

Night in Lindenton

Boximus

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Shadows clung to the bed as I lay awake and wide-eyed, staring at the stone ceiling overhead. I watched quietly as my breath expanded from my nostrils into narrow clouds of steam. From the room beside me I could heard the shuffling of feet. The scratch of a feather quill. The hasty turning of old, dusty pages. My master had pored through the old castle library for a week now. He had not deigned to tell me of what he was searching. I had not the courage to ask, either.

I studied his mind and heart every night, and he was in my dreams every day. He hid himself from me. Not that I had any right to know his soul. But what I knew was that he desired absolute control. Over me, over the land, over everyone. Pain was his preferred method of teaching, he said. Easier to punish than to reward, and people responded more quickly to pain than to pleasure. I learned that lesson all too well.

Pallid moonlight struck my eyes as I turned to glance out the window. What would have once been a booming castle town was now nothing more than moldy stone and rotted ruin. Every city would share Dunsthald's fate soon if something were not done to halt the onrushing tide of increasing chaos. The last war this region had seen had been the most devastating yet. An entire generation put to the sword for a noble class that cared little for their charges.

I had seen much of that chaos in the aftermath. My home city, Lindenton, had been buried in poverty and discontent in the following year. Choking. Crawling. Crushed by the untenable monolithic weight of its own age and frailty. Even when they had beaten all of their swords to ploughshares in an attempt to stave off the hunger riots and food shortages they had still teetered on the brink. Families like my own sent their youngest elsewhere to save resources. Many sons like myself had found themselves in the care of monasteries and convents.

"Zaell, come." I slid out from under the covers into the chill night air. The black wool robe on the nightstand was warm and comforting as I pulled it tight around me. The padding of my

bare feet echoed ominously as I reached out for the door, swinging it wide. It was unwise to ignore Halloween's summons. I was so accustomed to his voice now that he could wake me from a dead sleep if he wished, and he often did. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the lurid light that came from the blazing fire at the end of the room. Codices, atlases, journals, and all manner of literature were piled around Halloween's feet and at the desk before him. He looked haggard, but when we locked eyes I could see the fires of ambition burning in them as they always had. Calling Halloween a man would have been a grave misnomer. The smoke that billowed from his mouth, the runes inscribed on his horns, and his burning muzzle were right from the most horrible of stories. He was nothing less than a hellhound, although he was far from his duties of guarding the land of the dead or hunting lost souls. Instead, he was here, swathed in robes and studying old books like a wizard or a crusty academic when he would have much rather been out killing.

Halloween tossed the book he was reading behind him and it smacked into the wall, its spine broken. "Nothing. Days of reading and I have yet to find a single answer," he muttered, his eyes narrow and baggy.

"What if you're asking the wrong questions?", I asked, hesitant. I would have killed or died for him in an instant, but an advisory role was something I loathed. The wrong response could be quite painful. His chair slid back with a squeak of wood-on-wood as he stood to his feet, staring at me intently.

"You don't even know what answers I seek."

"No," I admitted. I had given it little thought.

"Recruits are difficult to come by when you possess a countenance such as I do, Zaell," he said pacing towards me, hands behind his back. "You have proved to be a rather wonderful and obedient exception." Were it not for his foul mood, I would have beamed at such praise. "I was hoping to summon more creatures like myself to aid in my cause."

"I imagine a royal family would be rather averse to keeping tomes of demonology in their private library. That would be quite a scandal." I leaned against the doorframe.

"It would. But someone like yourself found such a book in

a monastery of all places." He laughed deeply. "A monastery! A shame the King of Dunsthald did not keep such hellish secrets as well!" He stopped a few feet in front of me and cocked his head to the side. "Although I suppose you were mortal once, were you not? A transformation. Not quite the same thing."

"I'm quite sure I'm still mortal," I said, scratching my head. "My back is killing me, for a start." The lacerations near the small of my back, now mostly healed, throbbed at their mention.

"Oh, even the immortal still feel pain, Zaell. Still writhe in agony. Hell would be a very boring place were that otherwise." Halloween leaned in and stroked my face affectionately. "I did not hear you complaining at the time, either." My blood ran hot at the memory, and I was glad for the mask of bleached bone that covered my face. "Tell me. What did your transformation require?", he asked, taking a step back.

"A sacrifice of blood and a measure of magical talent. And knowledge of Durzic runes in order to invoke the proper incantations," I replied, trying to follow his train of thought.

"Could it be replicated?" He sounded eager.

"If we could find a copy of the ritual itself. But we would need willing subjects," I said. Halloween grinned and rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"You will find that there are a great many people in the world who would give up their bodies and swear fealty in exchange for a measure of power, Zaell. Creatures like myself know that very, very well." He turned to glance out the window. "The night is young, and winter's time grows short. Do you think Lindenton still has that particular book?" I gave it a moment of thought.

"Probably. The Brothers Scholaris insist on saving knowledge, even the darkest secrets. They likely still have it." Halloween's eyes gleamed as he cast his gaze on the axe hanging in the weapon rack by the far door.

"Then you'll just have to go and get it, won't you?"

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The air outside Dunsthold Keep was frigid. The cold bit my fur, skin, and dug right down to the marrow of my bones. Dry, fleecy snow blew into powdery heaps around the stone foundations of the castle ruins and gusted across my wolfskin cloak. Patches of ice caked the stairway down from the keep's entrance, and I fought to keep my balance as I descended. Somewhere behind the wispy clouds overhead was a full moon, a field of stars, and realms beyond, all hidden from view. I moved through the old bailey like a ghost, stepping over old broken wood and the pieces of stone that jutted out from what had once been a road, and headed down into the mountainous forest beyond.

The axe at my hip swung heavy with steel and corded sinew as I slipped through the spaces between the conifer trees. Owls sent warning calls that echoed through the highland forest. The brush, half-buried in snow, would sway and swish as raccoons and coyotes skittered away from my path. I couldn't hide who I was from them. The bone on my canine face betrayed my nature, and was cause enough to flee. They knew what I was. A predator. A slayer. Something aberrant.

It was a week's hike down from the mountains and into the nearby city of Lindenton. A short trek for my legs. In the time since my rebirth I had roamed far across the world. I had seen all of the gleaming, bejeweled cities of the north, sailed to the jungles in the east, and wandered great deserts in search of answers and treasures. Such a life was hardly glamorous or romantic. With no place to settle or call home, there was nothing to do with my life but drift. It was only by chance that I had met Halloween, and when he cast me down and demanded my allegiance my travels finally came to an end.

The journey was uneventful. I slept fitfully against tree trunks and in ditches hidden under fallen logs. The wintry weather was merely a discomfort. I drank cool, conjured water from my hands and killed small game with shadowy magics.

It was night on the last day when Lindenton appeared as simply a point of light in the distance. With each crunching step in the snow, it grew larger until it filled the entire horizon. The skyline was full of the old gothic spires of grey stone that was I familiar with, and mixed with the red brick domes and slanted roofs of the new age. The guards that patrolled the outer wall wore a riveted armor of padding and

yellow velvet, and carried modern crossbows and polearms.

The gate I approached was a long pointed arch with ornate tracery along its edges. Two heavily armed and armored guards stood vigil by its gold-trimmed double doors, their faces hidden under slitted visors. Their halberds gleamed menacingly as they pointed at my heart when I drew close. I did not exactly present a friendly face, I would admit.

"The gates are closed until sunrise," the left one said. I kept a safe distance. It was more difficult to argue with the pointed end of a blade than with words. I clasped my hands close to my chest and put on my best worried expression.

"Please, I am but a lonely pilgrim traveling to the monastery," I said plaintively. I watched their eyes drawn to the axe beneath my cloak, and the plates of steel on my chest and shoulders. They glanced at each other.

"Rather well equipped for a pilgrim, aren't we?", the right one asked. I glanced up to see a crossbow directed at me. I couldn't exactly blame them for harboring distrust. I looked like exactly the kind of person they were meant to keep out.

"The mountains are full of peril. I would place my faith in the gods to protect me, but-" My breastplate clinked as I patted it gently. "Armor and weapons certainly don't hurt, either." That seemed to mollify them.

"Have you been to the monastery before?"

"Once, in a past life."

They nodded to each other. The door shook as the one on the left slapped it with the flat of his weapon. "Open the gate!" The cranking of heavy chains rattled in the gatehouse beyond as the old wooden doors slowly creaked wide enough for a man to pass. Narrow, deadly eyes stared at me as I made my way forward. "Stay out of trouble, pilgrim. Heads are separated from shoulders rather easily here." It was hard to hide my smile as I passed by. I was more familiar with that fact than most.

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The Dancing Dragon Pub and Inn was one of the hold-outs from my time, before modernization took hold of the city. The

sinuous golden serpent on the sign over its door still glimmered as if it was new. It was all wood, and warm, comforting firelight flickering through the old hazy windows.

A bell rang as I opened the door, and I was greeted with a cacophonous mixture of laughter, joke-telling, and a violin playing a jaunty tune. I got the same looks I always did when I entered a tavern. Fearful glances and the distrustful gaze given to outsiders. I pushed past the crowded round tables towards the bar. Nobody recognized me. I had been lucky so far. Halloween's reputation was so fierce that what bloody assignments he had given me so far had always been attributed to his name, and anybody in this city who had once known me was long dead. I was an unknown as far as anyone in the area was concerned, and that suited me just fine.

"What's for dinner?", I asked the old, brown dog with long black hair behind the counter. He was built like a tree but going to fat, and had the jolly look of someone who enjoyed his work.

"Pot roast. Something to drink, too?" He busied himself cleaning his hands with a rag. Unbothered by my appearance, evidently.

"Yes. Pot roast and the house special." I put two ruddy ancient coins down on the polished wood with a clink. He blinked as he picked them up, inspecting them carefully.

"Never seen coins like this in circulation in a long time."

"They're silver, aren't they?" My teeth flashed as I tried to put on a neighborly smile. He bit the end of one before flipping it with his thumb and deftly catching it in his fist.

"They certainly are. Find yourself a table, son."

I cast my gaze about the room. There were no empty corner tables to speak of, but there was one close to the door, where the cold draft came in. Good enough, I supposed, moving to take a seat. If I couldn't keep my back against a wall, at least I would have a quick escape.

A pretty young girl in a long white dress and apron, the

spitting image of the barkeep, came by and set a steaming bowl of stew and a tankard of black beer in front of me. She gave me the same lovely smile that I was sure she gave every customer. Probably hard to smile for a face like mine, I thought, watching her hips sway as she carried her tray to the next table.

The pot roast didn't change much through owners. A spicy rich broth with hearty vegetables and big chunks of meat that went down easy. The beer tasted like bitter iron and grapefruit. A real meal after nothing but flash-burned rabbit and sterile water. It was heavenly.

I left the serving girl a silver for her troubles and made to leave. A hand fell on my shoulder as I reached the door.

"Leaving so soon?" The tigress facing me when I turned was about my height, wearing chain mail and a black and white surcoat. There was a big golden cat rampant on her chest, and a finely crafted longsword hung from her hip.

"Something the matter, miss?", I asked, feigning politeness. Fighting was my passion, but I knew my limits. One drawn blade and I would have to fight the whole damn city. It's not like anybody would believe the skull-faced man didn't start the battle that turned into a murder.

"I know you."

"I'm afraid we haven't met. Introductions might be in order."

There was barely a hair's breadth between us as she pulled nose-to-nose with me. "You killed those merchants and their guards by the old Dibault Road." I tried not to swallow. The eyes of the inn were gathered upon us. How would she know that? Anyone who might have been a witness was food for the crows.

"The zeal in your eyes tells me I can't convince you otherwise," I said, dull and flat. I pulled my cloak aside to reveal my axe. "You see my weapon. You really want to die over a misunderstanding?" She hesitated, taking a step back. Her brow furrowed as she stared at me intently.

"Leave." I obeyed her command. The door squeaked as I backed out of the room, careful not to look away. I would have

hated to go back to Halloween and tell him I failed because I was stupid enough to take a sword in the kidneys. It might be wise to keep a lower profile from here on out, I thought.

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The streets were empty except for the occasional group of drunks or homeless. I looked over my shoulder before I pivoted into a alley, taking a shortcut towards Old Lindenton. The lady knight wasn't following me, thankfully. I wasn't interested in shedding blood, not today. I was surprised to find the streets so deserted. My only company in the alleys was the mildew and trash on the walls, and the fallen snow under my feet. Lindenton had possessed quite a nightlife when I had last been here. The excursions following the last siege of the city must have put paid to that.

I stepped out in front of the monastery of the Order of the Brothers Scholaris. It abutted the eastern wall, one of the oldest sections of the city, and the area showed in its vaulted arches, swirling spires, and sculpted friezes. It was naturally unguarded, and the gate to the outer cloister of gardens surrounding the monastery proper was wide open. They welcomed the poor and downtrodden into their hospitality. Besides, who would steal into a monastery to rob it?

There was nothing amiss as I pushed the dark iron bars aside, slipping into the monastery grounds. It was just as I remembered it. The same gargoyles watched over the grassy exterior from their pedestals, their vigil unbroken by war and time. My boots clicked on the cobblestone path that led to the entrance. I stopped at the bottom of the stairway, staring up at the door. The people of this city might have forgotten me, but the order would remember. I had sacrificed a brother of faith in a ritual in the undercroft of the church, desecrating their holy ground. They tried to stop me, but what could a monk do to stop a man with the lean strength of a panther, the ferocity of a wolf, and an unquenchable thirst for blood? Unless they had buried that sordid part of their history, even the youngest of the order would have heard the stories.

I made my way to the oaken door at the front and tested it with a gentle pull. To my surprise, it too was unlocked. Praying that the hinges were well oiled and the wood was still smooth I

hauled it agape. Tried as might, the quiet sound of the door's closing still thundered through the empty halls. The long trefoiled tunnel in front of me led to a wide square room of tiled rock. A flawless wooden walkway ran around the walls, and a blocky staircase led down to the lower levels. I could smell burning spices as I took a careful step down. Braziers at the bottom of the stairs emanated a hellish red glow, the coals in their bowls still hot.

Finding my way to the library was simple. I had traveled these halls every night in my youth, unable to sleep and troubled my dreams of mindless violence. The monks thought me touched in the head; they let me do as I please and counseled me when they could. My solace had always come from books: encyclopedias, fiction, plays, and academic literature. The order's form of worship was through the collection of knowledge, and they had one of the most extensive in the entire northern frontier.

The front door of the library was open. Which meant someone was inside, studying. The huge walnut desk by it, normally occupied by the head loremaster of the order, was empty. In the darkness I could see an oil lamp burning in the corner. Burning in the section that contained scrolls and tomes of the most esoteric, forgotten, and forbidden knowledge.

One of the younger brothers, a white wolf in a simple habit and no doubt an orphan, was scribbling notes into a record book at a table in the corner. Keeping inventory then, I thought, moving slowly through the aisles. I was used to wearing shadows. They had long been an ally in my life.

Punched in the throat, headlocked, and knocked unconscious, he fell to the ground in a disheveled heap. I pushed him aside and quickly flipped through the pages of his work. Neat and orderly, all in alphabetical order. My finger fell on my target. Liber Daemonica IV: Commentaries on the Pacting, Summoning, and Transmutation of Daemonic Entities. I grinned nastily. So they *had* kept it. I looked down at the prostate body beneath me.

"Pity for you, brother. You may be our first sacrifice," I muttered. I slung him onto my back and strolled down the aisles. Old leather, vinyl, and other bindings pushed against my skin as

I ran my finger across the spine of each book. I stopped halfway down and pulled out a faded, black tome. Silver stitching bound its spine together. I turned it to blow the dust off of its face. A golden pendant, carefully crafted into the form of a trinity of snarling canine heads, was inlaid into the cover. "There you are," I cooed. The formulae, incantations, and rites within its pages would serve my master well.

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When I pushed through the door to the monastery, I was met by a blustery winter wind and two swords pressed into my nose. Lindenton sentries, their faces twisted up with disgust, stared at me blankly from behind metal helmets. I stepped forward, putting my hands up, and the monk hanging off my shoulder slid off and fell onto the stone ground with a sickening thud. One of them carefully relieved me of my weapon, keeping me at arm's length.

"I knew it was you," a deep, feminine voice said. I looked down at the foot of the stairs as the guards pushed me forward. There was the tigress, hands at her hips and an inquisitor's smile on her face. "The Monster of the Monastery." Her eyes darted towards the guards. "Does he have the book?" I felt a hand fishing around under my cloak. The golden cerberus gleamed in the azure moonlight as he drew the tome free with a nod. "Looking to undo the damnation you brought upon yourself, demon?"

"Not quite," I replied, looking sidelong at the man closest to me. They were too near. It would have been very hard to bring a weapon to bear in close quarters, especially when standing in a narrow stone arch. I decided to stall until they dropped their guard. "Rather hoping to finish what was so rudely interrupted before, actually." Her lips curled up into a sneer.

"I'm sure you thought yourself forgotten." Her blade keened with the singing of steel as she drew it free, pointing it at my face. "Whispers still travel in the streets of Lindenton. Stories are told at the local pubs," she said, her greaves clinking as she made her way up the stairs.

"There shall be more tales told yet." I growled, and rammed my elbow into the face of the guard on my left. I heard the crunching of bone and a cry of pain as his helmet crushed

into his head, and he tumbled back into the door. The other brought his sword around in a wide swing and I took a step back, the blade ringing against the stone arch with a shower of sparks. I grabbed his outstretched wrist with my left hand, his upper arm with my right, and pushed them in opposite directions. There was a gut-wrenching pop as he went down screaming, his elbow a bloody ruin where the bone poked out through the skin.

The tigress' blade tore a chunk out of my right hip as she lunged forward swinging and I stumbled, pushing forward with my other leg. The haphazard tackle sent us both rolling down the stairs in a tangle of limbs. Our armor clanged loudly against the stone, and I was breathing hard. I had to finish this quickly, before others heard the cries. A gauntleted fist smashed into my face, throwing me onto my back, blood trailing from my broken nose. My leg was soaked and hot, and there was a pool of crimson slowly expanding around me. I looked up, grimacing, to find the sharp end of a sword mere millimeters from my eye socket.

"You are beaten," she stated matter-of-factly, her chest heaving with each foggy breath. My hip itched as it started to heal, the skin pulling tightly into a protective layer of scar tissue.

"Maybe. Hoping to collect a bounty on my head?" I kept my eyes locked on her sword. She laughed.

"No, no bounties."

"For the honor of your order then?"

"My order?" She glanced down at the crest on her chest. "Oh, you think I'm a knight. No, I'm a common mercenary, I'm afraid." I shifted back a little. She pressed the tip of her blade to my throat. "Still, the guard will pay handsomely for catching a beast like yourself preying on innocent monks."

"That's your ambition? Be a dog for the guard of an ailing castle city?" There was a tic in her jaw. The chink in her armor, then. "Surely with your skill you could do better."

"Like what, stealing from a monastery? I know who your

master is, thief." I heard a bell ring in the distance.

"Then you know this act is merely a part of a greater plan. Would you rather spend your life picking at the remains of this city, or do you want to change the world?", I asked, narrowing my eyes. I watched the gears turning in her head. Guards were coming. Their footsteps echoed loudly in the empty city. "Look at the power I wield. The righteous fury in my heart. You can have that too, if you pledge your undying allegiance to him." I made sure to emphasize the undying part.

There was still doubt in her eyes when she sheathed her blade and pulled me to my feet. "You had better be telling the truth, beast, or you will die with him." A smile came to my face.

"You will find my master is not so easily beaten," I laughed. "Grab the monk, we will need him if you are to be like me." The vile tome I had dropped felt heavy as I bent down to pick it up from the ground. Heavy with power.

"There is a tunnel that will take us under the wall not far from here," the tigress grunted, hefting the stricken monk into her arms. She regarded me with icy, amber eyes. "Elaine."

"Zaell." Cries of panic and alarm were drawing nearer. "We should make haste, Elaine. This city's wardens will be here soon." She turned wordlessly and I followed. We padded quietly through the gate, into the alleys, and vanished into the night.

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Halloween stared at Elaine hungrily as he walked a steady circle around her. He had not said a word since our arrival. No doubt he had sat impatiently for our return, and he was not a master who liked being kept waiting. The monk lay by the fire, bound and sedate. I stood stiffly in the corner, and Elaine had kept her eyes on me and off of the daemon that was sizing her up.

"You exceeded my expectations, Zaell. You bring me not only what I requested, but a volunteer and pure blood as well," Halloween said, still focused on the tigress in his castle. "You are?"

"Elaine," she said hesitantly. Clearly she put no stock in old tales about giving a supernatural beast one's name.

"Elaine." Halloween let the syllables roll languidly off of his tongue. "Tell me, Elaine. According to my servant, you had him at your mercy and you relented. Why?" Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. So much for her bravado, I thought.

"He said you had much to offer me. Halloween." She spoke his name the way a child might talk of the bogeyman, and Halloween smiled like a curved knife. "You don't seem like the kind to make empty promises."

"I am not. I will tell you now, I expect absolute obedience from those who follow me, but in exchange you shall have everything. Wealth and strength shall be yours." Smoke hit Elaine in the face as Halloween stopped his pacing in front of her, sighing. "There is no going back, either. If you refuse this offer of power, I will tear out your throat, cast you into the fire pits, and consume your soul. Utterly." I remembered biting my lip once, as she did just then. Her hands were shaking as she descended onto bended knee, rapping her fist against her chest.

"My life is yours," Elaine whispered. Halloween reached down and tousled her hair like a happy father.

"Excellent. Now strip yourself of your armor and clothing. Those belong in your old life now," he said, turning his frightful face towards the young monk. "It is time for you to be reborn, Elaine."

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The monk's face was hideously contorted into an expression of abject horror. Intestines and viscera looped around his torso where I had opened up his chest and spread his ribs out like angel's wings. Elaine stood stock-still over his steaming corpse, staring dumbly ahead. Staring at anything but what was happening in this very room. I had carefully collected the man's blood into a porcelain bowl, and I now daubed it onto Elaine's naked body in an intricate series of looping runes and whorls. Halloween sat at his desk, eyeing the proceedings the way one might watch a card game, his legs folded and his chin cupped in

one hand.

"You will feel as if you are pulled in every direction, Elaine. There will be fire and blood," I said into her ear as I drew a spiral onto her shoulder. "And then you will be made anew." She nodded, her jaw set. My finger was dripping as I pulled it away for the last time. "It is finished. Take my hands, Elaine," I commanded, stepping in front of her. She did so, and they were ice cold. Horrified at her situation, I guessed, but too far in to turn back. I began the incantation.

*"E'las nal elbarath. Domineth, non praestil alnumeratis."* The words shook the very air around us. The dancing flames in the fireplace blazed brightly, shook, and guttered out, plunging the room into darkness. Elaine stared fearfully into my eyes. Her claws dug into my wrists, and I could see her stop breathing. *"E'las nal elbarath. E'las nal elbarath!"* The twisting symbols on her body began to glow and pulse with orange light. *"E'LAS NAL ELBARATH!"* The castle shook. Books fell from their stacks. A horrible smell of sulfur and death that permeated the room. There was a blinding flash of light, and then it was over.

The fire was burning again. What had once been the desecrated body of a once-holy man was now naught but a pile of ash. And Elaine...Elaine was beautiful. Her orange fur had darkened to an arterial scarlet. Her stripes were now the chaotic sigils I had painted onto her body, black as coal. Recurved silver antlers had sprouted from behind her ears, and a pair of great leathery wings grew between her shoulder blades. She was nearly a foot taller, and all of the fat in her body had burned away, leaving nothing but fit, hard muscle in its place. Elaine inspected herself carefully, awestruck. The breath she had been holding in escaped her nostrils as wispy, sooty smoke.

Halloween stood slowly to his feet and clapped his hands in applause. "Exquisite," he murmured. "Absolutely astonishing." Elaine flinched when Halloween traced his fingers along the edge of her left wing. His eyes met mine. The expression on his face was like a little boy given his greatest wish in the world. "You can make more?"

"As many as we have recruits." I looked at the pile of cinders at my feet. "And sacrifices."

"*Wonderful.*" Halloween stood at my side and looked up at Elaine. "And our first success will be more than willing to fetch us both, will she not?", he asked with a childish glee. Wordlessly, Elaine walked over to the billowing fire. The fire poker seemed tiny in her hands as she picked it up. There was a squealing noise as she flexed her arm, crushing the iron rod with one hand. The look on her face when she turned back was not of the woman I had met in Lindenton.

"I would be happy to, my lord."

I shined with pride. Lindenton would soon learn to fear the night.