

Death in Zamora

I heard from the caravan master that all traffic had been forced to stop at Arenjun in the foothills of the Kezankian Mountains where the border between Zamora and Turan is disputed endlessly by bloody tribesmen and I decided that I could end my journey there, that I had traveled far enough to be beyond reach of those who still sought me in far off Aquilonia. The horrors and terrors of the journey, all the way across the known world, slipped away from me and I smiled for the first time I could remember in months. It must have been an ugly smile, however, for the man who had told the good news looked at me as if I might be sick.

Al Saif, they called him, which I had learned meant the Sword. He was old now, his dark skin pitted and creased with age, the scars of ancient battles long since dried to faint puckers of lighter flesh on his swarthy cheeks and forearms. He ran the caravan in which I had traveled for two hundred or more leagues across the barren steppes of the high plains. He rarely raised his voice, but his men ran to obey his every whim. When punishment was meted out his lieutenant, a massive Nubian, delivered bone crushing blows with a knobbed club he carried over his shoulder at all times. The old man and the black man had obviously been many miles in company with each other. A single pointed glance from al Saif could cause a sudden thwack and a yelp of pain halfway across a valley.

These two ran the caravan, maintaining order, setting directions, keeping us moving

day by day across the broken land. Other men acted as guards, some on horse back patrolling our outer perimeter, others walking alongside the wagons during the day or sitting watches at night. The riders often bivouacked on the land at night, returning only for supplies and to report on what lay ahead or to either side of our route – a dusty track with the self-important tile of the Road of Kings.

Since my journey began, I have traveled in the guise of a young man – a beardless youth on an urgent errand for a merchant family. I am armed, with my long knife and my bow of yew, and I do not look wealthy at all – far from it after months of relentless pursuit across the face of the Empire. These factors have kept me safe from predators. I am too poor to rob, too well armed to bully, and not particularly appealing to those seeking more fleshy pleasures.

At least so I thought until I attracted the attention of two of al Saif's Zamoran guards.

Swarthy hillmen wrapped in badly cured hides they made their intentions known on our second night on the steppes. As I set up my sleeping roll they visited me, watching over their shoulders and speaking quietly in the trade argot that passed for a common language in the caravans.

“Nice bum,” said one. The other smirked and rubbed his crotch. “Sweet young boy like you, bet you'd like a big cock up yer arse all right.”

“Two cocks,” rumbled the other stepping closer. “One up yer arse and one down yer throat. That’s the way pretty boys like it.”

I ignored them though my heart pounded in terror at the thought of being discovered. A boy might get disgusting proposals from such as these, but a girl would quickly be passed around as the fuck toy of the entire camp.

“Going to be cold tonight,” said the first man as he too stepped closer and loosened the rope that cinched his ragged hides.

“Keep you warm between us, we will.”

“Heat that little bung hole of yours up til it glows like a camp fire,” agreed the other. He also began to rearrange his leathers, reaching inside the stinking skins to free his prick.

My fear vanished in a welter of white hot fury.

“Step an inch closer to me and I will cut that off,” I hissed, but my voice cracked on my emotion as I spoke and my threat ended in a squeak.

“Stuff a rag in his mouth so he can’t scream,” said the one who had freed his cock from his clothes.

It was longer than and I had ever seen, though that was no great sampling, thick and heavily veined, growing in size as he rubbed himself erect. It stank too, worse than the rank goat skin he wore as clothing.

I may be a woman, but I was raised in a warrior clan where all are expected to fight. I have been taught to use my weapons. I

have also been taught that in combat action is all that counts. I stepped quickly towards him and he grinned, actually thinking that I might be willing after all. My long knife slipped from its sheath with barely a whisper. I did not brandish it or show it to them. I swung it up in a short hard slide that took off a hand’s width if his cock in a single blow.

Blood jetted onto the sand and sprayed my legs as I continued to move quickly and efficiently forward. The first man’s severed flesh had not even hit the ground before the point of my blade stabbed into the other man’s belly through the gap in his leathers. It slid in several inches and then I dragged the blade sideways, twisting it as I sliced him open. A second gout of blood and a loop of guts slopped onto the dry valley floor.

“It would seem that I have had the pleasure of fucking you instead,” I said into the man’s shocked face.

“Come near me again and I will cut your balls off and roast them on my fire.”

The screaming started then and the others came running. The hillmen were not liked and al Saif soon declared that they had got no more than they deserved for threatening one of his customers. One died in agony during the night, I had sliced open his chitlins, and the other fled our camp before dawn. He took the shriveled end of his cock with him, hoping to find a wizard or a witch, no doubt, to reattach it. I received no more unwanted attention after that, which suited me just fine. And al Saif himself paid me the

compliment of allowing me to ride in his wagon the next day.

The next several days, I was able to ride in the lead wagon. I was isolated from the others for the remainder of the trek. I knew it was short lived, but I was fortunate to have the solitude.

When the caravan stopped, I knew I had to fend for myself from this point forward. It didn't scare me, because I was happy to be as far away from my homelands as possible. Once clear of the others I traveled with, I could finally remove my head-dress and let my hair loose from its bindings. It was long and I swore I would not cut it since my mother last did when I was half the age I am now. She has since died, along with my father. The dark taint disease took them both from me. It hardened my soul and almost changed me. But I guess it has made me strong. A survivor.

Many within the caravan have decided to break away and separate. I'm not sure what the immediate future holds for me, but I am ready for it to begin.

Al Saif rode on the buckboard of the lead wagon with Joey beside him lazily flicking the reins to keep the mules moving. The trail trended upwards, winding in wide serpentine loops as it mounted the side of a steep hill at a grade the wagons could manage. The weather was cold, with bitter winds blowing down the hillside towards them and from time to time, when gaps in the folded hills allowed, the young fugitive caught glimpses of towering mountains, snow capped and seemingly impassable ahead of them.

"The Kasenkian Mountains," announced the old man when he noticed the youth looking that way. "There is a pass. The only one for a hundred leagues in any direction ahead of us. It is guarded by the city of Arenjun, that some call the City of Thieves. The Aquilonians are here. By Mitra's balls they are everywhere!" He spat to emphasize his dislike of the imperial power that in the past generation had conquered half the world.

"They demand a toll to use the pass. I must pay in gold for each wagon, each mule, each camel. Beyond is the desert, cold at first but then warm and finally hot as it stretches out to the Inland Sea and the city of Agharpur. That is where we are bound."

He shouts out to his captain and the massive man delivers a blow to one of the guards who has strayed too close to the steep edge.

"I do not care if the man lives or dies," al Saif, pronounces gloomily as he returns his attention to Joey, "but the horse is worth money and I do not want it to suffer a broken leg because of the rider's stupidity."

They clop on for a while in silence.

"You did well with those ruffians back there," says al Saif suddenly, not looking at her but staring ahead over the mules' heads. "You are fierce and swift, like a striking hawk. Your blade is sharp and you wield it skillfully, but sooner or later the men will discover that you are not boy, and then they will not leave you alone until they have had their way with you, even if they must kill you first. It is the way of these rough beasts that ride the caravans. They are more animals than men.

“I have known for some days now, and my captain Raffa has suspected too. Others will sniff you out. Even now I can smell your blood quickening in your belly.

“I can protect you until we reach Arenjun, but there you must leave us, disappear into the Souk and become someone else. None of my men will follow you, that at least I can offer.”

He looks sideways at her, just a brief glimpse but she can see a glitter in his eye.

“You remind me of my own grand daughter. She is about your age and wants in all ways to do what the men do. But women are as not as strong – no that is the wrong word, they are not as - - rough as men. They cannot defend themselves. And men are beasts. They demand pleasures from women and will not be denied.

“Lose yourself in Arenjun. Seek out the inn of the Silver Eel. My cousin Fatima is in charge there – though do not tell her husband Joshua this for he will beat you. Tell her you have spoken with me and she will help you. She has many contacts in the city. But I must warn you, she does nothing for sentiment. It is all about the silver with her. If you get in debt to her, she will put you to work. And a pretty thing like you – yes I can see that you are quite lovely under all that dirt and scowling – she will sell your services as a whore if you do not pay what you owe.”

With that he fell silent and after a short distance more he passed the reins to her.

“By sunset we will be close to the city. I will send a man to steer the wagon into the

caravansary and that will be your moment to disappear into the shadows.

“Fare well, my striking hawk!” he grins. “I shall call you that when I speak of you: al Sadad Sukar in my tongue – the black hawk of the desert.”

The old man stepped down from the slow moving wagon and walked back along the long line of other vehicles and pack animals to keep things in good order.

Josephine said nothing while Al Saif spoke. She listened intently knowing that one small mistake could mean her life. He knew all along that she was a girl and protected her. The same for Raffa. She owed both men her life.

"Fatima at the silver Eel." She whispered to herself. She was scared, but knew she must strike out alone once they reached Arenjun. The girl had enough coin to last for a while, at least enough to appease Fatima, but would need to find work soon.

Joey looked around at the other wagons. "Al Sadad Sukar", she said with a smile. "I like that. The Black hawk of the desert."

A day or so longer, and she would be on her own.

Late in the afternoon, al Saif raised his hand to call a halt to the caravan.

“Our last night in the road,” the old man told her. “Tomorrow by mid-day we will enter the caravan site outside the walls of Arenjun. My scouts tell me there are many caravans already there. The high pass is

closed by ice and snow. We may have to wait many days to continue our journey. But it will be a perfect time for you to disappear into the city.”

He bustled away then, shouting instructions about where to pitch the tents and how to hobble the camels. Joey had little to do as the camp settled down for the night. It was cold this high up in the foothills of the mountains and her breath condensed into plumes of vapor when she breathed out. Her bed roll, spread out under al Saif's wagon was going to be chilly tonight. She tried to warm herself at the cook fires as best she could in preparation.

After the evening meal, the travelers began to settle down and Joey slipped away to her hidden roost. As she approached the wagon a dark mass of shadow shifted and spoke, softly, with a deep booming voice.

“My master tells me you will be leaving us tomorrow, little one,” Rafa, the gigantic Nubian warrior who is al Saif's second in command steps forward. His ebony skin gleams in the light from the fires behind her. He is mountainous, all muscle and this close up she can smell the maleness of him – a heady perfume.

Joey looked around, seeing that the two were relatively alone. It was safe to talk.

The girl nodded. "I believe Ive reached my destination. It seems like we've crossed the entire relm together. I'll make my new home in Arenjun."

The Nubian nodded.

"I suppose I should thank you for keeping an eye on me during our travels. I dont believe I would have made it unharmed if not for you." The girl forced a smile. Gratitude was something she was not comfortable with offering, but she felt it was appropriate now. "Will you be continueing with Al Saif much further?" She asked, but already knew the answer. His place was with his master and the caravan. However, there was something about the older warrior she liked. He was wise. Strong. And handsome. She had not seen many dark men like him. And his skin was the darkest of all. There was a part of her that hoped he would break away from Al Saif and strike out on his own.

(back post answer)

Joey walked closer to the wagon where her bedroll lay ready. "I have some food?" She offered. "Im afraid it's only dried horse meat, but you're welcome to share it with me." She invited, though embarrassed at her meager camp.

Raffa squatted beside her to share her meal, taking no more than a mouthful of what she offered. He moved easily and gracefully despite his size, his muscles sliding under his ebony skin as he leaned forward. She felt that she had never been so close to anyone quite so powerful or dangerous, like a great lion that walked alongside men, but could easily devour anyone it chose. Yet he seemed to be of no desire to frighten her. He smiled and nodded his thanks at her generosity, small though it was, and looked at her with a startling intensity that made her very mindful of how long it was since she had bathed or even managed to comb her

tangled hair. She also became very aware that he wore almost no clothing, only a simple breech clout that while he was seated did very little to hide his manhood, which seemed as large and powerful as he was. "I ride with al Saif," he said in his deep rumbling voice. "Since I was a boy. He freed me from slavery and gave comfort to my mother, who had also been a slave." He looked at her intently and moved a little closer. "Will you cut me if I touch you? It might be worth it, but I would prefer not." He gazed at her and moved his hand towards her flank. "It is long since I lay with a woman and you are sweet and lovely. Lay with me tonight and tomorrow we go our separate ways."

The girl looked at Raffa with respect for his forwardness. He did not mince words and did not expect anything more than a night of pleasure. She had been with several men in her young life and enjoyed a good screwing like most of them, but she was unsure about their privacy. Her small camp was simply under a wooden wagon.

She smirked at his offer. "Aren't you worried the others will see you with me? They might mistake you for sleeping with a boy?" She glanced down between his legs. His manhood appeared massive under the soft leather covering. She had never been with a dark skinned man and, to be honest, the chance excited her.

She slid closer to him. Their knees almost touching and she looked up into his eyes waiting for an answer. He moved towards her placing his massive arm behind her and helping her lay back. He positioned himself over her, his arms holding his frame off of

her, but allowing his hips to find hers. He looked into her eyes and spoke...

Raffa chuckled softly to her as she drew him close. His breath warmed her flesh and his scent of raw manhood stirred her belly in tight spirals of desire.

"Who is to say that I have not bedded many boys in the cold desert night, little one?" he whispered into her ear. "Perhaps I will turn you over and take you as one takes a boy? They seem to enjoy it well enough.

"But quiet now. The darkness will be our cover if you are shy."

He held himself over her, his powerful muscles propping him up on elbows and knees so that his long muscular body just scraped along the front of her but none of his weight pressed her down. His fingers loosened her robe and slipped one hand inside to touch her skin. She almost jumped at the power of the discharge between them.

His manhood had swelled to the size of her forearm yet he seemed in no hurry to enter her. Instead he let his fingers roam over her body, exploring her, stroking her belly, her breasts and then down into the cleft in her groin where he slipped one enormous finger into her sopping wetness and teased her womanhood to gaping wideness.

Even now he did not fuck her. He shifted his lean mass down along the length of her, tasting as he went until his tongue came to her wide open pussy and there he paused, lapping at her, sliding his long tongue deep inside her, probing at her hooded pleasure spot while he held her tight buttocks clear of

the desert floor on one hand to allow himself full access.

Her back arched as wave upon wave of pleasure flowed from her groin into her belly and up to her head. The man's stubble scraped across her delicate pudenda and this brought an aftershock of sensation with it as well. She gazed up at the underside of the wagon as he continued to lick her vagina feeling the welling up of fluid inside her. When she gushed, he cried aloud softly in pride at having brought her to orgasm.

Now she was ready from him. The lips of her pussy were wide open, her cunt sopping wet with glistening girl cum. He moved up her body still on hands and knees, still holding her ass off the ground and as his face came level with hers the glans of his cock nosed into her. Eager to have him, she reached up with her arms and grabbed the spokes of the wagon wheels to help lift herself up and wrapped her long slender legs around his waist.

He surged forward and her grip was almost torn free with the power of his thrust, but she felt his cock pushing deep inside her. By the Goddess! He was huge! Terrifyingly and gratifyingly huge. He thrust at her again and again and with each push a few more inches of his manhood buried itself in her, until with a final gasp he was all the way inside her, possessing her as no one ever would again. He breathed in her ear, taking careful grip of her buttocks with both hands now that she was helping to hold her body aloft and he began to push her off of him. Just a few inches at first and then he brought her back to slam his cock deep into her again, but with each thrust the length of the travel

increased until she was sliding on and off his brick two hand spans at a time.

Her flesh had opened to receive him and as he moved in and out of her she could feel the thick ropes of heavy veins that encircled his prick rubbing against her labia and clitoris. He was gasping now in his own pleasure and a quick run up to orgasm. She laughed aloud at riding such a wild primordial beast and hoped in her heart that he would not be spent with just one fucking. When he came, with a muffled roar, she felt thick gout of his seed fill her belly with hot joy. She locked her heels behind his back to prevent him from withdrawing before she was ready and rode the slow decline of his passion for a few last lingering moments of joy.

He stayed hard inside her and lowered her to the ground, making love to her now rather than fucking her like a wild beast. It was pleasant – what fucking would not be joy with such a prick? – but not what it had been. But he seemed to be just waiting for his energy to return. His rhythm increased again, but he pulled back.

“Like a boy,” he whispered fiercely. “Turn over.”

Joey's smile immediately left her face when he whispered those words into her ear. She had fully enjoyed him inside her, as she could tell he enjoyed her, but now he demanded something she was not ready to give.

"No." She shook her head with fear in her eyes. "No please."

The girl wasn't sure if the powerful man would respect her wishes or not. She had thought he was different than the other men. That he cared for her as more than just a sex toy. She had hoped he would join her on the road. The two of them together. She needed his strength of sword, but now she saw a different side to him. He could just take her if he wanted to, and she wouldn't be able to stop him.

"No Raffa... please."

Dark lust smolders in Raffa's eyes and he lifts her bodily above the ground. For long seconds Joey is terrified that he will indeed force her to his will. She could not resist him, and she could hardly claim to al Saif that it was rape – she has been enjoying his attentions thus far with eager abandon. By slow degrees however, the gigantic man calms his breathing and relaxes the corded muscles in his chest and arms.

"A time will come," he whispers huskily to her, "when you beg me take you from behind."

He lowers her slim body to the rough dirt beneath the wagon and props himself up on his hands to look down at her. His cock is still thick with desire and buried several inches within her pussy. His semen has leaked out of her and it lubricates his passage as he slides back fully inside her. Without words he continues to fuck her. His big hands reach up one at a time to stroke her small breasts, rubbing his thumbs over her hard nipples. As his motion becomes more intense and his lust builds to a second orgasm he envelopes her entirely in his grip

and she feels like a child in the clutches of a bear.

Once more he shoots his seed into her belly and then he rolls away. His cock pulls out of her flesh with a popping sound and a flood of hot spunk gushes out of her cunt onto the dry desert floor.

He turns away from her and falls instantly to sleep, naked and covered with her slime. She is disrobed, open to the night air and sopping wet with his emissions. While she knows she has pleased him, she also knows she has thwarted his desire to possess her fully and she is not sure how he will react when he awakens. The camp is full dark by now with watch fires at the perimeter and a glowing cook fire by the central tent where al Saif will be conducting his business.

In the distance, perhaps a league or two away, she can see other caravans camped on the desert, all making the final approach to Arunjen. Tomorrow they will be there and her life will change again. She glances aside at the big warrior beside her. He might be persuaded to stay with her, but he has made it clear what his price will be. Has this been a fun event at the end of a long trip to relax herself, or this a commitment to satisfying him in return for his guardianship?

Not for the last time she reflects that life is determined by the choices we make.

The girl immediately wanted to ask Raffa to join her, but being someone's slave sexually was not in her nature. The night was amazing and she enjoyed it more than any other night before, however, she knew this would probably be their last.

"What I ask of you is not of guardianship, but of equal partnership. You and I can strike out together and be indebted to no man. Our plunder would be our own. We'd rely on no one but each other. And tonight... well... tonight would only be a memory." She knew what his answer would be. He was a sexual beast and joining her would probably have to include her satisfying his sexual needs. She would be slave to no man.

"Tomorrow I shall leave the group and search for riches, fame and glory. I believe you seek the same. If you tire of being a slave to Al Saif, then join me."

She finishes getting dressed and pulls her warm cloak around her back while settling down for the night.

Raffa left her as dawn approached, rolling silently away. As the first streaks of daylight turned the sky pink, she heard his voice in the distance calling out to wake up the camp staff. As the day broadened into full light, the caravan slowly got moving again and she saw him doing his job, but always far away from her, never looking in her direction.

As the sun reached its full height they topped a low hill and saw the city ahead of them. About two hours away. The road was well traveled here and covered with fresh dung. The dust of another caravan hung in the valley ahead of them and even at this distance they could see the pall of smoke for a thousand cook fires hanging over the city.

"Looks crowded," said al Saif coming up behind her as she walked alongside the wagon.

The two of them walked together for several moments before he spoke again.

"Raffa will not leave me," he said. "He is not a slave, more the son I wish I had had," he went on quietly. "I'm sure he enjoyed his night with you, and I hope you were kind to him. He is a simple man. If he followed you, you would lead him into trouble. You are a hawk. He is a bull. He can never fly even though you lead him to run off the edge of the cliff."

"When we reach the city, you must leave us. There are laws that prevent foreigners from living within the city walls, but I think you will not be stopped by this. My offer still stands to seek out my cousin on my mother's side – Fatima the Fair. She runs a tavern called the Silver Eel in the Souk. Tell her I have sent you and she will help."

"But do not seek to seduce my men away from me again. If you do, my cousin will hear from me and she will slit your throat from ear to ear."

He turned aside then and left her to trudge the final distance to the city.

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Half a mile from the walls the caravan was directed aside by heavily armed guards with high conical helmets wearing chain mail and carrying spears and swords and shields. The caravanserai was outside the wall and all caravans were required to stop here. The place was packed and some of the caravans

looked as if they have been camped here for well over a week. Market places had popped up in any open spot and scores of children ran and played complex games of tag and hiding, shrieking with laughter.

Almost immediately, Joey watched two children stalk a drunk and rob him of his purse. No one tried to stop them as they ran away laughing, dividing the few copper coins between themselves.

One long tent had several scantily clad women standing outside of it, holding the poles and gyrating in sensuous ways.

“How much?” called one of the caravan guards as they rode by.

“A silver thumb to suck you,” said one of the women, “ten to fuck you.” The guards started counting their wages in their heads and laughing at which ones they would tumble as soon as they had been paid. Raffa rode up alongside them, swinging his great club. He glared at Joey as if she has done something wrong, but rode on before she could speak to him.

In the general tumult it would be simplicity itself to slip away from the caravan right now and blend in with the crowd.

The gruff look from Raffa was all it took to remind Joey that she needed to leave. Both Al Saif and Raffa had a fondness for the girl, but had a rough way of showing it. The old man had protected her until now, and had given her a contact in the city of Souk. She had never heard of this city, but had no other options. It was her only chance to survive, and she fully intended on listening to him.

Sex with Raffa had made her more fond of the black man. She knew their night together was just a night of pleasure, but a small part of her feminine being wanted there to be more. She hadn't bed many men, so a small part of her heart was broken when he rebuffed her. The girl only gave this a moments thought, as the harshness of the world dashed the innocent romantic in her. It was what made women weaker than men, she thought.

With the scolding look from him, she gathered her gear and slipped away into the crowd. Looking back once, only to see Raffa riding along side the caravan, barking at the men for a misconduct.

It wasn't long before Joey made her way past the city and beyond it's reach. She walked alone along the path through the barren grass. The land here was open with rolling hills. The sand was thick and it labored her. Within the hour she could barely see the great walls of the city behind her. She was alone.

Adjusting her bedroll that hung at her lower back, she trekked onward. Her bow string across her chest and her falchion sword at her side. She had about two days of dried meats and a skin of water. Hopefully it was enough to get her to the Souk. Or somewhere safe. It would be night in a few hours, and she wasn't sure what that would bring.

The caravanserai teemed with life and activity around her as she moved away from al Saif's camels and mules. Children ran everywhere, armed guards watched lazily, allowing theft and beatings within their sight

without stirring a finger to stop them. A half mile away the walls of the city itself loomed over the milling crowds. She could see a huge gate with dozens of guards, all paying close attention to who came and went.

In asking a question about the direction of Souk she quickly discovered that the Souk was not another city, but an area within the city of Arenjun – a market place. Indeed the oldest market place in the city.

“You won't be able to go there sonny,” called one old hag. “They check you at the gate – see if you've paid your taxes.”

Indeed as she wandered closer she could see that the guards were looking at everyone's wrist. By looking closely at several merchants approaching the gate she could see that each had a tattoo in red on the inside of his wrist – a stylized lion by the looks of it.

Kicking around the entrance for a while, doing a stint at begging, listening closely to those that passed by she gleaned enough to understand that the gates would be closed at sunset, with no one allowed entry or exit without permission of the governor. The tattoos were the mark of a tax paying citizen of the city. People born within the city that did not pay taxes would not be allowed reentry without the mark – a fact that let her know that there must be many within the walls unmarked. Her task was to gain entry past the guards – who were being discouragingly thorough in searching wagons and any load large enough the conceal a body.

The walls looked tall and formidable, but perhaps not unclimbable. Though the attempt would have to be made in the dark, and they might be more dangerous then when you couldn't see where your next few handholds would lead you.

There might be other options to get within if you look around. It's about mid day by now – cold but sunny.

Joey realized that getting into the city would be a problem. She didnt have the money to pay the entrance tax, nor did she plan on getting the tattoo.

Scaling the walls seemed like an option, but the last cliff she had climbed was for pleasure, and her life didnt depend on it. No, the walls were out. She'd have to find another way in. The desert was not very forgiving, and a few more nights outside might be her last. She had figured that in order to survive, she'd have to get inside and find Al Saif's cousin. From there, she could find work and earn her way. She didnt know what the future held for her. But for now... she was still alive, and that was all that mattered.

Joey walked around the outer walls for some time, taking in the sights and looking for any possible way in. She knew that any large city such as this one, there was always a black market. And goods that flowed there were often smuggled in. There had to be a secret way inside. A drainage tunnel or possibly an escape route if the city was under siege.

The afternoon turned dark and the night sky brought with it a cold breeze. This night

was going to be harder than last. If she couldn't find a way inside soon, she'd have to find shelter out here.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her frame and continued her search.

As the sun slipped lower in the sky and the cool wind picked up, blowing particles of sand in her face, Joey clambered over a steep rise. In the shadow valley below a narrow stream flowed sluggishly, emanating from under the city walls. The smell told her it functioned as a sewer outlet. The well worn tracks in the hidden valley told her it was used often as an unofficial entrance to Arenjun.

Creeping closer in the twilight she spotted a low arch at the bottom of the wall. Metal bars had at one time closed off this opening, but had long ago rusted and been pulled aside, looking like blood-stained needle teeth in a gaping maw. She would need to drop down and crawl within – not in the sewage itself, luckily, but prone and perhaps vulnerable to anyone she might meet in the confined tunnel.

And who knew where it might open within the walls?

As she debated her options she heard faint strains of music coming from the caravan area behind her and the catcalls of men watching some kind of entertainment.

She turned to look back towards the caravan hearing the entertainment begin, shaking her head at the disgusting lifestyle those lead. She wouldn't miss that lifestyle, not one bit.

Joey turned back to the only potential entrance to the city and stepped down into the drain. She sneered as the smell was worse than she imagined. Pulling her cotton scarf up over her nose from around her neck, the sand laden scarf smelled of dust storms.

She moved inside to the rusted bars looking at the situation closer. It was dark, but if she struck a torch she would lose her concealment in the night.

Moving down on all fours, she squeezed through the narrow opening avoiding the sewage filled water. If she smelled of sewage, everyone in town would know she snuck in. It would mark her as a non tax payer.

The girl moved quickly past this point and then deeper into the dark tunnel.

The stink quickly fades into a background smell as she scrambles on all fours under the low lip of the archway. Within the walls the tunnels continues ten paces or so before a similar arched opening reveals the interior of the city. Creeping forward from the darkness to peer carefully within the town walls, Joey can see that there are bars here as well and that these bars, unlike the ones outside the wall, are in fairly good shape. They are designed to prevent the passage of armed men, however, and she thinks she will have no trouble slipping between them.

The ditch is much more contained within the city, more of a stone lined drainage channel that runs alongside a street that runs along side the inner face of the city wall. Dusk is slipping down over the city and while there

are pedestrians out on the street, they are few and far between. In some of the buildings, which look to be fairly poor with several families living in one building -- though the houses are taller than any she has ever known. Some have three floors and indications of awnings or tents on the roof as well.

As she looks cautiously between the bars to judge when best to scramble out, a commotion in the street to her right makes her pull back quickly. A dark figure runs swiftly from shadow to shadow towards her position. Behind she can hear the clash of armored men running and a shout in the local dialect, which she cannot understand, but is clear enough in its meaning: Stop!

The fleeing figure knows where it is going, however, and make straight for the drainage ditch. Not bothering to avoid the sluggish sewage flow, the dark clad figure dives head first into the stone channel and wriggles like an eel under the bars and into the darkness alongside Joey.

A moment later three men wearing chain-mail and the conical steel caps of the city guard come sprinting down the street with raised torches, looking from side to side in every hiding place that might conceal their prey. When they reach the ditch they pause and confer. Again the words spoken are not in a language Joey can understand but the sense of what they are debating is obvious.

It's likely their quarry has gone this way, but they are not willing to follow.

Beside her in the dark, the figure from the ditch moves quietly, creeping out of the foul

water, and Joey sees the glint of reflected torchlight on a long curved blade. It's possible the newcomer is not yet aware of Joey hidden in the shadows, but that could change at any minute.

Joey slowly moves her hand to the hilt of her dagger, not wanting to pull it just yet. She inches back into a shadow to conceal herself from the torch light created by the town guard. It would be just her luck to successfully sneak into the city, to be caught by the town guard by chance.

She watches the shadow of her new guest, while sharing attention to the guards just outside the ditch. They seem to move a bit farther down the street checking the alleyways and a few wooden barrels for the outlaw. She turns her attention back to the person with her and gambles with offering a greeting.

"They've gone." She whispers to the shadowy figure. A gesture that indicates she will not call for the guard.

Ready to defend herself if the situation calls for it. If this person appears to threaten her chances to enter the city, or threaten her in any way, she is willing to kill.

At the first whisper of sound Joey makes, the shadowy figure twitches around to face her raising the curved dagger -- but in defense rather than offense. It is too dark in the sewage tunnel to make out any details other than a vague form, but when the figure speaks, Joey can tell in an instant that it is a boy or young man who confronts her.

"I'm not the only one who hides in the rat hole, eh?" he says, moving away from her

and speaking in the trade argot she had used to address him. "Those idiots couldn't find their cocks with both hands. They could never catch me."

To make a liar of him, the guards return, grousing aloud, but still clearly suspicious that their quarry has gone to earth in the sewer. Unable to follow in such a tight and stinky place, they content themselves with indeed finding their cocks and all pissing through the grate at the same time.

The boy, who had moved back towards the grate when he tried to put some distance between himself and Joey gets splashed with the foul stream. Joey jerks back to avoid the splatter.

[Roll 1d20: A 9 or higher to avoid getting a direct hit. 15 or higher to avoid any collateral splashing.]

The boy holds his silence despite the indignity of the dousing and after a few moments the guards leave for good, laughing and clapping each other on their backs.

"Yes, yes, run away and suck one another's cocks," the boy calls out after them, but quietly so only Joey can hear him.

"I am Amil," he says when the guards are gone. "You smell too good to have been in the sewers long, and the fact that you are here at all tells me that you are trying to sneak inside the city. I know a good place to hide. But it will cost you money for me to show you. Five copper sous.

"And another ten to stay there the night," he adds quickly.

Joey stood ankle deep in sewage as the town guards urinated directly onto her head. (I rolled a 3) She closed her eyes in disbelief and grimaced, not to make a sound. There was no where for her to escape the warm stream of the liquid. It was one moment in her life that she would hope to forget, but it seemed to successfully get her into the city.

The boy forced a smile with his bottom teeth as he watched Joey get soaked. He wanted to laugh but he didn't know the girl and feared she might call the guard back.

She wiped her face clean the best she could with her hand. "You were saying how good I smelled?" Joey sneered at him. Her first impulse was to refuse the boy's help, but she quickly rethought her situation. She needed a place for the night and the price was definitely right. Tomorrow she could seek out Al Saif's cousin, Fatima, at the Silver Eel in the Souk.

"How do I know I can trust you... Amil?" She asked.

The boy put away his dagger and stepped into the light. He was a boy of about 14 years old. Probably a street urchin. She assessed the threat as "non-existent" with this one. She'd kill him with one stroke of her sword.

Before he could answer, she accepted.

"Fine. I'll double the cost if there is a warm bath included." She offered.

He replied with a small curtsy. And the two were off. Amil grinned at her disheveled condition, taking the sting out of the

mockery by waving his hand at his own pee-stained clothing.

"I don't know where you have come from," he said, "but a hot bath is an expensive luxury in this city. But I know a place where we can clean off."

He peered through the grating to make sure the guards were not lurking just out of sight and then wriggled through, back the same way he had come in. He waited on the street inside the city for Joey to join him. It was a tight fit but she was as slim as he was and managed to squeeze through under the metal bars. Then he set off at a fast trot through the narrow streets.

The first thing Joey noticed about the city was that it was packed in. The buildings, mostly of stone, but many with wooden structures on top or leaning against them, were very close together. Most joined seamlessly with the ones next to them, though occasionally she spotted gaps between two buildings, choked with weeds and stinking like the sewer had.

The narrow streets between the buildings were paved with stones but the gaps were not joined well and many stones were broken or missing altogether with gravel beneath the empty patch. The people she saw looked poor, even to her, and they paid no attention to two street urchins trotting along.

The way was a maze and Joey quickly lost track of which way they had come, but Amil seemed certain of where he was going and she concentrated on keeping up.

At last they turned a corner into an open space. In the middle of a rough square was a big stone bowl and a metal pipe sticking up that gushed water. Women came and went from the bowl, which was full of water, and washed bundles of clothes, kneeling on the stones that made the edge of the bowl and dipping the clothes into the water to get them wet before beating them with wooden paddles on the well worn stone lip.

Amil ran forward, dodging between laundry laden women and jumped over the lip of the bowl, throwing himself full length in the water -- which looked about knee deep. Women screeched as a wave of water splashed them, and one or two scooped up stones and threw them at him, but he dodged the half-hearted attacks easily as he took his clothes off, down to his breech clout, and swished them about in the murky water.

"Come on," he called to Joey. "It's the best bath you can afford."

Joey stood and watched as the boy dropped down below the water and emerged clean. He smiled at her wiping his face dry. "Come on. It's the closest thing to a bath you're gonna get."

She glanced to the older women washing their clothes. They paid her little attention. It was late and it appeared they were doing laundry at night for a reason.

The girl slowly removed her bow and arrows from around her and then began to unbuckle her belt. She gently layed her sword on the edge of the fountain and sat next to it. Glancing at Amil, he rolled his eyes at her precision at removing her

items. She smiled at him realizing it seemed a bit time consuming. She then decided to speed things along and dropped into the water.

It was warm. Probably heated by the desert sun during the day. She submerged herself, clothing and all for a few seconds scratching the sand, mud and who knows what-else out of her hair. It was thick with dirt. When she came up for air, Amil had moved closer to her. Now that his hair was wet, he looked more his age. A boy about 12. She was a few years older than him at 16.

As she cleared the water from his eyes, she noticed he had moved closer. Fearing he would discover her to be a girl, she quickly turned her back to him and moved away towards the older women helping herself to a bar of their soap.

She lathered her hair, face, neck and shoulders before submerging again.

When she came up for air, Amil had moved back some distance, but she could see in his eyes he knew the truth. "You're a girl." He laughed. "A girl?"

Joey sneered at him. "So what if I am."

"No... you just had me fooled that's all." He smiled.

"Havent you ever seen a girl before?" She asked looking at him sideways.

"Um... um... Yes?" He said unsure as how to answer that question.

"Good. Then Id prefer you not watch me as I bath." She said turning her back to him and submerging herself up to her neck. She

removed her top and scrubbed the sand from it. Then stood with her back to him in order to soap herself. She looked back at him only to see him staring at her naked back wide eyed. Joey rolled her eyes.

"You obviously lie too." She said before dropping back below the water level.

It wasnt long before they had both finished, Joey taking soap to her body, before suggesting he use it too.

Within 10 minutes, she was gathering her gear and getting used to the feeling of wet leather clinging to her skin.

"It's late. Can we continue now?" She asked sarcastically.

Amil nodded and then grinned at her.

"You probably don't want to let the men see you're a girl," he said. "They like to fuck girls. They fuck the boys too when they're drunk and they can't find a girl. But if they know about you . . ." he let his voice trail off and he looked embarrassed. "Yeah. Best if they don't know."

He shook himself like a dog to get rid of most of the water and darted away along a different narrow street than the one they had arrived by. Joey followed quickly, arranging her weapons to sit comfortably as she ran. She was used to long hunting expeditions and the running felt good after so many weeks sitting on a wagon. The air was cool as evening settled in, and she was soon dry in the high desert air. Stars started to come out overhead and she was pleased that she could still recognize the constellations. She

had traveled half way across the world, but the night sky still looked the same.

Several turns in the maze of street later and they came to another square. This one had no fountain. Instead three taverns opened on the same square, each with seating and small tables that spilled out into the square. In the middle of the square were a set of five large braziers, each burning merrily with tall flames and sweet smelling smoke. As Joey watched, a boy went to each in turn and threw in more wood and a handful of powder that spluttered and then gave off a great gout of the aromatic smoke.

Men sat at the tables, drinking and smoking huge water pipes. The servants were all boys about Amil's age. They hurried among the tables taking orders for drinks and food, delivering them as fast as they could. Sometimes the men tossed copper coins at them for the service. Other times they tripped or cuffed them and then laughed at their casual cruelty.

"This way," Amil pulled at her sleeve, guiding her towards a side entrance to one of the taverns. "This is where I work: The Inn of the Purple Rose. The stable boy is a good friend and you can sleep in the straw for five copper bits. If you have any money."

He looked her up and down.

"If you don't have any money, you can sell some of your weapons. Or spend the night with one of the chiefs." He nodded at the men in the square who were now clapping their hands and calling for something to happen. "They will pay good coin to fuck a young girl like you, but then they will want

to keep you and share you around with their friends."

"I have the money." She quickly replied. The second option wasn't ever an option. She wasn't a whore... never close to one. She'd almost killed several men that tried to make her one.

She followed Amil into the stable where she quickly found the five copper. Smiling at the young lad, "Thank you for helping me. You seem to have a kind soul. I like that." She held out her hand to offer a goodbye hand shake.

The stable boy entered the room looking at Joey and Amil. The two boys spoke briefly in a language the girl didn't fully understand. She was able to make out a few words. Amil described her as a "Travelor" using the masculine tense. In addition to mentioning "three copper bits", which initiated a quick glance from her to him. The cost was five bits. She figured Amil was taking the remaining two copper for himself. She wished she had not mentioned him having a kind soul. The boy was simply helping her in order to make a few coins.

When the stable boy began to barter asking for seven, the two agreed on five. She regained her faith in the lad for a straight shooter. Amil turned to her. "You'll be safe here. You can sleep up there." Looking up to the loft.

She smiled and nodded at them both before climbing the wooden ladder. She glanced back to see both boys watching her feminine movements as

she scaled the rungs. She knew the stable boy had easily figured out she was a girl. The bath had washed away much of her concealment.

The loft smelled of sweet hay and the musk of horses. The stable lad swaggered about a bit showing her where she could sleep, pantomiming curling up in a ball as he jabbered away in his native tongue. The words washed over her, and one or two seemed familiar. Though he spoke too quickly to be certain. She expected that in a few days she would have some of their tongue mastered.

Once or twice he thrust his pelvis in her direction and looked at her expectantly, but he didn't seem surprised or disappointed when she didn't react to his clear invitation. After a short while a man's voice from below called out in an imperious tone and the stable lad climbed down quickly to look after a newly arrived pair of horses, removing their saddles, wiping the lathered animals down, feeding and watering them, getting them settled in stalls of their own. As Joey watched him through the gaps in the planks at her feet, she could see that he truly cared for the animals and was kind and gentle with them, but firm when they needed it.

Amil had vanished – presumably to attend to his own business, and the young barbarian woman lay back on her cloak in the hay. Outside in the courtyard musicians had started to play, a slow tune with weird pipes and sudden drum rattles that made her think of the open spaces of her own childhood. Slowly the pace of the music increased until it had become a wild jig. And then she heard

an appreciative roar from the men sitting outside the inns that faced the square and she knew without looking that a woman had started to dance for them.

The music and the shouts of approval went on for some time as the night became full dark. The stable boy did not reappear, though she expected that he would probably try to sneak up there with her during the night. He was probably watching the dancing himself from some shadowy hiding place.

A very loud roar and the beating of feet in in applause announced the end of the dancer's show, and the music settled down to the slow background noise it had been before. The horses shuffled about below her and she heard someone hiss a greeting in the dark stables.

Faint voices drifted up to her and she realized that three or more men were talking very quietly in one of the horse stalls.

Joey quietly moved forward onto all fours peaking through the seams in the floor boards. She was careful not to make a sound. She couldn't make out what they were whispering about, nor could she see their faces, but she could tell they were three large men. After a few seconds of whispering, they all exchanged money and one waved a fourth man over. He dragged a young woman with him who seemed to be bound at the wrists and gagged. She wore the costume of a veiled dancer and was hurried into the horse stall. There she was left with the two men who paid the third.

The two men pulled her down to the floor of the stall out of sight as the remaining two men left with the money. Joey could hear the girl whimper as the men raped her.

The barbarian wanted to jump down and help the girl, but worried she might get overpowered and be joining the girl. Joey rolled over onto her back and closed her eyes putting her hands over her ears so she wouldn't hear. She squinted in shame turning her back on the girl, but her own survival was most important to her. A lone girl in a city of thieves could easily end in disaster for her if she wasn't careful.

Roughly a half an hour went by before both men left. Joey had almost drifted off to sleep before realizing they had left the stable. She rolled back over onto her stomach looking back down through the floor of the loft, only to see the feet of the girl. She wasn't moving.

Much of the celebration at the tavern had died down and the streets were quiet.

Joey crawled forward to hang her head over the lip of the opening into the hay loft to get a better view of the girl laying in the straw below. Was she dead? If she was, would she get blamed? She considered gathering her belongings and fleeing into the night, and jumped with fright when the body jerked: A convulsive movement that quickly became a cough and then a retch.

The girl was alive, but badly hurt. The horses stamped and moved about restlessly, well aware that something awful had happened very close by. Should she go down and help, or just stay hidden?

She ducked back instinctively when the girl moved, but when she heard her gasping for life, she leaned forward again to look.

She was definitely a dancer from the tavern next door. Left for dead by those men. Joey wanted to help her, but feared for her own safety. Just then, the main door to the stable slid open. The girl reacted by struggling to escape, but she was barely conscious, and her legs hadn't the strength to carry her.

A large man walked over to the stall, followed by the same stable boy from earlier today. The man put his hands on his hips. "Get her out of here. I don't care where you dump her." He tells the boy then leaves the stable closing the door behind him.

The young lad scurries to move the girl, but finds her to be much older than he, and therefore, much heavier and harder to move.

The girl didn't seem to resist being moved, and seemed to surrender herself to whatever fate was in-store. Or, she had fallen back unconscious.

Joey sprang to the ladder and climbed down, jumping to the stable floor surprising the boy who had forgotten she had been sleeping in the loft.

He tried to communicate, but didn't know her language. "Not.. my bad... thing." He stumbled pointing to the girl.

"It's okay. I know." Joey answered, but he didn't understand. He only turned back to the body and tried to drag her from the stall.

The two lifted the girl and carried her to a table. It was early morning and the warm sun had been shining through the cracks in the stable walls. Joey brushed the girl's hair from her face and took a good look at her. She was pretty. Maybe in her late teens or early 20's. She had long dark hair which was mostly filled with straw and dried blood.

"We need to move her somewhere safe." Joey told him, but he only shook his head not understanding.

Just then, the door slid open again.

Amil stepped through the stable door holding food wrapped in a ragged kerchief. He stopped at the entrance, taking in the scene: Joey and the stable boy examining a mostly naked girl spread-eagled on a table. He glanced over his shoulder and slid the door closed quickly behind himself.

"What happened?" he asked, not coming close but nodding at the unconscious woman.

Joey explained in broken trade tongue while the stable boy gabbled away in the local dialect. Amil looked back and forth between them, but he slowly came forward until he was standing by the table as well. He looked down at the woman who was breathing heavily and sweating profusely.

"She does not look good," he said to Joey, and spoke to the stable boy as well. "She needs a healer. She will die without. But healing costs money. Will you stand credit for her – pay the healer whether she lives or dies? Or do we let her die?" He looks at Joey directly.

He spoke quickly to the other boy as well and the stable lad stammered out in very bad trade talk to her. "Please. Illustrious. Save Auntie."

Joey looked back at the stable boy, surprised that he knew the woman. Let alone that she was his aunt. Her first thought was to save the young woman, then the thought of how much it might cost for the healer. But trying to discuss fees now, and with the obvious language barrier seemed a daunting task.

Josephine quickly nodded to Amil. Then smiled back to the stable boy. "Hurry." She added in the common tongue.

She wrapped what was left of the young woman's clothes around her to cover her nakedness, then found a horse blanket to wrap her in and allow them to carry her.

"Show me the way."

Between the three of them they managed to get the almost naked woman wrapped in a horse blanket and carried her out of the stables. The first light of morning illuminated the courtyard where the big fire and the entertainment had taken place last night. Drunken men were collapsed on the cobbles in many locations and street urchins were busy picking through their clothing, looking for anything of value to steal.

One of the slumbering men woke up as his clothes were being rifled and he shouted in anger. A knife flashed in his hand and the boy who had been searching him staggered back dripping red from a slashed hand. The other urchins stopped what they were doing and descended on the drunk with stones and sticks, kicking him and pummeling him until

he fell back to the ground unconscious. Then they stripped him naked and gave the clothes and the knife to the injured boy.

One or two of the gutter snipes eyed up Joey and her companions, but a quick glance at her weapons and her fierce demeanor sent them back to easier targets.

Amil guided them along a side alley and up a set of wide steps between two buildings. The city was a maze, and Joey had no idea where she was, trusting to her guide to lead her to the right place.

Two more sets of winding stairs and they arrived at a narrow wooden house between two stone structures. Amil hammered at the door and after some minutes it was opened by a bearded man, half asleep, angry and sharp at being woken. When he saw the woman they were carrying he shook his head in frustration but ushered them inside.

The living space, Joey realized, was constructed on top of one of the sets of steps. At one time this had been an exterior stairway providing access to the upper levels of the stone buildings, but it had been converted into a narrow and multi-leveled dwelling. The entrances to the stone buildings had been bricked up.

"Put her down on the first landing," the man spoke trade tongue to Amil with a soft accent that was very different from the local tone. He was old, darkened by the desert suns, but clearly not from here.

As they laid her out on a pallet of furs on the landing, the man spoke again to Amil.

"You will stand the price?"

Amil shook his head and nodded at the stable boy.

"She is his mother's sister."

The old man shook his head and folded his arms across his chest.

"He cannot stand the price. He is already indebted." He looked curiously at Joey, running his eyes over her lithe young body without any sense of lust about him, and taking in every detail of her weapons and her fair skin.

"This one has no tax mark, no clan tattoos. Will she stand the price?"

Amil glanced aside at Joey.

"She says she will, but she must say it for herself. I cannot commit her."

The man looked again at Joey.

"Do you understand us?" he asked. "I speak Aquilonian if you do not," he added switching easily to that tongue in mid sentence.

The girl stepped forward nodding to the old man. "I understand... I'll take on the debt for this woman." She told him. Then realizing the seriousness of her actions. She had no idea who this woman was, or why she would endebt herself for her. She could be paying this off for the rest of her life. Joey felt a rush of come over her as her face flushed. She knew she had made a mistake. How severe, time would only tell.

"Good, good," the man said, moving away from her in a determined search of the odd spaces in the stair case house. Many objects

were stored on the steps themselves, using them as shelves, and yet more items hung from hooks hammered in to the stair treads above their heads. Bit by bit he collected bundles of dried plants, some small sticks, a ceramic jar of liquid that he pried open and sniffed at, making a wry nose as he did. One container he shook but it made no sound.

“Oh, dear,” he said. “Well, I suppose I can do with meadow wort and willow bark, though it won't be as strong.”

As he collected the items he piled them on a flat stone alongside a small hearth, and finally he fetched an odd metal bottle with a spout at the bottom that twisted on itself and went back inside the bottle near the top. He took a number of nuggets of charcoal and fed them to the fire on the stone hearth, blowing on them to get them burning with a white heat, and then he poured a thick liquid from a jar into the top of the bottle with the strange spout and added measured quantities of all the other materials he had collected. Then he sealed the top of the bottle with a tight fitting cap and placed it on a brass tripod over the hot coals. Almost immediately a pungent odor filled the room that reminded her of high holiday ceremonies at the temples of her youth.

“Now,” he said, coming towards her and drawing a slim blade from his belt. “It is time to pay the price for her healing. I need a little blood, only a splash right now to add to the mix. This will bind you to it and when she drinks it, she will be able to pull vitality from you. It will make you weak for a night or two or then slightly tired for some time – perhaps a month or three. During this time you and she will be bonded. She will draw

on you for her healing and if you were to die, she would relapse.

“Do you understand? You must agree to this willingly or it will not work.”

Joey was frightened by the man as he stepped towards her. She had understood the cost to be monetary in nature only. She took a step back and the man questioned her dedication to heal the girl. He asked her again. “Do you understand? You must agree to this willingly or it will not work.”

Josephine looked down at the girl. She was young, beautiful and innocent. She didn't ask to be raped and beaten. The gods would surely reward her for helping this girl. This stranger.

Joey stepped forward slowly holding out her wrist. “I understand.”

Amil is much impressed by Joey's courage and explains to the stable boy that she is willing to give her own strength to help heal his aunt. The boy throws himself at her feet and kisses her toes – a bit embarrassing in the circumstances, though he is a healthy, strapping young lad perhaps a year older than she with lean muscles and long limbs.

The old healer sets about his business, boiling pots and scorching leaves before he crumbles them into the roiling liquids. When he summons her forward and takes her hand, she barely feels the slice of his razor sharp blade across the ball of her thumb. Bright blood wells and drips from her flesh into the boiling mass. There is a flash of blue light in the corner of her eye and she feels a bit sick to her stomach, but the old man nods in satisfaction. He smears a thick ointment on

her wound and it seals over quickly, the blood flow staunched.

Now the old man turns his attention to the badly beaten woman. He takes up a curved stick covered with runic inscriptions and traces lines along the length of her body. Each line starts at her belly and runs to an extremity: Head, hands, feet. As she watches him work, Joey realizes it is not a stick but a rib bone he is using, much carved and decorated with sigils and signs, many of which have old remnants of colored pigments embedded in the bone.

As he works, the healer croons a wordless song that rises and falls in intensity. Joey feels herself getting very tired. Her eyelids droop and it seems she falls into a waking dream in which the healing magic goes on for a long time but it happens very quickly all the same. She sees color returning to the young woman's flesh, starting in her stomach and moving out to the rest of her body.

Suddenly she gasps and her eyes fly open in shock and terror – for her no time has passed since she was raped and beaten close to death. The old man lays a calming hand on her forehead and whispers to her in her own tongue, all the while moving the carved rib bone over her extremities and still singing his song of healing.

Now that the girl is awake, the healer brings the liquid he has concocted with his herbs and Joey's blood, urging her to sip it. She does so and grimaces in distaste at the flavor, but he makes her drink it all. Now the color in her flesh begins to glow and Joey feels much more tired – so tired in fact that she slumps to the ground.

“Let her sleep,” she hears the old man say and she realizes she is lying on a bed in his odd house. Fatigue rolls over her and she closes her eyes again.

When she awakens she can see that the sun is setting outside. The whole day has passed. Sitting up she can see the old man smoking a long water pipe and reading a book. Alongside her is the dancing girl, naked as a jay bird, startlingly lovely, looking her right in the eye as they lay side by side. She smiles, and her face is achingly beautiful.

“You save me life,” she whispers to Joey. “Me for you. Now. Forever.”

Joey lay there facing the woman trying to process what has just happened. When she hears the woman pronounce that she is "hers now" her eyes open with shock.

Josephine was taken off guard. First, that the woman could speak the common tongue, but second that she was now bound to her as a servant.

She slowly brushed the woman's hair back from her forehead. "What is your name?" "You've been through a lot and need to rest now." Joey told her. "Tomorrow you can help me find someone here in the city, then, I will release you from your servatude."

Joey wasn't sure how all this worked, but if would hate to force someone to be a servant to her against her will. But there was something about this woman that was different. Something that lead Joey to risk her life for her. Fates had destined them to cross paths. As the fates did Amil and the Stable boy.

Joey pulled a thin blanket up over the two of them, covering her nakedness, and rested the woman's head on her chest. The numbness of sleep overtook her again and they both fell back asleep until the morning sun woke them.

When Joey woke again it was dark, some time in the middle of the night, the lovely woman's arms had slipped around her waist and her ample bosom was pressed against her flesh in a very intimate way. The dancer sensed somehow that Joey was awake and snuggled tighter against her, kissing her shoulder and neck in an inviting way, making it very clear that any affection would be more than welcome.

In the morning, Joey felt better than she had the night before, rested and almost back to herself, but she could detect a deep down minor loss, and somehow she knew exactly where the dancer was at any given moment. It occurred to her that she had given so much to someone whose name she did not even know.

The old man came down from somewhere above them, making plenty of noise as he descended the stairs.

“Ready for breakfast?” he asked. “It's a beautiful morning and an old man rarely has two such lovely guests. There is hot water for washing on the stove, a bowl over there. I will be on the roof when you are ready.”

He speaks quickly to the dancing girl in her own tongue before he leaves and she jumps up quickly and washes herself from head to toe, completely unconcerned about exposing herself to Joey. She inspects the

bruising that still remains from her beating and gazes into the bowl of water to see her reflection. Obviously pleased at what she sees, she smiles warmly at Joey and pulls on the few rags she has – the torn and ripped houri clothes from the night before.

“Me eat,” she says, rubbing her stomach and pointing upstairs. Her command of the common tongue is very basic, but enough to get across simple ideas. With that she scampers up the steps without a care in the world. As Joey watches her go she cannot help but admire the sway of the woman's backside – it is a delightful sight.

The warrior rogue watched as the girl left the room. She stood there pondering what she had gotten herself into. Was the girl her servant now? Someone that would be following her around? There was no questioning the girl's beauty, but what use could she be?

Then it hit her. She is from this part of the realm. She lives in this city and speaks the language fluently. Something Joey did not. The dancer knows the customs, foods, culture and local knowledge, let alone contacts in the city that could help keep Joey alive. The more friends the warrior could make, the better chance she'll have. Look what a poor street urchin has done for her so far. Not including a poor stable boy.

Joey washed herself and gathered her kit. She climbed the stairs to the roof for her first meal of the day. Her energy seemed to be restored. And so was her optimism.

The healer had set out a meal on a large tray – dried fruits, hot tea with a pot of honey for

sweetening, soft cheese and several pieces of round flat bread, still warm from baking. He waved the young women to help themselves and eat heartily himself for several minutes. He looked them both over quite unashamedly and obviously liked what he saw: A slim, fierce girl, beautiful and savage accompanied by a shapely young woman, lovely and compliant, of a form to set men's minds racing and their loins lusting. He wiped his bearded face clean with a cloth that seemed only for that purpose and sipped his tea.

"I am Mulciber," he said, pouring more tea from the pot into his cup. "Silence Mulciber. As you know I am a healer. I am also an alchemist. I know a bit of simple magic, and I can bake bread." He laughed out loud at himself as if this were a joke. "One the side I deal in useful tidbits of information."

He looked squarely at Joey as he continued.

"You look like you know how to use those weapons you carry, and I can see that you are lithe and supple. You arrived in the company of Amil, who I know to be a light fingered lad, well known to the city watch. But you, I think, are an unknown quantity to them. You're a girl, actually quite a pretty one under all that leather and dirt. And in company with your lovely dancer, here, you could pass quite easily where men would be challenged.

"I'm looking to steal something. I won't tell you what unless you agree to help me, and swear a binding oath of silence. But if you do help me, there will be significant rewards for both of you. You will have to leave the city almost immediately afterwards, for

reasons I will explain when I know I can trust you.

"What do you say? Are you interested in such an endeavor?"

He set his tea down and took out a long clay pipe which he began to pack with dried herbs from a leather bag. The sun was rising in the sky and the day was getting hot, but he seemed in no hurry. Josephine didn't say much. She listened to the man as she ate. The girl trusted him less as he looked at her with the same desire as most men looked at her, but he was almost 3 times her age. Joey believed him when he said he could heal. This he proved quite well. So she quickly shook off the slight bit of mistrust and gave her full attention to him. Her life was in his hands and he never did anything inappropriate to her.

When he mentioned an item he wanted stolen, she stopped chewing and her eyes shifted to the dancer (did you give her a name?) Her grasp on the common tongue was so crude, that she didn't understand what he said. She continued eating and only smiled when she discovered Joey's gaze.

"What item do you want so badly that you would steal it?" Joey asked with a mouth full of food.

She wasn't apposed to a job like that, but her thieving abilities were limited. "It appears Amil might be the man for you." She suggested with a smile. Even though he was a child, she referred to him as a man in jest.

Mulciber nodded at her comment about Amil.

"He's a skillful lad in his way," he agreed, "and I will in all likelihood enlist his services as well when the actual raid begins. But right now I need someone who can look like a tasty bit of desert while concealing a wicked sting.

"And as I said, no details on the job until you agree and take an oath of silence."

He snapped his fingers causing his thumb to apparently burst into flame which he applied to the bowl of his pipe, sucking on the stem and blowing blue smoke out into the morning sky. Far in the distance she could hear the sounds of a priest calling the faithful to prayer and in the streets below the city was coming back to life with vendors hawking their wares and others leading donkeys and camels through the narrow roads towards unseen markets.

The old man seemed in no hurry, and the dancer -- she still did not know her name -- ate greedily, probably more food than she'd seen in one place in a long time.

Josephine thought about what he said. She ate a bit more taking her time to think. Her original plan was to see sanctuary with Al Sahir's cousin (okay I just can't remember the names) at her tavern, but this seems like an opportunity that has presented itself. She could always fall back on the tavern if needed. But for now, she has quickly made friends in a city where she is by far the foreigner.

"Very well.." She said taking a break to wash down the last of her food. "You have my silence. Now tell me what it is you seek."

She looked towards the dancer who seemed to notice that the elder man and she were speaking about something more serious than morning pleasantries. Her face became serious and she looked back and forth between Joey and Mulciber trying to decipher what was being said.

Mulciber laughed.

"I'll need more than your say so that you'll keep my secrets, my girl. This is deadly stuff. The penalty for theft in Arenjun is stoning. I'll need an oath, a binding oath sealed in blood. But just to whet your appetite, I can tell you that we will steal both gold and a magic sword – a thing out of legend. Just to touch it will put your name in the history books from now until the end of time.

"I know where it is and know much about how it is guarded. But I need someone lovely and smart to learn about the guard rotations. A seduction will be in order, though I dare say your curvaceous companion has more than her fair share of those in her past."

He slid a long keen blade from up his sleeve and sliced quickly across his right palm. The cut on Joey's hand from the night before ached a moment in sympathy for the wound. As the blood pooled in his palm, he offered her the blade.

"Swear on whatever god you hold holy and we will seal our pact in blood. I will know thereafter if you betray me, and you will know if I am unfaithful to you as well."

Joey took the blade into her hands. She did not want to slice her hand open, but knew it

was the only way the man would trust her with this information. This was her calling. She knew this was the reason she traveled across the realm, risking her life for a chance at a better future. This was the reason. This was the moment.

With a quick flick of her wrist, she sliced the palm of her hand and grabbed his hand tightly.

The two shook hands firmly looking each other dead in the eyes. She knew she could trust him. And he felt the same way about her.

As their hands clasped, Mulciber spoke a soft word that echoed in her head and she had a momentary sense of his intentions in regards to her and the dancing girl. They seemed just as he had spoken, above board and all business.

The moment passed and he offered her a clean cloth to bind her wound and indicated a pot of salve that he used himself to smear across the cut in his hand.

“It will speed the healing,” he suggested. “And take away a bit of the sting.”

He spoke to the dancing girl rapidly in her own tongue and she began to clear away the breakfast platter. When she had lifted it aside and carried it down the steps, he unrolled a parchment on the low table. It contained a series of circles, and when she looked closely she could see that each circle had smaller densely crowded symbols drawn in a steady hand. With a thrill she realized it was a map – each circle representing a different floor of a round building.

“Look over my shoulder to the south east,” Mulciber suggested softly as he smoothed out the weathered parchment. It looked old and showed signs of damage and staining at the edges. “You can see a tower of black stone.”

She glanced over in the direction he had indicated and sure enough a squat black tower stuck up several stories higher than the surrounding buildings perhaps half a mile away.

“It is the Tower of Enas Yorl,” he spoke again, not looking at the place himself – indeed he seemed to be studiously ignoring it.

“Look away, now,” he said, moving his hand to distract her eye. “Never look at his tower for too long. Yorl is over 300 years old and he knows when others are paying too much attention to that which is his. Fortunately this map is not his and never was. It belonged to the Builder. The tower was erected in a single night as payment for services rendered. Yorl has lived in it ever since. It is well defended. It has no doors and the walls are nigh on impossible to scale.

“The warriors who guard within the tower are an elite group. Dessert riders, fierce and proud. They serve Yorl in repayment of blood debt. Once a month, at the dark of the moon, Yorl opens his wall to allow the guard on duty to leave and the next troop to enter. This will happen in in five days.

“The returning guards have gathered in the city for a last bout of drunkenness and rutting before they are shut inside for a full

cycle of the moon. I need to discover what duties they have inside. Where and how often the patrol the interior of the tower. And most importantly what is here!" He points to a dark mass at the base of the tower. "It was not constructed by the builder, but prepared. It is down here, below the level of the streets that Yorl will have hidden his greatest treasures.

"We must scale the walls and descend to this level to find what we seek."

He re-rolls the parchment as the dancing girl ascends the steps again.

"Do you have any questions?"

Joey looks to the dancing girl as she climbs back onto the roof. Then back to Mulciber. "We?" She asks. "When you say we... you mean who?"

She glanced back over his shoulder to take another look at the tower. It now had a dreadful look to it. She felt her eagerness to join an adventure might have gotten her in way over her head. The thought of getting trapped deep within a black tower without windows or doors gave her the overwhelming sense of claustrophobia. She was used to the open air. Loved the open fields and forests of her homeland.

But she had given her word. And shared her blood with the elder man.

Looking back towards the girl and lifting an eyebrow. "We?"

The old man laughs as the young warrior's gaze takes in the lusciously curved dancing girl.

"Not her," he chortles. "But you, me, Amil and another fellow I have in mind. A rough sort but someone you would want to have on your side in a tight spot. You'll meet him tonight.

"But first, you and the girl have work to do. The guards who will be going on shift in the tower typically stay at the Inn of the Brass Wyvern when they are off-duty. Yorl pays for their rooms and their drinking.

"In five days they will enter the tower when Yorl opens the hidden door to them. That is when we will be leaving. We must enter the tower the night before and make our way down to the dungeons or whatever else he has hidden in the lower levels and find the sword I seek.

"In the meantime, you and your lovely companion must seduce the guards, get to know them, learn what their rotations and ranges are. And most of all, I must know what is below the tower. It will be the last and strongest defense, of that I am sure. To be ready, I must know what we will face.

"Talk to me about how you might go about this."

He sips hot tea and nibbles on dried dates as he listens to her reply.

Joey thought for a moment. Seducing men was not her strength. Killing them was. Her new servant would have to train her a bit. How to move, stand, flirt, etc.

"Seduction is not my strength. Wouldnt we be better off having someone on the inside to help us? What about this. She and I find ourselves at the Brass Wyvern when the

guards arrive. I befriend some and let them know I'm looking for work. I strike up a bargain with them." She looks to the dancing girl, then leans in closer as if to keep the girl from hearing. "I offer my new servant to them for a chance to work inside the castle with them. I can prove my worth with my sword and ask to be taken in. If I can gain their trust with this offer, I might be accepted as one of them. With me on the inside, I can find out everything I need to know for you." She looks back at the girl. "It's not a fair deal for her, but if you want that sword bad enough..." Joey smiles at him. "I don't need a servant."

Mulciber stroked his neat beard and looked Josephine up and down quite frankly.

"I like the idea of you appealing to them as a fellow warrior, though they will test you severely. But I need to learn the details of what lies within the tower before the gate is opened at the dark of the moon. My plan requires that we enter the tower by stealth the night before and leave when the portal is open. I am certain that the sword cannot be removed any other way.

"If you apply to them to join their company, they will require proof of your ability. It might be a very hard lesson with no chance for subterfuge – standing toe to toe with one of them. And the penalty of loss . . . ? I think you can imagine that yourself."

The plan was set. Josephine had agreed to approach several of the tower guards at the Brass Wyvern with Salome. Mulciber explained the plan to Salome and she

willingly agreed to help, out of servitude to her new master. She was bound to the brunette now for saving her life.

The trio discussed what information was needed. Mulciber translated much to Salome. The language barrier was proving difficult between Joey and her, but the two seemed to work well together. The dancer was obviously loyal and at times affectionate to her.

The hour was growing late and with their plan in place, the two girls changed into more revealing clothing. Salome helped the warrior with her make-up, and how to position herself to make for a more feminine physique. How to walk and carry herself in a way that would lure men to her. Joey struggled at first with this, but eventually noticed the elder man becoming aroused. It didn't bother her, since she had seen this before with him. If he had an interest in bedding both girls, Joey would only use that against him. The lure of sex is often a woman's most powerful ally.

The two girls left and within the hour found themselves a block away from the quaint pub. The culture in this part of the realm seemed to view women as sex objects and not as equals. Something Joey and Salome would use to their advantage. If they are not perceived as threats, the soldiers might feel less inclined to keep information quiet.

The girls gave each other a hug for good luck. Salome held her close a bit longer and whispered something in her ear. Joey didn't understand what it was, but assumingly a word of luck.

Then they both entered the pub.

The Brass Wyvern crouches like a wounded beast at the end of a cul de sac in a poor section of town. Knots of well armed men loiter in the narrow lane that is lit by flickering torches. They glance at the two women wearing little but silks to hide their charms and jeer in guttural tones at them. Making rude gestures that involved a lot of crotch grabbing and rubbing, they allow the women to pass, but press in behind them to prevent any sudden decision to leave.

The front door swings wide as they reach it, a tall man with horrible scars on his face is surprised to see them, but stands aside to allow them to enter while he holds the door in mock courtesy.

“Seems like I was leaving too soon,” he cries to the others inside, speaking in the rough trade tongue Joey had learned in al Saif’s caravan. She is grateful she will be able to at least understand some of what is being said.

The tavern inside is typical, a half dozen rough tables and blank benches. The stench of ancient beer and fresh piss, raucous cat calls from the well muscled and well armed men scattered about offering everything from free mustache rides to thorough reamings from both ends at the same time.

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Where are your manners?” a slim fellow wearing a long sword and an eye patch cries aloud in a voice that seems to subdue the others in an instant. He is bald headed, with rough stubble as if he shaves his head rather than has lost his hair. His face is tattooed to look

like a skull. He wears much jewelry, rings, necklaces and various piercings all crusted with precious stones.

“Come and sit with me, my dears, and tell Captain Burroughs what brings a pair of pretty canaries to this rook’s nest.” He pushes a couple of burly fellows aside who give up their seats willingly, snorting with laughter as if Burroughs is telling a good joke.

Salome glances aside at Joey, waiting for her patron to explain their presence.

Joey swallows hard and looks quickly at Salome. At that moment, she turns on the best acting job of her life and becomes someone she’s not. She smiles and flirts.

“Hello. We are looking for a few strong men to buy us a drink or two. We were hoping to find a few in this place.”

An outburst of laughter fills the room with this comment. “She’s looking for tough guys.” Joey hears muttered from within the crowd as she moves to sit next to Captain Burroughs. Salome sits across the table and is immediately joined by several men who push their way to the bench to sit next to her.

The two girls are surrounded. Salome has one on each side and several behind her. The men seem to leave Joey alone possibly for fear of Burroughs. The two didnt expect the type of welcome they received. The entire bar acts like they’ve never seen women before.

Joey is trying to act calm and a bit seductive, but her heart is racing within her

chest. Burroughs looks like a guy that would kill you first then fuck you. While his friends look just as blood thirsty.

The young warrior has to choose her words correctly or she and Salome could be dragged into the back and gang raped. "My friend and I are fascinated with the black tower and the brave men who guard it. We wanted to drink with all of you before you commit yourselves for the next month."

She didnt want to share too much of her knowledge, but needed to show their interest in the tower.

Captain Burroughs laughs out loud at her comment about the black tower.

"Yer one of them, are you?" he says, gulping from his wooden mug, ale sloshing as he slams it back down on the table.

"Want to get inside the tower? Want to meet the wizard? Want to know if the stories are true?"

He grins at her and waggles his finger in an admonishing way.

"Well I can tell you this, girlie, the stories are true. Enas Yorl really does have two pricks instead of one. A big one for your pussy and a smaller one mounted below just long enough to ram up yer arse when he gets going. There's lots of ladies like that idea.

"But if you're looking for a cock up both holes, I'm sure we can oblige, eh, lads?"

The other men roar their approval at this suggestion, but Burroughs seems in no hurry to share Joey. He shoves a burly fellow aside to clear space for her beside him.

"I don't know about the skinny one," cries one of the warriors, "but I seen the good looking one over at the Dead Donkey. She's a dancer. A damned good one, too!"

The men set up a cry for the girls to show them a dance. One fellow bangs out a rhythm with his hands on the table top and two others pull small clay pipes from their pockets and play eerie flute music with sounds of the high desert in their notes.

Salome begins to wiggle in time with the music and pulls Joey away from Burroughs clutches. They have practiced some basic dance moves in preparation for this encounter. Salome is very good and she does most of the work, but it is a dance of lesbian love in which the buxom wench presses her attentions on the slim girl. The men love it. They clap and yell when the dance is finished.

"Do it again!" they cry. "But take their clothes off them first," calls one fellow from the back. A suggestion that meets with howls of approval.

"Now, now, lads," calls Burroughs standing up and putting his hand on his sword hilt. "Captain gets dibs on the pootang, you all know that.

"Now, I'm not a greedy man, but I'm putting my bid in on the skinny one. She's a pretty young thing and I think she'll look real nice dancing up on top of my cock. Miller is second in command," he nods at a huge fellow with a bristling red beard and arms the size of ham hocks. "He get's second dibs - on the girl with the big tits, and my guess is he's not one to share. So the rest of you lot

will just have to take your chances with the regular doxies.”

There is a groan of disapproval at this, but no overt move to override Burroughs' ruling.

“Time to continue our conversation upstairs, my dear,” says Burroughs turning back to Joey. “I've arranged a room with a nice fire and a bottle or two of red wine. You can tell me what your fantasies are. And I'll do my best to make them come true.”

Joey was quite nervous when Salome pulled her up onto the table for their dance. But after a few seconds, Salome seemed in complete control. She was in her element. Her control over the men was amazing. She knew exactly what they'd like and how to keep them watching. It was a delicate balance of being provocative and sexy, but not overwhelming the lustful mob with too much seduction. A delicate balance.

There was a part of Joey that actually enjoyed dancing for them. All their eyes on her body. She was used to killing men, not being an object of their sexual desire. Being lusted after was always something that turned her off, but this time... it turned her on.

Burroughs held out his hand helping her down off the table. Then his hand firmly grabbed her under the arm forcefully leading her to the stairs. Miller smiled and wiped the ale from his beard. He usually doesn't get the pretty one with big tits. Tonight, Burroughs was offering him a treat.

The man was quite large. Joey could see Miller would be a man she hoped to never face in combat. He had to be three times her

strength and weight. Burroughs was much leaner, but she could tell would be much quicker. He'd fight with speed and gile. Also a fearsome foe, but one that fought a similar style to her. Overall, Joey remembered what Malciber told her about a possible fight. Now she understood. She was fierce in battle, but she'd never be able to take both men.

Joey let Burroughs force her up the stairs and into a private room. Miller pushed Salome into the same room. There were dozens of large pillows on the floor, two small tables and metal braziers burning red hot coals. The room was filled with a red light from the coals in addition to several hanging lanterns with red cotton cloth shading the flame. The room smelled of sweat and sex.

Not one to waste time on foreplay, Burroughs grabbed Joey from behind and pushed her face first against a wall, holding her in place with one hand while his free hand explored her ass. He grunted enthusiastically as he tore away her silks and pushed his fingers down her butt crack and forward into her cunt. Hooking one finger inside her pussy, tight and dry right now, he pulled her ass out and pushed her head down to make her bend double. His fingers slid deeper inside her and he found a spot that made her gasp. Her mind fluttered in and out of horror and desire as he used his knowledge of her body to coax a warm flood inside her.

“That's my sweet bitch,” he muttered as her juices flowed. “Like it rough, do you. You've come to the right place, girl.”

He pulled his finger out of her and fumbled for a moment at his own clothes. His cock, when he rammed it into her ass and probed for the wet spot of her cunt, was no where near as intimidating as Raffa's magnificent member had been only a few nights before. But unlike the giant Nubian, Burroughs was not interested in her pleasure, or her protestations. He rammed himself deep into her tight pussy and thrust at her in a frantic rhythm with all the finesse of a rutting beast.

She lifted her arms to protect her head from being battered into the wall as he fucked her and looked across the room to where Miller had Salome kneeling in front of him. The massive lieutenant was fucking her servant's face enthusiastically, holding her head firm with both hands as he pounded his thick prick into her soft mouth.

“Like to watch, bitch?” Burroughs snarled in her ear as he reached round under her stomach and pinched her tits. “I like that too.”

He wrenched her around to face Miller and Salome as they copulated and within a few seconds the foul captain roared out his satisfaction as he ejaculated inside her, his hot seed jetting up into her belly in a fountain of thick liquid.

Time passed. Miller and Burroughs took turns with the women, passing them backwards and forwards between them, often mounting them two at a time and forcing the women to pleasure one another with their tongues and fingers for their amusement and continued arousal. For Joey the evening became an ordeal of pain and degradation mixed with occasional moments

when her body betrayed her with spurts of orgasmic pleasure. Images seared themselves in her mind's eye in a kaleidoscope of sordid perversions: Speared on Miller's fat cock from behind as she licked Burroughs' hot sperm from Salome's bruised pussy, face to face with Burroughs as she rode his prick while Miller fucked her ass and the Captain kneaded her tits, smiling at her, enjoying her pain as much as he was enjoying the fucking.

But through it all, the idiot boasted of his position in Yorl's household, and as the hours passed, she learned what she had come to find out: Guard rotations and posts on each floor of the tower. And finally, towards the end of their ordeal she heard him speak to Miller as they lay back on the cushions, watching the two women copulate about what lay in the lower levels of the tower: The iron barred cells that held hideous creatures, experiments in Yorl's sorcery gone awry and the hidden strong room behind the altar to Yog Sothoth where the wizard's greatest treasures were concealed. This was the prize. But had the cost been worth it?

In the small hours of the night, the men finally passed out and the women crawled away. Naked, crusted with sperm, bruised and bleeding, as thoroughly battered as Joey could ever recall and literally fucked within an inch of their lives, they crept downstairs and sidled around the tap room, filled with snoring lumps, hearts in their mouths knowing that any sound would rouse these men, who would deliver the same assault a dozen times over again.

Somehow they made it outside in the faint light of dawn and away from the alley that housed the Brass Wyvern. Luckily Amil had waited for them out of sight and when they emerged on the street he hurried forward with soft robes for them to cover their naked flesh. His eyes grew wide at the sight of them, and he turned his face away in shame as they pulled on the rough homespun.

Even Silence Mulciber looked aside with in self-reproach as they re-entered his home, but he could not stop himself from asking as he lead them to a tub full of hot water: "Did you learn what we need to know?"

Joey helped Salome as Amil helped them both move to the bath. Mulciber seemed more interested in the information than the well being of both women. This was fitting for the culture in this part of the realm, but Joey still seemed a bit used.

Both women ignored the elder man's first few requests for details, as getting to the warm bath was their first priority. Once the two slid down beneath the warm water, closing their eyes, they could feel the tiny tears in their flesh burn. They were sore, bruised and torn, but they had succeeded in their efforts to extract information.

Amil started washing Joey's face with a soft sponge. The young boy didnt proceed any lower than the warrior's neck. Joey opened her eyes looking at Mulciber. She whispered to him.

"We have the information you need."

The old man looked up in interest when Joey told him they had discovered what he wanted to know. He might feel a bit

ashamed at what he had set them to do, but he was all business now.

"Tell me," he pressed. "Tell me everything you remember."

Eyes closed, soaking the pain out of her body in the hot water, Josephine recalled the snatches of conversation she had heard between Burroughs and Miller.

"Well, they didn't just come out and say 'These are the guard rotations and stations, my dear, just in case you're thinking of dropping by and robbing the place.' But Burroughs is a boaster and a foul-minded lecher."

She shudders as she suddenly recalls him slapping her face with his tattooed and pierced cock, grunting and calling aloud to Miller. "Did this to that new lad on second shift last time. He was on Dikkon's patrol, on the third floor after midnight. I got him in the hidden room at the top of the stairs and fucked him ragged until just before the watch change at three bells. He liked it. You should have a go at him too. He'll be on dawn watch this rotation, top floor. There's a cupboard no one thinks of in the back of the observatory. Plenty of room to bend him over good. Take your time. Patrol only goes in there twice a shift. He'll do anything you like for five shillings."

And on and on through the night, as the molester savaged and degraded her, but from time to time dropped tidbits of interest into the foul tide of his verbal abuse. And finally, the information that most interested Mulciber – the location of the hidden strong

room behind the subterranean temple to Yog Sothoth.

"That's where it will be!" cried the old man when she told him of it.

Again and again he pressed her to recount each item she had overheard, turning the words and the possible details over and over and making furious notes in a spidery hand on a long sheet of parchment with a quill pen that scratched and splattered drops of squid ink as he wrote. These notes he cross referenced with the maps he had of the likely interior layout of the tower, and to these he added small details culled from her recollections.

This went on for hours until Joey finally fell asleep in mid sentence. When she awoke, evening had descended and she could hear Mulciber and Amil talking in soft voices on the roof level two stories above her. As she stirred, Salome knelt down next to her with a mug of hot spiced tea. The barbarian felt a sudden pang of sorrow for the dancing girl. She had gone willingly into that gang of rapists because Joey had asked her to, and yet she seemed to hold no grudge for the damage and degradation that had been done to her.

"Mister says go roof," whispered Salome as she pressed the mug into Joey's hand.

Joey smiled at Salome causing the brunette to smile warmly back at her. "You put yourself in harms with me and for a man we just met." Joey glanced to the roof. "I feel awful for asking you to do that. I agreed to help him. Not you." Joey told her. But something told the warrior that most of what

she said was lost in the language barrier. Salome simply smiled and brushed away a bit of Joey's hair from her face. "I go where you go." The dancer said. Then she slowly leaned down and kissed Joey on the forehead. The warrior in her melted away and she returned to the little girl she was years ago. The soft kiss from the woman gave her such comfort. Being alone in a strange land, Salome gave her comfort. The dancer made her feel loved and would share everything with the girl.

Josephine reached up with her hand slipping it around her neck. She pulled Salome back for another kiss. This time, it was on her lips. The connection was electric. Joey felt a rush of excitement between her legs. The kiss was soft, long and passionate.

Just then, the two heard the creak of the wooden stairs as someone began to come down. It was Mulciber. Both women looked up at him.

"I see you're awake. Good. I hope you have recovered your energy. We have much planning to do." He looked at Salome and spoke to her in their native language. The servant jumped up and began preparing a meal, almost in fear of the man.

By the time she reached the roof level, Mulciber had returned to his chair. He sat smoking a long clay pipe and gazing out over the dark rooftops of the city of Arenjun. The various streets and alleyways that contained lanterns or open braziers glowed from beneath, looking like rivers of fire etching out the shape of the city. A still dark form standing alongside Mulciber

turned to look at her as she stepped up from the final set of stairs.

He was a warrior; even in the darkness she could sense his strength and power, hear the faint leather creak of his armor as he moved. When he looked at her she caught a glimpse of his face in the pale moonlight: Wide and strong with a scar that pulled his lip up at the left hand corner making him look like he was grinning at her in a lopsided way. But there was no humor in his eyes, glittering pools of danger and assessment with no color that she could discern in the deep shadows.

“Darak, this is Josephine,” said Mulciber, taking his pipe stem out of his mouth and blowing out a plume of aromatic smoke as he made the introductions. “She is a recent member of our troop. A most valuable member with great intent of purpose. She has found the last details we need to know. The time is upon us. Tomorrow night we shall climb and enter the dark tower.”

Darak grunted his acknowledgment and turned away from inspecting Joey.

“The boy? He can make the climb? The tower is . . . awkward, . . . wrong.”

Mulciber nodded his head and spoke again, looking out towards the tall tower he had pointed out to Joey a few nights past.

“Amil has many talents and great agility. He will climb the wall carrying a hook and a silken thread. When he has reached the uppermost level where the only windows are located, he will attach the hook and use the silk thread to pull up a knotted rope. We will climb the rope. It will not be easy, but I have

been in training for weeks and I think that both of you are up to the task.

“Once within the tower, we must avoid the guard patrols at all costs. The information that Joey has obtained will give us an excellent chance at doing so. If we are discovered, we are doomed. We might win one encounter with a patrol but once the tower has been altered there is no way out. Our own rope would be cut before we could descend a dozen feet, and the fall would be the most pleasant way that we might die.”

The warrior shifted a little and Joey watched the play of moonlight on his wide shoulders and narrow hips. He looked strong enough to pull the tower down on his own, but then she remembered Miller's ham hock arms and wondered if any man could be strong enough to face more than one of the guards who would be inside. Not Burroughs and Miller, thank the gods, they would be going in two nights from now. But she was certain that the guards currently in place were as vicious and capable as their replacements had looked.

“If and when we do encounter guards, we must kill them immediately and as quietly as possible. Darak and Joey will both be armed. And I have some small skills of my own.” He smiled a cold smile into the darkness.

“We have a chance, at least, and I would risk all for this prize. The sword we seek is mine. I will brook no argument on this. Any other treasure you find you may keep, but not the sword.

“At sunset on the day after we enter the tower, the door will open and the guards will leave while the new shift enters. This is when we must leave. Only while the door is open will Enas Yorl's protective spells be at their weakest. Only at this time will we be able to remove the sword from the premises.

“Do either of you have any questions?”

Joey watched Darak as Mulciber explained the plan. Amil to climb the tower and lower a rope for the rest of us. She glanced out across the night sky towards the dark tower and a shiver ran down her back. The thought of going back into the that world of Miller and Bourrows terrified her. She was abused so badly yesterday night, the thought of being trapped inside the tower and used by the guards over and over almost mad her sick. Looking at Mulciber explain the plan and his obsession with this dark sword almost made the warrior begin to question if she wanted to be part of this group.

She remembered al Saif and his advise to seek out his cousin, Fatima the Fair at the Silver Eel in the Souk. Maybe Salome and she could work for a bit and find a place to share. Then, she could find a new direction. One on her terms.

"Do either of you have any questions?" Mulciber asked snapping her out of her day dream. She shook her head, as did Darak, but then it dawned on her. What about Salome? She couldn't ask now. Nor could she back out of this quest. The old man would never let her go. She knew too much. Plus she swore to secrecy. She was in if she liked it or not. Her gut was telling her she couldn't

trust him, nor could she trust Darak. He was the only man that did not look twice at her. He seemed all about business. Or maybe the huge man knew she wouldn't survive, so didn't want to waste his time getting to know her. Or maybe they both had plans on leaving her inside once they get the sword. So many thoughts raced through her mind.

"I'll need tomorrow to gather a few items. Then I'll be ready." She decided to risk it. "What will happen to Salome while we're gone? Can she stay here?"

Mulciber looked her up and down a moment before he replied.

“She has served us well and she knows nothing of our plan. She may remain in the house while we are in the tower. I will impress on her that she must not leave until we return or until the dark of the moon has passed. If we are not back by then we will be lost, locked in the tower with Enas Yorl and his guards.”

He puffed on his pipe as he considered some more.

“What items do you need to fetch? I know for a fact that you came to my home with all you possess. Is it something you will need for the job? If so, I may already have it.”

Darak squats easily beside a tray of food that Salome has left with them and helps himself to mouthfuls of fresh dates and newly baked flat bread smeared with a garlic flavored paste. He glances up at both the old healer and Joey, looking between them, gauging their interaction. His eyes smolder in the dim firelight and while he does not look at

Joey as something to consume, he has certainly judged her thoroughly as to fitness for the task ahead.

“Let the girl go,” he growls. His voice is deep with accents from the far west. A Zingaran, she would guess. “She has sworn her oath to you as have I. She cannot be false. Her blood itself will betray her.”

He drinks from a clay pitcher of wine.

“This may be her last night to see Arenjun. When we quit the tower we must be away over the mountains faster than a bolt of lightning. Yorl will not be pleased, and only distance can make us safe.”

Joey stumbles to find an excuse to get away for a bit. "Um... I... If Im going to into the tower tomorrow night, this might be my last hours of freedom. I'd like to mentally prepare for this quest with some time to reflect alone." The girl looks to both Mulciber and Darak, hoping to sense if they're skeptical of her reply. Seeing the possibility of neither man trusting her, she fires back in defense.

"Plus, I dont answer to either of you. If I want to walk the city streets tonight, I will do that. You've healed Salome and helped me, but I have repaid you by selling my self as a whore for information you've longed for. I consider us even."

Both men raise an eyebrow at the girl's sharp tongue. "I'll be ready to go." She reassures them before storming down the stairs.

Salome stood next to the table with her hands in front of her. She had heard the

conversation, but only understood a few words. Joey assumed she figured out that she would be left behind, or released from servitude altogether.

"I'll be back. Stay here." The warrior told her. Salome forced a smile.

With that Joey left the sandstone building and entered the city streets. The desert night was much cooler than the day, and she pulled her cloak around herself tight. It felt good to get out on her own again. Even if it was just for a few hours. She shuttered at the thought of being trapped inside the dark tower. A prisoner to the men inside.

Joey worked her way through the streets, almost losing her direction a few times, finally finding her way to the Souk and then the Silver Eel. She at least wanted to investigate the possibilities of life in the city with a different direction.

She stood outside in the shadows, looking at the tavern and observing the patrons entering and exiting. She hid herself well in the darkness. Just then, she saw a familiar face. Amil moved cautiously down the street. He had followed her.

Mulciber makes calming motions with his hands as Joey snapped at him and Darak about having the right to go about as she pleased.

“By all means, enjoy the evening, indeed the night as you wish. You have more than earned your right to be trusted. It is close to our final goal and while you have only come into the plot very recently, Darak and I have been planning this for some time. We are anxious, is all.

“Return to us by mid-day tomorrow if you would. If I have not heard from you by then, I will ask Darak to find you – just in case you need help.”

The city at night is a lively place. Many market stalls are still open operating by lamp light. Food is cooking on braziers at each corner and the scents of exotic spices fill her nose. Men and women call out lewd offers to her, some for free, others asking a price for their services. Tavern spill over with drinkers, more than a few falling down drunk even this early in the night.

When she reaches the Silver Eels, a small establishment catering more to food than drink, she sees men and women entering together and hears music playing inside. The scent of roasting lamb and fish stew waft out on the night air and set her tummy rumbling despite her recent meal.

Amil approached, not noticing her in the dark shadows of an doorway across the narrow street. He peered about and then stepped close to the door of the inn, peering in as it opened for other patrons to see if her could spot her inside, then looking around again as he could not find her. Finally he took up a position of his own, not far from her, also to watch it seemed. She did not think he knew exactly where she was, but he knew she was close. If she stepped out into the street he would be sure to see her. If she could leave through the doorway behind her, she might find a way to avoid his surveillance.

She does not know if he followed her here or has some other way to find her provided by the mysterious Mulciber.

Joey hesitated in the shadows across the street from the Inn. Amil was positioned to watch for her. There was no doubt he was sent to follow her by Mulciber.

The thought of whatever future she might have had if she went to see Fatima first, would never be. Her fate was sealed when she followed Amil from the sewerage pipe. She met Salome, Amil, Mulciber... all for a reason. It was her fate. Changing direction now would only cause bad luck for her future.

The decision was made. She would not enter the Silver Eel.

Joey slipped back down the alley way without entering the street. Amil could wait there all night if all she cared. Serves him right for spying on her.

A few minutes later, she was back onto a busy street, sampling dried fruits from the many vendors in the area. She strolled through the low market enjoying the sights, smells and tastes of this new culture. She even flirted back with some of the men who made cat calls to her. Something she had never done before. For the first time, she saw the city in a new light. She felt this part of the realm brought out a side of her that was hidden. For the first time she liked where she was at.

The ancient city flared with life and firelight. Scents of food and liquor and sweat and perfume drifted on the cool night air. More than once as she strolled she was propositioned by both men and women. Several boisterous men eyed her up as a

possible target, but thought better of the risk as she eased her long knife in its sheath.

The streets were full of life and money changed hands everywhere, but from the shadows the poor watched hungrily, often only seen as a pair of eyes in blazing with anger and fear and resentment from a pool of darkness. More than once she witnessed pick-pockets plying their trade, and it was not uncommon to spot a beating or a robbery on progress down a side street.

At last she returned to familiar streets and Mulciber's front door. Salome answered when she knocked, much relieved to see her, leading her up the steps to their curtained landing and drawing her down beside her on the sleeping furs.

“Me scared you lost,” the woman stumbled in the trade tongue. “Me make happy for you,” and she offered herself to the young warrior in the only way she knew to bring joy.

Above them on the roof in the darkness, Mulciber and Darak murmured together in a tongue Josephine did not understand.

The next day was all business. Mulciber spent the time collecting together various flasks and vials that he arranged in a leather satchel with rags wrapped around each to prevent clinking. Darak inspected his weapons and armor carefully, oiling the heavy leather and making repairs where needed. Amil returned, sleepy and disconsolate, but suddenly happy to see her there without explaining why.

“Tonight at midnight we scale the tower,” Mulciber declared over a late breakfast.

“Get plenty of rest during the day. Eat well now, but only lightly after dark. Please drink only water today, and none after dark. Our options will be very limited once we enter the wizard's demense.

“Are there any final questions or concerns?”

Joey nodded at mulciber's direction. The day would be spent preparing herself mentally and physically. She had slept well the night before. Salome had made sure of that. But now the day's ritual would be to secure her equipment. Sharpen her blades, tighten the laces on her leather, rub oil into it to soften the cracks.

But the most important was the preparing her body and mind. A few hours before midnight, when the sun had set, Joey made her way to the privacy of the rooftop. Mulciber and Darak were below gathering what they needed. Joey began to disrobe.

The cool and dry night air of the desert was perfect. She removed every strict of clothing except a tin cotton skirt. Her body was unencumbered from all restrictions. Picking up her sword, she began the slow methodical dance. It was the martial art dance taught to her by an old friend. Deep, long breathing. Slow movements. Winding, twisting, balancing, holding her body in positions of balance. Her bare foot placed onto the side of her other leg. Stretching the weight of her sword above her head. Deep bends, leans, switching feet, all in an effort to stretch every muscle of her body and mind.

After 30 minutes, she was done. She felt at peace. When she opened her eyes Mulciber and Darak were sitting behind her, watching. She quickly covered herself.

"Impressive." Mulciber nodded. "An art form not seen in these parts."

But Darak didn't seem as impressed. He valued power over finesse. He simply enjoyed her physic.

"I believe we're ready." He concluded.

At the midnight hour, Mulciber collected his crew for the final assault.

"It is time," he announced piercing each of his cohorts with a glittering eye.

"Tonight we assault the wizard's tower. Amil, may his family be blessed for a thousand generations, will climb the wall of the tower carrying a hook and a slender cord. When he has reached the balcony at the very top, he will attach his hook and pull up a knotted rope. Then we three will ascend, one by one.

"Darak will go first to secure the balcony, then Josephine and finally myself. When we have penetrated the tower, my plan is work our way down to the lowest levels to reach the wizard's stronghold behind the altar to the foul god Yog Sothoth.

"Thanks to Josephine's foray into the enemy camp. We know of hiding places in the tower and a fair bit about the guard rotations. We will use this information to stay hidden and undetected for as long as we can. But there is no chance that will not face a struggle of some sort. We must be alter

and ready to fight at all times. We must be ruthless and ready to cut down any single guards we encounter and hide their bodies without making a sound.

"Any questions?"

The four gathered their gear and left for the tower. The night was dark and the streets busy. The group did what they could to go unnoticed, staying to the shadows and back alleys.

When they approached the base of the tower, the tavern Salome and Joey had been at two nights earlier was bursting with guards. A chill ran down Joey's spine as the sounds from inside brought back the painful memory of that night.

She quickly shrugged it off and caught up with the others. Amil could tell the place bothered her, but he didn't say anything.

Within minutes, the group had reached the base of the tower. The streets surrounding were quietly deserted.

"Okay." Mulciber whispered to Amil. "Let's get on with it."

The boy tied a thin line to his belt and began to find hand holds in the old masonry. He began his climb with haste and precision. The line he carried hung behind him. Darak quickly dropped 100 feet of rope to the ground and tied one end to Amil's line.

"Hurry up boy." Mulciber whispered up at him.

Amil was climbing quite fast and Joey was worried he would be pressured into making

a mistake. A fall from that height would surely kill him. The boy climbed halfway before looking down at the group. Mulciber shewed him on.

He continued to the balcony roughly 80 feet in the air. With a quick flip of his leg, he was up and over the ledge, pulling the heavy knotted rope up.

Darak didnt have to wait for Mulciber's orders. He had pulled on the rope making sure Amil had tied it off, then he lurched upward. The large man easily pulled himself up the side of the building, walking the wall with ease. Within minutes, he had made it to the landing with Amil.

Mulciber turned to Joey. "Okay... your turn. Now hurry."

Joey took a deep breath and grabbed the rope. She pulled herself up with her arms as her booted feet found foot holds in the stone. The first 30 feet was easy, then she began to notice her arms tire. She looked down only to see Mulciber gather the last of the equipment and fling it over his shoulder. He was impatient and wanted to begin the climb before she was done. In a panic, Joey turned and began pulling harder to reach the top. Her arms almost numb with exhaustion.

"Come on." Amil whispered down to her. He held out his hand, but was no way strong enough to help her. Joey climbed past it and grabbed the ledge pulling herself over onto the balcony. She collapsed on the floor catching her breath. Darak looked at her with disgust for not having the strength to climb the wall with the same ease.

"What are you looking at." She snapped at him. "You just do your job and I'll do mine!"

The large man turned away from her and moved back to the door that led into the tower. He listened to it and tried the handle.

Just then Mulciber began climbing the rope.

The climb is exhausting and terrifying. Joey has never been so high up in the air with nothing beneath her. Her arms and legs tremble with the effort when Darak finally pulls her up the last few feet and she slumps against the inside parapet that surrounds the tower at this height. Amil has a look of utter delight on his face as he looks out over his city.

"This is how the hawks see it," he cries excitedly running around the upper balcony top look out on all sides.

Mulciber grunts with the effort of climbing himself but reaches out to catch the boy by his hair.

"Silence, you dolt!" he hisses in the lad's ear. "Do you want us to be caught right away?"

They all catch their breath while the stern warrior and the lithe young boy explore the balcony that runs right around the tower at this level. The wall of the tower is pierced with windows looking out in five directions and a wide door that faces due west, towards the setting sun, she supposes. The door itself is flimsy and not locked. Why lock out the sky?

At this level the interior of the tower is a single round room. In the center of the room is a circular staircase coming up from below. On the side farthest from the door is the entrance to another stair curving upwards.

“Wait here,” whispers Mulciber to Darak.
 “The guards are not due to come up here for an hour or more, but be on your guard. There are rooms above at the highest level I wish to examine. I will take the girl for protection in case anyone is up there.”

He motions Joey to ascend the smaller stairs ahead of him.

“Be careful,” he whispers in her ear, his beard tickling her skin.

Joey nods at his advise in her ear, and slowly pulls her sword moving towards the stairs like a loyal soldier. She looks up the circular staircase first, before beginning the cautious climb upwards.

She quickly looks back at Amil before her head disappeared above the ceiling. The child watches her as if the only one he loves is leaving. She gives him a quick wink for fun before her face passes beyond the ceiling.

Darak moves to the staircase descending below to watch for guards. "You could be less obvious." He tells Amil. "She's too old for you. Women like that only go for real men. Not children."

Amil glared at him without saying a word. He was only 12 and Josephine almost 20. He knew the warrior was right, but he didnt want to admit it.

The stone steps turned about as she crept up them and she noticed a glowing greenish light coming from above. Looking around the curve of the newel post while keeping her head low, she could see that the floor above was outfitted as a study of sorts. The room looked empty but something on a table out of her sight was definitely glowing enough to dimly illuminate the entire space. She paused to listen but hear no sound of movement or breathing, other than from Mulciber below her.

“What is it?” he whispered, stepping up close behind her on the steps.

She slid aside in the narrow space to let him see for himself, and he nodded.

“As much as I would like to know what he is doing up there, I think you are right to be cautious,” he mouthed softly. “It is clearly magical and our presence in the room might alert him to us.

“Let us descend.”

Back down in the room they had come from, the warrior and the boy were lying on the floor, peeking down the stair well to the lower level.

“Any sign of activity?” asked Mulciber.

“It only goes down to the next level,” reported Darak, jumping effortlessly to his feet. “There seems to be two doors and another set of stairs from what I can see. I can hear a noise, muffled, but definitely coming from down there.”

Mulciber and Joey approached the stairs and listened carefully themselves. There was

indeed a noise, a rhythmic rocking noise and the occasional grunt and small cry in a different voice. Joey remembered what Captain Burroughs had said about a hiding hole at an upper level of the tower suitable for an illicit fucking.

She told the others what it might be. Amil looked sick. Mulciber and Darak looked calculating, as they turned the event over in their heads trying to extract the most benefit from the situation.

“Do we wait for them to finish, or do we go past them, or do we subdue them while they are distracted?” the warrior asked. Mulciber looked to Joey for her opinion.

Joey thinks to herself for a second. "I dont think we have much time to wait. Time is not on our side. Who knows what may lay ahead to slow our descent. I say we neutralize them."

She looks to Mulciber for his final approval.

The old man nodded his head in agreement.

“Keep it quiet and make it quick,” he whispered.

Darak stirred and rose on tiptoe. He glanced aside at Joey and winked.

“It's you and me, then, kid,” he spoke quietly with a gravelly tone that sent quivers up her belly. He slid a long knife from its sheath on his belt and started down the stone steps to the lower level.

“Sounds like there's two of them” he whispered in her ear and her flesh pimped with goose bumps at the intimacy and terror

of the moment. “When I shove the door open there will be a moment when they think they've been caught by their buddies. They'll be embarrassed and jumpy, but won't be thinking fight right away. That's the moment we take them. I'll go for the one on the right hand side you go for the one on the left. Get that pig sticker out.”

As they approached the two doors at the top of the next flight of steps they could hear the noises much more clearly now. Rhythmic thumping and squeaking mixed in with grunts, groans and sudden little cries of mingled pain and pleasure. Whoever they were, they were very busy in there. It was clearly coming from the right hand door and Darak motioned her to stand to his left as he steadied himself.

With a quick nod, he raised his booted left foot and kicked the door just above the lock with all his weight. The door flew open with a bang and they could see the tawdry scene inside. A large man with a fat belly had his pants down around his ankle. A younger man, barely out of boyhood, was bent forward over the tall back of a chair. His pants were down as well and his shirt had been tossed aside in some earlier part of the encounter. The big man was fully engaged in sodomizing the boy, clearly to both of their satisfaction. He was holding the lad's narrow hips and in the process of thrusting his fat cock into his boy's buttocks as the door sprang open.

“You'll have to wait yer turn,” he growled, barely paying any intention to the intrusion. The boy glanced over his shoulder at them, shame-faced at first but then puzzled and then terrified at the sight of their drawn

weapons. Joey watched these emotions play out on the lad's face in the first second or so and then realized that Darak was already launching himself at the rutting couple.

The warrior's long blade sank into the big man's gut from the back, aimed up and into his liver. The fat man screamed in agony, but the big fighter reached around and grasped his face with a gloved hand, clamping the scream shut. Blood spurted everywhere, and the boy mewled in terror as the sizable erection he had had a moment ago shriveled to nothing.

"Get him!" hissed Darak at Joey. "Make it quick!"

The entire encounter caught Joey staring at them. She didn't expect this, nor did she expect the brutal response from Darak. Neither of the two guards did anything to wrong her, so she was not filled with the blood curling rage that usually fuels her into battle.

At Darak's order, Joey sprung forward bringing her curved falchion sword down across the back of the boy's neck. His head fell to the floor with a thug as his body slid over the side of the chair. Blood poured onto the floor from his neck. The boy's facial expression frozen.

She stood there motionless staring at what she had just done. She had just murdered a young boy for Mulciber. The thought made her sick.

"Hey!" Darak snapped at her in a hushed tone. "Secure the room and watch the door. Snap out of it."

Joey nodded and moved across the room to the other door putting her sword away as she moved. Darak headed back to the stairs and motioned Amil and Mulciber down.

Joey listened to the door but didn't hear anything. She wanted to look back at the dead boy, but dared not.

Joey motioned the old man and the boy to come down the stairs and turned back for see Darak covering up the worst of the blood stains by moving carpets around in the room. It would not hide the signs of violence if anyone looked closely, but it might not look too obvious if someone just looked into the room quickly. The two bodies he dragged behind some furniture and draped with a blanket, tucking the boy's head between the big man's legs as he pulled the cover over them. As he finished he tossed her a small purse that she caught automatically. It jingled with coins.

"They won't be needing it any more," he said as he stuffed another, larger purse inside his shirt.

In a gentler tone he continued, as Mulciber quickly searched the other rooms at this level:

"You're in it now. This is just the beginning. Before this night is out we will kill again and there's a good chance they will kill us. So don't get all jittery about the blood. It's what we do. We fight. We kill. And tomorrow, if we live, we celebrate and forget."

The old wizard had finished his search of the rooms and motioned them towards the stairs.

“I want to get as far down as we can tonight,” he said, “and find a good place to hide. In the lowest level if we can penetrate that far. The door will not open until tomorrow night and as soon as we take what we have come to find, Enas Yorl will know. If we strike too early he will stop the door from opening.

“Quietly now. Darak on point and Joey at the rear to guard our flank. “

And so they went, the big warrior with his bloody knife drawn, the wizard and the boy close behind him, and the barbarian girl at the last, her mind in turmoil and the blood of a boy she had just murdered sticky and drying on her flesh.

Down and down they crept along the winding spiral stair. At each level, they paused and listened. More than once they heard men laughing and gaming and arguing, and pressed themselves back into deep shadows, but it was the middle of the night on the last night of a long boring watch schedule. The guards were all intent on leaving their confinement the next day and no one expected to find any danger in a place that was the most guarded place in the city. Like shadows they drifted down the steps, floor by floor until they came at last to the lowest level, deep beneath the level of the street.

It stank down here. Old piss and shit and ancient terror ground into the walls and the dirt floor leaving a miasma of dread. Faint cries of pain and hopelessness echoed from the side corridors as Mulciber cast about, seeming to actually sniff the air.

“I have no map of this level,” he whispered, “but what we seek is down here, according to the information Joey gained. We have pressed our luck and come this far undetected. I am well pleased with our progress. Now we must find a place to hide for the rest of the night and throughout the day tomorrow.”

Amil found them a spot. An ancient cellar with broken barrels that must once have held wine. Rats scuttled away as they moved inside and Darak nodded in satisfaction that there was a second entrance, with a rotted half askew door.

“They cannot simply bolt us in if they find us,” he said.

“Good,” agreed Mulciber. “We can hide here. I can use no magic within these walls without alerting Yorl to my presence, but Amil can set tiny snares that will let us know if anyone is coming too close. And then we should rest. Sleep as much as you can. There will be much action tomorrow night.”

The boy slipped away into the darkness to build his snares and Joey found a place to lay down. After a short while the powerful body of the warrior came close to her, a faint deepening of the blackness that surrounded her. She could smell his sweat and oiled leather armor and the tang of blood that had stained both of them.

“You did well,” he breathed. “Do you care for company? We must be silent, but not necessarily alone.”

The warrior rogue didn't want to be alone. She hid her fear well causing Darak to ask, but she was relieved he did.

She was amazed that they had been able to travel the distance they had without being discovered. From the tallest rooms to the deepest below the street, they would wait and rest.

Joey was worried the bodies of the two men they had killed earlier. It wouldn't be long before someone discovers them and a search of the tower is conducted. But maybe more concerning is how easily they managed to make it this far without seeing anyone else. Where were they?

She nodded at the offer for him to join her. The large wooden barrel made their positioning uncomfortable, but it was a good hiding spot. The curvature of the barrel allowed her to lean back into the frame, while Darak did the same on the opposite side. Their bodies touching against each other due to the cramped space. The keg was roughly 8 feet long and 5 feet tall. The back was rotted away allowing them access. Amil found another across the small room while Mulciber disappeared somewhere.

Joey welcomed the security of the large man if they were discovered and had to fight. The thought of being left alone in this tower still terrifies her. A fear she would never share.

The two looked at each other a few times, but kept quiet. Her eyes wandered up and down his body stopping at his growth below his belt. She wondered what it looked

like. Based on the size of his legs, she knew it would have the girth she liked, but then closed her eyes in order to change her thoughts. This was not the time to be wondering about being fucked by him.

In the deep gloom of their underground hide-out, Joey couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw Darak's manhood stir as she looked at him, and the tension between them was powerful. Despite their possible desires, however, she knew there was no chance of any real encounter here, not with Mulciber and Amil so close. Indeed the thought of the lovelorn boy's disappointment when she chose a man over him made her squirm a little. He would be hurt, and she wondered if she might offer him a consolation poke just to lessen the blow, and then thought that was probably not a good idea either. Men could be so weird when it came to possessing a woman. Instead, she consoled herself with warm images of Salome and Rafar, the giant Nubian who had possessed her so thoroughly only a few nights hence and let her go willingly.

As she drifted into sleep, she wondered again about their luck descending the stairs. It was very late at night, and it was the last night before the guards went off duty, so there was some justification that the watch would be lax, but perhaps Mulciber had abilities beyond what he had shown? He said he could not work magic within the tower, but what might he have done before they entered? Her mind twisted and turned over this and she did not notice when she finally slept.

She came awake with a sick lurch in her belly as a hand clamped over her mouth. She

started and was held still by a powerful grip. The moment of panic passed and she realized that it was Darak who held her, and she nodded her understanding that he was keeping her silent and not harming her. He released his grip and with drew his hand, stroking her long neck and flat chest as he did so. When she made no attempt to withdraw he continued his quick exploration of her body, moving his hand down her waist, across her ass and around her hips to rest at last on her belly. He pulled her suddenly into his groin and ground his manhood against her buttocks for a moment of two before releasing her and standing upright in a fluid show of strength and agility.

Mulciber drew the four of them into a tight huddle in the abandoned cellar, whispering very quietly.

“It is perhaps four hours now until the doorway is opened. Time to get into position.

“I expect they must have discovered the bodies we left upstairs. It will put them on alert, but the very fact that we have remained quiet and hidden for so long after the murder will also raise doubts in their minds. Were the men killed by intruders? If so, where are they? Or was it a murder done for jealousy and revenge? It will be well known that the two men were having sex, and unlikely that the boy had only one partner in this miserable den of iniquity.

“Nevertheless, they will all be on heightened watch, if for no other reason than to guard their own wicked hides.

“Quickly and silently now, we will split into two groups: Darak and Amil will cover our retreat while Joey and I enter the hidden temple.”

Even as he is telling them his plans, things change. A burst of noise comes along the deserted corridor down which they have been hiding and they sense a flare of light in the same direction. The loud mixture of men's voices comes to them, but not raised in anger, or plotting a search pattern. The voices have the tone of an assembly for some reason or another.

Mulciber flicks a finger of command and Amil scuttles out of their cellar, creeping along the corridor outside the door. He is back in a few moments.

“The guards. They're gathering in the open area. We're trapped.”

One by one, the thieves put their head round the doorway of the cellar to confirm what Amil has seen. The long corridor of empty doors, which are starting to look more like prison cells than cellars in the faint light, opens out into a wide area at the bottom of the steps down from the ground level. There are heavy wide pillars there to support the roof, and between the pillars the guards are gathering, a collection of hideously dangerous thugs and cut-throats.

But they don't seem angry or apprehensive. If anything they seem in a good mood, as if waiting something of entertainment or benefit to them.

“What do we do now?” whispers Amil, his eyes wide with terror.

Joey looked to Mulciber for answers. She was just as scared as Amil, but hid her anxiety much better.

"What do we do? They'll see us if we attempt to reach the temple. I think we should forget the sword and make a break for it once the doors are opened. We've pushed our luck to this point." She told the old man.

Mulciber and the others looked at the girl in shock. They had never heard her speak in such defeatist tones. Darak said nothing, but didn't like what he heard either.

The old man grabbed Joey's arm and snapped at her in hushed tones. "We are not leaving without that sword. We've come too far to give up now." He released his grip with an angry push and pointed his finger at her face. "And if I hear you speak like that again, I'll see that you remain trapped here in the temple."

She looked away and got control of herself. She glanced back towards the guards. There was too many for them to defeat and they had chosen a dead end to hide in.

She turned back to Mulciber. "What do you suggest we do?"

"For now we keep quiet as mice," the old man breathed in her ear, sinking down onto the stone flagged floor. He pulled a small mirror from a hidden pocket and extended it carefully at floor level into the passageway that lead directly to where the guards were milling about, cursing and laughing gruffly at one another.

Even though she could not make out individual conversations, Joey could gauge by the tone that the men were puzzled and a bit anxious about what was happening.

After several terrifying moments of waiting to be discovered at any second, the guards went quiet as one and the temperature in the dark cellar level dropped several degrees. A horrible fear descended on Joey and she shivered uncontrollably. Even Mulciber stiffened as he watched what was happening in the mirror.

"Good evening," the voice was soft and sibilant as if the lips that spoke were not fully human. The words were drawn out and whispered directly into the mind of everyone present.

"The time has come for you to leave my employee for another month," Enas Yorl continued, for who else could it be? "But this cycle has been marred -- by murder!" The sudden angry screech made everyone jump and some of them men in the dark cellar whimpered a little. Joey didn't blame them, She was close to peeing in her own pants with terror and she could not see the mage, except in her mind's eye. To be standing right in front of him, as they guards must be, would be horrific.

She glanced aside at Mulciber and saw something just briefly reflected in his tiny mirror, a glimpse of something dark and . . . writhing, standing out in the open area in front of the assembled men.

"At least one of you is a murderer," Yorl continued and Joey wanted to scream and

stick her fingers in her ears to stop herself from hearing his horrible soft voice.

"Before you can leave tonight, you will stand forth, one by one, and swear on the altar of Yog Sothoth that it was not you that killed the men at the top of the tower. Only those that swear to this may leave the tower."

There was brief angry rumbling at this, silenced in an instant by Yorl's sharp hiss of warning.

"Step forward, now, Captains first, and swear your innocence in the name of my dark master."

She heard shuffling movement and then a deep voice spoke out.

"I am Varik of Asgard and I swear I did not kill the men in the tower."

A slight pause and then Yorl's hissing voice.

"Good! You may leave, Varik. Here is your purse. The gate is open. Do not return."

One by one, some with bluster others in faint whispers, the men stepped forth and swore their innocence. Each the horrible wizard dismissed after a tense moment of evaluation.

Mulciber levered himself to his feet, careful to not make a sound. He pulled the others close to him in the Stygian darkness and breathed his words in their ears, so close they could feel his beard against their skin.

"The moment is upon us. No chance for secrecy anymore. When he has dismissed the last of them, he will know we are still

hiding and gods only knows what he will set on us in the dark. He does not worry that his men are leaving one by one, and I expect he has other guardians far more awful than these men that will be let loose once he is certain only we are left.

"We must strike now, while one or two of his men remain and he is still questioning them.

"Are you ready?"

Her long bow was too unwieldy a weapon to use effectively in the dark and narrow confines of the ancient dungeon complex. Instead she drew her falchion, a gift from her father at her first blood, and tested the heft of it as they gathered themselves for the fight.

The long blade, weighted to deliver powerful slashing blows, felt reassuring in her grip and she surged forward with Darak and Mulciber as they moved quickly but silently down the short passageway toward the last of the tower guards. As they came closer to the light of burning torches she glanced aside at Amil. The boy looked terrified, but he gripped his own weapon, a curved dagger, with grim purpose and nodded at her in acknowledgment of their impending struggle.

Darak was as swift and fierce and silent as a panther. He swept into the open space where the last of Enas Yorl's guards stood waiting to be questioned by their master and before they even knew he was there, he had cut one down with his long sword, slicing into his neck so that a spray of arterial blood soaked the walls and rotted stone columns.

And then the fight was on in earnest.

Only three of the guards remained in the room and Darak's bold attack left two. But two more heard the cry of the dying man and raced back down the stairs to quell the intrusion. Darak engaged the two fighters already in the lower level and indicated the other two running down the stairs.

“Buy the old man the time he needs to face Yorl,” the warrior cried at Joey and Alim. And then he was too busy to pay them any more heed.

The two guards descending the stairs looked at the girl and the boy, relaxing visibly at the sight of their opponents.

Both men were massive, with corded muscles and wielding broad scimitars. They stalked towards the young invaders and presented their weapons. Each was no doubt a formidable fighter, but in the years of being tower guards they had got used to being intimidating and had not been a real fight for a long time. Joey, the Desert Hawk, came from a fierce warrior clan herself and she had learned long ago that the only defense was a swift and certain offence.

She leaped forwards, surprising the first man with her speed and grace, sliding easily under his wide swing and stabbing her blade up into the soft spot in his armpit. The steel sank and the fellow screamed in pain and rage. She tore her blade out and twisted it as it came, rendering his weapon arm useless. His big sword clattered to the ground.

The second fighter had advanced on Amil, certain that his fellow would quickly subdue

a girl. The boy was not as fast as Joey and did not have the reach of her longer weapon. He stabbed at the man, who laughed and slashed back, slicing a long furrow in the boy's flank.

Spinning away from her disarmed opponent, Joey slashed at the other guard's undefended flank. The razor sharp blade of the falchion sliced through his boiled leather cuirass but the strength of her cut was turned aside by his armor. The fighter roared in anger and surprise at this unexpected attack and turned towards her. Amil took advantage of the distraction to drop down, well under the man's swinging sword and stab him in the foot with his dagger. A few more moments of thrust and cut between them and Joey managed to deliver a round-house slice to the back of his leg that hamstringed the lout and sent him sprawling to the blood-soaked flagstones. Dancing out of the fallen fighter's range, she looked around.

Darak had downed one of his foes and was involved in a duel with the other in which the blades flew so fast they looked like streaks of liquid steel in the firelight.

Beyond him, Mulciber and Yorl faced one another on the steps that lead up to the dark temple of Yog Sothoth. Neither man moved, but the strain between them was palpable. Smoke oozed from Yorl's cowed form and bright sparks splintered the blackness around Mulciber. Some awful struggle she could not see was taking place between them and she had no way of knowing who was winning.

Something moved in the folds of Enas Yorl's dark robe and she thought she saw a tentacle

like that of a sea creature rather than a hand emerge for the sleeve. Mulciber grunted in pain and stepped back. It seemed the struggle was too much for him, facing the powerful warlock in his own sanctum.

Freed from combat for the moment, in a more open space than the cells where they had slept the night, Joey drew forth her bow and nocked an arrow. With the speed of a life-long huntress, she pulled back, sighted for a fleeting second along the shaft and let loose.

Thunk! The missile pierced the dark wizard's cowl fully in the center of whatever foul shaped head it might hide. A cry of agony and despair rocked the very foundations of the tower and Yorl staggered back.

Quick as a cobra, Mulciber struck, hammering home his momentary advantage. A shower of brilliant sparks emanated from his finger tips and set the other wizard's robes on fire. Yorl cried aloud again and retreated further, stepping back into the shadowed space behind him.

The two magic users went into the temple itself and Joey followed behind, stringing another arrow as she tried to spy what was happening in the gloom beyond.

A ball of pure spinning light leaped into being above their heads at Mulciber's command and she could see the true awfulness of the shrine to the outer god. Her eyes felt drawn to the horror of the effigy carved above the black altar and she felt a stream of warm piss wet her pants as a shaft of pure terror invaded the core of her being.

This was a thing that no person could see and stay sane. It gibbered in her mind and slobbered at her soul in a way that made the rape by Captain Burroughs seem a lover's caress in comparison. She lowered her bow, overwhelmed by what lay before them.

“No!” screamed Amil, rushing past her, dagger raised as if he would cut the evil wizard down himself. With a gesture, Yorl sent the boy sprawling across the floor blood spurting from eyes and nose.

The attack on the gentle youth aroused her anger and her rage gave her the strength to raise her weapon again. Without thought she fired across the foul altar, taking Yorl in the chest with a shaft that pierced him fully, the steel tip jutting a hand span beyond his back, black ichor dripping on the stone and hissing where it fell.

Mulciber had taken the moment she and Amil had given him to marshal his forces. He spoke aloud in a voice that seemed to crack the very rocks around them. Words of command. Words of power. And with each utterance the dark wizard shrank back and down, growing smaller as his robes billowed around him and collapsed to the floor. At the last moment something foul and slimy that seemed to have too many appendages scuttled away into the darkness behind the altar.

Joey made to chase it.

“No!” gasped Mulciber. “You do not have the strength and I am at my very end. We must let him escape for now and find what we have come for.”

Darak pounded up the steps into the small temple, bleeding from several wounds with his bright blade soaked in the blood of his enemies. He looked around and nodded in satisfaction at the others.

“Help me find it,” groaned Mulciber, bending over in pain and exhaustion. “The sword. Calad Bolg. It is here and we must find it.”

They searched frantically, even Amil staggering back onto his feet, shaking with fear and pain like a fever. But no sign could they find of the blade they had risked so much to fetch.

“We must go, old man,” grated Darak after several fruitless minutes. “The door is open and the new guards will be here soon. We cannot face them. And Yorl is no doubt spinning another web to trap us as we speak.”

Mulciber moaned in defeat and nodded reluctantly.

“Very well,” he said, placing a hand on the tall warrior's shoulder and leaning heavily upon him. “Lead the way out, Darak. We have failed.”

As they turned to leave, Joey's eye caught on a rivulet of Amil's blood from where he had been cast down and wounded by the wizard's power. It had seeped across the flagstone floor and then vanished, dripping down into a wide crack, almost unnoticeable in the Stygian gloom. She stepped aside and knelt by the crack. Her fingers quickly traced the outline of a long narrow rectangle of stone inset into the floor.

Her heart leaped in her mouth as she took Amil's curved dagger and slid it into the crack.

“What is it, girl?” called Mulciber, turning back just at the exit.

She didn't answer but used the wide strong blade of the boy's knife to lever up the edge of the stone. As soon as she could lift it high enough to work her fingers underneath the lip of the stone, she lifted it fully up, standing it on a short edge. The stone was about a pace and half in length. Beneath it, in a depression in the very bedrock on which the tower rested was a leather wrapped bundle that could only be a sword.

She snatched it up and let the stone fall back with a crash.

“I have it,” she cried in triumph raising the bundle for the others to see and then raced to join them. Was she mistaken, or did she see a flash of rage on Mulciber's face as she caught up to them? He reached for the sword in its wrappings but she pushed on by him and raced up the steps beyond.

“Come on!” she cried over her shoulder. “We have what we came for.”