



Volume 01 Issue 04 February 2009



I want to thank writers and artists for their effort to get their articles to me on time. I was interrupted by real life issues. New addition to this and future issues will be Sanguine & Conventions. Here, readers will find with conventions will have Claws, Usagi, and Albedo demos / events and name of people who host them. They are usually on the newsgroup. Once I get their permission to post their email address, I will update it accordingly.

Note: Each author and artist retains the sole right to their work. Sanguine Production does not own them. Please contact individual owner for inquiry.

A word of warning: I'm not an editor. Authors are doing their best to keep their articles and story error free. But we do apology if we miss something.

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Art Credits

Bite mark Banner by Blue Kabuto (www.bluekabuto.com)
Artwork on page 11.....by Sean Fitzgerald (abcxyz1914@yahoo.com)
Artwork on page 25, 35 .. by Mushi Makino (www.furaffinity.net/user/mushicrosshairs)

Bite Mark FAQs

- **What to we want to see in Bite Mark**

Core Contents

- Ironclaw article (rule, NPC stat or background info)
- Jadeclaw article (rule, NPC stat or background info)
- Short fiction (can be IC, JC, UY, AI)
- Adventure (can be IC, JC, UY, AI)
- 4 - 8 illustrations

Optional Contents

- Mondevelle (sp?) article (rule, NPC stat or background info)
- Usagi Yojimbo article (rule, NPC stat or background info)
- Albedo (rule, NPC stat or background info)
- Other setting

- **How long does it need to be or do you want it to be?**

It can be as long as you like. Generally, I reserve 6 - 8 pages (12 pt, 2 column) per article, unless it is an adventure, then we will try to squeeze it in. But if your page count is more than that, we can always break it down into sections to be printed in future issues.

- **Can it also be in multiple parts?**

Yes.

- **Am I under a contract with you all?**

No. You are the copyright owner of your article. Since BiteMark is a freezine, each author retains the ownership of their works. However, later on, if we want to use your articles in future Sanguine supplements, we will negotiate a contract per article.

- **If so how much are we talking?**

Not much, a labor of love, a pat in the back, and a bragging right are all we can offer :(

- **Does the article need to be Sanguine Product specific or can it deal with any RPG material out on the market to date.**

It has to relating to Sanguine Product specific. It can be part of...

- ◇ Ironclaw
- ◇ Jadeclaw
- ◇ Albedo
- ◇ Usagi Yojimbo
- ◇ fan-based Claw System (steampunk, camelot, modern, star, etc.)

- Feel free to email additional questions to marketing@sanguine.com

Schedule for Bite Mark 5

4/22/09 — Article submission
deadline

5/22/09 — Bite Mark 4 release
date

THE SLEEPING LADY

By Matt Trepal

THE STORY SO FAR:

Bert, a Badger, and Tom, a Skunk are resurrectionists, skilled in illegal act of recovering cadavers for study by doctors and others of that sort. Approached by Rudolf, a Red Fox, for such work, the job gets increasingly difficult and complicated as Rudolf insists on joining them on their trip to the necropolis, repeatedly challenging the advice given to him, and generally threatening to disrupt the smooth system Bert and Tom have established. Rudolf also has specific and cryptic instructions, including a description, in rhyme, of where his prize is located:

Beneath great iron wings over-arching.
Beneath fell stone-cut princes marching.
Here the sleeping lady waits.

Beside black still waters cold and deeping.
Beside white-clad thorny vines a-creeping.
Here the waiting lady sleeps.

Having deciphered part of the rhyme, evaded guards, and kept unseen, the trio find themselves beside what they hoped was “water cold and deeping.”

PART TWO

The pond turned out to be no further than three chains from where we’d been hiding. A neat gravel path circled the kidney-shaped pond, blanketed with water lilies and other fancy show-plants. Those maybe could have been taken as “white-clad vines” even if they didn’t creep, but there weren’t no wings, and no princes, neither.

Tom cursed under his breath, but Rudolf’s brow was wrinkled in thought. “This obviously isn’t what we need. Do you know of any other water in this place?” When Tom and I shook our heads, he got to thinking again. “What’s the next most obvious image? The wings. So, let’s take a survey.” He wrapped himself tightly in his cloak, and climbed atop a nearby cenotaph. Taking my lecture at the wall to heart, he laid low against the marble and scanned the necropolis for some sign of the location of his prize.

Tom and I moved to the base of the monument and waited for him to finish. Soon enough he climbed back down, shaking his head. “I can’t be entirely sure, but I count no less than ten statues with obvious wings, spread across the entire necropolis.”

Tom groaned, but I wasn’t going to fritter away what darkness we had left by complaining. We’d already lost too much. “Any ideas on where to look?”

“Yes. The poem mentions ‘great iron wings over-arching.’ I can’t tell if it’s cast from iron, but there is a particularly large statue with out-spread wings in the southwest corner. I suggest we continue our search there.”

“That’s past the guardhouse,” Tom pointed out.

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“I’d noticed. We’ll just have to deal with the guards when we get there.” Tom took to grumbling again, but did his part to gather our equipment and move south towards the new site.

It took us near on another hour to make it across the necropolis, creeping along in a crouch, on the watch for the patrolling guards. We made decent time at first, even hunched over as we were. Keeping out of the normal lanes between the monuments, we slipped between them and behind them as we could. Tom and Rudolf, though, could fit places I couldn’t. We were edging our way up a narrow lane of tall crypts that crowded in on each other, just a few hand-breadths apart, when a hacking cough came from no more than ten paces ahead of us, down a crossing lane. Immediately, Tom and Rudolf slid in between two crypts while I did my best to follow. My belly betrayed me, stopping me less than halfway into the gap and leaving the rest of me hanging out in the lane.

The guards were talking as they walked. “Tea, Connor,” a younger voice said. “You’re not a young buck any more. Hot tea will clear out your lungs on nights like this.”

“Pfah,” an older, rougher voice responded. “I didn’t last all those winters up to Storvindeln drinkin’ tea.” The Stag and Weasel I’d seen leaving the gatehouse crossed our lane and I hunched myself deeper into my coat, tugging my hat as far down onto my face as I could, trying to hide the broad white stripes along my cheeks. Then I held my breath. I could feel Tom and Rudolf hard by me between the crypts, waiting to see what would happen. They weren’t breathing, neither. The reek of Tom’s spray was just noticeable, but that strange bit of Rudolf’s scent filled my head and nearly made me choke.

The Stag still held the lantern on its pole, and even though I couldn’t see them, my eyes being covered by the brim of my hat, I could see its

glow. Was I still in the shadows? I couldn’t tell for sure without looking up, and I wasn’t going to take that risk. Were the guards taking this lane? I gathered myself, readying to leap out at them if they discovered me. The light wasn’t moving.

“Whiskey, you mean,” Filipe the Weasel said. “That stuff doesn’t do you any good,” he told Connor the Stag. “Not when you’re sick.”

“You ain’t my mam, Filipe,” Connor replied caustically. “If I want a little nip of akavita instead of dried leaves boiled in water, that’s what I’ll have.” The light moved on, and the guards’ voices faded as they walked deeper into the necropolis.

When they had fully passed, I heard Rudolf gasp as he caught his breath. I took mine much more quietly. “Don’t do that,” I whispered to him. “Noises like that in a place like this attract more attention than you’d think.” I lifted my head a finger’s-breadth more to get a clearer view.

We took some time to recover our wits, and to wait for the guards to move off even deeper into the necropolis. “They don’t seem to be taking their jobs seriously,” Rudolf said. “Not if they’re talking that much as they walk the grounds.”

“Maybe not,” Tom told him. “But they still got cudgels, or even a blade.”

“True enough,” I said. “Now let’s go.” We crept up to the intersection, where the guards had passed. Tom threw himself flat on the ground and poked his head around the corner of the crypt just enough to see where the guards had gone to.

“They’re far past,” he whispered, then pulled back into our lane. “I can see the lantern about two rows further on.”

“Keep your eyes, ears, and noses open,” I told them as we headed up then lane in the opposite

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direction of Filipe and Connor. “We don’t want another one of those.”

By the time we reached the guardhouse I could see the statue we was aiming for, a great brute whose wide silhouette blocked out an impressive number of stars. Even through the ragged clouds, the light from the slivered moon highlighted the arc of its enormous wings, raised high and spread wide, and it dominated the area. The surrounding graves were mostly low and plain, as if they were afraid of being noticed by the colossus, and kept low to the ground out of fear. I couldn’t see none of the details on it, but even so it struck me as a thing far too sinister and menacing to be placed in a cemetery, except to frighten away the curious.

We crawled on our bellies, then, even though we was still a chain deep from the guardhouse, just to make sure we wasn’t seen. A cheerful light spilled from the lone window, telling tales of beer, and roast meats, and easy work. Beneath the black gaze of the towering monument we made for, those stories spoke to me loud and clear, a lure towards homey comforts and away from standing waist-deep in a grave. I ignored them.

We crawled for a few more rods, then continued on in a crouch. After another chain or so Rudolf pulled us in between two raised sarcophagi and pointed at the statue. It stood atop a dark stone base about ten hands high, and towered another twenty hands or more above that. Now that I was close enough to see its form, I realized that this weren’t no angel set to watch over the departed, but a monster, raising terror in all who might interfere with the charge it guarded. A behemoth with a great beaked head and talons the length of my hand tipping its fingers and toes it did not have wings, but instead a sort of feathered cape was draped across its upraised arms, and its chest and legs were covered with the same sort of feathers. Even in the faint moonlight I

could see its terrible expression. Small, deep-set eyes radiated violence, malice, and destruction. It seemed to be looking directly at us, challenging us, daring us to so through with our plan.

“Demons,” Tom whispered, and I didn’t see no reason to correct him.

“It’s called a Morrigna,” Rudolf said firmly. “A statue of one, at least.”

“A what?” I asked. Statue or no, it didn’t make me want to stand beneath it. Even now, hiding behind the sarcophagi, I felt its baleful glare.

“It’s a.... It’s not a demon, but it isn’t a man. They’re legends from the far north. Stealers of children and killers of livestock. They prey on travelers caught alone in the forests. I met an old bard who’d claimed to have seen a feather from one, kept as a trophy by his grandfather’s lord, but....”

“Why would any Triskellian family put one in the necropolis?” I asked.

Rudolf shrugged. “Would it matter? All I know is that it doesn’t have wings, not really, so this can’t be the site we’re looking for.”

“What about that?” Tom asked, pointing. Just to the left of the Morrigna stood a small well, its wall no more than four or five hands high. It was capped by sturdy wooden planks, and a bucket sat on top, ready to be lowered.

Rudolf’s jaw silently worked and his ears twitched as he took the sight in. “A well? In a cemetery? The water can’t be any good.”

Tom shrugged, his tail quivering. “Look around,” he said. “Most of these folks is above-ground, so there’s less chance of the well being fouled. And maybe they don’t use it for drinking.

“Beside black still waters cold and deeping,” he recited. “This is the right spot.” He sounded convinced.

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Rudolf snorted. “We’ll see,” he said, and crawled out from our hiding place towards the well. I jammed my hat down firmly on my head and followed, and Tom crept out behind me. We crossed an open grassy patch beneath the monstrous statue to reach the well, then rolled over and leaned against its wall.

“Congratulations, Tom,” Rudolf said, and pointed at the sarcophagi we had hidden behind moments before. The marble of the grave was covered in carved roses, gleaming white even in the faint moonlight, and each one trailing a long vine sporting long thorns. “So, where are the princes?” The Fox looked around at the other nearby funerary architecture.

Even if the graves directly beneath the Morrigna were low and plain, there was still plenty of intricately-carved monuments in the area to carry the princes we sought. The clouds had thickened, though, and blocked nearly all the meager moonlight. The three of us fanned out a bit, searching the likely sites close up, but it were almost a matter of reading the carvings by touch. I could make out dim shapes but nothing for sure, and I was about to suggest lighting the lantern when the moon cleared the clouds completely.

Directly opposite the Morrigna stood a memorial column, and they rose in a tight spiral up its surface, in full armor: Foxes and Horses and Boars and Wolves, some riding and some marching, bearing lances and great axes and long swords. The base of the column was carved to resemble a city with tall towers, but what they marched towards at the top was unclear. The others saw it too, and joined me at its base. We stared at it in awe, wondering at what it memorialized, what it signified.

“Fell princes indeed,” Rudolf whispered, almost reverentially.

“The top of the column is broken,” I said, flabbergasted. “The parade don’t end.”

“What’s the guards doing?” Tom asked.

That broke the spell the column had on me. “Dunno.” I crawled back over to the rose-covered sarcophagus to look back towards the guard house. As I did, crossing the patch of grass, I noticed that a red stone about four hands on each side had been set into the ground. This itself weren’t so unusual, as lots of marker stones get set right in the soil, level with the turf, but this one had no name, no dates, no family crest, even. The symbol carved upon it was nothing I’d ever seen before, but it reminded me of the gold-traced symbols I’d seen on Rudolf’s purse.

I didn’t spend much time looking about, as it was more important to find out what the necropolis’s guards were up to. Reaching the sarcophagus I eased myself up until I could see over, and when I was sure the way was clear, worked my way round to the side of a stele that gave me a view of the main gate. The lights still shone in the window, but I didn’t see nor hear nothing of the guards themselves. I returned to Tom and Rudolf with this news. “We can start digging,” I said.

“Most excellent,” Rudolf said with a grin, in a tone that sent a chill to the base of my tail. “This is where we need to work,” he said and indicated the area around the red stone, which didn’t surprise me.

“Do you know what’s down there?” For all that this job seemed just like any other resurrection I’d performed -- steal into the cemetery, avoid any guards, dig up the prize, then steal away with it -- it was becoming less and less business as usual.

“What I came to get,” Rudolf said, pacing a circle around the stone and its eerie carving.

“And just what is that?”

The Fox snapped his head up and glared at me. “It’s what you’re being paid to dig up,” he said sharply. “So stop chatting and start digging.”

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Making sure to not look in Rudolf's direction, Tom lit the lantern then took up one of the spades and began carefully cutting into the turf. He marked out the dig area, about two paces by four paces, and when he finished I took up the other spade and we began cutting out turves, laying them out to one side, grass-side down.

"What are you doing?" Rudolf asked. "We don't have time to waste! Just dig!"

"We got to replace all this when we're done," I told him as Tom continued to cut the sod. "If we leave a gaping hole in the ground, someone's likely to find it, before too long. That don't do much for keeping our visit secret. We pile the diggings on the turves, so it don't leave traces, and when we're done we load the hole back up and replace the sod. The turves ain't seamless, but if no one comes by right away, it can knit itself back together pretty well.

"I told you before, my lord: We know what we're doing. So let us do it." I pointed to the stele from where I'd seen the guard house. "Go keep watch," I told him. "Keep quiet and stay out of our way."

By that time Tom had pulled up most of the sod, and only the red stone remained. It turned out to be deeper than we expected, and was sunk into the ground no less than four hands deep, and it took the labor of all three of us, using the prybar as well, to lever it out of the hole we dug and carry it over next to the stack of turves. The digging itself went fairly quick. The soil was dry but not too loose, and with two of us taking turns we got to a depth of about nine hands in about an hour. Rudolf made frequent trips from where I'd posted him, to inspect our work, but always went scurrying back when I shooed him off.

As we dug, something tickled away at my mind. It weren't the danger of the guards, as that was something we dealt with at any dig. It weren't the Morrigna, neither, even as the mon-

ster seemed to lean over us, tracking our work. Halfway down, as I was waist-deep in the pit and bending over to take up a load of soil, it finally came clear. A scent was rising from the soil, the same unknown scent I caught from Rudolf. The deeper we dug, the stronger the scent became. Was we digging for one of the Fox's relatives? The similar scents hinted at that, but if that were so, why the secrecy? Why the resurrection? Why the riddle and the test? I figured that couldn't be the answer, and kept digging while I tried to track the scent of this puzzle.

At the first sounding of the mattock against something other than soil Rudolf was back at the lip, barely keeping his voice below a shout. "Careful!" Neither Tom nor I bothered to answer him, but we worked much more methodically, clearing the soil away from the casket. When the lid was uncovered, it turned out to be a thick oaken box eighteen hands long, nearly two paces. Oak wasn't a common casket wood, but those buried in the necropolis had the money to spend on fine materials. The box was bound with four wide iron straps and hefty iron nails, though, which definitely weren't common, and each band was stamped with the same symbol what was carved into the marker-stone.

When I looked up to ask Rudolf what he thought, he was already handing the prybar down to us. "Break it open," he ordered.

"We'll make too much noise!" Tom protested. "The guards'll be on us!"

"Then be quick with it, and we'll be gone before they make out where we are!" He tossed the prybar into the hole, and it landed between Tom and me, thudding on the casket. "Go!"

I have never been so unwilling to open a coffin in my life. The first night I dug into a grave, I wasn't this unsettled. I looked at Tom, and he looked at me. His spray-scent was thick, a sign that he had his own questions and fears about

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this. We both looked up at Rudolf who, in the odd shadows thrown by the lantern and the slim moon, glowered down upon us with a hungry expression that I ain't never seen except it was on a starving destrier. Whatever was in that box he wanted worse than I ever wanted anything in my whole life.

"Open it!" he spat down at us. "Damn you both, open it!" With a grimace, I took up the prybar and settled it beneath one of the nails, and Tom brought his spade down on it to drive it home.

Like Tom had warned, there was a clang and a clash, but even down in the hole it didn't sound like it carried far beyond. "Keep going," I told him, after we'd both stopped to listen for guards, while the Fox hopped from foot to foot like a kit waiting for the Midwinter Feast. We soon had the first band loose, and went to work on the others. Rudolf finally went back to watching for the guards, even if it were plain he really wanted to watch us. After a fair amount of work we had all four bands loose, and I clambered out of the hole to stand next to Rudolf. Alone in the open grave, Tom passed all the tools but the prybar up to us, then bent to lift the coffin lid.

It opened with a shriek, and some of the wood splintered as he forced it with the bar. When it was opened he stood over the prize, blocking our view. "Well?" Rudolf prompted.

Tom looked up at us, dumbfounded. "You didn't say nothing about it being a Bear!"

"What?" Tom stepped aside, and let me and Rudolf see. What he revealed was a striking, full-figured she-Bear, looking maybe ten or so years older than me, aristocratic even in death, and much taller and heavier than any of us. I judged her to be at least seventeen hands tall, for she took up every finger's-width of the coffin, and though she weren't fat by any means, I reckoned she was every bit of twelve stone. Wrapped in

the decaying shreds of an elaborate funereal gown, she had ginger fur and long white hair that was arranged artfully about her shoulders and bosom.

"She's in awful good condition," Tom said hesitantly as he leaned down over the prize. "Much better than the dress."

"Don't touch her!" Rudolf shouted. He leaned in over the edge of the hole.

"If we don't touch her, how do we get her out?" Tom stood with his hands on his hips, frowning up at Rudolf.

"Just stay out of the way." Rudolf perched over the prize, examining what we had uncovered. He apparently liked what he saw, as he grinned and chattered to himself. "Yes, yes, wonderful. Just as Virgile anticipated. The Society will have to admit me! And I'll beat out that oaf Cherenlev, to boot! Ha!" Tom and I stood by as Rudolf rambled, glancing at each other, me outside the hole behind the Fox and Tom shoulder-deep standing on the foot of the casket.

Finally Rudolf straightened. "Pull her out," he ordered. "But be sure to be gentle! Do not damage the body, or there will be no payment."

Just like a spade or a prybar, a coil of strong rope is always useful at a resurrection, and Tom and I quickly had the prize looped around and under the shoulders. She turned out to be just as heavy as I'd expected, and it took all three of us heaving and straining to pull her free from the hole. We laid her on the tarpaulin and as Tom and I started to fill in the hole Rudolf inspected her. In fact, he was giving her a very thorough inspection, in some ways that just struck me as peculiar, and in other ways that I don't care to describe.

"How long has this laid here?" I asked at one point, as Rudolf worked the toes, nodding his satisfaction as to their flexibility. "The soil was

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solid, and those iron bands were corroded, but that don't look like it's been in the ground no more than a day."

When Rudolf didn't respond, continuing to work the joints, I finally asked the question no resurrectionist ever asks. "Who was she?"

That got the Fox's attention, and his head snapped up from his inspection. To my surprise, his teeth were bared in a snarl. "Never you mind!" he growled. "She's mine, now, and she's going to get me everything I want!"

I had nothing to say to that, to be sure. Most uncivilized. If the Fox were studying to be a doctor -- something I seriously doubted now, given all what had gone on this night -- he'd need better manners. Tom and I began filling the hole, and we were about one-third done when Rudolf suddenly stood. "We'll go, now."

"You can't be serious!" I pointed to the gaping hole while Tom did a fair impression of it with his mouth. I didn't know why Rudolf wanted this particular body, didn't know why it seemed so well-preserved, and didn't care to know these things. What I did know was that I wanted to collect my last six denarii, which meant we had to keep this grave-robbing from being discovered, and I knew how to do that. We were running out of time, and I was sure I didn't ever want this particular resurrection to become known, so it were important to me to put everything back as it were, as much as we could. "My lord, we can't leave this. When the guards find it, they'll call out the Constabulary, and we'll be caught before we know it! Listen to me, I know what--"

"Shush!" Tom interrupted. He'd cocked his head to listen for something I hadn't caught; his ears were always sharper than mine. Rudolf's ears turned towards the site of his former watchpost, and he grimaced. I strained to follow what they heard, until finally I caught it, the slightest rustle of clothing. The guards had not returned to

the gatehouse after their pass around the necropolis, but had begun again and caught us beside the open grave, with a body in plain view. I reached down and closed the hooded lantern. Too late, surely, but the only action I could think to take.

My heart sank and a cold ball of fear formed in my gut. It was the gallows for us even if we gave up now. It was branding and hot pokers in the eyes before the gallows if we fought. The three of us were frozen, waiting for the guards to take action, when Rudolf leaned in close to my ear. "Wrap her up and take her over the wall," he whispered as we crouched in the darkness, and pointed at the nearby southern wall. "There is a house prepared to receive her, no more than a mile due east. It is a small house, with holly bushes around the front door. Take her there and wait for me."

Before I could ask any questions, he dashed away to the east, then turned northwards. Almost immediately, the guards caught sight or sound of him, and took off in pursuit. We heard them shouting as they chased him, calling for him to stop and face the Don's justice, until their voices were swallowed by the maze of stone. Every now and again a snatch of a yell would come back to us, from the weird echoes. While the guards chased Rudolf, we didn't waste any time. Tom was full of questions himself, but I shut him up with a gesture. With worry in his lone eye he worked with me to wrap the she-Bear tightly in the tarpaulin, tying it together securely, with the poles strung through rings at its corners. We had no choice but to leave our tools. Hopefully, our payment would get us some new equipment. If we even managed to collect.

Escaping the necropolis weren't so hard, after Rudolf led the guards away, as a nearby cenotaph let us climb to the top of the wall. Getting down

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the other side was a bit more challenging as we dealt with the prize, but we managed to get it done without a drop or a fall. As he'd told, there was a small two-room house no more than a mile east of the necropolis, with the front door flanked by holly bushes and a small window on either side. Trying the door I found it unlocked, so Tom and I entered and placed the prize in the otherwise empty front room.

The back room weren't much better, though it had a brick stove built into a back corner and some rough-split wood stacked up alongside. The doorway to the back room was opposite the front door, and a small window in the back wall lined up with the doors. In both rooms, other small windows were centered on the side walls. There weren't no furniture in the whole place but one stool, no food, no lantern or candles. We hadn't done much but double-time it to the house, and that pace don't allow for much thinking, but now that we'd reached the house and a little bit of safety we had time to worry. The prize's scent was stronger than ever, and I could tell that Tom could smell it, wrinkling his nose at the unusual aroma. It weren't no usual smell of a corpse and, for a body buried as long as this one obviously had, just reminded me how unusual this night had become.

I let Tom set himself on the stool, alongside the stove, and dropped myself into the corner opposite. We stared at each other through the gloom, with frequent glances at the doorway to the front room. I could see the bundled prize, waiting for Rudolf more patiently than we could manage.

"You think he's coming?"

I shrugged, though I don't know if Tom was watching me. I was watching the front room, myself.

"We left all our tools back there."

"Aye. I'm thinking maybe I've got no more use for them." I hadn't been thinking any such thing before then, really, but as soon as I'd said it I knew it was true. I'd lost my stomach for resurrection-work this night.

"Oh, aye." Tom's thoughts seemed to mirror my own.

"She don't smell dead." So he'd noticed, as I thought. "But she smells like Rudolf."

"True."

We sat awhile in silence. Through the front windows I could see a dim glow over the treetops across the road, to the east. The night was ending. "So," Tom asked again, "you think he's coming?"

I was going to answer that he'd better, as he owed us eighteen denarii, when the door burst open. Rudolf staggered into the front room, slammed the door shut and leaned against it, panting hard. He'd lost his cloak, and his trousers were torn at the knees. "Where is she?" he demanded as soon as he'd recovered his breath. "Where is she?"

Tom and I both leapt to our feet at the Fox's explosive entrance, but his attitude didn't let us relax none. "The prize is there beside you," Tom told him, and pointed. "We didn't do nothing but set her there."

"Yes," Rudolf whispered. "Yes." He unwrapped the Bear and, reaching into the pouch at his belt, removed a stub of candle, flint, and steel. He struck a spark and lit the wick, and the candle cast a sickly, oily light about the front room. Under this light he unwrapped the bundle and examined the prize, taking almost as much care as he did at the gravesite.

"It's all right, ain't it?" Tom asked. "No damage, not a hair mussed, see?"

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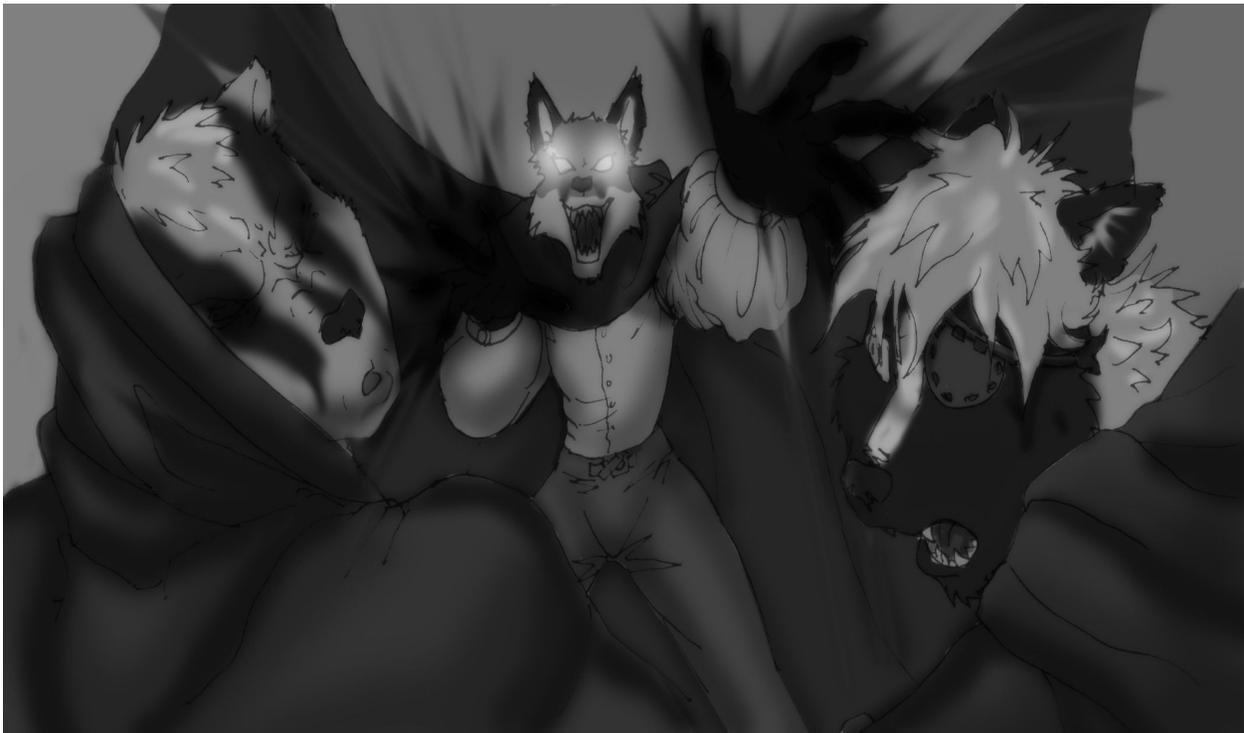
Rudolf stood. “That’s true. An excellent job, gentlemen. Excellent, indeed.” He brushed his free hand across the front of his shirt, leaving dark streaks on the light-colored cloth. “I expect you’re wondering about your payment.”

“Ah, that’s the truth, my lord,” I said. “It’s plain you have plans of your own, that don’t need us. So once we’ve got our fee we’ll let you to them.”

“Yes, I’ve got your pay,” he said. “Let’s go in the other room, so I can let you have it.” He led us into the back room and set the candle on the corner of the stove, where it filled the place with a jaundiced light. He turned to face us with his hands raised, which I found peculiar.

to just pay us already, when the most agonizing and amazing pain I’d ever felt in my life began.

Thinking back, I can’t quite describe it right, but at the time I didn’t even seem to have a mind left to think about it. All my flesh were being peeled off my bones one finger’s-width at a time even as I stood stock-still in the two-room house. I had a pit a thousand fathoms deep within me, filled with a fire that burned but did not consume, and was more biting frigid than the harshest winds blowing in along the Broken Coast. This weren’t a pain of the body, but a pain of the spirit, or of the mind. I don’t know, and I guess it don’t really matter. All that I can say is that whatever Rudolf was doing to me, it didn’t leave a mark in the end. Not on my body.



“Now then,” he said, “let’s begin.” Instead of reaching into his purse and pulling out coins, the Fox began to move his hands and fingers in complicated gestures, and began to speak in a language I’d never heard. I saw Tom take a single step back, and I opened my mouth to tell Rudolf

He held me for an endless time, and the pain did not cease, and I did not die. Mayhap it got worse, if it might be said that unbearable pain could get worse. Then it was over, as quickly and as cleanly as it had begun. I could think again, and feel, and there weren’t no pain but the mem-

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ory of it, nearly as sharp as the original. I pitched forward, and as I lost my senses I reckoned that striking the floor seemed right pleasant after what I'd just been through.

I don't know how long I was insensate, but it weren't long. I came around to Tom shaking me with gusto, calling into my ear. "Bert! Bert, wake up!"

I tried to speak, but made no sound more clear than a gurgle. Still, it told Tom I was there. He pulled me up to sit. My eyes finally cleared, and I could see Tom in front of me, supporting me with a hand on each shoulder and a terrified look on his face. He reeked of Skunk, fear, blood, and a dozen other foul scents. Vomit was smeared across his lower jaw, and blood trickled from his nose.

"What happened?" I croaked.

He stood then, and I noticed he'd soiled himself. Then I noticed I'd done the same. Whatever Rudolf had done to us, he'd done it thoroughly. "I had to, didn't I? It were him or us."

I couldn't think straight, couldn't get a handle on what Tom was talking about. "What's going on? Where's Rudolf?" A nasty thought was rising. "Did he run off without paying us?"

"No." Tom stepped aside and revealed the Fox's body sprawled on the floor, his head twisted and canted at as fatal an angle as you'd ever see on the gallows. A hefty piece of firewood lay alongside.

This was far nastier than what I'd been imagining. I slumped back in surprise, propping myself up with one hand against the floor while I looked from Tom to Rudolf's body, and back again. I was speechless.

I pushed myself to my feet and stumbled over to the Fox. Dead, for sure. There was a bloody crater in his skull where he'd been hit and his left eye was filled with blood, damage from the blow.

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His face wore an expression of tremendous surprise. The nearby log had bits of red Fox-fur plastered onto it with blood.

"How'd he wind up dead?" I asked.

Tom snorted, and I could smell anger rising up in the mess of scents pouring from him. "Like I told you, it were him or us."

"What happened, Tom?"

The Skunk took a deep breath, and suddenly got much more nervous, wringing his tail in his hands and blinking his single eye. "When he was supposed to pay us, instead he did something, didn't he? Something that caused me the most awful pain I ever felt. Like I was being crushed into a thimble and stretched out leagues and leagues. You understand?"

"Aye," I told him. "I wanted to die, but couldn't. He wouldn't let me, he wanted to cause the pain."

Tom stared at me for several moments, as though he were trying to tell whether I really knew what he meant. Then he nodded grimly. "Aye."

I waited for Tom to continue, but he kept quiet, watching the patch of newly-risen sunlight on the floor of the front room. "Rudolf didn't bash himself in the head."

Tom looked up at me as if he'd forgotten I was there. "No," he said. "The pain kept on and on, it weren't never going to end. But then it did. It was gone, and I was nearly gone, myself." Tom's fear-scent was fading, and his anger-scent was rising. His voice grew hard and he stopped fussing with his tail. "Maybe Rudolf thought I was gone, so he didn't need to spend his power on me no more. I was free of the pain, though I could still feel it in my memories." He shuddered, and gulped. Just as I still felt the effects of Rudolf's magic, as that were plain what he'd tried on us, I could tell that Tom did, as well.

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“How long were you out?”

“It couldn’t have been long, because he still had you. You....” A snarl grew on his lips. “You were just standing, eyes wide open, mouth gaping. It weren’t like you was frozen, I don’t think, but you wasn’t able to move. Rudolf was full set on you, not watching me. Tom sat on the stool, rested his elbows on his knees, and stared at Rudolf’s body. “You’re a tough bugger, Bert.”

Tom sat in silence. Eventually I slumped onto the floor against the wall. “You ain’t one to dodge a fight,” I said.

“I never been one to shy from a tussle,” Tom said, as if he hadn’t heard me. “I didn’t lose my eye in no accident.” True, he’d lost it in a fight with two Bisclavret sailors. “But this one, Bert, this one was different. This weren’t no bar brawl, and Rudolf weren’t no roustabout from the Docks. I just wanted to get away. I weren’t looking to stop him, or nothing, but the only way out was past him through the front room, and I knew I couldn’t do that without him seeing, so I hid behind the stove as best I could.” He leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. “Curled up by the woodpile as I was, though, I could see you. I could see him torturing you, and he was going to keep on with it until you was dead unless I did something.” He turned to face me, then.

“I took up the thickest, heaviest chunk of firewood I could find. I could barely stand, and the log felt more like a caber than a cudgel, and I was

mighty afraid that I wouldn’t be able to move fast enough. Rudolf wasn’t mindful of anything but you, and he didn’t notice me until I caught him upside the head. It weren’t enough to do more than knock him aside, but it broke whatever spell he was weaving. I saw you fall to the floor, and didn’t know whether you was dead or not. And then.... Then....” Tom sighed.

“Then I leapt on him, and struck him again and again, as fast and as hard as I could. When I caught my breath, he was dead.”

And so. “You did right, Tom, don’t think different. You saved me, for sure, and likely yourself as well. Once he was sure I was dead, that turd-eater might have come looking for you, even if you’d lay where you’d fallen. Aye, you saved us both.”

“But now what, Bert? We got two bodies we ain’t supposed to have, the Constabulary’s going to be all over because we left the grave open. They’ll call out the Don’s Trackers, and we left all our tools back in the necropolis! I hear there’s mages what can track you down from just a scrap of cloth! What if they bring in one of those sorts? And whoever Rudolf was taking that she-Bear to might still be looking for her. We got problems, Bert!”

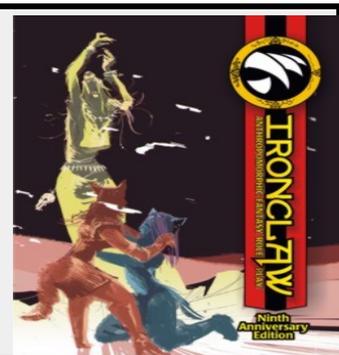
Before I could answer, a woman’s voice interrupted from the front room. “Oh, lads,” it said, silky and haughty, freezing my blood. “You’ve got more problems than that.”

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Black Dog

By Marvin E. Fuller

Author's Note: If someone wants to contact me, here is my email address, CyberCorn.Entropic@gmail.com. If someone wants to look at my website, it's Roadstripe Gallimaufry at <http://www.freewebs.com/roadstripe/index.htm>, which includes a handful of other stories written by me. Lastly, if anyone wants to look at more of my artwork, my gallery is on Side 7 at <http://www.side7.com/cgi-bin/S7SDB/Display.pl?act=gallery&aid=4797>.

Thank you for your consideration.

I saw the Horse lying dead on the ground and growled in frustration.

I had spent the past week tracking this Horse down the Skirfane River, only to find he had died a scant few hours before I reached him. A Horse with his belly sliced open and his neck broken couldn't satisfy my curiosity.

He certainly didn't do any favors for my stomach. People like Bats or Mice can hold a horrible amount of blood in their small bodies, more than the innocent might expect. A Horse is worse, much worse. I didn't envy whomever would clean up the body.

I glanced at the dagger I held in my paw, but it told me nothing useful. I snapped it back into its sheath, then opened my mind, scrying for any white or black magic spells on the corpse. I found the tatters of a black magic spell, soaked into the Horse's torn abdomen like a shadow on the morning sun. Shivering, I quickly got out of the way of the quartet of Mice detailed to haul the Horse off to burial. Glancing around at the folks gawking at the corpse lying in the middle of their village, I noted none of them to be very large, mostly Mice and Bats common in the Repense lands along the lower Skirfane River. I saw a few people from larger races, but, aside from the dead Horse, I happened to be the largest person there.

I wandered over to the Bat standing on a nearby wagon. From his vantage point, the little guy watched me with a guarded expression, the same sort of look I got from officials in small villages who didn't like the trouble my kind chased.

"Nasty piece of work," I remarked, deciding not to tell him about the traces of black magic I had found. Better he thought this just a normal murder. "Think the Mice can handle him?" I heard someone retching behind me and winced in sympathy.

"Don't worry," the Bat shrugged. "For two free rounds of ale, they'll do anything."

"I'd wager they'll want that ale when all is said and done," I grinned sadly.

"I'm not taking that wager," the Bat gave a little, squeaky laugh devoid of mirth.

"Yeah. Anyway, the good news is you shouldn't have any more trouble," I got down to business. "This Horse, when did he come into town?"

"Last night, according to Gilly," the Bat informed me.

"That sounds about right," I rubbed my paws together. "He's wanted by some folk up in the Skirfane Greens for theft."



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“You have got to be joking,” the Bat said in disbelief. “The Greens? Nothing happens there!”

“I know,” I agreed. “They’ll probably be talking about this one for generations.”

Just ask any pup living upriver, and they’ll tell you the same thing - dullness runs riot in the rolling, grass-covered highlands comprising the Skirfane Greens. Instead of spending a lifetime herding stinking animals and generally getting bored out of their skulls, some youngsters prefer to run off and see the world, maybe joining some mercenary outfit or possibly wending their way to Triskellian in hopes of making their fortune. Most such intrepid children would regret their decision to leave home, perhaps lamed by the inglorious reality of battle or possibly forced into nastier things. I lucked out, finding a career well suited to my talents and personality early on in my life.

I don’t like to talk about where I came from or about my parents, a Wolf hedge witch who entertained males on the side, and my Dog father, whom ever he might have been. Let’s just say, if I hadn’t grown up bigger, tougher, and smarter than the other pups in our dinky village, I would have lead a miserable childhood. I fled home at the tender young age of twelve and might have vanished into obscurity like so many other youngsters had not a chance encounter lead me to my calling.

I’m a Wolf Dog witch hunter who specializes in monsters. When a rouge mage conjures up some sorcery-born monster or the shambling undead suffer a bout of afterlife insomnia, people call for me, Rafferty Gilfane, to clean up the mess.

“The bad news is he’s not the first person to die,” I continued. “Two days ago, two of his companions were praying in church when a Black Dog burst in and wrung their necks like they were so much wet laundry.”

“A Black Dog?” the Bat’s voice climbed to a pitch that hurt my ears. “Please say you’re joking!”

“I wish I was,” I didn’t let his disbelief ruffle me. “But there’s a whole congregation who saw it happen.”

The Skirfane Greens could be lonely and empty between the small villages and isolated homes, perfect breeding ground for tall tales about monsters and ghosts that prey on the unwary traveler. Smart folk know most of those creatures qualified as humbug, story time bogeys to thrill one’s audience during the cold nights or to frighten youngsters into being good.

But not all could be explained by overactive imaginations.

The Black Dogs existed. Everyone in the Skirfane Greens knew they did. Some claim they’re spectral Dogs created by the powerful and long-vanished Autarchs to guard some fabulous treasure. Others believe they’re the phantoms of unbaptized children, executed criminals, or whatever S’allumer-forsaken folk chills one’s blood. A lot of balderdash and exaggeration had been built up over the centuries, making it difficult to separate the legend from the reality. One thing everyone could agree on, the Black Dogs loved to prowl after lone travelers in the dark, spooking them whenever possible.

The Black Dogs don’t appear to be limited to just the Greens. I’ve heard tales from the Avoirdupois of Black Dogs scaring the Horse folk in the remote and lonely corners of their plains. I wouldn’t be surprised if they roamed outside of our island of Calabria as well.

“Oh, dear,” the Bat chattered to himself in consternation. I couldn’t fault him for being nervous. Normal sensational deaths put people on edge. Add a monster in the mix, and officials’ innards are bound to tie up into knots. “Some of the lads claimed they saw a huge, shaggy Dog, as big as a Horse almost! ‘Twas black as night with big, red eyes like burning coals.”

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“When did they see it?” I asked before the Bat worked himself into too much of a lather.

“Late last night,” Bat gestured with a wing. “Right about here, in fact. No one wanted to investigate until the sun came up.”

“I don’t blame them,” I considered that, listening to the huffs and squeaks of the Mice as they managed to hoist the Horse’s body onto the wagon. “Do you know if he was traveling with someone?”

“I have no idea. You could try Gilly’s over there,” the Bat pointed to a nearby building, the only tavern in the village.

I thanked the Bat and headed for the tavern. Inside, a short talk with Gilly, a portly Mouse with a twinkle in his eye undimmed by the gruesome death not far from his front doorstep, revealed the Horse had arrived with a haughty female Ermine companion.

“They weren’t the fondest of companions, if that’s what you’re thinkin’,” Gilly told me as he restocked his barrels of beer and ale. “They argued a lot until she stormed out in a huff. He went after her. She came back in some time later and went to her room. She looked rattled, but, when we heard of the Black Dog, we figured that might have had somethin’ to do with it.”

“Where is she now?” I wanted to know.

“She left not long after dawn with some traders,” Gilly scratched at the white fur on his chin. “Said something’ about getting’ to Château Riviere as soon as possible.”

Armed with that information, I set out again, bumming a ride from a couple of friendly Badgers driving their wagon full of goods downriver. I figured I had about three days to intercept the Ermine before she reached the fort of Château Riviere at the mouth of the Skirfane River where it poured into the Bay of Auvrich. Once there, she could catch a

ship and sail to Triskellian where neither I nor the Black Dog could reach her.

As evening set in, we stopped in another town. Leaving the badgers to their business, I checked the local inn, hoping my quarry had also chosen to stay the night there.

“Yep, there’s an Ermine here,” said the innkeeper, an aged Wolf whose limp betrayed a youth spent fighting in some Bisclavret mercenary outfit. “Damned peculiar, too. She paid for an entire room for herself. Said she didn’t want company.”

“Damned peculiar indeed,” I whistled. Normally, travelers had to share a room on account of limited space and lack of funds. If the Ermine paid extra just to sleep alone, she must have access to a lot of money. That implied nobility, the gentry, or a well-off merchant.

“Yep, paid in dinarii, not these copper-noses the Duke hands out,” the innkeeper shifted his eyes about conspiratorially as he worked behind the bar. “She in some sort of trouble?”

“Yes, but not in the way you think,” I recognized a cue for a story. People loved to hear the news in far-off places. “There’s been some trouble up in the Greens. A friend of mine sent for me to come up and help out.” Whenever he could linger near me, I told the innkeeper about my journey, not forgetting the incident in the church or the death of the Horse.

“A Black Dog?” the innkeeper drew his silver furred brows together. “Ain’t heard of such things.”

“They don’t really like wandering this far south,” I quickly described the Black Dogs to him.

“They sound like right evil creatures,” the innkeeper remarked when I finished. “Thank Heloise they don’t come down here.”

“They’re not evil, per say,” I disagreed. “After all, one entered a house of

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S'allumer and killed two people. No evil, supernatural creature could do that."

"That's true, that's true," the innkeeper bobbed his head. "Ah! There's the little devil you're after."

I followed the innkeeper's pointing paw and saw a middle-aged Ermine climbing down from the upstairs gallery. She wore a travel-stained dress of good quality and some light boots for her small feet. She moved with well-bred grace, her fear betrayed by glances over her shoulders and the occasional start whenever someone made too loud of a noise.

I wended my way through the inn, catching up with the Ermine when she started back up the stairs. If I played my cards right, I could worm my way into her graces.

"Pardon me, Miss," I called out to her. The Ermine jumped as if she had been shot and whirled to face me, a paw on her breast as if trying to keep her heart from beating its way out of her ribs.

"My stars! You startled me!" the Ermine gasped. "What do you want?"

"Allow me to introduce myself as Rafferty Gilfane," I bowed gallantly. "I believe you need my services."

"No, no," the Ermine shook her head vehemently. She took a step up the stairs, away from me. "I do not need a bodyguard. Good night!"

"Wait!" I held a paw out towards her. "I'm not a mercenary. I'm a witch hunter-" The Ermine flinched at my words.

"No, no!" her eyes darted around the inn. "I definitely do not want your help. Please do not bother me!"

"But-" I tried.

"Good night!" she cried, hiking up the hem of her dress as she scurried up the stairs and into her room.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs for a moment, thinking over my options. Suspicions welled up in my head, but I shoved them aside for the moment. Right now, I had to persuade her to let me tag along with her in the morning. I climbed up to the gallery and rapped on her door.

"It's me, Rafferty Gilfane," I said. "I know what's after you. If you want to escape your black pursuer, you'd best get some help." I waited for a beat, but, unsurprisingly, I heard no sign of the Ermine. "Just remember, if the Black Dog wants to, he will barge right in and kill you, witnesses or no witnesses. I'll be downstairs when you're ready."

I retreated downstairs, listening for the Ermine, but to no avail. Her door stayed closed all night.

"I hear tell someone's seen a Black Dog last night," the innkeeper told me as he served breakfast the next morning. I pricked up my ears and listened intently, pleasing the old-timer to no end. "Ol' Ennis was out past dark, walking down the road to town when he heard footsteps behind him, 'trash - trash - trash'. He felt something hot pouring down the fur on the back of his neck, like someone breathing down on him. Ol' Ennis was fair near ready to jump out of his skin. Instead, he lifted his walking stick and turned to face whoever was behind him." The innkeeper matched action to words, twisting on a foot as if ready to fight off a foe sneaking up behind him. I noticed several of the nearby folk had fallen silent so they could hear his yarn.

"And then what happened?" I prompted him, though I could easily guess what Ennis had seen.

"He saw this huge, shaggy, black thing," the innkeeper continued with relish. "He looked up and saw two red eyes glaring down at him, glowing hot as if burning into his very soul. It was a

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Black Dog, as big as a *cumal*.” The innkeeper spread his arms as if about to embrace one of those large livestock animals.

“I hope Ennis didn’t try to hit him,” I remarked, alarmed.

“Haha! Nope,” the innkeeper chuckled. “I wager he was too scared for that.”

“Good,” I relaxed. “Where I come from, we always say you shouldn’t attack a Black Dog, or they’ll kill you right there.” I drew a paw across my throat.

“I reckon Ol’ Ennis got lucky,” the innkeeper nodded wisely. “All he did was scream. Don’t let him tell you otherwise. A couple of families heard him squeal like a little pup.”

“Ouch. At least he’s alive.” I grimaced. I didn’t bother to tell him that some folks thought seeing a Black Dog meant death within a year, either to the person who witnessed it or to someone that person knew.

“Yep,” the innkeeper confirmed. “When they heard him scream, some folks went rushing out to see what was the matter. They found Ennis quivering in the dirt, poor fellow. No sign of a Black Dog anywhere.”

“Scary,” I said. “That’s quite a story, innkeep. I bet you’ll be wowing the grandpups with that one.”

“Yep,” the innkeeper looked thoughtful as he returned to business and I got back to my breakfast. A moment later, a presence at my side made me glance up into the cold eyes of the Ermine, her delicate face now framed by a bon-

net. Both the worn satchel over her shoulder and the short sword she carried looked out of place. From the looks of the satchel, I guessed she carried another sword inside it.

“Mister Giffin?” she said, a haughty tilt to her little, white chin.

“Gilfane,” I corrected her. “What can I do for you?”

“I would like to take you up on the offer you made last night,” she answered. Her eyes flicked towards the innkeeper. Aha, she must have overheard him talking about the Black Dog. “You are correct. I need the protection. I am willing to pay you when we reach Château Riviere.”

“Good enough for me,” I finished the last bite of my breakfast. “Just let me get my gear, and I’ll be ready to go when you are.”

“Be quick about it,” she snapped. “I want to get started as soon as possible.” To get away from the Black Dog, no doubt.

I grabbed my coat and my own pack of supplies. I checked my sword and dagger before getting up. The Ermine gave me a frigid look, then led the way outside, where I plopped my hat over my ears.

“Hey, Miss,” I stopped her as she made her way towards a wagon a crew of Foxes busily hitched to their dray. “Let me take that sack off your paws. You look loaded down enough as it is.”

“My name is Lady Marie d’Lissemanteau,” she glared at me. Somehow, she managed to look down her nose at me despite my greater

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height. “Not *Miss*. And I am perfectly capable of carrying this by myself.”

“All right, all right,” I held up my paws in a placating manner. Now would not be the best time for me to confront her about the contents of the satchel. “I just thought you’d like some help is all.”

“I’ll tell you when I want help,” she growled. She spun on her heel and continued on to the wagon.

Several times that day, I noticed d’Lissemanteau watching me. Something cold and calculating stirred behind those dark brown eyes, something which put my witch hunter instincts on edge.

Once we stopped at another town that evening, I got off the wagon first and offered to help d’Lissemanteau down. She reluctantly accepted, her eyes sliding to the dagger on my belt. I knew right then she hadn’t been fooled by my charade.

“You’d best get yourself a room, m’Lady,” I told her as we entered the inn. “I can stay downstairs.”

“I think it would be best if we stay together, Mister Gilfane,” d’Lissemanteau frowned at me. “For some reason, I don’t trust you.” That made two of us. Short of Helloise Herself coming down from the heavens and trumpeting d’Lissemanteau’s virtue, I had no intention of confining myself in the same room as the Ermine.

“All the more reason we shouldn’t share a room,” I surveyed the inn, but nothing out of the ordinary jumped out at me. “It would be most improper. Tongues would wag.”

“Very well, Mister Gilfane,” d’Lissemanteau let me have the point.

Once she retreated into her room without a word, I settled onto a stool and waited, glancing at d’Lissemanteau’s room on occasion. Would she check and recheck every nook and cranny of her room, searching for any possibility the Black Dog

might somehow slip in? Did she shiver in her bed, wondering if the Black Dog would suddenly break down her door and slay her?

After sunset, I abandoned my seat and meandered outside to stretch my legs. I stood outside the inn for a time, looking up at the stars and feeling the cool night breeze ruffle my fur. I heard the inn door thump open and closed behind me. I turned and saw d’Lissemanteau standing several paces away from me, no longer wearing her bonnet or satchel. The moment had come.

“Mister Gilfane,” the Ermine’s voice cut through the air as sharp as the steel of the hunting sword in her paw. “Do you think me a fool?”

“Nope,” I glanced to either side, but saw nobody out and about on the moonlit street. As I expected, the townsfolk had all retreated into their homes for the night.

“You are after the sword,” her words weren’t a question.

“Yep,” I confirmed her guess. “Some good people died because of you.”

“Peasants,” sneered d’Lissemanteau. I could see her eyes glitter like obsidian chips in the moonlight. “I am playing for bigger stakes than your hypocritical morality. Sacrifices must be made for the greater cause. Which leads me to you. Why do you follow me, Mister Gilfane?”

“The Black Dog-” I started to say.

“A convenient excuse,” she interrupted. “No, I suspect you have been following me from the Greens.”

“Yep,” I didn’t deny it. “I know you’ve been poking around the Greens for over a month. A friend of mine sent for me to stop you, but I got there too late. You and your friends had already run off with the Sword of Whatchamacallit.”

“*Whatchamacallit*,” I could hear disdain drip from her voice. Considering the name I had been

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given twisted my tongue, I thought “Whatchamacallit” a definite improvement. “Fool. The **Sword of Zaqtusibtuqate** is a very ancient, and very powerful sword. Of what use is it rusting away in some barrow?”

“Oh, they have their reasons, I’m sure,” I shrugged. “Bodysnatching spirit or something. I followed you down the river because I wanted to save you and your friends from the Black Dog chasing you. Too bad I was too late for your pals. They’re all dead, all three of them.”

“Dead?” d’Lissemanteau seemed more curious than shaken by the news.

“Their necks snapped like twigs,” I twisted my paws against each other, as if wringing a wet cloth. “And don’t give me that innocent look. You know as well as I do who did it. Furthermore, I know you tried to kill the Horse.”

“I did not kill Rodewig,” she stated flatly.

“No, the Black Dog did that,” I concurred. “But it was you who stabbed him in the belly and put that black magic spell on him.”

“He was a coward,” scorn wrinkled her fuzzy muzzle. “I did not come so far just to give up the sword at the slightest sign of difficulty. Yes, Mister Gilfane, I know the Black Dog has been chasing us. My fool brother and his friend thought they could find shelter at that church. Rodewig thought giving back the sword would save our lives. They were wrong.”

“You tried to kill them all,” I guessed.

“No, I wanted them alive to suffer, only that Black Dog,” she spat out the name as if tasting something vile, “gave them a more merciful end than they deserved.”

“You’re a necromancer,” I glanced at her hunting sword. If she had done to that short sword what I thought she had...

“Ha!” she sneered. “Black magic is but a tool, a tool we Éteignoirs will use to crush your hypocritical religion.”

“M’Lady,” I sighed. Though it answered several of questions plaguing me, the arrogance loosening d’Lissemanteau’s tongue rankled my fur. “I’m obliged to give you this one chance. Give up the Sword of Whatchamacallit, and you can walk away from this with your life.”

“Never!” d’Lissemanteau gave a short bark of laughter. “The Sword of *Zaqtusibtuqate* is too important.”

“Who bloody cares about the sword?” I snapped. “The Sword of Whatchamacallit is useless to you.”

“*It is Zaqtusibtuqate!*” screeched d’Lissemanteau.

“Whatever,” I sighed. “Even to a pedant, it’s useless.”

“*Pedant?*” d’Lissemanteau leveled her sword at me, her body quivering with anger. “No, Mister Gilfane. The sword will ensure my House will no longer be dominated by those Avoirdupois tartuffes!”

With that condemnation of religious phonies, she lunged at me, intent on skewering my belly. I danced back, somehow aware I did not want that sword touching me despite the chain mail I wore under my shirt. I whipped out my own sword and blocked her strikes, no easy task when it comes to a slippery and tricky fighter like an Ermine. An unexpected swipe from her sword nearly made me drop my own. She immediately took advantage of my fumble, flicking my sword out of my paw and sending it skidding off into the night. An evil grin curled her whiskers as she stood in a fencer’s stance, her sword pointed straight at me. I cursed myself for underestimating her skill.

I grabbed for my dagger, yanking it out of its sheath. My dagger’s sturdy handle fit my paw as if made for it, and its long blade glowed brightly. A

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light singing filled the air as the dagger detected black magic nearby. Fortunately, I didn't need to scry about in order to find it. I could see the moonlight shine off d'Lissemanteau's eyes as they widened in astonishment.

"I was right!" she exclaimed. "And you accuse me of theft?"

"I stole nothing," I kept my eyes on hers. "They gave me this dagger."

"You know the Black Dogs," her eyes narrowed.

"Yep," I stepped carefully as we warily circled each other. "Last chance, m'Lady. Give up the sword, and I'll let you go in peace."

"Never!" she bounced forward, her sword slicing for my gizzard. I twisted aside, parrying her sword with my dagger. The blade of her sword snapped with a sharp retort as my dagger shattered the black magic cast upon it. D'Lissemanteau squealed and dropped her sword as if it had burned her. Undamaged, my dagger sang in a glowing arc as I swung it towards d'Lissemanteau. The Ermine tottered backwards, her paw clutched to her breast like the wing of a wounded bird. Pain creased her face and hate flickered in her eyes. She raised a paw, ready to strike me down with a spell.

Cue the huge, black paw wrapping around her neck and hoisting her up off her feet. The massive, shaggy shape of a Black Dog rose up behind

the astonished Ermine, his eyes shining red in the moonlight. I took a deep breath. I didn't look forward to the next few minutes.

"Mister Gilfane," d'Lissemanteau's voice quivered in fright. "Please help me. I'm sorry. I was only doing what I thought best."

"I can't," I told her sadly. "I gave you your chance. I'm sorry, m'Lady."

"Mister G-" a sickening crack cut off her

plea. The Black Dog gently set the limp body of Marie d'Lissemanteau on the ground.

"She deserved it," a slight eerie quality permeated the low growl



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Fuller

from the Black Dog.

"I know," I stared at the dead Ermine, feeling sick to my stomach.

"Five souls I had to put out of their misery," disgust colored the Black Dog's voice. "She sickens mine. Will you bring the sword?"

"Yeah," I dully promised. "Gurty's waiting for it."

"My sister chooses her friends well," approved the Black Dog.

"Thanks, Skriker," I mumbled. By the time I looked up, the Black Dog had vanished into the night.

I left town the next day, once various townsfolk insisted a Black Dog had been spooking peo-

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ple several times that night, thereby clearing me of d'Lissemanteau's death. I took the Sword of Whatchamacallit with me, keeping it within d'Lissemanteau's satchel so I wouldn't touch the sword during the trip upriver to deliver it to its rightful guardians, the Black Dogs of the Skirfane Greens.

One question nagged at me during the trip. How had d'Lissemanteau known where to find the sword? Who told her about it in the first place? I

could think of only one disturbing possibility - those other Black Dogs in Avoirdupois lands. What sort of plots might they be up to? When I returned to the Greens and gave the sword back to my old friend Gurty, neither she nor Skriker could confirm my guess as they had little to do with their kin on the other side of Calabria.

Sometimes boredom didn't seem so bad after all.

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Skyal

By Michael J. Simmons

Disclosure: This story is completely fictitious, and resemblance to names or places of person living or dead or places existing or not are purely coincidental. Ironclaw is a game system owned and copyrighted by Sanguine Limited Inc. Use of their world is with this Authors complete gratitude.

Gripping the Axe handle firmly between his hands, then flexing his hands to ensure that the muscles were ready. He swung the Axe back taking his stance fixed his legs a shoulders span apart. He chopped down splitting the log cleanly and evenly with a solid **THUNK**. Picking up the two split pieces he tossed them on to the growing pile of wood that was laid out next to the small church and home, where the he lived. Raising his equine muzzle to the sky, he inhaled the crisp morning air.

The feel of the morning sun warm on his face, the suns color a pale yellow like the color of his skin. His almost silver-white hair falling down to between his shoulder blades, as it waved with his morning exercise with the Axe and logs; to him it was a morning full of promise and hope, something to take his mind off his dark thoughts from the nights rest before. He had woke up with a

sense of some sort of dark foreboding dream in which he could not place the dream for it vanished from his thoughts as a flight of birds would.

Since coming out here over five years ago, he had helped to build the small village community of Eave's Reach. When he had found the small community they were just setting the foundations to the homes and meeting lodge. Having had his fill of fighting in the various wars of the Clans and Families of Calabria, he sought and found a place to still the quiet of his conscience and fulfill his own need. He offered his service as first a laborer and then when it became apparent that the village needed a priest he offered that to using what he had learned when he was a young colt at the feet of his Uncle a Clergyman for the Temple of S'allumer.

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To the people of Eave's Reach he was Skyal Silvermane the last name they the villagers had gave to him due to his silver white hair, after a couple of weeks of work Most of the folks of the village where Rabbits, Skunks, and other peaceable folk who had hoped to get far enough away from the turmoil of the House wars.

So they hitched up their dray beasts and household goods and came to settle in the foothills of the Rothos Mountains Along the east bank of the Ruther River. It was here in this open glade and field in a wide valley that allowed for rich lumber, rock cutting and a river that was clean and pure. That they came to set up their little community; Father Silvermane as they called him had been with them since that time he had presided over Handfastings, Birthing and thankfully few funerals, most from the elder folks who's time had come.

Father Silvermane mostly kept to himself, and did not ask of anything from the villagers. He tried to remain as self sufficient as the villagers, but the Villagers always made sure that the kept aside a share of their gardens, meats and labor's for their quiet priest. Who came upon them all those years ago? Skyal lifted another log on to the chopping stump and readied for another log to split. When he heard the running of feet, coming up the path from the village to his Church.

"Father Silvermane... Father Silvermane..." Came the cries as the runners came around the backside of the small church. He noted it was three of the oldest children from the village. Two where the twin sons of the Village elder a good-natured panther named Belasarvis and the other was one of Katiana's daughters a pretty little thing named Niamey. The children came to stop gulping for air as they tried to speak. Their words tumbling over one another, sighing Skyal; raised his hands to get them to stop. 'Now stop children, catch your breath first then speak and preferably only one needs to speak.' Waiting for them to catch a breath Derek the eldest

boy spoke, 'Father... Some strangers have come into town. My father is with them, they say they are in need of assistance.'

'Ah... did they say what sort of assistance they needed?' Skyal asked. 'No Father they did not, though some of them have rough bandages on them as if they have been on the run.' Replied Tobias, Belasarvis's youngest son. 'As soon as we saw them come into town, and father start to talk to their leader, we decided to inform you. Seeing as you have the medical knowledge and the favor of S'allumer.'

Chuckling at the young boys, 'you did well Children, and what did you see Niamey?'

'Welladay Father, as the boys was saying. But I ain't ever laid eyes on folks like these before. They are somewhat frightening to behold.'

'Now my child, what have I tried to teach to you all about tolerance of others. It matters not the difference of a folk's pelt, but what is in their heart that matters. But none the less, let us go get my supplies and we will see to what these folks needs.'

Saying that he put words into action and placing the Axe against the church wall. He stepped off and headed into the church, the children following. He made his way to the south wall where there stood a large cupboard closet and he pulled out a bag filled with bandages, then another filled with herbs along with a case filled with the various tools of a healer of the order of Asclepius.

The group then set off, Skyal closing the doors to the church. The group set off down the path, Derek in the lead followed by Tobias and Niamey. Father Skyal bringing up the rear as he placed the sling for the stretcher through his right arm and onto his shoulder. His brown robes swishing as he walked.

The children's clothing was the same peasant style smock with either pants or dress as appropriate to their gender. Tobias and Niamey where

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busy skipping and dancing around him and trying to play tag with one another. Niamey easily outracing Tobias with her doe like speed. Father Skyal his eyes laughing merrily at the scene, also he kept an eye on Derek who seriously carried the bags that he choose to carry for Skyal.

The young fur seemed to be taking his duties seriously as he came close to his coming of age ceremony. This providing the aging priest with thoughts of how to compose the ceremony for the young feline fur and several of the other youths; to incorporate the teachings of the Holy Order of the Asclepius and also that of S'allumer, the day was clear and bright as they made their way to the village below.

At the village, the villagers were busy themselves helping out the wounded. Who had come to them? As they helped the wounded off the wagon that they came in on; Belasarvis stood in the center of the chaos directing the villagers to help carry the various wounded, what did they call themselves again...*"Oh Yeah...Monkeys!!!!"* He thought to himself, *"Strange looking enough creatures came from the Wildenlands they called it."*

"Come on you lot, hurry with those bandages, Father Silverman cannot be expected to use his favors alone." bellowed the elderly Black Panther. Other village folk came by, including the elderly Mrs. Castlebunny. She was the matron of the rabbit family and she had not only the motherly nature for her brood but also for the whole village. Before the Horse priest appeared she was the one whom the villagers all went to for healing herbs and midwifery.

"So where is he! Still up there toiling over penance or some such!" she remarked as she walked up the small hill her girth not slowing her down one bit.

"Relax, he will be here, I sent me boys to go gets him. Also Niamey went with them, so he will be along. Meantime we can make sure all is readied for

when he gets here." replied the panther. His eyes sparkling with excitement;" Besides I thought you and he had settled your differences after the issue with trouble with the Finnegan family."

"We did, you old cot, doesn't mean I canna give him grief for being tardy..." she was going to finish but was stopped as a scream came from the common hall of the village. Both the Rabbit Matron and the Panther mayor, hurried to the sound of the scream. As they arrived at the common hall they found themselves confronted by a sight they had not expected to see. There all the villagers that had been helping where either being held at sword or bow point. The wounded seemingly miraculously healed.

"Now see here," Roared Belasarvis "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

"Quite yourself Cat, or I will find a way to muzzle you myself." came a voice from the background. "What the meaning of this is quite clear, we are taking you and your fellow villagers hostage and will be making your village our new base of operations. Seize him! "Gestured the ape who only now came strolling up from the back of the hut. His followers obeying seized the elderly panther and the Rabbit marm. A brief struggle later they found themselves tied up and hauled in with the rest.

"Now we wait for your Priest." The ape said calmly.

The walk was not all that long and as Skyal and the children walked over the small rise. They could see the village laid out below. From the town hall a large circular structure, its center most area a raised platform and in the round; outside of the hall was a wide avenue on either side of it. The town was set up so that the villagers homes where on the west or east sides of the town hall.

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Skyal noted the lack of noise and also the lack of activity. "Strange" he thought, "there should be more activity! Where is everyone? Where did they all go?" the hairs on the back of his neck started to tingle. He watched the young ones as they moved ahead of him. "Derek," he called to the young panther, "grab your brother and Niamey. Something is not quite...right???" The young panther looking over his shoulder to listen to the words of the horse priest; "Tobias, Niamey.... come on back Father Silverman wants to talk to us." Either the two younger children where not paying attention to Derek or could not hear them.

As they raced ahead of the small procession; Father Skyal started to become more and more nervous. Usually by now he would have been meet by one or two of the towns folk by now. It was then that his eyes caught a sight, something that was not normal to the town.

"Niamey...Tobias...Stop, Now...." He bellowed as he saw several strange creatures come suddenly out of the homes that the children had passed through just laughing and giggling moments before. The children's laughter became shrieks of terror as they where grabbed by their assailants. The Creatures arms where long as where there legs and they seemed to have overly long tails that held small weapons. Niamey and Tobias where grabbed each by one of the creatures. As three others approached menacingly on Derek and Skyal; there approach appearing to be coordinated.

"Derek, get behind me." Skyal stated his voice going from its gentle tones to commanding



as he started to ready his staff. He watched the three creatures close, their voices mocking.

"Well, will you look at this Chim, the priest wants to fight us!" the lead one claimed as he smiled evilly. Skyal's eyes never left the three as they closed in their inverted V.

"I warn you now, lay down your weapons and release the villagers. No harm will come to you." Skyal said his tone of voice low and dangerous to the young panther cub that sought shelter behind

the big stallions legs. Father Skyal started to spin the staff slowly in a counter clockwise motion, slowly picking up speed as the monkeys closed in on the pair.

"Derek, when I say run, I want you to run to the Church, as fast as you can and don't look back." His voice low and audible only to the pair of them, "I am not going to run father. My dad would be upset that I had run from a fight."

"Your Father would be more upset if you where dead, boy. Now when I saw run, I want you to run. Am I clear!" Father Skyal's voice now rang with a tone of command that the young panther had never heard from the Priest.

Of all the times to deal with the importance of youth a place of combat was not it. Skyal snorted in impatience and frustration. "Why did this have to happen, why? I had thought to be done with combat all those years ago. I wanted to give life and hope to the people not take it away any more life."

His thoughts where interrupted then as the monkey to his left, Chim he thought, lounged at him. Attempting a leaping attack while the monkey to his right came in low. Skyal stepped forward into the trio, catching the leaping monkey

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mid-air in the stomach with the end of his Quarter-staff, whipping the staff, then just as quickly swinging the staff back. He flung his leaping attacker into its partner knocking them both down.

“RUN!!!!” He yelled to the young panther, as he charged at the leader of the trio. Swinging the staff in low, he watched as the lead monkey starred first at his two fallen comrades then ducked so that the staff whistled overhead barely missing him.

“The Priest has got some fight in him I see.” Exclaimed the leader of the three. He dodged a few more staff blows trying to buy time for his two lackeys to get up which they were doing, albeit slowly. Drawing out two knives he hefted one and threw it at the priest. Skylar dodged the thrown knife, though soon found himself on the defensive, as the knife was a distraction and the enraged simian came at him wielding a knife in each hand and also a punch dagger with its tail.

The blocking and parrying went on for a few more seconds, as Skylar attempted to understand this style of fighting. “Damn, this is hard.” He was still trying to listen for the other two, one whom seemed to be getting on his feet. The other

was still on all fours trying to get his breath. This started to give the horse priest an idea, making some more feints he attempted to draw his opponent in closer. Then he made another tactical choice, as he pretended to stumble. The leader closed in with a wild shriek.

Skylar then rose up stabbing directly at the simian. Catching him straight in the chest. He felt the solidness of the hit through the wood, and then he lifted the staff straight up and brought it back down sending the stunned primate into the two other attackers on the ground. He managed to hit the one who was standing. He whipped the staff from low to high, on the one who was still on his hands and knees catching him squarely on the side with his staff.

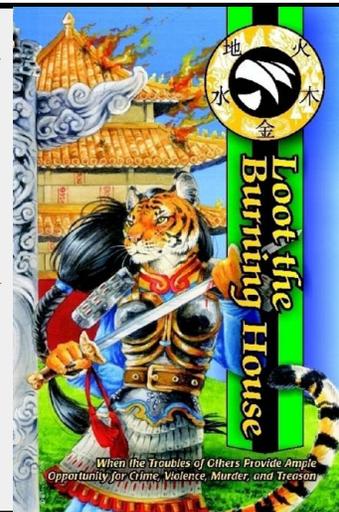
At the moment the place of the skirmish was quiet, but at the entrance to the hall. Father Skylar could see more opponents coming out of the entrance. No one of them looked happy to see that three of their own were down. Taking the advice he gave to the young panther cub, he also ran away from the village. Mentally vowing he would return.

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Tales of the Travelling Gazelle

Triskellian

By Michael J. Simmons

“Ah Triskellian, a city of Adventure, Romance, Intrigue and Suspense, what finer city to start in then good old solid, dependable Triskellian; The crown jewel of Calabria and the five noble house’s.”

Triskellian is the main city of the Kingdom if Calabria it is here that the majority of adventures and/or campaigns will start and/or even end. In Triskellian alone there are hundreds of things for the wayward adventurer to find from the duplicity of the noble houses, the chicanery of the merchant princes.

Even the plotting of the lower houses as they all vie for power and prestige, Gazelle our doe correspondent will be taking a tour of Triskellian and show us the sights and sounds of this most wondrous city. “Gazelle, please say hi to your readers...”

“Good day Goven’ers... How’s it going?”

“Now Gazelle you know what you are to do!”

“Of course, I am to go to Triskellian check out all the hot spots, like the Three-Spears Inn, The Bath Houses and the Cathedrale de Temoin send you correspondence which you will print for me at an astonishingly cheap rate, mind you.”

“Cheap...Cheap...I am giving you 2 denar a day. Cheap my backside, I’ll give you cheap. Now here is a list of places and people I want you to interview and check out so our gentle readers can get a feel for the city.”

“Ah, Boss...some of these places are in the not so savory areas of the City, just so’s you know.”

“And???”

“Well I am just saying you got me going into some very dangerous locations not at all like the

spots I mentioned which I am sure that our readers want to see, after all I am a lady of gentle means.”

“Gazelle, you’re far from a lady, and you go and report where I send you. Now get your butt out the door and start reporting.”

“Blimey... wants me to make a tour of Old Town, best to get this done in the daylight hours, though they say the nightlife in old town is also quiet exciting too.”

Old town a place of excitement and adventure, this is where the wheat and the chaff get separate, or a fool and his money. The guard has only one thing to say about Old Town after night falls if you are lucky enough to be caught by the guard and not by Old Towns denizens “Your either a scofflaw or a fool, and since fool don’t survive old town you are a scofflaw.”

Most honest merchants and adventures avoid being in Old Town after night falls. Old Town lies on the western edge of Triskellian. It is here where the Thieves guild is rumored to have their headquarters, some even say it is under the Old Tower which lays just to the north of Old Town. While Old Town is notorious for thieving and mugging it is also a place of some history.

After all this was the first section built when the city was founded way back when, even the oldest history books on record still show that Triskellian was around even before the books where ever printed. Rumor has it that the great city may have even been around during the time of the Age of the Autarchs.

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This may explain some of the odd goings on in or around Old Town at night, for who knows what horrors may still lurk when the sun goes down. Even those that are residence of Old Town don't come out once nightfalls. It is rumored sometimes the younger men and boys in some obscure right of initiation try to push one another into the night. Some have returned rumor says with wild tales of things best left untouched others have just disappeared into the night never to be heard from again.

Old Town is the home of the local thieves guild not that such a thing is mentioned in public light by the City Council after all if the merchant lords mentioned it then they would have to take some form of action. Such an all out internal conflict would not do Triskellian any good.

So the Lords and the Guild Master of the Thieves guild have a tacit understanding that so long as the Thieves Guild keeps it's deprecations to a minor amount then the Council will not send out the guards to disband the guild. No one seems to know whom the current Guild Master of the Thieves is, the person is reported to be under a hood that covers their features and also seems to be in possession of or has some form of spell on them that conceals their appearance. He/She has never been caught, but for those few poor souls that have had dealings with the Guild say that this individual is a formidable opponent, who is plotting to strengthen the guild. Though they cannot describe what race or gender this person is, accounts vary widely as no two accounts have ever been the same.

Other locales in Old Town is the Romney Inn, this quaint little tavern located in the North end of Old Town along the east wall that abuts the Cathedrale de Temoin. Is one of the better-established inns in the city? The tavern's mistress one Marie a red fox who claims to have some familial ties to the House Rinaldi but as to where or how she will not allude to. She is a plump fox with

black hair and dark eyes that all her to look over a perspective client and judge his worth down to the last Denar. They say there is not much she cannot procure also for the right price and that her information or goods are always right, her girls are rumored to be the best cared for as tavern wenches go.

She allows for no unsavory or unwholesome ways to bother her girls and her bouncer a Cat type who is all black in color for fur ensures that wayward hands do not interfere with the way the girls work. Though she is willing to discuss a price if you wish for a more private and intimate service. It is rumored that she is a way to get a message to the Thieves Guild though no one is sure.

As you surmise and assume that Old Town is dangerous to all who travel with in its domain, not always is that the case. As written that in all dark places there is a place of light hope so it is with Old Town. In the center of the Southern part of Old Town there stands a small church nothing like the Cathedrale de Temoin, but stand it does this church was where the faith of S'allumer has started. But since the time that they had finished the construction of the Cathedrale it no longer has many constituents. But here resides the Mouse Priest Kristo and his wife Keryie. They are the epitome of hospitality; their door is open to any and all no matter the day or night.

He has offered Sanctuary to any who have asked of it, and has kept more than his share of secrets from the confessions. His wife is Old Towns Mid-wife, their aged appearance should not fool you, they probably know about more secrets and the goings on's in Old Town then even the City Council does. It is said the Keryie is also an herbalist of no small skill.

Of course cutting through the middle of Old Town is the ever-impressive Aqueducts of Triskellian. Here is where supposedly the thieves' guild is able to move with near impunity through as

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they work their trade. To the west of Old Town and behind an enclosed gate with guards lays the Don's Palace, Sadly we could not gain access to the residence as they seem to be still working on the secession issue in the family Rinaldi. But back to the aqueducts, now rumor has it that the guild makes use of the aqueducts but it seems none of the local constabulary can verify those facts. If the guild is using the ducts to move supplies and people then it is without damage or disruption to the flow of the system. The gang of thieves or the guild whomever it is that uses the aqueducts is elusive though on one night I thought I caught sight of one of the Rogues making his way through the waters.

On to Dock Town this area of Triskellian is part of the cities commerce and trade. It is here that the lifeblood of trade and adventure comes to the city. You can find just about anything here in Dock Town, it has been said that if you wish to seek your fortunes it is in Dock Town that you need to start. It is here that the downtrodden, the adventurous youth, the desperate will go to get either away from their troubles or to find their fortunes. A word of warning for the fool hardy who stay in Dock Town overnight, some ships captains will not pay the fees of the Sailors guild or deal with their regulations, so Pressgangs are the rule for acquiring new crewmates.

Tales abound of treasure and adventure on some faraway land. Of several tales I have heard one was about the tale of a golden monkey statue that is said to dispense wisdom to those who know the right questions to ask. Another is the tale of some style of weapons a spear or sword with a shield which is said to have been wielded by an ancient Horse Lord Arthurus. It has been rumored that such a gear could protect a city or destroy it utterly.

Though the foul business of slavery is still practiced, I came upon an "Eleutherian" gathering as they protest the shameful practice at a slave auction. Some of the Eleutherian group where actually

trying to buy the slaves from the auctioneers to set them free. There were more then one or two heavy-handed blows over some of the trades that happened. But what is one to do, as long as the Guild Masters take no direct action nor the House of Rinaldi or the other Great Houses then we are still stuck with this foul business in trading in on a persons rights to be a free individual.

Some of the folk, brought over are wretched indeed from the lack of food and water. Their fur matted, and eyes dull and listless, the ships that bring them over are just as foreign as the cargo they bring. Also down here but on the North side of Triskellian and bereft of any city walls to hide behind is the start of the shipyards, though no Nobel house has yet to fully embrace this idea it is slowly growing, and it is the wise commoner who can make himself a name by producing ships inexpensively and fast.

On to New Town and the Guild House row, it is here where the majority of Guild Houses can be found from Merchants, to Mercenaries, Magicians to name a few. It is at the Guild houses that members can relax in some modicum of comfort. Also acquire new gear or get old gear refurbished. All for a small fee usually one denar or so the Guilds have worked out various arrangements with some of the local taverns and inns around the city for their members to relax.

In the Mercenaries hall there is a posting for various White Shield companies looking to hire on fighters, healers, priests, scouts, outriders, bodyguards. Most of the major White Shield Companies usually have a member on staff here in the Hall to recruit new blood into their specific company.

Some of the companies are Kildarvins irregulars a light Calvary Company mostly made up of scouts and destrier riders. Along with some archers, and a few other mixed classes which make up the odd hundred or so members of Kildarvins Irregulars.

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Kildarvin is a deer type who seems to have a knack of leadership and manages to get not only good contracts for her troops, but has also managed to keep most of her crew together. It is rumored that she is the daughter of a Nobel house, but as to which one or where only the light seems to know. The rest of the Guilds vary from job to job from a Farmers guild to a Coachmen's Guild, Laborer and Messenger Guilds.

In Dock Town there resides even a Sailors Guild for any ships captain to replenish missing crew and also to look for jobs. Such is the case with many things in Triskellian even here there is political Intrigue. As guild masters maneuver their guilds to prosperity and for control of the city. In Triskellian is also the great learning center the Dunwasser College this school of modern learning that was started by a shipping company that wanted to have better maps and knowledge of various regions in and around Calabria.

Also they wanted to have officers and crews that were moderately knowledgeable of where they were going and also be able to negotiate on behalf of the company. Since then the school has grown to now being one the greatest learning institutions in Calabria. It is here that the middle-class and the like send their children for education and learning. The school as run by one Pascal de Syranatal (an ape) he is the current headmaster of the Dunwasser College. In the school he is the ultimate authority.

The school is large enough that it supports several dormitory structures for students. Private rooms for those who are learning the magical arts; to even a healers hall for those who want to learn the healing arts. As well as plenty of space for an indoor/outdoor practice salle for those who are learning their weapons skills.

One of the most impressive structures in Triskellian is of course the Cathedrale de Temoin it is here that the center of religion for all of

Calabria to the glory of S'allumer. Its domes and spires reach to the sky, the inside of the great Cathedrale is impressive in and of itself. In the main hall are pictures of Helloise the magnificent, from the scene of her witnessing to her being tested and then her final miracles.

The main dome of the Cathedrale that towers over the main hall was put up by magic, it is said that it draws its power and light from the sun wandered (the father) who bathes us in his blessed light. The House of Helloise is what the commoners call the Great structure, it was said that where they laid the keystone to the church is where Helloise received the shining path from S'allumer.

Now there is one other local that I should mention as it is considered by those in the know and those who can afford it is a stay at none other than the Three Spears Inn, this facility is the crème de la crème of the city. It is here where young nobles can come to and claim to be slumming with the common folks. The prices while reasonable for the clientele are too high for most of the common mass.

It is run by Shelia Corlion, she is a bat type she is a crafty individual, and she runs her inn so that it does make her a tidy profit. Also it is heard that she runs other services for the Nouveau Riche and the Nobility to allow them to really unwind there is almost practically nothing she cannot lay her paws on in the way of a vice for her clientele.

These are just parts of Triskellian her history, culture centers of learning are all apart of what makes this the Crown Jewel of the Rinaldi family. Also why the other Noble houses wish to make it their own. For truly Triskellian is a center of great cultural learning, growth and industry for now and into the future.

"About time that lazy deer sent me something," groused Gazelles employer of the Antlers Rack. He read through the paper, "Huh not bad... need to get this to print. What is this she even sent me a receipt for her stays... okay...no problem.... SHE STAYED WHERE!!!"

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Asclepius Rising

By Michael J. Simmons

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Waiting is a universal constant, along with death and taxes you can always be counted on to hold true in any society. Also they say that waiting is the worse, specifically when one is an agent who is on the home planet of his people's enemies. Such is the case with Gaeth Firth a Doctor in the EDF (Extraterrestrial Defense Force of the Confederation Armed Services) or Confed. While waiting for the line to move his thoughts drifted back to when he was approached by an officer in the Special services branch who approached him while on Derzon II Where the MASH unit he was in were making the rounds in the mopping up effort.

"Excuse me Lieutenant Firth, I am Senior Commander Talot I am with Special Services. Is there someplace where we can talk." Firth looked up from his desk where he was filing out reports and requisitions to see a Black furred anthro feline, wearing the rank of a senior commander "My Pardon Senior Commander, um...not sure where we can go?" replied Firth.

"Perhaps we can take a walk?" remarked the Commander, his feline features where a blank mask which twitched the young rabbits awareness that there was something more to this conversation, when dealing with someone in Special Services one was always on their toes. Special Services is the Criminal Investigative Branch of the Extraterrestrial Defense Force. Picking up his coat and cap, Lt. Firth fell in behind the Sr. Commander and they proceeded out the door. The Lieutenant's brindle brown fur picking up the chill of the morning air as it blew across the tarmac and grounds of the base commons.

"Lieutenant Firth, Let us walk this way." The commander said in an authoritative manner as he set off on a brisk walk. "What we are about to discuss is highly classified!" There walk proceeded to take them toward the flight line. "We are need of people who are willing to make a sacrifice for the greater good."

"Greater Good!!! Sir!?!?" Firth replied.

"Yes Lieutenant... Greater good. We need people who will be willing to give up their lives as citizens of the Confed and also in your case your commission in the EDF as an officer to go be an "emissary" for us."

"An Emissary sir? An emissary for whom? You all in Special Services! Your kidding you wants me to spy on my fellow officers for you."

"No lieutenant, we do not need you to spy on your fellow officers..." a grin appearing on the black felines face "at least not yet! What we have need for you to do will require some traveling."

"Traveling??? Where to?" The Senior Commander remained quiet for a minute. "Lieutenant we know that you have no immediate family and no steady relationships with any one at the moment. We also know you are highly proficient in medical treatment and diagnosis of our various peoples. You also have other skills that make you an ideal candidate for what we need."

"Excuse me sir, but I get the feeling that you are setting me up, for me to say 'Yes' to something that I may find objectionable. In which case you may already know that I am willing to do

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whatever I can to assist the Confed in its purpose. Now can we cut to the chase and get to the point here. So you can stop trying to show me how clever you are!” Gaeth snapped somewhat in an annoyed manner.

“I am sorry lieutenant, but we have need to be assured of your cooperation. After all it was not that long ago that the ILR was here and had caused a significant damage to not only Derzonll but also to any Lapines who are loyal members of the Confederation and the EDF. Before we make our offer, we wanted to know that you could be trusted because it will require us to ask you to sacrifice everything, you have done to date. Lieutenant I am going to ask you to come with me to a facility that is on another planet where you will be trained and indoctrinated into the culture of the Independent Lapine Republic.” The Commanders statement was punctuated as an Aerodyne lifted off.



* * *

His musings where interrupted as he came to the check point, “Papers...” he fished in his pockets and produced a small data pad which he handed to the Security officer a yellowish colored Lapine then inputed in a desktop computer and scanned. “Purpose here!”

“Business, I am setting up a clinic.” Firth responded, the rabbit guard gave him a single glance. Handing back the pad, “Carry On.” Grasping the pad, he made his way through the press of the crowd. His ears picking up on the general hubbub of the crowd and also the general announcements that broadcast over the Public Address system.

He moved his way on to one of the local moving sidewalks getting over to a side so others can pass by him. He watched as rabbits of all types passed him. He in his travels so far had never seen so many lapines in one location. Even when he was home for one of the family’s reunions had he never seen so many. He came to the end of the sidewalk and stepped off, making his way to an informational kiosk he stopped to look over where he was in the space port.

He looked around trying to gather all the information he could, what he could see, smell, hear. All the advertisements each selling things from Fur dryers, colognes and perfumes, vehicles; he watched as the people passed by most of them apparently seeming intent on there on little world and not taking in the advertising warfare that was going on around them. Moving off from the kiosk he noted the taxi concourse.

He made his way to that location. He walked just looking; since his entire job according to the agent that trained him was to gather ‘soft intelli-

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gence' learn about the culture and what the people in the ILR are told. The next five or so minutes was occupied with weaving between the crowds as he made his way to the taxi concourse, along his way he saw many rabbits some in military uniforms others in some form of business dress which could almost be taken for military outfits.

"HmMMM...I am going to need some new outfits something that will help me blend in. But first I need to get out of this place and into my 'new' home." Finding the concourse he stepped onto the platform and soon was in a cab and heading into downtown of the Capital of Baliannian.

The trip was brief and soon he arrived at a domicile location. "Here ya are sir..." came the automated voice from the robot cab. "Thank you for using Baliannian cab service. Fare cost \$32 Republic credits." Gaeth inserted his credit chit into the slot, he heard the whirring and soon his chit was presented back to him.

Stepping out he retrieved his bags and made his way to the Hotel to see about getting a studio space for a minimum. "Greetings, " he said as he walked up to the main desk with an attractive female rabbit behind it. "I am hoping you have a studio suite for me to rent." He smiled at her as he slipped across his credit chit card and data chip.

"Let me check for you sir?" her voice chipper and bright. She ran the chip and card, checking their information then checking the hotel for the accommodations, the system showed that several rooms were available. Chewing up more of his credits it reserved the room for the next several cycles. She handed over the keys to the room to Gaeth, "Thank you for choosing to stay with us Mr. Firth. If there is anything more that we can do for you, let us know, you can call down here to the front desk." She stated her eyes flashing with eager appreciation.

Chuckling he took the keys, "I am sure if I have any concerns. I will let you know." He pro-

ceeded to walk to the escalators and took them up to the second level where from there he caught an elevator to the thirteenth (13th) floor. He made his way to his room. Opening the door. He made his way into his new home; it was a standard studio affair with a small kitchenette with a breakfast bar/nook. There was a small couch and love seat along with a fold out bed. On the wall was a mounted flat screen. He made note of the computer ports and hooked up his small laptop. An item made to look like it was of ILR make however housed in it the cream of Confed technology. Plugging it in and starting it up, he made it run its own diagnostic check. Moving on started to put his items, toiletries and clothing. Doing so he also checked around for any listening devices, not finding any. He then started to get settled in for the night.

* * *

While Lieutenant Firth slept, another meeting was going on this one in deep space along one of the many small pockets of neutrality. In orbit over a small automated mining asteroid complex hung a single vessel, soon the emptiness on the other side was filled with a silent flash as another vessel came into view. From the second vessel detached smaller ship which then headed to another separate airlock on the station. As a half dozen objects streaked from the arriving vessel to the stationary one, striking the vessel and then breaking it in half as it ruptured and then exploded.

Inside the station all was quite, the stations automated processing equipment having been shut down. Soon the sound of the airlock and pressure doors cycling and equalizing the pressure inside the station. As the doors opened, it showed three rabbits one in a high ranking officers uniform and two of his aides. The room already occupied by a trio of Felines also a high ranking officer and his two aides.

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“Ah Vice Chairperson Charlashi and guests so good of you to come.” exclaimed the senior rabbit who like his counterparts were now holding guns on the three Felines.

Charlashi turned around to see the rabbits and their sidearms unholstered. “Vice Chairperson... we are under attack... We are under.....” Static hissed from the comm unit on the old lions uniform.

“What is the meaning of this? What do you think your doing?”

“Why Charlashi... are we not comrades in arms in our little mutual endeavors there is no reason for us not to be civilized now is there. I mean after all it is not like either one of us is committing treason or anything!” Rogeth smiled evilly.

“Rogeth just talking to you is treasonous, however yes we are in this little plot of yours, so what do you need now in order for us to proceed.”

“Why that part is simple my dear Vice Chairperson, in fact you have already provided it.” Rogeth’s voice turning suddenly serious, as he fired his gun point blank at Charlashi’s face.

“Rogeth...are you out of your mind. We can talk about this, what are you...” several soft puffs were heard from the guns as Charlashi and his aides fell to the deck, shot in the chest several times each.

“Pathetic old fool.” Rogeth spat on the elderly lion. Picking up a comm unit. “This is Unit Alpha, Has the EDF ship been dispatched.”

“Yes sir, the ACV’s came in as you had planned and took them out in a single shot. We also went ahead and captured the yacht which was empty!”

“Empty!...where any of the escape pods missing or any of the EVA suits!” Rogeth exclaimed. “*Damn that Lion, where is his pilot. He never goes anywhere with out a pilot in command of his ship.*”

“Sir we have searched nothing is missing, and no pilot, maybe one of his aides was the pilot.”

“Maybe... Jettison the Yacht... let it float. We have the facility.”

“Aye sir...”

Clicking off the comm unit, he turned to look at his two aides. “Get them prepped in their chairs, and let us get this operation underway.” His aides started to pick up one of the three and place it into a chair, as Rogeth moved over to Charlashi’s body, pulling out a key card. He then took it over to a counsel, inserting it in. The screen came to life, typing in commands he set the stations keeping thrusters and then activated the chronometer to when they should fire off.

Chuckling to himself, he turned as his aides loaded Charlashi’s body into the nearest chair. “We all set,” getting nods indicating all was set. He then motioned for them to leave the station. “Karo and Sashiro... Let us leave... after all we will have to be at home before the war starts in 240hours. .” The other two aides also shared the same vindictive smile of success as their commander.

Soon the ILR destroyer boosted out of its orbit, leaving a lone mining station, one yacht and the debris and bodies of an EDF cruiser. Shortly there after the station itself started its own boost slowly moving away from the station. On board the yacht however a young mouse type watched from a view port as the ILR ship leap into fold space and then watched as the station started its own burn out of orbit.

Sitting at a computer counsel she stared at the blank screen her gray furred face starring back at her, with a start we realized she turned on the computer. “**Ident Confrim Code.**” replied the soft but deep voice of the Net computer. “EDF, Flight Specialist Miliea D.I.D. PS-23457. CODE Epsilon. I need a course plot of the mining station that just burned out of here at full burn. “**One moment, Please...**

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Course laid in, displaying on monitor.” she then starred in horror as she realized where the station was going, also who was responsible for the act, and whom the blame would fall. As she looked around with other various sensors she knew the the EDF ship was totaled and the Yacht not equipped with a jump system would take weeks to get to anything remotely resembling civilization. Thinking for a moment, she then accessed the ships main database. “We need to get a message out to EDF High Command or to someone in authority who can speak to someone in ILR Space. Apparently Vice Chairperson Charlashi is involved in what is going to be an attack on the home world of the ILR. Our automated mining station just boosted out of here on a bearing that will intercept Baliannian in 10 days time.”

“That is most distressing!!!”

“Ya, think... we need to figure out a way to stop this from happening. Sadly the Yacht does not have the power to boost and catch up to the station. Also currently there is not enough supplies on board this vessel to even do an intercept. I would starve or run out of air before the intercept could happen.”

“What about the Destroyer? I see by my sensors that while she was grievously damaged that is still a means to salvage equipment and supplies so that we may then warn the nearest EDF

base which at the boost capacity of this vessel is just under 200hrs. We can also rig a radio beacon to broadcast a message or warning.”

“Okay, I am going to go suit up and start scrounging for supplies, go ahead and start prepping the ships engines and plot our course for the nearest base. Along with setting the radio for continuous transmission.”

“I will need a release of Autonomous protocols!”

“Yes, sorry about that. Vera M. Delta Sigma 80229 under directive 27, authorize autonomous operation.”

“Thank You! I will begin to effect what is required for our mission. “

“Mean time I will get to becoming a scavenger.”

As she slipped out of the computer couch and walked back to the where the EVA suits were kept, checking over hers carefully to make sure that the Rabbits left no surprises. Checking to make sure her seals were set and all was green, she stepped into the airlock, donning an EVA pack. She then cycled the lock and with it opening, she stepped into the blackness of space.

<To Be Continued>

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Carta da gioco in Calabria

By Chuan Lin

Within a few years since it was first appeared in Triskellian, *Carta da gioco* spread like wild fire throughout Calabria and attracted attention among princes and paupers. Nearly all swear that *carta da gioco* can not only predict one fortunes but also bring or take away one's fortune. These *carta* are considered to be a more mundane sibling to hallowed *Tarocchi* which is known as the companion of high priestesses. *Carta da gioco* are made of specially prepared heavy paper in palm-sized for convenient handling. As a set, they are known as a *pack* or *deck* and each set contains 54 cards (4 suits of 13 cards + 2 joker cards). When a number of *carta* are held by a person, it is known as a person's hand. The front or *face* of each *carta* carries a distinguished marking that are used for interpretation. The back of each *carta* has uniformed designs or symbols, though, more often, they contains markings of their maker. In all instances, these *carta da gioco* (symbolized as orders) are assembled into a deck and then randomly shuffle (symbolized as chaos) prior use.

A Brief History

Carta da gioco first came to the attention of Triskellians soon after the marriage of Don Fidelio De Rinaldi and Amalsand Jakoba. Rumor has it that ladies of House Jakoba are born sibyl as their House was selected by ancient Autarchs to be their interceders with younger races. Whereas the Mistress of Triskellian has her *tarocchi* and only used it on selected individuals, her six Jakobian ladies-in-waiting have *carta da gioco* and were willing to demonstrate its potentials to their new found friends.

After a month of marriage, the Lady of Triskellians was expelled out of the manor and disappeared into the wilderness. Gone with her were two loyal Jakobian ladies-in-waiting. Three dallying Jakobian ladies-in-waiting married to different guild masters and sold replicating rights of their *carta da gioco* to their guilds for large sum. Her most senior Jakobian lady-in-waiting wandered throughout Calabria and gathered her own band followers and believers who were soon known collectively as *zingari*. As the head of these *zingari*, she known as Fata Buona.

Whereas the fates of loyal Jakobians and Fata Buona merited their own respective articles, the three dallying Jakobian guild mistresses used their guilds and gambling houses to exploit *carta* market. The major guilds sold replicating right to individual craftsman and lesser guilds. They then used the back of *carta* for advertisements, quotes of any kind, and custom designs cater to affluent members. By flooding the market with inexpensive replicated rights but high manufacture cost, this cut down number of dishonest merchants and craftsman who sought to save expense by bypass replicated rights. In addition, the big three merchant guilds are all, in one way or another, associated with gambling houses, these *carta* are used to separate fools and their *danarii*.

Gradually, more and more seeress appeared in Triskellian streets. They all claimed to master the art of Jakobian fortune tellings and they, alone, possessed the true *carta da gioco*. While, it is safe to assume that most claims are false, it is unwise to state it in front of seeress for fear of their curses.

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Current Tides

Triskellian - Carta da gioco are quite a common sight within proper of Triskellian. People are familiar with it and generally treated them as tools. Most vendors hawked their designs of carta. Many travelers passed through Triskellian stopped and get themselves several decks of carta da gioco. Merchant caravan carried stocks of them to other cities. Street Seeresses are born in the streets of Triskellian.

Doloreaux - Carta da gioco is viewed as a divination tool, a handy almanac, and a part of the Blessed's repertoire. Each card contains a mystery that requires meditation and contemplation. Only boorish used them for games and profits. And those tended to fall to ill-favored in later life.

Phelan - Carta da gioco is viewed simply another attempt by outsiders trying to corrupt Phelans. A deck of carta has no value yet people played it to gain something of a value. It claimed to divine one's future by looking at these carta and forgo the more obvious of looking up to heaven, looking down to earth, and looking all around. It is simply another trapping by outsiders trying to hold down Phelans.

Avoirdupois - Carta da gioco was previously viewed as a vice that corrupts one's soul. Despite being a contraband, it fast become a favorite among foot soldiers. Recently, a publicly held inquisition made against d'Antonio Ferrara, a knight of The Holy Order of Ardent, who was accused of carrying carta da gioco despite knowing the law prohibit. Instead of being made an example of breaking that law, d'Antonio Ferrara won the trail by claiming that carta da gioco helped him remember the virtues of S'allumer and that each card has a special meaning to him. The detail of that event is listed under Carta e S'allumer section below. Though the law has relented on prosecuting those found possessing carta, one has to be

cautious of displaying such thing in public. Despite successful conviction, there's a rumor that d'Antonio Ferrara is a member of Prieuré de Hellöis or was somehow coached by someone from that sinister fraternity

Bisclavret - Carta da gioco was viewed as a tool. But unlike Triskellian, Bisclavretians viewed them as simply a tool of luck and to claim it as a divination tool is simply ludicrous. They pointed to all those Triskellian seeresses that one could ask the same question to 52 street prophetesses and could receive 52 different divine answers. So, while viewing divination as a nice diversion, carta da gioco is best used for pitting one's skill against another in a high stake game. From them came Falschspiel who traveled throughout Calabria to challenge one another and to harvest *wools from sheep*.

Carta e Calendar

A band of zingari traveled through d'Doloreaux and their entertaining troupe had caught attention of town folks throughout that duchy. Even Duke and Duchess of d'Doloreaux have heard their fame and invited them to their court. While rest of court and zingari mingled, Duke and Duchess of d'Doloreaux had treated Fata Buona with such respect that impressed the guest of honor. The Mistress of zingari had accepted Duke's invitation to stay with them for a season while the rest of zingari stayed at the outskirts of the town by d'Doloreaux Castle. During that time, she was being served not as the leader of ragtag band but as a full fledged Jakobian nobility.

During her stay, Fata Buona personally read Duke d'Doloreaux's fortune and answered his three questions. It is said that the first question had come true. To Duchess d'Doloreaux, the mystical lady simply said, your secret fear will be put to rest. She then requested the Lady of the Castle to

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give her two hours each day together so they can share knowledge. No one knows what's going on during those two, sometime four or even six hours. By the time zingari leaving Castle d'Doloreaux, the Duchess has her own set of carta da gioco. She continued her self-enclosure for two more seasons and appeared when her duty as Duchess or as High Priestesses of Lutarism is required. The remaining time is spent in solitaire in Sacred Grove of Lutara.

On the Day of Receiving as the ceremony is about to close, as the High Priestess of Lutarism, the Duchess joined by the Great Mother, make a startling announcement. The Great Mother has bestowed a gift of revealing Mystery to the High Priestess. Carta da Gioco is also useful as an almanac tool:

Twelve face (court) carta are directly related to the twelve months of the year.

Two colors to the deck - red and black - matching the two halves of the year (summer solstice and winter equinox)

The four suits - Hearts/Spring, Diamonds/

Jill of Heart/ Birch Knight	Jack of Diamond/ Alder Knight	Jack of Club/ Oak Knight	Jill of Spade/ Ivy Knight
Queen of Heart/ Rowan Regina	Queen of Diamond/ Willow Regina	Queen of Club/ Holly Regina	Queen of Spade/ Reed Regina
King of Heart/ Ash Majesty	King of Diamond/ Hawthorn Majesty	King of Club/ Hazel Majesty	King of Spade/ Elder Majesty

Summer, Clubs/Autumn, and Spades/Winter - match the four seasons of the year.

Thirteen cards in each suit to match the 13 weeks of each season.

Deck holds 52 cards just as there are 52 weeks in a year.

As such, for the Blessed, carried having a set of court carta helped them meditate and maintain focus.

Carta e S'allumer

During one of many expeditions near Porteur-du-Soleil, a bunch of knights had been on a long hike and they arrived in a little town called Annemasse. The next day being Dimache, these knights went to Church in the morning. Knight-Captain François Dupessey was in charge. After the Chaplain had read the opening prayer, knights were selected to lead the prayer. Those of the knights who had a prayer book took them out, but one knight brought out a deck of carta which he spread them out. When Knight-Captain Dupessey saw the carta and said, "Son, put away those carta.":

After the services was over, Knight-Captain Dupessey instructed other knights to hold Knight Ferrara on charge of holding contraband. Eventually all were gathered in front of Provost Inquisitor Jean-Pierre Vigny. And a very publicized inquisition was held.

After the opening prayer for S'allumer's wisdom and mercy, Inquisitor declared, "Knight-Captain, why have you brought this man here?"

"For playing cards in church, You Honor."

"And what have you to say for yourself, son?"

"Much, Sir," replied Knight Ferrara.

The Inquisitor said, "I hope so, son, for if not I shall punish you more than any man was ever punished."

Knight Ferrara said, "You Honor, I have been on the march for about six days; fighting large group of heretics. I have lost most of my possessions, among which the Holy Scripture and prayer

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book. But I hope to satisfy you, You Honor, with the purity of my intentions.” Then the knight began his tale:

“You see, You Honor, when I look at the Ace, it reminds me that there is but one S'Allumer.

And the Deuce, reminds me that the Time is divided into two parts, the Age of Ignorance and the Age of Light.

When I see the Trey, I think of our Capitular Brotherhood: Ardentines, Passarellites, and Guérisseurs.

And when I see the Four, I think of the Four Tenets: Ascension, Asceticism, Pancreationism, and Monotheism.

And when I see the Five, it reminds me the last five days of beloved Helloise wandered the street of Triskellian and healed woes of the city.

When I see the Six, it reminds me the parable of six wise maidens who were ready to go with their lamps trimmed with oil and the six foolish men were shut out.

When I see the Seven, it reminds me that on Dimache, S'allumer blessed this day of peace and rest.

And when I see the Eight, I think of the eight righteous persons who carried on the works left by Hellois. Penitent Passarelle and her seven warrior maidens.

And when I see the Nine, I think of lepers our beloved Helloise cleansed, and nine out of the ten didn't even thank Her.

When I see the Ten, I think of Ten Sanctus who directly ascended to Heaven.

When I see the King, it reminds me that there is but one King of Heaven, S'Allumer the Luminance.

And when I see the Queen, I think of the Blessed Nursemaid Helloise, who is Queen of Heaven.

And the Jack, I think of Holy See of S'allumer who are principal defenders of our religion.

I find that there are 52 cards which equate to the number of weeks in a year. There are 4 suits that match the number of weeks in a month. There are 12 picture cards; they are corresponding to the number of months in a year. There are 13 tricks and there are thirteen weeks in a quarter.

So you see, Sir, my pack of cards serves me as a Bible, an Almanac and a Prayer Book.”

The entire court was quiet for few minutes except for the sounds of furious scribbling by court scribes as inquisitors looked through each carta and thought of what Knight Ferrara. Some of audience took out their carta da gioco and looked through them with new view. Then cheers broke out of audiences and persisted even after Provost Inquisitor Vigny couldn't silence even after breaking a mallet or two. By the time he did, Inquisitor Vigny announced a temporary recess. He and two other inquisitors retired to private room. In about an hour or so, they came out and to pronounce their verdict.

In all, they could not find any wrong doing with regards to Knight Ferrara defense.

Carta e Characters

Career: Falschspiel

Born from back rooms of guilds and posh gambling houses of Bisclavret, Falschspiel is a person who uses skill and deception to win at card games. Unlike regular gamblers who they viewed as uncouth low life, Falschspiel prided themselves as gentlemen and *gioco di carta* they played, a gentlemen speculation. They often challenged each others for reputation and against lesser skills players for livelihood. Some even used their adroitness to perform various card tricks and

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seemly magical card tricks as entertainment to nobility.

Applies to Gamble, Performance, Psychology, Holdout or Observation

Career: Street Seeress

Self-proclaimed practitioner of Jakobian art of divination, Street Seeresses can be found mostly in streets of Triskellia or within wandering bands of zingari. Their primary tool is a personal *carta da gioco* for prediction and interpreting relationships, love, careers, etc. Street Seeress readings are affected by many factors including individual card meaning, the order in which they appear, and their position within the *spread* when dealt. While individual cards have basic symbolism, their interaction with the reader and the requestor have endless combinations.

Applies to Augury, Fast-Talk or Street-wise, Navigation or Observation, Meditation or Psychology

Carte e Gifts

Gift, Esoteric – Acme of Control (1, 2, 3 points; required Career – Falschspiel, Esoteric Gift – Carta Throwing, a deck of carta)

Falschspiel threw his *carta* against incoming attacks in an effort to lessen the damage against him. Each *carta* acts as a d4 Cover Dice and is destroyed at the end of the round. For every point put in Acme of Control, Falschspiel can use up to twice as many *carta* to block. And for every point, he can use that many *carta* to block the same attack. Falschspiel can use this gift once per round for as long as he has *carta* in his hand. Destroyed *carta* are not counted as *carta* in Falschspiel's hand.

Gift, Esoteric – Blackstone's Con la Carta (2 points; required Career – Falschspiel, any one of Falschspiel's Esoteric Gifts)

Most considered this as the epitome of Falschspiel's spirit, "as the trick that requires only that a *carta* is thought of, it does not require the use of a deck of *carta*." As long as Falschspiel can hold that thing as if it is a *carta* then that thing will satisfy the requirement for deck of *carta*.

Gift, Esoteric – Carta Flourish (1 point; required Career – Falschspiel, a deck of carta)

Carta Flourish is a visual display of skill performed with *carta da gioco*. There are many types of flourishes: one handed cuts, spreads, two handed cuts, fanning, aeriels, springs, and etc. They are visually very fascinating to watch.

Falschspiel can perform this in front of a number of audience equal to his career dice (e.g. d8 = 8 people). While Falschspiel performs, his audience can do nothing but watch or being *fascinated*. At the beginning of each round, Falschspiel has to roll his career trait dice. As long as he did not roll a *botch*, his audience continues to watch his performance. To actively break away from Carta Flourish, the target has to roll his Will + Resolve dice against Falschspiel's career trait dice.

Gift, Esoteric – Carta Throwing (1, 2, 3 points; required Career – Falschspiel, a deck of carta)

Thurston Grip (1 point) - The most obvious way of *carta* throwing, one gripped the *carta* between his first and second finger on his left hand. The left arm is raised in an exaggerated motion as if one is throwing a knife. One can propel up to two *carta* per throw per round to a maximum distance of 7 paces. Each *carta* does d4+1 damage.

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Thrown carta is destroyed. Falschspiel can use this gift once per round for as long as he has carta in his hand. Destroyed carta are not count as carta in Falschspiel's hand.

Jay Technique (2 points; required carta Throwing 1 pt) - A more subtle way of throwing carta involved by gripping the middle of the carta horizontally between the thumb and the middle finger, while the index finger rests on the corner of the carta nearest the hand and away from the body. The wrist is cocked inward at a 90 degree angle, then flicked briskly outward, propelling the carta. For distance and power, the technique adds motion of the forearm bending at the elbow straight outwards from a 90 degree angle simultaneous to the flicking motion of the wrist. One can propel up to four cards per throw per round to a maximum distance of 6 paces. Each carta does d4+2 damage. Thrown carta is destroyed. Falschspiel can use this gift once per round for as long as he has carta in his hand. Destroyed carta are not count as carta in Falschspiel's hand.

Chrislinn Method (3 points; required carta Throwing 2 pt.) - This method of throwing cards is done simply by using one's thumb. One can propel up to six cards from the deck per round to a maximum distance of 5 paces. Each carta does d4+3 damages. Thrown carta is destroyed. Falschspiel can use this gift once per round for as long as he has carta in his hand. Destroyed carta are not count as carta in Falschspiel's hand.

Gift, Esoteric – Poker Face (2 points; required Career – Falschspiel, a deck of carta)

Through constant competition, bluffing and psychology, Falschspiel learn to disguise and strength his thought. As long as he has a carta on him, Falschspiel can add his Career trait dice to any Test of Will or Resolve rolls.

Gift, Esoteric – Triskellia Reading (varies – see below; required Career – Street Seeress, a deck of favor carta, meditation)

Most common reading method, *Triskellia Reading* is bastardization of more traditional *Tarocchi Method*. Yet, the potency is there for the reader. *La Baraja Doloraux* is another child of traditional Tarocchi Method that was handed down by Fata Buona to Duchess d'Doloreaux. Av-oirdupois also developed a method of divination which was called S'allumer Cross.

One Carta Answer (1 pt; 1 fatigue per draw) - State the question, shuffle deck, draw a carta. The carta represents an overall impression of your problem. See *Carta e Fortuna* for description of the card in question.

Daily Draw (1 pt; required *One Carta Answer*; 2 fatigue per draw) - Randomly draw a carta which represents what is the inquirer's day will be like for the inquirer. See *Carta e Fortuna* for description of the card in question. When the inquirer encounters situation that matches his carta, he will a **bonus** to his skill roll if necessary.

Three Carta Draw (2 pt; required *One Carta Answer*; 2 fatigues per draw) - States a question, shuffle the deck, randomly draw three carta that give answer/overview to a single question/issue. Lay out three cards in a row from left to right. The carta in the left represents the question's origin; the carta in the center represents the question in relation to inquirer; the carta in the right represents the question's resolution. See *Carta e Fortuna* for description of the card in question.

Improved Daily Draw (2 pt; required *Three Carta Draw* ; 4 fatigues per draw) - Randomly draw three carta which represents what is the inquirer's day will be like for the inquirer. See *Carta e Fortuna* for description of the card in question. When the inquirer encounters situation that matches his carta, he will a **bonus** to his skill

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roll if necessary. Once he encounters two out of three possible situations, he will not get a **bonus** to his skill roll when the third one occurs.

Battle Carta Draw (2 pt; required *Daily Draw*; 3 fatigues per draw) - Street Seeress's stress has greatly enhanced her ability to read carta. In fact,

she is able to summon images and project into battlefield, whether the image is real or illusion is still subject to debate. See Carta e Fortuna for description of the carta in question. In most cases, once carta is draw, it will not return to the deck.

<To Be Continued>

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Sanguine & Conventions

Or where you can find Ironclaw, Jadeclaw, Usagi, and Albedo games are run in conventions.

Here, readers will find with conventions will have Claws, Usagi, and Albedo demos / events and name of people who host them. They are usually on the newsgroup. Once I get their permission to post their email address, I will update it accordingly.

Colorado

Rocky Mountain Fur Con

— August 7th - 9th

<http://www.rockymountainfurcon.org/2009/>

Denver— TBA

Note: Ithiaca Dreamweaver will run Ironclaw event

Origin Game Fair

—June 24 - 28th

<http://www.originsgamefair.com>

Columbus—Greater Columbus Convention Center

Note: Sean will run Ironclaw event

Illinois

Midwest Furfest

— November 20h - 22th

<http://www.furfest.org/>

Wheeling — Westin Chicago North Shore

Note: Last year we saw Purrzah demo couple IC games. Hopefully, she will return this year for more.

Pennsylvania

Anthrocon

— July 2 - 5th

<http://www.anthrocon.org>

Pittsburgh - David L. Lawrence Convention Center

Note: Jason will be there.

Ohio

Morphicon

— May 15 - 17th

<http://www.morphicon.org/>

Columbus—Holiday Inn Columbus-Worthington

Note: Swift Fox will be there. We're looking for few GM to demo