

Curse of Magic: Rebellion

by

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Please be aware that this novel is a first draft, not a completed novel ready for publication in bookstores. It has been spell checked, but not grammar checked or edited in any way by me at this time. You will see mistakes, imperfections and accidents as you read. These are not intentional, but they are acknowledged and will be fixed as soon as possible in post! You have been warned.

At the end of the novel, you will find a list of the things that are likely to change in the future. Of course, there will be more changes than those, but it's a good way for me to let you all know which mistakes I am aware of and plan to fix.

As you read, please keep in mind the spirit of NaNoWriMo: write 50,000 words over the course of November. The goal is not to write the perfect novel in 30 days, but instead to keep writing rather than editing, panicking or changing things as you go. This work may be flawed, but it is beautiful in its flaws, because despite them, I managed to successfully write a novel. Mistakes can be fixed, but there is no substitute for perseverance and hard work.

Also note that the chapters are not broken up into formal chapters at this time. If you are the kind of reader that likes to stop after the end of a chapter, keep an eye out for stars (***) or dashes (---). These will indicate safe places to take a break.

Curse of Magic: Rebellion

Morrow Grave rode into the city of Rathport, his rough brown woolen cloak wrapped tightly around his slender frame and the hood swathing his unshaven face in shadow. The rain had been fierce on his way from Albert-town, and he had done his utmost to escape the bitter chill that crept slowly across his skin, but even his cloak was beginning to fail him in regard to warmth. He did not wish to stop, in this city of all cities, but he knew that to continue onward would be a fool's errand, for him and for his lady Fair. Her snowy white coat would require the attention of a skilled and dutiful hostler to restore it to its usual glory, of that he had no question. Even the best steed faltered in these conditions.

Lowering his chin and setting his mouth into a thin line, Morrow made haste for the Rathport gate, trying his best to appear unthreatening. Years of the priesthood had given him humility and subservience in spades, even when he did not want them; it would be a boon tonight, he hoped. He was blessed with kindness and meekness, a danger to no man, and he was getting on in years. Old, no man had ever called him, but the years of praying on bended knees, lost in thoughts upon the bitter cold floors of the cathedral, had taken their toll. His hair, though none could see, was laced with the gray of a man twice his age. Nobody would suspect an aging former priest. He had to believe that. He had no choice.

As he anticipated, the guards at the gate paid him no attention. They were wrapped in their own cloaks, both literal and figurative; the dark woolen swathes they wore left only their eyes exposed to the world around them, and those eyes were set upon the raging skies and flooding ground rather than on Morrow himself. It was clear that they regretted their positions; given a handful of coin, they would abandon their posts for the

nearest warm tavern and the nearest mug of warm apple grog. Morrow shook his head imperceptibly as he passed. Though he understood their disinterest, he had limited patience for those who turned their backs on their sworn duty. Then again, he thought to himself, it was the thought of a hypocrite. He himself had left the priesthood, chasing an impossible dream. He still wanted to believe there was some difference in that, though. These guards were only a brave face on the gate of Rathport anyway; the city had suffered enough, even through their vigilance. He might have abandoned the priesthood in search of his own soul, but these men were the worst kind of failure; the kind that fought to maintain order and failed. They had no more reason for vigilance, knowing that it would do them no good against the enemy they faced.

The scars still haunted him with every step that Fair took among the ruined streets and blackened homes. Citizens still wandered the street, peering with suspicion at the stranger on his white horse as if he were the worst kind of sinner. For all they knew, he might be. The men and women who had come to this village a year ago had not stood out either, before they stole the lives of a hundred innocents. They called themselves pirates, and claimed a right by violence to everything that Rathport had to offer; it had been a simple rout, considering that none of the citizens of Rathport had ever needed to bear arms against any man prior. The priesthood had named them other things, and the name that still came unbidden to his lips tasted bitter in his mouth: the Tormentor's Hand, named such after the power they all held and used to make good on their threats. It was vile, as all magic was; the priesthood had been very clear in their distinctions. Had not the Gods given it up in the first place, to remain above the land and look after Their children?

Morrow wanted to close his eyes against the grief-stricken and fearful faces. As a former priest, it had been his task to see the refugees at the monastery. The dead and dying he oversaw as well, trying to offer hopes and dreams of a peace that

he did not believe in himself. Even now, away from the duty he had shunned, he felt the call of his former life as clearly as if he still knelt in the medical wing of the cathedral, his hands awash in the blood of the dying. These people needed help, more than any man could give; if the Gods could not give it through a man dedicated to Them, who could? Even as tainted as he knew that he was, he wanted to yet believe that he could bring them peace and salvation. He was a foolish man; it was not the first time he had known it, nor would it be the last. Helplessness was simply not an acceptable feeling, for a priest. He hated himself more each time he felt it.

The main plaza gave way to a series of small, cramped roads, barely large enough for Fair to pass through unhindered. The citizens that saw him ducked into their homes, both to allow his passage and to gain some measure of protection in case the worst came. He wanted to open his mouth and shout at the top of his lungs, to proclaim in the city center to all who could or would listen his innocence; he was no member of the Hand, he was a priest of the All-Holy, and to fear him was to court the wrath of the Gods. However, he knew in his heart that more fear would not undo the wickedness that these people had suffered. It was one of the many things that separated him from the priesthood he had left behind.

These citizens, with their tiny, unpaved streets, broken windows and shadowed filthy alleys made him choke back a wave of nausea. It was not that he found them repulsive; it was the very desperation in their existence that left him empty inside. If only there were something he could do, something that his hands could touch and rend into a way to save them, he would not hesitate to do it. He could feel his palms beginning to sweat and shake, like an old man's; he clamped them viciously onto the inside of his cloak. If only he could reach out, instead of riding by. If only he could reach into every man, woman and child and call back the fears, the pain, the brokenness of their dreams, and carry them away to greener fields and palaces of

gold. The Gods, for whatever reason, had denied him that potential. Their touch was so much harsher than his own.

It was in the middle of this thought that the little girl, her clothing tattered and torn, and her angelic face smeared with mud, darted in front of Fair's hooves. Startled out of his reverie, Morrow had only a moment to whip his reins backward, knowing even as he did so that Fair would not stand for such treatment. She was a good horse, and such behavior was not needed, nine times out of ten; it was the tenth that concerned him, and always had. As if in response to his knowledge, and to give Morrow what he wanted, Fair reared on her hind legs, letting out a terrible neigh of rage. Her rising front hooves cleared the tip of the child's quivering nose by inches, and as the child's eyes began to fill with tears of shock and fear beyond what was required of her by the very city she adorned, she began to buck, tossing Morrow from side to side in an attempt to put him in his place.

The child fell backward, away from Fair's fury and into the muddy street. She was crying now in earnest, squalling like a summer storm, and with much more of a defensible reason. However, her fear had frozen her in place; not nearly far enough away to be free of Fair's mighty hooves. Morrow, his reins held in a death grip in his white-knuckled fists, shouted to her, but he knew that his words were falling on deaf ears. "Get back, little one! She'll calm down if you just back away! Go back to your mother and father! Go!"

He didn't have time to consider the thought that the girl might have spoken a language different than his own. He didn't have time to consider anything before Fair bucked again, taking advantage of his momentary lapse in attention. He could feel himself losing control of his wild, beautiful lady only seconds before she whipped around and darted forward, directly into the path of the little girl. She had never hurt another living soul before, despite her unpredictable nature; he had no reason to believe that she would trample the innocent waif beneath her

heavy, steel-hard hooves. Horror steeled his heart into a stone as two things registered in his mind at once; the wild panic in Fair's eyes that he had never seen before; and the unmistakable shattering of a child's all too fragile bones. He was too late.

Furious, and with no other choice, Morrow forced himself to manage Fair's rearing and bucking just long enough to find a safe dismount, then let her go. It cost him almost as much as the sound of breaking bones; Fair had been his horse since his arrival at the cathedral, and had been one of his dearest friends during his time there. He had not been able to part with her, nor she with him; he had tried to leave without her, only to have her break down the stable door to follow him. Had their relationship really come to this? He had never judged her to be a danger to others, and without the evidence direct before his eyes, he would never have believed such a story in his life. The wildness in her eyes frightened him nearly as much as the child she had trampled; that was not his Fair, that was an animal who had seen too much; a trapped animal in a cage, about to be led to the slaughter. What could have brought her to this, he could not fathom, but he had no time for regrets. He could only watch out of the corner of his eye as she took off into the forest like a demon possessed.

Kneeling in the road, he cast his gaze over the child, whose screams of agony had reached the breaking point. He could see her injuries were grave; Fair had not shown her a moment of mercy. Without aid, she would die of her wounds; he did not need to be a trained doctor to see it. A crowd had begun to surface at the sound of her screams; twenty pairs of eyes looked down on him with fury and fear. If he had been suspicious before, now he was a danger and a threat to them all, though not perhaps so severe a threat as the Hand. It was not a position he was comfortable with in the least.

"Please, is there a doctor here? Someone that can save her? I am a priest, I have no medicine that will cure these kinds of injuries. I can only soothe her, and that will not save her life."

The crowd continued to stare, transfixed by the haunting screams and sobs of the wounded child, and the fear that kept them from reaching out in any way to the horrified Morrow. Anger that he had not yet grown accustomed to showing boiled forth in his panic. "Will you just let her die, then? The Gods know you have every right to fear outsiders, but turn your backs on those who need you, and you will suffer far more alive than she will dead." Desperation crept into his voice. "Please, do not let her pay for my lady's transgressions with her life. She has no reason to suffer."

Not a single soul lifted a finger at his words, and disgusted, Morrow turned his face back and down to the girl, who was clearly dying with each moment that passed. Deep in his heart, he knew that he had lied when he said that he had no medicine that could cure her wounds. All it would take would be a touch of her forehead, a grasp of her wrist, and she would be healthier than the day she was born. Perhaps the citizens knew, somehow; perhaps they could sense the wicked power that flowed through his veins and passed with his blood through his entire body, radiating outward through his skin. It was one of the many reasons he remained shrouded in his rough woolen cloak; an innocent touch would betray him and have him destroyed at a moment's notice. He did not need to wonder what would happen, if he chose to save the girl's life, in so public a place.

His mind flickered back to the first time he had tried to save a fellow priest, who had broken his neck by falling accidentally from a high cathedral tower. The others had stopped him, binding his hands with leather to prevent his touch from landing. It would be wicked, they told him, albeit gently. To save his life with such a vile power would be to damn his soul to eternal torment and misery, and what priest could ask that of another? It was enough, they reasoned, that they allowed such a man as Morrow to stay and practice the faith, to try to make amends with the Gods for the sin that resided in his

soul from birth. It was all he could do, they said, to even have a chance at redemption. In Morrow's case, allowing the death of a man who had only sought the Gods' love and mis-stepped on his path to glory, was preferable to trying to save his soul by means of wickedness. Morrow had spent the rest of the night in solitude and in tears.

At the girl's side, he was faced with a similar dilemma. He could heal her, save her life and send her on her way; she would live, and he would be forced to flee the town of Rathport, eternally branded as a criminal in the area. He had come to Rathport with a purpose, and his purpose had been utterly destroyed by one moment of foolhardiness from his beloved Fair. Could it be that the Gods had no purpose for him in this place after all? If that were true, what did They gain by delivering Their message by such violent means? He no longer even wished to stay in Rathport; he would have been just as happy to move on, but his need for information that perhaps only Rathport could give, was simply too great for such a decision to be made lightly. Yet, if he chose not to save her... he could not even think it. To allow her death would surely damn his soul in the end, far more than the use of his power ever could. After all, her injuries were his fault in the first place.

"Forgive me, Fathers and Daughters of the All-Holy. I do Your work this night with tainted hands, but I must believe that You would not ask me to witness the death of an innocent with no attempt at rescue. I believe You call us all, and that this may indeed be her time to ascend to Your arms, but I do not believe You would perform this act through me. I am come to deliver peace and comfort to Your world, not to deliver Your dead."

Those words spoken, Morrow reached out with large, gentle hands, creased and scarred by the years they had spent tightly bound, to cradle the girl's broken and bloody wrist. The crowd gasped in recognizance of the same wicked power that had destroyed them so recently; an audible chorus of disgust,

shock and rage that he did his best to ignore, instead focusing on the passing of his healing power into her body. With heightened senses that came from his transfer of power, he could detect a handful of citizens retreating into their homes, too horrified to watch; still others shifted as if to stop him, but ultimately lacking the means or courage to do so. He could not fathom the feeling that healing the injured could be viewed as wicked or unwelcome, but he was no fool, after nearly fifty years of experience with similar situations. Though the priesthood had bound his hands, he had found ways of healing with a kiss to a fevered forehead, or the touch of a nose to a dying man's foot in a gesture of supposed respect. They had never known; he had been so careful to avoid their notice.

No matter how damned his soul might be, he intended to suffer after his death for the actions he had performed in the name of aiding and strengthening his fellow man, rather than the number of times he witnessed their suffering and restrained his hands in fear.

The girl's screams were quieting, and her eyes, which had been closed against the pain and nausea of her broken body, slowly opened to take in Morrow. A warm aura seemed to shine around him, and he found the courage to smile at her, just as he would have for any dying soul that he had come to comfort. "Fear not, my child. This is the love of the Gods, and with it you will be healed. Fear not horses as well; horses are wild and not pets, but they do not harm without reason. I will find out what caused this, so that it will not happen again. I promise you, no one else will be hurt."

She squirmed in his grasp as his touch turned from the cold touch of death to the warm brush of a summer wind, and finally to the blazing heat of an untamed forest fire. Still more of the crowd began to disperse as the child's flesh and bones slowly began to knit together, as if the fire in Morrow's hands could be said to cleanse them. He could hear their voices growing in anger, some now wishing death and decay upon his body and

his soul, some denying his role in the priesthood at all, and some - the worst, he thought - claiming that the pirates had returned to seal the deal, and that the children of Rathport were their new particular targets. He did not look up or speak, in the end. These people had seen too much, and thought they knew too much; they would never hear him, no matter what he said. Only his death would assuage them in the end.

At last, the girl found the strength to wrench her tiny wrist free of Morrow's grip, and leapt to her feet as if nothing had ever happened. She watched him with wary eyes, suspicious of his power, and yet she was so strong and lovely that she could not hate him for the kindness he had shown her. Suddenly shy and embarrassed by the priest, she turned to run into the crowd and back to whatever family claimed her, but at that moment, a burly man bearing more than a small resemblance to the girl's features strode through the crowd, his muscles bulging like stone outcroppings. Morrow braced himself for the attack he knew was coming, for this man could not be anything other than the child's father. As if to confirm his guess, the little girl ran straight into his arms, laughing.

"Daddy, daddy, see? I got stepped on by a horse, but this nice man saved me! I'm all better now!"

The stone-like gaze of the giant did not waver a single inch at his daughter's joy. Instead, he politely set his excited child back on the ground, and turned his baleful gaze to Morrow. The priest was acutely aware that the man's ocean-blue eyes were filled with tears; tears that he could show no other man. Morrow knew he was doomed with just that look alone; they were not tears of joy or thankfulness. They were tears of loss. Morrow had made a very, very large mistake in healing her, indeed.

"May you rot in the deepest part of hell, priest," the man spat through gritted teeth. "Have you any idea what you've done? And you've even witched her into thinking you've saved her! Your evil knows no bounds." He grabbed his daughter

roughly, holding onto her shoulders and shaking her so violently that her tears began anew, and not from any remaining pain that Morrow had inflicted on her. "Get out of this city before I call the authorities. Your kind isn't welcome here. You've done enough damage this night."

Before Morrow could turn to leave, a glint of steel shone in the giant's hand; his standard meat knife, used for comfortable dinners by the fire with his family. Not a single person in the crowd lifted a finger as the knife found its way unerringly into the little girl's neck. Her death was instant, and instead of sharing Morrow's hatred for him, the crowd echoed the sentiments that the giant had just thrown at Morrow. They wanted him gone. If he had not healed the girl, there would have been no reason to destroy her; her death would have been an innocent accident. A life given by the hated magic was not acceptable, and would bear only the most wicked of fruit; so they believed, and so they always would. Indeed, the damage had already been done, a year before Morrow ever arrived.

Morrow turned, his head bowed low to hide the tears that streamed down a face that had suddenly aged a thousand years, and made his way out of the cramped and vicious street that had led him so astray. In the plaza, people threw the spoiled remains of their food at him, or spit at him; he noticed none of it. Only two things registered on his haunted mind as he left the town of Rathport, much more alone than he had been when he arrived. The first was that he had failed to gain the information he sought. The second was that the Gods, most of the time, had the sickest sense of humor he had ever seen in his life.

Arma Flair crouched amidst the darkened Black Forest boughs, atop one of the highest trees. She could have seen forever, if she had been able to stand; as it was, her sight was limited to the ten miles of dirt road beneath her. She was

beginning to get bored. Patience had never been one of her virtues; in fact, she doubted she had ever possessed anything worth awarding the title of "virtue." In her past life, perhaps the tables would have been turned, but she didn't like to think of that more often than she had to.

Whatever her job might once have been, tonight's job was something she preferred not to do, but had learned to do with a straight face and a straighter blade. The rebels preferred their goods ill-gotten, and from those who served no purpose in polite society first; the problem was, they were running out of both criminals and food. Word of their twisted and perverse company had reached the farthest ends of the world, and criminals were starting to think twice before reaching for this free loaf of bread, or that pretty little trinket for their unknowing sweethearts. Criminals often lost the hands they stole with, as well as whatever baubles were worth their trouble, when they met with the Tormentor's Hand. It was their mark of pride, of solidarity; they were not to be trifled with.

Arma, as usual, was at odds with the situation she faced. She had never intended to end up on the wrong side of society. A simple life, she had most desired, and had most eluded her from the time she was a child. She had had duties to perform, favors to sow and strangers from kingdoms not her own to befriend, before she had ever earned her womanhood. How ironic, then, that the day she received that precious gift, she had also been stricken with a curse; a curse that would haunt her for the rest of her life, and rob her of what chance remained for her to live a halfway normal life. Which of the fertility goddesses she had angered, she had yet to fathom - but at least her power, and her willingness to use it, increased exponentially at the end of every month!

The Tormentors welcomed such gifts with open arms. She had, at first, been terrified of the way their greedy eyes hungered for her power, lusted after it as if her ample bosom and slender beauty could somehow allow them to tap her

abilities further. They had desired her long blonde hair too much; she had refused to play their bedroom games, and cut it man-short to send the message clearer than her words. They wanted her to kill, and kill she would, but the suggestion of prostitution, to a girl who had been just shy of royalty so many years ago, had frightened her beyond anything else she had considered in her life. Her violence, impatience and what little remained of her soul would have to suffice.

They had made her a captain, after seeing the full range of her abilities in person. She might have been one of the rare and elite Masters, had she given in to their demands, but captain suited her just fine. Unfortunately, being a captain on this night meant lying in ambush for any travelers foolish enough to pick this particular road out of Rathport. The apprentices and sell-swords weren't reliable enough, even if they had the muscle and violence to pull off the job once a target came along. The Tormentors always needed sharp eyes; they had not yet found anyone with enhanced eyesight as a magical ability. Once a target was sighted, perhaps she could lay aside her own power in favor of theirs; they needed the prestige to report to their commanders. She needed a break.

The sound of heavy hoof-beats brought Arma's attention fully back to the road, forgetting both her treasonous thoughts and her wet, aching muscles as if they meant no more to her than the wind itself. She spied several flashes of ethereal white between the trees, long before the creature entered her full vision; her hands flashed in silent signals to the band of misfits that she knew would be watching for her alarm. They were slow, as she had expected, and she could see the full outline of the white horse, its eyes wild with abandon and its body trembling with the exertion it took to maintain its frantic speed, before any of them reacted enough to drop down to confront the beast.

The apprentices were swathed in black cloaks, both to protect them against the damp chill of the air, and to allow them to blend in among the Rathport guards and the shadows

alike. The horse never saw them coming as they grabbed its free-flying reins and wrestled it down into submission. For its sake, the Tormentors needed good horses; they had not yet become desperate enough to consider supplementing their meager diet with horse meat. This white horse, in its beauty and majesty, would likely be passed to a Master, someone in need of notoriety; white horses were rare, and would be noticed and feared from a distance during their future raids.

Disappointment was the first thing to register on Arma's senses when she dropped down to join her lackeys. The horse had borne no rider; she had hoped to bring back some much-needed rations and wineskins, not merely a horse, however beautiful it might have been. She was no eye for horses, but she could tell that the beast was past its prime and in need of recovery before it would be useful. Its fright had been genuine; she wondered what could possibly have sent such a beast in flight from Rathport. Had another band of Tormentors attacked again? The thought made her grind her teeth in irritation. Rathport was theirs, and had been theirs, for weeks on end. If another band encroached on their territory, it would mean blood, both theirs and her own company's. They couldn't afford such a costly encounter.

As she approached the horse to begin checking it for any immediate injuries, however, she froze, her hand resting on the animal's flank. The horse was still overwrought and frantic, but it seemed to calm just a bit beneath her palm, almost as if it found her touch familiar. The thin but soft material of her gloves was all that prevented the creature from melting to the ground in a puddle of gore; the thought of it relaxing for her was too much to pass off as mere coincidence. Her breath caught in her throat; her stomach clenched into a tight knot of panic. The rider of that horse, she had known him, once. It had to be him; the man who had both saved her life and damned her at the same time!

Her hands shaking, she pulled away from the horse

without further investigation. When she spoke to her apprentices, her voice was harsh yet quiet. "It's good. Let's get it back to Master Grimm before he comes out here looking for us." Her back was to the haunting beast before she even realized she had turned around. She could not read her apprentices' faces through the thick black cloth masks they wore, but she knew they sensed her weakness; the great Lady Arma did, in fact, have a weakness after all! It was a fact she knew she would have to contend with, once they informed her superior - and why wouldn't they? There could only be promotion and praise in it for them. The best Tormentors were not only the most powerful; they were the most crafty and wicked as well.

She would just have to pretend that she'd been unwell. The alternative was too much to face, both for herself and for the killer she had become. It was better to pretend she knew nothing; that the man associated with that white horse was simply dead, lost in the forest; she could sneak away from the group on the way back and claim to have found his stripped corpse out in a deserted glade. There were ways of hiding her shame that she had not even begun to think of; she would continue to think of them all the way back to camp.

Morrow leaned over the rail of the Drifting Hag and lost what remained of his meager lunch. The crewmen pointed and laughed their drunken laughs; a braying not unlike a sick donkey, he thought with a shudder. On any other day, he would not have had any trouble with the ocean; today was no exception, but it was wiser to allow his fellow passengers to assume the worst they could fathom instead of the reality he hid from view. An old man trying in vain to set sail with the seaworthy was by far the kinder image to give them, than an old man sick, both in heart and in body, from loss and an unstoppable surge of failure. They couldn't know, and they never

would, until the day came when they too found themselves on the run from the very people they had sworn to protect and serve. All it took was a little magic.

Closing his eyes did not help; he had always looked inside himself for answers and for peace, and had never found either to be available at his whim. Instead, he did his utmost to focus on the crashing waves that propelled the boat forward, inch by inch. Watching the ocean, he knew, would be the first mistake for any land-faring old man; for him, it was a comfort to watch the ebb and flow of change.

The monastery had taught him seamanship, in the course of his desire to attend those in need in places beyond the ocean; he had come to feel more at home on the waves than in his makeshift bed in the stables, Fair serving as his only warmth during the frigid winter months. There was something welcoming about the rhythm of the ocean, something that promised him that all things in the world were balanced and fair. The tides came in, the tides washed out; the boat that went down in the storm ought to have known better. It gave as good as it got, and took fools for what they were; it was not a message that Morrow had seen often echoed in the world at large, though he wished vainly that he might encourage it.

The urge to throw himself overboard - a simple task, for an old and helpless man such as himself - was maddening. How easy it would be to end his cursed life, once and for all! He had never wanted this power of his, never asked for it, and he had certainly never intended to stand by and watch as people died, with or without the use of his gift. The haunted look in the eyes of the father whose child he had "witched" had not faded from memory since his flight from Rathport, and he doubted it would do so anytime soon. What good was a gift, when it was not welcomed? A gift that was possible to replicate through natural purposes, albeit with far greater risk, seemed foolish; unnecessary. It seemed that people would rather risk being cured with dirty knives and tainted water than accept the beauty of

what he could do. The priesthood had never managed to cure him of his anger; it raged silent and helpless inside him.

Only two things stopped him from agreeing to the selfish but comforting thought of ending his life. The first was the feeble desire to live on; to someday see a world where magic such as his might be redeemed. He had limited hope for such a thing, but he had always been a dreamer, and a foolish one at that. There were still those who asked for his power in secret, and revered him as a God himself for the beauty and kindness and peace he could provide with a single touch, but they were few, and he had to admit to himself that it was only a matter of time before someone talked. He had been careful to leave a trail of false names and lies behind to hide his identity, even with those that promised discretion, but someday, his luck would have to run out. It was inevitable.

The other thing that stopped him was the memory of the last time he had tried to end his life, twenty years prior. He had gone to the bell tower, rope in hand, with a purpose and confidence in his stride that he had never mastered at any other time. Then he saw her; a hysterical young girl, roughly half his age, her well tailored clothing torn to shreds as if she had been running for miles through the most wicked of brambles. Her feet were bare, but that was not what Morrow had noticed first; beneath them, a patch of dying grass was slowly spreading into a perfect circle, surrounding her in a ghastly embrace.

He had paused, uncertain of what to do; though nearly thirty years of age by his estimate, he had never had more than passing contact with females. The demands of the monastery were firm about such things, and he had never found any need or interest for anything more. On top of that, this was a mere girl, and someone of higher birth than him by far; he had no business hesitating before falling at her feet. Still, something about her set him off guard, his skin crawling and his heart pounding with adrenaline. The patch of grass beneath her feet chilled his blood even further. A careful look into the distance

brought a trail of dead and dying grass to his attention; the way she had come, no doubt. She was dangerous, he knew at a glance; the smartest thing to do would be to send her away. The tears streaming down her face, and the strength with which her hands were balled into fists, ready to strike anyone who dared touch her, however, prohibited him from doing any such thing.

Bitterly he shook his head, casting aside the memory. She had intruded into his life so suddenly, so painfully, that he had never spared a second thought for his original purpose. After his encounter with her, he was not at all certain that he could bear to end his life any longer. She had given him a reason to live, though she had not known it at the time; after all, he was twice her age, and he was a priest as well! Their union had not been one of Man, but one of Mind; they each bore each other's scars, and sought the same things from a life that was determined never to see them succeed. He remembered her screams as he touched her; her struggle to defend herself, knowing that she would destroy him in an instant, the antithesis to his own power - but he had not pulled back. His soul, she could not take.

The information he had sought in Rathport was in regard to the girl that he had met, that strange day. He had never been able to remove her from his mind. She was so frail and delicate, like a forgotten flower in a field of weeds; but it had not been her beauty that captivated his mind. It was the screams that had undone him in the end; the absolute pain and terror that human touch could bring to another. He had wanted more than anything to erase that; to touch her again and again, to show her that she did not have to fear anything. It was only a lie, of course; had she touched anyone else, she would have had an ocean of blood on her hands. With him, however, she could feel no fear, no pain. She was, if anything, more alone than he was, and the thought of that served only to break his heart.

It was the desire to find her that ultimately drove him to reject the monastery. He was too far astray from their ideals

already; adding this strange affection for a child that he barely knew only drove the wedge deeper. Love, he could not call it, for he had never experienced enough of it to know. Obsession, perhaps, or insanity, suited him better. His power - his curse, they called it - was the only reason that he could reach out to her, and to call it wicked or a sin after that only served to incite his rage to levels he had never encountered before. That itself was another nail in the coffin, of course.

The heaving in his stomach began to settle as Morrow began to practice some of the deep breathing exercises that he had learned at the monastery. Though he could not call himself a true man of the Faith any longer, he believed with everything inside him that he still had a link to the Gods that had granted him his power. Why would They have given him such a thing, if They had not intended for him to use it? The curse, everyone else called it; it was something that just happened, if you were wicked or cruel or if someone in your family needed to be punished for some slight in their youth. He was not so quick to believe that. The Gods had given up Their power indeed, but he could see for himself that magic was far from dead. People just couldn't trust what they couldn't understand. They were afraid, of the very thing the Gods had commanded. That too, broke his heart.

If the Gods willed it, he would find the nameless girl that had haunted his dreams for twenty years. He had spent his time in search of information that might lead him to her, but so far his search had turned up empty. It was a fool's errand, he knew without a doubt; the search for a child with no name and no portrait to pass around could only end in ruin. As someone of high birth, that too would pose a problem; there were places that he could not go, even under the guise of the priesthood that he used to serve. Add to that the fact that the child was older, too; he dismissed the thought that a child so perfect could have transformed so much as his own haggard face had, over the years.

Still, no matter how much he tried to convince himself to leave off his ridiculous search and spend the rest of his remaining life as a recluse, plying the Gods he still served in his own way and on his own time, he failed to find any sort of peace or comfort in the consideration. He had followed his heart for the first time since leaving the monastery; he had first noticed he had a heart to follow at the same time. To turn his back on that now would be the most foolish decision of all.

One of the drunken sailors sidled up to Morrow, interrupting his thoughts with a rudely jostled elbow and a grin that bore more holes than a wedge of cheese. “Chit fer yer thoughts, old man, if they’re worth ‘at much.” He laughed and flashed a ruddy copper coin between his fingers; it was the donkey man, Morrow realized with a sinking feeling in his chest. Of all the luck! The man, oblivious to Morrow’s discomfort, only moved closer, throwing an unwashed arm around his shoulders with a careless air. “Canna get ya some chowder? Mebbe a loaf or two? My buddies an’ I were takin’ bets on how long yer lunch’d stay put. I’m gonna be rich, see?”

Morrow was, not for the first time, relieved by his rough, woolen cloak. If the man had hit any part of his skin, there would have been trouble beyond anything he could handle. Though he had learned the finest of seamanship, he had yet to learn to swim. Gently he removed the donkey man’s arm from his shoulder, forcing a feeble grin in his direction. “Surely you don’t want to be this close if you’re correct, aye? Maybe you need a new cook. Poison’s not all that appealing, even at sea.”

The guffaw that followed was too close to Morrow’s ear for him to avoid wincing when it came. “Speakin’ of Cook, he wants ta see ya. Says he got a problem fer a cloth to handle.” It always bothered Morrow to hear the slang term for the priesthood; who deserved more honor than those who had dedicated their lives to honoring and teaching about the Gods? “Better git to. He looked a bit green hisself.”

With his message delivered, the sailor raised a half-full

tankard of ale in a drunken salute, then made his way as carefully as he could manage to his post, only falling into his fellow lookouts twice along the way. Morrow shook his head, dismissing the sot as quickly as he had come. He had no patience for drunks, though his conscience bitterly reminded him that an obsession for drink was not altogether unlike his obsession for his mystery girl. The ship's cook, at least, was something he could deal with easily.

Making his way to the galley cabin was no simple feat, with the Drifting Hag pitching almost constantly. If he had not been a seaman, Morrow would have been very afraid for his continued survival. If the cook was seasick, it would not surprise him a bit, nor would it surprise him if someone had snidely informed the man about Morrow's illness and heavily implied that Morrow believed it to be the fault of the cook. Sailors had a rough sense of humor, outside of Morrow himself.

What did surprise him, however, was the state of the galley upon his arrival. Pots, pans and various food stores had all been strewn across the floor in haphazard piles, as if the pitching of the ship had simply knocked them all astray. He might have believed that, from the movement of the ship, but there were other conditions that ruled out the possibility of simple accident. Bloodstains covered the bare walls and rugged floor, culminating in the corpse of what Morrow could only guess was the ship's cook, lying in a heap against his trusty stove.

A low groan emerged from the body as Morrow neared; the man was not dead after all! Morrow crouched next to him, heedless of the bloody mess, and looked into the cook's fading eyes. "Let me be frank. I am more than a priest, sir. I can save you, but it may damn your soul to hell if I do. I will not act without your consent. What would you have me do?"

The man shuddered, pain wracking his body; Morrow could see, upon closer inspection, that his body was slashed in a thousand places with his own butcher knife. Morrow's mind immediately jumped to the donkey man; could he have done

this? If he had, why had he sent Morrow down here to witness it? At last, the cook reached out with trembling hands and grasped the edge of Morrow's sleeve. "Please... I...have children. Do what... you must."

His head fell, having expended the last of his energy with the plea, and Morrow knew that his time to act would be limited. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself and placed his hands around the most grievous of the cook's injuries; a vicious wound in his neck that should have killed a lesser willed man. The golden glow that surrounded him was familiar and comforting, and he slowly guided himself into a trance-like state, focusing on each individual wound and willing the deepest to heal first. He preferred his patients unconscious; it would save them the uncomfortable burning sensation that had so upset the child in Rathport, and it would also ensure that he did not need to waste any effort in restraining his patient. His sole task would be to heal, and heal well.

Time passed, without Morrow or his patient noticing. It was only when Morrow began to catch himself yawning and his head dipping lower over his patient that he realized the windows in the galley had gone dark. Healing complex networks of injuries such as these were time-consuming and exhausting, particularly as violent as this one was. The child he had tried to save in Rathport had mercifully had simple but clean injuries; those healed quicker and without much effort from him. Unable to remove his hands from the cook, he resorted to using his teeth to bite down into the flesh of his arm to help him stay awake. It was not the first time he had needed to do so; anyone who saw his arms uncovered would be shocked by the number of scars he bore from just that sort of behavior. Thankfully, nobody ever did.

Still more time passed, and Morrow sensed a growing knot of panic making its way into his stomach as he bit down deeper into his own flesh. He was well aware of the limits of his own power; the magnitude of his patients' injuries, plus his own

strength and ability, affected his gift greatly. The closer a patient was to death, the more power Morrow would need to expend. He had already healed one patient close to death, the night before, and he had not slept well, out among the Black Forest trees and away from his planned comfortable bed in Rathport. Healing another one now was foolhardy at best; but of course, Morrow did not have the heart to abandon a man in need. It was one of his greatest strengths, he felt, but it was also very likely to be his doom in the end.

Almost at the same moment Morrow's vision began to blur, the cook stirred into consciousness. The garish scene was no less traumatic than it had been, but the blood had stopped flowing from the man's neck, as well as the rest of his injuries. With his newfound strength, the cook gently but firmly sat up, his bones and muscles popping with the exertion of moving after being too long in one place. "That's enough, priest. You're going to end up in my place, and I can't do what you do."

Morrow, forced out of his exhaustion by a need to move, snapped back to attention and pulled his hands away. "You're not fully healed, I'll manage. Just sit back and..."

The cook folded his arms sternly across his chest. He was a few years younger than Morrow, by his guess, and well built, albeit with a thick layer of fat covering everything he had; it was a cook's prerogative to bear such things well. "I said, that's enough. I'm a seaman, not a pansy. Scars are fine as long as they ain't open." Then, with a sardonic chuckle, he added, "Maybe I'll only go halfway to hell, this way."

Morrow winced, but the cook only laughed in response. "Don't worry yourself, priest. I owe you my life, and there ain't nobody down here to see what happened. My name's Huck, but most folk just call me Cook. That's fine by me." He offered a firm, calloused hand to Morrow. "Anything you need, you just ask. I'll repay you any way I can." He noticed the hesitant look on Morrow's face, and shook his head. "I'm not a stupid man, priest. I know what they think of powers like that out there. I've

seen men hanged for it. But what you just did there deserves a place in the sainthood, not death. If I'm damned for sayin' it, then the Gods strike me down here and now. They were willin' to leave my kids orphans, before you came."

Morrow accepted the handshake, but the toll that healing had taken on him was beginning to become too difficult to manage. His entire body trembled with the effort of remaining conscious, and cold sweat had soaked through most of his clothing. Huck managed to get his hands firmly under Morrow's arms before he lost control of his body, as lifeless as a dead man, completely asleep.

It was a state that he had fought showing any living soul; to fall impotent in the face of an enemy, or even a man who had been innocent but considering a mugging or beating, would see him to an early grave. His only thought as he lost consciousness was of the mysterious girl that he had yet to find, and of how he could not fade to death before he got to see her face, at least one last time, and to touch her one last time.

Huck hauled Morrow over to a pile of bulging flour sacks, and with the effort it would have taken him to lift a baby, laid him down atop them. It was the only thing even close to a bed that he had, and when the priest woke up, he had more news to tell him; such as why going above deck again would mean risking both their lives again.

Arma glared up at the sullen-faced man in front of her, torn between the desire to rip his throat out, and the desire to do things slower; accidentally allowing him to trip over one of her bare ankles, or bumping into him in the middle of a dark alleyway, would be so much more appealing. Either way, the spreading bruise that marred her left cheek would be avenged; her past life aside, it was the mark of the truly unsalvageable to strike a woman, even an untamed hellion such as herself. She

was, after all, only the messenger.

He sneered at her as her fingers gently probed her swollen cheek; the prints of his knuckles bore out the most color in her face. He had often wondered if she could lay hands on herself, she thought with a bitter smirk; now he knew. She listened with half an ear as he spoke in the language of the well-born; a language he had learned only by listening to the death wails of others.

“If I am to understand you correctly, Lady,” and there was a significant pause before the honorific, “I sent you on a mission to retrieve bodies. Not only did you fail to locate, or create, any corpses, and subsequently any food, drink or supplies, you brought me a nag.” Arma’s gaze fell to his left arm, which was bandaged in a swath of cloth strips that ran up and over his shoulder, undoubtedly torn from her own bedsheets as payment. She would have laughed, if doing so would not have incited further violence on his part. “The nag in question has broken my arm, putting me at a significant disadvantage in future missions. I am effectively useless until further notice. This places you, my sweet, as the acting leader of our band. I am sure you had no intent to cause such a rise in your own potential.” His words dripped with sarcasm, as if she were too much of a fool to understand him otherwise.

She remained silent, unwilling to bait him further, nor confess to an untruth, and after a few moments of impasse, he continued. “The plan, which you missed, of course, by being out frolicking like a peasant wench with a pretty horsie, was to strike the village of Meria. Since I’m sure you haven’t bothered to look that up...”

She finally had to speak. “Coastal town, due northwest of here. Don’t play me for a fool, Krame. You’re not leader anymore, you know. I could melt your tongue for you, if you can’t keep it civil.” The smile that crossed her face never reached her eyes. “Unfortunately, I wouldn’t do it the way you hope. Maybe the girls in the next band over would be more

welcoming of your empty threats and emptier mind. I have no use for them.”

His face burned with the heat of a thousand suns, and Arma could almost hear him gasping for air, like a fish out of water. If there was anything Krame hated, it was women; even worse were strong women. It was far from the first time he had pressed his luck with her, and she intended to someday manage to make one of his attempts his last. Though she had not planned to usurp his self-appointed throne in pursuit of this, she could not argue that it could only serve as a benefit.

It took him several minutes to fashion a tenuous grip on his temper before he responded. “You’ll like this one then, wench. The order was to slaughter every last man, woman and child in the village. They aren’t much, maybe twenty homes at the most, but they’re well off. Fisherfolk and traders mean that we’ll be living the high life for the next month or so.”

The bitter tang of bile rose in her throat. The orders he referred to came from the Authority; the entity who controlled the Tormentors. Nobody had ever seen the Authority before; it spoke from the shadows through servants who died immediately in messy ways upon delivering its messages. No one thought to question it, for fear of what it would do; the going theory was that it had once been a human, but had received a gift powerful enough to denigrate its body to the point of inhumanity. Its gender could not be determined, so most safely opted to refer to it by its title. There were a few who wondered if perhaps it could be a God, come upon the land to make its desires known; she didn’t want to think of that, though she could not strictly deny it either.

An order from the Authority meant that she would have to carry it out. There would be no clever failures to spare the lives of the innocent; no subterfuge to blind the Masters from the truth. Only the most vile of orders came from the Authority, she had noticed, perhaps toward this very end. Any such order from a man could be denied or refused; from the Authority, it

was law and order and high command all at once. She was not the kind of girl who would risk her own skin for that of another; she had lived too long with the Tormentors and the wilds of nature for that instinct to prevail. Still, the slaughter of a small coastal village, just to prolong their own continued existence, wore heavily on her heart. As leader, she could refuse the kind of wanton usage of their spoils that Krame had intended, but reality was a harsh mistress; if she did not allow it, they would steal it, and come for her in the night. It was not a risk she could afford.

Not for the first time, Arma wished desperately that she knew of a place to find one of the “good” bands of Tormentors. Not all of them were led by men such as Krame; petty despots with an eye only for their own well-being and pleasure. The original Tormentors, in fact, had been only the best of men, with the best of intentions. To create a world where magic was not vile and sinful, but welcomed and embraced; that was their goal, but they had opened their arms to any with magical gifts, thus allowing the truly wicked in as well as those who would change the world with their power. The one who had guided her to the Tormentors in the first place had been the better kind; now she was dead, at the hands of ruffians not much different from Krame. She still hated them with a passion; wanted to own them, force them to her feet and make them pay for the loss of her dearest friend and childhood nursemaid. As it was, she would never find them; Krame would have to suffice.

From the gloating smirk on his face, she would have sworn he saved this particular job for her. Her displeasure for random death was well known among the fools she served with; however, her willingness to destroy anyone who tried to take liberties with her person, or with anyone stupid enough to cross her, kept most of them from mentioning it within earshot. Only Krame, with his hatred for women, lacked the wit to watch his step near her. She would never suffer fools if she could help it; those fools who openly sought to hurt others with their

foolishness died first. It was one of the ways she justified the destructive power that flowed through her veins. If her only gift was death, then she would deliver it to those that best deserved it, and pay the cost silently, knowing that she had done all she could.

It was something that he had taught her; the man that rode the white horse. The man that she was doing her best to convince herself was dead, too far gone from the world to ever grace her eyes a second time. She had been only a child... if he could only see what she had become, he would reject her. A priest he was, though he followed only few of the traditional rules; such death did not become him, and never would. Still, she knew what he had come to the bell tower to do that morning, and if she had ever done a good thing in her wretched life, it was the interruption of that act. Such a man should not be wasted at his own hands. In another life, in another world, she might have even loved him, but love was not for women like her. There was the love of death, and nothing more.

Krame, of course, could not keep silent for more than a handful of moments. His snide, mocking tone cut into Arma's precious thoughts like a jagged knife, bringing both her temper and her power boiling to the forefront of her mind. She had always envisioned it as a lava flow, buried, sleeping in the spaces between her blood and her flesh. The rush that came with it was equal but more powerful than adrenaline, and it only took a moment to erupt before the bodies started hitting the floor. For just a moment, she wanted to lose control; to give in to her desire and leave Krame a broken and charred mountain of flesh beneath her boots. It would have been so easy, and it would have felt so good...

Still, she restrained herself. It would be more fun, ultimately, to keep him around as a personal assistant. Just maybe, being forced into servitude for a woman would be good for him. It was growing more obvious by the moment that he had not spent enough time hiding between his mother's skirts,

at the very least!

Whatever he had been saying fell on Arma's deaf ears, and she cut into his rambling without a second thought.

"Krame?"

He blustered, fumbled, unused to being interrupted, particularly by a woman. "I wasn't done, but what do you want?"

She smiled, again, this one more dangerous than the last. "Firstly, you will no longer speak to me in such a tone. I expect you to maintain the level of respect that you owe me as leader. If I feel that you are failing, remember what I can do to you. I know what men find most important in life." The place she directed her eyes left him red for an entirely different reason than anger. Her smile did not waver an inch as she continued. "Secondly, I expect you to call me Lady Arma at all times. If I hear the slightest omission, hesitation or argument, I will aim for your tongue first. A mute servant follows orders better, I think." The growl that had been in his throat died immediately.

"Lastly, I want you to go and inform the others that we set out for Meria at first dawn. We will go by land; we cannot afford a boat right now, and I will not frighten the Rathport citizens further by demanding free passage from them. If I hear anything that I find to be unacceptable on the way there, any inkling at all that there is a man or woman dissatisfied with my promotion to leader..."

She strode forward, brushing Krame aside like a stray sack of meal, and arrived at the side of her own personal tent. Without waiting for him to ask what she planned, she removed one of her gloves, stretched her slender fingers luxuriously, and then gripped the side of the tent with her bare fist. In less than a moment, the cloth caught fire and began to char. She took her hand away, but the damage was already done; both she and Krame watched, she in amusement and he in abject horror, as the tent collapsed in on itself and withered into a smoldering pile of ash and scrap.

“But... where will you...” Krame’s voice had become a whisper, as he managed the only words that he was capable of producing at that moment. She liked it that way.

“Sleep? Oh, don’t worry. You were the leader; I am now. That means I’ll take your tent. Mind the wildlife, they get restless after the full moon reaches its height.”

She turned her back on him and made her way to the spacious tent that had formerly been Krame’s, never once looking back. He would be trouble; she knew without a doubt that she would have to punish him at least once or twice before he learned his proper place. Nonetheless, for this night at least, she knew she had him beaten. There was no further need for watch or discussion until the dawn.

Shedding her wet clothing, Arma sank down onto a cot that smelled of sweat, oily hair and perfume that she had never smelled before. The dawn would arrive all too soon, and before she slept, she would need time to cry in advance, for the lives she would be forced to take. She never forgot the faces of those she destroyed; it was part of her penance. If she ever forgot for a moment to honor those she killed in her memory, she would be no better than the mindless beasts that she had threatened Krame with; they weighed heavy on her heart, as she intended them to. Perhaps someday, they would burst her heart once and for all.

Morrow awoke to a throbbing pain in his temple, just above his left eye. He wanted to curl into a ball and whimper, but he was too proud of a man for that sort of behavior. His time at the monastery had taught him to ignore personal discomfort; to cast it aside as an offering to the Gods, rather than an inconvenience to him. If the Gods could only take it away, he would be more than glad to sacrifice anything They wanted!

A sound in the distance alerted him to the fact that he was not alone. Nerves overriding his pain, Morrow sat up and turned, the motion leaving lights flashing across his vision and fluttering wings of distress in his stomach. When he managed to get himself under control, he laid eyes on his companion; it was Huck, of course, who cleared his throat again, more quietly this time. Huck smiled apologetically and dipped his head in a nod of greeting. "Sorry 'bout that, priest. Your lodgings ain't what I would prefer for a man of the cloth, but they're the best I got to offer."

Morrow shook his head, still dazed, and looked down to discover his lumpy bed of flour sacks. The rough blanket that laid over him appeared to have been roughly sewn from the remains of some discarded burlap sacks as well. He couldn't complain; it was more than he had expected to find, after losing consciousness in such a disturbing place. The blood-spattered room looked even more garish than it had before, as the blood had all dried into rust-colored reminders of what he had witnessed. His head only reminded him how much he disliked looking at them.

Presently, he came to the chief question he had. "Are you still recovering? I should have been able to keep watch, there's no telling what could have happened..."

Huck squared his jaw and looked him in the eye with a gaze that would permit no further foolishness on his part. "I'm fine, for now at least." When Morrow looked as if he might ask further about the suggested "later," he continued, "Don't worry your head about me, priest. We've still got problems above deck, and you still ain't told me your name yet."

Resting his head in his hands, knowing when he was out of his element, both from the seeping exhaustion and confusion still assaulting his body, and from the mad pounding of his head, Morrow gave up trying to command the situation. "My name's Morrow. Morrow Grave."

A muscle twitched in Huck's face, and then he paused to

let out a low whistle of appreciation. “One of those Graves, are you? I thought your face was familiar.”

The denial Morrow gave was flat. “Only in blood, I’m afraid. I lived in their home for all of ten hours. They had just enough time to change my diapers before they figured out I was an abomination. If they never had a funeral for me, I’d be surprised.”

Huck nodded, a humorless grin spreading across his face. “Doesn’t surprise me, though I’m sorry they gave you such a raw deal. They’re none too kind to what they don’t understand anyway.” At Morrow’s curious glance, he added, “I met them, once. On the other end of a document stating my talent and prestige as a chef. They didn’t like my terms. So I ended up on this wreck instead.” He gestured grandly to the horrid galley about him, whacking his sturdy palm into one of the supporting beams, as he would have clapped an old friend on the back. “From one hag to another, I passed on the waves of the Gods.”

Laughter made Morrow’s head throb worse than it had before. He resolved not to repeat the motion a second time. Instead, he spoke low, trying to keep his voice at a whisper. “You said something about the situation above deck?”

Now Huck lost his jovial tone and sighed. He found a seat atop several crates of supplies. “I’d tell you to sit down first, but you’re already there. Might as well join you.” After a moment, he spoke again. “You’ve been out for five days, Sir Grave. I don’t know if you know that. You’ll notice that nothin’ down here has changed, except for one thing; the door is shut. I’ve tried it five times, and it’s been locked from the outside all five times. I almost broke it once; I’m sure I could, but then I got to thinkin’.”

He stood and began pacing the bloody floor, as Morrow tried to fit his head around his disbelief. He had passed out before, to be sure, but five days was a new record. Had he really risked his life and come so close to death without noticing? He would never have done anything different, if given the chance,

but the results still amazed and frightened him. Could it be possible that he could push his healing further and learn to control the toll that it took on his body? Perhaps he could...

Huck returned to his story, and Morrow pushed his thoughts behind him in order to focus what remained of his attention on it. "I know who tried to kill me. I've still got the stink of his rotgut in my nose and throat as we speak." He spat in the corner; Morrow did not need to ask further who he referred to. "Unless I miss my guess, the same told you to come here and find me. What yarn he spun you, I don't much care. What is clear to me, at least as a simple ship's cook, is that he probably intended you to die alongside me."

"Why would he do such a thing? Drunken madness? Or..." Morrow winced. "I suppose some measure of my power must be visible to others. I myself cannot see how it has marked me, but it would not be the first time I have been singled out."

Huck nodded. "That, and I'd guess the drink has somehow given him an extra dose of wit, allowin' for how dumb he is normally. He got sensitive to you; and he sent you down to me after he'd done the deed. I don't need to ask what he's got against me; that mug he's got didn't come from me. I said he'd had his fill." Sensing Morrow's displeasure with the realization that his power was readable from the outside, he paused. "I should tell you, it's not somethin' just any man can smell on you. Only those who know what to look for - either they've been around a magician, touched by one, or knew someone who was one. The general people don't know, Gods be praised. The ones that know are the worst. Of course, other magicians can sense it too, but I wouldn't lay odds on that one for the moment."

"How is it that you know so much about magic, without being a magician yourself?" Morrow was impressed. It was the first time he had ever met with anyone well-versed enough to discuss the finer points of magical usage; at least, anyone not trying to kill him first and foremost. Of course, the priests at the

monastery had been less than forthcoming.

Huck ran a hand through his greasy, unkempt hair. When he looked back at Morrow, a shadow had fallen across his eyes. "My children. My girl grows things; flowers and trees mostly. Our crops never die, I swear, no matter how bad the weather gets or how rough the season is. My boy has a gift with horses. They hear him, and he says they talk back, I dunno. I used to think it was an overactive imagination until I saw him tame the worst-bred animal at our farm with just a touch." A snort of disgust punctuated his next comment. "Unlike your own folks, Sir Morrow, I ain't got the heart to kill that, or toss it out like the waste in the morning. They done no wrong to anyone, least of all me."

Suddenly, Morrow thought that the man's kindness made perfect sense after all. "And your wife?"

It was the wrong question to ask. Huck shook his head, and the shadows in his face grew longer. "Let us just say that she did not share my opinion. She's gone now, and they're mine, and that's the important thing."

Before Morrow could manage an apology, Huck returned to the problem at hand. "Anyway, the bastards above deck have us trapped down here, waitin' for you to join me in hell, before they even think about opening that door. If we bust out, they'll be like flies on..." Looking at Morrow and suddenly recalling that he was indeed a priest, he grinned sheepishly. "Well...you know. Sorry. They don't want us gettin' out of here alive."

"So it will be a fight, then." Morrow felt his heart sinking. He was alive, thank the All-Holy, but he was in no condition to remain upright for long periods of time, and in even less to heal wounds. He was no fighting man; what use had there been for violence in a monastery? He could use his covered fists, if pressed, but he was no sort of trained fighter, and he knew it in the depths of his bones. Fighting would likely injure him, rather than his enemies.

“Not just a fight, Sir Grave. Most likely a mutiny.” Huck leaned back against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. “By now, they’re all in on the act, including the captain. If he didn’t know, he’d be pretty pissed about the lack of food and ale by now. We’ll have to take the ship for our own if we mean to survive this.”

Morrow tried to stand, to assert himself as being able to stand on his own two feet without difficulty if nothing else, but the first rock of the ship sent him back roughly on his bottom, in the middle of his makeshift bed. Surprising both himself and Huck, he let out a mild curse of frustration. “I’m no fighter, Huck. I’m not even much of a man, right now.”

Huck nodded. “You’re fine, but you’re not going to be able to help much. That’s fine. I just want you to be ready, when I go out there. You’ve made me able to fight again, at least, so we’ve got a chance. Sorry to break this to you, priest, but my childhood wasn’t like yours. I grew up in back streets and alleys. The only reason that drunken sot got me was because I didn’t have my back to a wall.” A genuine grin crossed his face. “I don’t exactly like it, mind you, but I’ll do what I have to. To pay you back, and to get back to my kids.”

Morrow frowned, but couldn’t do anything other than nod. If Huck was as good a fighter as he claimed, there was always the chance that by the time anything dangerous happened, Morrow would be recovered enough to take action. And if not... well, what harm could there be in sacrificing his life for such a man? To die healing a man who only wished to survive the hand dealt him by the Gods, and return home to his gifted children, whom he loved despite their sins. He could not hope for a more worthy end, though he would not seek it out like a fool. Either way, he would be at peace with the final result.

“Well, it’s settled, then.” Huck stood, cracked his neck and his knuckles, and plastered his most feral grin onto his face. “I ain’t wastin’ any more time down in this hell hole. Let’s go home, priest - whatever home that’ll be in the end.”

His fist was through the helpless wooden door before Morrow had time to do more than rise, unsteadily, from the sacks of flour and grip the edge of the kitchen's tabletop. He watched as Huck twisted his wrist around to unlock the door, then withdrew his fist in order to swing the door politely open.

There were no guards. Huck had been correct to assume that they were not being actively watched, at least. The small corridor that led to the upper deck, however, would bring them in plain view of their enemies within moments. Huck, ever a man with a purpose, strode casually down it in a series of confident, broad strides, leaving Morrow to catch up. The sounds of battle reached his ears at the same moment he staggered into the broken, shattered doorframe. He wanted to scream to the man to wait, to not be reckless, but he knew that Huck was not nearly the berserker that he was projecting. He would be careful, for his children first, and for himself second. There was no reason to worry. No reason at all.

Mustering every last ounce of his courage, Morrow stumbled down the corridor, trying to steel himself for the battle ahead. For all he knew, it could be his last.

The assault on Meria was swift; as swift and sudden as she could have made it. Knowing it was not comforting in the least. Arma raked her bloodstained hands through her cropped hair, leaving haunting streaks of red interspersed with the delicate blonde strands. Those who looked at her from afar had called her a Devil, a Demon, and a Goddess of Death before they died; she had not responded to any of these. The truth, she feared, was greater than any of these.

Her fingertips brushed against something in her hair; a wilted flower, withered by time and the bloodshed she had just finished causing. A single white daisy, its beauty marred only by infrequent red splashes. She had once vomited at the sight of

blood; it was a memory that seemed to belong to another person, in another lifetime, perhaps. The sight of her own blood still had the power to make her knees weak, but it was so very rare to see it that she had almost forgotten. Thankfully, she had not been reminded today. The flower served as a reminder of the more delicate creature she had once been, and today, it was just as scarred as she herself was. It made her strangely sad, though she could not think of why.

The apprentices, in their black cloaks of secret death, milled about the vacant village, some carrying corpses to the funeral pyre in the middle of the commons, some congratulating themselves and each other on their conquest. Not a single one looked her way; it was just as well. She didn't need any of them; didn't want to hear their whoops and shouts of joy at the destruction of their fellow humans. They made her sick; sicker by far than blood ever had. If it would not have earned her the Authority's wrath, she might have thought to take them too; she could say it was an accident, that bloodlust had taken her, but the Authority would know better. He, or she, was no fool, and Arma's murderous hands were tied.

She shifted atop her newly-acquired mount, uncomfortable to have it beneath her, but unwilling to let it go. The white horse she had taken from the Black Forest would bear no other rider, and rather than have it put to death, she had taken it for herself. Each powerful stride and motion reminded her of the man who had ridden it before her; she couldn't allow herself to think of him, not with so much blood everywhere. There was a part of her that wanted to find him, to smile up at him, covered in blood, and to fall on her knees, begging forgiveness that he could not possibly give; the rest of her wanted to run, to never let him see the creature she had become. One look would destroy him; one touch would send the kindness he had once shown her into the distant past of her memories, and she wasn't at all sure that she could survive such a thing.

She watched with half her attention as a pair of black cloaks dragged off the body of a young woman, not much older than herself. Her sightless eyes were open and accusatory, and Arma could have sworn that they stared at her alone. She smiled, as if to say farewell; it did nothing to ease her pain, or that of the soul that would haunt her for eternity. The woman marked one of the final corpses to be delivered to the pyre. The Tormentors always burned the bodies of those they murdered; the risk of disease from rotting corpses was too great, and if they did not taint the Tormentors themselves, they might do worse by tainting the very food and supplies they had come for in the first place. In those cases, the deaths were completely useless, and made Arma more furious than ever.

She found herself wondering, not for the first time, if the war that the Authority promised would ever come. The original Tormentors had listened, when it spoke of a gradual ascent to power, through the unfortunate ends of others, in order to establish a more formidable opponent against those that rejected magic. It was all in the name of building their army, it had claimed, and that someday, when their power had reached some unspecified threshold, the battle would begin. She had joined, hoping that that day would be soon; that she could use her wicked power to make the world a better place for others. And yet, she was still murdering, still killing, for no discernible reason.

She wanted to speak to the Authority, even if it cost her her life. Only Masters had the right, so her task seemed simple enough; she would have to become a Master first. Her rise to leader in the place of Krame had been a step forward on that goal, unintentional though it might have been. There were still tasks to perform as symbols of her dedication; trials to overcome as proof of her strength. It would not be an easy road, but she would walk it; for the sake of herself, and for the sake of the man she still kept trying to tell herself was dead somewhere, mount-less, in the Black Forest. Power such as his brought her

to her knees; it was the vilest kind of sin to punish a man for trading wellness for injury. Her own power, she understood, was an abomination; but his! It was too much to bear without violence.

Just as her anger began to boil, another woman wearing the standard black cloak of an apprentice, approached her. Not a woman, on second glance; a child, with the full height and confidence of a woman twice her age. Her features were sharp and hawklike; compared to Arma's soft curves and glowing beauty, she was like a sharpened battle-axe next to an enchanted blade. Her dark hair was long enough for her to sit on. She must have been beautiful, once, just like Arma, she thought; time and murder had hardened her to the point of forgetting it.

"You are weary, Mistress. What ails you?" Though her voice carried the harshness of long suppressed emotion, it still had a lilt that almost brought a smile to Arma's face. All the childlike air had not left her, yet; it was refreshing, though she knew it could never last.

"Don't worry yourself. I'm not what I would call popular, at the moment. Krame saw to that, while he still had a tongue. Once we take our goods and leave, I'll be in a better humor."

The girl smiled, revealing a sudden hint of her former beauty. "Beg pardon, but have you ever been in a good humor, Lady?"

The comment caught Arma off guard; surprise had never settled well with her. Angrily she turned on the girl, though not for the reason she expected. "And just what business do you have, saying such things to the leader of your band? And what makes you think you understand anything about me? You're no more to me than the dirt stuck to my boots, wench."

The girl didn't even flinch, which upset Arma even further. "I've been watching you. I'm sure that makes you nervous, but I've watched you since you first came to us. I watched Krame try to break you. I watched as you left him a

shell of a man. I watched it all, and thought someday I might walk in your footsteps. A foolish dream, shall we say.” Her green eyes bore into Arma’s with a naked honesty that made Arma want to flee on the spot. “You think no one hears you, alone in your tent at night. You have no secrets from me, my Lady.”

It was all Arma could do to restrain herself from killing the child outright. She had not been watched; she couldn’t have been! And overheard as well! No, it was not possible! She had done her best to be silent, and to keep her thoughts private from others, to avoid their knowledge of how weak she truly was, and how little she thought of their aims...

The girl, sensing that Arma was too stunned to be a threat, took one step further and reached out. Her hands, like Arma’s, were gloved, but the gloves ended just shy of her fingers, leaving them free to move. Arma had no time to think before the girl had taken one of her hands in her own, as if she were Arma’s dearest lover and friend. Arma’s rage melted into a combination of terror and panic, but the girl was stronger than she looked; her hand went nowhere when she tried to jerk it away.

Several of the black cloaks were watching now, clearly enjoying the sight of their female leader and this chit of a girl, hand in hand; depending on how Arma reacted, there would be either another murder or a romantic prelude at hand, and they weren’t going to miss either! The girl looked over at their newfound audience and had the audacity to wink; Arma wanted to kill her again. What could she possibly hope to gain from this ridiculous display?

Then her breath caught in her throat, as the child’s silky black hair moved far too close to her cheek for comfort; her lips were too close to Arma’s to stop what was about to happen. Did the girl long for death? Or... could her power be stronger, somehow? Was she about to lose her life to some child, playing at love games to hide the soul of a devil?

When the girl spoke, it was in the barest of whispers,

and below the ability for anyone beyond the two of them to hear. "You trust no one, Lady. Therefore no one trusts you. You lack nothing in power, but you lack followers. You have made us follow you, but we do not wish to. Make us wish to. Those that do not, will die, if you will it. You are not as alone as you think."

Then she did kiss Arma; a fluttering, ethereal thing that she could not be sure had actually happened, but though Arma waited for death to be as swift as her own assault on Meria, it came not for her, nor for the child. She had not yet resumed breathing when the girl pulled away, a soft blush staining her cheeks. A fine actor, the child was; she would have to remember that, for the future. How had she overlooked such a child before?

Furthermore, did the child mean what she said? That there were others in the band that desired what she did? Or was this some kind of trick, to call her desires out into the open, so that she might be ambushed and murdered in turn? The girl had asked her to trust, to open herself to others; had she any idea how impossible that was, after the things she had seen, the things she had done? Had she been wrong from the start, to hold herself so carefully away from the eyes of others? Honesty was not a virtue often, among the magically cursed.

The girl gave Arma one last smile and patted her hand, before releasing it with a reluctant sigh. "Think on it, my Lady. If you change your mind, seek me out." Her words were clearly meant as a double entendre; their audience nearly tripped over their own boots, but the seriousness in her eyes clearly informed Arma that she meant it as a continuation of their previous conversation as well.

Then, just as quickly as she had come, she was gone; Arma began to wonder if her power lay in some sort of ability to disappear, or to fade into the shadows. If she had not still felt the kiss, and the girl's touch on her hand, she might have dismissed it as foolishness, but she was not quite fool enough to ignore reality. Perhaps the girl was right; the continued charade

of their being lovers might indeed be beneficial for keeping the menfolk away from her tent long enough to manage some semblance of privacy; something she had not had, since Krame's deposing. Leader or not, they still wanted to see a pretty girl undress. Perhaps, if that girl had no interest in men...

The grin that spread across her face made half of her audience giddy with imagination, and the other half suspicious; Arma never smiled, ever. If she was smiling now, hell was about to erupt on someone, of that they were absolutely certain.

It only occurred to her later, when she lit the funeral pyre alight with bare hands that inflamed the wood and flesh more violently than her destructive wake had for the living citizens of Meria, that she had yet to learn the girl's name, or how she had managed to touch Arma without the sting of death. They were questions she would answer, and soon.

There was little to do for Morrow, at first, other than lean against the corridor wall and watch. Huck's fists were like hammers of judgement upon the heads of his foes; if Morrow had not known better, he might have suspected a secret past as a martial artist or a mercenary, as well as a childhood in the streets picking fights with bullies. One after another, the ship's crew turned to stop his sudden onslaught, only to find themselves lifted by the open necks of their shirts, or in some cases, the legs of their pants. Huck was flexible, it seemed.

The anger and disgust in the eyes of the crew, however, confirmed Huck's suspicions well. They had not anticipated Huck and Morrow's survival, much less that they would emerge in any condition to fight. Those that had noticed Morrow, lurking in the corridor, spat curses and insults at him as much as they did at Huck; he was no friend to them, just by virtue of the gift he possessed. It made him angry; he was glad for a moment that the Gods had bestowed a kinder gift upon him than others,

or he might have regretted his actions for the day. For this, he wanted to believe that They knew what They did; that They had some reason for cursing his life the way They had. There was too much reason in the madness, though it left him a broken and lonely man.

He was not, at least, completely alone. Huck had restored at least a fragment of his hope when it came to the world and its magical anomalies. If all the world could just be as Huck was; if all the world could let things be! The damage from the Tormentors had been so great that any hope of that seemed impossible, he knew. Still, the Tormentors were beings of battle, of death, of destruction; they had no better way to stop themselves from killing than Morrow did to stop himself from healing. They did what they did best, and not all of them did it for wicked reasons. The priest in him decried this separation of sin, but he had lived too long in the real world to remain oblivious to the difference between a man who fought as Huck did, for a reason and a purpose, and a man who fought only for the joy of death.

Huck had finished with the majority of the crew, and paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. He had taken perhaps undeserved care to incapacitate, not kill, his foes. Whether this was in regard to the fact that his companion was a priest, or his own personal sense of justice and mercy, Morrow could not be certain. Huck had not come away completely undamaged for his kindness; most of the shallow cuts and bruises he bore had been given him during those times he stopped to ask for information from his targets, or had spent extra time making sure that the fallen were not in danger of being thrown overboard by the swiftly tilting ship. The captain, it seemed, was aiding in his smallest of ways.

As a priest, Morrow was well aware of the fact that life was rarely, if ever, fair. He knew the doctrines of self-effacement, of pushing aside one's need for justice and gain, and giving them up to the Gods and Their will. Despite that, these doctrines had

been the hardest for him to stomach, and he was beginning to seriously doubt that he had, in fact, learned them at all. He had pleased his superior, at least, but with each passing day, Morrow wished that his hands, clasped so long in earnest prayer, could do something to change the world beyond the restoration of the wounded to health. Only the Gods, he feared, could make for the sort of change he most wanted, however. No man, and no woman, could change the minds and hearts of a million others, all of whom had their own reasons to reject the desire for peace.

A handful of shouts before him brought his mind back to the battle at hand. Huck had managed to grab the shirts of two more lackeys, bringing them squarely into each other. The crack of skull against skull was deafening; they slumped to the ground, unconscious. Morrow could not wish them any less than a pounding head when they awoke. A third lackey, however, unnoticed by Huck until too late, ran up behind him, bearing down with a wicked looking and rusty knife. Huck had just enough time to turn to face him before the blade plunged down into his left bicep, around the edge of his sleeveless shirt.

Morrow stood upright, leaving the wall he had taken for support, and made a move toward Huck, but the cook shook his head, glowering at the man in front of him. "Don't move, priest. I've got it covered." As the crewman gloated at his strike, Huck reached down to grab the hilt of the new addition to his body. With the man watching, he steeled his jaw and almost politely began to draw forth the weapon as if it had no more meaning to him than removing a stray hair or bit of dirt from his clothing. The look in the sailor's eyes morphed from glee and self-congratulation, to stunned blankness, to abject terror in the blink of an eye. Realizing that the only way Huck would return his weapon would be by having it served to him in his gut, he took the wisest option available to him and fled in the direction of the captain's cabin toward the height of the ship. It was beginning to become the final stronghold of their assault, quicker than Morrow had anticipated.

Blood ran down the front of Huck's shirt, staining the white cloth red; Huck ignored it and turned to Morrow with a grin. "Think that's the worst of it. Now we've just got to deal with the captain, and whoever was dumb enough to run back in there. You still standin', priest?"

Morrow nodded, but his eyes never left the wound in Huck's chest. "You, sir, have the stamina and stubbornness of a raging bull. Are you sure I can't..."

He threw back his head and laughed, a merry sound that Morrow couldn't help but grin at. "Feeling left out, eh? Sorry. I guess they didn't teach you how to bust heads in the church. It's a useful skill, sometimes. Might even be useful for you. You can do more with your hands than just heal, you know. Fill 'em with something that works for you instead."

Huck bent down to retrieve a sword from one of the fallen crewmen. After what looked to Morrow to be a very cursory examination of the weapon, he offered it to Morrow with a solemn look in his eye. "Look, priest. I ain't gonna be around forever. Once we get off this boat, you're goin' your way and I'm goin' mine. I've seen what you can do, and it's mighty fine, but understand something - you won't live to use it, if all you do is run away. You've been running away from just about everything in your life, haven't you?" It was more a statement than a question, and Morrow looked down to the deck in shame. Was it so obvious?

"I don't blame you. It's easier to run away and let them hate you. Makes you stronger, makes them weaker, I've heard it all before. But there will come a time in your life where you will want to fight. Some things are worth fighting for. If you learn anything from me, I hope you learn that." Huck smiled, a genuine one that reached for Morrow's heart. "I don't wanna hear someday that some bastard cut you up and you sat there and let him. Not after you saved my life. Not after you saved my kids. You don't have to use it until the time comes, if you don't want to. Just know you have it, and think on it from time to

time.”

Morrow, with trembling hands, reached out to brush the hilt of the offending blade with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. He doubted that he could even have the strength to bear such a weapon, let alone ever have the need to take the life of another. Still... if he had had the weapon back in Rathport, would things have been different? What good had he done by healing, only to watch the child die anyway? If he had only been stronger, more willing to fight instead of running away...

After a few moments of hesitation and inner turmoil, he took the weapon in as firm a grip as he could. He would have to learn to use it, he knew; it would not come naturally to him, as weak as his body was in the face of physical exertion. Still, he could not deny the truth in Huck's words. At the moment he hefted the blade, he felt something small and innocent whimper inside him, then die quietly, forgotten and alone; he was no longer a priest. He could no longer call himself innocent; he was no longer a simple bystander in the world, observing and healer where necessary. He would act to carve his own destiny; he would not be helpless any longer!

Huck turned away, allowing Morrow his thoughts, and slowly began to make for the captain's cabin. Just as Morrow turned to follow him, however, something violent and dark exploded into the sky in the distance, leaving a black cloud of smoke staining the beautiful sunny day, carving it in two. Rather than dissipating, the smoke continued to billow, unabated. A forest fire? Or...

Huck's face twisted into a death mask of pain and despair. Before Morrow could react, he had fallen to his knees, shouting something incoherent about his children, and Meria - the place where their boat was supposed to be landing. Could it be so close already? Suddenly Morrow put two and two together. Huck and his children were from Meria. He was on his way home. And whatever hellish fire had claimed the sky for its own, lay at the heart of it.

The captain, it seemed, would have to wait.

Arma turned to her new friend, at war between the natural distrust that had become part of her very soul, and her newfound attempt at trying to find the courage to reach out to someone other than herself. They had retired to her tent, and after waiting long enough to ensure that no overly curious apprentices were eavesdropping, or leering in through some imperceptible hole in her tent to watch the “girls at work,” she had decided to find out exactly what the truth of the matter was, in regard to the mysterious child. Trust, she could not argue, was a valid thing for her to work on, but in order to do so, it would first have to be gained. Otherwise, she was little more than a fool.

The raven-haired child leaned back atop Arma’s bed, her knees crossed lazily in front of her. Her eyes were closed, Arma noted, but she was anything but asleep. The girl was all poise and act and drama, and that alone was reason enough for Arma to distrust her good intentions. Even if it were used against her enemies, rather than herself, how could she trust someone who never showed her true face? Was she friend, as she claimed, or foe? And even if she was a friend, how easily that could shift, and Arma would never know.

“Masque.” The sudden word startled Arma, despite all the attention she had given to watching the girl. “It’s not my real name, of course. I trust you, my Lady, have no doubt of me; but if I told you the truth, my ability to aid you would be compromised.”

Arma’s eyes narrowed. “So, I assume that would make you someone I wouldn’t much like, if I knew the truth?”

The girl shrugged, an unreadable expression in her face. “Think what you will. I can’t answer you and still sit here. Choose wisely.”

It galled Arma to give up, but it seemed wiser to continue to allow the girl her game. If nothing else, she hoped to uncover enough secrets to weasel the rest out for herself. Once she knew the truth, she could make her full decision on whether to keep Miss Masque alive. "I concede. You have given me no reason to distrust you, so far."

Masque nodded, as calm as a summer breeze; she had expected this. "To limit the number of secrets between us, I will give you the secret of my power. You have yet to even ask any of us what we do, do you know that? You simply give orders, rather than using each of us where we are best effective." She stretched, deliberately, and Arma had to look away; the girl's tight shirt and tighter leather vest did little to restrain her gifted body. Did Masque actually believe that she could be baited this way, and by another woman? If she had been a man, perhaps... it was awkward to think of.

"My power, is this." Without warning, Arma found herself enveloped in Masque's arms, being cradled like some sort of infant. Just when her anger began to flare, she noticed the prick of pain in the back of her neck; a single drop of blood fell away from the tiny wound that Masque had given her. The girl smiled, forcing Arma to rest against her while she brought her weapon into full view; a slender needle of a knife. She put it away without further instruction.

Arma struggled against her grip, but Masque was stronger than she looked. The girl placed one hand quietly over Arma's mouth, willing her to remain silent. "I'm not done yet. Be still, Lady. They say I am the ultimate assassin. My power is in my blades. When I touch another, my aim is true and my hand is steady. Without the touch, I have learned to be nearly my own equal. The fact that I can touch, and kill, has made me best at ending the lives of brothel invaders, I admit, but I may look at a king, or perhaps even the Authority, the same way, with the same eyes, and know the end of his life in an instant."

Arma felt her heart begin to race beneath Masque's

hands. Her gift was real enough, it would seem, and she had a rough sort of beauty that would guarantee any man's interest in her enough to practice it often. It would be invaluable in the art of assassination, but... the Authority? Speaking such words was treason, of the highest order. Arma certainly had questions, for the Authority, but a frown crept over her face at the realization of what could happen, should she somehow get the chance to ask them. If the Authority truly had a soul to match the devastating commands that it issued, then perhaps destruction was an outcome. She could not let such a being live... but treason!

Masque ran the fingers of her free hand through Arma's hair, still not permitting her to move. "You have questions. We all do. The Authority's commands come from a beast, more animal than man. He takes pleasure in seeing our power, and uses us for such. He is no better than a common brothel man himself." When she smiled, it was not a kind one. "Everyone else calls him an It, or just the Authority; I know better. Only a man could be so cruel. There is no other explanation."

The stroking of her hair was beginning to put Arma to sleep. Sudden anger laced through her veins, and she roughly pushed herself out of Masque's grasp and away from her hands. "Stop that. I'm not your lover, Masque. I thought all that was just an act. I barely even trust you. After what you've said tonight, you're lucky I don't execute you here and now." Her heart only raced faster at her own threats. "Keep your hands off me, unless there is some reason you must gain my attention or save my life. Can I trust you that far?"

The look in Masque's eyes was, if anything, victorious, but she nodded sagely. "Very well, then. The rush of your heart and the ease with which I can trap you say other things, but your words I shall obey, my Lady." Arma wanted to grab her by the throat; though she did not have any interest in romance, with or without a woman, she had first thought that Masque's power lay in her ability to induce strange reactions in the bodies

of others. It was distracting first, embarrassing second, and completely unwelcome third! She gritted her teeth as Masque spoke again. "If anything, you should take heart in the fact that I am just as skilled a murderer, when it comes to women."

One thing still bothered Arma. "Speaking of that... um, how did you, you know... Without dying?" She couldn't say it without blushing.

"Kiss you, you mean?" Masque's voice had taken on a lazy quality, or was it sulking? Arma couldn't be sure. "I know your power, my Lady. As an assassin, it is my duty both to kill, and to avoid being killed. A simple salve on my lips was all it took to block you. My skin never came in contact with you."

"You are both clever, and dangerous. Why you are on my side is a question I would like answered." Arma stood at the back of the tent, at the farthest point she could from her new friend. The newfound effect that the girl's power had on her had made her even more wary of her company. Even if she was on Arma's side, Arma would have to keep her busy; it would be far too stressful keeping command of her apprentices, control of her emotions, and Masque's hands where they belonged all at once!

For only an instant, Arma swore she saw Masque falter. The girl's changing attitudes and emotions drifted out of sight, leaving behind a quiet shell of a girl lost in thought. Whether it was her real self, or just another guise, she was not prepared to guess, but it interested her a great deal. The flatness in Masque's voice when she spoke only seemed to corroborate Arma's belief that she was seeing the truth behind the artifice. "I too, have questions. Let us not share them. Our questions are for Him, and Him alone. No other soul could possibly answer them, and some might even scorn them."

It was true, true enough that Arma could not argue. She was, however, gripped by an intense curiosity to know what a child such as Masque could have to ask the Authority. Did she simply want into its bed, despite not knowing its nature? Or did she want power? Or perhaps, just perhaps, she had questions as

deep as the ones that lay on Arma's heart. Despite the almost jester-like quality of her new friend and companion, there was a strength and bitterness in her words, and a mind that spoke of knowing more than it ought. After all, she had come to Arma, risking a violent and painful death, rather than hiding in the shadows, continuing to play at love games with the other apprentices. There was more, far more, to Masque - of that, Arma could be absolutely certain.

As expected, Masque's betrayal of her true self shifted away, into more comfortable climes for her. "So, you wish to see the Authority, correct? That will be difficult, stuck here as we are. Someone will need to report the success you have wrought here in Meria."

"What do you suggest?" Arma frowned. "I'm not sure I've had enough experience with you yet to trust you to deliver that news alone." It was typical for a leader to deliver the reports to the Authority anyway; they were the ones tasked with the orders, therefore, they were the ones to answer to their successes or failures. Some, in Arma's position, sent their trusted lieutenants to deliver messages for them, fearing a rebellion or worse. As a new leader, it was risky to leave her apprentices unattended.

"Disband them." Nearly every time Masque spoke, Arma felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach, with the wind knocked out of her. The child could move from surprising, to frightening, to maddening, to outright insanity more brilliantly than any stage actor or madwoman Arma had ever seen! Sensing her disbelief, Masque continued. "You do not know, of course, but the men and women you have out there are divided in their beliefs. Half are like us. They have questions to answer, at any cost. The other half will follow you only until they find a way to remove you from the equation. You may control them through fear, but they will never follow an order to address the Authority directly, rather than an order to continue the pillage and slaughter of humans like cattle. They are not

worth our rations, nor our time, nor our supplies.”

“So you’re saying that I should take those that have questions, and just... go? Go to the Authority, knock on its door, and announce our arrival?” It was foolish; the sort of plot that only a child would think of! “We would be exiled. Removed from the Tormentors. The Masters won’t stand for our disappearance, and it’s only a matter of time before the Authority comes looking for us, after that.”

“Let Him.” Masque did not look at her. “If He wants us, it will be that much easier to meet Him, when the time comes. The journey to His heart will be a long one. We have time to wait. The Tormentors need us; this will be a blow to them, to lose us. We are powerful women, my Lady, women that they desperately need in their onslaught against the magic-less. If they do not notice our absence, then we have determined that there is no more desire for that fight to continue; that the Tormentors have become nothing more than an Authority-sanctioned band of killers. Do you think it an unwise bet?”

Arma sighed, finding a cross-legged seat on the floor. She would be lying if she said anything other than no. Her misgivings about the Tormentors had been long-standing, after all, and men like Krame only further made her wonder about the future of the Tormentors. What once had seemed like a noble goal, in pursuit of demanding the tolerance and acceptance of the world, had turned into little more than a bloodbath. And if that was the case, then the Authority had to be notified. If it were unaware of the happenings of its people, then it would only be noble to report it; otherwise... She couldn’t think of it.

Just as she began to wonder, in the very recesses of her mind, what the priest on his white horse might have advised her to do, Masque yawned and performed another of her blatantly provocative stretches, then stood. “If we mean to leave, we should do it soon, and sudden. I have spoken with those that I know have questions. They await your command, my Lady. The

others will sleep until dawn, where they will find us missing, and suffer whatever fates they visit upon themselves.” She had not even waited for Arma to answer!

A growl surfaced in Arma’s throat. “And you believe that you can give orders without my approval? Without asking or informing me of your plans? You have a lot to learn about playing the servant, child.”

Masque smiled her usual opaque smile. “I carried out your orders well enough, my Lady. You just didn’t know you were going to give them, yet.”

With that, she bowed low to Arma, blew her a soft kiss that infuriated her to heights well past anything she had managed that day, and exited the tent, leaving Arma to fume between bouts of packing and preparation.

It would, indeed, be a long journey to the Authority’s door.

The fire still smoldered in Meria when Morrow and Huck arrived at shore. There was no one to greet them, and no one to miss them, either; the captain had not been worth his weight in talent. He was the kind of captain that gave seamen a bad name; all drink and no skill. Tossing him into the water had given him a sober head just in time for him to start swimming. Morrow had been concerned for the man’s continued survival for only a moment, until he’d learned that Huck was one of the only able fighters of Meria. If this attack was not planned to coincide with his absence, Morrow would eat his cloak, one thread at a time. That made the captain his enemy, as far as he was concerned.

Huck had run off with only a momentary apologetic glance at the priest; Morrow did not need to question his urgency. The fire that still blazed near Morrow’s feet seemed to preclude all hope for survivors, but Morrow could not deny him

the necessity of looking, one last time. Morrow dragged his cloak across his face to block out the smoke and the scent of intermingled pain, fear and death; the warmth of the fire attracted him, despite the source of what fed it. It was not the first time he had been witness to the atrocities that the Tormentors wrought upon the weak and undefended; had it not been for Huck's association, he likely would have turned around at the first sign of wreckage. He had seen enough in Rathport to last him the rest of his days and beyond.

The fire snapped and crackled, and Morrow stepped aside as something fell free of the flames; the porcelain head of a doll, the paint that had served to give it a face ran in streaks down its surface. He gazed down at it for a few moments, both out of respect for its previous owner's passing, and to allow it to cool before his exploring hands reached out to lift it up. The streaks of paint turned to streaks of blood and tears in his mind, and he wanted to reject it; to throw it back into the blaze it came from, despite knowing that it would never burn. The fossil of Meria was too precious to spurn, anyway; who knew what else would survive? The Tormentors always took anything of worth or of use, after all.

Bitterly he cast his mind upon the Tormentors. If he had only been a more destructive man, with the gift to take lives, rather than restore them, he would make them suffer the hell they had wrought upon the innocents of Meria tenfold! And then, when they were finished, he would give them Rathport's vengeance as well. The sword in his hand might have done for that purpose as well, but it would have taken him a decade to seek them out and destroy them, if in fact he even succeeded in surviving to finish the deed. The Gods, it seemed, had other plans for him than Their retribution. Why They wished to keep him chaste and unsullied was anyone's guess; he had long since given up trying to know Their minds.

He stowed the broken head in his knapsack, taking care to restrain his desire to force it in with no care for its well being.

He was angry and he knew it, and somehow he doubted the Gods would blame him for being angered by such things. Why did They not do something; why did They not take action against these most wicked and vile of sinners? If someone, anyone, only had the power to stand up to them and destroy their stranglehold on the world, it would be a much kinder and gentler place. Bitterly he glanced at the sword he wore, which hung awkwardly from his hip in a makeshift scabbard that Huck had fashioned for him. If only he could use it, and use it well enough to stand outside the fear of the Tormentors' destructive magics... but what use was a sword against such evil?

Then he sighed, confronting the awkward thought that had begun to surface in his mind; a feeling of shame, of impatience, and a different sort of anger than the one he felt toward the Tormentors. He did not want to harbor such a thought, but he had no firm evidence to deny it, either; he was simply afraid. All his life, he had been taught never to kill; never to stand out or be noticed. He was to be as the earth; warm, comforting shelter, but invisible to all but the Gods; other men would walk upon him and be lifted up without ever seeing him. Such was the way of a priest. Now, seeing the evil that had permeated the world and only sought to grow in notoriety, could his silence be maintained? What good could he do, in this kind of world? It would be better to take his blade in hand, and...

Guilt washed over him. No matter what he feared his life would come to, now that he had denied his oath of pacifism, the act of taking a life still seemed like one meant for another man. Huck had said that Morrow would not have to use his blade until he chose to; he was beginning to doubt that a great deal since coming to Meria. Could he ever be ready for such a demand? And yet, how many towns and cities could he afford to arrive late at? Eventually, he would come to a town in need of defense. It was only a matter of time before someone forced his hand. The thought that the Gods might want him to kill could

not be tolerated in any form in his mind; he thrust it out almost tangibly, with a shudder that shook his entire body.

Something haunted him; the vision of the beautiful child he had met at the bell tower. The longing in her eyes, the desperation in her motions, and the grief that had wracked her body as she sobbed in his arms, defenseless and in need of salvation, had never left him for a moment. She had killed... he knew that, he did not even need to ask. It was written on her hands and in her eyes, as plain as any script he had ever seen. It had robbed her of everything, leaving her a shell of a human. What could it take from him? He was not a vain man; humility had been taught well in the priesthood, and beyond that, he had never had much reason to think great thoughts of himself. Still, to lose what small measure of pride in his manhood that he yet retained, seemed the most frightening thought of all. Unless... could he find something greater than what he had, at the hilt of his simple sword?

The sounds of a violent struggle reached his ears from somewhere in the distance, and Morrow's hand froze almost willfully on the hilt of the sword he had been stroking absently. Had the time come? He made his way past the ghastly fire and onward toward the sounds; through a handful of charred buildings and broken windows, into a silent alley, if such a small thing could be called a true alley, and into the outskirts of the village.

Then he saw that he and Huck were not, as they had hoped and feared, alone.

A circle of tents still remained, with a campfire in the center, laid in the precise pattern that had marked so many of the Tormentor camps in the area. Perhaps it was a necessity, for someone's magic, or perhaps it was just a personal quirk of the layer; Morrow did not care enough to dwell on it long. The tents were well stocked with the goods of Meria; packed crates and filled sacks held what they intended to ship back to their foul master. He did not know the name of the thing; no man

lived to tell the secrets of the Tormentors, if ever he found out. Either he was put to death, or he joined them.

The origin of the battle he had heard was immediately apparent. Huck, breathing hard and with tears of rage streaking his hardened face, was locked in mortal combat with at least three magicians, all wearing black cloaks. They wore superior grins as they tormented the grief-stricken father, who - of course - was not faring well against their onslaught. One seemed to have a gift for forming blisters upon his enemies; one boasted a powerful ability to siphon out Huck's energy and transfer it into his own, and the last one simply controlled the ground; where he touched his bare feet, small earthquakes trembled, forcing Huck to keep moving or risk being knocked to the ground. That one seemed more powerful than the others, though Morrow could not immediately determine why he felt that way; perhaps it was as Huck had said, magicians could sense the power of other magicians, if they had a mind to.

Huck did not even turn his face to Morrow; he was so focused on surviving that he had no moment to spare for anything outside of his three assailants. The look in his eyes demanded blood; there was no question in Morrow's mind what the poor cook had found in his search of the village any longer. The laughter of the child in Rathport echoed in his mind, bringing a growl and a seething blaze of red into his vision as he battled with himself. Huck needed attention, the kind that only Morrow could give, but there was no time. Huck would never stand aside now, not with the slayers of his children right in front of him. Morrow could not heal him mid-fight either, not with so much motion and confusion in play. The ability to maintain a hold on him was just not present. The only solution, then...

Awkwardly he drew his weapon free. The makeshift cloth scabbard unwrapped itself and fell to the ground, unheeded. Morrow felt his muscles protest the weight of the weapon, but he refused to bow beneath it. He had the strength

of fifty years of fasting, overnight vigils and grave digging inside him, combined with the necessary strength of a seaman; he was not completely unprepared for his burden, whatever he might think. If nothing else, he wanted his outer display of strength to be even weaker than his actual potential; let his enemies think him the feeble old man that he appeared to be. It would make his newfound duty easier, and faster, and perhaps just a touch less evil than it would have to be, otherwise.

The earthquake magician was the only one of the four men present to notice him. A cruel smirk swept across his face, and he bowed mockingly to Huck before coming to stand before Morrow. Each step he took shook Morrow to the core; he found himself thrusting his blade down into the earth in order to maintain a standing position.

Anger began to cloud Morrow's judgement; the man's command of earth seemed to violate the very tenets of the priesthood that Morrow had been musing on before the battle. To rattle the earth; to destroy the gentle protector and walk upon the backs of greater men than he, only to destroy them in his passing. He could not stop the thought that entered his mind then; he wanted, more than anything he had ever wanted in his entire life, to kill. Even the thought of the ruined child he had loved swept away in the tide of fury that enveloped him. The Gods, he decided, would just have to forgive him; or he would have to suffer the hell he had accepted the moment he took up the blade.

The man continued to smirk, knowing that he had Morrow in a deadlock; Morrow could not stand without leaving his blade deep in the earth, thus preventing any sort of attack. He had to have figured out by now that Morrow's power was not of the destructive variety; otherwise there would have been an attack from some other angle than the blade by now. Morrow felt panic begin to rise in his throat. How had he ever thought he could win such a fight? The answer was clear; he had not thought at all. He had jumped to the aid of his friend, lost in

the same sweep of emotion that Huck was, but for different reasons, and now he had to learn to fight; to put aside all else and think like a killer. Yet another small part of him died with that thought, but he knew it could end no other way. If this battle could be won, and Huck's life saved, by his actions, then his cause was just. He had to believe that, or he was no better than the man he faced.

Feeling confident, the magician stomped down hard on the dirt, rather than the slow, deliberate steps he had taken before. Morrow felt his knees give beneath him as the powerful quake tore dangerous gashes in the earth around them; the other magicians and Huck stumbled in the distance as well. Curses from the other magicians were aimed at their comrade, but the man never even flinched; he had what he wanted, and their anger could be better spent in the destruction of Huck. A growl crept into Morrow's throat as he grasped his blade for all he was worth, bent down on his knees like a servant before a beloved vassal; he would not bow to devils like these! He would sooner die than bow his head and heart to evil. That thought, at least, he had no qualms about thinking.

Suddenly it occurred to Morrow that gripping his blade as tightly as he had, had opened up gashes in his protective gloves. Blood stained the material where he had cut beyond cloth and into flesh; whatever failing the blade might have had, sharpness was not one of them. He corrected his grip back up to the hilt, but he sensed that his attacker was laughing. Laughing soundlessly, that was; the man never spoke or uttered a single word! It was starting to wear on his nerves. Perhaps the evil in his heart had seized his tongue and rent it beyond hope of speech.

"You are wicked, man of the Tormentors. You have performed great evil here today. Do you know it? Do you embrace it? Do you know that the Gods have no mercy for such things?" Dirt and dust from the quakes lodged in Morrow's throat, and he coughed. "You may end my life, but know that

yours has already ended.”

The man’s face did not even register a single change. It was clear to Morrow that the man had no use for his Gods; he served a higher one, the God of Death. He cared not for what he did and who he murdered, or why; it was enough that he could feel others tremble at his coming. The vilest sort of demon, Morrow thought. A demon that had no other purpose but to be destroyed.

Another earthquake, similar in strength to the last one, shook the ground as the man looked deep into Morrow’s eyes, and without looking away, dug his heel sharply into the earth. The shudder was enough to unsettle the priest, and he felt himself fall away from his blade and onto the pained ground. He was suddenly struck with the knowledge that he would die here, not even able to wield the blade that had caused him such grief, and at the feet of a man who could not even comprehend the concept of death and what it meant. Furious, he slammed his fists into the ground, as a small child might have when throwing a temper tantrum.

Then, something happened that Morrow had never seen before.

The earth shuddered, but not in the way that it had beneath the magician’s onslaught. It seemed to pulse and writhe with what Morrow could only describe as an insane sense of joy. He could feel the power being dragged out of him, sensing a deeper need than any patient he had ever treated before; it would take every ounce of his strength to survive. The magician frowned at this new development, as did the other magicians; Huck at last turned and faced Morrow, only seeming half aware that his new friend had arrived; Morrow could not spare a thought for him any longer. He had a new job to do, it seemed, one that didn’t involve the sword at all...

He was healing the land. Growing it. Changing it. How had he never considered such an act before? Of course the earth lived beneath his feet! It was only the backs of men who had

gone before him, rising up to lift him out of his peril and into the skies. The Gods had, indeed, blessed him for his lack of will to use the blade...

Morrow watched with growing disbelief as the broken ground seemed to spontaneously become a thriving mass of uncontrolled grasses and weeds. Where once his attacker had stood, a tree had grown in his place; no, he realized with a sudden start, the tree had grown through his attacker, judging from the blood and gore that surrounded him. The tree's roots had gone wild as well, poking up through the ground in various places at will; these had tangled the feet of the other two magicians. Huck had enough remaining sense to put some distance between himself and them; their power was impossible to use, without being able to touch him. Morrow wanted to laugh, and found himself doing so, uncontrollably. Tears of joy poured from his eyes, rather than the tears of pain he had shed so often up to this point. He could fight, he could fight after all, though he would not cast aside the weapon just yet...

Then he began to realize that his power was running out, faster than it ever had before. The act he had just performed was so grand that he had expected it to kill him outright. He reached out to Huck with one hand, reluctantly pulled from the ground.

“Don't...give up. This tree... will live on... for them.”

He had only a moment to see the tiny light of a long-buried hope in Huck's eyes shine, before his body gave out and he collapsed to the floor, the world black but full of joy around him still.

Arma looked down upon the sway of Masque's shoulders as the girl trudged in front of the white horse's hooves, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. So far, the escape from Meria had gone better than she had hoped; her new

companion certainly did seem to be able to back up her insane plans with results to match. None of the tents of those they had left behind had even stirred in the breeze; now she, Masque and nine others all made their way north across the rugged Mountains of Iksar. North was where the Authority was, of course, but it would take them nearly a month to reach their destination on foot, and perhaps another month to assault the Authority's keep in search of an audience; no one knew exactly what that would entail, having never done it themselves. Even Masque was of no unexpected help on that point, it seemed.

The nine apprentices that had chosen to follow her were some of the weakest; Arma couldn't help but feel a sense of impatience and disappointment at that. For all of his difficulties, Krame had been a powerful magician, and so had many of those that followed him. She had left him rattling the ground with his fury, to make up for his lack of ability to give voice to his curses and desires for vengeance. He was useless, she knew after all; there had been no point to trying to corral him into some semblance of a better man. The mountains did not change any more than Krame did, without the onslaught of a thousand years of waves to beat it out of them. She could not afford the wait, and she did not need it, where she was going. Masque had changed everything she thought she would need to worry about.

The apprentices kept their eyes on Masque, not on her. It wasn't surprising, given that Masque had come to find them; had puzzled out the secret desires that lay in their hearts, and given them voices that they had never known they had. Arma had been their leader, and still was, in name, but it was Masque that led them toward their new purpose with as-yet unfailing aim. Again, Arma was grateful that Masque was on her side, and not her enemy. She had not fallen into a foolish sense of security about the child, of course. She had simply begun to offer her some slack on the rope around her neck. If Masque chose to betray her, after gaining this little bit of her trust, there would be blood without question. Some of it might well be Arma's -

but there would be blood.

Masque walked before Arma, not because she was the leader of their little group, but for two other reasons. The first was that Arma fully intended her to take the brunt of any attack meant for the group. If she was a traitor - and Arma was not, as she had thought before, ready to assume that she was not - then she ran the risk of dying first at the hands of whatever plot she had cultivated. If she was genuine, then at least Arma would not have to march while feeling the child's penetrating and often provocative gaze on her own back! The hair on the back of her neck stood up just at the memory of the first five minutes of their march. She would never turn her back on Masque again while she lived. Somehow, Masque seemed to take a perverse pleasure in that, as well.

It had been five days since their march began. Their steady progression northward was hampered by the slow and methodical transition from autumn to winter. The trees had changed their leaves in a passionate display of fire that Arma so privately loved to watch, and now the fire fell from their branches, burned out and charred until spring, at the ends of their lives. She shared the sentiment, somehow. Whatever she had been, before Meria, she was not at all certain that she still was; the days of being just another Tormentor, albeit a talented one, were gone. If anything, she was now a traitor, walking the path of treason and death, hand in hand with a demon, a mysterious horse, and a handful of infants in tow.

She could not deny that she was glad to be free of the daily slaughter of innocents; the only killing she had done since Meria was in regard to animals, in order to supplement the goods they had taken from their spoils in Meria. They had intended to travel light, and Masque was very particular about it; they would gain the most speed without being laden down by unnecessary baggage. They could live on less than they were accustomed to, after all; under Krame's rule, they had begun to get fat and lazy, neither of which would get them any closer to

answering their questions - her exact words, Arma remembered. It was the simple life of a traveler on the road, or so it would have appeared to anyone who saw them. Without the use of their magic, they were as any other common people would have been; silent, resolved to trudge ever onward toward their goal, and prepared to face whatever hand the Author- no, the Gods, dealt them.

Aside from the potential necessity of treason in her future, Arma was as close to happy as she had ever been, since her meeting with the white horse and its priest. She had wanted to run away with him then; to live as man and wife in a little tiny cottage, growing flowers and baking bread, just a couple of ordinary people, free of the sins that chained them like dogs to the gravestones of the world. She might have done it, too, had she not been so afraid of the very connection that she had so cherished. No one had ever been as close to her as he was; no one ever would be, again. Masque was a brilliant woman with a great many skills and talents, but she was not what the priest could have been to her. It was a loss she had regretted from the moment it happened. And then came the Tormentors, and her chance to find him again had been lost forever.

She would simply have to live out the rest of her days following what remained of her heart, she had decided. It was what he would have wanted her to do. Masque had lifted the unwanted burden of leadership from her shoulders, and given her the freedom to act; it was a gift she would not toss aside carelessly. For the first time in many years, she had her whole life ahead of her, and the only person that could stop her was herself. Privately, she had to admit that it scared the hell out of her, too.

Abruptly, Arma felt the white horse beneath her stall. She looked up from her reverie to find Masque frozen in mid-step. Her lithe body was taut and seemed to be teeming with electricity; if anyone had touched her just then, Arma thought, they might have been dead for reasons other than her talent. It

became apparent in a moment that she was listening intently for something; her fingers impatiently twitched her long, flowing hair away from her ears, leaving them as open to the air as possible. The apprentices, stopped behind Arma, all had their hands on their various weapons, or barring that, they grasped their gloves, ready to bare their flesh in defense at a moment's notice.

After a moment, Masque swore softly - the words were still ladylike, despite their harshness - and turned to face Arma. "We have attracted some unwanted attention, Lady. They do not pursue us from Meria; don't trouble yourself with that thought. I can think of no one who would have reason to attack us here, unless..."

Arma did not need to ask her. There were countless pockets of Tormentors; hers had been only one of a good fifteen in the area, and those were only the ones that openly reported themselves to the Authority. There were at least as many who lived the life of a Tormentor, but chose not to ally themselves with the group they emulated. They often didn't live as long as the official Tormentors, of course, but they still posed a threat to the common people just as great as the authorized ones. They were the ones that left the bitterest taste in the back of Arma's throat. She had not wanted the life that she had ultimately chosen, it was true; but without loyalty to something, what use were men, or women for that matter? They were murderers, and nothing better, even more so than her own band had been.

Then she saw him; a bare-chested man with skin the color of the very mountains that concealed him. A ragged cloak was tied around his neck; it looked like some kind of animal skin. Were these simple bandits, and not Tormentors at all? A haughty smile came to her face. If they were, then they had made a grave error in stopping their flight north...

He smiled back at her, and spoke, removing any doubt of his good intentions. "What a pretty pair of ladies. Are your gifts as pretty, I wonder?"

“That depends on what you’re asking for. Shall I show you what we have?” Masque’s face was unreadable, but Arma more than had an idea of what she was thinking!

Arma shook her head and laughed at the both of them. Hell would freeze before she let Masque continue that line of thought. At best, she would lose time to her companion’s pleasures. At worst, she would find herself involved in them! The rock-colored man looked taken aback; good, she thought. He had underestimated them, indeed!

“I’ll make you a deal, peasant.” Arma suddenly sat up straight in her saddle, looking down her nose at the man. “If you turn around, here and now, I won’t have to show you the gifts that my companion has informed you that we have. If you are simple bandits, I can tell you here and now that attempting to call my bluff will be the end of you. You have no idea of what you are playing at. If you are Tormentors, then be warned that we are not your average Tormentors. Play with us and the Authority will play with you in turn.”

The apprentices shuffled behind Arma and Masque, looking between the two of them and awaiting the tiniest signal from either. The man looked intimidated at first, but then a second confident smile replaced the look. “Strong words, from such a little lady. I wonder if you can handle me.”

Arma was halfway out of her saddle, her gloves half off, before the man held up an unrolled scroll. “Careful what you do, woman. This here is a writ of arrest, signed by the Authority. Each band that follows the Authority received one as of this morning. By the descriptions listed here, I’d say you are most definitely the ones that it was designed to catch. Calling -my-bluff, unfortunately, will earn you the rank of High Traitor. I don’t need to tell you what that means.” He laughed at the new spark of fear in Arma’s furious glare. “I think the Authority has just brought me some very nice company for the evening. And the next few days or so. I’m sure it can wait until I’m finished.”

Masque hissed under her breath. “So soon, He misses

us? He is wiser than He seems.” Confused by the male pronoun in association with the Authority, the man paused, but not long enough to miss what came next. “There’s one thing you forgot to mention, lack-wit. We’ll only be arrested for High Treason... if we get caught.”

Then her gloves were off, and her knives filled her hands from at least three different places on her body. Where she hid those knives, Arma had only a split second to wonder, before she leapt from the priest’s white horse into the growing fray. Apparently the man was not alone; comrades of all kinds were filling the mountain path near to bursting. She judged the majority of them to be apprentices at best; good, she would not be completely outmatched. Her own apprentices had obviously been watching Masque; many now wore fingerless gloves for the sole purpose of being able to work with their hands while keeping their power quite literally at their fingertips. They were ready to spring, and spring they did, without looking back. For Masque, or for her, they would watch their leaders’ backs; that much she did not need to guess at any longer.

Masque’s power was in full swing. Arma found herself with no immediate threats to her person, so she had a moment to study the child in action. She found that she could detect no difference between the strikes that Masque delivered with the aid of her power, and those that she did not. It made for an interesting question: what use was a magical gift, or a magical curse, if one could achieve the same end through normal means? Her own power would require the use of a great deal of knowledge of explosions and fire to mimic, but there was still the element of speed and directness that gave her the advantage over any imitator. There were things she could do, just by being her, that no one else could. The same, it seemed, could not be said of Masque. Oddly, the thought was comforting.

Two of her apprentices were on the ground; Arma frowned, but wasted no time in approaching their position. In her old capacity as leader, she might have admonished them for

their carelessness, or demanded that they improve, in order to be allowed to continue at her side. Now, such taunts and demands would only cast aside some of the few allies that she and Masque had in their journey; she could not afford it. She finally pulled off her gloves and jumped to their defense, her body moving almost as fast as Masque's, but not quite; if Masque was a she-lion, then Arma was a she-wolf, rougher and lonelier, but no less deadly. Her hands wrapped around the attackers' throats; they died within heartbeats of each other.

Then she sighed, looking at the twenty more that surrounded her. It was going to be a long delay. Which meant a longer journey. Which made her very, very angry.

Morrow awoke beneath the shelter of two trees, bent sufficiently to offer him shade and a small amount of extra warmth on top of his cloak. He blinked, momentarily at a loss for what had befallen him; how had he ended up lost and on the ground? Then he remembered. A gasp tore forth from his throat, and he dug his boot heels into the dirt in an attempt to back away from the newer of the two trees that shaded him, a look of panic on his face. Now he remembered the nature of the tree, and what - who - had stood in its place. He was safe, it seemed... but only at the cost of another's life.

His heart thumped loudly in his chest as he fought off a wave of guilt and nausea. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs that he hadn't meant to hurt anyone, hadn't meant to cause such a thing to happen; but he also knew it was a lie of the worst caliber. He would have hurt the man with blade rather than magic, had he been able to do so; the thing still stood upright in the dirt, looking like the lonely grave marker for some fallen soldier. He had been ready to die, and then his power wrested unimaginable things from him. It was a wonder he was not dead, himself. While that might have been just

punishment, he could not say that he was unhappy with the outcome. If nothing else, he had protected Huck from harm.

Huck! Morrow struggled to his feet, looking about wildly for any sign of his friend. The fallen Tormentor apprentices were still trapped by the roots of the tree; they spat at his feet when he tried to approach them. So much for understanding. Huck himself was nowhere to be found. Attempts to ask the apprentices from a safe distance were met with laughter and taunts; they would not help him without further threat to their lives, and he was not yet ready to resort to violent threats, like some sort of tavern lackey. Huck had little left to live for, it was true; but Morrow had seen the glimmer of light in his eyes, and knew that Huck had spent so much of his life fighting for it; the idea that he would just give up and hand himself over to his enemies did not seem reasonable.

With a sigh, Morrow took one last look at the Tormentors' camp. There was little use for him in remaining; his journey in search of the lost child he had loved would have to continue, without any further information to boot. How had he managed to get so far off his course? He had hoped that when the dust settled, he might ask Huck for information, but he had missed that chance; now there was nothing left for him to do but travel onward, to the next town, and pray that the same fate that befell him in Rathport did not happen again. Granted, the further north he traveled, he ran a better chance of people trying to kill him for not joining their filthy bands of murderers, rather than possessing magic in the first place; the location of their leader's hideout was no secret. At least he would suffer less guilt, if his power demanded further blood, in the north...

Then he saw something that nearly unhinged him as badly as the discovery of the man he had killed. A fallen and rotting daisy, forgotten in a corner of the camp, wasting away back into the ground it had come from. A single pin, like the kind that noble ladies kept their hair up in, was attached to it, though it had rusted over in the rain and the late autumn chill.

He was not fool enough to believe that there was only one woman who wore flowers in her hair, but... that particular flower! In such a vile, sinister place! He did not want to consider the thoughts that filled his head then, but his head had never much cared for whether or not Morrow wanted to consider something.

Could the girl have been captured and slain? Or worse... could she be a Tormentor?

Without realizing it, he began to shake his head in denial. She had the talent for death, it was true, but she did not have the heart for such mindless murder as the Tormentors praised. She would have died at their hands, a long time ago. Unless... he gritted his teeth in anger. Unless they had somehow forced her. Or unless their meeting that day had weighed less on her heart than it had on his. Unless she had given up hope. Suddenly death almost seemed preferable.

If she was dead, or possessed by the Tormentors, then his search was over, almost before it had begun. He would not put it past the Gods for a single moment to have made him realize the joys in his life too late to act on them and make a life for himself away from the repression and silence of the monastery. Was it jealousy, on Their part? Could They not stand the thought of losing one of Their own so much? Or had he yet to learn something about the world? He was not a perfect man; he lacked money, a steady job, and a family of his own; Huck had only brought his lack of normalcy to light. However, he had a good mind, a good heart, and a willingness to sacrifice everything he had ever known in search of the only person that had ever captured his heart; was that so punishable? He didn't want to believe that, any more than he wanted to believe that the child was dead.

He sat down absently in the dirt, thoughts filling his head in the same ominous way that clouds began to fill the sky. The rain was returning, almost as if to mirror the blackness that had come upon his soul. He had only begun to wonder if this

was his punishment, not for leaving the monastery, but for the destruction of his enemy, when the first raindrops began to fall. He studied the tiny wet patches in the fallow ground, having always had a fascination with the speckled pattern of an impending downpour; this led him to discover a series of hoof prints that he had not noticed before. It was true that most horses made the same kinds of prints, but a lifetime of looking after one horse gave him pause at their shape. Could Fair have come this far on her own, after his release?

Fair, and the flower, in the same place? He was jumping to conclusions and he knew it, but somehow his conclusions offered him more hope than his bitter thoughts for the first time in ages. He had to believe that his beloved child, and his best friend, yet lived. Without them, he was just as lost as Huck. If the evidence before him was perhaps suspect, he chose not to dwell on it. After all, he had been a priest; there were times where faith could and would overcome even the most impossible obstacles. And yet his conscience, a little nasty crackling voice behind his ears, warned him that putting too much faith in something was akin to blindness. For now, he would accept that blindness, for there were ways to overcome it.

Pulling himself to his feet again, he could see the sun rising above the tops of the trees; high noon, by that position. How long had he slept, this time? There was no Huck to tell him, and he supposed that ultimately, it didn't matter. He would simply move on, and glean what information he could from the next village he came to - if they were still alive, of course. The thought of following a trail of death northward did not appeal to him, but he had had so many bad experiences in the south recently. Perhaps it was time to try something else.

He had left the confines of Meria and walked until the sun began to set, before the voice addressed him from the lengthening shadows. "Going my way?"

Morrow paused mid-stride, his hand searching for the hilt of his sword. Something akin to disgust awoke inside him;

why could he not manage a single day without some sort of interruption or conflict? Just once, he would have liked to move from point a, to point b, without some sort of disastrous interference! This irritation laced his voice when he spoke, though he felt somewhat amiss in projecting it to the stranger. “Why don’t you tell me where your way is, first.” The speaker was a woman, speaking in soft, sultry tones; her accent placed her from the far north, which immediately brought his hackles up. He had already killed one Tormentor, and as much as it pained him to admit, he had begun to forgive himself the offense already. If she meant him harm...

A chuckle replaced her words for a moment. He could hear the smile in her voice when she finished. “Personally, I was thinking of taking a little trip northward. Toward my homeland. Surely you’ve guessed that by now, being the intelligent, handsome man that you are.” He decided her voice was like rich silk; luxurious and beautiful, with foreign flair, but altogether frivolous and tempting. He didn’t like her one bit. “That shard at your hip looks strong. Maybe you can protect a weak woman such as me?”

He paused. She didn’t give him the impression of being weak - not in the least. “My sword... was given to me by a friend. He left before he could train me in its use. I am no hireling, madam. I am just a traveler, heading north in search of information.”

He caught sight of her then, as she had expected him to; she stepped delicately from the shadows, and what he saw was indeed far from weak or in need of protection. She bore all the features of a Northlander; tall and slender, with hawk-sharp dark eyes and face paint to accent them. It was purple, in the shape of butterfly wings. Her dark hair would have been long, but she kept it pinned up in a severe bun. Her clothing was made of the very silk he had thought of when hearing her voice; at least, what there was of it. Her bodice barely contained her, and the simple wraparound skirt she wore did little to hide her

legs. Childishly he thought that his nameless child might have worn such things with the air of a queen, rather than a lady of the night; it was a thought he put behind him quickly.

Across her back, however, lay something that distressed him far more than her voice, her personality, or even her style of dress. A sword, twice as long as his own, and a good inch broader, shone in the sunlight and cast rippling shadows across the ground in her wake. It was a beast of a weapon, and he suddenly came to the realization that she must have known how to use it. Tormentor though she might still be, the real danger at hand lay in that weapon of hers. But then, if she'd only wanted to attack him, why would she have spoken so carelessly to him, and invited him along on her nameless quest?

She took his silence as invitation to speak, as most women he had met did. "All right, I will stop my pretending, if you will stop yours. I am on a mission, swordsman. I must travel north, and I must do it with a minimum of fuss." A strand of dark hair fell free of her bun and brushed down her neck alluringly; he looked away from it and firmly into her eyes. He had no interest in her charms. "You think I am a magician. If you are correct, then I already know everything I need to know about you. Magicians just know these things, don't they?" A lazy tone crept into her voice. "Though I suppose I only asked you about your sword. It's so hard to tell, isn't it? Who's safe and who's not?" She shrugged. "You could always just kill me, I suppose. To be safe."

His eyes widened. Was the woman sane? "I... have no wish to kill anyone."

A soft snort punctuated her reply. "I would have thought otherwise, from the destruction of that village."

Anger flared in him then. She thought that he was a Tormentor, too! That meant that she couldn't possibly be one of them. "You misunderstand gravely, woman. That atrocity was not by my hand. I destroyed a man, without meaning to, in defense of someone who lost his family in the massacre. As I

cannot now locate him, I am forced to move on alone.”

She nodded crisply. “Good. That is what they told me; the men you trapped, of course. I cut them free, I hope you won’t think ill of me. They would have starved there, or fallen to the elements, eventually.” Despite her words, her eyes never left his blade. He had already admitted how useless it was; why had she not given it up? “I am no friend of men such as them, but I thought it wise not to leave you with further blood on your hands.”

“So you have no magic, then?”

“I never said that.” Now a catlike smile graced her face, and her slanted eyes nearly closed in the process. “I happen to have some talents, yes. As do you. It’s a useful skill, being able to figure it out, isn’t it?”

Morrow frowned. He was going to have to get used to trusting his instincts when it came to other magicians, it seemed. “If you are a magician, then you should not have any need of aid on the road, madam. Why seek me out?”

“That.” She pointed to the useless weapon that she had been watching, and her tone became serious. “A weapon without a wielder trained in its use is doomed to fail. You do not know much about the Northlanders, do you, swordsman? We are magicians, more often than not. We are also masters of the blade. Blades come easily to our hands, and dance more easily in them. How you came across such a thing is beyond me, but if you are not willing to use it, I must see that it is given a proper home. You do it grave injury by letting it fall dormant.”

Morrow shook his head. “You speak as if it lives.”

“Doesn’t it?” She smiled again. “You believe it is just a weapon, don’t you? That’s not surprising, coming from you. A sword is not only a tool of death. It is a symbol of your will and your courage. It stands for what you believe in, and what you most want out of life. It takes on a life through you. If you do not sustain it, it will destroy you. Understand this, and you will find it to hand when you most need it. Do not, and it will slay

you while you sleep.”

Morrow's first thought was that her words were utter nonsense. However, the more he thought about them, the more he began to realize the truth in at least some of them. He had, after all, taken the sword in order to defend himself and Huck. There had been a reason he desired to fight. He had drawn the weapon at Meria, though he had not ultimately used it; only fate had played a role in that. He still did not know how to use it; it swung as a meaningless paperweight from his belt; a burden that he was only beginning to manage to carry without regret. Would others assume he knew how to use it, as this woman had?

She interrupted his silence again. “I can see that you wish to keep it. That too is a sign of your will and courage. A man who had no will to fight would have left it where it lay.” One of her hands found its way to a slender hip; the other stretched toward Morrow. Her wrist was covered in golden bangles. “My name is Ashra Kendi. I come from the North. My father was Ardo Kendi, an honest bladesman. He sold blades to the God, and now rests in His grave.” What she meant by that, Morrow did not quite understand, but he took away that her father was dead, at the least.

“I will make you a deal. Two travelers heading north will make less of a target than one, particularly with our blades in tow. In exchange for your company, I will teach you what I can in the use of your weapon. If you haven't the aptitude for it, I may ask that you give it to me again. Be prepared for that possibility.” Ashra smiled; it was almost a smirk. “This will be a great challenge for you, but if you are willing, I will meet you halfway.” More seriously, she added, “If nothing else, I may trade you a useless burden for a useful one, and you will have another tool with which to gain the information you seek.”

Morrow didn't like where that was headed, nor did he trust everything that Ashra had claimed, but the alternative - to fight her, or to try to evade her - seemed less likely to earn him

any further benefit. It seemed he had found a new companion, at least for a time. In the back of his mind, he wanted his child to know the lengths he had gone to to find her; he wanted her to know that he was coming to find her, no matter how long it took or what he had to do to get there. But a part of him resisted; the little knot of worry in the back of his mind. He couldn't believe she was dead, or that she had joined the enemy...

But it was possible. Anything was possible, in the end.

A week had passed, since the incident outside of Meria. Arma huddled against Fair's side in a bleak tavern stable, the stale straw covering her legs. There had been no room at the tavern Masque had directed her to, of course, and no amount of threats or displays of destructive power were going to earn her a room. She sighed, and Fair seemed to sigh with her. The flight from the battle had been a long one, and she had done it without Masque or her apprentices to aid her in any way. It seemed wrong, not to have someone barking at her heels, or in need of her direction, for once.

Masque and the others had stayed behind, to continue the battle. She hadn't wanted to leave, but there were more enemies than they could handle; apparently the pocket of Tormentors they had uncovered had a sizable hole in its bottom, and once the leak had begun, there was no stopping it. She had fought until her power made her weary; twice she had almost fallen from her saddle, but there was Masque to shove her back into it every time. The girl's clothing was soaked in blood when she turned to Arma and demanded that she go on ahead; to find shelter for them once the battle had ceased. They would be in need of warm beds, food and drink, and a doctor if nothing else. For once, she had not stopped to flirt with Arma; a sure sign of her seriousness. Against her better judgement, she had

agreed; it was her first attempt at paying Masque with the trust that she had most requested.

That had been five days ago, and Masque, nor any of her apprentices, had met up with her. She had paid the innkeeper for the use of his entire tavern and inn exclusively; the man was beginning to think her mad, and she wasn't far off from agreeing with him at this point. She herself had given up on staying in the nice rooms, and taken shelter with Fair, just to have some semblance of friendly companionship. If there was one thing she had learned from the last five days, it was that she didn't like to be alone.

Outside the tavern and inn, known colloquially as the Shepherd's Crook, the city was alight in color, music and flair. The harvest festival had begun for the city of Chross, and due to its position in the near exact center of the nation, it served as one of the biggest meeting grounds for those who would celebrate. Girls in brightly colored dresses and skirts sought men in rich tunics and fresh leather to lay with in pursuit of bounties of their own; merchants cried their wares with a keener eye and shrewder design than they would on any other day, and beer and wine flowed more freely than Arma had ever seen before. As one of the nobility, she had been denied the presence of such realities from her childhood, and her family had certainly never expected her to be caught in such proximity to them!

She had avoided the crowds, afraid that some reveler would crash drunkenly into her, and accidentally grab something he would pay for with his life. However, the gala called to her in ways that she had long thought were lost to her. Balls and parties would have been her element, once; she had trained for them long and hard, and with only the best teachers. Her parents intended for her to catch the eye of some minor prince, after all. She itched to dance, to throw back her head and laugh into the wind. She no longer had the long tresses that seemed to swirl about her in beautiful waves, but that was a minor setback...

She frowned to herself. If only there were some way to make it safe to join the crowd! If only she could disguise herself and still stay innocent to straying hands and innocent kisses! She did not need the attention in particular, but she knew what would come of a girl her age, dancing amongst the crowd with no attachment to speak of. Still, for just a moment, it would be nice to be part of a thriving mass of pure unadulterated joy, unrecognized by anyone, but still part of them.

Her mind strayed to Masque again. Even if she had some of Masque's precious salve, that trick would not work; she would sweat it off in moments, and it only worked for a single touch. Undoubtedly Masque knew that; one touch, or one kiss, would be all she needed to work her magic on her intended targets. The girl was so careful, and so far ahead of her game that she often made Arma feel like the child between them in comparison. How, then, had she not arrived on schedule? Had her luck and planning all run out? She didn't love the girl; didn't even trust her fully, but she was the closest thing to a friend Arma had had in quite some time. She wasn't ready to lose her yet.

Tired of feeling sorry for herself, Arma rose and brushed the straw and hay from her clothes. She was dirty and smelled like horses, and if there was any hope to be had of finding a way into the tumultuous crowd, she was not going to do it by lounging around with Fair. She would wait another day for Masque, and if the girl had failed to show up by then, she would move northward with her questions. It was too late to think of anything further; there could be no going back to her life as a simple Tormentor, much less the one further back that would have had her in royal garb finer than any the revelers boasted. To the Authority, she would go - alone, if not with Masque.

Two hours and a great deal of coin later, Arma smiled at her reflection in the mirror. The hired maids she had procured on short notice had done a fine job; all traces of the scent of horse sweat was gone, and in its place the soft scent of jasmine and roses. Her short blonde hair was covered by a horsehair wig; it was as long and full as her old hair had been, with a coppery shine that outdid the coins she had paid to purchase it. Her simple gown was the deep red of blood and nobility; that had raised a few eyebrows when she ordered it, but they had not opted to question her, which she was immensely grateful for. From the top of her neck, out to her wrists, and finally to the tips of her toes it covered her body completely, but the pattern of the cloth seemed to bring out every curve and suggestion of her body without needing to show any flesh in the first place. Her hands were covered in soft brown leather gloves, and her boots were made from the same animal.

Last but not least, a full-faced mask covered her face, also made of matching leather; the eyeholes were decorated with beautiful cutwork in the shape of roses. A single teardrop had been cut beneath the left eye. She was pleased with the leatherworker; none of the holes were sufficient to allow for mistakes, but they did add a depth and dimension to the admittedly strange costume that she had demanded. If the man had any qualms about serving a “witch,” he hadn’t shown any, but then, she had been careful not to show him, either.

Content with her look, she stepped out into the street, prepared to try to join the revelers in their games.

Arma could not remember when she had enjoyed herself so much before. The laughter that spilled from her made her want to cry; once she had laughed so easily, but the girl she remembered had seemed as if she were dead in her mind. Arma had placed her into her grave, covered her with ash and dirt, and

said a prayer over her long ago. She had stopped laughing, after the incident that drove her from her home, that night - the night she met the priest, and the first night she had discovered her power. Her discovery had been a bitter one, and far too cruel for a girl as sheltered as she; she had only begun to comprehend why her mother and father lay in pools of their own blood, burning from an unseen fire in their souls, when the guards arrived to arrest her. She hadn't meant to, of course; it was a simple mistake, a simple kiss on Daddy's cheek and a simple tug of her mother's hand, and then it was all over; her life had changed completely.

He had been the one to hold her while she cried, and tried to make sense of where it had all gone wrong. How her childish innocence and love could have cost her her entire family, inheritance, and life. She had nowhere to go, no friends that would save her now; she was as good as dead. He had wanted to help her, to carry her when her own feet would not; she loved him for that, and for the lack of fear in his eyes when he looked at her. He never faltered or flinched; he reached out and held her and nothing had happened... for him, only. Had he possessed some trick akin to Masque's? She couldn't believe that - he had not planned for their meeting any more than she had. What had it been, about that strange and beloved man...?

Still laughing, she froze in a sudden nightmarish moment. His face was before her; he moved through the crowd with a purpose, keeping his head down low to hide himself, but she would know him anywhere at a glance. Behind him, a dark and lovely woman placed her footsteps in his, trying to hide her handsomeness from the world; it was like trying to hide a red rose in a field of white daisies. She blinked, disbelieving; and then he was gone, as if he had never passed.

She might have believed that, but the scent that lingered was all too distinctly his, mingled with the scent of foreign perfume that cloyed her senses in a way that made her want to gag. Behind her mask, unchecked tears of rage poured from her

eyes. She had always wanted to see him again, to tell him how much he had meant to her, that day... but now? Now, she was more than a lost little girl. She had used her power knowingly to kill. She had become the scum of the world, the enemy of life and love itself. And now, she was on her way to find out why she served the master she did. Whom did the orders come from, and through what means did it offer its violent and hateful demands? She had to know - it meant the answers to the rest of her life, and possibly the keys to the shackles that bound her still to the scent of blood.

Even if she found that the Authority was the will of death, and ended its reign with her power, she would not be ready to face him. By the look of the woman behind him, she no longer needed to, anyway.

Morrow's heart was racing. He had seen the strange creature in the mask of leather roses, and for some reason, she had seemed for a moment to reach out to him with a desperate need. He had not been able to see her face, of course, and she clearly wished to be unrecognized, but there was something oddly familiar about her. He might have turned back, had it not been for Ashra; she kept a warrior's pace, and stopping would have caused her to run into his back at minimum; run him through at the worst. He could not deny that her company had been instrumental in getting them to Chross so quickly, so his will to deny her when she requested the utmost haste in their journey was limited.

Shaking his head to try to clear it, he struggled to keep up with Ashra, who had overtaken him just outside the city, and showed no intention of slowing down. She glanced back once to look at him, a breath of a curious look that seemed to know that something was amiss, but she had not the time to dwell on it or coddle his disquiet, so she kept moving, expecting him to follow

or be lost in the wake of her passing. It might have irritated him, in his past life. Now, he was her student, and sought to earn some measure of her pride, even if he knew he would never be a master student.

Her training over the last several days had been harsh, but though his poorly used muscles ached in protest, and his bruises and cuts had only just begun to heal, he was at least able to hold the blade and swing it without much difficulty. That was a step in the right direction. She had requested that they make their way to the town of Bathet next, north up the western coast (an attempt to soothe his exhaustion, he thought, with the promise of beautiful scenery for the next leg of their journey) and by that time, he thought he might even be able to tell one type of strike from another. He was by no means particularly talented, but neither was he the incompetent that he had been at Huck's side.

He let his mind wander as he trudged after Ashra, a frown tugging at his features. While he had been walking, he had heard rumors, much as he always did. He had picked up a fine ear, both in order to gain free information about the people in certain towns, and to catch early wind of any particular dangers or people that might pose an unnecessary risk to magicians such as himself. On the wind, amidst the revelry, he had heard whispers from an old man regarding the strange buyout of his entire property, for use for an unspecified amount of time, until further notice. The buyer, it was said, was a beautiful woman with short blonde hair, with a mighty temper.

Then the talk had turned to what both young and old men alike might have wished to do to her, had she not been so much of a danger, and he had closed his ears to it. No other rumors seemed to have surfaced, and he had not had any time to question anyone, thanks to Ashra's insistence on speed and silence. His search for his child was growing colder by the moment, just as the weather had; it was not something that pleased him by far. Had he his way, he would have stopped at

the tavern himself - just to check - and if nothing else, tried to find someone who might know her. He couldn't talk to everyone, of course, and that limited his success more than anything. Surely, someone had to know her! Unless she was really, truly as alone in the world as she had told him, that night.

If that were the case, after all these years, then every wasted step was a fresh failure to find her. At least he knew that she could not have sold herself out at a brothel or as a nursemaid; her hands would not permit her that job any more than his would have permitted him a job as a mercenary. There was still the fear of her becoming a Tormentor, lodged beneath this sense of relief, that made his stomach churn. If her hate had grown strong enough for the people that tried to punish her and kill her for her power, it was far from unthinkable; far from impossible.

It was an easy trap to fall into; though he could never agree with such violence, he understood what drove others to it well. He had always wanted to demand understanding and patience from others, and acceptance of talents like his, which could only heal and help others. Still, to request that kind of behavior through violence could not be the only answer in the world! No love could come from hatred, or balance from chaos; the world did not work that way. It was one of the few truths from his days as a priest that Morrow had not found wanting over the years. Therefore, he clung to it with a greater desperation than he might have, for some others.

He tried, very carefully, to think of what he would do, if his worst fears were brought to light. If his search ended in her ultimate death, or her discovery as a Tormentor. The first proved to be too much; his eyes blurred with tears, and he tripped mid-stride, narrowly catching himself on a felled pile of logs. Ashra turned to glare at him, and he apologized absently, returning to his stride. The second option, at least, proved to be slightly more palatable. There were hundreds of reasons that men and woman

professed loyalty to the Tormentors; hers could be any of them, not just an animalistic desire for blood and death. Most seemed to feel something of that nature, but he had been asked to join the Tormentors himself, a multitude of times before. Some of them seemed human, at first.

He sighed, shaking his head as he walked. The girl he met had been strong, stronger than she and even he had understood. He wanted to have the faith in her that she could not have in herself; wanted to believe in her to do the right thing, when every instinct he had tried to tell him that any reasonable girl in her shoes would have denounced them where they stood. She was, though, only a girl. Had another man given her the solace she so desperately craved, and given it to her through the Tormentors? Had someone given her a place where she felt she belonged? If that were the case, breaking her free would be an utter impossibility.

Not for the first time, he cursed himself roundly for having let her go in the first place. It had been such a sudden thing; they had been together, the child almost sleeping in his arms after crying herself nearly to sleep. He gazed down at her tender face, wanting to stroke her soft cheek and brush the tears away, but not having the courage. Then the horns had blown in the distance, her body had gone rigid, and she had leapt to her feet. He called to her, asking her to wait and explain what was going on, but she looked once at him, terror and regret mirrored in her eyes, then looked into the forest, in the direction of the horns. Then she was gone, like a startled doe, and he had not been able to follow her tracks. The monastery had ceased to be his home a week later.

Suddenly he found himself walking into a solid object, and startled, jumped backward in alarm. Ashra had stopped ahead of him, noting his absent-mindedness, and allowed him to walk right into her. Her arms were crossed firmly beneath her breasts, and her dark hair twitched with annoyance as she shook her head at him, ignoring his feeble attempts at apology and

muttered promises to pay more attention. She had clearly decided that she had had enough of his silence and brooding.

“A dragon has occupied your mind, swordsman.” She still did not call him by his name; he guessed it was to offer a continual reminder of the fact that he was training with his blade in order to become more able to use it as an implement for defending his will, not just Morrow, the former priest-magician. “The smoke curls from your ears, but the flames still burn in your head.” He had begun to like the way she talked, if not her voice; the lyrical yet foreign way she referred to things made him think, and once he got to the root of what she had said, he found the words to be as familiar as any of his own for what she meant.

“I apologize, Madam Ashra.” He looked down into the dirt, honestly ashamed. He had not meant to allow himself to become so distracted. Ever since the rose-girl in Chross, he had not seemed quite right, and he knew it. “I am distressed by my lack of ability to gain the information that I seek. I have not had the time to make my usual inquiries at the establishments we have passed.”

She smiled; Morrow thought he saw a hint of apology there, but chose not to assume it with a woman such as her. “Is my pace too great for you? You have only gotten stronger since we began it, so I must assume it is doing you good.”

He shook his head. “I cannot complain, aside from knowing that my tasks continue to go unmanaged. I had something... important to do, and I fear that every wasted moment pushes my search deeper into the shadows.”

“Who is she?”

Morrow glanced up, startled, to find a smug smirk on Ashra’s face. He opened his mouth to ask how she knew, but she spoke first, and firmly. “You think you have yourself mastered, swordsman, but you do not. Your eyes betray you, as if they look for something unseen at every turn. Your behavior in crowds is that of a dog sniffing to catch a whiff of some scent

known only to it. I saw you stop, at the girl in red. Such hesitation in a sword battle will see you dead, and your sword reduced to ashes.”

He could say nothing. He knew every word was true. And yet...

“The girl in red had her face covered. Yet your instinct made you pause. Do you think it not possible that it was she?”

Morrow’s heart caught in his throat. Hadn’t he just talked with Ashra about learning to trust his instincts? His instinct had been right every time, so far, since Huck pointed it out, even during the times he had not believed in it or listened for it. Was it possible? Or... had he just picked up another magician, unknown to him? He was not practiced enough to know, not capable enough to answer that question, yet. There were so many things that could help him in his quest to find her, but he had not the time to study them; to study them would be to take the necessary time to lose her. He was fighting a losing battle.

“She... was noble, I think. I never got her name.” He took a deep, shuddering breath; it was the first time he had spoken of her to anyone. The monastery priests, of course, would not have understood. “She was younger than me by far; a taboo, a sin, to anyone’s eyes but ours. I think she felt it too, but she ran away. I think someone must have been looking for her.” His eyes closed against a sudden threat of tears. “If they found her, and put her to death, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Silence, swordsman.” Ashra’s voice suddenly sounded a thousand times louder and angrier than he had ever heard it before. She had seemed to have no end to her patience before; now she was furious, and he had not intended to upset her. He listened with stunned surprise, obeying her order without further discussion. “You claim to be a priest, who has spoken with God. Yet you have no faith in your heart. Your heart tells you that she must live, or you would not still be searching. Your heart tells you that you have sought her all your life, and yet you

try to tell yourself you are a fool. Perhaps you are, if you still deny yourself everything you have learned at this point.”

“Then she is a Tormentor, and my enemy.” His voice was flat.

“Is that what your heart tells you?”

“Yes. I have been wavering between a feeling that she is dead, and a feeling that she is dead to me, specifically, since I first set foot into Rathport and saw the massacre there. If what you say is true, then my quest is over already.” Now his own voice began to rise in anger. “Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me, woman! You know so much; tell me where she is or be silent for once in your life!”

“So you can get angry. I was worried, for a moment.” Ashra never even flinched. “I was merely curious whether you had considered the possibility of rescuing her. You are a poor prince, my swordsman.” She chuckled, and before he could object, she stepped forward and planted a gentle kiss on his cheek, almost like that of a mother to a son. “Was that her, that we passed? If so, I admire your dedication in not leaving me where I stood.”

He found his fists clenched in frustration. “I don’t know. I don’t know anymore what is just a thought I’ve been having, and what is my heart trying to tell me something. How do I separate fact from my desired reality, now that I know this?”

“Experience. You must find out for yourself.” Ashra looked serious again. “But I thank you for coming with me. You see, I have a task almost like yours. I have someone I seek above all others, as well. I have learned to hide it well over the years, but hide it I do.” Her eyes suddenly met Morrow’s, uncomfortably. “My power works only within me, you see. With a touch, I can quiet my mind to the point of non-existence. I can clear my mind more easily than any man or woman that I know. If faced with pain, I can erase it. If faced with grief, I can erase it. Unfortunately, it works only for me.”

She shifted in place. “I have spent my life in pursuit of

the only person who has left scars upon me that I cannot erase. I will find him, or die trying.”

Morrow gazed blankly at her, uncertain of whether to envy her power, or reject the perceived pleasure in using it. He had had moments where all he wished to do was forget the face of the child; to pretend she had never touched his heart, to forget his days at the monastery and just start life over as a new man. But to lose the memory of her would be to lose a part of himself; he did not want that, not even at the cost of his own sorrow. He would bear it until he found her, however he found her; it was all he could do.

Ashra sighed; it was the most human sounding thing that he had heard from her since he first met her. “If you truly believe that was your woman, swordsman, I will release you from your task here and now. I am not so heartless as to deny you that. But if you choose to follow me, then I will accept no more of this behavior from you. Would she want you questioning yourself in circles, or would she want you to put aside your fears and questions and do what you know to be right until you find her again?”

He wanted to grab her by the throat and strangle her; to rip the blade from his waist and slay her a thousand times over. He was divided, in the worst way he could think of; he wanted desperately to go back and find out, once and for all, if the girl in the mask was his precious child, and if she was, to take her away then and there, living out the rest of his days with her, away from the wickedness of a world that had never wanted them. He also knew that he had been a fool; that he had promised his aid to Ashra, and he was more than slacking off on his duties. What right had she to suffer for his inner turmoil? What love did he stand between, as she had told him?

Finally, he steeled himself and looked up at her. “I will follow you, as I promised, Madam Ashra. You have taught me well, and I have no enmity toward you. I have been selfish and preoccupied. I would not deny you the love that I was foolish

enough to lose on my own. When I am finished, I will return here for the rose girl, and find out for myself.”

He didn't want to do it, but if he was to face his child again, as the good but flawed and hopelessly innocent creature that he had been, he had no choice but to carry on.

“Well spoken... Morrow.” Ashra spoke his name deliberately, watching him flinch at its usage. “For that, you earn more than my tolerance. You earn my respect as well. Let us finish our task so that we may both be finished, and find rest.”

She leapt ahead before Morrow could speak, and in silence, he made to follow her. He could only hope that somewhere, his child would wait for him, Tormentor or otherwise.

Arma packed her meager belongings and left in the middle of the night. She bade no farewells, made no promises, and spoke to no one. The rose mask that she had purchased the night before remained on her face, though she had cast off the robe in lieu of something more appealing for travel; she had no wish for anyone to see her true face any longer. She had a duty, one she would carry out now without a single doubt. Masque had not returned; it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except reaching the Authority's door and passing beyond it, whatever lay between.

Her questions for the Authority were growing ever larger. Now, on top of the demands it made, it had cost her the man she loved. If she had not run away; if she had stayed with him, allowed him to protect her, instead of running from her father's guard, she might have never come to this. Instead, the Authority had been her only choice in life, and she was beginning to think that it knew that very well. It was unreasonable, but she was in an unreasonable mood; perhaps it

even controlled the lives of its Tormentors, plotting for their continued failures in life until they eventually came crying to the only place that would have them.

As she opened the door to the tavern that she had so calmly usurped from its proprietor, she found a knife stuck to the door. Between the sharp blade and the pierced wood, she found a piece of paper, with roughly scrawled words written on it. Not pausing to think of the proprietor's eventual discovery of the damage to his door, she twisted the blade free and looked the note over. Unfortunately, its contents only served to worsen her mood.

In no uncertain terms, it informed her that the traitor Masque had been captured, and was soon to face trial by the Authority's hand. If she knew what was good for her, she would turn herself in at once, to stand trial as she so justly deserved. The penalty would be less for her compliance, of course; she might even live, though in service to the Authority's worst commands, she knew without a doubt.

Masque had been caught. It seemed impossible, in the back of her mind, but she had believed it impossible that the man she loved could ever have given up searching for her, too. Somehow it was less of a blow. The bitter anger and grief that occupied her heart had little room to grieve for a self-absorbed child who had sold her body for the price of blood. The concept of friendship was gone; never again would she trust. Masque had been wrong, on that, at least. She might have turned away from the Authority, too, but she had nowhere else to go. At the least, it might kill her after all.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she slammed the wooden door behind her. It creaked in protest before falling off of its abused hinges and crashing to the floor. A night guard looked her direction, but by the time he thought to call for backup, she was gone.

The next week was a string of meaningless events, in meaningless places, amid meaningless faces. The mask Arma wore kept her shielded from any interrogations or interruptions; it seemed that people either ignored the strange outsider completely, or were too frightened by the strange mask to pursue her. A few seemed to bubble with curiosity, and came close, hoping to unmask her; she met them in dark alleyways to practice her craft. She might even have cared about one or two of them, just a little. The scent of blood and the screams both trod on deaf and mute emotions.

The Authority sent several more messages, some more pointed than others. There were many mornings where she awoke to threats posted upon her door, and on the mornings there weren't, she found attackers instead. They were little match for her, in her heightened state, but the Authority sent them anyway. She might have wondered at its eagerness to destroy its own people, but she had seen worse, and did not need to wonder at all. This was its normal behavior; nothing had changed but her, and Masque, and the priest that left her soul in tatters.

It wasn't his fault; try though she might, she could not find it in her to blame him. It had been many years, and she had been just a child; her need for him had been a shameful thing then, and it would have continued to be, had it succeeded. He had done his best to save her, and she had run away; what did she expect of the man? She did not find it impossible in the least to imagine that he had left the monastery; that had seemed on the verge of happening, even before she met him. He was too good for such a place; he was the soul of a priest, not merely the letter of theological law as they were. But... she had hoped he would leave it for her, not some northern wench with the body of a goddess reborn. Her footsteps matched his too perfectly; her eyes never left him for a moment, like a lithe and twisted serpent, ready to fall upon him at the slightest provocation. It

made her sick first, and angry second.

Did she wipe away his tears, as he wiped away hers? Did she know the hidden depths of his soul, as he knew hers? The sheer possibility of the answer being yes drove her onward at a madwoman's pace, not even seeing the forests and mountains and rivers she passed. Hours turned to days, and days turned into nights without her notice, making what had been a journey of epic proportions become a brisk walk in the moonlight, where she was concerned. With each day that passed, she wished more and more for her own capture and death. It would be so much easier than this wondering, this longing, that would never quite go away.

Qardin, the Seat of the God and the Authority's Chair, was the biggest city that Arma had ever seen. For just a moment, she forgot her anger and sadness and saw it for what it was; the magnificent display of colors and lights amid buildings and castles of sand. Almost all of Qardin was sand; they said the Authority, whom they called their God, in the north, was like the shifting sands of time, eternal and yet ever changing. The Authority had appeared first in the north, and more magicians came from this part of the world than any other; it was another question she had for it, when she arrived at its door. Could it somehow give power directly to its chosen? Or was it mere coincidence?

Now that she had thought of it, her mind strayed to her lost companion. Of course, she should have noticed earlier that Masque herself was a northlander. The dark hair and eyes were spot on, though she did not wear the face paint typical of a northlander woman. Her speech clearly marked her as someone of high birth, if not royalty, as well; she was far too polite, even when mocking or angry. The woman following her priest - her teeth clenched, before she realized it - had also been a

northlander, though of the more typical kind. The blade at her back had been no joke, tied though it was for safety purposes. Then she paused, in memory; the priest had also worn a sword. Had he somehow joined her in battle? That, at least, was absurd to think of; it might have made her laugh, on any other day. He was no warrior, at least, not of the blade. He fought his wars with words and with faith.

She forced thoughts of his words and faith out of her mind, and refocused on the massive creation that was Qardin. The town seemed to slope upward, with the most ornate and beautiful tier housing a magnificent palace of crystal studded sand; that had to be her target. Taking the immediate route would see her arrested, she had no doubt; Qardin was known for its security and safety. It had to be, to keep thieves and undesirables at bay. Such a prosperous climate invited trouble for those who lacked vigilance. The Authority was no fool, whatever else it might have been. It kept its people well, and in exchange, fed off their servitude. A comfortable little family of death, she thought, and spat in the dust at her feet.

A pair of guards glanced her way. Before she could free herself, they had approached her; what they had in vigilance, they also had in speed and skill. The women were the beautiful half of the northlanders; the men were more inclined to be stones that supported the rise of Qardin. They were taller than their women, and built twice as wide; almost all of it was muscle. It made the giant weapons on their backs appear comically tiny in comparison; they could just as easily kill a man with their massive fists, but they had developed nearly a kind of religion around their blade work, she knew. Their faces were blank and unchanging, and their eyes were almost completely white and changeless. If they had the ability to show emotion, she had never seen it before.

She stood at attention, rigid in her apprehension, as they circled her. Finally, one of them spoke, and his voice was like the hardest granite. "State your purpose in Qardin, woman." It was

another pattern to their speech; the use of names was prohibited among all but the closest friends and companions, in the north. Strangers were referred to by gender or by profession. It still rattled her nerves to be cast as just a simple woman, though.

She took a deep breath. "I am here on business of a private nature. I must see the Authority, for I have information that would be of great benefit to him."

The guards, of course, did not blink. "The God denies entry to those who are unworthy. You wear not the dress of Qardin's elite. You have not displayed your right by skill. Give us this information, and we will deliver it in your place."

She smiled, wolfishly. "I am here to prove my right by skill. Though I warn you, it may end in your deaths."

The guard shook his head imperceptibly. "One may not display right by skill in simple combat. There is a ritual; a method, a path that all follow who wish to view the God. You are not prepared, woman."

"Then prepare me." This time her face was as blank as theirs. "I have no time for your games. My business, as I said, is urgent."

"Your identity is not known to us, woman. Remove your mask, and we will begin the preparations."

She moved to comply, and within moments of witnessing the face that lay beneath, Arma found herself in chains, being led up the interminable flight of stairs to the Authority's Seat. It was the easiest route, she had decided. Subterfuge was Masque's game, not hers.

Masque had not been treated well, in her absence. The cell that contained her would-be friend reeked of rotten food and undisposed waste. The girl wore no clothing, and Arma's breath caught in her throat at the sight. Had Masque been conscious, she thought wryly, she would have enjoyed that, but

for the wrong reasons. Scars and bruises covered most of her body, many healed, but some looking fresher than she wanted to think of. Her hair, once a beautiful mass of tresses, appeared to be tied in tangled, rough knots. Her ever-present weapons were missing; apparently they had divined her power, and robbed her of it in the first several moments of her capture.

Arma, in her own cell and shivering, as naked as Masque, couldn't help but feel a flare of anger. She had intended to get caught, en route to the Authority, but Masque clearly had not. The kind of treatment she was receiving was limited to only the worst offenders to the Authority; the unapologetic, those who could not be swayed out of their mission. Why hadn't the girl lied to get free? What could possibly have wrested the absolute unwavering truth from a child born to lies? Masque was no more a fool than the Authority was. Could there be some meaning in allowing her to be beaten? Sprawled helplessly on the floor as she was, the first image that came to Arma's mind was that of the brothel girl that she had once been asked to become by the Tormentors. Without her blades, Masque was little else.

What had happened to the apprentices that she and Masque once led, Arma had no idea. The cells in the rest of their block of the dungeon were empty; either they had been killed, or they were being held separately from their leaders for interrogation purposes. It would have been nice to find a way to free both them and Masque, but Arma's old instincts were prevailing; she had a duty to perform, that came first. Her friends had come to this place in search of the same thing that she had: answers. If they had failed in their quests, then it was no business of hers. She had made it precisely where she wanted it, and no risk could be taken for anything further. It was selfish, inhumanly so, but she didn't care anymore.

Guards came to Masque's cell; another pair of brutish rock-like Qardin men. They looked at Masque's cell first, but finding her unresponsive, they turned away without a second

glance. Clearly they were not interested in her well-being. Instead, they turned to Arma.

“Woman by the name of Arma Flair, you are hereby formally charged with the crime of High Treason. The Authority our God intends to have you executed, along with your partner.” The guard who had spoken pointed in Masque’s direction. “She has not long to live. You were wise to turn yourself in, rather than share in her punishment.”

Arma glared at them with all the force she could muster. “I meant what I said. I have business with the Authority. Take me there.” It was a bold move, perhaps the one that Masque had first attempted, but she would be of no use and no success, holed up in a cage until further notice. Suddenly, something clicked in her mind and she made a great show of wincing and stooping down, as if her ankle were injured. “I will have words for your god about my rough treatment, among other things.”

If rocks could have looked puzzled, the guards would have. “We have treated you as we would any complying prisoner, woman. You have not been mishandled.”

She sighed. She had hoped that one of the guards might open her cell to investigate, but that was too simple a trick for them. They were magicians themselves, after all; she could feel it in her bones, and they knew that to touch her would be to court death. The act of leaving her naked spoke that well enough; the cell’s walls and floor were of sand, to block her power completely. She could not burn or explode sand. Privately she was glad they had not placed her in a metal cell; her bare feet would have caused her to burn with every step, and eventually killed her; a sadistic way to die, to be sure.

She hated to admit it, but it was beginning to look as though she would simply have to wait for her execution. The Authority would be there, she knew. It always oversaw its executions; another reason she yet believed that it took great joy in the actions it ordered and carried out by the hands of others. If it was really cruel, it might even have Masque kill her... or

make Arma kill Masque, first. Nervous laughter welled up inside her at that; the concept was altogether too real to be ignored, and too frightening to be accepted.

Her laughter turned from nervous to hysterical then; after all she had been through in the past several weeks, and in light of her own impending death, she could not begin to explain why, but everything just seemed beyond funny. The priest - she had fallen in love with a priest, a man of the cloth, a man of the untouchable order, who had sworn an oath of celibacy. She had done it over the span of one night; a night that had turned her from a girl into a woman, and from a woman into a freak of nature. She had spilled her soul to him, a complete stranger, and wept in his arms like some sort of hysterical wench in need of slapping; he had never looked away for a moment. And he had touched her, and her skin thrilled at the touch; the only touch she had ever known that did not result in blood.

And now, when she was about to die, he was farther away than ever. He could not save her now; he didn't even need her anymore. She had given up her life to the very thing that was going to ultimately destroy her; a monster of the worst caliber, she knew without a doubt.

She would tell it how funny it all was before she died, at least.

The guards, still listening to the sound of her laughter, departed.

Morrow kept his word, as he and Ashra made their way ever northward in pursuit of Ashra's yet unspoken final goal. He had not fallen prey to his own thoughts, or at least, he had not fallen so far beneath them that his actions and promises were no longer relevant. For his part, he believed he was keeping the bargain to the best of his ability. Damning though her words

had been, it had been the thought of what his child would have thought of him, if he had continued to follow his own selfish aims. He would not be worthy of her, and there was nothing more frightening than that thought; not even the possibility of needing to tear her from the clutches of the Tormentors.

A new thought had occurred to him as he walked. If she was noble, might it be possible that the Tormentors had kidnapped her to serve as an impressive ransom? She had claimed she had no family, but surely a distant cousin or three could be located and threatened. Whether said relatives would aid her, however, he couldn't know; and that would most certainly result in her death. A bad thought, then, it seemed.

Ashra, by contrast to Morrow, had seemed to grow more distant since her last outburst. Though she no longer referred to him blankly as "swordsmen," he felt as if he knew her less and less with each step. It was like following a bloodhound, set on a particular trail; she saw nothing but the trail, heard nothing but the footsteps of some ghost in the distance, and pressed on without a glance backward. If she grew tired, hungry or frustrated, she did not show it; Morrow had long since decided that she must be using her power to erase it all. She could not, unfortunately, do this for Morrow as well, so stops were still necessary - just fewer of them, which was well enough for her.

When they stopped to rest, she built her fire with a practiced hand, spread out a cloak from her travel bags, and fell into the sleep of the dead. He had watched her as she slept several times, being the sort of person that did not fall asleep or stay asleep easily; what sleep she got was plagued with unspoken nightmares. She screamed silently and fought imaginary captors and seemed to shudder with revulsion or rage or some combination of the two at varying points in the night.

He had never thought before to use his power on a sleeping target, to try to wash away traumatic dreams: he had done so only to find that the slightest touch or interruption brought her upright and alert instantly. It did not take her more

than a breath to arm herself with her giant blade, which she slept less than a handspan from. He still bore a rough slash across his chest from the first time; he had not tried again, though he had long since forgiven her; the stunned shock in her eyes when she realized what she had done, and her frustration at both her own reaction and his innocence were real enough.

Unwilling to upset her further, he had opted to continue on in silence, rather than inquire into her problems as she had inquired into his. Whatever she needed, it was not sympathy or friendship; it was a comrade, as she had requested. Someone to watch her back while she focused on her task solely and unfailingly. How many traps had she sprung by being too focused, blind to her surroundings? He thought he finally understood why such a woman would have needed his assistance after all. It would be slow going, extricating herself from every overlooked band of Tormentors, or every curious band of townsfolk or travelers.

He had begun to decide that they were headed for the far North; Ashra did not advise him of their travel plans, she simply led and he followed without question. Each city and town they passed was a bump in the road, where she was concerned; her path always led her north, and north again, ceaseless and unerring. She followed roads where possible, unwilling to risk a partially trained swordsman in the true wilds of the world, but there were bands of Tormentors that hindered their progress on occasion. These she fought with a grim sort of glee, and none of them ever survived their encounters with her. Morrow was growing more capable as a swordsman, but his true utility, as always, lay in his ability to help her recover from any injuries she sustained in pursuit of ridding them from problems.

Morrow had only begun to reach the realization that her status as a northlander was likely to make her a Tormentor as well as a magician. She never offered her enemies any particular reverence, and she battled them as ferociously as she did the wild animals that set upon them. However, despite this, there

was no obvious love for cruelty in her. She buried the dead and honored their blades at each pass, and many were the towns and cities where she had left the blades of the dead in the hands of those that needed them most; citizens with families to protect, crops to defend and businesses to treasure.

It troubled him more than he wanted to admit. All his life, he had been taught to detest Tormentors; they were good for little other than the kind of wanton destruction he had seen in Rathport and Meria. They killed for the joy of it, with no greater purpose than to hear the pleas of those that knelt at their feet. If Ashra was truly a Tormentor, it changed things. She operated under a code of morality and honor that was far outside his own, but he could not honestly call it evil, in his heart. Perhaps, just perhaps, not all Tormentors were equal in their goals. If that were the case, perhaps his child could be safe, after all. Perhaps he would not have to face the possibility that she would want to recruit him, or kill him, barring that. The thought brought an extra urgency to his step, and he soon managed to surpass Ashra several times on the road; a realization that seemed to goad her into moving even faster to rectify the situation.

They traveled this way for many days, and soon reached the great city at the heart of the northlands; a place he never thought he would ever see with his own eyes. Qardin was not for men such as him; their priests were more like Ashra herself, than like Morrow. They had no use for the gods that Morrow believed in; their swords were their gods, and one God ruled them first and foremost. He had heard tales of unbelievers being cast out from the city walls of sand and stone, forced to take shelter elsewhere; Ashra did not seem distressed about the possibility, so he put it behind him and followed her, much as he always did.

They had, it seemed, finally reached the pinnacle of Ashra's goal.

There was a great commotion in the Qardin city square when they arrived. Morrow's concern about attracting attention was definitely unwarranted, in the light of everything else, it seemed. He traced Ashra's footsteps with his own as she approached one of the many pairs of golem-like guards; they were at least twice his size in width and height, and made him feel a bit like a boy again, at the feet of the father he had never known. He had intended to keep himself silent, to allow Ashra to direct their next moves, but fate and the Gods he yet kept in his heart had other plans.

First came the news of a recent Tormentor arrest of a pair of wanted criminals. He was not supposed to have heard this; the guards frowned heavily at him and tried to insist that Ashra send him away, but she managed to guile them into believing that he was also a Tormentor. He was not sure he liked even the sound of the lie, but remained silent lest his protests ruin Ashra's plans. The captured were both women, it seemed, and very powerful ones at that. Their crime was high treason against the God; they would be put to death after three days of interrogation and penance. Morrow did not want to think about what either of those things might entail, for the God of the Tormentors.

They were beginning to discuss the finer points of the capture and how it had taken place, when a drunken shout of anger cut into their discussion. The voice came from behind Morrow, but he found that he needed to turn around only to confirm his suspicions; he would know the voice anywhere. If he hadn't recognized it, it might have troubled him less by far.

The red-haired lout with a mug in one hand and a clenched fist opposite, was no more the true essence of Huck than Morrow's sword was his own true essence. A drunken but sadistic grin warped his kind and friendly face into a ghastly mask of rage; he fixed his attention on Morrow, ignoring Ashra

and both guards as if they were no more than ants in the road. He offered a hand in greeting despite his obvious discomfort, but Huck was not interested in the greeting of old friends.

“Lookit, it’s the priest from the Drifting Hag,” he slurred, and glared at Morrow with all the strength he could muster. Ashra swore under her breath, her cover blown, but if the guards cared a whit for this bit of news, he could not have guessed. He kept his focus on Huck, who had drawn close enough to spew his rotten breath into Morrow’s face. “Imagine meetin’ you here, with a pretty little Tormentor whore on his arm. Don’t surprise me none at all. You always were a coward.”

Morrow’s heart skipped a beat, and his brow furrowed. “Huck, I think you have me mistaken for someone else. We were friends, until I lost you back in Meria. I looked for you, but you were gone. I agreed to help Ashra complete a task before I return to the search I spoke of to you. This is not what it seems.”

Huck laughed, hiccups and wheezing emerging between his guffaws. “Don’t gimme that, priest. I saw what you did to those men. I’d have had ‘em, they killed my kids, Gods damn them to hell. I’d have had ‘em but you walked in and witched them. Didn’t know you could kill without that sword I gave you. Lucky you didn’t kill me.”

Suddenly Morrow felt his stomach lurch. He had lost consciousness, right after he had unintentionally attacked the Tormentors through his healing magic. He had never seen Huck after that; as he had told the man, he believed him to be dead or simply fled, on his own path to restore the shards of his shattered life. Now he knew better. Huck had not left to find a new path in life. The spark in his eye that Morrow had seen before passing out was not one of hope. It was one of fear. Huck thought that Morrow had betrayed him every step of the way. With the rotgut in his system, he probably even thought that Morrow was a Tormentor. Maybe he even thought Morrow had been sent to distract him from Meria, just like the others. The

best part was that there could be no restoring of what had happened to his spirit. Morrow knew when a man was past saving; he had witnessed enough confessions to become a very good judge of character. The Huck he had known, fought alongside and admired, was gone, and all because of a moment of unexpected behavior from his magic.

Of all the people he had met in his life, Morrow had thought Huck would be the last one to stop fighting. He had defended Morrow, called his power worth protecting. Morrow had saved his life, and Huck had done the same for him. They had survived the plot meant to destroy them both, and emerged victorious, but in the end, they had only been pawns in a much larger game; that of the Tormentors, as they destroyed what remained of Huck's meager life. It might almost have been better if Morrow had let him die, though it would have also meant Morrow's death as well; the thought was a bitter one. First the child in Rathport had died not once, but twice, for his actions, and now Huck was all but the walking dead.

"You're a bad man, priest," Huck spat, pain distorting the rage in his face for only a moment. "I thought you had the power to save people, but you're just like everyone else. You're just like them, Gods damn it, I'll kill you now so you can't leave anyone else's kids orphans. I'll kill you so nobody else has to. I've got the right, you bastard priest. Should have stayed at the monastery, you know. I grew up on the streets. I grew up on the streets..." He looked momentarily confused. "The streets grew up on me too."

Ashra bit back a giggle, obviously taking his words for drunken foolishness, but Morrow found more truth in those words than anything else Huck had said.

Huck brought one giant fist up into Morrow's face, and the Qardin guards flew into motion. One of the stone-like men grabbed his wrist, immobilizing him, and the other moved its body between Huck and Morrow, more swiftly than Morrow could have imagined. Ashra, frowning, had unsheathed her

sword. One of the guards spoke. "You are inebriated, man. Violence is not permitted within the walls of Qardin, so speaks the God. Continued violence will result in your arrest or death."

Huck laughed and broke his mug against the side of the guard's head. It was then that Morrow raised his voice for the second time in his life. "Stop right now, all of you!"

Even the guards paused; a lucky thing, for a man who was the second closest person in the entire group to a criminal. He shook his head, exhaustion and anger still present in his voice. "The drunk speaks the truth. I am no Tormentor. I was a priest of the All-Holy, and have no faith in your ways, though I am no longer fit to call myself a priest because I wear this blade. I met this woman on the road, and she requested my aid in bringing her here quickly. I have fought by her side in an effort to see that request honored. I have healed her wounds and restored her energy as well. By the time I realized I was fighting alongside my enemy, I was already here."

Ashra looked down, whether from the guilt of having held back the truth, or from the naked honesty of Morrow's accusation of her being his enemy, he couldn't tell. Still, he continued. "I am magically talented; my power is one of healing, or so I thought. But on the night this man speaks of, I was knocked to the ground by an opponent whose skill was to rend the earth asunder. I did not expect to be able to heal the ground as well as a human body, and a tree grew up and through the enemy I faced." He shuddered at the memory. "I have killed, which is something I never intended to do in my life, but I have done so. Since then I have killed others in defense of this woman's life as well as my own."

Huck interjected. "See, I told you he was a damn murdering bastard, that's why I tried to kill him just now."

Morrow ignored him. "I have no further business here, unless Ashra wishes it. My intent was to finish the task that she had asked of me, and then return to my own aims in other parts of the world. If you must arrest or remove me, then do what you

feel is appropriate, but I am not a liar. I will have the truth known first.”

“Your truth is a lie, priest,” Huck announced, in an absolutely calm voice. “The least you can do is kill me like you always wanted to.”

Then suddenly, he twisted free of the guard’s iron grip with superhuman force. A lifetime on the streets truly had morphed him into another kind of fighter entirely than what Morrow or even the guards were accustomed to. Before Morrow could object, Huck had grasped the handle of Morrow’s blade and pulled it free from his belt.

He placed the edge of the blade near his neck, and as the others looked on in stunned horror, he neatly removed his own head from his shoulders.

Morrow again followed Ashra through the streets and alleyways of Qardin. Neither spoke to the other; there were no words to describe what had just happened, and even fewer to justify it. The guards, faced with the necessity of cleaning up the remains of the violence that Huck had inflicted upon himself, had decided that Morrow’s speech rang true. They did not like permitting his presence before the God, but he did not appear to be a threat, and Ashra promised them that her task was very nearly complete; he would be leaving soon. On top of that, the guards had seemed almost too easy to please. Morrow wondered if perhaps they knew what Ashra planned, and were letting him pass in order to facilitate some greater plot.

They arrived at a fancy building, not nearly as ornate as the grand palace at the top of the city, where sat the God, but well enough to indicate a minor noble’s residence. Ashra paused and took a deep breath; Morrow’s emotions were dulled enough to largely take the words that came next without much reaction at all; he found it to be a good thing.

“I have misled you, Morrow.” Her eyes sought his, the same guilt she had worn in the plaza returning. “I told you that I had come to find the man responsible for leaving those scars upon me that I cannot erase. You assumed, from your own story, that I was searching for one that I loved. I am afraid I can allow that lie to continue no longer.”

When he refused to speak, she continued. “I am a magician. This you know. The man I once loved, the man in this house, is not. He was an anomaly to my people; a reject, unwelcome except for the fact that he is too well off to destroy. But I loved him anyway.” She sighed. “I was a fool. He finds magicians intolerable and wicked, no matter their power or their reasons. I thought that because my power is inward and not outward, I might be able to hide it from him. When he eventually found out...”

Suddenly, her dreams made sense. “He beat you.”

She nodded, and her face fell again. “He did more than that. I was pregnant with his child. She did not survive the beating.” Slowly, she unsheathed the giant sword at her back, resting the tip in the sand. “I swore I would come back for him, to erase my shame and pain, and to take vengeance for what he chose to do to his unborn child. I could not have made it here without you. But I cannot ask you to come any further now. This is my grudge to bear, and my hands to stain with blood.”

Morrow shook his head slowly. Though his emotions were dulled, he could not help the general feeling of despair that ran through every bone in his body. It seemed that the magic that flowed through his veins was indeed some kind of curse. At every turn, people tried to hide their magic, or be rid of it; nobody wanted to use it for the greater good. What was the use of any of it, anymore? Why had the Gods even bothered?

He nodded to Ashra, then turned his back on her. “You’re right. This is not my burden to bear. I do not blame you for what you are about to do. But your world isn’t mine, Madam Ashra. We ask the Gods for their forgiveness, and move

on, for all the good it does. Maybe you're right, in the end. I don't much care, anymore." He began to walk away. "Everything I thought I knew seems to be crumbling before my eyes. My friends lie to me, use me and throw me away when I am not what they want me to be. I am not who I thought I was, either. This world has betrayed me."

He set his jaw and stopped, briefly. "But through it all, there is one who has been more betrayed by it than me. I am going to find her. Sometimes, it is better to think of those who have seen more than you, and lived to tell about it. You may think me weak and blind. Huck thought I was a betrayer of the worst kind, and was willing to die to prove it. I saw men, women and children die because I used my power to save them. But she... she's never known any kind of love from anyone. At least you knew love, once. You will find it again. I can only pray that I am so lucky."

"Morrow, wait!" Ashra fell to her knees, supported only by her blade. "I don't want to kill him, but... I can't erase the fear, the anger, the pain! It destroys me with every breath I take. He was everything to me..."

"Sometimes, you don't know what you have, until you have lost it." It was a lesson Morrow had learned, first and foremost, on his journey to the north. "Farewell, Ashra. Do what you feel in your heart to be best. I will do the same."

He left her weeping in the sand, her blade still and silent for the first time in what he knew had to be years. She had been so alone, with no one to question her resolve and determination until now. He could not blame her, as he had said; that kind of betrayal of a woman's trust was unforgivable. And yet, there were people like Morrow in the world, who would reach out and help others that they saw hurting. There was hope for her, though he could not be her hope, in the end; he had hopes of his own that he desperately needed to bear to their ends.

There was no doubt in his mind, anymore, that the girl in the rose mask had been his child; his beautiful angel, grown

to womanhood in shackles that he could not know. Had she been hurt, as Ashra had? Had she lost hope and learned to kill as a way to sate her own failures and weaknesses? If she had, he would find her and show her what it meant to destroy; he would destroy every bond that held her, as well as every bond that held him. They would find a place where their magic could join together and create something beautiful. No more would he fear his feelings for her, and no more would she flee his embrace; they could show the world what true magic was all about.

It was a task he was beginning to feel that only he and she could accomplish, together. Certainly nobody else in the world seemed to want to try, anymore.

They came for her at dawn. Not one, but two pairs of Qardin stone guards, swathed in hanging, loose robes of crimson velvet, peered into her cell, waking her from her slumber. With their usual bland demeanor, they informed her that her execution was to be carried out, and that she would come before Masque, by virtue of her rank. She had almost forgotten that Masque was a mere apprentice; her inferior in all ways but mental. Of course, the Authority would want to see Arma fall first. She was, after all, supposed to be one of its best. It seemed that the Authority was not above the pleasure of simple vengeance.

To her credit, she tried to fight them, as she had every single time that one of them had approached her to deliver food and drink. Though she knew in her heart that it would come down to patience and longevity, she still could not sit idly by and waste a potential chance for escape. They were used to it, and only beat her on her worst and most successful - or most damaging - attempts, now. Her herculean struggle might well have given her usual pair of guards a headache, but with four of them present, she quickly found herself on her knees again, the

weight of their powerful, muscular bodies bearing down on her almost as much as their power; they all seemed to have the ability to cancel the gifts of other magicians. How they all had some form of the same power was beneath her; she had never seen a power copy itself before. It seemed somehow wrong; each person and each power at least seemed to be unique to them. It seemed right, at least, for the power to replace the identities of the people that it had robbed of their previous ones.

Masque was a dead woman, except for the imperceptible rise and fall of her chest in the adjacent cell. Arma had seen her wake, eat and drink sparingly, relieve herself, and lie back down in a fetal position on the floor of her cell more times than she could count. Though she had made eye contact with Arma on more than one occasion, it was as if her mind had been taken from her; there was no recognition and no friendship there to concern herself with any longer. Masque didn't even listen anymore when Arma's escape plans failed, and the lashings and beatings began. She was still trying to learn to return the favor for Masque, who seemed to evince no particular threat, and yet suffered at the hands of her captors anyway. She had decided that nothing much made sense in Qardin, anyway.

The guards, no longer willing to tolerate discomfort from a woman about to be destroyed, grew impatient with her feeble struggles to rise from the sandy floor. One lifted her with the strength of a single hand, while another clamped a series of chains around her naked body. The first clamp was a collar around her neck. Then another, around her breasts. Then another, around her waist. Two more around her wrists; two more at her knees, and two more at her ankles. Each clamp was attached to the next highest by another chain, all interconnected, almost like a hastily built chain mail suit that had not yet been filled in. The chains were cold and took her breath away, which was probably the first thing they intended.

Instead of fighting, she let her mind wander, aimlessly. What else was there to do, but to reflect on her life as it passed

slowly before her? She found herself thinking of the frigid chains that held her; they were not much different from the chains that people put upon themselves, and upon others as well. People were never happy with themselves; they always wanted more wealth, more power, more beauty, more land. They had forgotten how to be thankful for things, and now that the Tormentors had come to serve as a way to show them, they only forgot it more in the wake of their anger at what they had lost.

People were also never happy with each other. Mothers wanted daughters to grow up and follow in their footsteps; fathers wanted sons to do the same. Friends wanted each other's silence first and foremost; the moment the sync was broken between the two by some argument or disagreement, the relationship crumbled like the sand beneath her feet. Everyone wanted to be happy, unchallenged by the world around them, and then they grew complacent, not seeing the world for its many dangers and beautiful truths.

Only those with magic, she had begun to think, had any idea of what the real world was, anymore. She had found her most violent enemies and her closest friends, after she had become gifted, within the Tormentors - other magically gifted folk. While their world had been lawless, disordered and frantic, often deadly, it had been somehow more real than the one she had left behind. In the home of her father, she had been only a poor daughter. In the home of her mother, she had been only a poor lady in training. What she had become had frightened her, and still did, more often than not; but what might she have become otherwise? Could an innocent life, free of these realities, be worth living, in the end? Would she be content to look down on the magically gifted, if she herself were not one? The answer disturbed her.

As they led her out of her cell and into the corridor, she began to wonder what the answer to it all could be. The original Tormentors had intended to make war upon the magic-less; a kind of battle of attrition, to make them see the strengths of the

magically gifted. There were healers in the Tormentors, after all, and not just healers that had been bought for a hefty sum or blackmail. The idea was to band them together into a unified, cohesive and protected force, and then go about their lives doing what they would do any other day; to show the non-gifted that they could live in peace. It was the new blood, the angry and jaded and poor, that sought to turn their war of peace into a war of blood. They wanted to reverse the tides; to turn their own kind into the elite of the world, and force the ungifted to grovel at their feet.

There were times when she thought this viewpoint was sheer madness; peace could never come from war, and if the Tormentors continued down the path they sought to progress upon, they would never find a way to restore the world to its former glory. They would not stop the magic from taking people, nor find the acceptance they craved. They would gain what they wanted by force, and become no better than those they fought against. After all, wasn't it only fear and distrust and a lack of understanding that made the ungifted hate the gifted? On the other hand, there were situations such as her priest's, that made her want to kill the foolish masses on sight. What good could there be in denying a man who could save people's lives and souls? He had been chastised, beat down, walked upon, cast aside and abandoned, and he was the kindest man she knew. What, then, did that mean for her? She couldn't watch him suffer, day after day, at their hands; a compromise had to be reached!

For that, she had joined the Tormentors. And for that, she yet stayed with them, traitor though she was. She had not denounced their ways upon interrogation, and had not betrayed her priest to them, either. There was no question in her mind that they would seek him out and demand his participation in the Tormentors if she did; he was a powerful man, and they needed powerful men. Perhaps, by her questions, she could learn once and for all whether the Tormentors had ever spoken

truth, when they spoke of a war of peace and kindness, or whether it had all been a ruse in the name of keeping quiet those who would have fought them.

The guards marveled at the silence of the hot-blooded young woman that they had forced into submission countless times. She had never been so willing to comply; almost eager, in some strange way. She caught one of them looking at her, and smiled; it was a bitter smile, but that did not diminish its beauty and genuine nature. If he could have smiled, he would have returned the gesture, but as it was, he simply resumed his solemn march forward, his eyes on the ground before him. What could they be thinking; the rock-like men with no faith in their own right to speak? The urge to address them all and ask that very question was overwhelming, but the procession had almost reached the central execution chamber; she would have no time to hear their responses, and somehow asking only to miss the answer would be more painful than never having asked at all.

She had not noticed before, with no windows present, but their procession from her cell had been rising up a very gradual incline. When they entered the central chamber, however, the reality of this hit home like a thunder clap; they were on a pathway far above the room's floor. In the middle of the huge circular room, a black pillar rose from the floor to the ceiling, and crisscrossing paths intersected it from each cardinal direction; no, she noticed, they were skewed in the shape of a letter X, rather than a true cross. How poetic, the Qardin people were; she would be slaughtered at the center of the X. X marked the spot where her life would end, forever.

They wasted no time fastening her chains to the pillar, and she wasted no time grabbing at the chains that bound her. As expected, the metal warmed and began to burn into her flesh, bringing tears of pain to her eyes. It might melt, if she could hold it long enough, but she would kill herself in doing it; better to wait for the Authority's kill command rather than her

own. She had not come this far to commit suicide.

Foolishly her mind focused on her priest. If she had fallen in love with a knight of the realm, or a warrior of some kind; even a lesser prince, she might have a potential rescuer to wait for. He would swoop in from the high rafters, riding a chandelier of golden light, and throw his arm about her waist, tearing her free from her bonds and lifting her back into the sky before the first of the guards even knew what was happening. The priest, of course, could not know she was here; could not know her name to find her, and thus could not even be nearby, let alone save her. She shook her head, a second bitter smile crossing her face; she had been foolish enough once to think she might be able to save him. With her power, she had needed no saving; she would be the sword, and he the shield, in their life together. How naive she had been! And yet, it still seemed like the sweetest dream in her life.

She watched with a growing feeling of nervousness and adrenaline in the pit of her stomach as the Qardin civilians and more guards began to fill the room. She had not noticed before, but the circular room had an endless number of seats around its girth; this was more like an amphitheater rather than an execution hall! Anger began to war with her panic. They were going to make an example of her, to ensure that no other Tormentors of her rank and prestige would ever think to disobey the Authority again. It was so very like the Authority; she just continued to underestimate it again and again. If she ever got free of this predicament, she would remember never to do so again.

Then, suddenly, the Authority - she had never seen it directly before, having always spoken through a magical barrier and screen to contact it with orders or messages in the past, but she knew without a doubt - stepped in from the southwestern leg of the X, facing directly toward her. Every bone in her body froze stiff; every muscle she had tensed as if in preparation for some earth-shattering blow, and it was still at the farthest point

from her person that it could be. It wore a black robe, very similar to her own red one, that covered the majority of its body; by the look of it, it stood a foot and a half above her, and she was a tall woman to begin with. The black fabric seemed to shine and glisten in the dimming light; she could barely make out the rich golden threaded accents that adorned it as it moved. Its face was also covered; a golden mask that seemed to wrap around the entirety of its head, leaving no room at all for recognition. Her own mask had maintained the classic open back of most masks; whoever had made it was even more talented.

A hush fell over the crowd, which had finally seemed to stop filling the room, though only for lack of space. She was, for all intents and purposes, alone with the Authority of the Tormentor's Hand; to all ends, her personal king and God.

She wanted to kill him. Unfortunately, she had questions to ask first.

The Authority spoke first, and the voice that emerged from the mask was a peculiar mixture of genders; the soft, higher-pitched musicality of a woman's voice, but with the harsh firmness of a man's. "I am the Authority. You are known to me, Arma Flair. I have spoken with you before on matters concerning my orders. I was given to understand that you knew what I asked of you, and had conducted yourself accordingly."

In the face of her fear, Arma became belligerent and overconfident. What did it matter, now that she was going to die? "I knew you sent me to do your filthy work. I did it far too many times without question. Lucky for you I was such a fool."

His tone suggested insolence and bemusement. "Come now. Surely you, yourself did not think to question me. You were a loyal subject. Someone put ideas into your head, didn't they? Mistress 'Masque,' perhaps?" She could hear the inflection in his voice, reminding her that she still did not know Masque's true name. Indeed, she had followed Masque's master plan, but only after realizing that she was not alone in her misgivings

about the Authority's orders. She could not blame this all on Masque.

"It was Masque who showed me that I am not the only one of your subjects who hesitate when you give the order to kill. I had thought I was destined to fall in your footsteps, demon. I thought I had no choice, and nowhere to run. She showed me differently. I borrowed her strength to do what I would have done anyway, given the choice."

The Authority hissed in anger, and the gasp that came from the surrounding audience was audible, even at their distance. It had continued to walk forward toward her, and now stood almost nose to nose with her, the golden eyeholes of its mask bearing down into her own eyes; a ghostly display of being able to see through anything, or so Arma thought. She did the obvious thing; she reached out to grasp the mask.

For a moment, it jerked away in horror; her fingers had begun to melt the gold. Then, just as suddenly, it was over; it stood at arm's length, clutching its pseudo-face in rage and pain, almost as if she had burned its flesh directly. WHEN it spoke again, there was no more hint of amusement left. "You will be put to death, Arma Flair, for your disobedience to me. As with all prisoners, you may deliver your final question. Speak quickly, or you will find your question forfeit. I hope you have a good one, considering all that you have done."

"I do." Arma stood upright in her chains, despite the nakedness that made her so nervous and cold. Her eyes bore into the golden mask, willing it away to see the truth beneath, for all the good it would do. Her power was destruction, and had she been just a little faster; if her power had not required time to build upon itself to reach full strength, she might have done it once and for all. The time to end her life was nigh. Her last thought, before her words spilled forth from her lips, was of the face of the priest. She wanted, above all else, for him to be happy, even if that meant being in the arms of the northlander woman she had seen in Chross. For now, at least, that question

seemed to be answered.

“My question is simple. Why do you order us to do such filthy and vile things? I have killed for orders that were not yours before. I do not question that. What I question is the unnecessary slaughter of innocents. Why not criminals, or those soon to die anyway, or others that will not be missed? Instead, you have us rob children of their parents, and parents of their children. Whole families die at your hand. Why feed on their pain and death, when you could have so much more from their cooperation?”

The Authority calmly looked down at her, and despite the mask, she felt its words as truth in her heart. They echoed on the inside of her soul, long after it had given the order to begin the execution, and her body had been ripped into shreds by the magical chains that bound it. The Authority looked away as she died, and down to the floor, but its answer was audible only to her, as it had been for every man, woman and child before her.

“Because I have to, dear one. Because I have to.”

Morrow, in his attempt to leave the strange and magnificent city of Qardin, had found that its denizens did not want him to go quite as badly as he had anticipated. No fewer than five different citizens had taken note of his power at a distance, and offered him the traditional invitation to join the Tormentors. Despite his best attempts at concealing himself from view in his rough woolen cloak, they all saw him; he was beginning to come to the conclusion that somehow, he was growing in power, as was his recognizability to others who looked his way. That would explain the events in Meria, and why he could not walk more than a handful of steps without difficulty.

They were all polite, at least, at his refusal. Though he

could have threatened every one with the All-Holy's brand of fire and damnation, or his own sword - his will to end the nightmare that the Tormentors caused - he found himself unwilling to resort to the methods of a simple berserker. If Ashra had taught him anything beyond his blade work, she had taught him that people were not as simple as he had been led to believe. Tormentor though she was, she was also human, and it had given him much to think about on his way south through the city. If the child in his memory had grown up at the hands of the Tormentors, could he honestly tell himself that it was because she enjoyed it? People did things they were not proud of all the time, himself included. Losing her had been his first.

In the end, his goal was twofold, it seemed. The first goal was to find her. The second was to find out, once and for all, who she was - Tormentor, woman, or both. There was a third, he thought to himself, as well; to decide for himself whether or not her answer could leave him doubt about her that could change both of their lives forever.

He was about to make haste for the gate, before anyone else noticed him or thought to halt his progress, when the herald came down from what he now knew was called the Golden Stairway; the seemingly endless flight of stairs that led from the God's palace to the feet of His subjects in the city below. A large sack was slung over one shoulder. Every man, woman and child in the streets gave him deference; it seemed that his word was as good as the God's, where they were concerned. Given that he hadn't managed to see their God at any point, he guessed that the herald must be the face that the God presented to His people. Privately, he knew of no God who would deliver such a selfish demand to His people; the face of the All-Holy lived on every man who knew Him and spoke His name. This God was false, to be sure, if He tolerated such facade.

Morrow could not help himself. Exiting during such a procession would more than offend the local population. On

top of that, he was curious, for the sake of his own wondering, what the puppet of such a God could have to say. He had learned many things over the course of his journey, but unfortunately, ignoring the infernal, childlike curiosity that had plagued him since he was a boy, had not been one of them. As soon as the man spoke, he knew his mistake had been a fatal one.

“Citizens of Qardin,” the man began, his voice managing to carry some hint of emotion beyond the normal stone-like men of the city. Morrow could not decide whether the emotion was pride in his God, an attempt at bravado in the face of a tale he did not relish telling, or something else entirely. “The traitor, known to us all as the woman, Arma Flair, has been delivered to the God, and has met with His vengeance. Her crime was High Treason; once a faithful subject of our God, she grew weary of His hand upon her life, and sought to remove it with His death. But of course, one cannot kill a God.”

Morrow could have sworn the rock-like face smiled, for only a split second, before it continued its tale. “If such a woman can question our God’s desires, know that any of you might, as well. It is our duty to obey and to serve. Questions are for the doomed to die, not for we who live on in His name.” He bowed his head. “The God has asked me to deliver this message to you, in hope that it finds you able and willing to heed His voice. If there are any who doubt Him, even as we speak, then He has asked that you bear witness to the result of your defiance.”

He knew what was coming before it happened, but he was riveted to the spot, unable to look away. The bag was too large to contain anything other than a body, and in such a city, with such a God, of course the slain woman would be made an example. He had seen it before, countless times before; if there had been anything left of Huck’s children in Meria, perhaps they might have suffered the same. A slight rush of adrenaline flashed through his veins; could she perhaps yet live? If she did,

he might be able to reach her in time. Though he did not know the woman in question, anyone who opted to defy the kind of God that the herald spoke of more than earned his respect and favor.

The herald turned the sack upside down, unceremoniously, and cries of fury rose from the crowd; not at the herald, and not at the God, but at the woman who had chosen to betray them all. Morrow heard little of it, and saw little else, but the ruined body, as it collapsed in a heap amid the sandy ground. It was a horrifying sight, one that no one should ever have to see; indeed, the price of treason was great.

Worse than that, however, was the fact that he recognized her.

She was dressed as she had been in Chross; the rose-girl he had wanted so desperately to see again, and to question about his long-lost child. The robe was red, masking much of the bloody mess from view, and leaving little of her body to sight. Her face was covered in the same leather mask she had worn; his eyes focused on a single wisp of blonde hair that trailed forward around the side of the mask. Though the violence done to her was apparent enough, even the God, it seemed, had some idea of proper respect - perhaps the fear of the sight of what had actually been done to her would serve as a stronger warning than the actuality.

The crowd reacted as the God no doubt intended. Some spat curses at her; others literally spat at her bare feet. Some threw stones, while others simply shook their heads in prayer and regret, then moved on with their daily lives, no doubt thinking that it could never happen to one as loyal and true as themselves. It was a scene that left him with bile in the back of his throat and his teeth clenched together so tightly that his jaw muscles began to tremble with exertion. This was, simply put, vile enough for man; by the orders of a God, it was an unforgivable sin.

He waited until the crowd had dispersed, and the herald

had gone, before approaching her in the street. Though his body trembled with fear and anger, he had not forgotten his intended purpose for meeting her, dead or alive. He had wanted to determine her nature; to know once and for all whether she was, in fact, the girl he had met all those years ago, as his heart had told him. The silence in his breast had already informed him of the truth, but he could not - would not - believe it until he saw it for himself. If her power had still operated after her death, he might have known with a touch; as it stood, there was only one way to be certain of the answer he sought.

He knelt down, unwatched by the Qardin citizens, to whom she had no more meaning, and unfastened the strap that held her mask to her face. The leather fell away, and beneath it lay the cruel, undeniable truth; a beauty that both took his breath away, and brought forth a scream of anguish that nobody heard but himself.

He had all the answers he needed, but he was also too late.

The priest made his way to the bottom of the flight of stairs, death in his eyes and his blade held tight in his hand, in just the way that Ashra had taught him. There was no more time for regrets; no more time to wonder who he was and who he was meant to be. His heart governed all of his actions now, for the first time in his life, and though he knew without question that they would result in blood, he did not stop to question or falter. Arma - so that had been her name - had paid for her questions with blood; he could not do any less than the same, if he wanted to quiet the unrest in his own soul.

Ashra had taught him to make his blade into the physical representation of what he most wanted out of life. For the first time, he knew what he most wanted. It was not as simple as vengeance, no matter what others might have thought.

He would indeed avenge his beloved, but her death had not been random enough to stop there. She had served her God with all of her heart, and He had betrayed her; the last in a series of hateful injuries done to her in the name of controlling her power. He did not need to know more than that to justify what he was about to do. He had known the God of the northlanders was false before; now, He was not only false, He was the absolute reversal of anything that could be called a God.

The Tormentors were the farthest thing from his mind as he settled upon his grim duty with a bitter joy in his heart. If Arma could deny them, then there were no doubt others as well who questioned. Therefore, his task was simple. Those who stood between himself and the false God would perish. Those who stepped aside would be spared. Only those who stepped aside could be called human, in the end.

Though his own soul would be damned for eternity, he had to have faith that the All-Holy would forgive his transgression. He would kill, but in so doing, he would give the world something beyond a petty tyrant in search of blood. He would give it hope for the future.

He put his foot down on the first step. This journey, too, would be long.

He lost count of how many guards he had destroyed, somewhere into the early double digits. His blade and clothing were drenched in blood, yet his resolve had not wavered in the slightest. He had gained a newfound strength in himself and his purpose in life, as impossible as that sounded; though he had lost his beloved, and he would never manage to forgive himself for that, her death had shown him what it meant to want something badly enough to fight for it. He had thought he had known, before, while he searched blindly for her in vain, but he had not; he had followed the avenues of a blind man, searching

in places that he knew he would never find her, because the information he had precluded any hope of her discovery. He had known she was noble; he had no place in castles or keeps. He had known her power; he had not thought to inquire about that out of fear. All these things could have led him to her in time to save her life; indeed, he had passed her once without stopping to think! All because he had not trusted in or believed in himself enough to listen.

The image of her broken, battered body, which he had gathered as respectfully as he could and moved to the outskirts of town before his rampage began, flashed before his eyes. It was an imprint on his mind that would haunt him while he slept, every night of the remainder of his life. Somehow, he thought it was fair.

Time passed, with new deaths in each heartbeat. Morrow found himself at the top of the stairs. The two guards that watched him could not show their fear or anger, but they fought him all the same. He let them live, this time, with an ultimatum. They were to deliver the God to him, directly, or watch as the rest of the God's palace met their ends. He sent them with that message, and then waited.

His wait was in vain. After fifteen minutes, he resumed his charge. Either they had fled and dishonored their status as guards, or the God had destroyed them in anger at their message. Either way, they were free of His iron grip.

He opened the door to the palace, and went inside.

When he met the God, otherwise known as the Authority - it had no name, insofar as he had heard - it was in a circular chamber, upon a pathway high above the ground. The

room stank of blood; the pillar in the center had not yet been cleaned. The creature in the golden mask sat in a chair that had been delivered to him from somewhere; the crowd that had gathered to watch the execution had left. It was only himself, and the Authority before him.

What the creature had to say, however, when he spoke a fumbling, emotional demand for answers, was not what he expected to hear.

“You’ve come to kill me. I had hoped it would be sooner than this.”

Frantic and furious, with no patience for further confusion, Morrow demanded another answer. Though He might not have granted it to anyone else, the Authority complied.

“Tell me, Morrow Grave. What is a God, to you?”

He staggered, gasping something about kindness, beauty and light.

“Gods can be that. Gods can also be cruel. Sometimes, they are even somewhere in the middle.” The Authority made a sound, and Morrow could not help but think that it sounded like a very human, very hopeless sigh.

“I became a God, in hope that I could guide my people into a better life. The God you serve, the All-Holy, was the one responsible for the death of magic, wasn’t He? The people did not seek Him; their pain had to come from Him, after all. So I thought, the only thing to battle a God, would be another God.”

Morrow shook his head in disbelief. The Authority ignored him.

“I started it well, you see. I masked myself, so that no man or woman could know me. Then I masked myself further. My power is that of shields and masks; I can defend myself against an army, but I am powerless to fight others. I thought I would fail, because of that. But I found others who wanted to fight, and we devised a plan. We would fight, but we would

fight with our shields, not our swords. We would show the world what it meant to be gifted, not cursed. Our powers, eventually, would become a positive influence on the world.”

Morrow fell to his knees in exhaustion. The Authority only paused.

“I did well up until the point I believed I needed more than just a circle of close friends. I believed I needed an army, to protect us from those who would harm us. I believed that allowing anyone who was disillusioned with the way that magicians were treated, would come to me and I could heal them. You might understand that, Morrow. Have you ever wanted so badly to help someone, and yet you know that if you reached out, they might flee your kindness and do more harm to others?”

He couldn't speak. If he had, he might have slain the man then and there.

“I let them all in. Many were like myself, seeking a place for themselves that would permit the use of their magic without prejudice or injury. But the rest took it too far. They wanted to injure as they had been injured; pay back the population that had alienated them and killed so many of the ones they loved. I could not blame them, nor cast them aside without becoming the very thing that I sought to destroy. They needed a place, evil though they were, and I gave it to them.”

The Authority sighed, again. “When they began to destroy without my consent, I knew I had to act. My decision, in the end, was to begin to control the violence in the best way I could; by ordering it. I knew that those who refused my orders were the good ones; I knew that I would be forced to destroy any of them who came to me seeking help, rather than fleeing my control entirely. Arma was ever the strong one. I always feared it would come to her death. I wanted her to hate me... but she didn't hate me enough.”

At these words, Morrow broke down completely, the way he had not when presented with her corpse. He sobbed like

a newborn baby. The Authority kept on speaking.

“I cannot atone for what I have done. My only defense now is that I have always chosen the smallest places that I can find for the destruction. There is no way that we humans can determine the value of a life, but my intent was ever to destroy entire families, and only families in small villages; those who lived on the outskirts of the world. If anyone had to die, I wanted it to be those who would not be missed; children and their families both could go to the Gods, and nobody would be left behind.”

“You failed,” Morrow managed to gasp. “You left a father without children. He turned from the greatest man I have ever known into a raving lunatic, because of you!”

“I do not wish your forgiveness or love, Morrow.” The Authority rose from his seat and looked down upon the crumpled heap of a priest. “I know all that I have done. Arma did her best to protect you, but you were on her lips at every turn, and on her heart as well. I knew that you would follow her, and I knew that someday, it might come to this. I had hoped that you could end it. But first... I have a question for you. May it be my last question, as I have offered to so many, including Arma.”

Morrow, daunted by this, did his best to struggle to his feet, angrily casting the tears from his eyes and scowling at the golden mask. “I have heard all that I care to hear. Ask now, and I will grant your wish.”

The Authority reached around to the back of his mask, and the sound of a metal catch releasing accompanied the movement. His mask came loose, and he lifted it away, to reveal a handsome young man, not much older than Arma had been. His features were thin and delicate, almost like a woman's, but he was muscular and powerful like a man as well. It was the same strange symmetry that Arma had heard in its voice, but Morrow knew at a glance that the Authority was male in truth.

He spoke, holding his mask to his heart, and keeping his

haunted eyes on the floor. He was, after all, only human, and facing his death. “I ask you this, Morrow Grave. In your heart of hearts, as kind of a man as you are, do you think you can do better? With my death, the responsibility of my people falls to you. My guards are dead. Qardin will be in chaos without a hand to guide them. Will you be their God? And will you be a better one than I?”

As the Authority had answered Arma’s question, so too did Morrow answer his. His sword plunged into the young man’s chest, directly through the heart; he died instantly, and Morrow felt a shudder of emotion sweep through him - something he thought he could no longer feel. His answer left him with more questions than he had ever had before, and he thought on the answers to those questions in depth as he made his way out of the palace. He had a job to do, when he was finished wondering; one last thing he was curious about.

In truth, his answer had been no better than the Authority’s.

“I don’t know. But I certainly intend to try.”

When Morrow left the Authority’s palace, it seemed as if the entire city of Qardin had come forth to bear witness to his deed. Many were in tears, and many more wore defeated expressions. However awful the man that wore the golden mask had been, it was clear that these people had been accustomed to the established order, and had even grown to love it, in their own ways. Rarely did the controlled believe they were being controlled, he’d found. He had had no such thoughts in regard to the monastery either, until he had left it.

His mind was not on his new status as the God of these people, but on his own God; the All-Holy he had come to treasure. The priests had had their own belief in regard to His teachings; he had found it hard to agree. They had used His

name to keep Morrow in a tight little box, content to watch him waste away out of fear of his magic. The All-Holy - as others had claimed, the one responsible for magic in the first place - had not seen fit to allow this, apparently, for He had offered Morrow his freedom, in the form of a woman. How ironic it was, to think that one of the things that priests denied themselves, could be a sign sent from the highest authority!

There were those who claimed that he heard something other than the voice of the All-Holy, in his heart of hearts. They thought he was mad, or justifying his own actions in his mind, while hearing nothing of the actual holy voice. He had left them to their judgements, for the ultimate Judge would tell them the truth, in time. Every man, woman and child had their time; Morrow's had simply come sooner than he, or they, expected.

He did not practice the rhythmic chants that were supposed to give order to their prayers and make them more pleasing. He did not spend hours on his knees in prayer, any longer. He had even taken up a vile, wicked weapon and, against the basic priestly tenet of non-violence, slain both men and a false God, this night. He had learned to understand something of the northerners' faith in their blades. The All-Holy fought in His own way as well, and for His own reasons. He could only trust that He was being guided by a hand that knew better than he; otherwise he was lost, and damned, in the worst way. Without that guidance, he knew in his heart, he would never have reached the Authority, or Arma.

Arma - the name on his lips and in his mind drove blades of anguish into his heart. He had not known her name before, and now that he knew it, he could no longer speak it to her, and show her its beauty. All the things he might have said to her, and all the things that he might have done with her, as they grew old together, drove his heart deeper into his stomach. The All-Holy had brought him to this place, but had cost him dearly in doing so. Could he have been wrong, about Arma being his sign from God? She had given herself into the hands

of evil, as he had most feared, but she had also sacrificed her life to gain the truth. This price was too much to pay, for her. He knew she would have taken it, believing herself unworthy of forgiveness - that was the worst knowledge of all.

Forgiveness, he thought with a deep sigh and a dutiful, priestly mastering of his emotions, was the first step on his path out of Qardin. He stood before the amassed crowd, his eyes sweeping over each of them in turn. He was going to deliver them from the God they had known, but he would deliver them into a world where nothing was as it seemed.

“Tonight, a great tragedy has befallen the city of Qardin. Your God, the great Authority, has fallen to evil. He sought only to protect you, and to guide you, in his final moments, but the hand of wickedness was too great for him to prevail.”

The crowd stirred; the tears flowed faster, and the anger simmered to a boil.

“You knew your God to be a fierce and often cruel master. He handed down orders that you followed without question, out of your love and respect for his guidance. Some of you did question. He told you not to, and He did it with such precision that it made certain that you would not question Him further. He asked for your blindness and acceptance, and you gave it to him, as he gave you strength and security that you had never known before.”

Morrow took a deep breath. “I stand before you now, as the hand and the blade that pierced the heart of your God. You will despise me. You will wish my death. You will be lost, for a time. However, know this: He asked me to guide you in his place, as the next Authority of Qardin. He gave me his blessing, before he died. His reasons were his own, and that should be enough for each and every one of you who believed in Him.”

The crowd erupted. Fistfights began. Some fled the plaza, while others tried to console their friends and loved ones. Still others, having listened to his words, fell silent, wanting to hear what the slayer of their God could possibly continue to say.

He spoke above them all, for the first time unafraid to speak his true mind to the world. It was far, far too late in his life to hold back, now.

“Your God wanted a world in which those with magic could stand shoulder to shoulder with those who had no such power. He wanted you to call them brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, many of you decided that peace was not enough. You wanted war; you wanted to punish the injustices and pain that you suffered to attain that peace. When you set upon this path, you stepped away from your God, and onto the pathways of death and torment. Your very namesake, the Tormentors, should have shown you that. Know that you have followed not your God’s will, but your own. Gods do not change alone; their followers change them, as they change their followers.” He felt his hands clench into fists. “You were his breath, and He was your life.”

A contingent of furious citizens were suddenly held back by the throng of people, against Morrow’s anticipation. Could it be that his words were reaching them? He had expected to be dead, or at least fighting for his life, by now. It would be folly, then, to stop.

“As your God, I have a new order for you, citizens of Qardin. When I give it, I will leave you. You will have two choices; obey me, or do not. There will be no punishment from my hand should you choose to disobey. But know this: what I ask of you will not be easy, nor will it be beautiful. You will all have to find your own reasons for what I say to you, and live according to those reasons. Though I am now your God, I am just a man beneath, and before that, I was a priest, serving a God that you do not know. I will not ask you to know Him now. I want you to have time to decide what you believe in, for yourselves.”

Even the violent members of the crowd quieted, to hear his next and final words.

“Live your lives according to your hearts. Listen to them

and fight for them, no matter what they may tell you or how hard it may be. It has taken me fifty years to learn this basic tenet of life, and I have lost friends and loved ones because I did not obey it. If you choose to follow something other than your heart, your failings will be your own, not mine nor anyone else's. There does not need to be a God to punish you for that. The way you live your lives will be testament to what you most desire. A wise woman once told me that northerners believe their blades are an extension of what they most want out of life, and what they are willing to fight for. I ask you to lift your blades, and your hearts, for your own needs and loves and joys. If you do that, happiness must follow."

He walked forward, fully anticipating a brawl, as he trudged toward the gates of Qardin. The crowd, instead, parted to allow his exit. They were silent for many hours after he left, and it would be many days before the first man rebelled against the new order. Even so, there were five men to stop him as he did.

Morrow had no more need to watch what happened next. He had done all he could. Perhaps, somewhere, the Authority looked down on him and smiled. He could only hope that the man continued to watch as he performed his last act as a living man and a living God.

In the darkest, filthiest cell of the Authority's dungeon, Masque awoke from a fevered dream. She had thought she was speaking with a man bathed in light; a kind man, not the men that she would have expected in such a place. The stone-like men of Qardin were gone, and this man stood in their place. He smiled at her in a way that she had never known before; not the smile of a man about to sate his pleasures, or the smile of a man appreciating her beauty, though he could not or would not indulge. This smile, she could not place, but she thought, given

her experience with the world, that it might have just been simple friendship.

Then he offered her a hand. She did not want to touch him; he was too beautiful for words, and she was so filthy, after days and weeks holed up in her cell. She had pretended to be injured beyond measure, hoping for one last chance to save her friend, Arma, but she had failed in that as well; they took Arma first, and left her too broken and battered to act. She blamed herself for many things, but Arma's death was first and foremost on her mind. She should have been stronger, she should have gotten free and saved the girl, somehow! She didn't deserve his kindness. She turned her face away from him.

Then he was gone, and she had slept, it seemed. But one thing above all others she noticed first, when she opened her eyes.

Her cell door was open to the world outside.

She was waiting for him when he returned. He had expected no less. Her blood had soaked the ground where he had laid her, and her beautiful face was still uncovered; he had not had the heart to hide her away from the world, again. She had been hiding for a long time, he knew; there were tiny wrinkles, born from her pain and suffering, on her delicate face, and the sadness in her still-open eyes made him wish all the more that he might have spared her at least some of it.

He had, however, come to realize that as he had changed, during his journey to find her, so too, likely, had she. What strengths had she gained that he had never seen? What truths had become evident to her, only after she had left his side? She was still the child he had known and loved in so many ways, and he only felt all the more for her after all these years; he would give anything, up to and including his life, for a single smile, if he could.

That thought was what had given him the strength to carry her here, away from the chaos of Qardin, and into the forest beyond. He had become a man, and a God, and he had been a priest. But through it all, he was one thing that never changed; a healer. Though he had healed many people back from near death, he had never had the courage or strength, let alone the opportunity, to try to heal someone back from death itself. He had heard the childhood stories condemning those who tried such foolish things to a fate worse than death; he was no fool, when it came to such tales, since the monastery wrote most of them.

Despite the risks, he had made up his mind. Though he had only begun to find his strength in the world, he had done so much in his fifty years of life; not many men could say they had grown up in silence and shelter, then broken free of a beautiful cage for the love of a shattered child half their age, then spent a lifetime searching for her, only to find her dead, and then taken the place of her God. It was absurd, and it grew even more so every time he considered it. One thing that did not confuse him, however, was that he did not want to grow any older without Arma by his side. He had come so far only for her; to regain what he had lost, and to end her suffering. If he had not been able to accomplish that, then everything he had done was in vain. What a terrible God he was!

If attempting to restore Arma's breath ended with the loss of his own, then he would die knowing that he had done his best, and given his all, to save her. Either she would live, and he would know he had chosen right, or she would die, and he would see her soon. There was, of course, a chance that he would not die, and that his attempts would fail...

But Morrow Grave had finally learned to listen to his heart and his instincts. Though it was certainly possible, it was not at all likely.

He knelt beside his beloved and reached out with gentle fingers to caress the side of her cheek; one of the places she had

been damaged the least. The touch alone sent spikes of pain and awe down his spine; he had wanted for so long just to touch her again! He knew that any man outside of himself would have wanted to touch other parts of her, and for other reasons, but he was still a priest beneath the skin. Though he might have learned to be a man, and to visit those places alongside her, he had no such desire now. It was enough to know that she was close, by his side, and that he would not wake up to find her gone, like some kind of ghost; able to capture his heart but wholly intangible. A dream of a woman he wished more than anything to have and to hold.

He settled on the ground beside her, her blood staining his clothing, and crossed his legs into a comfortable position. He would be sitting there for what remained of his life, he had a feeling. Then, when he could find nothing more to correct, he closed his eyes and pulled his beloved's hands into his own.

The pull of power was even more instantaneous than it had been in Meria. It was as if her entire body cried out for him, and he had no choice but to answer. He had no reason to deny her, first and foremost, and he had a moment to marvel at his own body's confusion; he had never given all of himself to his healing before. He had always kept something back, knowing that to give it all would be to court his death, and in other times and other places, he had had a need to live on, to protect others. This time, he knew and accepted the result of what he was trying to accomplish. It was frightening, yes, but exhilarating in ways he had never known before. If he had ever thought his gift was a curse, he would never, again.

A vision came to him then; a memory of his first meeting with Arma. Her beautiful, innocent face streaked with tears, and his sudden urge to take her in his arms. She had fought him desperately, as if she thought his touch would kill her - or hers would kill him. He knew her power; he had seen it in the dead grass beneath her. Why was it that he could touch her, and nobody else could?

A smile came to his face. He knew the answer now. He had learned to listen to himself, and the only possible answer was that it was possible for a soul gifted with light, and a soul gifted with darkness, to bring out the best in each other. They were a matched pair; others could be as well, if they tried. For every soul born to kill, another would ease the burden and give life to the dying. For every beginning, there was an end; for every end, there was a new beginning waiting to happen. The world moved in circles; the very same circles he had fought to believe in since he first came to the monastery. At least his captors, the ones that had held him back, had been able to teach him something in the end.

If he could balance the darkness in Arma's soul, and set her free at last, to live the life that she deserved, he would welcome death with an open embrace.

Her eyes hurt, when she opened them again, as if she had opened them and seen the world for the first time. Her entire body ached; she couldn't understand why, until she looked down at herself. The sight was garish, and made her want to gag; she still had not mastered the sight of her own blood, after all these years. It was strange, though; investigating herself with a gentle but firm touch, she could not manage to locate any actual wounds.

Arma sat up, her muscles unknitting with each hesitant motion. She had only a moment to frown in confusion, before the reality surrounding her set in.

Her hands were clasped in a pair of hands that had tightened around hers. She knew his touch anywhere; his face burned into her memory. He had changed, and aged more than she had expected, but he was still the man she had loved more than life itself.

He was not breathing. She knew what he had done, and

both love and hatred for him filled the tears that streamed down her face then. The memories of her last moments came slowly back to her; her captivity, the Authority's answer, and her execution. He had given her the only thing he had left to give, and now he was gone, forever; her dark power could not restore anything, only destroy.

Next to his body, he had drawn some symbols in the sand. Gently she pulled her hands free of his grasp and moved to see them more clearly. The first was his name; Morrow Grave. A name that suited him, she thought to herself. The second was a map, that - if her memory served - led back to Meria. The third was an image of a tree.

Last was a short note. She could almost hear his voice in the words, and that somehow eased the crushing sorrow that left her nearly as breathless as she had been after her death.

"To my beloved Arma Flair: I have been many things over the course of my life. I have been a son. I have been a castoff. I have been a priest. I have been a friend. I have been a murderer. I have been a God. But know that all of these things were nothing, had I not met you and been the one to set you free. Live on, child. It is the greatest gift I can give."

She had just finished reading when footsteps approached. The dark-haired girl was dirty, bleeding from a few minor injuries, and bruised beyond measure, but she still wore the same jester-like smile that Arma had come to love from her. On her face was something that Arma had never seen before; a smile. Masque, too, had changed, it seemed.

"The Authority is dead, Arma." Her voice broke a little, at that. "I think... I think this man killed him. People in Qardin are talking about it; he told them all to live without their God, and then left with your body. The stone guards are even learning to smile, now, can you believe it?"

"I can, actually." Arma looked back at her priest; her beloved Morrow, and bent to kiss him softly before standing up. "He saved my life, after all. And now, we can do anything we

want to. We can be our own authorities.”

Hand in hand, Arma and Masque made their way back toward Qardin, to oversee the changes that were taking place. Arma believed that she owed at least that much to Morrow. On top of it all, she still had no particular love for Masque - certainly not the kind that the girl was learning to taunt her with again! - but she remembered Morrow's kindness to her. If nothing else, she could offer the same kindness to Masque. Perhaps, in a world without control and orders that could not be followed, she could grow into a real woman without fear.

They would live out their lives in the world that Morrow had left for them, because it was what their hearts told them to do.

Intended Changes

--There are many cases where I reached the end of a chapter and realized that my word count for the day was complete. A lot of battle scenes or complex situations that I could have continued further were cut off. (I could have just done more work for those days, but I wanted to make sure that I maintained drive for the project, and so forced myself to stop even if I had more to say.) I do plan to finish these for the final novel, and expect that the word count will rise dramatically as this happens.

--Masque is supposed to be mysterious and annoying. However, in order to reach my ending in time, I didn't have her do all the things I wanted her to do. She has potential that isn't realized. You won't find out everything about her yet, but I can still give you more than I did. I may remove her bisexuality as well. It gives her a good way to bother Arma, but it's not necessary in the grand scheme of things. No reason to risk offense if it isn't an innate part of her character and the story.

--I would like to do more with Ashra. You may note that I was creating my world in more depth as I went along, and I hit the interesting stuff about the sword-as-religion too late to do much with it. She was created as an excuse to keep Morrow moving toward Qardin, but I think she needs to be more than that in post. She may have her name changed too, as it is easy to confuse her with Arma. I wanted to keep all names starting with a unique letter, and I may go back to that during editing. (That means Masque/Morrow too.)

--I think Arma needs to get her rose mask earlier, perhaps having her start the novel wearing it. It would give Masque something new to bait her about, and it would make the reveal of her death that much more poignant. She wears a figurative mask through most of the novel, so it makes sense to

have her wear the real one.

--I forgot about Fair halfway through the novel. I feel so silly. I know I can find a way to involve her more!

--A few things need to be clarified. I didn't always know where I was going with certain plot threads, and on a few occasions, a plot thread meant to be "big" was introduced late or glossed over as being just a minor thing. An example of this is the balance between those with "good" power and those with "bad" power.

--The dates and ages of events and characters are incorrect and need adjustment to make sense. There is supposed to be a large age gap between Morrow and Arma, but in trying to maneuver the dates of their first meeting and other related events, I realized that something didn't add up. I ignored it and moved on.

--The names, locations and information about geographical locations need a huge amount of work. I did pretty much no cartography work or fleshing out of the locations in this story, with the exception of Qardin, and I want to make them feel more real. You will see a LOT more description and detail in the edited version. This is the other place where the word count will rise a great deal.

--I originally had Morrow living in a cathedral, as a priest ought. However, I switched to using a monastery because my intent was to have him living humbly and having to work and meditate alongside his brothers in the faith more than traditional priests do. He is more like a monk by most people's estimation, including my own. You'll see references to the cathedral early on – please assume I meant monastery!

--More character development. As I had my beginning and ending in mind first this time, I didn't have a chance to develop my characters as much as I always do. Morrow is a bit one-sided in his quest to find Arma and become a stronger man, and Arma herself is not very interesting apart from her power and her eventual decision to seek out the Authority at Masque's

goaded. Everyone else was largely a tool to keep the story moving and I think it shows too much.

--The ending is a little too final for a book that's meant to be the first part of a series. I want to give more lead-in to where I'm going with the series rather than creating quite so solid a standalone.

The pacing of Morrow's coming to terms with his power and his desire to grow into a stronger person is off. Arma's realization of her intent to get answers from the Authority is off as well. I spent a lot of time going over my character details and motivations and such, but not much time building these arcs at a coherent pace. The final version should correct this.