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The Cost of a City.

by Thomas Tongue

On a crown of tall rocks beneath the night's moonless shroud, Aethra kept watch over the desert. Below, she could hear the clicking mandibles of the noxmanti as they probed the surrounding thicket. One of the larger nox pushed its way into the brambles, toward the base of the rock outcrop. Aethra aimed her arbalest, took a deep breath, and fired a splitting bolt into the creature's chitinous breast. The nox screeched in pain and fell back into the throng of other noxmanti, who attacked him without mercy. *That should keep them busy for a while*, Aethra thought.

As the sound of noxmanti fighting over the carcass filled the night air, Aethra smiled and resumed her watch. She shifted her weight on the warm stone, and massaged the soreness from her buttocks, glad that her apprentice, Niryn, would soon take over. His scary eyes weren't as good as hers in the darkness, but they were adequate enough to kill any nox that decided to get adventurous. He'd be useless at spotting any Demarian patrols, but it didn't

matter. With the nocturnal swarms of nox emerging from their warrens to feed, the patrols would stick close to their camps.

The fighting amongst the noxmanti subsided, as a new feeding order emerged. Weaker nox watched at a respectful distance while a pair of larger, more aggressive nox tore open the carcase of the fallen. Satisfied that the surrounding desert was clear, and anyone's approach would surely stir the nox to attack, Aethra slipped down the rock into the chamber below, where Niryn sat waiting.

Compared to the darkness above, the low light from the glowdust on the chamber floor seemed bright. Out of habit, Aethra checked the passages that led out through the rocks, just in case one of the creatures had slipped inside without her noticing. They were empty.

"No sign of Darlock?" Niryn said.

"I didn't really expect to see him," Aethra said. "The Rhunock know these foothills like the glitter of gold. You'll never see one unless he wants to be seen."

A voice spoke softly from one of the passages, "She's right." The faint glint of an arrowhead emerged from the darkness of the passage, followed by the dim shape of a readied crossbow and its rhunock bearer. Another stepped silently into view from one of the other passages. Aethra shot a glance over to the remaining exit, and found that it, too, was occupied, though the third rhunock was apparently unarmed.

"These rocks aren't the safest place for a dargai," Darlock said. "War does terrible things to hospitality." The rhunock struck a firestone, and lit his pipe with it, the brief flash illuminating his scarred face. The wind outside shifted through Darlock's passage and filled Aethra's nostrils with his stench, an odd mixture of the strong, sickly-sweet smell of lyvaran

healing salve and the pungent odor of sweat and decay. *He's a mess*, Aethra thought. *I didn't think the war was going so badly for them.*

Niryn cleared his throat, and prodded Aethra. "Answer the nice rhunock, will you? I'm allergic to crossbow bolts."

"Your war is with Demaria," Aethra answered, remembering the pass phrase. "Though my blood is Dargai, my heart is Scaryn." A rhunock had picked the reply, partly because it didn't make sense. Dargai had no blood.

The pipe glowed as Darlock took a long draw. "Well met, then," he said. "Take the top and keep watch." The armed rhunocks fell back into the shadows, followed by the scrabbling sounds of short legs climbing the outcrop. Darlock approached, and the basic features of his face could be seen in the dim light, hardened and dour.

Aethra sat down on a small boulder, so that she was almost eye-level with Darlock. She ached to know what had happened to him, but such questions were too personal among the rhunock.

"You reek," Niryn blurted, "By the One in the Many, what happened to you?"

"Mind your tongue," Aethra said as she smacked the back of his head. "A thousand pardons, Darlock. You remember Niryn from our last meeting."

"A fool is easily forgotten." Darlock said. "I don't remember him. It doesn't matter. I won't be staying long enough to remember him this time either."

"So why did you call for me? What do you need this time?" Aethra said. "Cira Nai didn't have any details for me before we left the Ring of Fire."

"You know of the Seizorann in the city of Sunai, yes?"

Aethra shuddered. "Yes, I know of it."

"We need you to kill it," Darlock said. "As long as the creature fortifies the city's walls, there's no hope of breaching them."

"What about your explosives?" Niryn said. "Surely a few well placed charges would open the gatehouse..."

"No," Darlock growled. "We've tried everything. The Seizorann is too powerful. As long as they have its protection, the war is unbalanced and we cannot hope to prevail."

"Then by siege..."

"NO!" Darlock's outburst echoed through the chamber. "Aethra, tell your whelp to shut his head when he's too stupid to do it himself."

Aethra placed a hand on Niryn's shoulder. "Forgive him, Darlock. He doesn't know what it is, or what it can do," she said. "Niryn, the Seizorann is a creature found deep underground, near large deposits of mage-stone. It feeds on the stone's mana, and spreads its roots into the surrounding rocks, like a tree trying to gather more water. The roots harden the rock like diamond, which is why the Sheyar'tyl thought to bring one to Sunai. It feeds on the natural mana of the people, and strengthens the buildings and walls of the city."

"Why don't they use one of these creatures in their own citadels," Niryn said. "Seems like a natural solution to the problem."

"We tried four months ago," Darlock said. "To speed its growth, we spread mage-stone around the citadel, to encourage it to grow toward the walls. It worked for a while, but the monster grew larger than our capacity to feed it. We didn't know at first. A few went missing. Then a few more. We didn't know what was happening until it started openly attacking and devouring our people."

"How many?" Aethra's voice choked.

"Almost everyone." Darlock produced a small glowstone, its red light made the rhunock's scars seem more macabre. "I was lucky."

"Did you kill it?" Niryn said.

"No," Darlock said, "though it wasn't for lack of trying!"

"If your people couldn't kill it," Niryn blurted, "how do you expect us to kill Sunai's?"

"That Seizorann is much older," Darlock said, "and secure in its position in Sunai.

Like the ones we found in the mines, it's well fed and complacent. A very different situation from a voracious monster feeding on everything within its grasp."

"How do you kill such a monster?" Aethra asked. "How do you kill something as big as a city?"

"By attacking its head," Darlock said. "It cannot draw mana through metal. Wrap its head with fine goldspun, and then surround that with explosives. Without the mana, they are too weak to withstand a decent blast."

"That doesn't make any sense," Niryn said. "How is covering its head going to stop it from drawing mana through its roots?"

"The tentacles are conduits," Darlock said. "They draw the mana toward the creature, a collection system of sorts. The beast's maw sucks at the ambient mana, which is enriched by the roots. Cover the head and it can't eat. That's how we kill them in the mage-stone mines."

"So that's why the Seizorann's attendants wear goldspun robes," Aethra said. "I always wondered about that."

Darlock nodded. "They need to the robes to get close enough to attend to the Seizorann. Otherwise it would suck the all the mana out of their flesh. No mana and no blood makes one dead dargai." Darlock smiled.

"So you'll take the job then," Darlock said as he extended his hand.

"Sorry, Darlock." Aethra shook her head. "I know we've been through a lot together, and your money has been good, but this is a big leap from spying and petty sabotage. I don't know if you can carry enough gold to cover this." This time it's going to cost you some serious coin, my friend.

"Your Cira thought you might have some reservations," Darlock said as he fished a small narrow crystal from his jerkin and offered it to Aethra.

Holding the crystal with both hands, Aethra snapped it in half, and the ghostly image of Cira Nai appeared before them. "Hello Aethra. I have instructed Darlock to use this crystal when you start negotiating the price for your services. The Ard gour rhunock have offered to cede the abandoned citadel of Kuhnaetra to us in exchange for the destruction of the Seizorann. You might be wondering what's in this for you?"

Aethra shrugged. The thought had crossed her mind.

"If you are successful," Nai continued, "then your house will be vested with a title within the new city. I don't need to tell you how much this will improve the lives of the Scaryn people. I have every confidence in your success."

The image of Cira Nai faded. Aethra stood quietly for a moment, and considered the stakes of the assignment. What the Cira had left unsaid was the price for failure, a price that would be paid by her family. It was hard enough to rise in station as Dargai amongst the Scaryn. Failure would probably mean the ruin of her house.

"So your people will hand over Kuhnaetra if we do this?" Aethra said.

"You have my word," Darlock offered his hand again to seal the agreement.

Aethra paused for a moment, exchanged a look with Niryn, then clasped the rhunocks

scarred hand. "Is there anything else you can tell me about the Seizorann that might be useful?"

"I don't know what will be useful," Darlock said. "I had one of our scribes compile some notes on what we've learned over the years, and from our experiment." He pulled a folded piece of parchment from his jerkin and handed it to Aethra. "I wouldn't get caught carrying that, if I were you."

"Don't worry." Aethra shot him a withering look. "I know my job."

Darlock stuffed two pudgy fingers in his mouth, and nearly deafened Aethra with his whistle. The two rhunocks slid into view from above, and filed past Darlock into the dark passage behind him. "Our forces will be ready in two days," Darlock said, slipping into the passage. "You can make your move any time after that. Good luck, Aethra."

The remainder of the night was spent resting and preparing for the long hike that would start the moment morning's twilight forced the Noxmanti underground again. The occasional nox had to be killed to feed the pack, and keep them at a respectful distance.

The march from foothills of the Ardgour mountains to the approaches of Sunai took all morning. Though Aethra and Niryn dressed for travel in laissetts, the light robes of desert traders, the oppressive heat and blistering sun made Aethra glad to see the walls and gatehouse in the shimmering distance. They had been stopped several times during the trek by patrolling Demarian soldiers, who seemed to emerge from heat-mirage to question them. A few times, Aethra had to convince herself that they were real before they closed to greet them.

With the city clearly in sight, she could see the sinewy pattern of the Seizorann's tentacles embedded in the walls, with several areas of scoring where the rhunocks had

obviously tried to breach. Traces of the assault were clearest around the outer gate, which seemed even more deformed from the Seizorann's grasp than the last time Aethra visited.

"Now we see if your papers are worth anything." Aethra said. She was confident that her papers were still good, having used them four months earlier to gain access to the city. Niryn was another matter. The Demarians saw the Scaryn's official neutrality as a sign that their northern brethren would play both sides of the conflict for profit. So a Scaryn trader would be detained for questioning, and probably watched closely while he conducted business within the city. Aethra reckoned a Scaryn slave would not be nearly as suspect. "Start getting into character. They'll be watching you very closely at the gate. You need to carry this deception, or it won't matter how good the forgeries are."

Niryn made a derisive snort. Aethra knew he didn't like the plan, that he felt his role as her slave was demeaning. She wondered how he would feel if the roles were reversed.

The entrance to Sunai was served by a three-chambered gate, with two doors and a portcullis providing entrance to the middle chamber of the outer close. From the outer close, another pair of reinforced doors and portcullis led beyond into the city. Aethra and Niryn passed through the gnarled outer gates into the close where a robed official sat under a shaded canopy, waiting to inspect papers and goods of those entering and leaving the city. With trade cut off from Hebridonia beyond the mountains, there wasn't much business.

The official, a lean man with a sneer etched in his face, watched Aethra and Niryn as they approached the table. *Great*, Aethra thought, *A bureaucrat with time on his hands. There's nothing more dangerous.* The man sat passively while Aethra produced the papers from within her laissett. Concerned by the disposition of the official, Aethra slipped an extra Demar into the bribe wrapped in the papers, and set them down in front of the official. The art



of the bribe was delicate. Too little, and the incentive to smooth the process was insufficient and the official might take offense. Too much, and the man would be confident that Aethra was trying to smuggle something in.

"Remove your yashmak," the man said, "so I can see who I'm dealing with."

Aethra nodded to Niryn, then unwound the loosely wrapped cloth which shielded everything but the eyes from the hot sun. Her thick black hair made a stark contrast to the pale skin it framed.

Niryn pulled off the headdress as a single piece, trying to preserve the shape and wrapping so he would not have to re-assemble it again. His cusped ears poked through the mop of his dark brown hair. There was no concealing he was Scaryn. The ears, the fair complexion and a sixth digit on each hand all pointed to a Scaryn heritage. The race was an odd mixture of traits from the Kyelsoran and Dargai races, having the ears and fair complexion of the former, and the additional digit on each hand and foot from the latter.

"Ah! A Scaryn," the man drummed his fingers on the papers, still folded and unexamined. "We don't see many of you anymore." He looked at Niryn intently, waiting for a response.

"He's mine," Aethra said, as she pointed to the papers. "I have his bond with my phyle documents."

"So he's your slave then." The man looked intently at Niryn. "How did you get him?"

"Traded two gargeks for him." Aethra said. She could tell the man was going to keep them in the hot sun all day with questions. He clearly had nothing better to do except fish for potential spies. How was a bribe supposed to work if he didn't look at the papers?

"Good price." The official looked disappointed that Niryn simply stood there while

they compared his worth to beasts of burden. He turned his attention to Aethra, and flashed a toothy smile filled with pointed teeth. "Of course, it's a good story too. If it's true."

At the sight of the sharpened teeth, Aethra shuddered, recognizing the hallmark trait of a Sheyar'tyl disciple. Every time she returned to Sunai, there were more of them, worked into positions of power. The Seizorann was only the beginning for them. Until all of Demaria is under their heels, the Sheyar'tyl would not rest.

*Time to play his game*, Aethra thought. "The papers do not lie. My house belongs to the Grindian phyle." The official's sneer steepened at the mention of Aethra's familial allegiance. "I am entitled to enter and leave Sunai freely. The bond with my papers, bearing the Grindian seal, proves that I own the slave."

The official pulled the papers to him, removed the bribe and deposited it within his robes. He closely examined each document, then offered them back to Aethra. "Everything appears to be in order. You may enter the city."

Aethra took the papers, folded them, and tucked them back within her laissett. "Thank you," she said. "Are there any new laws or edicts that I need to be aware of? It has been four months since my last visit." In Sunai, it always paid to ask. New rules could be costly to the uninformed, and ignorance of the law bought no quarter.

The official shook his head. "Curfew is still midnight. The council is too busy killing rhunocks to bother with law. I will make one suggestion." The official leaned forward, his toothy grin presented a fierce rictus. "Your phyle is weak. If you value your freedom, you should petition to join a stronger house."

His message was clear to Aethra. The days of a vocal opposition were numbered, and

if she was smart, her house should ally with a phyle supported by the Sheyar'tyl. Aethra turned toward the inner gate. "I'll look into it. Thanks."

"Be sure you do."

A pair of guards stood beside the final gate and watched as Aethra and Niryn passed by. "Careful where you rest your head, farunzhai," one of the guards said. "Your phyle cannot protect you or your slave..." The guards both smiled with razor teeth, and Aethra could hear their leather gloves creak as they flexed their hands on the hilts of their swords.

Surprised, Niryn turned to face the guards. "Did he just call you..."

"They're not worth it." Aethra grabbed his arm and pulled him further into the city. There was nothing she could do about it. The guards were fortunate in their occupation, though they did not know it. Anyone else would be watching their entrails spill from a fresh seam opened by her shortsword. But no one fought the guards and saw another sunrise. Not that the guards were exceptional fighters. If they were, they'd be doing something more profitable. Fighting a guard meant living out your days in the salt mines beneath the city, every scratch a stinging reminder of where you are, every breath a lungful of needles. "The wheel will turn for them soon enough."

The guards' heckling faded into the gatehouse commons bustle as Aethra and Niryn crossed to the twisted main street which led to the city's heart. All around them, they noted the Seizorann's influence, in the meandering maze of cross-streets and alleys, and the contorted architecture which bowed over the cobblestones. Like the people of Sunai, Aethra knew why the Seizorann shaped the streets and buildings: to draw more mana. Like a tree throwing down roots, it slowly closed over many of the alleys and narrow streets, forming tunnels where it could draw the most from those who passed.

There were complaints, to be sure. But the Seizorann's needs were the city's needs. It made the buildings stronger. So what if the rooms weren't square anymore, or the floors uneven? A small price to pay for what it gave the city in return, right? Aethra shook her head. Even in the four short months since her last visit, changes were evident.

They turned down a side street, its sky choked out by the overhanging buildings. "How does anybody live here," Niryn whispered. "I can feel it leeching off me!"

"It's in your head," Aethra said. "You just think you can feel it because you know what it does." She wondered if that was really true. Except for the courtyard surrounding Rannoch Temple, where the main body of the Seizorann lived, Aethra had never felt the pull of the beast's hunger. But she grew up in Sunai. Perhaps an outsider would be more perceptive.

"But the houses and streets," Niryn said. "Why would anyone choose to stay?"

"Anybody can get used to the most unpleasant things over time," Aethra said. "Just look at your own people. They went from living on the fertile veldt to living beneath the Ring of Fire."

"That's different," Niryn said. "We hide from the Kyelsoran to preserve our race. We don't have a choice. These people do."

"Do they?" Aethra shook her head. "If you leave Sunai to live elsewhere in Demaria, you start at the bottom, one short step from slavery. Enduring this is better than losing everything."

"But how could they allow this to happen?"

"It didn't happen overnight," Aethra said. "The Seizorann and its Sheyar'tyl masters

are slow, patient and subtle. As long as it's easier to do nothing, people won't fight it." Apathy was a well worn tool in the Sheyar'tyl's strategy. So far, it had served them well.

Down several twists and turns, they walked in silence, and finally stopped in front of The Boasting Boar Inn. "Remember, you're a slave," Aethra said. "Merrick may be Grindian as well, but that doesn't make him trustworthy." At Niryn's acknowledgement, she led the way through the door.

Inside, the Inn was dimly lit by shallow brass dishes of oil placed about the room, the dull flickering light from each of the wicks providing an evening twilight. By nightfall, when the revelers arrived for an evening of drinking and whoring, the elegant lamps, and their flammable contents, would be replaced with wall mounted sconces that would not turn the tavern into an inferno when the fighting came. Aethra crossed to the bar and smiled at Merrick. "Don't tell me you're trying to go upscale here, with these dainty little lamps. You forget your roots."

"You're the last person to talk about loosing roots, Aethra," Merrick said. "What can I do for you?"

"I need a clean room for a few days," Aethra said, as she examined the walls behind the bar for the Seizorann's eyes.

Merrick looked at Niryn's pointed ears. "It'll cost five," Merrick said.

"Demars?" Aethra snapped her attention to Merrick. She'd never paid more than a handful of farthings in the past. "Come on. Gouge someone from another phyle. You've done better before."

Merrick bowed his head. "I'm not Grindian anymore. Phyle Nirveli now. Blame your friend for the rate hike."

"He's my slave," Aethra said. Nirveli. A safe choice. When the official at the gate mentioned Grindian's falling star, Aethra had thought of Nirveli as a likely refuge. At least they're not aligned with the Sheyar'tyl. Yet.

"Slave," Merrick said. "Trading partner. Husband. Doesn't matter. He draws the same amount of attention. If anyone else brought him, it'd be ten."

From within her laissett, Aethra produced ten demars and set them on the bar. "Two nights to start with."

The coins quickly disappeared, and Merrick handed Aethra a key. He motioned for them to follow, and disappeared up some stairs at the end of the bar. Down the hall on the second floor, Merrick held a door open for them. "It was swept a few days ago. But you might want to do it again if it's important."

"Thanks," Aethra said, stepping past Merrick into the room. "I'll let you know if I find anything." Merrick nodded to Niryn as the Scaryn slipped into the room and closed the door.

Over the next hour, Aethra and Niryn combed the room for the Seizorann's eyes, small bulbous protrusions in the wall that the Sheyar'tyl used to spy on anyone in the city. Aethra spotted several old sockets, where the eyes had been removed and filled with plaster. Officially, their removal could not be punished, since the knots were supposed to be harmless bulges caused by the Seizorann, not a means to watch people. Unofficially, everyone but the most naive recognized that some form of retribution would come if you acted against Sheyar'tyl's interests while within view of the eyes. Aethra was surprised Merrick was still in business.

"My side is clean." Niryn straightened, and rubbed his back.

The straw pallet scraped as Aethra pushed it back against the wall. "Mine too," she said. "We'll have to check it again tomorrow, but for now it's safe."

"What now?" Niryn sat down on his pallet, and Aethra joined him.

"We need two ceremonial robes of the Seizorann's attendants," Aethra said. "With one robe, I'll be able to get close enough to wrap its head with the other. Then I can set the charges and run."

"So which one do you want me to work on," Niryn said, "the robes or the explosives?"

"You get the explosives," Aethra said. "The cohorts keep stockpiles spread about the city, so no one act of sabotage can take out all their stores. I found that out the last time I was here."

"They hired you to destroy the powder magazines?"

"Magazine," Aethra said. "The rhunock's spies told them there was only one. Looking back, I'm surprised anybody believed that. I blew up the first one I found and got out. It didn't slow down the blasting in the Ardgour though, so they must have had more."

"Ok," Niryn said. "Leave it to me. I'll do some scouting this afternoon. I should have some candidates by supper." Niryn stood up, and donned his yashmak.

"Good." Aethra smiled. She felt a twinge of uncertainty about sending Niryn out alone, but despite his lack of experience in Demarian lands, his apprenticeship was nearly finished. He was a master thief. A natural. "I'll take care of the robes. See you back here at nightfall."

In the dim light of the Boasting Boar's main hall, Aethra watched as the evening crowd filtered in. Each time the door opened, she casually looked over to see if it was Niryn. In the three days since their arrival, they had made good progress toward acquiring the materials for the kill. Niryn had also been arrested twice. If he was caught carrying the explosives, he wouldn't be walking through the tavern door. But some guards looking for her would be. A cold trickle ran the length of Aethra's spine.

"Waiting for your friend?" Merrick paused beside Aethra, and reached over to extinguish the candle on her table.

Aethra nodded. "Friends wait for friends, don't they?" Keep it abstract Merrick, Aethra thought. Too many eyes here to tell you what I really think.

"Some wait," Merrick said, and carefully poured the lamp oil into a flask. "Others watch. Yours will be safe."

Aethra suppressed a puzzled look at Merrick as he moved on to the next table. What was that supposed to mean? Before she could ponder his enigmatic response, Aethra spotted Niryn rush through the back door of the room, and hurry over to her table.

"You have some interesting friends in Sunai," Niryn said, motioning for Aethra to follow him. "It's a pity we won't have time to thank them on this trip."

So he did run into trouble, Aethra thought. "Perhaps next time," she said, following Niryn up the stairs and back into their room. His brisk pace re-affirmed her worst suspicion: the hourglass has turned, and they were no longer safe.

Inside the room, Aethra closed the door and quickly went to gather her gear. "What happened," she said. "Did you get them or not?"

Niryn flashed open his robes to reveal two dozen pouch-charges sewn to a coil of



rope around his midriff. "I thought I could taste the salt," he said. "Two guards stopped me just after I escaped the magazine. The same two who have been dogging me since we got here. They were just about to search me when this other pair of guards approached, and told the first two that they knew my owner and would take me back to her."

"What?" Aethra turned to look at Niryn. "Who were they?"

"House Nirveli. Friends of Merrick's, from what I gather." Niryn said, adjusting his yashmak to re-cover his ears. "The first two didn't give up easily though. They were Sheyar'tyl, and took some convincing. Merrick's friends think they'll come tonight to detain us for questioning."

"I would've liked more time," Aethra said as she shouldered her pack and swept the room for anything left behind. No sense making it any easier for the scry-mages. "I was only able to find where one of the Seizorann's attendants lives."

"Only one?" Niryn said. "I thought there were dozens of them."

"There were," Aethra said. "When I lived here twenty years ago, it was not uncommon to see one in the streets with their glittering goldspun robes. Perhaps they were too tempting a target for thieves, despite their allegiance and power."

"But you were watching the temple, right?" Niryn said.

"I only saw one person leave the temple," Aethra said. "And I never saw anyone enter. They must have another means of coming and going."

"Well," Niryn said, "we only need one, right? So what's the catch?"

"She lives in the Nazrain district," Aethra said. "It's an elite part of town, so she must be someone powerful in the Sheyar'tyl. Perhaps a priestess. Not exactly an ideal candidate."

"The two of us should be able to take her, right?" Niryn said.

Aethra shook her head. "She may be too powerful. If I don't get her with surprise, it's probably over. No point in both of us going in. The silent kill is a solo job."

"So what do you want me to do," Niryn said, "wait outside?"

"Something like that." Aethra opened the door and stepped into the hallway, cutting short an argument she didn't want to have. She made her way back down the stairs and over to the bar where Merrick was serving ale. Niryn followed with an irritated scowl.

After pouring a tankard for another customer, Merrick eased over to Aethra. "Leaving so soon?"

"Afraid so," Aethra replied, producing twelve demars from her laissett. "Our cargo won't keep, and it's better to travel the desert at night."

"Beware the Nox," Merrick said, his eyes drifted toward a pair of guards seated at one end of the bar. "They will be looking for you."

Aethra nodded. "Some friends were telling me that earlier today." She handed Merrick the coins. "Their kindness was greatly appreciated."

Merrick smiled, tipped his head toward the door, and turned to take another customers order. Aethra stepped away from the bar, and moved toward the front door of the Inn, stealing glances toward the seated guards as she wove through the crowd. If they're here for us, Aethra thought, slipping out the back wouldn't do any good, and might draw immediate suspicion to us if they aren't. In the worst case, I could start a fight and try to escape in the melee. Merrick would understand.

Aethra exhaled a ragged breath as she stepped into the warm night air and closed the sound of the Inn behind its thick wooden door. She looked up at the sky, and noted the deep hues of failing twilight. "We've got a few hours before curfew," Aethra whispered to Niryn,

and motioned for him to follow. "Enough time to sneak into Nazrain, and hopefully get the robes."

"Once we have the robes," Niryn said in hushed tones, "will we have time to kill the Seizorann and get out?"

"No." Aethra said. "I'd rather not fight the Nox all night. We'll have to hide until morning."

The walk to the Nazrain district took over an hour, partially due to the distance involved, and partially due to roving guard patrols which had to be delicately skirted. The district had its own wall within the city and a manned gatehouse. Aethra and Niryn slipped into a dark alley, and switched their light colored robes for tight black clothes.

The two crept to a spot in the wall beyond the sight of the guardhouse. Aethra worked her foot into a toehold, and started to climb. She smiled at the irony that the Seizorann made the wall strong, but it also warped the wall's surface enough to be scaled without rope by a skilled climber. Aethra stopped just short of the rampart, and listened for guards.

After a few moments, Aethra was confident no-one was on the rampart. She motioned for Niryn to follow and vaulted over the edge. The walkway was empty, with a faint light spilling onto the stone near the guardhouse further down the wall. She crossed the rampart, and started her descent into a lush garden on the other side.

Once they reached the bottom, Aethra and Niryn crouched in the dense foliage at the edge of an exquisite garden. Aethra pulled her arbalest from her back, and loaded it with a splitting bolt. "Might as well get these ready," she said. "If someone spots us now, we'll have to fight our way out."

Niryn agreed, and did the same.

With measured steps, Aethra and Niryn crept through several gardens lush with night-blooming Cereus and Datura, the flower's perfume thick in the still night air. After crossing a deserted street into a narrow lane between two estates, Aethra stopped beside a hedge and peered into the yard beyond. "This is it. Wait out here and be ready."

Niryn started to object, but Aethra placed a finger across his lips.

"I'm going to try to steal the robes and leave," Aethra said. "If I'm discovered, someone might run outside for help. Make them quiet."

With shoulders slumped, Niryn nodded his agreement, and stalked off toward the front of the house.

After she could no longer see Niryn, Aethra turned her attention to the house, a small two story villa with a roof garden. Aside from a faint flickering glow in one of the upstairs windows, it was dark. She probed the hedge for a thin spot and quietly pushed her way through, crouching on the other side. With slow, careful movements, Aethra crept to the back of the house.

The roof is probably the safest way in, Aethra thought. Nobody locks the door to the roof garden, especially in Nazrain. She gently unloaded her arbalest, slung it across her back and started to slowly scale the villa, using handholds created by the Seizorann. The climb was easy, though Aethra nearly knocked over a vase precariously perched on the ledge. A quick look around the perimeter of the roof showed several vases on the edge, close to falling. A crude alarm against clumsy thieves.

Careful to avoid knocking over the vases, Aethra climbed onto the roof, and crossed to the stairs leading into the house. The door had been left open to let the cooler night air in,

the scent of myrrh borne on the warm currents rising from the opening. Aethra could hear indistinct speech coming from below. Great, Aethra thought, she's not asleep yet.

Before she could get comfortable beside the door, Aethra startled at the sound of a muffled scream.

A woman's voice from below yelled, "Shut Up!", followed by the smacking of flesh. "Fix his mouth, you idiot!"

Aethra's bones chilled as she heard the muffled cries become stifled and the woman's voice became low again, with a peculiar cadence. Aethra bit her lip as she fought her conscience. It wasn't her business.

But she couldn't sit and listen to the faint whimpering, and disturbing rhythm of the woman's voice. Without fully considering the situation, Aethra found herself creeping down the stairs, and along the hallway toward a dimly lit room. The words were clear now, but completely alien to Aethra. The echo off the plastered walls gave the effect of several women speaking the words in near-unison.

Aethra nearly walked into the room before she realized the trance-like effect the words were having. The whimpering had stopped.

A finger's width from the door, Aethra stood petrified against the wall. Through the door, she could hear a multitude of wet, puckering sounds, and the noise of flesh slapping. *Run! Get out of here! The Rhunocks can keep their damn city!*

With a shaking hand, Aethra pulled her dagger from its sheath, and peered through the doorway. The shock of what she saw left her stunned, and she nearly bolted down the hall, fleeing from the nightmare in the flickering light. The woman might have been Dargai at one time, but the narrow black tentacles which sprouted from her spine and the dark sockets

interspersed on her torso bore witness to a horrible transformation into something far more sinister.

In the corner, a dargai man in servants clothes cowered as the tentacles burrowed under the flesh of a third dargai strapped to the floor, writhing in agony.

It was over before Aethra knew it. Her reflexes took control, and Aethra slipped behind the creature and stabbed the it between two ribs. The creature had seen Aethra rush in, but was too entangled to respond before the blade pierced her lung. Aethra twisted the knife, pulled it out and plunged it into the other side.

Several of the tentacles snapped at Aethra's face, their barbed ends peppered her with burning welts and gashes. Aethra fell back and drew her shortsword as the servant streaked from the room. Niryn will get him, she thought.

The creature freed herself from the victim, and turned to face Aethra, its lips moving without sound.

"Can't cast spells if you can't draw breath." Aethra smiled. The creature lunged with claws slashing, but Aethra's blade was too quick. The creature slumped at her feet. For good measure, she planted the tip of her sword in the base of the its skull.

The dargai strapped to the floor was dead, and Aethra staggered from the room shaking, the full horror of what she had seen finally seeping in. The servant, she thought. Her nerves nearly shot, Aethra stumbled down the stairs into the foyer, and watched as Niryn dragged the limp servant's body through the door.

"I managed to catch him as he came out the front," Niryn said, as he closed the door. "I take it everything didn't go well upstairs."

Aethra shook her head, unable to form the words of an explanation.

"This one won't be going anywhere for a while." Niryn flopped the unconscious servant in the corner, and walked over to Aethra. "You alright? You look like you're going to ..."

Aethra doubled over and retched.

"Yeah, that," Niryn said, and stepped back. He waited for her to finish. "What did you see up there?"

Aethra shook her head, and exhaled again. She wiped the vomit from her lips. "Why don't you go have a look for yourself."

"Alright," Niryn said. He stepped past Aethra, and disappeared up the stairs.

A moment later she heard Niryn convulsing in the corridor. A guilty smile stole across her face, and she climbed back up the stairs.

With his shirtsleeve, Niryn mopped his face. "Why didn't you warn me."

"I did," Aethra said. "You weren't listening."

"Come on." Aethra rested a hand on Niryn's shoulder. "Lets search for the robes."

It wasn't long before Niryn called for Aethra to join him in the room where she had killed the creature. They had dived for who would have to search that room, and Niryn had lost. "I've got good news and bad," Niryn said as Aethra came into the room. Niryn laid out a goldspun robe, yashmak and gloves from a chest in the corner. "This is the good."

"And the bad is that there's only one set," Aethra sighed, "right?"

Niryn nodded. "Unless she likes to hide them about the house. This one wasn't hidden at all."

"Well," Aethra said, "keep looking. We need two of them."

They continued to search the villa until morning's twilight, when they found a

trapdoor in the cellar. Beneath the door, a staircase descended into a dark passage, its walls formed by black sinew.

"I bet this is how they go to the Seizorann," Niryn said. "There could be dozens of these tunnels beneath the city."

Aethra nodded, "This is probably the best way for me to get in. It would save trying to bluff past Nazrain's guardpost."

"This was the last room," Niryn said. "We still only have one robe. What are we going to do now?"

"I'll just have to make due," Aethra grimaced. "We can split the robe down the back. I'll just have to grapple its head and carefully remove the robe. If its mouth stays covered, I should be fine."

"And if it doesn't?"

Before Aethra could answer, she heard the thumping of footsteps across the ceiling, and the front door of the villa slam open. Niryn burst up the stairs, and Aethra ran after him. Through the open front door, they could see the creature's servant screaming as he ran down the street.

"Niryn, don't!" Aethra grabbed her apprentice before he could bolt out the door, "It's too late. Grab the explosives and I'll throw open the back door. If we're lucky they'll think we fled through the garden."

Aethra met Niryn back in the cellar, and they climbed down the stairs and closed the trapdoor. By the light of her glowstone, they hurried down the passage until it veered to the right to join another tunnel.

"This will have to do," Aethra said as she handed golden gloves and yashmak to



Niryn. With her dagger, she fought to make a ragged seam down the back of the robe. The material was soft and slippery, like silk, but difficult to cut. By the end, Aethra was sweating.

"There," Aethra said, as she slipped the robe on, its length brushing on the ground.

"how does it look?"

"Just don't turn your back to it," Niryn said.

"Noted," Aethra said, as she turned to look at the explosive pouches Niryn was carrying. "How do I set the charges?"

"Well, normally you'd wrap all the pouches around a central charge with a fuse in it..."

"I won't have time for that," Aethra took the goldspun yashmak, and started to wrap it around her head. "If the pouches are close enough together, will one of them set the others off?"

"It should," Niryn said, "I don't think the explosion will be as powerful. What did you have in mind?"

"The pouches are sewn to the rope, right?" Aethra said, her voice muffled as she finished covering her mouth, leaving only her eyes exposed. "I'm just going to loop the rope around the head, light a fuse and get out."

"What am I supposed to do while you're in there?" Niryn said.

"Find a way out of this underground and wait for me at the eastern edge of the plaza surrounding the temple," Aethra said, pulling on the gloves. She took the coil of pouches from Niryn, and slung them over her left shoulder. "Be ready to run."

"I'll go with you as far as I can," Niryn said, "just in case you run into trouble."

The two walked in silence for several hundred yards, passing three more passages

which joined the main artery. At the last intersection, Niryn stopped. "I can definitely feel it pulling at me," he said. "We must be close to the temple."

"I'll go on from here," Aethra said. "You follow this passage back and see if you can find a way to the surface."

"Are you sure this is a good idea," Niryn said, his brow furrowed. "Maybe the Rhunocks should just keep their damn city."

Aethra smiled. "This isn't for my title anymore. This is the first chance I've ever had to make a difference for Sunai, to strike the Sheyar'tyl at their heart. The last few days, I've thought about what I told you when we first arrived. People don't notice small changes. But with the Seizorann gone, that will be a big change, one that might wake Sunai and make it fight what the Sheyar'tyl are doing all over Demaria."

Niryn seemed to consider this for a moment. "Then may the One in the Many guide your hand and your heart, and deliver you from evil."

"Thank you, Niryn," Aethra said. "I don't think 'good luck' would have covered it. See you in the light." She wasn't sure if she meant daylight or the afterlight, but she strode away from Niryn before he could say anything more.

As she made her way down the passage, she could see an upward staircase illuminated by two glowing globes. Several yards short of the stairs, she had to stop because her eyes began to sting and water. She covered her eyes for a moment, rubbing them against her gloved hands, and the stinging subsided. The eyes must also need to be covered, she thought.

The yashmak still had a yard of material which hung behind Aethra's head, draping down her back like a flow of long golden hair. She pulled the remainder back around, so it

draped in front of her eyes, but hung open at the bottom. Aethra reached into her backpack, deposited the glowstone, and fished out a mirror. With the mirror in her left hand, she twisted it around to get a view of the corridor ahead. A few more hands would be useful right now.

With a limited field of view, Aethra slowly crept toward the foot of the stairs and started to climb. At the top, she could see morning's light sifting in from small anterooms to her left and right, but ahead lay a dark corridor lit by the feeble glow of two wall-mounted globes. She moved down the corridor, softly treading on the gnarled stones, until she reached the chamber entrance.

Inside, it took a moment for her to survey the room. There were at least three other figures there, standing still in goldspun robes. For a moment, Aethra thought she might have to kill them first before setting the charges, but then she spotted the tentacles from the floor which slipped under the robe and yashmak of each figure. Images of the creature she had killed earlier flooded her mind. When she spotted the cocoons along the wall, some intact and some broken open, Aethra almost lost her tenuous grasp on composure.

At the center of the room, the Seizorann's roots all pulled into a crown that hovered above an opalescent filigree of tentacles sprouting from a bulbous protusion in the floor. That must be the head, Aethra thought. With a deep breath, she strode into the room, pulling the coil of explosives from her shoulder.

As she approached the head, a half-dozen tentacles emerged from the floor and started to slip under Aethra's robes. With a shot of adrenaline, she leapt to the side and ran the remaining distance. She slung the coil of pouch-charges over the opalescent feeder-tentacles, settling them at the base where they met the larger bulk of the creature. Behind her, she could hear the wet suckering sound of the Seizorann de-coupling from the three attendants.

No time to see what they're doing, Aethra thought as she threw her arms around the feeders, covering them with the robe. A shrill screech filled the air as she backed out of the robe and tucked its edges under the coil of charges. Then a stabbing pain in the middle of her back knocked Aethra to her knees, and a presence invaded her mind, probing its sticky fingers through her thoughts, asking "Who are you?"

It was like fighting under water. Aethra struggled to draw her shortsword, but flailed helplessly on the floor as she faced her attacker. Several more tentacles emerged from beneath the faceless goldspun robes as Aethra found her wits and ripped the sinewy coil out of her back. She nearly succumbed to the searing pain, but managed to land a well placed kick which sent the attacker sprawling.

The other two were upon her as she got to her knees, but for them it was already too late. Aethra ripped her yashmak open, drew her sword, and quickly dispatched the two unarmed attackers. She was almost lost in the moment, when she spotted the third attendant pulling at the robes covering the Seizorann. She reached the figure just as it pulled loose the far side of the covering, and crushed the back of its head with the flat of her blade. It slumped over the Seizorann's head, and the writhing beneath its robes ceased.

Aethra paused for a moment to catch her breath, and realized the walls and floors of the chamber were moving! Several black stalks shot out of the floor and slashed blindly at Aethra and the covering robes. While dodging the random attacks of the Seizorann, Aethra fished a firestone from her pocket, and searched for a pouch with a fuse already planted. At last, she found the primed pouch beside the fallen attendant, struck the firestone against the floor, and touched it to the fuse. The short fuse burned at an alarming rate!

Through the dark corridor she raced, dodging the shoots and vines of the Seizorann as

it sought to ensnare her. The explosion threw her to the floor just as she reached the pair of anterooms at the end of the corridor. The shrill screeching of the creature was replaced by a loud ringing in Aethra's ears, and she wondered if she's ever hear properly again.

All around her, the Seizorann spasmed and flailed wildly. Aethra staggered to her feet and found her way outside through the left anteroom. For a moment, all she could see was Niryn racing towards her. She felt faint.

"Come on," Niryn yelled loud enough to be heard over the ringing in Aethra's ears. "We've got to..."

Niryn grabbed Aethra and heaved away from the temple. A second later, one of the temple's towering pinnacles crashed where she had stood.

"The city is tearing itself apart," Niryn screamed as he pulled on Aethra's arm.

Then the world snapped into sharp focus. All around, she could see the Seizorann ripping free of the buildings and attacking anyone nearby. People were pouring into the streets, many still in bedclothes.

"What have I done?" Aethra stood swaying, her mind stunned by the terror she had unleashed. Buildings that were severely deformed by the Seizorann crumbled without its support. Those that still stood were a hive of menacing whips, many of which already occupied in the devouring of their prey.

Niryn slapped Aethra, then grabbed her face. "Listen to me," he yelled, "we have to get out!" Aethra nodded and did not resist as he pulled her further away from the crumbling temple..

At the eastern edge of the plaza, Niryn let go of Aethra and drew his shortsword. He

pointed to the golden yashmak still partially tied about her head. "You might want to get rid of that."

Snap out of it, Aethra thought as she discarded the gloves and yashmak. She reached to draw her sword and realized she must have lost it in the temple. She cursed under her breath, and gestured for Niryn to lead the way.

Together, they hastened through the streets, avoiding the Seizorann where possible, fighting it when necessary. The roads were choked with rubble and the desiccated remains of those who had not escaped. As they made their way, Aethra noticed that there were fewer tentacles still active, and many lying dormant with no visible sign of injury. By the time they reached the ruins of the gatehouse, almost all of the Seizorann's tentacles had fallen still.

On the gatehouse commons, a large mob had gathered and was climbing over what was left of the outer wall. Aethra and Niryn joined the throng and started climbing over the pile of rubble that was once mighty fortifications.

As they reached the crest of the wall, the ground shuddered and the stones re-settled. Aethra narrowly avoided a small boulder which would have crushed her foot. She looked back to see if anyone behind her needed help, and saw the top of Rannoch temple disappear into a great sinkhole. The sinkhole was growing at an incredible pace, devouring blocks of the city in the blink of an eye.

When he noticed that Aethra was no longer beside him, Niryn looked back. "What the freck..."

Aethra turned and started to scramble down the other side of the ruined wall. "It's the salt mines," she yelled out, "They're collapsing! Run!"

The thunder of the sinkhole's voracious maw was deafening as Aethra and Niryn

reached the bottom and sprinted into the desert. She couldn't understand why the mob in front of her was stopping. Then she saw the Rhunock army waiting on the next rise, perhaps two hundred yards away, their standard flapping in the wind.

Over her shoulder, Aethra saw the advance of the sinkhole stop, just after swallowing the city's wall. The ringing in her ears had subsided, and over it she could hear the cheers and war-cries of the Rhunock. She bit her lip and turned back toward the army, and saw the Rhunock dancing about and celebrating.

"Somebody has to pay," Aethra growled as she took Niryn's shortsword. She strode through the mob, and marched toward the forward ranks of the Rhunock. Niryn chased after her.

"Aethra! What are you doing," Niryn asked as he caught up. "You're Dargai, remember? They'll kill you!"

"What's one more in this morning of death."

As she approached the warriors, Darlock stepped out of the rejoicing throng and rubbed his hands. "Aethra! You've done it," he shouted with a broad smile. "I knew you would come through!"

Aethra swung her sword down on Darlock, but it was countered by another Rhunock standing next to him.

"Aethra," Darlock said, the smile still fixed on his face, "what's wrong? You seem upset?"

"What's wrong," Aethra asked as she pulled back her sword and swung again. The blow was deflected by the same guard. "You lied to me! You knew this would happen and didn't tell me!"

"If I told you," Darlock said, his smile fading, "or Cira Nai, then neither of you would have helped. The wheel has turned today Aethra, and crushed the Sheyar'tyl."

"It also crushed thousands of innocents!" Aethra's next blow was parried, but not before nicking Darlock on the cheek. A fresh trickle of blood flowed down his face.

Darlock stepped forward, exposing himself to her next swing. "A few had to be sacrificed in order to save many more," Darlock growled.

The tip of Aethra's blade came to rest beneath Darlock's chin. The guard stepped forward, but Darlock gestured for him to stand down. "The Seizorann destroyed Sunai, Aethra. Not you," Darlock said. "Demaria will come to realize this, and then they will start asking questions. The Sheyar'tyl will not like the answers."

A moment passed, with Aethra and Darlock staring at each other. Then Aethra lowered her sword, and looked back at the mob of Dargai gathered a hundred yards away. There were perhaps five hundred left from a city of over twenty thousand. Was her friend Merrick among them?

"The war is over," Aethra said as she turned back to Darlock. She could feel the morning sun burning her face already, but she didn't care. "Go home. Leave your army's supply carts and gargeks here. We will need them to make the two day journey to Celai."

Darlock nodded, "Are you sure you wouldn't rather return to the Scaryn?"

"They have nothing, and many of them have probably never been beyond the city walls," Aethra said. "I must take them to Celai, and count the cost of a city."



