

Lord Stephen wearily slumped back onto the sweat-stained and uncomfortable chair, musing on just how wrong things could go in a mere three days.

Seventy-two hours ago he had been the state's most wealthy and self-possessed merchant. Grain, iron ore from the mountains, fish from the coast, precious metals and gems, even women if one was so inclined; if someone wanted it, then Lord Stephen was like to be able to get it for you.

His fat fingers were firmly lodged in every pie, and his name, a great name stretching back to the first men to set foot upon Mellorian, was known throughout all nine of the city states. It was synonymous with power, and that most of all Lord Stephen liked best.

Yet as he sat in his now empty manor house, silent save for the calls of woodland birds from the estates outside, he realised those days of ascendancy were behind him. It seemed plain to him that his journey upon the long path of life was nearing its conclusion, and the shadow of the doorway beyond loomed heavy in his heart. He looked forlornly at the rotten food upon the dining table, the remnants of a breakfast three days passed that he never finished.

He marvelled, admittedly in a morose fashion, at the difference now present in his life since that accursed meal. Since he had clapped eyes on the letter and he had seen those six words that had heralded the ruination of his comfortable, ordered world: *I know what you have done...*

Lord Stephen scoffed at the letter; assuming it was merely a poorly wrought jest. There was no further elaboration over its meaning, for the letter was otherwise empty, nor any hint as to its author. He questioned his servants about its provenance but no one had even seen it delivered - yet they all swore on oath it was present when they rose that morning, sitting in the silver bowl in the foyer.

Lord Stephen put the letter aside and continued with his breakfast as was his way, at a leisurely pace. His enthusiasm for the food was somewhat soured by the note, but he was a rapacious eater, and so gamely carried on with his chewing.

Servants flitted to and fro in the small room that served as his dining chamber. A Butler and two other table servants; topping up his small beer or bringing another course to the table to satiate his prodigious hunger.

They moved swiftly and quietly, for they knew better than to interrupt his meal with questions or distraction, and even more so now that he had fallen into a sullen mood.

Lord Stephen was prone to distemper whenever he felt slighted, and this was worse by far if he felt that from someone he considered beneath his station. They had witnessed his rage at even simple infractions before, and they would give him no cause if they could help it.

What the letter made reference to, Lord Stephen wondered about with some trepidation, and more than a little curiosity. A voice; far back in his mind and buried deep within that part of his memory forcefully repressed, tried to answer, but was quashed. *Some things must stay buried*, he thought, hastily dismissing the images that tried to creep into his mind.

He heard *the voice* for the first time as he took a bite from a cold leg of chicken – a personal favourite of his.

*Liar!* came the challenge, very close at hand but not obviously from anywhere or anyone he recognised.

Lord Stephen spat a mouthful of bird upon the table and his face turned scarlet.

“Who said that?” he bellowed.

The servants stopped their duties immediately; a look of confusion mixed with disquiet at their lord’s annoyance writ plain upon their faces. “M’lord Stephen,” murmured the Butler anxiously, “No one present said a word. We all know better than to interrupt your important ruminations, master.”

Lord Stephen snorted derisively, but was mollified for the time being. He thought that he had conceivably misheard the sound, for who would be foolish enough to insult him within his own manse?

He went back to his food without a word of apology. Lord Stephen was not the sort of man to abase himself before the common sort. A man of his character and standing had no need to beg forgiveness: they instead demanded respect. He was a firm believer in the rule of the mighty over the poor and the weak; he would not brook any challenge to that.

Lord Stephen had barely put his mind back upon thought of his business when he was interrupted by the voice once more.

*Thief!* It exclaimed with unashamed defiance.

Lord Stephen stood violently, wielding a table knife in a threatening manner.

“Which blackguard among you sullies my name once more? I’ll have your hide when I know the truth of it, don’t doubt me!” Lord Stephen roared.

The servants were put into a difficult position. Again they had heard nothing but the angry chewing of their master, but yet he seemed so very sure someone had spoken, and this gave them irrational pause. They knew better than to gainsay him twice, so they stood mute, hoping for a sudden abatement in his wrath or for a reason for it to at least present itself.

“Well?” he hissed. “None of you have the courage to say these things to my face, clearly. I shall have the truth of it though, or my name is not Stephen Zantt!”

The three servants present in the dining room backed away, realising that it would take more than the calming works of the Butler this time. To his credit, the man tried to speak once more but was cut off by his master.

“No more of your slippery words,” Lord Stephen warned the Butler. “None of you shall leave here before I have my culprit. If any of you wish to remain in my service, they should turn in the cove forthwith!”

No one spoke, instead looking fearfully between each other and Lord Stephen. They were at a loss to explain his vehement anger, and none of them dared challenge him further and give the man a reason to dismiss them. Yet their quizzical faces seemed only to anger him further. Lord Stephen gestured back to the dining table.

“I shall return to my seat and by the time I have eaten that leg of chicken I expect the coward to have owned up. If not I will have you all thrown into gaol for your insolence.”

He turned stiffly and sat down; his beady eyes daring them to defy one such as he, the great Lord Stephen Zantt. He focused on the leg of chicken for a single hungry instant, and in that one moment the mystery voice rang out again.

*Slanderer! Bearer of false witness!*

The slender thread of his patience was now cut. He slammed his fists down on the table and grabbed the larger of the meat-knives that was close to hand. The servants bolted for the door in sheer terror of their lord, the aging Butler the last of them. None of them had any intention of stopping for they knew Lord Stephen always kept his word over matters of punishment.

They sped through the manor and out the front door, breaching so many of his rules of protocol that they knew they would never again be permitted to return regardless of their blameless part in his fury.

He chased them, but his portly frame could not match their terror-fuelled speed. Lord Stephen held the knife aloft and cursed them as cowards and rebels. He sucked in a lung-full of air, feeling a burning in his blood and droplets of sweat forming on the nape of his neck.

A sound behind him made him turn, and he saw more servants staring back at him with the same infuriating confusion on their faces as the three he had just chased off.

“Back to your work, you idle rogues!” Stephen bellowed before turning back to squint at the diminishing figure of the butler, still sprinting in the distance.

*Swindler!* The voice called again, louder and even more insistent.

There was a note of mockery now, as though its owner was amused by the response prompted from Lord Stephen. The other servants had already begun filing back to their duties as he had commanded, though they were curious about the master’s actions. All of them were well aware of his temper, and they wished to stay on the better side of it.

“Hold!” Stephen screeched at them with incandescent fury.

He could not believe that they still dared to torment him, his mind utterly missing the point that none of the previous three suspects were present, and the alarming implications of this.

“You are all in on this together!” he raved. “I can see it now; you have all taken it upon yourself to mock your master, hoping that anonymity will spare you my wrath.” Lord Stephen shook his jowly head fiercely.

“Oh how you must have all laughed dreaming up this game for me; taking my coin whilst disrespecting my position. You are all rebels! City dwelling filth the lot of you! Perhaps you think you are too good for my manor and my service?” He pointed an arm to the open doorway. “Then leave, all of you... at once!”

The servants delayed a moment, the speed and strangeness of the situation outpacing the thoughts in their heads. Lord Stephen screamed at them once more, spittle issuing from his lips, and they realised this was no jest. None of them dared argue with the master, and so they trudged meekly past his ample frame, none of them meeting his wild eyes. They thought him capricious, more than a little mad; but ultimately he was the one with the money and the power.

In the hours that followed the dismissal of his entire staff, some semblance of calm returned to Lord Stephen. Although he would need to find a new group of servants to maintain his manor and keep him in the comfort he was accustomed to, the feeling of freedom that an empty house provided gave him a sense of excitement. He retired to the sun-room, into the worn but comfortable

arms of a reading chair. Many a warm day he had taken a brief nap within its plush confines, and today he had need of it to ease his troubled humours.

He was just dozing off, considering the pleasant matter of hiring more staff and of punishing the rabble that had mocked him, when he heard the voice again.

“Murderer.”

It came from close by, and yet was distant. There was no one else visible in the room. No place of hiding that could possibly conceal them.

The word reignited in him a sudden panicked anger, but now there was fear also. The line had been crossed, and those memories locked away in the back of his mind stirred once more. Rationality told him that one of those swine had returned, that their sport was not yet completed. But a fear stirred in his breast for the first time; unlocked by an accusation that none could know, save the distant and dim past.

“Ho!” He shouted, trying to gather his wits. He got to his feet, turning on the spot and directing his words forcefully to the rest of his empty house. “I shall have at you with my short sword when I catch you. What a knave to taunt the lion in his den!”

A loud thump came from upstairs. Then another. Lord Stephen grinned wickedly, and dashed to his mantle, where he found a long-handled dagger. The fool was trying to rob him just above. What a nerve this trickster had to try and outwit Lord Stephen Zantt with such distractions! He burst from the room, seeking the stairs and the fool that had finally revealed his location.

Just as he placed a foot upon the stairs, distantly noting that they were unusually dark despite the time of day, the voice called to him once more.

*“That dagger will not avail you, brother Stephen.”*

Lord Stephen stopped dead. “I have no brother,” he cried out in a smug bellow. “He’s...”

*“Dead,”* the voice cut him off. *“Thirty years to the day, brother. I see you have declined to honour the day, but I suppose that is to be expected, after all.”*

Lord Stephen reversed his step, descending back into the wide corridor that fed the stairs. There was another thump from upstairs. Closer this time, and louder. His ears registered another thump, and then something after – another sound that reminded him of something heavy being dragged along the floor. A mottled hand gripped the top of the stairs, its owner just beyond the light. Lord Stephen shrieked, for the hand was clearly rotten through and bone gleamed beneath the remaining slivers of tendon.

He turned and fled, the dagger falling from his grip as all thoughts of offence were dispelled utterly. He ran for his dining room, which due to the presence of his silver service was one of the more defensible positions in the house. The fact that he could have exited the manor and into the welcome embrace of the sun never occurred to him: his wealth, his power was tied up in this ancestral pile, and even his present terror would not override that fact.

He sped past the heavy oaken door to the room, and immediately span on his heels, gripping it and slamming it closed. He produced a heavy iron key from a chain around his neck and slipped it into the lock. The click of the mechanism was the most beautiful sound he could recall hearing.

His relief was short lived though, as he suddenly became aware of the servants’ door at the back of the room. He pushed himself from the locked door, leaving a sweaty handprint upon its heavy, dark wood.

Lord Stephen went over quickly to the other door, overturning all manner of objects from the sideboard he passed on the way. He tripped on the foot of the dining chair; out of position since he had thrown it back pursuing his errant staff. His head connected with the edge of the solid teak sideboard with a great crunch, and for a moment he lost consciousness.

Sometime later, moments or hours he could not tell, he became dimly aware of the sound of a thump, followed by a hideous dragging. Terror bloomed in his heart and the fog of his injured skull was abated. Lord Stephen could tell the sound was close; very close to the locked door! He whimpered pitifully, the ache of his head was like a drum being hit with a wooden mallet.

With great effort, Lord Stephen pulled himself forwards to the unlocked servant's door. He moved slowly, for he was a large man and not accustomed to exercise. Eventually, his strength returned enough to get to his knees. He was dimly aware that a serving fork, probably knocked onto the floor by his passage, had pierced the flesh of his arm. A steady flow of blood ran down its length, and he viewed this with a sort of detached horror, but he could not spare a moment to pull it free. Not with one door to his safe room unlocked.

He crawled furiously to the servant's door and used the heavy iron handle to pull himself upright. He was thankful he had made this room a secure place when the second lock clicked into place as he clumsily twisted his key in it. Now he felt some degree of safety; enough to review his situation and check his options. He extracted the fork from his arm, and winced as the blood flowed more freely from the wound.

A voice came from outside the first door. A voice he now recognised and that inspired a fear in him unlike any other he had known in his life. It was indeed the voice of his dead brother, Bertram; who had been in the ground some thirty years. The voice was now more familiar and yet less, for it had taken on the coldness of the grave. Desiccated and rasping, like the wind through bone chimes.

*"Brother Stephen,"* the voice whispered, *"will you not let me in? Shall I not take tea with you, as we did of old?"*

Lord Stephen tried to speak, but no words escaped his throat - merely a squeak of terror. He held on to his wounded arm tightly, and the flow of blood slowed, eventually stopping.

*"Open the door brother Stephen,"* said Bertram, a tone of authority now introduced. *"I am eldest; in truth this manor is mine! You must let me in."*

Lord Stephen shook his head. *"Nay...Nay Bertram, I shall not do that,"* he said nervously. *"Go forth from this house and bother me no more, spectre! Back to your grave I beg you."*

No reply came from Bertram. Long minutes passed before Lord Stephen heard movement. Thump, drag, thump, drag. His eyes followed the sound from one door to the next, hairs raising on his trembling hand as the door handle on the servant's door slowly turned. The lock held true, and a small sigh of relief passed Lord Stephen's lips.

*"I am no spectre, brother Stephen,"* whispered Bertram from beyond the door. *"My soul has never passed through to the blessed realm. What you did has cursed me to be trapped here. Bound to this rotting corpse that was once my body. Would that I were a spirit, I would come through and pay my dues to you!"* The door handle turned again, more insistently this time.

*"Nay brother,"* pleaded Lord Stephen to the creature behind the door. *"I am blameless; I swear my life on it!"*

A hacking, wheezing laugh was his reply.

Lord Stephen set his chair upright and slumped into it, the threat hanging in the air all the while. He could scarcely believe the situation. He poured through rational possibilities, wondering perhaps if he had eaten something for breakfast that had disagreed with him? Was it that the sound outside his locked door was no more than spoiled meat fighting against his digestion? Or might it be an attack of the humours, brought on by too much business and a lack of exercise? Such things were commonplace in his experience.

His hand grasped for a goblet of small beer that had been left on the table from breakfast. It shook with such force some of the liquid was thrown from the vessel and fell onto his tunic. He took a deep draught, and he felt a little calmer. No sound could be heard now beyond the door.

It suddenly struck him to be the height of foolishness to have believed he heard anything at all. He took another deep swig of the liquid and found his hand more responsive. The terror was fading, replaced by a surfeit of embarrassment. To think of what he had been reduced to, mere hours after dispensing with his servants. He managed a wan smile as he considered that he had become too soft in his later years!

*"I am still waiting, brother,"* came the voice of Bertram, as though he knew what Lord Stephen had been thinking. *"I am come to collect my due, and the debt is great. Greater than all the gold your greedy hands have amassed since you put me in the cold earth."*

Hope drained from Lord Stephen like the small beer in the goblet he dropped to the floor. It rang out as it contacted the stone, like a cheap bell calling the house to dinner.

Bertram laughed again, *"I am announced then, dear brother. Shall I now take my place at table?"* His tone betrayed a certain malicious joy, as though he had dreamt of nothing else than reacquainting himself with his brother Stephen for thirty years, and now the hour was at hand.

Lord Stephen howled in anguish, eyeing the door in dread. "I shall not permit you through, Bertram! I can't!" he pleaded. "I beg thee, go back from whence you came. I shall pay the Rectors to sing hymns at your grave for a year for the salvation of your soul. I swear it! You shall enter the blessed realm and others shall take note, such will be the gold I spend in your name if you will just leave."

The door jarred as it was struck powerfully, interrupting the pleading. Stephen cowered from it, toppling from the chair and landing painfully on the floor once again.

He held out his hands to the door, as though he could ward back the evil it held at bay. He looked around for anything he could use to defend himself, quickly noting the knife he had threatened his servants with earlier. *How I need their aid now!* he thought, cursing his blind wrath. He could see now that the evil creature outside had played a trick upon him, had turned him against those who could offer protection. How easily he had fallen for such a simple ruse!

The door jerked again, the anger of Bertram was great, his impatience to revenge himself on his brother growing ever keener.

*"Come now Stephen,"* Bertram's crypt-voice hissed. *"Let us not trifle any longer. Do you think I failed to see you in the reflection of my window pane as you approached with the blade? Do you think I know not the arm of my own brother as it grasps my neck, readying it for the cold kiss of a knife?"*

Bertram struck the door forcefully once more. *"Such was your greed then, that you would kill your only brother for money."* The last word came out with such surprised distaste, though it was the smallest thing in the world.

"You don't understand," Lord Stephen protested feebly. "I was to have *nothing*. I saw the will! I was going to be cast out into beggary while you had *everything*."

The door almost caved in under the fury of the undead. *"You killed me for coin, you wretched, fat pig! I would have seen that you had an allowance; I had no anger toward you."*

"Allowance! A pox on your allowance!" Lord Stephen spat as he raised himself back to his chair, now confident the door could hold against the creature. "I am Lord Stephen Zantt, born to raise our name up higher than ever before. Not to watch you waste it on baubles for your Mehtosii witch!"

Bertram howled in rage. *"Do not speak of her, you craven dog!"* he screamed through the door. *"Do you think I know not what happened to her, even as my life's blood spilled onto the floor? I have heard nothing but the howl of her spirit for the last thirty years. She screams for vengeance at what you did!"*

Lord Stephen squealed as more of his past was dragged out from under the repression he had willingly put in place. "Nay," he cried softly, "nay..." as though he could dispel his past with a word.

*"I know all, brother Stephen,"* Bertram's voice crowed. *"I know how she sobbed and pleaded. I know how your hands felt around her throat; how she struggled for air before the blackness took her. I know many things that even you do not know, you whose eyes took in her last breath."* There was a pause after that last word, and Lord Stephen stared at the door blankly, becoming increasingly disturbed.

Bertram continued, *"What you failed to notice, as you carried her body out into the night to bury, as you shovelled damp earth over the evidence of your crime, was that she yet lived."*

Lord Stephen gasped in shock. "No, she was gone. I would not be so cruel —"

*"She lived!"* hissed Bertram's corpse. *"Her mouth filled with dirt, her arms locked in position by the weight of it, but her eyes were wide open in terror. They implored you to look once upon them and know, but your guilt prevented that, didn't it brother?"*

Lord Stephen shook his head, but it wasn't the action of someone with absolute certainty. "I thought, I mean I was sure at the time. It was not my intention to make her suffer; I wanted it to be as quick as possible." He exhaled deeply, placing his hands on his head. "She lived then?"

The door shook with another violent blow. *"She lived, you worthless, bloated turd of a man,"* Bertram spat. *"Her last vision was of the spade as it lowered... Then she was alone with her horror and madness."* Bertram's voice had become soft and wistful, as he relived the pain and the fear of his beloved wife. For him, a fate worse than his own death.

There was a tapping sound on the door. Soft at first but building in intensity each time. Tap tap, tap tap, tap tap. Bertram's voice took on an air of excited revelation. "Do you hear that, Brother Stephen?" he asked. Tap tap, tap tap, tap tap. *"The sound of approaching footsteps perhaps?"*

Lord Stephen strained to hear. There! Footsteps were indeed approaching. "Help! He bellowed. "Help me, there is a monster here, summon the guard! Help I say!"

Tap tap, tap tap, tap tap.

Louder and louder.

The chance of rescue emboldened Lord Stephen, and he got up stealthily and made his way to the servant's door. He put his ear to it and listened. Tap tap, tap tap. Yes! Someone close at hand. He quickly turned the key in the lock, swinging the door back to bark a warning at whomever approached.

Standing before him, illuminated by shafts of light falling through a small window in the adjacent room, was the walking corpse of a woman, his onetime sister-in-law, Margot Zantt. The majority of her face had dissolved in her long sojourn under the earth, but there was enough there to stir a memory in him. Her boney fingertips reached out towards him, and Stephen emitted a piercing shriek before slamming the door and locking it once more.

Bertram, laughed. *"I forgot to mention, dear brother, that I am not the only one here to exact revenge!"* As he spoke, the main door shook as it was struck with mad ferocity. A woman's shriek, ethereal, deep in anger, rang out from behind it.

"No!" Lord Stephen sobbed; he dropped to his knees and he cried as the guilt of his past flooded back. Emotion overwhelmed him, and tears ran down his rotund cheeks. He had suppressed his memories for so long, had quietly justified his action internally a thousand times. It was for the good of the Zantt name, he had told himself. His brother was a spendthrift, a dreamer. But it was all a lie, and he knew this. It had been about his need; his relentless desire for money.

The main door came under a protracted assault, a rage denied for thirty years of torment exercising every ounce of impotent fury.

"Lady," pleaded Lord Stephen. "I am sorry. Truly sorry for what had to happen. It was never meant to transpire thus. You shouldn't have come in when you did, seen what you did. I would have taken you as my wife, Taken your son as my own."

The attack ceased the moment he mentioned that word: son. A seed of devious possibility blossomed in his mind, banishing repentance to the farthest corners of consciousness. "Yes, Lady. Your son lives – I have raised him all these years and he is now a man of note, or so I have heard." He paused, waiting for any sign to continue. The absence of attack was good enough.

"I treated him with every kindness, and he wanted for nothing. I sought only to be the father that I was forced to take from him. Mercy I beg, if only for the one act of kindness I showed you."

There was a scratching, gentle but still audible, at the door. A thin, reedy voice whispered *"He...phes-cus..."*

Lord Stephen got to his feet and put his mouth close to the keyhole. "Yes Lady Margot! Hephescus, your beloved son. I would gladly share tales of his life, if you would but allow me the chance to repent for my sins. He has been apprenticed to a Great House of Magic! Can you imagine it? A Zantt in a position of importance in a Great House. A Zantt with the second sight!"

Stephen's voice took on a calmness and charm that had not been present before. "How our name has grown through his many deeds, you would be so proud." His wily intellect, one that had seen him excel in the mercurial world of business, had identified a chink in her desire for vengeance. *If I can but convince her of this one point, I will live*, he thought.

"*Hephescus,*" she repeated in broken and ragged tones, with a hint of deep sadness too. Without warning, the door was hit with such force dust was loosed from the timbers of the room.

The very hinges of the door, designed to withstand the predations of a team of thieves, shook under the assault of a mother, denied the chance to raise her only child.

Bertram laughed. *"A clever gambit, my brother. But unlikely to bring you the victory you hope for. We have waited thirty years. What are a few more scant hours to us, the undying? We shall wait. If we cannot claw you out of your bolthole, we shall wait for necessity to bring you to us. Then, you will know our torments. All of them."*

Lord Stephen kicked the now empty goblet across the room in frustration. He had allowed himself to hope only to see it dashed. His mind, now acclimatised to the most insane of situations, allowed itself to return to type. His anger surfaced, white hot and vicious. "I have food, and water," he sneered, gesturing back to the half eaten breakfast. "I shall remain here, safe enough until visitors come. The manor is never long without them, and they shall bring me salvation I assure you. I will have your corpses burnt like kindling wood. The Great Houses are known to me, they shall send wizards to vanquish you if I but ask it. I shall go on killing you two until the deed is final!"

*"Is that so?"* Bertram asked. *"I wonder if you would have such courage without anything to eat or drink. Look on your stores and know fear once more, you fat, leprous rodent."*

Lord Stephen dismissed the comment with a hand, but he could not stop himself turning to look, even if it was just to prove his rotting brother wrong once more. His mouth dropped open with dismay at what he saw. The food was crawling with maggots, beetles - insects and filth of all kinds. Moreover, it now carried the unmistakable pungency of rot about it. It was almost as if the ghouls outside had infected the room with their own hideous visage.

He went over to the table, looking for anything not touched by the teeming waves of putrescence now covering it. If could at least have water, his thoughts told him, then that would give him much time to wait. He went to the sideboard, to the water jug first. A foam of greenish algae covered the surface. He recoiled in horror as something moved just under the surface, sending a ripple through it.

He peered into the urn of small beer, but that too was now befouled. Something black and viscous, looking like the sweat of death itself, had settled upon it. Lord Stephen looked down on it in disgust and knew that no level of thirst he had ever experienced would convince him to drink from that urn again. He took his seat mutely, the confidence afforded him by his anger all spent, and the laughter of his long-dead brother ringing in his ears.

For three days Lord Stephen waited in that room.

His only understanding of time coming from what little light made it through a tiny thickly-paned window and the sounds of familiar birds that reached his secure room through the empty halls of his manor house. The candles that kept the room illuminated fell low through overuse.

Of his captors he heard little - that is unless he tried to get any sleep. In such cases they would create a terrible din to prevent it from coming, or would try to force the doors; using his own terror to keep him awake when their noise was insufficient to the task.

For a man used to the comforts of food and drink - and the best to be had of those it was sure, the hunger and thirst gnawed away at his mind. Within a day he was considering trying to wipe off the creatures from the rotten chicken legs and feast upon them. But the smell was beyond appalling to him as he approached them.

The long summer days meant a build up of heat, which only intensified the progression of putrefaction in the room and his constant, unquenchable thirst that he knew he could not slake. He

drank his urine after two days, gagging at the foul taste of it, though the corruption had now taken root in his own body.

He defecated in the corner of the room, which seemed only to exacerbate the fecundity of insect life present. Flies crawled into his ears, and his mouth as it lay open when he tried to doze. His own considerable reek added to the general wretchedness of the atmosphere; the strong malodorous stench of an unwashed, sweaty fat man.

He talked to himself to pass the time, or sometimes to the rotting sentinels beyond the door. He cursed them, or he cursed himself, and often he cursed hope. He begged and pleaded, he threatened and bargained. No course brought him the slightest respite.

His heart told him that there would be no happy end for him, no saviour to rescue him from the infernal captors that stood guard at his doors. He had considered every option available to him, even the most unlikely of scenarios. For a time he wondered if he could make a break for it, but to even approach one of the doors caused a violent attack from the guardian behind it.

So he sat, and he waited, gazing off into nothingness. The memories of his previous life of plenty and of power became dim; and only the knowledge of want, of discomfort, and of the ever present fear of being torn limb from limb by ghoulish assailants occupied his mind.

Soon enough, his thoughts turned to other ways to end his torment. After all, he had a knife, had fabrics in the room he could use to form a noose, but his desire to persist overruled such uncomfortable thoughts. Lord Stephen wondered if the hunger or the thirst would be the end of him first. For he would never open those doors and let himself to be subjected to the revenge dreamed up by those he had wronged so long ago.

Lord Stephen awoke with the taste of foulness in his mouth and those accursed flies crawling around on his lips. He was unsure how long he had been asleep, surprised that it had even been possible. His damned captors had not let him get so close before.

He suddenly became aware of the sound that had roused him from his sleep. An insistent, soft knocking. Not like the incessant pounding of his brother or his rotting bride, but something all the more heartening.

"Uncle?" enquired a concerned voice. "Uncle, it is I, Hephescus. Where are your servants? Are you locked within your dining room? Uncle?"

Lord Stephen tried to push himself up quickly, but his head swam from the exertion. "Hephescus" he exclaimed with a parched throat. "My boy you must flee, they will get you! Call the guardsmen from town, get help right away."

"Uncle," replied Hephescus, "I have searched the house and no one is present. I have even used a spell of unmasking upon your manor, just to locate you. Nothing is in this house but us. Were you attacked by bandits? What happened to your staff?"

With a supreme effort, Lord Stephen got up and cautiously approached the door. He crouched down on aching knees to look through the keyhole in the door; half expecting to see something foul staring back at him. For it to be some sort of trick. He spied the hale looking hand of something living. His heart filled with joy and relief when his nephew lowered his face so it was visible to him.

“Hephesus, my dear boy!” said Lord Stephen with utter delight. “I’m so glad to see you! I beg you to assist me, I have been trapped in here for days without food and water. Oh I am so hungry and thirsty, I shall eat for days! Please my boy, you must help your Uncle.”

Lord Stephen drew the key from around his neck and placed it in the lock, he weak hands taking a moment to obtain the necessary purchase before the mechanism sounded and he drew back, opening the handle.

A warning sounded in the back of his mind, that perhaps this too was a trick. Such was his hunger and thirst, however, that he eagerly grasped the chance. As the door swung open, he held his breath to see what was beyond. He released a huge sigh of relief to see his nephew there, some years older than the last time they had parted, but unmistakably dour-faced Hephesus, standing there in his vestments of wizardry.

Hephesus Zantt was tall and gaunt, a short beard framing his face, and with the long angular features common to the Zantt. He wore robes of purple, the colour of his House, and a long travelling cloak with the hood thrown back. Hephesus gave a formal nod, “Uncle, you are a mess. Let me assist you.”

Lord Stephen almost embraced his nephew but had the presence of mind to maintain his distance, such was the unkempt and unclean state of his person. Hephesus strode purposefully into the room, his nose wrinkling at the distasteful stench emanating from that unpleasant corner. The wizard’s eyes lingered on every detail, drawing a picture in his mind of his Uncle’s last few days.

He noted that Lord Stephen was exhausted and he bade him sit at table, to which his uncle complied. Hephesus raised an eyebrow. “You say that you are hungry and thirsty, Uncle?”

“By the Sleeping Gods, yes my boy. Not a morsel to eat or a drop to drink these past three days. Trapped in here for my own protection while those fiends stalked my halls!”

Hephesus rubbed at his small beard as he examined the table. “Uncle, what of this food here on the table? It is not in the best state but it is certainly edible.” He motioned his long arm across the tabletop.

“What?” asked Lord Stephen. “Are you blind my lad? To eat that filth encrusted offering would have killed me with greater swiftness than those who forced me in here. On that matter, I ask you to-“

Hephesus coughed impatiently. “Uncle this food is fine!” he said with some surprise.

Lord Stephen was about to protest again, when his eyes caught sight of the food. It was not a sight that was familiar to him, and his thoughts became confused. The table was now clear of crawling insects and putrescence, leaving some rather ordinary looking if slightly beyond its best, food. His eyes widened, and in an instant an arm reached out, grabbing an aged slice of mutton. He sniffed at it, detecting only the tang of the mustard used to marinade it. He greedily fell upon the food, tearing at the tough meat with his teeth like a mangy dog having found an unexpected meal. His eyes closed in intense joy.

Hephesus crossed to the sideboard. He peered into both serving vessels and shook his head slightly in disbelief.

“Uncle,” he chided. “You have enough water here to keep you for a week!” His dark eyes fixed on the swelling present on Lord Stephen’s head. “Ah, you have an injury to your head I see. That explains much, I fear.” Hephesus filled an empty cup with water and handed it to his Uncle. The elder man drained it in a single greedy gulp, a thin trickle of it escaping his lips and dribbling down his neck. “Rest now, Uncle. It is all over now.”

Tears of thankfulness came to the eyes of Lord Stephen. His mind was much confused, for he had tested both food and drink so many times these last few days and found them to be beyond consumption. It simply wasn't conceivable that there had been nothing wrong. He had been so damnably sure!

He thought perhaps Hephescus was right and that his mind was much affected by the knock he had received. After all, much of what had transpired did so only after he had fallen. Could it all be explained merely by such mundane chance? He feared to hope after these long days of misery he had known. But he knew one thing, now that his nephew was here, he would indeed be alright.

Even if he had not imagined it all in some sort of delirium, with a powerful wizard at his side, nothing in this world *or the next* could threaten him now. He grabbed handfuls of meat and set about them with relish, every once in a while gazing with gratitude at his nephew.

Hephescus drew out a chair, grimaced at what he saw there and then tried another. He took a seat opposite his Uncle. He waited patiently for the man to finish chewing; a smile of sorts – for Hephescus had always been rather solemn as a child, on his face. Eventually, he judged it the right time to ask more of what had occurred.

“Uncle, what happened here to leave the manor emptied, and you the worse for wear?” inquired Hephescus.

Not wanting to reveal much of what he had imagined, or the implications of such revelations, Lord Stephen hesitated, trying to direct the conversation elsewhere. “I am too fatigued now, dear boy. Allow me the time to recuperate, and I shall tell all, I swear it.” *Allow me the time to come up with a story that sounds plausible enough*, he thought.

Hephescus was not put off. He had an enquiring mind, and was dogged in the pursuit of the truth. “Come Uncle,” he smiled. “Have I not delivered you from hardship? Do I not warrant some scrap of information to ease my mind? Your behaviour is quite strange, out of place, and I have half a mind to summon a physician.”

Lord Stephen waved a hand in dismissal of the idea, a slice of meat dangling within his chubby fist. “Nay my boy, I shall not have a quack touching me and asking the most insolent of questions. Some good rest is all I need. Yes, rest and food is all I require for now.”

Seeing from the look the Wizard was affording him that his nephew would not be dissuaded, Lord Stephen spun a tale about bandits, thieves in his household, collusion between the two. Lord Stephen made himself the hero of the piece, naturally, and of his privations a legendary feat of endurance few men could have managed. He thought he saw his nephew sneer at that, but such was his general good cheer, and such was his need to concentrate on the fabrication that he put it out of mind.

On he went for some time, providing various details about his confinement; how he had rejected the entreaties of his foes to present himself – something too close to the truth for comfort, and ending finally with the blessed coming of his beloved nephew to free him from captivity. Thirsty and hungry from his invention, he grabbed a withered chicken leg, and rose for another cup of water.

Hephescus sat quietly for some time, thinking on all he had just heard. He watched his gourmand uncle avail himself to every scrap of food and every drop of water. He waited until this was done, before adding further comment.

“Uncle.” He said with a questioning tone. “There is one thing that is not clear to me in all this.”

Lord Stephen scratched his dirty neck, feeling well pleased with a full stomach and a nicely lubricated throat for the first time in three days. "Oh, nephew?" he said absentmindedly, "What is that?"

Hephesus stroked his beard once more, looking puzzled. "In all your story, you failed to mention what happened to that letter you received?"

Lord Stephen frowned. "A good question that, you see I -" He stopped. His eyes slitted and he looked over at his nephew. "I mentioned no letter, Hephesus." He regarded the man cautiously. "How could you have known about that? I barely remembered it myself with everything I have been through."

The wizard smiled at his Uncle, a thin gash in his face without a hint of warmth. "I sent you that letter, Uncle. I placed it in your silver bowl just three days ago. And I then waited." He raised his hand, and the open door slammed shut and locked by itself.

Lord Stephen's eyes widened in alarm. "You! You did this, you did all this!" He tried to get up but Hephesus muttered a word of power and he found himself unable to move a muscle below his neck. He screamed invectives and cursed his nephew for a traitor.

Hephesus got up and walked round the table to his uncle. He grimaced as he reached inside the older man's tunic; the reek of his body's odour was quite overwhelming. He pulled the key from within, ignoring the protests and question of his uncle, and snapped the chain that secured it to Lord Stephen's neck. He placed it in a leather pouch at his belt and returned to his seat.

Hephesus glowered at his uncle. The mask of fair seeming fell away, revealing an old and deep hatred. "Ask me why," he whispered through gritted teeth.

Lord Stephen did not have to do so for, the reason was plain. "How long have you known?" the older man asked fearfully.

"I first heard the spirit of my mother calling when I was seven," Hephesus replied quickly, to the surprise of his Uncle. "My dreams had long been of dark things that I did not comprehend, of blood tinged with sadness and love. I always sensed darkness in you, Uncle. A sin at your core that was disguised by the façade of your existence.

I was called to a place in the woods far from the house by a force I could not explain nor refuse. There I communed with the spirit of slain Margot, the mother of which I had no recollection. The mother that you had said abandoned me when I was but an infant."

"So long!" Lord Stephen whispered agast, trying to comprehend it. "Yet I knew nothing of it."

Hephesus nodded factually. "Her spirit was maddened by its fate, by her long confinement in unsanctified earth. But the spirit of my father was stronger. He told me all I needed to know. For long years you clothed me and fed me. Kept the roof over my head; kept me alive - no doubt out of guilt for your actions, for you never displayed any love for me in the long years I lived in your shadow."

Lord Stephen tried to refute the claim, "Nonsense. I raised you as my own son."

This angered Hephesus – a vein bulged on his expansive brow. He jabbed an accusing finger at his paralysed uncle. "You may have paid my way Lord Stephen, but I was raised out there in the woods, where the bodies of my parents lay mouldering in the dank earth!

There I learned all the lessons of life that I needed.” Sparks of sorcerous energy flashed in his dark eyes and he pounded the table with a fist, sending plates and cups flying. “Why do you persist with lies, even now, Uncle? Do you think I have come here to forgive; that I can be convinced of a falsehood by your slippery words?”

Lord Stephen dispensed with his attempts at reason, disgust apparent on his sneering face. “So you have come here, after all this time, for revenge? Spare me the hypocrisy of your position, boy. I know what your House does. I know enough to be sure that you have killed, as I have killed. My reasons are not so different to yours. Let us not pretend to ourselves that we are different.”

Hephesus shook his head in denial. “No, Uncle. Were it merely for revenge, I would have killed you many years ago.” He began to draw on the table with his fingertip; some complex pattern that left faint trails of purplish light.

“I was too terrified of you while I lived under your roof to do the deed,” he said without looking up from his work. “Though I thought about it often enough, I assure you. I hoped to learn power enough from the House of Magic you sold me to – yes Uncle, I know of this! You saw an opportunity after my talent had been discovered, and you saw profit in it. Your mind has worked ever thus; seeing people as naught but tools in the aggregation of gold.” Hephesus sighed and shook his head.

“Little did I know that the Great House of Myrke prohibits us from taking revenge on those that have wronged us, or you would have joined your brother, my father, in the earth many years ago. The Law of Myrke states that ‘the wardens of justice may not serve if they allow their minds to be ruled by passion’, for who should have trust in them?”

“Then why are you here,” Lord Stephen asked. “Why the subterfuge and the torment?”

Hephesus smiled again, but this time there was true feeling in it. “I have been called to pass judgement upon you for many crimes, Uncle. Larceny, slander, false witness – incidentally, is there no level you will not stoop to in the act of removing a rival?” he asked.

“The Prince of Bibios himself has spoken out against you. His Highness has paid for the service of House Myrke to punish you for your prodigious avarice. But only the crimes you have admitted to these last three days have earned you more than the warning I was to give you; something more permanent is now called for.” Hephesus offered a small bow to his uncle. “For this I thank you.”

Hephesus stood, and as he did so, the table began to glow brightly. “Lord Stephen Zantt,” he intoned solemnly, following the ancient rites of House Myrke. “You have confessed to the murder of your brother, Bertram and his wife Margot. For this I now pass sentence on you in the name of my House; and that sentence is death.”

Lord Stephen laughed. A hollow sound filled with resentment and defiance. “Do it then! Your hands shall be as red as mine, and I shall enjoy knowing this before I die.” Despite his bravado, Hephesus could see the man’s desperate struggle to fight the spell holding him in position. Hephesus almost admired the man’s singular desire to persist. Almost.

“I shall not corrupt my hands with your blood uncle,” Hephesus replied coolly. The edges of his form blurred before the eyes of Lord Stephen, and within the blink of an eye he was naught but a purple mist, rolling towards the doorway and through it. His voice was all that remained, and it whispered “Not when I know of those who will be much keener than I for it...”

A rotten hand grasped the edge of the table, bathed in the light of the circle of power that had been drawn upon it, followed by another one. A hideous corpse raised itself fully into view just a few scant inches from where Stephen sat.

Lord Stephen recognised Bertram from the scraps of clothing upon its person; for they were the clothes Lord Stephen recalled burying him in. Another hand, mostly bone, grasped his sweat ridden tunic from behind, and he felt something dragging itself towards him. The worm-eaten face of Margot rose up in front of his eyes, no more than an inch from his face. He could smell the sweetness of her decay, could see the multitude of worms writhing within the hollows of her skull.

From outside the manor, Hephescus listened as Lord Stephen screamed once, a wail of utter fear as he saw the *door at the end of the long path*, and then there was silence.

He nodded once: "It is done," he said to himself, relief evident in his voice. *With it perhaps my life is forfeit too*, he thought, for House Myrke had instructed him to pass sentence for lesser crimes only and he had wilfully disobeyed.

A form coalesced from the darkness around him and he instinctively began to summon power to his wards for defence. He felt the familiar power of his teacher, Master Kendros, and relaxed. The teachings of Myrke had instilled in him the desire for justice above all things, and if it was his time to be judged, then he would stand tall and accept it.

He turned to Master Kendros and bowed to the smaller man, which was quickly returned, the charms on Kendros' staff jingling as he moved. Hidden behind the traditional hooded cloak of House Myrke, Kendros' face was obscured, making his intent impossible to discern. Even Hephescus had never seen his face, and the apprentices within the House often gossiped as to why the master would not even lower his hood in the seclusion of House Myrke property.

"You have defied my orders," came a quiet, unthreatening voice from within the hood. "I believe I was most clear, Hephescus."

Zantt nodded. "Your instructions were clear, master. I failed to comply with them and I shall accept any punishment for my actions. I failed the test of loyalty." He breathed deeply, feeling the release of a debt that had built in him all these years. He felt peace for the first time since he could recall.

"You did indeed," replied the soft voice. "But I think you passed the test of self-determination. It is said that justice is blind, but we of Myrke must not ourselves follow blindly. You see, we are no mere executioners, Hephescus, we all must all walk the razor's edge between justice and vengeance. In many cases, that line is blurred."

The smaller man paused thoughtfully. "Where necessary, we must be judge over the actions of men; but this must never be taken lightly, lest the love of dominion creep into our hearts. A wizard of Myrke must root out evil via his wits only. Fear is a weapon, yes, but it is also an equaliser for those whose voices are not heard, alive, or *dead*. It must be used to provide just enough rope for the guilty to hang themselves with, but never to compel their action. We are not the Acedians, after all."

Hephescus looked down at his teacher in surprise. "I am not to be punished then?"

Kendros' hood shook gently. "Not for the justice you brought to your family. It was not borne of rage - though I must say it went on overlong, but that is an indulgence I will allow this one time. You

allowed him time to come to true repentance, and I have faith that your hand would have been stayed in that event.”

Hephesus said nothing. He did not share his master’s faith at such an eventuality.

“But punishment will come,” Kendros conceded, a flicker of mirth present in his quiet tone. “Your sloppiness was unforgivable. Did you heed none of my teaching? That letter was a foolish touch; you are fortunate indeed that your Uncle was not wise enough to consider it for long, or perhaps he would have seen through your plans. Why would a dead man write him a letter?” Kendros chuckled openly at the look of embarrassment that had settled on the face of his apprentice.

“Also,” Kendros continued, “the realism of your conjurations needs a great deal of work. Thirty years and your ‘ghouls’ still had flesh, clothing, and even vocal chords? Such inept design my boy!”

“They were enough to burst his heart in terror,” Hephesus replied defiantly.

The hood nodded. “Aye, that they were. You were fortunate his guilt was so strong, I think. For the future, I shall have to introduce you to someone that can help you with the realism of your phantasms, but for now, I consider this contract concluded.”

The small man raised his staff, and a nimbus of Shemk energy built around the peak of it. “Hephesus Zantt. I hereby name you as master in the House of Myrke. From this day forward you are no longer my apprentice, but a fellow of my House. You have performed well on your first unaccompanied contract. The first is always the hardest my boy, the closest to home.”

Hephesus thought about that last comment as he watched his former master dissolve back into the ether, dissipating away on some other errand no doubt.

He turned and took one last look at a place that had, for the longest time, epitomised misery and injustice in his life. His eyes drank in every detail, for he knew in his heart that he would never again return.

Hephesus felt gladness that the manor house no longer held such a power over him; it was merely just another place to him now. This dispassionate appraisal pleased him, for he realised he had taken a first step on a long road. A journey that would release many from the burden of their past, as he had been.

Hephesus had learned early on in his life that the sins of others called out to him, and now the path to resolve them had been made clear.

As this understanding came upon him, he allowed his form to dissolve into the evening breeze, leaving behind the oppressive weight of his past, the sins of his Uncle.