

Ephemera:

How the Arrogant are Met

“To be consumed by one's own desires is foolish enough; to think those desires just, and pursue them as such by any means, is the belief that one is a God who may judge their own moral value. The world has a way of bringing justice to such well-meaning wickedness.”

It was getting late more quickly than he'd expected, and a pang of anxiety warned him to hurry. His hands fidgeted in the pockets of his heavy black overcoat, and he ran his thumb compulsively along the inner seam. Winding his way alone through the back streets of the city called Riviem, the young man, named Azrael, navigated them surely and without thought, observing the darkening sky with a mind left free to wander. His tightly strung shoulders relaxed, marginally; he had time still. Not much, but he had time.

This night had taken seventeen years of his life to come. Now that it was finally here, he found himself afraid. The emotion, far from overwhelming him, brought him to a state of charged excitement. The energy was fluttering around in his chest, propelling him forward with long, eager strides.

They called themselves the Couriers, but the only messages they ever delivered were the final words of enemies, made to be understood by a single, decisive strike. They were political meddlers, assassins, fear-mongers of the highest degree. Their grip over the land was invisible and dominating. In every major city along the northwestern slice of the kingdom of Ephene, they had the king's men in their pocket; on the roads, their eyes were countless.

To learn this, Azrael had been among their number for half of his life. He'd been mortgaging out his soul, slivers at a time, to their name for the past twelve years, in addition to the five years he'd spent simply to find them. His search had begun a few weeks before he'd turned eight years old. That was when his father, an ambitious and politically active knight, had been murdered. Back then, Azrael's head had been filled with stories of legendary heroes and dramatic odysseys. He'd found within himself a noble and unwavering determination to see justice done – and, just as important, a smoldering hatred for the craven assassins that infected the land.

He knew them and their ways. Azrael knew what would happen, how it would happen, the way in which it *had* happened time after time: A good man would die, an innocent one be scapegoated, and the killer would live a long, healthy, prosperous life. The boldest knight of the kingdom would never be killed in fair combat – it was the dagger from behind, or the poison in the drink, that spelled the natural end of those that were brave, just, and willing to fight for their ideals.

He despised their callous power, more than any words could express. Not for the ease with which it was done – Azrael knew from experience that any perceived grace the act of professional murder might have, it was gained only through years of hard labor and unimaginable trials which forced the perpetrator to perfect the act of killing. But to discard all sense of ethics, responsibility, humanity, and strike out to impenitently take another man's life was a purely disgusting act. Particularly so when one of the many men so murdered had been the exemplifying symbol for all things good during Azrael's young life, torn from him without remorse.

But after so many years, he was about to finally bring satisfaction to his grief, and penalty for

the crime. There were no great heights to his ambitions - Azrael was only one man, and not a particularly stalwart one at that. He could do nothing about the pervasive Courier organization that was the true root to his misery. But just to put *one* killer down, though, *one* that had done so much wrong and caused so much injury to men, families, towns, communities – if Azrael could do that, and through it disturb the cocky invincibility of the Couriers!... he would live contented the rest of his life.

His window for action was arriving, and he was nearly in position. He didn't have time for a straying mind, now; his attention refocused to the cluttered alleyway. There was a windowsill here, with one pane missing and another cracked.

He recalled that the building was inhabited by a large family, the father of whom was an assistant to a paper-maker, and most his sons apprenticed throughout the city. His youngest boy was a particularly mischievous scoundrel, who was forever sneaking away from work to cause trouble for his harried mother. At this hour, no member of the family would be away from slumber, which meant no ears to overhear him at work.

Azrael launched himself from the ground with a swift stomp on the windowsill, propelling himself up just enough to grip the low-lying molding near the roof of the house. The toe of one boot was supported at the topmost panel of the window, while he dug in with the other to gain purchase in a bit of cracked plaster. He scaled the vertical wall quickly, knowing that no handhold he found would be able to bear his weight for long, and forced himself over the edge of the roof. Standing, he moved deftly across the barren rooftops, routing himself habitually around chimney stacks to provide himself the most cover for the short journey.

It was still with several minutes to spare that he arrived at his striking point, scouted just that morning. The roof was built steep and high, with a small, flat landing between the two gabled peaks. It was about as long as a small horse was tall, and half that width. The landing was accessible only by a palladian window, the outward-swinging hinges of which Azrael had already disabled when he'd been by earlier.

Getting to the landing was a delicate maneuver, in which Azrael was forced to slide, inches at a time, down the side of one peak. Any clumsy slip would wreak havoc on the silence he was dependent on, and if he were incompetent enough, there was the hard and unforgiving alleyway far beneath him to welcome his mistake. Carelessness was only the enemy of the ill-prepared, however - Azrael was skilled enough to reach the landing with ease and grace.

From that point, he had a perfect scoping view of the entire alley below, along with near-perfect concealment. Laying himself down on his belly with his face just inches from the twenty-some-foot drop, Azrael pulled the collar of his overcoat high up around his neck, pretended to be impervious to the chilling air of early evening, and waited.

It wasn't long until his patience was rewarded with activity at one end of the alley. His heart tapped nervously on the inside of his ribs as he distinguished a single figure approaching, just as he'd predicted.

The man he watched tonight was no stranger to him, though they'd met only once before. Azrael's memory of the man's face was unspecific, made vague by the haze of time and chaos, but the details were all the same as he recalled – squarish, with narrow eyes and a rounded nose, quirked eyebrows. The man's hair had been a dark brown when they'd once met, but this man's now was a

dulling blond, thinning a little at the hairline. His face was forgettable – all the best assassins' were, of course. He seemed about the right age for the man Azrael remembered, seventeen years past the prime he'd been in that night - though he was several pounds heavier than might have been expected, it all seemed quite plausible that these traits were all those of his target.

Proof enough for hope, but not enough for action. Azrael would not allow mistakes to be made, no matter how much he desired to make conclusions, to act. And so he looked for more definable telltales, searching with a calm and rational mind that was utterly untouched by his fluttering, rapid heartbeat.

There were signs that the eye learned, which could spot out an assassin from an average man. How a person walked, how alert they were to their surroundings, whether they reacted to small changes in the environment - all the small traits of a regular military man, when mindfully hidden, marked the killer. Azrael himself had been warned about these natural habits throughout these studies, and drilled on how to alter his behavior to keep from being spotted out when he needed discretion. But even with strict instruction, no one was so omniscient that they could maintain a conscious cover unto eternity.

Today, his mark was clumsy. He was presenting his gait as a lazy man's, shuffling his feet when he walked – but ah, the man hovered his fingers near his waist-belt with absent purpose. No visible weapon could be seen; the man either bore concealed arms, or had lived his life with a weapon for so long that it was a natural extension of his being. But anyone wearing his well-mended, tailored clothing either would display their weapon openly to keep away the riff-raff and announce their status or else not travel alone through the seedy back ways; they certainly wouldn't be without any weapon at all! There was no viable reason that someone as well-to-do as he was had to conceal a weapon; not unless they had a need not to draw unnecessary attention to themselves. Just like Azrael's target would have.

The chances that Azrael had picked the wrong target, on this road, with this man's mannerisms, at this time on this night, were infinitesimal. He had confirmed identification; there was no more reason to delay.

Reaching carefully around his back, he carefully pulled the two hollow tubes underneath his right sleeve free of their straps and, one in either hand behind him, joined them together. The dart, prepped hours earlier when he'd overcome his nerves and made his decision to act, was produced from one of the front-most of the many pockets sewn onto the inside of his coat. He handled it gingerly as he loaded it, tip-first, into the dark-varnished blowpipe.

Azrael didn't ready the weapon immediately, but slipped it silently to line the edge of the roof and held it in place with both hands. The man walking the alleyway was almost perfectly beneath him now, fully unaware that he was observed. If Azrael were to have any second thoughts about what he was about to do, now was the time to change his mind. In a few seconds, his window to strike would open and he would follow through with whatever he'd decided, and live with it the rest of his life. He either had to call off the plan now or commit.

The man's back was to him, and he was walking away from him toward the end of the alley. The moment had come, and Azrael knew he couldn't let it pass. He measured the angles, brought the blowpipe to bear, and took the shot.

The gap between action and result was nearly seamless, filled only by the sound of pounding, rushing blood circling through his ears. The dart stuck, biting into the back of the man's neck. The man

stopped and reached suddenly for the tiny projectile, pulling it from the muscle in the back of his neck in swift, fearful reaction. Pushing away from the ledge, Azrael covered up his white-haired head with the black sleeves of his overcoat.

Poison was one of the most disgusting methods of killing mankind had ever devised – also, the most poetic. Many toxins were perfectly safe in small doses, even beneficial. Although the deaths they brought were considered hellish, there was nothing unnatural about any of the causes. Even cyanide could be found in apple seeds, if one were determined enough to get at it. Yet, by abusing what nature provided and preying on the poor design of the human body, the act of murder could be completed easily, long before death would be marked. The trip was unstoppable once begun; you either fought it and hoped for a miracle, or surrendered. Either way, the result would be the same in the end.

Even as the man hurled the dart aside, it was easy to tell by the look in his eyes - he knew it was too late. Azrael kept still, shielding his eyes behind his lowered lashes to keep any gleam from giving away his position. He didn't dare to risk more than the barest of margins to observe the man over the roof's edge; even flooded with anxious excitement, Azrael's common sense knew that the man was likely armed and very dangerous. Through the slim line of vision he had, Azrael could see the assassin stagger some steps away, grabbing in panicked frustration again at the back of his neck, then hurrying onward and away from the threat he couldn't pinpoint.

It was futile; even if he had escaped the area, he couldn't escape what was already looming over him. Azrael watched the man produce a white little pill, the same sort of antitoxin that he himself carried – but it was another useless gesture of rebellion. If the man had an injectable anti-venom, he might have been able to protect himself; but of course, if he had produced that, Azrael would have struck and killed him in his distraction. Instead, the man had only the small, slow-acting capsule to swallow, as useful to him as a mouthful of sugar, and then he began to stagger away again.

He only made it a few more yards, when his living strength crumbled. The man's legs refused to coordinate, and he fell. He was laid prone on the ground, but struggled, rolled to face the sky, arching up his back and scrabbling in a poorly coordinated attempt to raise himself again. Still fighting the poison, fighting even as his face began to tic and his lungs began to convulse, the man shouted, angry and desperate; but his tongue, growing steadily more inept, stumbled over the curse words that he meant to say, until he was spewing just an indecipherable sludge of a sound. His panic made his heart beat faster, pushing the poison ever eagerly forward, hastening what was already impossible to stop.

It had been only minutes by Azrael's mental watch, and he could see that his victim's breathing was already harsh and frantic. Each lungful of air did less good than the last, and the man's struggles grew less and less vigorous. He was swallowing hard between gasps, but his loud breathing was already beginning to seize up and silence.

It was killing in its perfection. There was nothing that he could do now, and even if someone should happen by with a proper antidote, it was too late to stop the venom from running its course. An assassin deserved no better fate.

Even assured of this, Azrael couldn't feel satisfaction. Every little struggle the man made against his fate, however small and weak, his young killer felt an unwilling shiver of sympathy. He fought these moral qualms, swallowing them down with the bile in the back of his throat. He held no hidden pity for the man who was now dying from his distant hand – or at least, he reasoned as much – but to watch another man die, and particularly to bear responsibility for it, was difficult for any virgin to

murder. It was a necessary evil, though. No, more than that – it was justice, and needed no excuse.

Disassembling the blowpipe and concealing it in his clothing again, Azrael stood from his hiding spot and dropped down into the alleyway. The drop wasn't without risk, but he wasn't about to break an ankle out of stupidity. He knew how to tumble on the landing, overcome the inertia of the fall, and recover swiftly.

Azrael straightened again, observing the body further down the alleyway, and turned. Stooping, he recovered the incriminating dart and slipped it away into his pocket. He intended to leave no evidence of his actions tonight but the body.

There would be chaos over the next few days, and he, as well as everyone else in the organization, would be placed under deep scrutiny. It would be difficult to take any action while being observed so hawkishly, but he'd spent years planning his escape. He would bide his time and watch his step, draw no more attention to himself than usual; then, when the timing was perfect and other demands stole away the eyes watching him, he had carefully planned the route by which he would abandon the city of Riviem.

He had places to reach first, alibis that he had to create – and quickly. The sooner he was away, the better he'd be tomorrow when they would begin asking questions. With the body still shivering less than ten yards away, seconds were too long to be lingering in this alleyway.

Striding quickly, Azrael began to make his way off from the scene, turning down the first alleyway to his right. He knew this straight stretch to be shaded well from the bare light of the waxing crescent moon, and it was well-connected at the other side to the general mess of pathways winding through the back streets of the city. Proceeding through here, he just had to hurry, and he could--

There was a sound. Absorbed in his thoughts, he was too slow to recognize it, and had only begun to lift his head when the crossbow bolt took him off-guard.

The impact was surprising enough that he broke his silence, shouting in wordless pain and falling a single step back. He'd been snagged in his right shoulder – the bolt had sunk itself home right where the skin hollowed away from the joint, impaling itself deep into the flesh. His exclamation stifled into a clenched-jawed grunt as he reacted, heaving his body against the wall and ducking for cover among some old casks. Even shot up with painkilling chemicals, his frenzied mind was already figuring the angles, calculating where the enemy had come from – *but what enemy? How many? Equipped with what weapons- crossbows, obviously, but what else?*

His attacker wasn't remaining in hiding. With bold arrogance, a figure stepped into the open alleyway, chuckling to themselves. Plucking up his nerve in order to steal a peek around his broken shielding, Azrael felt a wash of grim certainty – he was in very, very deep trouble.

“Nice cover!” The figure complimented him brightly, tossing aside the steel crossbow. It clattered loudly as it tumbled into the alley wall, dragging to a slow stop amidst the tight silence of Azrael's non-reply. Refusing to be taken in by the cavalier gesture, he stayed covered as he sized up the weapon's wielder. He knew the man's face, and the connotations of his prompt arrival at the murder scene were frightening. The only explanation was that he'd been in the area already, waiting for Azrael to act. A heavy lump knotted his stomach. The Couriers had *known*, and *prepared*.

The blond man in the alleyway had a few scant centimeters of height over Azrael to accentuate the year's age that he also led by, but held himself always in a straight and interested manner that contrasted noticeably with the slump Azrael walked with. Azrael knew him to have a fondness for fine, long-sleeved shirts with elaborate cuffs, although the cheerful crossbowman was wearing nothing so lavish tonight – *work clothes* meant something that he wouldn't mind getting bloody, a simple shirt and leather jerkin. His name was Drake; a political virtuoso, skilled in subterfuge and court affairs, with an collected attitude and wicked sense of humor that found him friends in any circle he encountered.

When it became apparent that Azrael wasn't planning to banter back, Drake put his hands at his hips and dug his toe at a bit of dirt. “Oh, don't be so sore. If you'd hadn't ducked earlier, you might've avoided a bit of pain. That's hardly my fault if you weren't paying attention, you know.”

Ignore him, Azrael ordered himself, inhaling deeply. Drake always operated in one way; he got under the skin of his enemies, yanked them around, and turned it to their ruin. Azrael's advantage had always been found in his ability to stay calm, calculate the situation, and react with planned precision. Drake would do his best to distract him, but so long as Azrael refused to give him that power, he would maintain some advantage.

It was difficult, though. They weren't mere acquaintances; Drake was his brother-in-arms, one of only a small handful that he'd spent his training learning to trust with his life. Although he was capable of acting as an individual assassin – his actions tonight had already proved that – the intention of his training had always been to act in a small, nontraditional unit.

The project had been enterprising, and risky. By training four of their most promising recruits to act in a unit, the Couriers had hoped to increase their scale of operations. The group was meant to straddle the line between assassins and terrorists; to achieve their goal at all costs, to take as many lives as necessary and practical, and to build a reputation that could be used for leverage in the political dabblings of the Couriers.

It was a drastic change in approach for the organization to consider, and he, along with three others of unique talents, had been hand-picked for the intensive training that the project demanded. Drake was the face of the group, the coordinator and the diplomat, who made the decisions and kept things moving forward; SVN was meant to be the individual combatant, the one that took a specific target, any target, and ended them without question or reservation; the third, Teddy was the support and supplier, capable of demolishing any obstacle and providing solutions to any problem. As each of them was necessary for any cohesive plan, so was Azrael – he was the crowd control, the massacerer. The alchemical weapons he had learned to create and keep at his disposal, his extensive study of tactics and strategy, had trained him so that he could be the distraction – or the savior – or the one to take the fall.

Their group had just nearly come to complete their training; once they were concerted together and sent to act, there was nothing in the kingdom that would be able to withstand their designs.

Or there would have been nothing, if Azrael had ever been sincere in anything but his hunger for revenge. But being relied on like that, in a position of trust - he'd always felt so damn *secure!* But now his betrayal was betrayed - and, with a sinking feeling, Azrael began to realize it had been that way from the start. In the company of killers, he'd trusted too much. While he'd spent the past twelve years studying the ways of death-dealing, training closely with his team, he'd been scrutinized and interrogated, questioned and manipulated. If they'd found his beginnings, the young man had always reasoned, they'd find his ends – and if they knew his aims for infiltrating their group, he would have

been dead before warning could reach him.

But he knew now that this was not true. The Couriers had either known the whole time, or sniffed out his intentions some while ago. They knew that Azrael's father's death laid within their own organization, and they *had* to have known he'd seek revenge at the first opportunity. And they'd seen him through his training, fed him their propaganda at every step, and then offered a final test of loyalty by serving up the assassin whose face was branded into Azrael's bloodiest dreams. They must have planned that he might falter in his will, or grow greedy and be distracted; and if he didn't, what did it matter if he got his justice? An operative was that was clumsy enough to be caught was worthless – their only sacrifice was the effort they'd spent training Azrael. For an organization the scope of the Couriers, it must have been a worthwhile gamble.

And he'd played along every step of the way. It was no wonder that Drake had that smug look on his face – how long had his own comrades been preparing for this day? He thought to ask, but he couldn't see how the answer might help him except to buy time – and time did him no good against the inevitable.

“The crossbow's down now,” Drake pointed out helpfully, “you needn't cower in the corner.”

Jackass. Pulling himself off the disgusting alley ground, Azrael set his face into an impassive mask. He was hyper-aware of how the skin around the shoulder's wound was painfully stretched with each motion of his arm, but nonetheless, he reached to the long stiletto knives at his belt. Even the smallest motion wracked his injury, but he couldn't afford his arm to be useless. He was at a severe disadvantage already, and nothing but the barest introductions of conflict had passed.

He asked the question, but knew the answer already; “This is the way we're going about it, then?” He stood, even and grim, empowered by the feel of his weapons in his hands. These weapons had been custom-made, designed specifically around his needs and unique fighting style - he remembered the weeks he'd spent, practicing with one design after another, until he'd finally come to decide on these deadly blades. He'd specialized entirely with them by his third year of training: Two-weapon fighting; close range combat; slashes, jabs and slices; disabling and killing blows. In all the years he'd had them, Azrael had rarely had to use the knives with a killing intent, and never against a friend... or was-friend, Azrael reminded himself sharply. “Friends” didn't generally shoot each other with crossbows.

“Well, it didn't have to be, but we've not many options left now, have we?” Drake called to him cheerfully, keeping his distance on the other side of the alley. His voice was confident – the fingers tapping on his arm, less so. “How difficult are you to make this on yourself, Azzy? We can be done with it quite quickly, if you'll lay your weapons aside.” His grin was normally quite appealing, but the man's long face had a most disturbing bend when he smiled too hard, as though the skin wasn't meant to stretch that way.

“If you'd wanted it to be done quickly,” Azrael grunted, reaching up to break the shaft off the bolt in his shoulder, “you'd have aimed better.” He let the wooden bar drop to the ground, and devoted the full of his attention to his smirking companion standing across the way. Azrael was done with these games, this talking, these fake pleasantries that Drake adored indulging in. If the other man weren't bold enough to take the next action, then Azrael would go to meet *him*, and one way or another, they'd see this affair done with.

The man seemed to divine his intentions, and sighed deeply. “Friends fighting... what ugly business. If you insist on it, though, what can I do?” He was expressing at his fullest. Every word was accompanied by a broad gesture, a small shift in expression, a gentle change in inflection. The act would have been mesmerizing, if Azrael weren't quite so furious about the hole in his shoulder. “It will be a shame, though. We've known each other so long! I know quite certainly, I'll regret it the rest of my life....”

He's talking too much, Azrael perceived with undeniable certainty as Drake prattled on; *he has got to be stalling*. But stalling for what reason? Fear? Azrael had no doubt of his ability to overpower the braggart; his training was better for the cause, whatever Drake might have boasted during drunken challenges over the years. The question was, when had *Drake* come to recognize Azrael's hand-to-hand superiority? And if he was so concerned, why had he discarded his crossbow – was he waiting for something more pleasing?

There had to be a better option for Drake than for him to engage in a losing battle and play to Azrael's strengths, the young man discerned, and then was struck with dread – he knew *exactly* what Drake was expecting. Azrael had been stupid, short-sighted! Even a fool going into battle ought to know how to count, and if Drake was here, then that meant--

There were no footsteps to hear behind him, nothing to tip him off to any danger, but he was turning to meet the manifesting threat just the same. His heart was hammering frantically as he cursed himself, *too slow, idiot, you're too slow!*

And then it was too late.

“... That I had no choice but to stand back, and let SVN have the pleasure of rewarding your lies,” Drake concluded, his mournful voice utterly unbelievable when accompanied by the broad smile on his face.

Azrael tried to defend himself, raising his left arm to protect his face, but that did little to ward off the imminent impact from a gargantuan demi-human form launching at him. Something coiled around his wrist, and the full collision struck him hard in the torso, flinging him ragdoll-like against the axis anchored around his arm. His back hit the wall with enough force to crack his head, the impact staggering his vision. Before gravity could drop him, an arm pressed across his shoulders and pinned him. The newcomer, standing nearly a full foot above Azrael and fully covered by draping black cloth, had already half-disabled him within the first three seconds of the fight.

Azrael knew – even in his most optimistic predictions, he *knew* – he was no match for SVN. However highly he thought of himself, he was human; whereas whatever manner of human SVN had once been, no one could mistake him for any longer. His incredible size was one thing, and an open and trusting mind could accept it within the range of the merely abnormal; but that was the smallest of his deformities.

Even having known him for years, Azrael had never once gotten much a look at how SVN truly looked. There'd been something always warning him from trying, a quiet hand waving him off from what he truly did not want to know. What glimpses he'd gotten, however, had instilled images jointly of the gargoyle demons on church rooftops and bandaged lepers cast out of sight. There was something sickening about the way he was built, a wrongness in form that was accentuated whenever he moved. SVN's hands were twisted and sharp, scarcely functional as hands at all, and his arms were elongated

beyond any reasonable curse of genetics. Every edge of his strange, unreal body seemed sharpened to a point, and despite SVN's gangling and languid appearance when he was at rest, the thing could move with a speed and dexterity that baffled the eye.

Fighting SVN was useless – Azrael was defeated before he'd even begun. But escape was already inconceivable; it was impossible to persuade or coerce SVN into turning away from a hunt; and Drake, that *bastard!* Azrael could hear him *laughing!* The situation might be hopeless, but that didn't mean that he had to go out with a whimper. If he couldn't stop what was to come, and he knew that action was futile, he had to act in *some* manner. *Better to die with a spine than die with a brain* – someone had told him that once, in a gravelly and sagely voice, and Azrael suddenly found that he whole-heartedly agreed.

Trying to make *some* use of the momentum from the impact, Azrael tried throwing himself forward to break the pin. It was to no avail, though; the black-cloaked figure, hidden by cloth and hood, was massively strong, impossible to unbalance. Azrael still had one hand free, though, and brought the blade it held arcing upwards for his assailant's belly. His hand was blocked by a reproaching elbow jab, catching him on the inside of the wrist and slicing the skin wide open. Simultaneously, he tried, and failed, to slash the offending forearm with his one hand and twist free his captured other.

“You can do better than that, Azzy! Or do you want some pointers?” Drake offered from the sidelines, his voice still interrupted regularly by snickers.

Growing frustrated and desperate, Azrael bared his teeth angrily. “Damn it!” he screamed as he brought the heel of one boot to strike at the inside of SVN's left sole. Unhindered by the soft cloth of the creature's shoes, he landed two sure, heavy blows, stamping and grinding with enough strength to crack bone.

But what should have sparked extraordinary pain – something, *anything!* - had no effect to Azrael's eyes. All it seemed to do was coax SVN into deciding that he'd had enough of the fight. With a sudden and powerful strike, the cloth-veiled giant brought one deft knee up into Azrael's gut.

Gagging and choking, Azrael drooped, unable to act but feebly in the midst of the spasming sensation thrown up by his solar plexus. His free hand fumbled to keep hold around the hilt of his stiletto as he determinedly reached for one of the manifold pockets inside his overcoat, pulling loose the secure flask of hydrochloric acid with the tips of his fingers. Even SVN had to have *some* weakness, he just had to find it and exploit it for all it was worth--

He wouldn't get the chance. SVN latched to the shoulder of his arm – why did it have to be *that* shoulder, already injured by the crossbow bolt! - with one jagged claw, ripping mercilessly through the thick material of the overcoat and scoring deep rends into the flesh. The pain convulsed through Azrael's arm; he lost grip of flask and knife both, writhing and biting back against an agonized howl blocking his airway.

He was still struggling against the pain when the reality of the situation arrived. Azrael had no use of any of his weaponry now. Without it, there was no damage that he could do to SVN that wouldn't absorb; even with it, he didn't seem to have even drawn blood! It had been useless to try and fight after all; dismal as surrender was, he'd lost.

Ceasing his efforts at resistance, Azrael twisted his face uncomfortably and took stock of his

condition. Everywhere that SVN had struck him bled openly, his wrist and belly and chest, and he wondered how he hadn't even noticed the cuts. They would hurt later, presumably – though it seemed unlikely that there'd be a later for them to hurt in. At the moment, the only pain he could feel was from throbbing injury to his shoulder, and he felt sickened to take more than a glance at the torn, bleeding flesh twisted under SVN's unforgiving grasp. Any tiny motion, made by him or his captor, would send pain rushing through his entire upper torso like a lance of electricity. One small test of this, and Azrael resolved not to move unnecessarily.

A scrape of metal tore his attention away from his unfortunate situation. Just a foot and a half from him, Drake was picking the fallen stiletto from the ground. He'd stopped laughing, at least, but there was still a stupidly irritating smile slathered over that rat face of his--

Spiteful intuition struck. Even if SVN's ability to ignore pain made him beyond reprisal, the backstabbing son of a bitch that had trapped Azrael into the predicament wasn't. It wasn't as though the toe of his boot was going to do a great deal of damage, connecting with Drake's forearm like it did – but anything that made that bastard shout and jump like that was an achievement of some sort, even if the motion had twisted SVN's claws deeper into his shoulder.

“Cute, Azzy,” Drake snapped with a snarl, rubbing his arm. Even through the pain, a dry, humorless smile found its way onto Azrael's face, smug and contemptuous. Drake reached for the stiletto again, snatching it up and pulling his hand free of the danger zone. Azrael saw his chest move in an inaudible sigh, and his smirk widened.

Drake tucked the knife into his belt, but was unsatisfied to have escaped further bruising with only one of the weapons. Circling one pace, the man considered his options, then nodded to the other in Azrael's pinned hand. “Drop it.”

The small bit of mirth Azrael had wrested from the situation vanished. He said nothing, instead observing with edged silence his blond-haired comrade.

When it became clear that Azrael was not going to do as he'd been told, Drake threw his eyes dramatically heavenward. “Good Lord, what are you trying to prove?” He exclaimed disbelievingly. “How difficult you can make things for yourself? I'm very certain that's not what protocol anyone's *ever* taught you for a compromised situation.”

“Doesn't apply,” Azrael answered obstinately. “You're assuming I've anything worth cooperating for.”

This direct reply caught Drake frozen while he considered it, taken aback by the held man's evaluation of the situation. Then, he chuckled appreciatively. “Not bad, not bad!” He congratulated. “You're very right; the situation doesn't call for it. Though if it did, I wonder if you'd be any less trying. But you can have it your way, if it makes you feel any better for it,” Drake offered magnanimously. “SVN, please retrieve Azrael's knife for me.”

Trying to keep hold of the weapon was a bold and foolish gesture, but also irresistible. When Azrael refused to surrender it to the monstrosity, SVN callously pressed into the deepening gash of his shoulder. The pain crippled the rebellious captive while SVN pulled the knife free of Azrael's unsteady grip. Smiling, Drake accepted the stiletto from SVN with the pride of a lord accepting offering from his vassal. “That's a good boy,” he crooned – though whether he spoke to his obedient accomplice or pain-

wracked Azrael, was unclear.

Tucking away the second blade, Drake regarded his bloodied companion closely. He held no sign of remorse as he analyzed the lines of seething pain drawn out over Azrael's face; stranger, neither was there a hint of detachment. It was a stretch to think that there might be any friendly feelings to accompany that smile Drake wore, but Azrael wondered – where was the hostility?

It didn't much matter. “SVN, take the coat, too,” Drake determined, observing without pity as the cloaked figure went about prying the outerwear from Azrael with ruthless efficiency. The battered man's defiant will was beginning to slip, struggling to find purchase on a stumbling consciousness. It was enough determination if he could focus, keep himself aware of the situation, look for opportunity... to... do *something*.

With less ceremony than before, SVN one-handedly passed Azrael's overcoat to Drake, keeping the weakening man propped up with the other. The blond man took the garment with a surprised exclamation - “Good lord, did you start keeping bricks in your pockets?” In spite of his wobbly state, Azrael couldn't help a snort of laughter as Drake turned out the coat, observing the multitude of filled pockets and straps that contained a plethora of equipment. Inspecting the inventory, Drake's eyebrows shot up as he looked to the coat's owner. “... Ah, you've started carrying a crowbar. You decided you weren't hauling around enough already?”

Faintly amused, Azrael mumbled, “Has its uses,” and was overcome by a sense of surreality. He shouldn't let himself feel encouraged by the conversational gestures of a man that had shot him with a crossbow - but the situation was too bizarre to internalize, otherwise! He couldn't suppress the seated belief that Drake was his ally. Too many years of friendship and rivalry, maybe. They'd been interlocked in their pursuits ever since both were determined, smug, and exceptionally talented teenagers, forever competing to out-boast one another over half-empty tankards. No matter the circumstances, could that sort of history really be entirely uprooted in just one night?

Not so easily for Azrael, perhaps. But Drake, smiling blithely and draping the coat over one shoulder, sudden seemed not be so sentimental. “Well, that's my business here completed,” he noted, glancing upwards to track the position of the moon. “I'm going on ahead. SVN, take your time finishing up, and then we'll rendezvous.”

Those words lit up in Azrael's mind like a spark striking oil, flooding him with alarm. *Finishing up?* Azrael had no time to question the meaning of those words before they became abundantly clear. Even as the man he'd finally decided to identify, still, as *friend* went to retrieve his crossbow and depart the scene, SVN seized Azrael roughly up by the front of the shirt. A flood of panicked adrenaline shot through Azrael's already overworked system, and he choked out a startled, “Wait--”

Too late, too feeble, too worthless. Flashes of warning light swarmed his vision as Azrael found himself thrown to the ground, reflexively curling up to try and protect himself as the first unforgiving blow came down from the towering SVN, followed by another, and then another. Being viciously beaten to death by a former ally wasn't a spectacular way to end a life, but through the mouth of his tiny, distant bit of sanity yet remaining, Azrael philosophically assured himself most people didn't get a choice in the matter of how they died, anyway. At the very least, he could take some assurance that he'd gotten to see his goal through to the end before he went; most people couldn't say that of their lives, either.

Some small comfort, his practical side grumbled, before it was silenced by agony.