

The best way to kill someone for revenge is an intensely personal choice. Each of the four times I've done it over the seventy eight years of my unnaturally long youth has been different. The first time I had lied to myself until I believed that my motivation was a desire to prevent the child-murdering bastard from doing it again, and so I dispatched him with a knife in the dark as painlessly as I could. Despite what he deserved, and I wanted, he felt no pain. After that, the guard captain who had silently countenanced his superior's despicable practices had been more violent. While I'd intended another simple slaying, he'd caught some inkling of my intent. The resultant sword fight had left half of Chagres on fire. I don't know if the captain had bled to death before the building collapsed on him. With the wounds he'd given me, I hadn't stayed long enough to find out. But as the cold nights went by on the blasted plains of Na, and wind whipped sleet scored the rocks of my shelter, I tried my best to hope he'd gone to his end painlessly. With his aorta nicked, it would have been close.

We'd fallen through the roof together, when the licking flames had gotten to the dry ceiling beams. Even before the shale had given way underneath our feet, we had been hopping about as tendrils of sooty flame reached through the tiles. Then there had been a terrible crash, flailing blades as we tumbled, and somehow I'd gone through a wall. The few people who'd rushed from their beds to see the horror had helped me away from the blaze. They thought I'd just been a victim of the fire, and had time to save my blade and nothing else. That was a common mentality in the city of Chagres. When all who remembered me would have died, I hoped to return there.

The third one had been simple if the hardest. That thing should never have existed under starlit skies, and the touch of the sun burned its flesh. I'd initially gone hunting it out of ideological reasons, but when it killed the priest who was helping me everything became personal. Still, demon, monster, or nameless aberration, it presented me a curiously morally transparent victim in the end. It was all hate and spite, without the capacity for mercy. After dismembering it and dragging the cursing pieces into the light so the purifying sun could burn it away like an infection, I'd actually felt some form of satisfaction. That was the only time I've been able to let go of the built up tension from a murder easily. I walked away without any regrets at all.

In the Forrest of Mad Gods, when I crouched over dying Lemora, I knew that there was going to be no similar purging catharsis. Oh, she certainly deserved it more. The whispering souls of her victims had formed a shrieking, ethereal vortex that raged about her head. Though the occult winds stirred neither paper nor the expanding pool of blood that spread from her head wound like a crimson halo, to me it raged like a great sandstorm, confined to the dark room. One by one she tried to bind them to her and knit her severed veins with their power. Each time she pulled one from the tortured mass I would sever her bonds on it, and let the poor dead thing go on to its next life.

If there is any justice in this world, a thing I've come to doubt, Lemora would find her next life a hell of her own making. She knew that as well, and it must have driven her to the desperation to keep living, even as soul after stolen soul of her victims I liberated from her forever. Like an infection, she took a very long time to die, and I stayed with her to the very end. I cut apart dark magic and necromancy, and the gifts of demons she'd bargained with for extra hours. Killing her didn't take half as long as making sure it would stick. When I finally left her den of sin, horrors, and simple filth I felt as dirty as her dark powers had been.

As is my custom, developed from the incident with the guard captain, I poured oil over the building until it erupted like a volcano at the first touch of a match. The grime encrusted walls had sucked the oil up, becoming nearly explosive in their inflammability. Dirty thatch vaporized as a pillar of flame roared up to the stars. After the windows started imploding, the suction very nearly took me in to join

the dark sorceress's fate as the hungry flames greedily devoured air. I clung to a tree bent almost parallel to the ground and spat bond breaking spells into the blaze, feeling with my magical senses the bound vortex of poor souls straining against the dead magus' prison. It took nine emerald counter magics to break the anchor fetters, and a tenth more powerful than all the rest combined to crack the thing itself like a necromantic egg. Then the evil thing crumpled, and its hatchling blew away into the night as the dead fled that horrible place.

By dawn the fire was gone, and bone white ashes lay in a pile on the ground. I poked through them until noon, ignoring the heat that blistered skin through my boots. I've been the victim of obsession enough times to realize that my guilt for not recognizing Lemora's debauchery earlier was threatening to consume me. It had to be stopped before it drove me mad. So I ensured that there were no more captured victims bound to soulstones or minor charms to power her devices. The fire had taken care of her blasphemous books. All that remained was to canvass the pile of detritus until I was sure I had given the least of mercies to all of her victims, the freedom from this world that should have been guaranteed with death. It was partially for me, so I could turn my back on this incident as well.

That mercy did not come easily.

Morning breezes blew away the cinders. Underneath were seared flagstones of the floor, set in the dirt as a foundation. I pried them up one by one, and hauled them each fifty yards to the edge of the Ascending Veils Bluff. At the bottom of that was the chaotic river Meander, that stormed down its ravine path with mad intensity completely at odds with the name. Lemora's magic both required its chaos and was undone by immersion in it, a dangerous dichotomy that was typical of the dark powers. I heaved the stones of her house into the river and watched them sink. It took me the rest of the day, and I slept well that night.

At dawn I searched the hole because I had to be sure. There was an astonishing density of insect life in the dirt, and every time I turned the earth with my sword grubs burrowed out of sight in mass quantities. While I'm not terribly fond of such things since they remind me of tombs and rotting flesh, things that go hand in hand with the nefarious entities I've devoted my life to stopping, I'm not afraid of them either. My superstitions are under tight enough check that they don't cloud my opinions of the little beasties. They're as natural as death should be and make sure the living don't keep their valuable nutrients from the next thing that needs them. Still, I don't like them. I searched the area extra thoroughly as penance for not catching her evil earlier. Had I not, I would have missed the small metal medallion that had been hidden under the hearth.

My sword, Agate, which I may as well describe now, has slightly more than three feet of curved blade. The metal is some exotic mixture of steel, crystal, and jade the color of deep sea ice bobbing along in ship-murdering icebergs. The man who sold it to me didn't know where it was from, who'd made it, or what it had been made for, and only consultation with several far flung metallurgists enabled me to learn the components at all. Metallurgists aren't commonly sword masters, and none of them could explain the shape better than the material. It's too fat to be a saber, almost too long to be a katana, and on the back, shortly below the point, is a wicked barb that makes thrusting almost useless. Well, it thrusts just fine, but removing the sword afterwards is somewhat tricky. I keep it because I took a strange liking to it, which I justify to myself with the fact that the weapon is basically indestructible. When I was trapped in the Frost Whore's caves to die, my first failed escape attempt involved me whacking the granite walls of my prison with it for eight hours a day for nearly three weeks. The blade wasn't even scratched. Now, free of that place, I liked a weapon that never broke or dulled, and considered that reliability enough overcome the impracticality of the shape. (If you're curious, the

granite walls showed about as much result from my attempt to dig through as the blade. I gave that up, fashioned a rope from my hair, and tried to use that to climb out. That didn't work either, but the Frost Whore had been watching via magic and came in person to taunt me. I pegged her in the face with a rock and broke a few of her teeth. That evening she mispronounced the words of the spell that kept my own magic in check. I noticed, cast "Boil Water" on the icy bars over the waste hole, and escaped through there. You're not getting details beyond that because I'm still trying to repress those memories.)

My blade sank into the packed dirt easily but hit something several feet down. When I withdrew it, there was a medallion dangling from the rear barb. Several feet of braided cord held a dozen pea-sized beads. It was too long to be a necklace but didn't look sturdy enough to be some kind of belt. Nor was there a clasp. The cord seemed to be fastened to itself with a oval of metal roughly the weight of a dram coin. At first it looked like tarnished silver. I stared at it for a minute, trying to figure out if it was magical, and concluded that on closer inspection it reminded me more of verdigrised brass. Several minutes more study reminded me of rusted metal. None of these substances had any business resembling each other. Perhaps the filth that encrusted it would explain the confusion. I put it aside and finished my search of the premises. There was nothing that required further attention.

Taking the little medallion, I returned to the gorge that held the Meander. Descending to a point where I had access to a small pool, I carefully rinsed the thing off. The cord disintegrated almost instantly on contact with water, assuring me that it was arcane in nature, and the beads vanished one by one like soap bubbles. As each one vanished there was a silent sigh of relief, and a sensation of a lost wanderer finally finding a way home. Only the metal piece remained in my hand. Deep relief hit me too, and I was very glad I'd taken such care.

Inspecting the medallion closer confused me even more. Now that it was clean, the uncertainty of its composition was markedly greater. I began to wonder if it was rusted gold, which as far as I knew couldn't happen. Finally deciding there was no way of telling, I put it down and carefully worked up my strongest spell of bond breaking. I didn't really know what I would be dealing with, so I made sure I had plenty of room for a melee if there was something in there that didn't want to be released before unleashing it. With blade in hand, I shaped the magic and unleashed it with a cry of "Breaking of a thousand locks!" in the ancient tongue of the gods and their primordial pregenerators.

No demons appeared. What did was the ghost of a little old man, bent with age, whose pale beard reached almost to his belt. He looked very solid, escape for the occasional spray from the river that passed through him effortlessly. I hit him with a demon banishment on general principle, but it did nothing. Moderately certain now he was what he looked like, I inspected the little ghost. His bald head was wrinkled with age and spotted here and there. His clothing was very simple, farmer's boots under a knee length tunic. I'd seen thousands of peasants dressed just like that tilling fields across half he known world. The old man stared at me in confusion, and then looked around bewildered. He had the attitude of someone just awoken. That was pleasant if odd, because normally souls who get shoved into soulstones do so kicking and screaming. This one must have gone willingly.

"Who're you?" I asked, pointing my sword at him.

"Who're you?" he countered. The language he used was archaic, halfway between the colloquial tongue I used natively and the old tongues I cast spells in. Between the two, I could figure out his meaning, and reply in kind.

That didn't mean I was going to play the 'no, I asked you first' game. Besides, courtesy was with him. I

should have introduced myself. “My name is Stark Vision of Inevitability,” I said, which was true enough. “I just slew the black witch Lemora, who had been practicing soul entanglement. Were you one of her bound prisoners?”

“I was bound, but not by her, nor was I a prisoner,” he replied. His voice was firm. “I went willingly to serve my children. Our farm had been the subject of poxes for two decades, and when I was about to meet my end I volunteered to be placed into this charm so that my influence could protect them. I remember being placed in a shrine of honor, and watching generations of my descendants pass under my eye. When the poxes vanished, I ceased my watch, and slept in the medallion. It's presence should have protected my family while I slumbered.”

That rang noble if it was true. “Where did you live?”

“The kingdom of Aphor on the banks of the Mer.”

That meant nothing to me. “Did you know of the Realm?” I asked, referring to the biggest government currently in the world. The old man shook his head. “What about the Shogunate?”

“I know that. It was the empire of the south,” he replied.

The Shogunate had fallen just shy of eight hundred years ago. Lemora may have been several hundred years old, given how she had used her powers to remain young and vital, but had certainly not been around long enough to see that. “Well, old ghost, it's likely that at some point your medallion left the farm of your children. It came to the possession of the witch, and you've been protecting her domicile for at least a century. But now she's dead, and I'm going to send you on. Be peaceful in the next life.”

“But what of my children?”

“Never heard of them, nor the land of Aphor. Also, you're in the east now, so if the Shogunate was to your south, you're at least a few thousand miles off. By now they're either gone, or there's so many of them they're doing well.” I considered how to send this one on. If he'd been put in the medallion willingly, he was bound to Creation via fetters of his own making. Smashing them with magic would be profoundly rude at best, and basically murder from another point of view. I was all right with that if necessary but would rather not.

“How long has passed?”

“A millenia. Maybe more, maybe a little less.”

“You have not heard of them?”

“I don't know who to hear of, for you've not told me your name,” I pointed out.

The old man considered this. “My apologies, Stark Vision of Inevitability. I- I am-” he paused, and thought long and hard. “I do not remember my name, nor who my family is. A shame, because I cannot protect them now.”

“In that case, may I send you to the next life?” I asked politely. “With your permission, I can make it both quick and painless.”

"I'm dead, what fear do I have of pain?" he replied, amused.

"If that was the case, I wouldn't have had to kill Lemora as desperately," I replied sadly. His words showed the naive assumption that things were the way they should be. If only he had been right.

"Lemora was the black witch?" the old man asked. "The one you slew?"

"Yes," I said. "The world is a better place now that she is gone."

"Son, I may have been dead a long time, but I lived for a long time before that. I know a hollow statement when I hear one," he replied.

I looked down at my blade blankly. There wasn't a trace of blood on it. There never was. I don't know if it drank the blood it spilled, or the same magic that rendered it impervious cleaned it. The result was the same, that it looked oddly pure for something I'd used to kill so many people with. "She was my wife for a time."

"Oh. I'm sorry, my son." he said sadly. His voice seemed honestly grieved.

"It happens," I said, which was another hollow, stupid thing to say. "But it is done. I'm undoing all her works, and the other souls bound to you are gone now." I dragged my mind back to business.

"Other souls?" he asked curiously, noticing the tactless change of topic.

"Your medallion was linked to a score, perhaps more, bound souls. I freed them before yours."

"Would you look in on my family after I am gone, then? See if you can find them, and attend them as best you can. It will be a simple, healthy work, with little blood spilling. A fine end to a bad business," he requested politely.

His words made sense. My previous plans for a next step involved either alcohol induced unconsciousness for a while, or screaming my rage to an uncaring sky. Helping people, especially descendants of someone freed from Lemora's clutches, would give me a nice closure, and end this affair charitably. That would be good. I wanted to have killed her for good reasons, not because I was furious that she'd lied to me for so long. Maybe this would swing the balance.

"I would be happy to, though without your name I have no idea who they might be," I told him honestly.

"When the wizard placed me in the medallion, he said my love for my family would bind me to them, keeping me on this world. Perhaps-"

"Absolutely not," I interrupted, spitting vehemence with my words. The old man stopped, startled by my sudden rudeness. I took a deep breath and forced myself calm. "My apologies. I will not use the dead. I understand you were bound willingly, but I will never countenance such things, nor utilize their effects. When I leave here, you will be free to leave this world."

"What if I refuse your offer?" he asked pointedly.

"I would rather you go willingly," I replied levelly.

"So it's like that."

"Indeed."

"Very well. If I go willingly, will you do your best to find my descendants and give them such aid as you are able?" he offered. "Promise me you will make your best effort, and I will ask nothing else of you."

That was reasonable. All things considered, I really didn't want to send him away the hard way. It was vaguely distasteful and smacked of disrespect for the dead. Since respecting the dead was half the reason I did what I did, it would be counter to my principles. "Very well," I accepted. "Let me think a moment."

He nodded, and stood silently while I sat on a rock to consider. It takes a ghost no effort to stand, so I didn't bother to invite him to sit next to me. My blade was still in my hand, and the weight of it was comforting. I considered it and the ghost.

"Sir, do you remember what you looked like in youth? If you could show me that, perhaps it might help," I suggested, going over the abilities of ghosts. Most of them are bound to their form at the moment of death, but all the ghosts I met personally had died in violence. The rules might be different for ones who go peacefully.

It seemed to be the case. The old man's form rippled, and grew indistinct like he had retreated into fog. Then it clarified. He was taller, well formed, and majestic of face. His body was immaculate, and his skin was flawless. Before his eyes had been milky with age, but now were a piercing blue under thick black brows. His beard vanished, a foot of thick black hair tumbled from the back of his head, and his body projected almost tangible vitality. Clearly, the old man had a high opinion of what he'd looked like as a younger man.

"My," I observed dryly. "I'll go looking in the temples of the gods of heroes immediately."

The ghost glanced down at himself and then smiled. "The foible of age is a rose tinted memory," he excused himself.

"It seems so," I agreed. "Unfortunately, this doesn't help me. But I have a bit of paper here, and some charcoal. I'll make a sketch. Not that I think your descendants will look anything like you after all this time, but if you had any famous ones, perhaps a picture of them will remain. Do you, that you know of? Have any famous descendants?" I produced the paper as I spoke and started drawing.

"We were the greatest farmers of Aphor," he replied loftily then laughed at his own hubris. "But that doesn't get one commemorated with paintings or sculpture. I'm sorry, I only know what of my family came to the shrine where my amulet rested. No great personages came through there."

"Well, I'll see what I can do," I assured him. I spent a few minutes capturing his likeness as best I could and then did another of his features when he reverted to old age. It seemed to tire the ghost to remain young. After the sketches were done, I carefully rolled the charcoal and put it in a scroll tube for safe

keeping. "I have a few ideas of where I can go."

"Thank you. You'll do more good than I will in that medallion," he said. I was touched by his serene attitude. It was likely a reflection of his state of mind at the point he had died. I hoped my end would be similarly restful.

"Are you ready?" I asked, standing and drawing my blade.

"I have been ready for death for millenia," he explained simply. "Do your best for my kin, and I shall have no regrets."

"Severing of Unneeded Fetters," I whispered and whipped the blade across his form. Drawing it like a razor across the ghost sent cascades of sparks from his ephemeral skin, like the edge of the blade was slicing through steel chains. If a ghost is unwilling, I'm forced to rely on other, more brutal techniques, but in this case the old man showed not a touch of discomfort. Then the point of my sword past through him, and there was an arcane ringing like a bell tapped with a chain. The old man smiled at me and whispered a shadowy benediction as he dissolved into mist that was born away by the rushing wind. Once again I was alone in the gorge. I slid the blade back into its sheath and departed.

It was certain that anyone who bore enough filial resemblance to the nameless ghost to be recognized would be dead. If they were famous enough to be immortalized in art, they most likely died rich. Therefor I went directly to Sijan, city of the dead. It was several thousand miles west, mostly down river. The run did me good.

When the city rose from the horizon with the dawn, I strolled into the grim silences of the tomb ridden necropolis. The place had none of the evil associated with monuments to death. The city was in business, and given that its purview was the one great constant of life, they had no impatience for new clientel. Vast tombs to the richly deceased rose behind the tall outer wall, while communal mausoleums stood like a thousand towers. The air was full of incense. When I strolled up to the gate guards, I could hear funeral hymns being sung in a dozen languages. Some were mournful, some full of hope, and occasionally one was upbeat, rejoicing in the life completed. The gate guards wore full length black robes and greeted me formally when I arrived.

"Good morning, sir. Welcome to Sijan, city of the dead."

"Good morning, gentlemen. A ghost asked me to find his descendants and take care of them. I'm here to find any information on who they might be."

"We shall endeavor to help you," the guard replied. He indicated a black robed acolyte within, who informed me he would take me to the city proper. I fell in behind him.

Within Sijan the living stay underground, leaving the surface for the spreading confluence of tombs. Given the likelihood of unappreciated spirits rising as vengeful ghosts, the respect shown to the city's deceased majority is reasonable. Still, going underground between towering mortuary edifices behind a black robed acolyte was unpleasant. Ultimated I was taken to the rooms of a revered librarian. His walls were covered in serious looking documents, and the occasional grim painting. He was dressed in the omnipresent black with white and yellow tassels on his robe. He had very short white hair that

formed a ring around his bald spot, neither mustache nor beard, and the thin build of an academic who eats little and moves less. He was as pale as one would expect. We exchanged pleasantries. Up until this point no one had asked me my name. While I'd considered using an alias, I decided to err on the side of honesty.

To his opening questions, I responded, "My name is Stark Vision of Inevitability. I was contacted by a ghost from the land of Aphor on the river Mer. In order for him to pass on peacefully he wanted me to attempt to find his descendants and help them as best I could. Unfortunately he was dead so long he did not remember his name."

"Mention of Aphor is not unknown to certain old texts from the Shogunate. I am willing to help you, but my time is not free," the elderly man replied. These people weren't into death for free.

We negotiated a price which taxed my limited funds without overburdening them. After that the man introduced himself as Wood Elm, which surprised me slightly. I was expecting Blissful Repose or something similarly baroque. Still, after money changed hands he rose and we turned out attention to his documents.

If you want a detailed lesson in history I would have recommended you talk to this guy. He narrated the course of his investigation as he pursued it, giving me an incidental lecture that was surprisingly interesting. History comes to me as a dry subject, about a bunch of dead people doing things that don't matter any more, but his perspective was a bit warmer. To abridge, when the Shogunate fell just shy of eight hundred years ago to plague and a massive invasion of the Fair Folk known as the Balorian Crusade, the limits of reality retreated thousands of miles from the encircling Wyld. Aphor had been a nice little place cradled in the cup of soaring mountains far to the north and east of the modern outer limits of the world. It simply didn't exist any more.

While one might normally expect them to all be dead, I pointed out that the ghost had still been clinging to our world. Since he wanted to serve his children, that meant someone should have survived. We pored through the ancient documents until mention was found of an emergency evacuation conducted by a splintering fragment of the old army. Several hundred soldiers, beset on all sides by vastly outnumbering fae and cut off from support had made a mad run to the outskirts of the world even as it fell into chaos. They'd grabbed everyone they could get their hands on and mention of 'people of Aphor' appeared. Unfortunately, the Wyld got the best of them as they retreated. No mention of them surviving was made.

"Then how did we get the records?" I asked.

"Well, these are the personal chronicles of Yvores Alson, one of the few Dragon-Blooded historians who survived the Balorian Crusade. He was captured by the fae, and escaped when the Scarlet Empress unleashed the Sword of Creation, nearly seven years after he fell into their power. These chronicles dictate his ravings," Wood Elm explained. "This chapter chronicles stories he claims were told to him by the Fair Folk, seeking to break his will with stories of despair."

"Fantastic," I murmured. "So it's all a lie."

"Unlikely. One of their favorite tactics at the time was half truths. Enough truth to hide a barbed hook, enough lie to set it deeply. Besides, this ghost still possesses his fetter, so it must be anchored to something."

“Possessed,” I corrected absently.

“He's moved on?”

“Very peacefully.”

“May his soul have repose. Still, up until that point, at least someone must have survived. This is the only report I have.”

“Any chance of any others?”

“I will carefully search the other records I have of that time,” Wood Elm assured me.

“This might help,” I added, producing the portrait. “That's what he looked like in youth, that's what he looked like now. Perhaps it will give you some guidance.”

He took the rolled paper in his thin hands and examined it carefully. His fingers were so thin they were like spider legs. “Very common features for the old shogunate. Notice the aquiline nose, and heavy brows. Possibly northern descent, with strong blood from the Blessed Isle. It was possible, if not probable, his people moved out to Aphor during the initial push towards settlement in the dawn of the Shogunate. He was probably deceased for five hundred years or more before the Balorian crusade.”

“Remind you of anyone?” I asked. “Anyone buried around here, perhaps?”

“I do not know. I will certainly conduct your inquiries to the archivist of the entombed. It will be only the slightest of extra charges.”

We discussed exactly what 'slightest' meant and found our opinions on the topic differed quite widely. Ultimately we agreed on a price again, but it wasn't slight. I retired to reasonably priced accommodations to wait.

Sijan's nightlife is sadly lacking. Pretty much everyone is there to bury someone or attend a funeral. I had hoped for wild parties as people rejoiced that they, at least, didn't need the personal attention of this place, but the gloomy mood dampened that completely. I wound up sleeping most of the time, and pretending I was someplace else the rest.

After close to a week of watching my funds diminish I received word that my results had been compiled. Wood Elm met me in his office, and diplomatically read me the results of his research. To paraphrase, there were none. There was no one in the city for a final repose who matched up with both the ghost's appearance and origins either. The only possible lead was that Yvores Alson, the dead historian, rested here, and had been known to appear to people who offered him the proper assortment of grave goods. These the Sijanese were willing to provide for a very reasonable price. Bidding farewell to the rest of my funds, I accepted.

Yvores Alson had been interred at great expense. His final resting place consisted of a fourteen foot pyramid-shaped edifice of white marble. The base was a rectangle twenty feet by forty, and the top was a twenty foot ridge, crested with sculptures of old dead people doing things I didn't care about. Around the marble edifice was a well tended hedge twice the height of a man. The result was a secluded area

where visitors could be alone with the dead. Alone except for the guards, that is. Apparently the place had a problem with crypt robbers, and so my visitation would be chaperoned by two respectful gentlemen in the somber black robes everyone around here wore. We waited for twilight, and then I let them conduct rituals inclined to raise the ghost I wanted to speak with.

It didn't appear. We waited until midnight as the acolytes intoned sacred chants that seemed to consist mostly of groaning. Eventually it became apparent that the dead historian was remaining silent that night. I asked the two guards for a moment's privacy, and knelt at the tomb while they withdrew to the small opening in the encircling hedge. They turned their backs, giving me some slight privacy while remaining close enough to prevent me from any depredations. I assumed a properly reverential pose, and opened my eyes to the spirit world.

Yvres Alson wasn't there. He wasn't in the tomb either. No spiritual fetters linked any ghosts to the the resting place. I glanced around, and observed some of the neighboring tombs that overtopped the green hedge. A few of them had easily visible fetters. Mulling over this I said a couple words for the departed historian and rose.

Before rejoining the guards I stared hard at the ground. The grass was freshly crushed in the form of boot prints. I wore sandals, and the guards both wore formal shoes. Comparing them to mine showed me that the feet were about an inch longer than mine, and the prints sank deeply into the soft, well tended earth. With my head bowed, like I was deep in reverie, I followed the steps. Whoever it had been had approached, knelt where I had, and then waited. After that the steps got muddled. I cocked my head and pondered. It seemed impossible, yet suddenly I figured that the boot owner had lunged. Gaging the direction the lunge had gone led me to the monolithic tomb. The tall flowers about its base were undisturbed. Several of them were thorned varieties. The freshly turned earth about them showed no footprints. Nodding to myself, I joined the two guards.

"We're sorry the deceased did not hear your solicitation, revered sir," one of them consoled me.

I nodded, pausing at the gateway in the hedge. Pretending to be momentarily overcome, I looked down, staring at the places they had stood. There was nothing to learn, as they had disturbed the earth too much for trivial remnants of past visitors to remain. "I appreciate your concern. What was the last time Yvres Alson appeared to a supplicant?"

"Perhaps nine months ago. A party of historians from the city of Lookshy came to discuss some things with him. That's the last we were here, and this sector of tombs is within our usual purview."

Nine months ago I'd been living in deceived marital bliss with Lemora, and this quest had not entered my mind. Those boot prints weren't more than a week old. Between when I came to Sijan and now, someone had rekkilled the historian. Interesting.

"Ah, well, May he rest easily. I'll be returning to my rooms then."

They lead me to one of the larger stairways that plunged under the earth. Departing downwards, I passed several dozen yards under the earth. The stonework was in excellent repair, showing recent renovations. Multifaceted crystals lit the way, gleaming a different color from each polished face, doing much to abate the gloom of the place. At the bottom of the stairway was another guard who sat by a heavy iron gate he could close as necessary. We exchanged pleasantries, and I went looking for a place to think.

Since I was completely out of money, I passed the night in a dim chapel. Candles lit the frescoes of old gods, showing their scenes of triumph against foes now as forgotten as they. They flickered slowly, burning down to pools of wax while I considered the old images. To be thorough I compared features against the nameless ghost. Occasionally miracles do happen, but this wasn't one of those times.

There was a discrete way to do this and a blatant way. The discrete way was going to take time. The blatant way would get me run out of the city, pursued by guards, the local police, and possibly angry gods. For that reason alone I was tempted to do this the blatant way. Running half the course of the Meander had done marvels for my stride. Yet I chose caution. Someone was acting against me, and shown considerable aptitude. In spite of that, they had underestimated me badly when they'd assumed I wouldn't notice the traces of their actions. By kicking in Wood Elm's door and beating knowledge out of him, I would inform anyone interested in my capabilities with specifications, as well as making enemies. There would not be a second chance if I burned my bridges here.

Shortly after the morning meal was served in the city's visiting houses, I went to speak to Wood Elm a final time. My stomach was irritable with me for being empty, a condition exacerbated by sleep deprivation from last night. When a young attendant showed me in to the simple library the elderly archivist worked in, he was already there. I devoted extra effort to remaining calm.

"I was told that Yvores did not rise to meet your invitations last night," the old man said. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was a nuisance," I agreed. "But I imagine even the dead grow tired of being summoned back to the world of the living. They've earned their rest. Is the historian visited often?"

"There's a party of scholars from Lookshy that come here every few years," Wood Elm replied. He seemed comfortable with the specifics. "They're putting together treatises on military strategies of the fall of the Shogunate. They've come at least half a dozen times now, so clearly the results are profitable for them."

"When was the last time they came?" I asked.

"Less than a year ago. In the spring, I believe," he said.

That matched up with the numbers from the guard I'd spoken too. "Is there anyone else who visits?"

"Not that I know of. Of course, up until last year we didn't have the rash of tomb robbing we're enduring now. Before then anyone could simply visit the deceased as they felt so inclined. We don't know what happened during that time."

"But since then, has there been anyone? Recently even, within a week or so?"

"Not so far as I know. You're the only one who has expressed any interest in that time," he assured me.

I remained impassive while trying to tell if he was lying. Only succeeding on the first count, I considered whether or not to abandon plan 'subtle' in favor of plan 'mind-blasting magic.'

As usual, I opted against it. The moral ramifications of overwriting someone's will with magic lead to

an ethical quagmire I was loath to explore. Having always considered free will one of the indelible dividing lines between anything alive versus the animate dead or automata, forcibly adjusting that through arcane power seemed the high end of a treacherous slope into necromancy. I had never seen anyone, ever, dabble into necrotic magic without ultimately falling into corruption. I wasn't going to try to be the first. Now, in the city of the dead I contemplated the very much alive Wood Elm, an old man who seemed to live quite happily with his books and funereal rituals, and asked myself if the secrets I wanted out of him were enough to kill for. They were not. If it wasn't worth killing over, it wasn't worth taking away his free will with my dominating mind. His word would have to be good enough.

“These gentlemen from Lookshy, they work for the military academy?” I asked.

“You think they may have learned something from Yvores Alson about your ghost's descendants?”

“It seems a reasonable area of pursuit,” I replied with a shrug.

“Indeed. In actuality, while they are funded by one, perhaps several, of the military academies, they are mostly independent. I believe Gens Haid, a minor noble family of slight means, has commissioned the work. Since you were unable to contact the spirit directly, I would be more than happy to pen a letter of introduction for you. Consider it a free gift, considering the money you've spent already.”

That was quite a bit cheaper than anything I'd come to expect from the Sijanese. I thanked Wood Elm profusely. He produced a sheet of vellum, dashed off a quick letter, and placed it in a waxed lambskin case for me, sealing it with black wax. His signet was of laurel wreaths under star speckled skies. After that he saw me to his door.

“I'm sorry I could not be of more help. Please come again. It's such a pleasure to ply my trade on someone who can return breathing,” he said. I think it might have been intended to be a joke. With that he waved his hand in front of my chest. It was a southern gesture that meant 'farewell.' I ignored that, grabbed his hand, and shook it firmly. He accepted the mild affront with good grace, and we parted.

Wood Elm hadn't held a sword in weeks, if ever. A driving forward thrust causes the handle to rake the palm unless one already has well developed sword callouses of a singular type. The old man didn't. I hadn't expected him too. That didn't mean I intended to take it on faith.

I departed Sijan with as little excitement as I'd arrived. By noon I was making my way south over the river Avarice, and then west along a little used road over sweeping hills. Soon the dark city was hidden by evergreen trees and gray leafed oaks. The road left the latitudinal river to cut south by south west, circumnavigating the salt marshes at the conjunction of the Avarice and the River of Tears. I had set into an easy jog, covering empty miles with some speed until my stomach's complaints proved too much to be ignored. After that I left the road for the trees and stalked game until I finally ran down a bear. At my charge it rose up to roar at me, an intimidating act that left it open. A single whip-like stroke took its head off neatly, and then there was bear meat for supper.

In this manner I made my way south, letting time flow behind me like the miles underfoot. Occasionally I passed caravans, bound to either the grim Sijan or beyond it. Distinguishing their destinations was as simple as checking for a cargo of coffins. No one gave me any trouble. The land here was neither desolate nor filled. Towns stood alone, surrounded by their fields and orchards, and separated from each other like islands in a sea of trees. Road conditions varied widely from near perfect to rutted bogs. If there were bandits, they did not bother me.

When the towns grew common enough that I could see one from another I knew that Lookshy was not far. The air smelled of salt water. Mist settled over the countryside one dawn and hugged the low places. It defied the sun all morning, and only the full blast of noon drove it away. As the seething fog boiled into the air, I crested a hill and saw the towering walls of Lookshy, home of the orphaned Seventh Legion, last remnant of the fallen Shogunate. If the city was as I recalled, it would be full of the immortal Dragon-Blooded, puissant warriors and lords of terrestrial creation. There were many of them, and they were filled with their own power.