a shadow on the floor growing larger and larger. When he looked up, he noticed to his horror the cause.

“LOOK OUT!” he yelled as he pushed the two women out of the way of the collapsing gold pile just before the it came crashing down on him.

“LOBO!” both Umi and Diana cried after the gigantic pile of treasure had settled.

“No...it...it can't be,” stammered Dwarf as he and Quilp just stared at the golden hill that was now their friend's tomb. Or so they thought.

“Ok, that was interesting, though I would rather not do it again,” came Lobo's voice from what seemed to be out of nowhere.

“Lobo? LOBO! Where are you?” Umi desperately called.

“OWW! Umi, don't yell! I can hear you fine through that ear jewelry Hetchel gave us. Apparently that pendant Serista gave us actually works, not dig me OUT of here!”

t that the other members of the party began to dig frantically, but as soon as they made some progress, gold from the top of the hill would just fall down, covering their work.

“Firg! This is not good,” Lobo said nervously.

“What's wrong love?”

“The dang pendant is blinking! I don't have much time left, hurry up!”

“It's no use,” Quilp growled, “we won't reach him it time!”

“But we can't let him die!” Umi cried.

“Wait a minute,” Lobo said, “I have a plan, everyone get as far away from the pile as you can, find cover quick!”

“Wait, what are you going to do?”

“Just do it Umi, you have fifteen seconds!”

“Come on lass, I think I know what he's gonna do!” Quilp yelled as he grabbed the back of Umi's blouse and pulled her behind a large pile of silver with Dwarf and Diana. As the fifteenth second passed, a huge explosion rocked the room as the pile of gold erupted into ball of flame and concussive force, spewing coins and trinkets everywhere.

When the dust settled, a large hole filled the center of the room where the crushing pile of gold had stood.

“Lobo?” Umi asked worriedly, wondering what had happened.

“Ok...I've changed my mind...THAT was interesting,” Lobo said through the hole in the floor.

“Lobo, are you alright?” Umi cried worriedly, looking over the edge of the hole in the floor to the room below.

“Yea...I think so, though I'm gonna have a talk with Serista AND Hetchel when we get back,” Lobo replied as he looked around his new surroundings. “Uh, guys, you might want to get down here.”

As the rest of the group climbed down into the dark room, they saw what concerned Lobo so much. Hundreds of bones, both rat and human, filled the outer walls. The stench of death and decay filled the room.

“I think we’ve found the source of our problem,” Lobo commented softly.

“Indeed you have, infidel,” came an eerie voice from a dark corner of the room.

When they all turned to look at its source, they were shocked to see it came from a normal looking gray rat, normal that is for that fact that it floated in mid air instead of scampering along the ground.

“Wha...what are you?” Umi asked.

“I have no name,” replied the dark voice, “but you may call me the Lord Rat for now. I was hoping you would make it this far, though your point of entrance was...interesting.”

“So you’re the cause of all this trouble, a insignificant little rat,” Quilp snorted.

“Oh, I’m much more then an ordinary rodent, stumpy. For centuries I have lived beneath the hall of this castle, silently building my magical power and my army, waiting for the chance to strike all you insignificant pests from what should be MY castle. I have watched you all live and develop, suffer and lament about your losses, both physical and mental.”

“So all that stuff upstairs IS stolen from the castle,” Lobo said, “but why? What the heck is a rat supposed to do with gold?”

The rat just formed his mouth in what appeared to be a smirk. “Technically none, but it was ever so enjoyable watching as people wondered where their precious items went to, not to mention when they started to accuse each other of thievery. Alas, the time for amusement is over. Now that I have been discovered I can no longer wait to put my plans into motion. I will soon kill every last man, woman and child in Castle Marrach and claim my throne. That is, after I’ve taken care of the likes of you, muhahaha, HAHAAAAH..ACK!” the rat cried as it fell to the floor lifeless, an arrow sticking out of it’s midsection.

Quilp blinked. “What the hell just happened?”

Lobo chuckled as he lowered his bow and walked forward. “Adventuring rule number six,” he said, “If the evil mastermind starts to laugh maniacally, don’t waste the opportunity to put an arrow through his throat.”

“Well, that... that was really anti-climatic if you ask me,” Diana quipped.

“Clever trick, boy,” the errie voice said again, “but what will you do against the real thing?”

“Que?” Lobo asked as he turned around and ended up staring directly into the blood red eye of a monster more dragon then rat. “Oh firg,” he commented softly, “it’s going to be one of those days.”

“Big or small, I’m still going to gut you like a holiday turkey!” Quilp yelled as he, Umi and Diana charged the monster while activating their pendants.

The pendants flashed a brilliant blue for a second, then just as quickly faded.

They stopped in their tracks.

“Ok,” said Lobo softly, “this is REALLY gonna be one of those days.”

The rat dragon just chuckled. “I cast an anti-magic spell on this room as soon as you blasted through the ceiling. Those pendants are now just cheap trinkets, and unless you have anymore tricks, so are your pitiful lives.”

“Well...actually,” Lobo said nervously, “I do have one left...”

With that, he leapt backwards, and taking two canteens off his belt, flung them into the eyes of the Lord Rat, where they exploded in a splash of yellow liquid.

The rat dragon howled in pain as it rubbed at its eyes trying to remove the yellow liquid, which allowed rest of the party to retreat through a passage Dwarf had found while the others had made their ill fated charge.

“What in the world was that stuff?”, Dwarf asked, as he spurred his mount on faster and faster.

“Old adventuring trick for large monsters. Cat urine, and DON’T ask me how I got it! Right now, JUST RUN!”



Robert and Philo sat on the steps of the eastern courtyard, still tenderly nursing their injuries from their disastrous missions against the rat hoards.

“You know Philo,” Robert said softly, still holding his broken arm, “if I ever see another rat again, it will be too soon.”

“For once I agree with you,” Philo replied, wincing at the stitches that kept his leg in one piece, “at least its nice and quiet out here...”

“Yes it is quiet,” Serista added as she stepped out into the afternoon breeze, “and I’m quite confident our people will be finishing off our problems very shortly. We just need to sit and enjoy the fine calm air.”

The calm lasted all of seven seconds as a powerful explosion ripped through the floor of the courtyard, spewing dust and rock into the air.

“Oy, Hetchel sure doesn’t mess around when it comes to ‘er inventions,” Dwarf said as he poked his head out of the gaping hole that was once the center of the courtyard.

“You can compliment her later, Dwarf,” Lobo yelled as he helped the others out of the hole, “we have bigger things to worry about right now.”

“What is the meaning of this?”, Serista screeched, still coughing up dust. “Who is responsible?”

“Well to be honest, the thing behind us kind of forced our hand,” Diana admitted softly, brushing the dust from her dress.

“What thing? What are you babbling about?” Serista demanded, as just then a giant rat-like dragon reared up from inside the whole, shaking the ground as it pounded its forelegs against the cobblestones of the courtyard.

“Lord Rat, Lady Serista. Lady Serista, Lord Rat. Have fun!” Lobo yelled as he grabbed Umi by the arm and ran for the southern tower after his quick introduction. The monster looked around for those that had violated his lair, but seeing so many other victims, decided to just go about a policy of general death and destruction.

The upside to the parties entrance was that the explosion had aroused the curiosity of every guard, actually everyone in the castle, so that very quickly the beast was surrounded by soldiers. The downside was that they we’re not much more successful in fighting it then anyone would have thought, so all that was accomplished was that the monster was distracted for a few short minutes.

“Why did you have to bring that thing up here instead of defeating it down there?” Serista asked accusingly as she found the would-be heroes hiding behind some pieces of the shattered floor. “You used the pendants, didn’t you?”

“Aye, we used the bloody pendants,” Quilp snorted, “the lot of good they did. He countered them as soon as we activated them! We’re lucky to be alive right now.”

“That’s impossible,” Serista snorted, “Those pendants were fool-proof! Nothing can counter MY magic!”

“Well if it’s so good why don’t you just fry that thing?” Umi shot back.

Serista snarled, “I would if I could, but I used all of my power making those amulets. I can’t even light a candle for at least another few days.”

“Well that’s just great, we wont be alive nearly that long if we don’t think of something fast!” Lobo said quickly, glancing over at the battle that predictably going very badly for the good guys. All of a sudden an idea flashed in his mind. “I think I’ve got it,” he said as he opened his backpack, “I need you all to create a distraction while I...wait a minute,” Lobo stopped short as he frantically searched his backpack a second then third time. “Didn’t Hetchel give us three of those packages?” he asked confusedly.

“LORD RAT!” a voice cried out amongst the clamor of the fighting. “LORD RAT! I challenge you to battle one on one, or are you a coward?”

“Dwarf!” Diana gasped surprisedly.

“What the devil is the little midget doing?” Serista frowned.

“Small body, small mind I guess,” Quilp snorted.

Through the pall of smoke and mangled bodies, they saw Dwarf prodding his riding dog along, so that he stood directly in front of the beast.

The monster gave a sinister grin. “So, you think you can beat me your little lance, boy?”

“Oy am not a boy! I’m Dwarf and I’m gonna slay you with one blow!”

The rat lord laughed, and lowered his head as low as he could to look at Dwarf on equal footing. “Well then,” he snickered, “come and try...”

With that, Dwarf let out a whoop and spurred Bounder on, charging full speed at the beast's head. As it seemed his miniature lance would pierce his nose, the beast opened its mouth to swallow both rider and dog whole, but amazingly Dwarf leapt from his mouth and dived straight down the monster's throat while his dog safely changed direction and sped away.

"He...he was a brave guy," Umi said, a tear falling down her cheek, "a complete idiot, but brave none the less."

Before they had time to mourn the loss of their friend, however, a desperate plea from Dwarf filled their ears, and at that moment, Lobo realized where the last package went.

"EVERYONE DOWN!" He yelled to those still conscious in the courtyard as he pulled the heads of his compatriots down with his. The rat lord was at first confused at this, until he too finally understood what was happening all too late, as his midsection and torso burst into a brilliant ball of flame, with internal juices and organs splattering the walls of the courtyard. When those assembled finally worked up the nerve to pop their heads out of cover, they saw the remains of the rat dragon spewn all over the courtyard. They also saw Dwarf, dressed in his homemade armor, standing in the charred husk that used to be the creature's midsection with a smile as big as his face could possibly fit.

Lobo was the first to regain his senses as he rushed to Dwarf's side. "Dwarf," he asked, "how...but...how the hell did you survive that?"

Dwarf's grin got even wider, "Simple, I forgot to turn me pendant on when we fought him downstairs. I figured since we were out here now, it'd work right. Since I saw it kept you from being crushed and blown up, I thought it would protect me from getting eaten and blown up."

"So you grabbed the package from Lobo's backpack and got yourself eaten so you could blow him up from the inside, right?" Serista asked, amazed that someone like Dwarf could think up something so clever.

"Yep...great plan, wasn't it?" cheered Dwarf happily.

"Maybe," Lobo replied, "but what would you have done if the pendant didn't work?"

"Well...I...I was gonna...gonna," Dwarf stammered, as he realized the risked he had taken. His eyes quickly rolled up into the back of his head and he fainted dead away. Lobo sighed softly and laid Dwarf down among the charred ruins. "Well, at least it's all over with. We can get back to normal, whatever THAT is..."

"Not quite," Serista interrupted, "the Queen will want to know just why so much damage had to be done to her castle to get rid of the rats..." Serista paused, looked at the five who had saved the castle, and raised an eyebrow. "As well as why you all are wearing jewelry that was stolen from the royal collection twenty moons ago."

Lobo just held his head. "I was right before, this IS going to be one of those days..."



The Double Edge Sword of Oaths

by Soledad Bourdo

Living life to the fullest of passion's which reside within our Hearts. Tis the one of the things each duelist believes in. That and following one's Heart. In these two beliefs, all feel this beat within the blood that flows through their bodies the strongest. Aye, each of us feel many things, find solace in different ways, see differently that which surrounds us, or living the moment as befits the occasion presented to us. We are a passionate people. *Living* the moment as if there will be no other.

Many here in these cold walls would consider me veteran. Yet, my betrothed, Edouard, and his triad have many more days over me. Over 3000 days they have counted. Mine number just over 400 as of this recollection in which I scribe. And yet, a quarter of my own life here was not entirely my own living.

But I digress from the reason of writing this recollection. It has been a ten-day since the ritual, and still I am bewildered what has beset me these past few moons¹. Much of those memories are lost to me, while others, before the cloaks decadent touch upon my skin, are honed to a sharp edge and pierce an already deeply wounded Heart. And yet, each moment that returns are moments that have been lived by me, and are remembered with clarity.

It is hoped with this recollection as it is written, some small clue shall be revealed as to what truly happened to me, that the memories stolen from my mind shall once more be laid claimed too. It is a necessity to unweave the intimate web woven within my mind, or else all that I have worked towards shall be left within ruin, to include my own Integrity and Honor. And this shadowed web is extremely intimate, for the demon laid claim not only to my body, but also to my very soul. Whatever it was that held me in thrall, lived those moments with my body and without my consent for nie one hundred days.

Shattenman.

A singular word that brings involuntary shudders to my current weakened state. Man or demon, I know not for certain, but I know with certainty it is this very creature who has somehow manipulated my life into the existence I now live. I write of what has been lived since the moment I gave oath to a demon made man, with twisted, tainted Honor. I write now, of the one many know as Morte and the cloak that played whimsy upon his soul. I write with trepidation of the shattenman, who was released by broken trusts. But one must go back to that fateful meeting nearly 300 hundred days ago, to begin to see how this puzzle begins.

T'was a brisk morning when I first laid eyes upon him. He was standing menacingly in the hallway, threatening a ser I had come to think as a potential duelist. Sylandros was his name, and he had been battered severely. Seeing the tall man with the silky white hair loom over him, I was instantly placed myself in defense of ser Sylandros, in attempts to protect him as best as this small form could. I slid quickly between the two men, and grasped the hilt of my sword within its scabbard and summoned up the bravest of faces I could muster.

Morte, physically detailed, was a tall, sleek man of pale skin, with a thinning goatee, silky silver hair, which was long and braided. His piercing violet eyes and angular face left one noting this arched eyebrows, angular nose, firm mouth, and high cheekbones. Yet his very nature, or aura as some would call it, was born of dark purpose. A true shadow walker to be watched. This was sensed immediately by me, as I gazed upon him. Morte's intentions so clear in his malicious tone against ser Sylandros, his dark eyes that glittered of promise of chaos to come. 'Twas Ebony and Ivory, him and I, as we faced each other in the hallway.

I challenged him to walk away from ser Sylandros or else to taste the hunger of naked steel in a ritual of the sword dance. Ser Morte answered my challenge, but not as was expected.

As is the right of the defender who has been challenged, Morte's choice of weapon was wit, dealing in words of riddled rhyme, and not steel. I readily agreed to his terms as the defender of Sylandros's Honor, as I could not step down from my own challenge without losing my own Honor. The terms of our duel was he would leave Sylandros alone if he lost, and if I lost, I would hand over instead a treasured Necklace given to me by sweet, gentle, sera Gwen. Even now I shall forever remember the prose riddle presented.

"My face is revered, and homage paid to me as people glorify my presence, and yet, I am not a man. What am I?" Morte rattled off, a seductive smirk playing across his face.

I stood speechless a moment, as I tried to conceive an answer. A face that was given homage? My mind searched earnestly of what knowledge I had of the cold walls that encompassed us, thinking the riddle was based upon this time and place.

Ser Sylandros did try to whisper something to me, but his words were too soft to be heard as I concentrated upon the riddle. Seeing a reprieve from ser Morte's attentions, he quickly ducked into his room as I stood there trying to give a response to the sinister Morte.

At least now ser Sylandros would be safe, as I glanced at the closing door. "An alter" I supplied, keeping my face well guarded from emotions as I redirected my gaze upon the pale man before me.

Morte's smile was beguilingly triumphant as he gazed upon me. "Nay little sera. It is simply, a coin," he drawled.

He extended his hand, and hungrily eyed the necklace I wore. I choked down bile which had built up somewhere deep within my gullet and carefully removed the gift that was given in friendship and trust.

“Care for it well,” I hoarsely murmured as I traced the delicate leaf designs of the necklace with my fingers. “Leave alone ser Sylandros, Riddler. You have won and as is proper, I admit defeat in this duel, but nor will I hesitate to come to his defense.” I dropped the necklace in his outstretched hand and he watched me a moment, assessing what he could from my stiffened posture.

He held it out there for what seemed and eternity, allowing me to see that the gift was truly gone. Maybe it was done purposefully, but he seemed to take a sudden disinterest in it and simply placed it in his pouch. This simple action alone, stung me deeply and after a brief glare which Morte lavished at the red door, he bowed and left, stating over his shoulder he had business elsewhere to attend to.

I stood there, numb. I suddenly realized I had allowed myself to think I could defend Honor with sport of riddled words, and felt the fool for being played so well. I quickly glanced at the red door and pondered what ser Sylandros thought of me at that very moment. The shame cut quick to the core of my being and I considered slinking off and licking my wounded pride when Morte’s words suddenly struck an ominous cord deep within me. My first thought immediately turned to ser Duraze.

Duraze was my protégé during those days, and also a ser who held my attentions more than any other man since my disastrous affair with Edouard Ramos. I knew deep within my Heart of Hearts, Morte was out to goad Duraze with the very necklace I had just lost, and my concern became great. It was, after all, no great secret that Duraze and I met most mornings to spar in the Practice Hall.

And so, I ran as fast as my small legs would carry me.

I found Duraze and Morte, in the practice hall as I had suspected. Each challengingly eyeing the other as they stood next to the table. Defiance noted in the stance of Duraze, and cool aloofness in Morte’s own posture, and surety of victories taste palatable upon his lips, as he *toyed* with the Necklace that had only moments before been mine. It could be said that Morte believed he had won before the duel had even begun.

I was not the only one who got wind of this event either. Both sera Charmiam and ser Noddi were also present, two individuals who were intent upon the outcome of this duel.

Duraze pulled out the practice swords from the sack in which they were kept, and laid them upon the table, inviting Morte to examine the blunted blades. Morte casually laid the necklace upon the table, then once more squarely faced Duraze.

Morte smiled. “Since it was you who issued the challenge, it is my right to select the means in which to meet the challenge.” He briefly glanced at the swords lying upon the table, then dismissively waved at them. “In my defense, I chose to use a game of riddled phrases.”

Duraze frowned, clearly confused and soundly placed off balanced. “I challenged you to a duel and you agreed. To step back from it now would be a dishonor.”

Morte smiled amusedly at Duraze, and ignoring everyone else that was

present for the affair. "I accepted the challenge, boy, but you never stated it was to be done by steel. You *assumed* it would be."

Oh how the man could play games with words, manipulating them with elegance and ease. He was a true master, and I watched him play in avid interest, learning the way this opponent danced. Oh aye, he was honorable in how he managed to present himself, even if it was twisted and askew to the mass interpretation of Honor. But I watched and learned, keeping my mouth closed and my eyes and ears opened as I had done those first days after awakening.

"The rules are as follows," Morte began. "You may chose anything single word to describe your position of power, and I shall answer it with my own word of power to overturn your word. No word can be reused twice by the same player, however the other may ..."

And for the briefest of moments, I found myself admiring the ivory ser as he issued the rules of the game. Then I remembered what had brought me here, and redirected my attention to Duraze. It was then that I realized Duraze readily accepted the terms in which Morte presented to him.

"Duraze. Don't do this." I begged imploringly, "Tis just a necklace, and nothing more." But even as I spoke those words, the thought of the necklace being bartered a second time in less than two chimes stung me deeply.

Quietly Duraze answered me, without breaking his visual contact with Morte. "This is my Duel, and I intend to honorably see it to its end."

With that, I shut my mouth, knowing it was useless to argue the point. Duraze's passion for the duel nearly matched my own, if not exceeded it at times. One of the many traits that attracted me to him. I watched the game unfold between the men, silently praying to the Lady that she would gift Duraze with foresight to play the game with quick wit.

In soothe the game could have gone on from bell toiling to bell toiling, for both men were sparred well with words riddled. But somehow, someway, ser Noddi managed to convince the Trickster that he fell afoul by his own rules. I cannot recall the exact word game that was played, as I was completely engrossed by the two men. Perhaps it is shameless of me to scribe this here, but my own burning desire had been fanned into impassioned flames as I watched the men play the game out. I almost believed they were not fighting over a simple bauble, but instead over me. Almost that is until Duraze won and he retrieved the prize that was contested.

Honorably, Morte conceded the round of word play to Duraze, and gingerly, Duraze retrieved the bejeweled necklace, and with purposed stride, came and stood next to me, towering over me as if to protect me from the shadow walker who stood in our presence.

Morte merely smiled and bow "It was just a necklace," and he leveled me with a cool and detached gaze, "won easily by pride misplaced." I flinched as his words cut to the core. Oh he had read me all to well, and I was a fool to think I could mask it from his knowing eyes. But I should also thank him silently for abruptly stifling the burning furnace of passion that threatened to break its bonds.

Smoothly he pivoted, and left all of us staring at the door. Duraze relaxed momentarily then turned his attention to the necklace in his hand. He clenched it momentarily then handed it to me, a cool and reproachful look upon his face that left me feeling suddenly very cold inside. Stiffly he bent down, and emotionlessly murmured in my ear. "Do not be so willing to play his game. He will play you for a fool."

I stiffened abruptly and for the first time in the fifteen days since meeting Duraze and acting a mentor to him, he gave no sign of respect for me in his voice. It was then I realized I we were now equals and no longer student and teacher.

But that was only the beginning of the downward plunge between Duraze and I. But to elaborate on this, I would have to miss several important events that should be marked here first.

Morte and I had our third meeting the same day, in the same place where I faced against him with ser Sylandros. Again the circumstances were nearly the same, as I was there to escort sera Rose to her room, as she too seemed to fall victim to Morte's game of word play.

She had been accosted by ser Morte, by her claims, within the duelist lounge earlier that morn. Perhaps it was moments after his leaving the Practice hall that this event transpired, but of this point I am uncertain. All that I know is that within a bell I found myself escorting the gentle sera to her room and was once again face to face to the mysterious man who wielded power in his words of riddle.

He eyed her predatorily as we entered the guest hallway, as a man of heighten desire gazes with an insatiable hunger upon a woman unable to defend herself.

For the briefest moment as I faced him there, I could only think of the first meeting and my pride still stung from his triumph. But having watched him face against Duraze, and see him in action without me being his prey, I decided to play the game as he attempted to play words once again against sera Rose.

"Leave the sera out of this, Riddler," I gruffly said to him. "You and I have unfinished business."

He simply smiled at me "Why sera," he said with mild surprise in his voice, "You wound me. I thought only to compliment the sera on her lovely face and nothing more."

I frowned deeply and quickly suggested for Rosa to enter her room. She complied gratefully and ducked quickly into the green door we stood near.

Morte laughed softly, as he watched the door close behind the sera. "You amuse me, duelist," he said, his eyes lingering thoughtfully at my feather pin. "I tell you what sera. I have a proposal for you."

He then spoke of a game that would be played out between him and I. Morte declared it would truly test my mettle and wit against his. As a prideful woman that I am, a fault that haunts me even to this day, and with a curious nature of things that are shrouded in mystery, I listened to his game of suggestion.

We stood within the hallway, arousing curiosity of several denizens, as he challenged me. Ser Morte simply stated that if I truly wished to stop him, then I should face him upon a battle field of power and alliances, and defeat the treasonous act which he and his shadow court was about to execute.

Morte says, "Will you accept this challenge, Sera?" as a wicked smile played across his lips.

"You seem to have" I paused as I searched for what I wanted to say, without giving away my own game. "...Much at your disposal. I am most curious, and find you an interesting puzzle. A puzzle I plan on solving quickly." Poor attempts I know, at trying to allude to a mysterious air, but one must be careful when they suspect the man before them is possibly an agent of the Faceless Master who lived within the Inner Bailey. And in cool reply to my distant words, he merely bowed to me, mocking my very words.

"I wish you...luck."

I instantly interjected before he could speak further. "Two can play this game of words." I should have known better. I should have stayed quiet.

He smiled amusedly at me and coolly said "Challenge me all you like. Bring blade, bring word, bring anything you may," Then he gave me that decadent smile, lightly tapping his head "I will be ready."

Even as I write this, I look back upon it and realized I was an utter fool. I would have sworn an eternal oath that very day, claiming he was the very man who had tried to frame Edouard for the Murder of the Armsman. But then, at the moment I faced him, I was certain of myself, full of willful pride, especially after it had been I who had helped find Edouard innocent of the crime of Murder.

I smiled slyly at him, thinking I had him where I wanted him, and thinking of revealing a card of my own. "I will bring" I paused purposefully to give effect, "vengeance, eventually. *That* is a promise."

He watched me with a bit of surprise in his eyes, but I must have missed it then. "Vengeance? What ever for?"

He murmured softly to me. "And a warning on 'Vengeance', dear girl," to which I bristled for his implication of referring to me as a child, "It makes you stupid.. and slow." Transfixedly, I stared into his eyes, attempting to keep my face emotionless. "Think with a clear mind, if you hope to have a chance," he finished, a small smile playing across his face. "I tell you this, because a game with no good opponent... is just no fun."

"You do not know of the Raven then," I teased enigmatically, feeling superior the more he spoke.

Sarcastically he returned my response with a question of his own. "The Morrigan's Raven, or Odin's raven?" Morte's face drew up in a smirk, his poster belying his own interest.

"Tis for you to learn," I quipped in return, only momentarily confused by his reference as those Ravens meant nothing to me. A lesson I shall write now to any that read this. First, if you do not know what you deal with,

then keep your mouth shut and listen. This discussion between him and I was the pinnacle of foolishness upon my part. But I digress yet again.

I can recall a response that was finally elicited from his face. He eyebrow shot up rather curiously as he heard my answer. "Oh dear me," he drawled. "It looks like I am not the only who is mysterious one now." Unknowingly to me, that very moment, Duraze arrived to hear my volley of word exchange with the pale ser.

Morte laughed then, attempting to unsettle me, but as I have said before, I was a foolish woman. "Oh. One last warning, Duelist Faer. Watch carefully as you play this game. Be careful not to emulate me, or use my methods."

Duraze growled quietly as he watched from the steps. Had I known he was there, I think perhaps things would have not been as they ended up. But at that moment, Initiate Elea decided to come out of her room and also join into the foray of word play.

Elea is a pragmatic woman. To look upon her you would think she was incapable to do much of anything, yet it can be seen in her eyes that she is extremely powerful in presence. The contrast of the health of her body with the health of her full head of wavy blue black hair, is very striking, but as I said, the vibrancy of life lived in her eyes. After her binding, she aged immensely as part of her soul was bound into her focus. With her arrival upon the scene, I suddenly felt revived and certain that Morte would find himself quickly outnumbered. I was wrong.

I stood defiantly and faced him, my chin jutting out to give me an bit of height, "Like you, I have my own weapons, and not always of steel."

Morte says, "And the castle... is our chessboard.." He smiled, "My pawns are in place, and move to attack your Knight in six nights. Six moves till check. Move quickly Duelist."

Solemnly I nodded to him, believing he was the man I was truly after, "And Death will be the ultimate price. Final death." Of course, I was not thinking of my own death or the Knights, but instead that of the Faceless Man. To me, Morte was just a middle man.

It was then that Duraze decided to make his presence know, and I nearly flinched as I heard him speak to Morte. "Your words are full of rhetoric, ser, and your revolution, a pathetic gesture, at best. You called me a zealot once, but you are no better, save that my goal is pure. You should take to sleeping with the rats whose hole you crawled from, and leave decent folk alone." Morte just chuckled lightly, as if it pleased him immensely that he was able to get at Duraze so easily. Duraze simply gave him a leveling look while he stood there rather tensely.

Morte says, "Such language ser, and in front of the seras no less.." He softly tisked, "Hardly becoming a gentleman," then proceeded to wink bemused at young Duraze.

Elea and Anabeth stood quietly behind me. Feeling their strength, all I could say was "I look forward to this challenge."

"May the best... person win." He simply stated and started to head

towards the steps that lead out to the parapets just beyond the guest rooms.

Elea however, knowing the game of chess chimed in her own question. "Queen's knight... or King's knight..." Purposefully she paused until she was sure she had ser Morte's attention. "Or, do you not know chess well enough to answer that, ser?"

Morte says, "Oh, that." He paused deliberately to ensure his audience was still enraptured with his words. "Well, Information is never free. And yes, I do know chess rather well. What do you offer for in exchange for it? " A slow deliberate, yet sinister smile played across his pale, angular face.

Elea challengingly smiled at him. "Prove it, "

"Nay.. Not for lack of profit. Offer me something Make it a challenge" He leveled a look at her and simply waited.

Moments passed and the silence was thick with tension, so much so a knife could have severed into two halves. No one moved as the two of them stood there waiting for the other to speak. Then suddenly, Elea looked away, touched me upon the shoulder to get my attention and clearly stated for the entire hallway to hear.

"He is bluffing."

Morte blinked as if unaffected by her words, softly snorted his amusement, his face taking on the appearance of boredom, and deftly waved his hand as if giving a clear dismissal to the Initiate. Elea on the the other hand, shrug off his sudden detachment. Inside I was clearly confused at what had just transpired between the tall man and the First Initiate. He turned to me, then and bluntly asked "Am I?"

"He plays the game well, First Initiate. He has been playing it for some time." It was all I could say, as I myself was still completely off balance.

Without looking at ser Morte, Elea continued upon her train of thought. "One who knows chess, and knows it well, would never hesitate to answer that question."

Morte says, "Alas, this is not a true chess game, Elea. But I hesitate to give my plans away so easily. However, I am a sporting man." He smiled subtly then, and lowered his voice as if to give his words an inflection of mysticism. "Make it worth it, and I might reveal them."

Elea was completely disinterestedly in what he had to say, and I just stood there, unknowing the underlying currents that were going on between the two, as I was so intent upon finding my own vengeance.

Duraze had had enough of ser Morte, and was completely annoyed that I even stood there now, after what had happened only a bell before this particular meeting. He spoke directly to Elea, and yet his eyes briefly met mine. "You give him too much credit, sera. He is delusional. I would cuff him for his slights were it not against the Capitulary to strike the ill of mind." Morte simply chuckled, delighting in the fact that Duraze was obviously disgusted with the entire situation.

Briefly Elea and I exchanged soft whispers as Duraze and Morte batted words against each other. She was certain I was playing into Morte's hands

and as I prided myself in thinking I had finally found a means to get at the Faceless man. I denied it flat out and in carefully hushed words told her that I was falling for nothing. That in fact I was there to protect those who happened by, and ensure that peace was maintained and that no other would fall prey to his games.

Mind you, I look back on this entire day as the beginning of the end of my innocence. Aye, there was the murder of the Armsman in which I learned that duplicity comes in many forms. I had also had the lessoning of pained betrayals from Edouard, and aye, I was fueled into action because of no outlet for the passion that built up in me because of the nearness of Duraze and the lack of witheral to allow him to know that I favored him. To top it off, Elea was standing there cooling eyeing me and made me question why I was even answering this challenge in the first place.

Then suddenly Morte was gone. While Elea and I had been exchanging words in hushed tones, I had missed his departure. Duraze was flushed with annoyance with the whole interlude with the pale mysterious man, and the others just stood there in silent contemplation of what they had just witnessed. I briefly scanned the hallway, mentally noting those who had gathered and realized that I had taken on a responsibility to see an end to this game Morte had begun. My ego suddenly climbed several noches and my confidence once more in place. It was now my turn to play the mysterious man in the Ivory shell.

But a moment before I continue. There are some things that should be noted here before I proceed to tell my tale. A bit of foresight to offer at this juncture so that you might understand the why I lost a piece of myself to the Shattenman.

This shadow court was then known as the *La Cour D'Ombre*. I had only that morning read the treasonous statement written by purposeful error. himself It has been publicly announced that this dark group planned to move against the powers to be, even if it was shrouded in riddled-rhyme and misspellings. Realizing this was the man who wrote the treasonous work, my pride overcame good judgment, and I accepted his challenge. I had no faith at all with the powers He bade me to set my own pieces into place, to defend the Knight that would fall six days hence of our meeting. But being the gentleman he was, even if it was a strange and twisted Honor, claimed he would leave Sylandros alone during that allotted time.

To know then what I know this day, would be to say that there was nothing to stop the murder of the good Dame Oriana. Six days, nor six hundred days would not have been enough to have saved her, as the powers that move within the Inner Bailey are much beyond my own simple reach. But I remiss yet again, in idle musings of what could have been.

But after ser Morte retired to his room, I then turned to those who had gathered in the hallway as was surprised at the gathering. Ser Noddi, from the Poets was there, as was sera Hannah and ser Sylandros, both duelist hopefuls. Sera Anabeth was there then quietly left after giving me a most

curious look as if uncertain of what I was truly doing. And Charmiam as well, looking to me for some protection, and yet her face so full of unasked questions. But it was Duraze my eyes held most, although I tried to hide this fact. And it was his cool but annoyed gaze that struck deep within me that I found resolve to speak.

“We should speak in a place that is a bit more private than this hallway,” I commented quietly, trying to keep my face as neutral as possible. Sylandros then invited us into his small room to offer such privacy.

Two tollings of the bell we sat in that tiny room, hunches and suspicions voiced. There was talk of the Black Guard, Alo the messenger, and how perhaps the *La Cour D’Ombre* might be involved and to what its purpose was.

It was then I learned Morte had preyed upon several innocent guests within a night and day of passing. My pride could not tolerate such arrogance and I cursed the ineptitude of the Winter Watch yet again at their lack of watchfulness. To this day, I scoff at what they call themselves, for they are only watchful of what they desire to watch, and purposefully ignoring that which does not immediately concern them.

But all that we spoke of that day in that room was nothing but idle speculation. However, in those two bells, a plan was laid down that I was certain would buy us more time to save the ‘Knight’ in question. With my confidence renewed, and a new purpose to defend, I went in search of my goddess, the Lady of the Sky, as well as a good sparring with Duraze, in hopes to renew the kinship I felt had suddenly become strained.



I moodily watched the doorway close behind Duraze as he left the practice hall, silently praying to the Lady about the situation that lied between us. I tightly gripped the sword hilt of the blunted sword, feeling the blood run out of my hand.

What was I to do with him? How was I to properly mentor him when all I wanted to do was kiss him and find out exactly how deep his burning passion would shake me? Duraze was nothing at all like Edouard, who had easily known and welcomed my advances. Duraze on the other hand, was elusive and unreachable for several reasons.

First and foremost was the fact I was his mentor. To cross that line would perhaps be destructive upon the relationship we currently maintained. Yet it would ease the tensions we felt when were alone together in the same room. Secondly, there was the fact that there was something deep and disturbing about his nature that caused me pause to persue. Not sinister, but something dark and foreboding that he seemed to carry with him as if it were a weight upon his shoulders. And lastly, there was Edouard Ramos. I was still pinning over him, and dared not approach Duraze and use him as a counter balance to the pain I still felt whenever I saw Edouard.

Thus I stood there upon the floor, feeling the emotions building in me. The sparring had done little to ease the building tensions of my body and

spirit, so I turned my sight inward and searched for those memories I had of my own people. Briefly I shut my eyes, and took myself back to the knowledge I had gathered from my clumsy forays upon Clu'mysia². I envisioned the proper stances of the Ky'Lien³ and began to dance.

My small stature makes it difficult to wield a long sword properly, so I must use the weight of it to offset my opponents and keep myself out of their reach. Thus the sword tends to be held inside of my own personal space, which makes it appear that I am unsuitable to dueling at all. 'Tis no small task, I assure you, to constantly spar against tall men and women here. But it is my hidden strength that I have learned to portray an ungainly swordswoman when I spar. But it is also the weight of that very sword that makes my defense weak. If I can not win a duel quickly then tis certain that I will lose in a duel that takes to long. I lack the endurance to keep up with my 'towering' opponents, as well as the strength to lambaste my opponents. . Instead I use agility to stay away from the onslaught of my opponents, strategy to pull them into my precise tight patterns.

I felt the sinews of my arms and legs answer the call of the memories within. I rocked upon the balls of my feet, to keep my momentum fluid, and weight of my body properly distributed. I began by alluding to one stance then changing completely with a single twist of my wrist to feint against my imaginary partner.

Sidestepping in intricate footwork, twisting my waist deliberately, giving false illusion of my intentions to my invisible dance companion, I lured myself into a deeper meditation of the dance.

I kept my patterns tight. Slashing my sword purposefully in this direction, whirling smoothly upon the balls of my feet, bring my sword inwardly, deftly rolling my wrist to present a parry while the light danced in reflection upon the flat side of my sword. Horizontally I slashed, carefully keeping the sword from over extending to far.

Strength of my forearms and wrists to guide me through the movements, I moved through the ritual dance with deliberate motions. Artistically I turn my sword, using my free hand to weave unseen patterns in the air around me. Stepping forwardly, rolling my shoulder backwards to give my sword arm length and extension.

Slash, lurch, thrust, spin. My eyes closed and my whole being intent upon the purpose of finishing the dance.

Suddenly I realized I was not alone. My internal alarms ringing I opened my eyes, just as a bead of perspiration rippled down my brow, and found ser Morte standing near the door that lead to the Terrace beyond. Stonily, I eyed him.

"How long have you been standing there?" I gruffly asked him, feeling annoyed that I had not 'heard' him come in. I quickly wiped my brow, but never took my eyes off of him.

"Long enough to know your skills in swordsmanship are better than my own" he replied, "But not long enough to see your display from beginning. Your skin was already glistening from exertions when I arrived." He smiled at me, giving me that measuring look as if seeing me with new eyes.

I shivered imperceptibly at his words and was set off balance by his lingering gaze. Granted I care not what men think when they look upon my body, but strangely his appraisal left me wondering what he was truly thinking. "Tis impolite to stare so, especially while one considers themselves alone," I courteously informed him.

"I simply admired the demonstration you were performing. Nothing more. It was quite interesting to watch."

Attempting to change the subject from myself and my private dance to the Goddess of the Sky, I firmly suggested to him "Leave off ser Sylandros."

He arched his eyebrow only briefly, in mild surprise at the quick turn of the conversation. "What is in it for me?"

"He is no threat to you. He will keep his silence."

"I can not allow him to live because he was witness to something he should not have walked in on. Closed doors means closed for business..."

I cut him off "No. He life means nothing to you. He saw nothing and will say nothing that is for certain, but I will have you call off your hounds. If he had seen anything important" and I gave him a meaningfully gaze, "then he would already be dead."

"No?" He then repeated his earlier question "What is in it for me?"

I realized that his desire for a game was his weakness. Inwardly I was smiling in triumph but kept my face well schooled from allowing my emotions to show. "I challenge you to a game," I said simply, thinking this was the most opportune time to set into motion the very plan I had spoken with the others. "If you can not answer my riddle, you will call off your hounds."

This piqued his interest and with slow deliberation he straighten. Morte gestured towards the Terrace "Come into my office and we can negotiate." He held the door for me as any gentleman would and I slowly strode thru the door. He closed it behind us and without allowing him to see my face, I walked to the very center of the Terrace before turning towards him. It was then that I noted a particular gleam in his eye and I was left wondering ever briefly why it was there.

"If you can not answer my riddle, I gain his freedom. If you answer it," I paused dramatically before clearly saying "A life for a life. Mine for his."

Surprised flashed across his face, "Tisk, tisk little duelist. It is not like you to barter with lives so easily."

Although he towered over me as he walked towards me I gave him a steady gaze and allowed him to see that I meant every word I said "When it comes to protecting those who can not protect themselves, I use what tools are at my disposal. Not every duel should be faced with metal of steel in hand." Coolly I watched him, feeling completely in control for I knew that none in these walls, save those that I had just spoken to in Sylandros's room, knew the meaning of my name. I was certain to win this challenge.

This surprised him yet again, my casual bluntness and my calm exterior. He gave me a disarming smile suddenly "Alright. A life for a life. Your life for his."

“I would barter with no other.”

“If I answer your riddle “he continued “then you are mine. To do with as I please ...”

“Aye.”

He firmly insisted, giving me an intense gaze “You will swear to serve me loyally, never to undermine my work, or myself, or plot in any way against me. You will serve me as I see fit and never question nor balk at the tasks I give you, or what I command from you.”

I was now becoming irritated. “Aye. I swear this. To serve loyally, and without question, without purpose to conceal anything from you. Do you know so little of duelists that you would question my Honor?”

Morte intently watched me as considered the weight of my words, measuring me up as if he as truly uncertain of my words. Or so I thought then. I know now it was all for show, to allow myself to fall blindly into the trap he had so carefully laid. Oh he knew me well enough, I suppose, knowing by the very pin I wore that Honor bound me like no other person who did not wear the feathered pin.

“Ahhh”, he smiled predatorily at me, “a worthy opponent indeed. I accept your challenge, duelist.” He smoothly pivoted then and strolled languidly to the parapet and lean casually against it as he faced me. “Give me your riddle.”

“Answer me this Riddler; “I began, not allowing him a moment of chance to turn the tables against me, or allow him a chance to recant his words “Allusive and fleeting the sera be, alien shell among those living, known name spoken will translate simply. What is my real name?” I asked as I purposefully attempted to give myself height and presence before him.

Bah! So I am not a person who can make riddles. The point of the whole thing was that I was certain he could not have learned my purpose in a bells tolling, and that I was going to be triumphant and have Sylandros’s life once more secure. In all his actions I had noted that day, not once had the man shown true dishonor. Twisted, and warped, Aye! This I do not doubt, but he was honorable nonetheless. He was all these things I mentioned, and perhaps more, but ones Honor is all that one can maintain, and it was the deadliest tool any person can wield against another. Honor verses Honor. Tainted or not.

Slowly, deliberately, he smiled. He entire manner relaxed completely and he opened his arms wide as if welcoming a long lost child back home and into safe haven. “Come here little dove and I will tell you. Come and listen to my gentle whisper as I caress your ears with the answer you seek.” He smile changed from serene to something like that of a predator about to eat its prey whole and yet still very much alive.

I hesitated.

He laughed. “What? Do you think I do not know it? Do you think for a moment that you can best me at my own game? I warned you little dove, not to emulate me.”

I bristled at his accusation, but I was for the first time upon that Terrace uncertain. Could he possibly gotten to one of the others? Forced them to reveal my very plan?

He crooked his finger at me, beckoning me to come to him. I did. It was either that or run, for at that very moment, trepidation began to rise from the pit of my stomach, and loud internal alarms began to sound deep within the bowels of my gut.

I walk with careful deliberate steps from the center of the terrace, the view behind him lost to my eyes as I attempted to search his face, his eyes, for some sign of uncertainty on his part in answering my naming riddle. But there was none there. What I found in his eyes only served to heighten my own dread as I felt my vision narrow solely upon his violet and depredatory eyes.

“Faer. Little, sweet, Faer. “ I never saw his hand rise from his side and was shocked at the light intimate caress of his hand as it drew up from the base of my neck to my cheek Briefly I shivered in repulsion of his touch, and glared defiantly at him.

“I know your name, your real name. How I shall delight in breaking you little dove.” I bristled angrily as he named me after a gentle, submissive creature. His smile only deepened, a soft chuckle briefly coming from his throat. It was not jocularly I saw in his eyes in his eyes, but instead delectation.

“Speak it then, “ I commanded harshly, finally finding my voice and startled myself at how much emotion I allowed him to hear. He paused then, watching my reaction to his torture. “Say it! Answer my riddle now, and be done with it!” I demanded again, hoping, praying that he could not see how close I was to the edge of the abyss.

“I will not give it now. I rather enjoy seeing you like this. “ he purred softly.

“Now! You will say it now. We struck a deal and I will see it finished. Here and now!” I was becoming desperate. My personal freedoms were on the line, as I was bargaining with my life. “Give me my name or else I shall spit you upon my sword, here and now.” Shakily, my hand fumbled with the hilt of my sword as I attempted to untie the small leather thong that kept the sword secure within its scabbard.

“No. “ Morte said, “ I want you to languish in your freedom for a short time, knowing that some day, some time, some place, I will come for you, and then you will be completely mine.” But before I could open my mouth and call his bluff, he quickly added “But I will however, give you *half* of it. Now. Today. So that you can be assured that I *know* your name, and that I am not playing a farce with you.”

It was those last words that I realized in that very moment I was no longer the hunter, but instead the hunted. I knew betrayal then, and I seethed with anger as my mind drifted back and I began a mental accounting of those individuals who knew my real name.

Duraze. Noddi. Elea. Charmiam. Sylandros. One of them betrayed me.

But who was it? Even to this day, I am still uncertain, as no proof was ever found. But many things have happened since that day and Now as I write this. Many things.

Defiantly I glared at him. “Speak it then. Let us be done with the task at hand.”

“Oh my. So much anger, and so much pride. Yes. I will enjoy breaking you, little dove. I even think I could learn to love you,” he murmured seductively, his eyes lingering upon my face.

“I will never love you,” I retorted angrily, my face screwing up in frustration “Never! Speak ...”

He cut me off as he deliberately caressed my arm, murmuring softly near my ear “The first half of your name,” and he paused ever so dramatically that I am certain he could see my entire being trembling in anger, shame and humiliation.

“Dark. “ He said finally and I stood frozen watching him delightedly laughing at me while he languidly strolled towards the door. “Live while you can duelist. Live everyday as it is your last, for one day soon, I will call on you and give you the other half. And then, you will be mine.” Then he was gone.

I stood there, numb for a while, staring at the door, knowing full well the freedoms I had known were truly lost. I would not be able to live as I wished, with his hand so closely wrapped around my spiritual throat.

Even as I write this, and tis certain that who ever reads this recollection, that the deal was not truly sealed between him and I. But deep within my spirit, I knew that he knew, and it was just a technicality that held him at bay. An Honorable woman I am, with much pride, but in sooth, the oath was forged, and I could not in good conscious say it was just a matter of time before he owned me completely. In a single breath of a word, I was his truly.

Much towards evening, just before the sun gives its last rays of warmth in this cold and forsaken place, I found my Oath kin, Kiera and Robert. I quickly ushered them both into Kiera’s room and gave my tale of woe to them. I offered then and there, cause to rebuke me, and forsake myself completely to Morte. Both of them would hear none of it. They tried to find a loophole to break the oath, and I can not fault them for doing so. However they knew without a shadow of a doubt that what transpired that afternoon would forever change not only our triad, but even leave lasting effects upon the duelists.



I pause now in my remembrances of that day as it is only the beginning of what I am searching for. Over the course of ten moons, the duelists have dealt with many misadventures and tragedies due to Morte’s interferences. A bartered oath caused so much chaos among the duelists that even now I find it hard to follow all the events that were related to its forging. Two shattered triads, abduction, broken betrothals, a duel fought to the death

that left three dead, and finally the mysterious cloak of shadows which was so recently in my possession. To write each instance of dealings would not bring about an answer to what has happened to me. Instead I shall give a briefest summation of how he mired himself into the lives of the duelists.

Nearly a moon had passed since my first meeting with Morte, and in that time I grew to know another man. One who understood binding oaths from beyond the grave, and one driven by retribution to seek justice for a transgression against his family and kin from the Time Before⁴. In the course of my time spent with Morte, I eventually learned that two entities resided within the same body.

First was Anjou, who had been a noble and honorable man, and then there was Morte, a creature given birth to by the single utterance of an oath of vengeance. It is to Anjou that Kiera shared blood ties with. I personally grew to care for the entity known as Anjou. Nay, not love, but cared deeply enough for him because he was my Oath sister's, brother. Privately, both Kiera and I had hoped to free him from the oath that bound him so tightly to Morte. But that was not to happen.

As I have said, Morte continued to meddle in the affairs of duelists, or perhaps it was the other way around. As Kiera and I searched for a means to bring back her brother, Morte worked to play our own triad against each other. Eventually, Morte was able to place Robert into a position in which Robert's loyalty and honor were questioned by all the duelists, was forcibly removed after making a critical error in judgment in a duel.

If one were to make an accounting of Morte's interferences, it could easily be said he was the catalyst to the breaking of two triads; Edanya's and my own. Although Robert's forced dismissal touched me deeply, it was not the first triad to break.

The first to leave us was Viola, also known to some as Punzel. In sooth, I know it was not Morte's meddling that caused her to question her oath, but instead it was directly related to her brother of the Oath, ser Duraze. And perhaps, in small part, what Edanya did to buy off the debt of my life that I had incurred with him on the Terrace that fateful day. But I digress. Let us briefly touch upon the others who felt the torrential chaos Morte brought in his wake.

Because of interactions of my triad with Morte, Duraze began to question the very loyalty of the duelists he thought he had found a place among. Embittered by events not only of my doing, but also the knowledge of Kiera being blood kin to Morte, caused Duraze to turn into himself, and feed upon the anger and hatred which grew within himself. Granted, my illicit liaison with Morte was the final blow Duraze could not tolerate, but I was certain that he could eventually come to terms of the why I had forged such an alliance with the tall, pale Riddler. How better to watch your enemy than by embracing them unto your bosom? Instead it pushed him ever farther from my reach.

Edanya, in her own way, attempted to salvage my freedom. She somehow manages to succeed in 'buying' my debt of Honor to Morte. This too pushed Punzel further from her Triad and the other duelists, so that

eventually one night she came to the decision she could not follow our path any longer. In soothe, I can not claim to know all the whys to her eventual leaving, but can only assume it related to Morte's meddling. I still feel guilt to this day that perhaps I was a driving factor to her eventual resignation as a duelist.

Other events involving Morte caused many duelists to despise his nature, and his very presence in the Castle. The harshest of these was perhaps when Punzel broke her betrothal with Martel and exactly one moon later allowed ser Morte to make an official announcement of courtesy that he would formally be courting her. Martel was deeply devastated by this. I, on the other hand, in soothe was jealous of the ease in which Punzel was able to stir the human side of Morte into being.

However, it was their courtship that fueled the embers of something even more deadly, and would eventually claim their lives. Of all the events that did transpire there is only one that stands freshest within my mind's eye, as if it only happened a ten-day ago. For you see, for me it is the case, but for all others here, it has been just over 3 moons since the fatal duel that took three lives. It seems that all my memories from that day I began wearing the cloak of shadows to the day of the actual ritual has been stolen or perhaps ripped from my mind. Or perhaps, they were never mine to begin with.

Twas a sanctioned duel to the death that transpired upon the southern terrace. As ser Morte did not own a blade of his own, it had been decided that swords would be requisitioned from the Lord Chamberlain's office. Once the swords were taken out of their scabbards, it was quickly noted that the blades were iron.

Morte speaks clearly, "Martel, Of the Duelists, I reopen my offer of reconciliation, provided you deliver a full and an unconditional apology to me."

Martel instead answered Morte with his own offer. "And to you ser, In consideration of those that have appealed to me. I say that if and when you yield, I will accept that, instead of your life."

But neither would step down from the duel as sera Viola Punzel stood there watching them, both men of Honor and Pride. They commenced to start the duel and engaged each other three times both wounding each other in the first two matches.

— *Thrust, block, parry* —

— *Sidestepping, thrust, slash* —

Their deadly dance was hypnotic and magnetizing to all who beheld the duel.

— *Jab, parry, lunge* —

— *Block, feint, and riposted.* —

Not many can say much about the first two woundings, but I vividly recall seeing that something was dreadfully wrong with the two men by the

time they had begun to the third and final face-off. Suddenly, time began to crawl before my very eyes. Each movement is seared into my mind as I watched the unfolding events with equal amounts of fascination and horror, unable to speak out for fear of distracting either of them.

— *Thrust, lunge, riposted...* —

Morte, his eyes blinded by the tears streaming down his reddened face, raised his sword a final time, to thrust at Martel. Morte lurched forward, covering the distance between them quickly, almost too quickly for even Martel to react accordingly. Morte lurched not for Martel, but instead blindly towards Punzel, his eyes glazed over from the fever of the duel. Martel's sword was clearly too far out of position for a parry. I saw an expression of panicked desperation spring upon Martel's face as Morte made his leap, and miraculously, Martel managed to place himself in the path of Morte's blade. A fraction of a moment later, Morte's sword was buried to the hilt in Martel's chest. The blade protruded through Martel's back, and shallowly penetrated Punzel's arm, drawing a thin rivulet of blood.

Everyone there reacted differently to what unfolded before their eyes. Some gasped, some called out Murderer, while others, such as me could only numbly stare at the scene as it played out before our very eyes.

Then Morte's last words rasped through his throat, as he blindly stared at the Martel's body lying upon the terrance and Punzel kneeling next to him. "Love... only ever... brings...Pain." His breathe rattled through his lungs as if he struggled against some unseen inner pain. His flushed face and a blank expression crossed his face, which gave me the impression he truly did not know what had transpired before all our eyes.

Suddenly, he staggered backwards only a pace, dropping his sword. His body lost all rigidity and he slumped to the ground. I held my breath as I watched his body for some signs of life. Nothing. His chest did not rise or fall, and the blood from his shoulder had slowed to the barest of trickles. Although the wound to his shoulder had not been grievous, he was in fact as lifeless as Martel, who's body had only moments earlier been taken away by Lith.

Shock and dismay shook the entire populous, and some rushed to Punzel's side in attempts to save her life. Then silently as before, Lith arrived and gently placed Morte's body on the gurney and quietly rolled it away, back into the bowels of the earth. It was then that many began to speak amongst themselves in hushed protests of how the duel had transpired. All I could do was numbly stare at Punzel as she too began to feel the effects of poison in her system.

I stepped forward just enough to hear softly speak to Charmiam, "In his service to the balance, Morte did many things that were dark, and most reviled him for this. He understood that this was his sacrifice." I also listened to her call out to Martel in the shadows that played upon the terrace as full night fell. Her death was slow, and Apprentice Anabeth worked feverishly over her body, in attempts to stop the action of the poison. Moments before Punzel gasped her final breathe, a unobtrusive courier arrived and delievered unto her a scroll. Upon that scroll my greatest fear was realized.

Sometimes, in everyone's life, a little blood must shed. To many of you forget our name, and to many of you dare attempt to tread in our private domain... Beware that which you cannot see, cannot detect, and cannot stop. As sure as a blade, it can kill you. This, has been an example of our power. We are the Rats who skulk the shadows, and we are also the Cats who can hunt the rats...and we prowl, looking for our next meal."

And so, the Cats and Rats claimed three more lives to their purpose or cause, and unwittingly Martel and Morte played into their hands so easily with the requisition of swords. The Corporal of the Winter Watch, glad to have both another duelist dead, and Morte's chaotic interference silenced, purposefully put off performing an investigation into the murders. As far as I know, even to this day, the person's responsible for the deaths of three honorable souls has still been left unanswered.

Lith arrived once more, as Punzel faded from this time and place. I turned to leave to chase down someone I had seen at the duel, knowing it that now was the time for action and that I could later grieve in the privacy of Edouard's room. But First Acolyte Charmiam stopped me before I took two paces towards the no so secret door that lead to the main courtyard of the Outer Bailey. "Ebony ..." she called out to me.

I slowly turned to her, noting the tears and pain in her eyes. She continued brokenly "I have ..."

Another tear ran down her face as she stood just a few paces from me. Miserably I croaked "Aye?"

"I have something for you."

From a large sack she carried at her side, she withdrew the Cloak of Shadows. Until that moment, I had thought the thing had been completely destroyed in the fireplace in the refectory during Morte's fit of rage when he had seen Punzel with Martel. But my eyes did not lie to me as they struggled to gaze upon the mysterious material that consisted of the cloak.

"He wanted you to have it, if he fell here today."

She and I both stared at each other momentarily, words unspoken passing between us, knowing deep within our hearts that she had loved him where I had not. I had shared something with him that she had desperately needed. It was a moment of torment we both faced knowing what the other knew.

I walked the necessary paces between her and I, and accepted the cloak reluctantly. One can never refuse the dying wishes of men or women. She gazed at me imploringly, begging for solace with her eyes. Instead I took a step backwards hoarsely murmuring to her "I ... am sorry, sera. I... do not know... I can not offer..."

Abruptly I turned and quickly fled to Edouard's side, begging to leave the gruesome scene, not wishing any others to see my weakness of character.

Three days later, I recall shaking out the cloak, turning it carefully so that I could place it upon my shoulders. The very moment that the thing

rested upon my shoulders is the very moment that my mind grows black, as if shrouded in the very essence that made up the cloak.

You would think that would be the end of my tale. Sadly though, it is just the beginning, for even now as I complete this recollection, the riddle still mystifies me. In soothe, I can not say if it was the oath that bound me or if instead it was the binding of an oath made upon the terrace one late afternoon so many moons ago. [¥]



Footnotes

- ¹ **Moons** – For the purpose of this story, moons refer to months.
- ² **Clu'mysia** – translates to 'Lunule Conveyance'. A ritual of dreamwalking that takes place outside of the body. This is done through meditations.
- ³ **Ky'Lien** – translates to 'Dance of the Spirit'. It is a special cleansing ritual of the mind by utilizing the body to attain a higher level of self, to achieve a better focus to obtain the desired goal.
- ⁴ This is directly related to a single memory each newly awakened guest has when they first awakened in Castle Marrach. Most everyone refers to it as a previous life.

Endnotes

- [¥] Authors Notes: There is an entire dictionary of words related to the race of people I created for another story in which I have been writing now for almost two years now. The Ka'Mirānth is solely my own creation and has nothing to do with Skotos or Castle Marrach. However, as I have based a lot of Faer's personality/history on the rituals of one of the existing sects, I have of course used some of the terminology here in this story.

The Awakening

By Isaria [Jen Smith]

In the cold and dark morning hours, a consciousness was born. Low light from simple wax candles filtered out the worst of the shadows, and gave a glow of serious ambience to the room. Soft shuffling sounds of movement in the dimness...the momentary swish of heavy skirts...the sound of thick wool dragging across damp stone. And then the voices, two of them speaking barely above a whisper. Were there two? Or was that echo? No, no there were two at least. One voice is heavy with age, and weight of a lifetime's responsibility, masculine for certain. The other one feminine, soft, soothing and hopeful against the chill that invaded every corner of the room. Still, there was confusion. A vague wariness of light, of sound, it meant nothing yet but still rang true somewhere in my memories. True in my memories. My memories.

The voices layered upon each other, arguing, discussing, joking, I could not tell. Their sound filled my ears like a hushed roar; the sound of a storm to a newborn. And the light, that flickering pale light, hovering somewhere above my closed eyes. The sense that I could open those eyes, and see more was both distantly exciting, and daunting at the same time. Slowly, slowly a third element invaded my already spinning mind: Sensation. A creeping sense of body slowly filled me. More than consciousness, an entire form! Letting go of the noises that created a constant background to my discovery, I began to focus on what seemed to exist as part of me, below my neck. A scant throbbing in my chest, alright good. Constant, liquid movements of heat down my arms. Arms! Then seeping into my belly, groin, and legs. The heat was pushed through each part of me as I discovered, like fire through delicate, timid tunnels of thought. All of this happening now, as my chest rose and fell with a steadiness. Chest, lungs, bellows, breath...breath...I was breathing! For a few moments, the simple act of taking in chilled, harsh air, and allowing it to fill me with life, took all of the simple concentration I had as yet been able to muster. The slow, but insistent realization took hold of me as those first breathes coursed through my body: This heat was life. I was Alive.

Directly following that slow and determined flow of heat came the cold. The most penetrating and purposeful cold that ever this body had felt, thought colder times would surely be known. Suddenly, my entire body wracked gently with a shiver. The slightest of moment's; it was a human body's reaction to the environment. A human! Or at least a semblance of its form, lying here in the frigid darkness. And oh, how I shivered.

The hushed voices which had been a constant buzz in the background during my self-realizations, ceased suddenly. For a few seconds, the only sound was my breathing, the rush of cold air gusting into my head and disappearing someplace below. Then, a warmer, sated push back out into

the darkness, and timid silence around me. A gentle movement came towards me. I could hear her breathing now, just out of tune with my own. I could sense her closeness, and then her touch as she checked my wrist with her practiced fingers. Touch, oh Gods touch! That sensation exploded upon me, the heat of her fingers banishing the cold void that was my wrist. And I shivered again, as she removed them. Because she was so very close, when she spoke next, the words formed into coherent sentences. Still muffled by newness and substance, my ears only caught pieces.

“.....awake Doctor. Shall we.....her.....Castle?”

I did not hear the answer. My mind was already racing with the simple fragments that I had heard, and understood. “Awake....her...Castle.” Awake? Had I been sleeping then? And for how long? No sleep that every was could make my body forget the sensations of breathing, of hearing, sight and touch, no matter how long that sleep had lasted. Being “awake” just did not make sense; my mind passed it by in confusion.

“Her.” Another female then. I am a woman, though until the girl’s words had assured me of it, my sex had been yet another confusion that my groggy mind was not able to consider. There was no sensation yet to describe woman to me. I had not yet heard my own voice, nor seen my body. No emotions but confusion and realization were available to me, to further explore who I was.

“Castle.” A word finally with description. Was I in a castle, was that where I had slept? Was I going to a castle, and that the reason that I had been awakened? My mind fixed itself to that single word, the questions and possibilities flying at my consciousness, bombarding me with images. Walls, stone, granite, wood, gates, metal, iron, rust, towers, parapets, stairs, doorways...the list went on, the pictures went on. But what was I remembering? Were these generic visualizations of the word? Were they specific memories of someplace I had been before? I didn’t know, and the absolute need for understanding was too great for my fragile state. Too many questions plagued me, and my mind was not able to sort them out all at once. Confusion turned into pure frustration, and a new emotion was born inside of me. I felt the tears begin to well up in my eyes.



“Doctor, her eyes are beginning to move a bit, may I remove the wrappings?” Her fingers began to pull at the ends of the linen that encased the body on the table. She knew what his answer would be. She always knew what his answers would be. The man was as predictable as the weather. But she asked him anyway, willing to play out this scene time and time again, because of her love and respect for the man sitting at the desk across from her.

“Lith, it has not yet been 24 bells. The process is not yet complete.” The response was deep and scratchy with age. This reply was well practiced, and edged with amusement. He was always willing to re-play this ritual with the girl, may the Queen love her, it helped to make their tasks less stressful to them both.

“I know Doctor,” Lith replied. “I just worry for her. ‘Tis cold this morning, and she’s beginning to shiver.” A tiny smile played across her lips as she turned to face him, “And this one’s not missing any body parts, so for the most part she is complete.”

The Doctor’s upper lip twitched slightly as he peered at the woman on the table, not deeming to answer Lith’s impertinence. Lith was right though; this one was a perfect example of his Necromancy skills. And even his ancient eyes could see that she was beginning to regain consciousness. She would be frightened and confused, most-like, Gods weren’t they always. He wish he had a cigar for every time the souls awoke with the newly-sickness. But he had work to do this morning, and dealing with crying maidens was not on his agenda for the afternoon.

Lith watched him examine the body from a distance. She knew that it was not callousness that made Dr. Getheht so distant from his patients; it was necessity. Every day he re-awakened new denizens to repopulate Her Majesty’s Castle. Every day he sent them on their way, weak and limp, and confused. They would be forced to find their own paths, their own answers to the torrent of questions that would surround them. Sometimes the process was too much for the ancient bodies that had been stored so long in the catacombs. Sometimes they did not survive. And sometimes the person re-awakened was simply not worth the exhausting effort that Getheht and Lith lavished upon them. The denizen would in fact, return to him again in a moon’s time, requiring his magical arts again to be re-awakened from a death caused by some petty squabble or somesuch. Lith had heard the frustration in Getheht’s voice as he would bend over a denizen, growling that if the person returned one more time to him, he would leave them as nature intended: dead. Every so often, the residents of the Castle even had the gall to write to the Doctor, asking him to undo what he had wrought. They asked to be put to sleep once more, directly violating the Queen’s wishes, and insulting Getheht thoroughly. Doctor Getheht was tired. His detachment from these people was a necessity. If he ever got close to them, any of them, he might just go insane.

Getheht walked towards Lith and the woman upon the table. He was surprisingly agile, though one would not guess it from his gaunt and emaciated form. He gazed down at his patient with a judging eye. Raising his hands, he gently pulled the wrappings away from her face. Skillfully, his hands removed the body’s last protection until a head was revealed, eyes shut. Examining her every feature, Getheht mumbled something to Lith, and gestured to his desk piled with notes. The girl fetched him his clipboard and watched patiently at he scanned for the woman’s name.



Cold! Oh gods was it cold! I could hear the girl and the old man speaking, coming to some sort of agreement, and then someone was touching my face. Soft fingertips removed the haze that had enshrouded me, cloth it felt like. But then the cold struck me with full force. The sharp and bitter air stung my eyes where the weary tears sat, unshed. I could feel my body’s small

movement, trembling in the attempt to keep warm blood traveling through it. The light in the room, though dim to most, was a brilliant beacon to me now. Even through closed lids it was brighter than anything I could remember. At that second: confused, cold, and in shock, there was nothing more that I wanted than to know it was all a distant dream, a nightmare. I knew nothing, was surrounded by questions.... And then the girl's voice, clear and melodic washed the pain away.

"Isaria." Lith smiled downwardly at the woman and watched as her bright, intelligent, violet eyes began to blink.

"Isaria," grunted the Doctor to himself, scanning his clipboard. "Odd name, but then they all are. Well, welcome to the Castle miss, and so-on, and so-forth." Gesturing dismissively to the woman, he turned his back and walked to his desk. Lith knew he was pleased with his work. The woman was simply lovely. Now he would finish his notes on sera Isaria for the Queen, and then promptly move to his next patient for the day.

"It's alright Isaria. Open your eyes only when you are ready. They'll get used to the light quite quickly." Lith gazed softly down at the woman, all the while tucking the blankets tightly around her.

"We are going on a very short trip. I will be taking you to your room to sleep off the rest of the process. You'll be fine."

My room? I had a room apparently. A room and a name: Isaria. From the moment that the girl had said that single word, my mind began to calm. Isaria...yes that is my name. And somehow I don't think I belong here, but the girl had said that everything would be alright, and I had no choice but to believe her. In all reality I wanted nothing more than to believe her. And she had said sleep. Even though I had just "awoken," I felt like I could sleep again for days. All of the questions seemed to quiet in my head, as the girl pushed my table to a room. She chatted quietly the whole way, re-associating my ears with the sound of voice. Her voice was so gentle to me, and made me feel safe and protected. Somewhere between her words, and a soft and simple bed, I fell asleep once more.



Lith's strong but dainty form silhouetted in the blue doorway. The torch from the hall shone brightly behind her, and the beginnings of the day in the Castle were stirring.

"Sleep well Isaria. And..." Her soft voice paused a moment. Quickly, she glanced side to side, watching for any denizens that might step from their doors early this morn.

"And good luck."

And she shut the door, leaving the new woman to sleep in peace. At least..for a while.



Windows on Marrach Awards

The Grand Prize

The grand prize went to an excellent short story:

Grand Prize: Concentric Light and Shadows, by Ulrich Lang

Artwork Prizes

Prizes for artwork were awarded for a variety of mediums including pencils, colors, and computer-generated art:

First Prize: Queen Vivienne, by Sara Johnson

Second Prize: Morte Portrait, by Heather Hart

Third Prize: Simply Vivienne, by Gaby Bernier

Artwork Honorable Mentions

The following artwork was also highly acclaimed, and would have placed if not for ineligibility:

Honorable Mention: Chorus, by Heather Hart

Honorable Mention: The Royal Court, by Heather Hart

Honorable Mention: Marrach Castle Afternoon, by Michael Blum

Short Story Prizes

The best short story was Ulrich Lang's *Concentric Light and Shadows* which went on to win Grand Prize for the contest. However, there was tight competition between several other excellent pieces. The short story winners were:

First Prize: The (Not-So) Usual Dungeon Crawl, by Michael Ramirez

Second Prize: The Double-Edged Sword of Oaths, by Soledad Bourdo

Third Prize: The Awakening, by Jen Smith.

Poetry Prizes

Winning poetry entries, like the artwork winners, covered a wide variety of forms:

First Prize: Est Quaedam Fiere Voluptus, by Lisbeth Gessamen (and Ulrich Lang)

Second Prize: The Ghosts' Gavotte, by Pete Darby

Third Prize: Imagine Marrach, by Taco Schenkhuiszen

Poetry Honorable Mentions

As with the artwork, a few additional pieces would have placed if they'd been eligible:

Honorable Mention: The Ballad of the Winter Ball, by Kimberly Appelcline.

Honorable Mention: The Song of the Shadow, by Kimberly Appelcline.

Honorable Mention: Snowblind, by Ulrich Lang.

Honorable Mention: Lament of Remembrance for Love and Honor, by Lisbeth Gessamen.

