

Spiders and Demons

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Faced with the threat of the Grey, Liyah must pretend to love her husband.

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She stepped down the broad marble staircase uncertainly, feeling the weight of the coin purse Artemidoros had given her thump heavily against her leg. At the bottom of the steps, she turned back, looking to the porch above, attempting to glimpse the man who stood in the shadows. A pale hand briefly extended into the sunlight in a decisive gesture; go. Exhaling a breath of pent-up nervousness, Liyah squared her shoulders and raised her chin in an attempt to appear certain of her mission. The young woman paced down the street, heading to the market. At breakfast that morning, Kaeso Flavius Artemidoros, patron of the household, Church member and Grey escapee— her husband— had beckoned her to his table, a rare gesture that signified the man had something on his mind. Amidst her murmured courtesies, he had cut her awkward words short: “On the morrow, we host an official from the Church.” She had drawn in a sharp breath unintentionally. Beginning to form a reply, Artemidoros’ soft, rasping voice had stilled her again. “And Liyah,” he had reached across the table to take one of her hands in his own, crushing her fingers “if you cannot make a better pretense of being my wife than those excuses for pleasantries you greeted me with this morning, the official will be certain to see through our farce. Know that I will bring you with me when they condemn us to the Grey.” A rippling shudder at the recollection of Artemidoros’ words raised gooseflesh on her skin, though the sun shone warmly overhead, promising another sweltering summer afternoon. Less than a year ago, after stumbling out of the voided abyss between realms of reality, in the companionship of Aranha, Liyah had met Artemidoros; a rogue like themselves who had escaped the condemnation of the Grey. The man posed by day as a Church representative— by night, he and his followers played at destroying the corrupt infrastructure of the religion, composed of Grey elites, searching for hapless souls to damn to the void. Artemidoros had explained his motives for his underground counterattack, earning the trust and support of Liyah and Aranha. In a moment of seeming vulnerability, the affluent man had also explained his personal plight, which threatened to undermine his entire enterprise. Artemidoros had been born to prefer men to women. His sexual deviance, while unremarkable to either of the Grey-transgressors—who harkened from a world where such preferences were commonplace— was condemned in this other land. The Church officials had long monitored their merchant-supporter, suspicious of the man who had riches, but no wife, nor heir, to pass on his prodigious profits. In short, Artemidoros needed a wife. Liyah, in sympathy for the man (while

harboring gratefulness toward him, he who had provided protection and purpose) had consented to take on the role of the merchant's young wife, to deter the Church from his trail. Although she had returned his soul child to him in the final months before they had made the decision to escape from their world, Liyah did not consider herself to be tied to Aranha by bonds deeper than those of friendship. Accepting Artemidoros' proposal, Liyah had not been concerned with how her companion would react, had not given a thought to consulting him beforehand about her decision. She was her own person; the time she had spent with Doctor Streiter leading up to the woman ultimately trying to control her in the effort to wrest the child she carried away from her, solidified her conviction to never be manipulated by another person again. When Aranha pulled her aside, struggling to keep his temper in check, stating his belief that he perceived Liyah to be his soulmate, she had been astonished, mortified. She had never touched the dark man outside of the joyous hug they had shared when she had successfully transferred his soul back to him. "Aranha, a couple? What are you saying? I know that you are grateful for the return of your soul, but that hardly equates to us love. Do you love me?" At the question, the tall man had visibly blanched, setting his teeth in a firm grimace Liyah recognized from his street days when one of his fighting dogs seemed to be in a losing contest. "I... that does not matter. You know me more deeply than anyone else does. You carried a part of me, damnit. We traveled through that hell of the Grey and managed to trick Streiter. We are inseparable. I will not let some pompous bastard get between us." Aranha's voice had dropped to a low growl, the predatory snarl he used with his fellow accomplices when they tried to cheat him of his share of the raid. "Aranha, what do you think makes two people a couple? I know that I do not feel love for you. I respect you, and appreciate our friendship. But I thought you would understand that this man, Artemidoros, needs our help, and who better to support him than us? He does not feel any inclination towards me, nor I towards him. And besides, if the Grey officials were to discover him, we would be subjected to their inquisition as well, by default of assisting him." She had taken his hands in her own, looking up into his deep gold eyes imploringly. He had withdrawn one of his hands from her grasp, his eyes never moving from their fiercely interlocked gaze. She felt the brush of his fingers against her skin through the fabric of her tunic, gently tracing along her spine. They met with pockets of marred flesh, and Liyah drew in a shuddering breath. "Do you have any recollection of when I did this to you? Kaeso, that man," he spat the words forcefully into the air "you propose to marry required that you erase the numbers that had been inscribed onto your skin as a means for the Grey to track you as a child carrier. I knew it would hurt you to scar out the numbers. But against better judgment, I agreed because you asked it of me." Aranha's hand clenched into a fist over the material of her shirt. His words came out falteringly, and unshed tears glistened in his eyes. "Now that bastard asks to have your body for his property. Streiter almost took your freedom. Kaeso has already requested you to obscure your identity. You are still willing to leave my mutual respect for you to return to being a non-entity, another person's chattel?" In the end, that was the decision she had made, forsaking the only connection she had to the other world, the only other soul in this land who knew her for what she had been, had defied the odds of escaping the Grey with, for Artemidoros. No matter how she had tried to persuade her friend to realize she was giving her freedom to insure their greater liberty,

Aranha had not listened. She could still feel the ghost touch of Aranha's fingers on her back as they trailed away. And look where her decision had led her. Her marriage to Artemidoros had been formal and simplistic. As he had promised her the same night Aranha had walked out of her life, her husband had never attempted to consummate their vows, had not touched her besides the emotionless and dutiful kiss they had shared at the nuptials. Yet the already cold man, uncertain of all humans and unwilling to open his heart to others, had grown colder towards her within the passage of a year. For fear of Liyah being snatched up by the Church for questioning, or perhaps afraid that she would run away from his comfortless estate, Liyah had been condemned to being locked away in her husband's home. She was permitted her own lavish chambers and access to the centralized garden, away from the prying eyes of every passerby. Despite these liberties, she was rarely allowed to sup with her husband when formal events necessitated her presence. Never was she permitted to voice her own opinion at the religious and political meetings Artemidoros hosted in his receiving chamber. The secret assemblies of the counter-Grey collective that she and Aranha had once been privy to attend had drawn closed to her as well. When she had appeared at one of the gatherings shortly after their marriage, the other members who had jested and argued with her companionably had glanced at her out of the corners of their eyes, smirking and otherwise refusing to acknowledge her presence. When she had added her commentary on a subject, she was met with uncomfortable silence, and her husband had drawn her aside afterwards, threatening that if she dared to voice her opinion again in the presence of his followers, he would not desist in beating her to demonstrate where she stood in his household. She had not attended a meeting since, and she was careful to stay out of Artemidoros' way. She could not, however, help from time to time passing by her husband's expansive chambers, as she came from the kitchen to her own rooms, and would find herself pausing outside his closed door. From within she could hear lovingly crooned words and the soft noises of kisses. On occasion, she would see Artemidoros' young lovers emerge from the rooms in a tousled and love-dazed state, and could not help but feel a pang of resentment for the simple recognition that her husband gave to them— attention to which she was completely forbidden. In one such moment of distress and need for her husband's attention, Liyah had brashly stolen a pair of scissors and had cut her silvery hair short in the semblance of the style the paramours wore. With a frantic fervor, she had bound her breasts tightly and put on some of the masculine clothing the tailor had been in the process of repairing. Jauntily, she had swaggered into Artemidoros' chambers. She wanted his reaction, any affirmation that she still existed. Her husband had approached her in faltering disbelief. But as he drew nearer, her Grey-stained eyes gave her away. In an outburst of anger, he had ripped her doublet from her and grabbed at the fabric that concealed her femininity. The ire had quickly dissipated, and he had called in a guard, never deigning to address his wife directly. For a week, she had been confined to her own bedchamber, and when she was at last allowed to range about the household, two guards stood a constant vigil outside of Artemidoros' rooms. She was still treading along the cobblestone streets under her husband's orders, that she fetch the following night's meal and preparations— her actions doubling to make her seem to be engaging in the part of the devoted wife, completing errands at the behest of her doting partner. For the first time within a year, she was

allowed to roam beyond the bounds of Artemidoros' oppressive hall. She could run away. Liyah owed the man, who was husband only by name, no favors. The very contemplation of the idea sickened her. She had to remain staunch in her actions, grasping at the final shards of her former self she had been, devoting herself to Artemidoros' cause for the sole purpose of protecting Aranha from the torture that would await him at the hands of the Grey elite. If she faltered in her task now, she would give herself over completely to becoming the ignored phantom, the desultory pawn, completely controlled by Kaeso Flavius Artemidoros. It was this conviction alone that caused her to follow the man's orders: her only duty now to retain a scrap of her own identity, for the sake of Aranha.

Artemidoros bade her enter the market frequented by his merchant friends and the Church aristocracy; to wear the same fine dress he had bestowed upon her as his wedding present; to make herself seen and noticed by those in power. Besides seeking provisions and festivities for the following night, her husband had ordered her to search about for a bauble that caught her interest, which she would gleefully ask her husband to purchase for her, as they walked about the streets with the official in tow. Trying to keep a foggy and faded image of the layout of the upper market district fresh in her mind, Liyah turned down a side street that would open onto the main palazzo. She stopped short of bustling into a crowd of onlookers, held in check by a row of militia, the palazzo strangely empty behind the armed guards. Set on determining what unforeseen circumstances were barring her from her duty, Liyah pushed forward. Objections from the sedentary crowd were quickly quelled as men and women recognized the determined young woman in the colors of House Artemidoros: pale mauve and charcoal grey. As she reached the forefront of the throng, Liyah strode purposefully up to one of the guards, who touched the brim of his helmet in recognition and respect. Liyah gestured at the masses behind her, "What is the occasion, sir? I had planned on fetching food for my husband and his household." "My apologies, Baronessa. Hasn't your husband informed you? His good friend, the Marchese, Publius Valens Severus has been killed. The palazzo is closed to all trade, in observance of the passing of his body on the way to the Church." Liyah took a step backwards, struck by the portent of the news. The Marchese had been one of the predominant sponsors and a member of the counter-Grey initiative. Had his death been an unconnected matter, or one ordained by the Church, a warning? The woman looked up to the skyline of the city, to see how the guards Artemidoros had assigned to shadow her on her mission were receiving the information. But the two women were engaged with military officers as well, and were being led away, their faces impassive. Noticing her glance, the man said, "Again, Baronessa, I apologize. It was our orders to keep the rooftops entirely clear of outside forces, in the fear of a public demonstration. The Marchese was well-known." She passed a weary hand over her eyes. In a quiet voice, as if talking to herself, she replied, "I needed to get those provisions for Artemidoros." "There are always the lower shops, Baronessa. They may not be the most savory of places, but if you are that desperately in need, the markets would be the only place to go. The palazzo is to be closed off for the rest of the day." A look of unfiltered horror entered the woman's grey eyes. Desperately, she stood on tiptoe to look out on the empty market square, and then, seeming to steel herself, Liyah turned away, calling a word of gratitude over her shoulder. Retracing her steps, Liyah confronted her predicament. If she turned

back, she would provoke Artemidoros' silent resentment, though she would save her husband face by refusing to enter the same streets where lowly sellers and murderers lurked. And where Aranha had been sighted by Artemidoros' spies. He had supposedly formed a vagrant faction owing allegiance to neither the Church nor her husband. The thought of her friend drew Liyah up short, her heart beating faster. Despite the potential stain she might incur on the merchant's name, she must chance the lower sector, if only for a glimpse of the dark man. Crossing over the bridges that bisected the multitude of canals delineating the central portion of the city, reserved for the affluent families, Liyah entered the Pigeon's Coop market. Before she saw the first fishwives and thrifty merchants, she heard their loud cries, as they tried to sell their wares, or the occasionally pitched voice rise above the other noises in piercing gull-like shrieks, haggling prices with soldo-pinching customers. As she stepped into the main thoroughfare, littered with human debris and natural detritus, Liyah could feel eyes upon her, taking in her clothing and manner of walking, eyeing the heavy purse she had forgotten to conceal, dangling at her waist. She breathed a quiet sigh of relief, as she recognized a few higher-class purveyors intermingling with the grungier lot: those like herself who could not wait a day to make their purchases. Liyah followed the smells of roasting meat to a butcher's storefront, one of many of the multistoried houses whose central level had been converted to a shop. The gore-stained butcher's children leaned out of the window on the second level, hooting with laughter, as each took turns making gruesome faces at those who wandered below. Liyah obtained mutton for the supper on the morrow, and haggled with the fisherman at the next stall for the price of his rather ripe looking joby— one of Artemidoro's favorite dishes. Bundling her hard-won packages underneath one arm, she turned to head further into the bustling marketplace, when she jerked to the side, under the force of a jarring collision. Barely managing to keep hold of her goods, Liyah looked down to see a young boy struggling to get to his feet, all the while rubbing a scratched kneecap trickling blood. Immediately, she knelt beside the boy, who looked up into her face, mucus dangling from his nose. She reached out to offer the child assistance. He danced out of reach, shouting, "Hey, you lordling's wench, watch your step! Some of us from these parts don't sit as high and lofty as the likes of you." Liyah gasped, affronted, but undaunted, continued to reach toward the child, meaning to check his knee. "Bugger off, lady! The King of the Splats don't need no tenderness from some prince's whore." The boy turned a cartwheel, and dashed away through the unfazed crowd, making rude hand gestures as he fled. From above, the children assembled in the butcher's window cackled with laughter and shouted praise down at their young leader. Liyah was not surprised to see the fish seller turn away, a snide grin on his face. Frowning in contemplation, the woman retrieved her purchases and pushed herself to her feet. She noted other scruffy and bedraggled urchins, boys and girls alike, creating muffled chaos in their wake, their tongues as unfiltered as her own tiny assailant's had been. Unbidden, a memory of her own childhood surfaced. For a moment, the street children took on the appearance of the adolescents who had cornered her inside the deserted place of worship, plucking at her knee-length, dirt-stained tunic and calling names at her as she squirmed to sit as close to the back of a pew as she could. When they had finally had their fill of youthful torture-play, she had lay curled in a ball, clutching what remained of her only garment to her bloody frame, choking on the

obscenities she could not call after the children. In that moment, Liyah had promised herself she would never be silenced and abused like that again. Returning to the streets, Liyah cast a furtive glance around the stalls where cloth merchants and jewelers carefully hawked over their wares, some carrying thin metal rods, with which they would sharply rap the knuckles of a too inquisitive hand. Though she knew Artemidoros would never stoop so low as to consider purchasing any of the tawdry rings or collars on display in these parts, Liyah decided to make an effort of noting the styles currently fashionable in the Pigeon's Coop. Some of the jewelers she passed sneered openly after her, certainly thinking her to be a well-endowed mistress of some elite man, carelessly looking to spend her lover's lavishing. Trying to avoid their gazes to maintain her dignity, Liyah turned away from the goods, and caught a glimpse of her two guards— Ilenia and Selene— dogging her footsteps from the rooftops. Suddenly tired of the ceaseless bantering and screeching of the people around her, Liyah looked around for the first wine seller she could see, and determinedly wove through the shoppers of Pigeon's Coop, no longer caring about assessing which merchant to approach. She advanced toward the yawning, listless merchant; he rose from the barrel he had been perched on, holding a tap at the ready, evaluating his well-off newcomer. Standing in front of the man, Liyah was aware of his eyes scanning over her, analyzing not only her dress, but also utilizing merchant mathematics. The man's darkly tanned and mustachioed face contorted into a lopsided look of amusement, noting that the affluently attired woman stood barely taller than two of his barrels did, stacked one on top of the other. Her silver white hair framed her face in the facsimile of a foppish young gentleman's style, brushing over her grey eyes. "Hello young sir, out buying some wine for your padre, and in your mama's wedding dress by the looks of it. What will be your taste?" The merchant jauntily placed a hand on his hip, and licked his lips slowly, all the while maintaining eye contact with her. She was at wit's end, frazzled by the funerary procession, her husband's verdict, the young ragamuffin. Curtly and defiantly, she strode towards him, looking up into his face. "Sir, I am not in the mood to be played around with. I simply demand the best of your stock, and am willing to purchase as many barrels of it as you have available. I will further compensate you for the labor of bringing your stock to the Barone, Artemidoros' doorstep in the morning." Consciously, she mirrored the man's cocksure stance. In return, he raised his brows in mock astonishment, and let out a low huff of breath that might have been a chuckle. A previously unseen laborer appeared out of the shadows of the poorly assembled tent, and began to lift casks of the drink toward a dubiously crafted wagon. The wine seller's half-leer returned to his face as he whipped out a small sampling glass from his ample pants' pocket, deftly tapping into a barrel, filling the snifter with a shimmering burgundy liquid. The man turned back, proffering the glass to Liyah, his devious smile not reaching to his dark eyes. "Daddy might not be very happy with you if you didn't taste a sample of my vineyards, my lady." His words gushed with false courtesy, making mockery of the woman. Liyah's hardened resolve crackled. After entering this other realm beyond the reach of Streiter and her drug concoctions, the woman had vowed never to enjoy any beverages or substances to which she could become addicted. Liyah forced her grimace into a frown of distaste, and vehemently retorted, "I trust your wines are as cloyingly sweet as your own manners, sir. I require no tasting." She pushed at his outstretched hand, and managed to drop

some of the blood-red drink onto the ground. Instantly, all pretense of pleasantries deserted the merchant's features, to be replaced with unchecked malice. "You wench," he hissed, shoving the glass toward Liyah again, and spilling some of the contents of the flask onto the bodice of her dress. "You've carelessly spilt some of my best stock, so now you will have to drink it." Before she had a chance to react, the man was beside her, one arm wrapped around her shoulders, the other hand tilting her chin backwards and pressing the cup to her lips. Distantly, Liyah felt a part of herself wondering why Artemidoros' assigned guards were not taking any action. Unwillingly, her mouth opened in a gasp as the man sharply pinched her ear, and the liquid was trickling down her throat. Finally regaining a snatch of mastery over herself, Liyah moved away from the man, bending over to cough dryly, accompanied by the merchant's laughter. "Little fiery, isn't it? Bet your so-called husband doesn't come even half as close to igniting similar heat between the bedsheets, does he?" She cut the man's barking laughter short by throwing her coin purse as forcefully as she could into his chest, silently gladdened to see him take a bewildered step backwards. "There sir, I think the sums you find in the purse will be more than sufficient to pay for the goods I have requested. Unfortunately, it would take more than that to give you any pretense of dignity." Again, the strange crooked smile curled across the seller's lips as he peered into the bag, eyeing the amount. "No, my lady, it would seem it is you who is the unfortunate one. There is certainly not enough coin here to pay for even two barrels of my stock." Angrily, Liyah snatched the sack back, and with a sinking feeling, she replayed the encounter with the street child in her memory, realizing that he had expertly played off her emotions and had made away with almost all of the money. Looking with uncertainty at the merchant, she allowed a beseeching tone to enter her voice, "I, forgive me, sir. It seems that I have been pickpocketed. On my honor, I swear that as soon as the requested shipment has been delivered to my husband, he will be more than willing to compensate for my error." "I spit on some mistress whore's word of honor. That trick has been tried before, girl. I will have my dues here and now. However the sums must be balanced out." The merchant stalked forward. Liyah held her hands outward in a gesture of supplication and helplessness, and found herself caught off guard a second time as the man deftly reached a callused hand down into her bodice, groping around. Well, if that is all the sum he requires, that is not a price too high for me to meet. It may even lend some credibility to my husband if the official decides to examine me physically for signs of our marital relationship. The woman's heart fluttered into her throat when the inquiring hand instead closed around the delicately wrought pendant that hung about her neck on a gossamer thin silver chain. Withdrawing the ornament into the light, the merchant murmured, "Now this, girl, might just make up for my losses. Hand it over, or I will wrench it from your neck." Liyah was caught in a moment of indecision. Aranha had removed the trinket from the collar of his favorite fighting dog, and had presented the minute silver spider to her. It had been the unspoken pact between them that had sealed their dedication; the decisive moment when the man had entrusted his newly won life to her. He had pledged to follow her into the depths of the Grey. Casting a glance behind her, Liyah realized that their scuffle had drawn a considerable number of the market people to watch the proceedings of the vent. Realizing that to deny the merchant Aranha's gift would only hurt her cause; the woman took a dejected breath, and

reached behind her neck to the undo the clasp holding the spider there. Large, warm hands closed over her own, paralyzing her movements. She could not turn to see who had approached, and the sudden pallor on the winemaker's face made Liyah gulp in fear. Breathing in a voice barely more audible than a whisper, in deep tones, Liyah felt the words of the interloper on the back of her head. "Now, dear sister, there will be no need for that. Merchant, what price were you asking?" Liyah almost fell back into the arms of the man, still holding onto her hands in a gentle grip— her faint concealed by the man. Aranha, who stepped closed closer to support her abruptly limp frame. To his credit, the wine seller composed himself swiftly; the only hint of his unease the nervous twitch of his fingers on his mustache as he counted the sums on his fingers. The price he named in a barely cracking voice was overwhelmingly overpriced, and yet the heavy bag Aranha tossed to the merchant seemed to fulfil the demand amply, judging by the man's wicked smile of mirth. "Better thank that brother of yours for taking better care of his purse than you, girl. I will see to it that the casks you requested make it to m'lord Artemidoros, before the rise of the sun." The winemaker cast one final bemused glance over his shoulder as he turned away to revel in his profits. Liyah slowly lowered her hands, as Aranha let go of her, moving to steer her away from the tent and back into the streets, when the onlookers dubiously eyed the tall, dark-skinned man, and the pale, short woman. Some even released sighs of regret at the ruined moment of escalating drama. In a short furtive glance, Liyah looked up towards Aranha, but he held his face in an impassive mask, giving no sign that he noticed her. As the man guided her further and further into the divisions of the lower markets and cityscape, she dug her heels into the muck-ridden ground, causing her companion to draw to a halt. "Aranha, where are you taking me?" For a moment, the woman thought he might ignore her question. Just as she was about to repeat herself, he replied monotonously, his eyes staring through her without seeing, "A favor, I did for you back there. Now I wish to request a similar boon of you." Uncertain of her friend's words, and still reeling with the conflicting emotions of embarrassment toward the wine merchant, and happiness at the presence of Aranha, Liyah nodded her consent. "Of course, but where are we going?" Aranha did not reply, taking huge strides away into the chaos of the streets, making the woman run to keep him in sight. "Aranha, please! I do have to be back at Artemidoros' estate before nightfall." The rapidly receding figure of the man made no sign that he had heard her words. Without warning, Aranha turned down a side street that grew immediately darker; strings of clothing haphazardly sprawled in between the decaying buildings. Ramshackle thatch roofs blotted out most of the sunlight. Still, the man did not stop, winding down increasingly more dismal and stuffy pathways, where drunkards sprawled and bug-bitten and bedraggled children watched the couple's passage from behind knotted strands of hair. At last, Aranha drew to a stop, so unpredictably that Liyah almost ran headlong into his turned back. Squinting into the sordid darkness, Liyah could barely make out what seemed to be a dilapidated wall, sealing off any exit from that end of the alley. Opening her mouth to voice her protest, Aranha wheeled around and grasped her firmly by the shoulders— her heated words tempering off into a frail squeak of surprise. "Liyah," his deep gold eyes finally met and held her own "do you trust me?" "What kind of question is that, baixinho ?" In her exasperation, Liyah let slip the diminutive moniker the man's street relations had called him. "After all

we have—” Aranha cut her words short with a derisive slashing motion of his hand. “Listen, Liyah. I want you to call off your two shadows. I will not answer your questions until they leave.” The woman glanced up to see Ilenia and Selene hesitatingly looking down from either side of the alleyway, hands hovering over their daggers. Liyah called up, “Selene, Ilenia, please. Do as the man bids and leave us.” “Fear not, I will personally escort the Baronessa back. But if either of you so much as breathe a word of this to your master, you will regret the tongues you spoke with.” In the passage of a blink, the guards faded into the city. Aranha waited some long moments before turning back to scrutinize Liyah. “You trust me, called me friend. Yet you were in the process of giving away my symbolic gift of esteem, in the name of the man you call husband. Tell me, Liyah, the words you spoke when we last parted, do they still hold true? Do you still pretend at being a housewife for the sake of my safety, to fight the abysmal void from which we appeared?” “Of course! I had no choice but to offer that merchant your token— Artemidoros sent me for provisions for a feast we will be holding for a Church official. My obligation is to make a show of my devotion to the man in the hopes of deterring his capture and subsequent interrogation. If he were to be imprisoned, he would certainly unmask us all.” “Well... and do you love him?” Aranha arched an eyebrow. “No. I never have, and never will.” “Have you consummated the marriage?” Liyah instantly felt a pulsing cloud of dark frustration crackling and constricting over her head. “Why the hell would you care? Are you the keeper of my body, the keeper of my heart, because I do not remember ever giving you that responsibility?” A huff of shame escaped from her lips as the man’s face contorted into a flitting grimace. “Aranha, sorry, please I—” Aranha moved past her, not ever deigning to favor her with a glance, his amber eyes clouded with some unreadable emotion. Liyah felt a bloom of dread wrench her stomach— after so long, she had gone and botched her chance to reconsolidate with her friend, and now he was leaving. She wanted to scream, break down into tears and tell him the horrors of Artemidoros’ silent household; how she was afraid that she was becoming an unnoticeable ghost. Damn her short temper. Her lurching thoughts crashed to a standstill as she felt Aranha’s hands once again at the back of her neck, and before she could move, he had unfastened the chain, and taken the miniature spider into his palm. His voice sounded, but she found herself unable to turn and face him. “I think I will be keeping this, unless you can prove to me that you desire to maintain our companionship.” “Aranha,” she sighed, at a loss for words. “If you value our past experiences, then you will listen to me, and do as I bid. I know of the official that will be visiting you. And I know that she will be playing a part as much as you will—the woman has detailed evidence of Artemidoros’ masquerades, knows that you are just a puppet he is manipulating. She guesses that beneath it all, Artemidoros may also have his hands in unsavory anti-religious actions. The official will play along with your game, but will eventually ask to have you privately examined, at which point her deductions will be confirmed. You and your husband will be arrested. Hence the reason why I asked you such a personal question. “You see, Liyah, the fact is that you have not done enough to secure safety for any of us. And so I have brought you here to offer a proposition, a way out of this mess, if you can do as I ask. Interested?” She trembled at the news, but realized that she was unsurprised by Aranha’s revelation. Evenly, she replied, “What would you have me do?” Aranha came before her, his eyes scrutinizing her face. “I have it on good information

that the palazzo will again be closed tomorrow. You will have to return to the lower markets. When you do so, after your meal, make certain that the official is with you, and that you stop near to where you were pickpocketed." A sour taste filled her mouth. She knew the man was keeping his plans secret from her intentionally, and had her so ensnared that she would be a pawn to them as well. "I'm scared," she spoke simply. Aranha did not comfort her, his face remaining impassive. "Be there tomorrow. Or you will have much more to be afraid of." He strode from the alley, clutching the spider in his fist. Liyah could only follow. * * * After dropping the goods off in the kitchen, Liyah made her way towards her chambers, emotionally drained, desiring only to fall into a listless sleep. As she passed the opening to the formal dining quarters, she startled at the sound of Artemidoros' voice. "Come here." Unwillingly, the woman complied, attempting to compose herself and test her skills of wifely demureness. Artemidoros sat at the head of the sprawling table, where he had been that morning, stroking his beard absently as he stared into the fire that crackled across the room. Liyah stood at a humble distance to the side of her husband. "Were you able to secure the meal for our guest's visit?" "Yes, m'lord." Liyah almost added that she had picked out his favorite fish especially for the occasion, but decided to keep it a secret, that Kaeso would not need to feign his delight. "Come, you can do better than that, you sound like a beaten scullery maid." Without asking permission, she stepped forward, crouching by the man's chair and unthinking, pressed her lips to his, experimenting with portraying the acceptable amount of passion for a man and wife to decently exhibit. She almost drew back in surprise when Artemidoros pushed forward and actually returned the kiss, his teeth biting at her lip. Unable to stand the strange contact any longer, Liyah withdrew, brushing a finger over her mouth and realizing that her husband had drawn blood. "You will have to desist from doing that in the presence of our company. And, Liyah, would you have another suitable dress to wear? It appears that you have gotten your present one dirty." "Don't worry, Kaeso, she can borrow my mother's dress, though it might be a touch too big on her. She was after all a maiden of House Artemidoros." The voice sounding from the entryway belonged to a young man, who was leaning against a pilaster, arms folded brazenly. "Welcome, Nevio. I was beginning to wonder if you would join us." Instantaneously, Artemidoros' mien changed, becoming more open and jovial. Liyah moved away from her husband, observing the bond between him and his long-term lover. "Thank you for your offer; I am sure my wife will show you her gratefulness." "Yes, thank you, Nevio. I greatly appreciate your concern." Liyah tried not to flinch away as the paramour approached the saccharine scent of the sweet bay he loved to chew preceding his playful touch on her arm, where his hand rested a moment too long. "My pleasure, my lady," Nevio bowed forward, the brown curls of his hair almost brushing the top of her chest. Drawing up again, a wide grin on his face, he turned to Artemidoros. "Would you like for me to demonstrate the proper way to kiss a man, my love?" Without waiting for a reply, the younger man pressed up against Artemidoros in a sinuous, catlike motion, indulging his lover with a deeply heartfelt kiss. Despite feeling that she was intruding on some private spectacle, Liyah told herself to watch, hoping to mimic some of Nevio's techniques for the benefit of the Church visitor. At last, her husband gently disengaged, maintaining a gentle grasp of a curly lock, as he contemplated Liyah speculatively. "You know, my dear that might be an excellent suggestion."

Nevio's leer grew, only to turn into an artificial scowl of consternation. "Well, Kaeso, please, take no offense, but I could instruct her in more than that, give you some, ah, insurance to use against the official in the event she wants to check on the more tangible aspects of your marriage." Artemidoros continued to scrutinize his wife, who had paled visibly. Admittedly, she had considered her deflowering that very morning, but somehow, to go through the act with her husband's courtesan abhorred her. Attempting to control her emotions while trying to plead with her eyes for her husband to dissuade from the thought, she was dismayed to see a grin spread across his features. "My dear Nevio, what a clever boy you are, always looking out for the household's best interests. I sanction you to do as you will." "Well, love, if it is alright with you, I will set to work immediately. I have it in mind to work up an appetite, and Liyah will be a fine primo. Would you care to join us, Kaeso? It could be an experience we have missed out on all these years." "Wait, do I not have a say in this?" Liyah spluttered, unable to control herself, wrenching Nevio's hand away from her shoulder where it had begun to sensually trail downwards. "And what, wife, would you have to say?" Artemidoros was once again coldly despondent, his nose curled in the beginnings of a snarl. "I, my lord, my...love, I do not wish to intrude on your relationship with Nevio. Would it not be better suited to find some other more... well, more suitable man?" A glower came over Nevio's face. "No. And Nevio, I will not be accompanying you two. I trust you will commit fully to your task. Give her something to blush about when the official asks tomorrow. Take her to her chambers; I will not permit her blood to sully my bed, nor her presence to contaminate my quarters." Nevio forcefully lifted her to her feet and guided her out of the room. Liyah realized that Artemidoros had calculated this moment far in advance, that no amount of pleading or reasoning would have called him away from his icy determination to have his way. Even though they were halfway down the hallway, Liyah could still feel the sting of her husband's parting words, as sickening trepidation grew in her stomach, making it hard to breath. "It is unfortunate that we had no cause to consider this sooner, Nevio. The inquisitor will be easily able to tell by her rawness that our trysts were infrequent. Let us give the official reason to believe that it was frantic and desperate lust that will have made my wife so tender." Nevio chuckled as he pushed her into her bedroom, the door closing with a resounding crash behind him. * * * The look on Artemidoros' face when the cooks had carried the steaming plate of goby into the dining hall had been anything but surprised— or pleased, or any emotion at all. And after eating a dainty bite of the fish, he had declared it too ripe for his tastes, refusing to touch the mutton as well. Her husband had been standoffish and unresponsive to all of Liyah's attempts at flattery and charm. It was as though, with the arrival of the Church official, his final reserves had dried up leaving his wife to flounder like a beached sea creature. To make matters worse, Nevio had invited himself to the meeting, coyly winking at her from across the table. Liyah would fearfully look to see if their guest had observed the man's taunting flirtations, but the woman seemed wholly absorbed in talking politics and spiritual matters with her husband. Liyah felt a nagging sense of recognition whenever she looked at the official, though she was certain that she had never laid eyes on the other woman before. Watching as the representative waggled her fork in the air and animatedly engaged in a debate with Artemidoros, Liyah realized why the visitor seemed familiar. Though this woman's meticulously bound silver hair

was nothing like Streiter's honeysuckle blonde, short locks, the two women shared an uncanny characteristic of passion, suffusing both of their figures with a static sort of intangible energy that coursed through their limbs and made their hair seem to stand on end. Whenever the woman turned her gaze fleetingly on Liyah, her piercing eyes (a conspicuous shade of grey marking her as an ambassador of that hellish liminal abyss), their momentary focused intensity was one such gaze she had been subject to time and again when Streiter had conducted her experiments. And, disconcertingly, the women's names were even similar: Wren Streiter and Warda Steiger. Liyah found herself stumbling and fumbling awkwardly in the woman's presence, trying to drown her memories from a world away. When the meal had been picked at and finished with an air of distaste, Artemidoros and Steiger rose; her husband proposed they take a stroll through the streets. Against her will, Nevio approached Liyah and assisted her to her feet, his hands lingering on her back, as he helped her into a light shawl to ward off the evening chill. When her husband turned away from her attempt to tuck her arm through his, Liyah was appalled as the young paramour instead clutched her hand closely to him, escorting her down the steps. Liyah was certain that if it were not for the act she and Nevio had engaged in the night before, the official would certainly see there was a lack of any kind of relationship between her and her husband. Feeling the brush of Artemidoros' lover's sword pommel on her hip, she felt a nauseating mix of gratitude and repugnance for the man. The otherwise unceasing bickering of the baron and Steiger came to standstill as they reached the end of the street leading to the main palazzo where two uniformed guards stood. As Artemidoros engaged in an animated argument with one of the men, who shifted uncomfortably, but held his ground, Liyah realized that Aranha's prediction had been realized. Kaeso stalked over to Nevio and Liyah, and grabbed hold of her arm, gruffly drawing her away from the on looking company. In a low voice charged with malice, he hissed, "Did you know that the palazzo was to be closed today?" Even as she tried to resist the urge to lash out at her husband, she could not contain her temper and responded, "I had meant to inform you last night, m'lord, but you had a more pressing design to see to, and have not deigned to hear me out from the moment we were wedded." "Do you truly want to be destroyed by the Grey? I thought you valued this second life." "I have done all in my power to seem besotted with you, to be the perfect wife. I have not complained of your ploys. But it seems to me that you are the one determined to end in flames. If there is some thing I can possibly do to acquiesce you, let me know, Artemidoros. But I cannot play our farce out on my own." The Church official was approaching, and the man's sneering expression instantly dissolved into one of unreadability. "My apologies, Warda. If it does not displease you, we will continue our stroll through the lower markets. I am afraid that these after-meal walks do wonders for my digestion, and I would be sorry company if we returned to my casa now." The woman offered no resistance, and accepted Artemidoros' outstretched hand, as once again, Nevio pulled Liyah close to his side. They meandered through the market, drawing the envious and sometimes conniving gazes of the other customers and merchants. Nevio whispered obscenities into her ears, brazenly laughing and drawing undesirable attention to the two. A jeweler began to cry his wares in a pitched voice directed toward Artemidoros' and his companions. Liyah seized the moment, she wrenched herself free from the courtier's grip and added

a lighthearted, prancing skip to her step, as much for the benefit of the official as in response to Nevio's open-mouthed dumb-founded gape, his words dying on his tongue. She told herself she would pick the most gaudily embellished piece from the vendor's stall and demand for Artemidoros to purchase it for her in the whiniest and simpering tones she could muster. For a moment, the world tilted around her and her confused thoughts projected the memory of the skewed world she had tripped into, the rent in the fabric of reality, by which she had returned to the Grey. Her falling motion abruptly jerked back into uprightness, and she realized a pair of hands were holding her close. Had Artemidoros sent Nevio to stop her idiotic cavort for the jewels that shimmered on the merchant's white cloth? She almost sent herself into another fit of pitching vertigo when she felt her head being tilted upward, to look into familiar golden eyes. In the next moment, her thoughts completely disbursed as their lips met in a fervently hungry kiss. For a countless number of heartbeats, Liyah floated in some liminal space, only aware of Aranha's mouth against hers— Aranha's lips— and they were...kissing! Reality tumbled down in a sound-wrenching rush about her, and she withdrew from the man's inquiring attentions. What would the Church official think? Had they seen? Peeking over her shoulder, Liyah saw Artemidoros standing still in an onslaught of burgeoning motion, a peculiar look on his face. Above, the guards that consistently accompanied the merchant-baron withdrew their weapons, in slow motion, as though they were engaging in practice while fast asleep. They spread out around the perimeter of the market square, searching for any threat, any accomplices who might emerge from general, continued clamor of the purchasers. Meanwhile, Steiger, who had undoubtedly seen Aranha and Liyah's embrace, had inexplicably retreated into the crowd, hastily withdrawing and blending in with the other street dwellers. And Nevio was barreling towards them, his jaw still slack, his decorative rapier clutched in his hand. Her attention was wrenched back to Aranha's immediate presence as he murmured, "I am glad to see that you heeded my words. Our time grows short. Do not ask questions. Take this, and end your connection to Artemidoros. After you have completed this, leave his home. I will find you." She felt the cold bite of a sliver of steel being pressed into her hands. In shock, she glanced down and realized the object to be a wickedly sharpened dagger. "Aranha, wait, you don't understand. Our ploy will not be discovered. Last night, I—" The man interrupted her protestations with another kiss, pulling back shortly to give one last directive. "Do not fail your task!" As expeditiously as he had come, Aranha slipped away. The portent of the undertaking she had been saddled with hit her fully. Liyah bent over to wretch helplessly, but not before she saw Artemidoros' protective retinue writhing in a moment of indecision— remain to defend their employer, or disburse to chase the dark man? Nevio was at her side, trying to draw her away. She allowed herself to be led back toward her husband, her mind twisting in hopeless whorls. She almost dropped the blade as her body trembled. "You have much to explain," Kaeso turned away, without further comment and without concern for his own safety. Liyah and Nevio followed in his wake. She managed to hide the dagger at her wrist, beneath the sleeve of her dress, focusing her mind toward her purpose: kill Artemidoros. * *

* He was pressing her up against the wall of his innermost chamber, a room she had been in only one other time before. The intensity of his attention now made Liyah wish for his indifference. He had his own curved scimitar held to her neck, keeping her in place. "What dealings have you had with that

betrayed? What plans have you plotted against me?" Liyah gasped a weak cough, the metal pressing into her skin repressing any attempt at responding. She tried to mouth her innocence. "Where has Aranha been hiding this year? What forces has he amassed to combat the Grey? Have they secured the instrument?" She had no idea what her husband was speaking of. Instrument? Was there some way to fight against the omnipresent omnipotence of those loathsome god figures? Artemidoros seemed to sense her confusion, and let up on the pressure he was exerting on her windpipe, allowing her take in huge panting lungfuls of air. "Did you plan out your love affair with that man to betray me, to soil myself in the eyes of the ambassador? Well, my dear," he spat the endearment, making it into an acrid curse "you have sorely misjudged the situation. The Church has plans outside of your ken. You are no longer vital to me. I will dispose of you, but not before I wring every last word of what you know about the Grey from your dying lips." Before she could retaliate, the coldness of her husband's revelation making her heartbeat thud deafeningly in her temples, Artemidoros had pulled her away from the wall, throwing her sprawling face down on the bed. As he approached, Liyah gathered her wits, and clasped the concealed dagger in her hand, waiting until Artemidoros had knelt over her, to react. She spun, trying to aim a kick at the man's chest, all the while slashing with her dagger without intention, other than to draw blood. Artemidoros' surprise shone in his features. Yet he continued to grapple with her, now trying to wrest away the weapon. With a backhanded shot, the man sent Liyah lolling on the bed, She somehow managed to keep hold on the sharpened metal, driving it toward his unprotected throat. He managed to halt the dagger mid-strike, and returned a similar blow, which Liyah barely restrained. They hung in a perfect balance of suspended motion; Liyah's weapon poking into Artemidoros' neck, his blade hanging a breath away from the flesh in between her eyes. They both clutched at one another's arms as if they were lovers. The unbridled malice each had harbored for the past year gleamed unfiltered in their eyes. When Artemidoros spoke, his voice trembled slightly with effort, and astonishment, "What is the meaning of this?" A feral growl escaped her lips, a sound she never knew she could make, angry and animalistic. "I will not be manipulated any more by anyone. I will kill you!" An ugly grimace spread across his face. "You don't know what that would cost you." Liyah began to struggle again, bucking upwards in an attempt to throw the man off her. His position did not change, though his grasp on her dagger wrist tightened. "Artemidoros, let me go. I do not want to shed your blood. I will leave your household and never trouble you again. I am sure you can find some way to protect yourself or escape from the indictment the Church will evoke against you. We are wasting time." She shuddered at his suddenly ferocious smile. "You really do not understand what is happening, do you? Aranha did not deem it important enough to share his uncovered insights? As you will soon be back in the Grey, let me enlighten you. "When first I met you, I was engaged in a power struggle with the Grey. I am a free agent, hiring out my expertise to the Grey and its enemies alike, depending on which party was willing to pay the higher price for my services. I have sent countless souls to be consumed in that negative void, and condemned soulless Grey godlings to an unending existence here. "You and Aranha presented a unique anomaly, a case I have only had to have dealt with a handful of times. The Grey had placed a great bounty on your capture. Their strange interest piqued my own. I invited Aranha and you to shelter under my

protection, until I could discern whether it would be more beneficial for me to kill you, or hand you back to the Grey. "I have been in a contract with the Church for some months now," his teeth showed at Liyah's incredulity, a look that mutated into a scowl "where they offered me a prize greater than I had ever been tempted with before. I made the bargain." She could not help herself. "What was the price you were paid? "Even as we speak, Liyah, an elite entourage from the Church are surrounding my household. As they come to apprehend you, you will kill me by your own hand. But, I shall not die. Your murderous actions will release my earthbound, physical form, and I, too, will accompany you into the Grey, where my true form, as a godling will be realized and rewarded. The Grey will have you to do with as they wish, and I will be granted strength that had originally banished me from that realm. I will re-obtain my demonic form." Liyah's hand holding the dagger immediately withdrew, as the full portent of the complex scheme struck her. She realized Aranha did not have the slightest comprehension of what his orders would bring about. In his plan for cleansing, Aranha would actualize the man's desires. "No." Her word was but a rasp. She attempted to drop her weapon, as the sounds of heavily clad footsteps echoed in the antechamber. Artemidoros' hands clutched over her fingers, keeping them firmly in contact with the hilt of the blade. "The necessary presence for my transformation comes." Artemidoros' mouth grew into a yawning grin, impossibly wide, baring strange teeth. The strength flooded out of her limbs in her terror and despair. The thing that had been Artemidoros drew her hand up, plunging the dagger point thickly into the back of its throat as the door to the bedchamber flew open and Steiger and many armored soldiers burst through. An inhuman sound, like the barely audible scream of a hunting bird of prey from on high, shattered the air, melting the stained glass window by the bedside, throbbing in Liyah's mind, turning all of her thoughts into a seething blood-leeched grey. The form of Artemidoros went up into a twisting blue-black flame, instantly curdling his flesh, exposing muscle and bone. Liyah was splattered with flaming cinders, piercing through her skin as blood exploded over her face. Before she closed her eyes from the blinding negativity of the vacuous black fire, she thought she glimpsed a shadowy spiked and clawed creature spring from the shreds of Artemidoros' body and leap into the air. * * * She opened her eyes, certain she would find herself in some color-bleached, noiseless cell in the Grey. There was no sound, but the bright bloodstains of Artemidoros' release splotched cryptically on the ceiling of his chamber. Cautiously, she squirmed out from beneath the scorched remains of the human carcass, and peered around, waiting for the guards she had seen enter the room materialize from the shadows. The drawn-out stillness, as if the air in the room was holding its breath, continued. Liyah went and grasped the melted fragment of Aranha's dagger that had flown almost into the hallway, and slowly tiptoed from the death-riddled chamber. Outside, she was confronted with more strange carnage. Nevio sprawled with his back to a pillar, blood still gushing from various ragged wounds perforating his body. The corpses of Church soldiers fell in a semicircular fashion about him, their forms sprawled as though in on final gesture of religious supplication. She began to dash down the hall, seeing other members of the Artemidoros' household and retinue prostrate on the ground, with their own aura of Church troops surrounding them. Liyah opened her mouth to scream, but could hear nothing. In a headlong, frightened sprint, Liyah bolted through the entryway, her legs carrying her an

unfathomable and directionless distance from the house trapped in rigor mortis. When she could run no further, her legs crumpled on the chipped cobblestones, her blood and tears combining with an onslaught of rain to coagulate in a fecund mud about her.