

Ephemera:

How the Arrogant are Rewarded

“Before the advent of such rumor, there was no such thing as an ultimate price. If there had been, there would be no fear of it; there would always be one single concept, the worst that could be done, and the uncertainty and terror that marks true loss would be gone. Now, the only thing to fear about it, is that it is not what we've expected it to be.”

They'd left him living.

The concept was more than he could understand. It felt like agonizing hours before he dared to move his beaten and bloody body, reawakening pain anew with every motion. Drake was gone; SVN was gone. The off-white shirt he'd worn underneath his lost overcoat was tattered and stained by dozens of cuts, gashes and slashes, each injury contributing its own painful worth to the price for his disloyalty to the Couriers.

But it was still such a small amount to pay, contrasted with the extent of his wrongdoing! Could it be real?

For a glorious moment, Azrael believed it. His life had been spared! Staggering from the ground, he attempted to come to terms with the thought of living. He could run from this place, as he'd planned. He would run, and then he would live. He could build anew, make his life something he created, not this hollow act he'd maintained for so many years!

However, despite his best efforts, common sense would not abandon him long. He'd killed a prestigious superior, and that was not forgivable. All because he was not dead yet did not mean that the Couriers were going to let him live - it meant nothing but that when the end came, it would be calculated and precise. Azrael wasn't an unruly upstart that needed quiet disposal now; he was an example to others, any that might betray their poisonous trust. He would be dead before the morning.

Numbly, he settled back against the wall, trying to find some other answer than fatalism. He knew that the Couriers' numbers and resources were more than he could compete with, particularly when it was they who had trained him about the strategies of evasion. Their sentries would be looking for him, and someone among them - perhaps even one of his own tutors - would be planning his every step before he took it, leading him to where he would meet his end. There was no escaping what he'd wrought.

It took a great amount of effort to move the injured and sore muscles of his body, but he refused to acknowledge any weakness within him. Pushing away from the wall, Azrael surged an unexpected step forward, steadied himself, then began striding from the alley as quickly as his feet would take him. There was no way for him to tell how much time he had before someone might be on his tail. If he was to die tonight, he owed someone an apology – for whatever honor he still had, he had to see to it.

The vibrant young woman in his mind was the Lady Emiree. Her title was granted by being third child of Baron Lucas, titled the Lionmane after his extensive conquests on the behalf of the King and Crown during the last Ten-Year War. Her father's status, taken with Emiree's own graces, made her the pride and joy of the entire city. Their meeting had been happenstance, but their continuing

acquaintance had been the product of mutual fascination and, as eventually realized, devotion. Emiree was his confidante, and the sole thing in his life he could trust to be constant and honest.

When he'd discovered, the night before, the identity of the man that was visiting their headquarters – the affluent assassin of so many years, visiting explicitly to honor the christening of Azrael's nearly-graduated team, who so coincidentally happened to be the same man that had murdered his father so many years before – Azrael had went immediately to Emiree, overflowing with worry and anticipation and intensity. *I have a night*, he'd told her – raved, more like it - *and he'll be in Riviem. And then I have a day, and he'll slip into the underbelly of the city, and I'll not get another chance at him without watchers!*

She'd been cool, calming, and stoic. *Not tonight, not tomorrow*, she'd urged him. *Love, stop, please, and think; yours is the mindful head, not mine. You need time to ready yourself. If you jump now, do you know where will you land?*

Azrael had grown angry, urgent. Emiree had grown desperate, and refused to budge. 'Other opportunities' had been her battle cry as their disagreement had worsened; there would be other chances, better ones! He knew the man's whereabouts, he could wait. And when he did choose to make his move – *if he chose it still*, she hadn't said, but Azrael knew from her eyes that she'd hoped – he would act with planned perfection.

He'd known she was right. Knowing it, being made helpless by its truth in the face of his pent-up rage, had driven him to say ugly things. Undaunted, Emiree had dogged him unflinchingly, eking out concession from him by small degrees. When she'd gotten him to admit to his lunatic state, she'd begged him, *promise me. Promise you will not act, until you have thought it through!*

After a night of harrowing contest, wrestling with his desires and rationality both and turning the frustration out on his beloved, Azrael had folded. He vowed his patience to her at last, and wholeheartedly, she'd believed him. It was nearly dawn when he'd departed, slipping through the back gate where the guards were heavily paid in order to ignore his late-night visits.

Then, within hours, Azrael had turned back on his word and began planning his selfish revenge.

Perhaps whatever was to come, he'd earned through his contemptible breach of trust. The only tragedy was that Emiree would suffer for it. The promise he'd made that night meant nothing, next to the one he would break when they killed him. *Will you marry me* wasn't a small affair, particularly when followed up with, *when this is all over*.

He couldn't just... disappear. Not without telling her what was to become of him, and asking forgiveness.

The alleyways began to widen as he hurried along, watching with acute paranoia the shadows and rooftops. Unless the strange transient curled up at the street side was in the Courier's pay - but Azrael didn't spare the beggar more than a glance as he pressed by. The tramp was a sleeping woman, and membership among the Couriers was entirely fraternal. He was only grateful that she seemed to be sleeping too deeply to see his bloody form; if she panicked and went screaming for the city guard, it would be an unwanted distraction from his goal. Any other bystander would make equal threat, but fortunately, these streets were unpopulated at night.

The dirt alleyway intersected with a larger thoroughfare leading to the richer residential districts near Riviem's cultural center. Tall lantern-posts lit the cobblestone streets in large patches, forcing Azrael to skirt the pools of light. He had to be very cautious. Even if it appeared deserted, the streets of these neighborhoods saw frequent patrols by the city's militia - those named the Lion's Sons after brave and respected Lionmane that had seen to their creation. An inopportune encounter in his bloodied state would raise questions, and steal away his chance to meet with Lady Emiree.

The road was long, but clean and smooth the entire way, walked without any petty worry of whether a crack in the stone or a stray piece of litter would slip a clumsy foot. Eventually, it ended at a wider crossing, which wound its way around the outermost wall of a large estate. The Baron's home, Rowan Manor, was protected by this towering and impressive work of brick masonry. To Azrael's left, he could see where the road wound off to intersect with the central street of the city, which led from Riviem's northern gate straight to the door of the Lionmane's estate. But it was the back gate that he could find passage through; always the back, and never the front.

He followed the street to his right instead, and soon came to the tight knit of streets before the discreet servant's entrance to Rowan Manor. Barely more than a hole in the wall, it was always monitored by a pair of the Baron's men. The set that had the night shift, Azrael knew fairly well. They were good men, if corruptible. Protecting the honor of their lady meant accommodating her midnight visitor and protecting the secrecy of those meetings – it only took a weekly handful of coin to persuade them of this truth. Both men were good soldiers - they kept their mouths shut and found excuses to leave their posts whenever he made his presence known.

Even as he was thinking of this, Azrael arrived at the gate, and found that no men were standing at it. They must have spotted him before he spotted them – an awkward first, as he had always seen them long before they ever noticed him. That inattentiveness would hurt him later, if he didn't correct it. Suppressing a strange reluctance brewing in the back of his mind, Azrael gathered himself together and hurried through the gates to the manor.

The yard here was tranquil, almost otherworldly. Tall arbors marked the passage of the stone tile pathway, punctuated by stone steps that easily traversed the staggered layers of the garden. Young rowan trees planted at regular intervals along the manor building were coated in clusters of white flowers; some were already shedding their petals to the ground, eager for summer to come. Growing with abundant beauty, flowers blossomed alongside the path, bearing muted colors that asked, but not demanded, appreciation. At this time of year, the trellises lining the manor's walls were spilling over with white and blue flowers, each of the abundant blossoms bearing six or seven broad, spade-shaped petals.

Azrael moved quickly on from the familiar haven, cutting across the grass and stepping over flowers in his way. Two stories overhead of where he stood was a quarter-circle veranda, affixed to the wall and propped up by a pair of corinthian columns. This was Emiree's; it connected to her private chambers. The lantern hanging outside it was unlit, the velvet curtains drawn shut - but the left door was opened, denoting secret invitation to the noblewoman's nightly visitor.

Over the years, the climb to the balcony became a mindless affair – and even injured, he felt confident as he began the first steps of it. There was a curving staircase at the manor's back entry. Against the wall behind those stairs, a trellis extended about fifteen feet further upwards. Immediately next to this was an ornate window, belonging to a parlor room rarely used except when the Baron had guests. The topmost point of the window was crafted into a pediment, just above which a long cornice

molding was wrapped around the building, providing a ledge about as wide as a spread hand that Azrael could boost himself onto. From there, he just had to inch along to where the wall angled sharply away, leaving a few feet of empty air to Emiree's veranda.

By the time he reached this final point, his injuries were twinging and aching. The climb had stretched and abused them mercilessly, and although Azrael had never worried much about the jump from the corner to the balcony, he found himself hesitant. It had always made Emiree so nervous - all her fears were echoing in his mind, ridiculously out-of-proportion though they were. Death by stupidity would be a rather ignoble fate, particularly one that had been predicted on so many occasions before - he rather doubted Emiree would ever forgive him for it....

Azrael steeled himself, then leaped. The short gap flew beneath him, dozens of feet of empty air between him and hard ground, attempting to shatter his focus - but he caught the side of the railing, and clung tight. The pain in his shoulder sparked as he hauled himself over onto the balcony. He permitted himself a wince as he rubbed the injury, then ushered himself to the door.

Inside, the fireplace was lifeless, casting the room in a peculiar darkness. The gleam of moonlight bouncing off white marble flooring of a personal washroom was the only source of illumination, and a poor one at that. "Emiree, I need to talk to you," Azrael called softly, passing the curtains into the room.

Inexplicably, his stomach flipped. A sense of wrongness filled him, overwhelming in that first moment where his eyes cast about to try and pierce the room's shadows, puzzling over what put him at such unease. The familiar shapes of the room fell into place - the tall curves of the wardrobe against the northeast wall, the flat lines of the tapestry hung above the fireplace - there were no changes that clamored for attention. But when his eyes adjusted to the dimness, Azrael finally found what had been so wrong. The first colors he saw were red, on white, on pale, pale skin--

He staggered where he stood, caught by a surprising surge of weakness. It passed, and he rushed forward- "Emiree! Emiree, what happened? Em, talk to me!"

She was lain propped against the foot board of her bed. There was no rise of breath in her chest, and not even the smallest response to his urgent calls. The front of her nightgown, a pearl-hued frock of smooth cloth, was soaked through with her blood, slashed deep by sharp instruments. The red was smeared all over her arms and hands and spattered on the floor, still very wet and vibrant in color.

He came beside her and crouched, trying again to rouse her - "Emi?" She did not respond, still. Somewhere, he knew what it meant already - but at the same time, he couldn't be made to accept it. Involuntarily, Azrael reached out, touching a cold curl of her dark hair. Pulling his hand away, he found bits of red sticking to his fingers. *Her skin is so pale. There's so much blood already. I don't think I can help her -*

There was nothing to help, he realized suddenly. It was already far too late. "... Em..." His voice shook with a heartbreak he hadn't yet come to feel. He was unwilling to feel yet - Azrael knew only an aloof and distant sense as he sat flat in front of the body, staring and trying to understand what he refused to comprehend. The tiniest bit of warmth was yet fading off her cheek, shivering through his fingers as he gently stroked her face. Her eyes were still opened into tiny slits, staring at whatever nightmarish scene had brought her to this state; he reached to close them, but paused.

A maddening denial swept over him, feeding a growing sense of anger – it didn't make sense! Azrael found his words, and the protest bubbled up to an unstoppable force within him. Angry, defiant, he spat out, “How could--” But the words strangled in his throat, and the energy he'd found to speak with rapidly dried up. Weakly, he took one limp hand of the Baron's daughter's into his, pressing it tightly to his lips and shutting his eyes. *It couldn't*, he objected again silently, feeling less and less convicted with every repetition in his mind.

He couldn't hold the truth at bay forever: The Lady Emiree was dead.

“God,” he whimpered miserably, swamped by powerlessness. Slowly, Azrael slid himself to sit against the foot-board of the bed next to the lifeless form. He wanted to pull her close to him, rub her hand, whisper, *it'll be all right* - but what would it do? Dead was dead. For whose benefit could he say such a thing? His own? How pathetic....

He was absent for several minutes, his mind free-floating and nonreactive. Azrael barely knew that any time had passed in his blank state at all, except for noticing that his cheeks were soaked. Drawing a suffering, shivering lungful of air, he beat a tight fist against his thigh and dipped his head to his chest. Looking upwards, scanning the darkened bedroom in a lost and desperately hopeful manner, he looked for something to lead him. What was he to do now?

His eyes caught on something familiar – or, more specifically, a lack of something familiar. A small mahogany table, normally set beside the balcony doors with a pale gold cloth draped over it, was missing from its home. It was unlike him to overlook such a detail.

Numbly, he rose and wandered the carpeted floor with vague uncertainty, searching for where it had gone to. He had little else to investigate, and the need for answer was great. It was embarrassing how long it took him to realize that the table had simply been moved across the room, now set in front of the bedroom's exit to the hall. Its small frame had been overlooked in the dimness of the room. Atop it, he saw the glint of something metal.

His guts churned. Azrael drew nearer. He could see now that the table boasted two objects – they were stilettos, of a familiar design, cleaned of all but a few smears of blood.

What he could have already guessed, if only he weren't stunned by grief, was understood. The Couriers, it was the damned Couriers! Emiree was dead, and these were *his* weapons. Azrael had... it was because Azrael, he'd betrayed them. They'd....

There was something more there, Azrael saw. Wrapped around one hilt of the stilettos was a golden chain, just as familiar and ten times more precious than the weapons that had been stolen from him to commit such treason against their master. It was thin and delicate, dropped with tiny blue gemstones every inch or so. It was his token to Emiree, the promise he'd given her – she'd worn it braided in her hair every day since their engagement.

Gently, he freed it from the weapon hilt, feeling its cold metal in the palm of his hand. Very clever, for them to have known the significance of it; in an odd way, Azrael felt appreciative of the detail. How it was that the assassin had divined the meaning of the jewelery? Had Emiree said something, before she'd died? Or had they simply known about Azrael's lover for so long that they'd been able to anticipate the impact of such small elements?

It didn't much matter. Silent but for a strangling choke, Azrael wrapped the chain several times around his wrist, looking mournfully back to his dead beloved. This was it, wasn't it; the end. There was nothing left now. Nothing for him in Riviem, and he'd never see the outside of it. Was there any reason to keep going at all? He drooped his head sluggishly, leaning back against the wall and feeling his will draining dry – *none....*

Footsteps. Pounding, fast, clamant footsteps. Approaching Emiree's door – now? At this late hour, when there was nothing to be done? Could it be, perhaps, the Couriers--

Azrael's quelling mind stirred to life, his blood rising against the impeding threat. Even as he reasoned to himself that it couldn't be the Couriers coming, it could only be the armed men of the Baron's service, his hands seized up the knives from the table. He knew what their possession would look like, but he'd get the blame no matter what he did just for being there. There would be no chance to explain that he'd been set up, and he'd rather be armed if he had to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Tipping the table over to pin it properly against the door, Azrael staggered back. The first fist struck the door, a heavy male voice shouting, “Lady Emiree, there's been an attack! My lady, are you safe?” The sentinel began shoving at the door, trying to open it, and hollered warning when he found himself impeded. To stay here, Azrael would be caught in seconds.

Automatically, Azrael started for the balcony – but half the way there, his feet froze. An invisible line was drawn across the floor where Emiree lay dead, meeting where he stood. To cross it, he knew, meant that he would never return again; to remain, he would never leave. The temptation to stay and meet with his fate sprang suddenly - a forest grown in seconds, impassible and awful. It was hesitation he couldn't afford, but....

His instincts answered themselves, sending him forward as though a hand had shoved him forth. *Em, forgive me*, Azrael pleaded numbly, meeting no answer but a cold sense of desolation in his own mind. He was disappearing out the curtains when the door wrenched open behind him, the force of its swing sending the table clattering. Azrael stood dizzily at the balcony's edge when he heard the furious roar behind him as the men dashing into the room found the slain body of the Baron's daughter.

It's a long fall from here, he thought numbly as shouts flooded, louder and louder, *but it's too slow a slow climb down....*

There was a rowan tree. It wasn't tall enough to reach the balcony, but fell short a good ten feet beneath the lowest railing. It was difficult to say where the branches lay at this late time in spring, where the flowers obscured its form, but Azrael *thought* that if he jumped properly, there might be a strong bough he could catch hold of--

“*Assassin!*” There someone was behind him. His time for guessing was done. His thoughts were still so unclear, muddled by grief and shock and turmoil, it was difficult to make decisions - but if he let his body do the thinking, he might get somewhere. If he didn't, there would probably be steel in his back any second.

Azrael vaulted over the railing. The wind whipped past his face, nearly drowning out the enraged cry of the man that had spotted his escape. He felt all his weight vanish as free-fall kicked in, making gravity a force of motion instead of a lodestone over his shoulders – *shoulder--*

Shit, there was no way that he was going to be able to catch that fall with his injured shoulder! What had he been *thinking*, this was stupid, so incredibly stupid that he didn't even have time to reflect on how stupid it was--

He hit the branch. In his panic, he'd misjudged its position badly; he struck it with his shins, failed to grab hold of it, and slipped backwards. Falling, Azrael struck another bough with his back, lancing pain through his body and half-flipping him. The tree forked, and he caught around it with his right arm. It wrenched at the joint, he gasped at the impact and lost his grip, and he fell again. There were tiny branches now, ripping at him, shredding the skin of his arms and face, tearing a long hole through one pant leg.

The ground met him hard. He struck it limply, tumbling once before he rolled to a groaning still.

Dazzled, addled, and bewildered, he coughed as he sat up. Somehow, he'd made it to the ground in a single, conscious piece – pained and bruised, but whole. His mind was refusing to clear, pounding with hammerfalls, but he was able to stagger to his feet all the same. There were shouts, more shouts, loud shouts – close shouts? Men were in the yard with him. Two of them, he thought dimly, and marveled that he could count so far. How had they arrived so quickly?

His head was whirling, struggling to disassemble tragedy and process danger both at the same time. Each of his fingertips felt alive, eager, furious, wrapped around the still bloodied stilettos - utterly unafraid. Distinctions of loyalty vanished quickly when the first guard, entering the range of combat, thrust his rapier, demanding Azrael to move or be slain. It was self-preservation, some ultimate truth of insanity, which was driving him to *keep moving, keep living* - grieving and destructive, without thought of escape or explanation to the men trying to kill him, only bent on vicious defense of his own life. Men of the Couriers, men of the Lionmane; if both would kill him, he would defend to his last breath!

Dodging to the side, Azrael found that he understood the fight only in that he felt it was happening. The tip of the guard's blade was testing him for weaknesses, using quick swipes and jabs to see how he reacted, which Azrael answered only too eagerly with sharp rebuffs and repels from his stilettos.

He was slow, though; slower than he should be. He could defend, but had no room after to press an attack. He'd been trained to dispatch men with the sort of training as this guard had seen, but in his injured state, they were nearly an even match. In these circumstances, most the battle was a test, a wait to find an opening; the one that found the other's weakness and exploited it best would win.

Azrael laid money on the guard's gullibility, and began to exaggerate the injuries of his left arm, bringing his right stiletto to defend on both sides as much as possible. His attacker brought the point of his rapier to threaten the left side of Azrael's torso, and when it was blocked by the righthanded blade, the guard abruptly reversed his swing. A swift flick cut Azrael's upper-right arm, just barely dragging along the skin deep enough to bleed – but the guard had only been seeking weakness, not searching out a disabling blow, and now thought that he'd found it. The fencer lashed out in a succession of short, confident jabs, misleading and distracting, before repeating the successful maneuver of before--

Only to find it ending very differently than his first attempt. He'd meant to make a crippling blow out of it, and so lunged forward after the feint. But Azrael was ready for the attack, and slapped the rapier hard aside with his right knife as he stepped forward. His left stiletto, held so ineffectually

before, lashed out precisely, entering the man's belly and slicing up to exit at his shoulder bone.

His companion surged forward in alarm as the man cried and toppled, but was unprepared for Azrael to smoothly turn to meet him as well. He'd hardly readied his sword when Azrael kicked the side of the man's kneecap, rendering him unstable, slammed a knife into his blade-wielding arm, and then dispatched him with a merciless slash across his neck.

Azrael didn't even have time to get his breath. There was a third approaching, charging from behind with a lusty roar. Kicking aside the body of the second guard, Azrael turned to meet the unexpected attacker with grim savagery. This one slashed out with the waved blade of a flamberge, darting its point toward Azrael's face with determination. Dodging to the side of the intended stab, Azrael blocked the slash that followed him, pressing forward to attack his aggressor. Unexpectedly, his assailant was slow to react; Azrael was within striking distance, the man's richly robed form utterly exposed to him.

The deed was done before Azrael realized what he was committing. Had he been more aware, he would have realized that no palace guard would wear such decadent colors and cloth as the man attacking him - in fact, he would have realized this before he'd ever crossed arms. But in his haste, he'd been unmindful; and now, Lucas the Lionmane was pierced through the chest twice with sharp, deadly steel, and Azrael was the offender.

The cloud of adrenaline left his blood in an instant, sparing Azrael nothing from the immediate understanding of his crime.

Both men were paralyzed by the moment; but it was the Baron Lucas - the aging man who should have been his father-in-law - who broke the stillness first. Azrael let the weapons slip from his hands as the old knight crumpled to the ground, falling prostrated onto his side.

"... No," Azrael gasped, the portents of the situation finally sinking in. Even as he grappled with the fallen man, trying to scope out the damage, he knew his own powerlessness. He had nothing to staunch the bleeding, stitch the wound - he'd carried all those supplies had been in his coat. Even if he'd had tools for first aid, though, it would do no good. Baron Lucas was gasping for air, every breath gurgling with the blood in his lungs and choking on more of the same clogging his throat. Stiletos were delicately-pointed, nasty weapons meant for dealing killing blows. An aging man who had two of them among his vital organs would have only minutes before death.

There was no reassurance he could give that could ease the pain of the doomed Baron, robbed of his daughter and now his life. An apology seemed wasted, pitiful against the magnitude of his sin - but Azrael flailed, he grasped for escape, he stammered out, "I'm sorry--"

It was remarkable how the Lionmane was able to gather what precious life was left in his body, and funnel it through the hate raging in his eyes. With every ounce of energy, he spoke with chilling clarity: "Lying, lecherous whoreson! Disease-ridden cur! You will never see forgiveness, and I *swear* to it." His hand shook with moribund weakness as he raised it, but it was demon-possessed as he furious grabbed onto Azrael's collar. It was Azrael, shocked and trembling, who found himself forced down to the man's level so that the baron's every word washed hot, sticky breath over his face, "You will see justice. Every moment of your existence will be cursed, every step you take hounded. You will live in misery, hunted, until the end of your days. Upon my honor, it will be done...!"

The man began to asphyxiate, sputtering and suffocating. His hand slipped from the cloth of Azrael's shirt, grappling instead at his throat in clawed terror.

It took Azrael a brief eternity to understand what he had to do. It was an act of pure filth, and his hands were shaking to think of it – but mercy made necessity. “I think that you are right: I will,” he murmured with surprising coolness, producing the small hunting knife hidden under one trouser leg. “Go peacefully, Baron.”

Cutting the dying's man throat was easy. One slick motion, deep into the flesh and crossing the jugular vein; a moment, laid bare and stretching endlessly, where the gurgling turned to a hissing scream; then, he had only to watch the life dull from the Baron's eyes.

It had barely bothered him to recover his weapons from the corpse, picking off a tatter from his shirt and wiping the blades clean dutifully. Walking away from the Lionmane's body, though - *that* was one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do. But more of the guards in the Baron's pay would arrive soon enough to find the unfortunate results of his handiwork, and there was no escaping the brand of a murderer once they arrived. *As though I might escape it already*, Azrael corrected himself grimly, closing his eyes as he turned from the body.

Now was the time to leave this filthy scene. Hastening, he crossed the grounds of Rowan manor and left through the back gates. Already Azrael heard the din of armored footsteps fast approaching, and the fact baffled him. It was far too soon for the city's men to have come already! There was no way that anyone from the Baron's home could have raised the militia so quickly--

Unless someone knew that the murder was going to happen before it did, so that they could have alerted the guards in time. The explanation was damnably simple: The Couriers had set him up thorough-out. No doubt, they'd alerted the Baron to his daughter's death, provoking him to challenge her perceived killer before he could escape, and then immediately gone to warn the city watch of a threat to the life of their lord. How many pitfalls had they lain out for him this night?

Not much sense in raising that question now. Until he'd dealt with what was already hovering, the future was unreadable. The cry was rising behind him now, enraged- *the Baron is dead!* Whatever he might have rationalized about the fault of Emiree's death meant nothing in his defense now; the Lion's Sons would kill him in a heartbeat, to avenge their fallen leader. If he still would not accept that fate, he would have to fight with better than anger and hurt.

They were following him already; Azrael cursed himself for the loudness of his footsteps. Escape was perhaps feasible, if he could outrun them – but was he sure that he could? The roads were well-lit, and they must see him plainly already. He was likely to pick up more pursuers by charging blindly through these cobblestone streets, and the one thing he absolutely could not afford was to draw *more* attackers on him in his condition. It was better to pick his ground, ready himself, and fight.

Azrael shifted course, racing down a winding cross-street. He was able to get a brief glimpse of them when he turned – they were keeping up with him, all right, though some were slower than others. This group was small, manageable under the right conditions. The advantage to being the chased was that he could choose the place to fight, while his pursuers could only decide whether to accept the terms he offered.

They were coming to tighter roads now, narrow enough that more than two men would have

difficulty approaching him from the same direction at once. Where the street came to a crossing, Azrael abruptly stopped and turned, pulling free his stilettos from their sheaths. The lawmen were undeterred, continuing forward with renewed energy now that their prey was in reach. He met them with calm, unfeeling readiness.

The first was leading the rest by several eager paces – this guard's face was fresh and smooth, place him at maybe seventeen years in age, and he wore the cocky sureness of his youth well. Azrael stood in motionless preparation as the youth came within range, roaring a vengeful “For the Lionmane!” as he brought his short sword arcing upward.

Azrael knocked the blade harshly off-trajectory with his left blade and closed the distance between them before the unprepared guard could recover. With his right stiletto, Azrael found the knife a quick home under the lowest rim of his attacker's iron breastplate, punching a deep hole deep into his belly. The youth's eyes shot wide and his throat strangled out a pitiful mew of disbelief before Azrael roughly disengaged, shoving the incapacitated man back toward his arriving comrades.

Three of the militia, not including the unfortunate youth, were arrived on the narrow crossroads with him; probably the whole of the group that had followed him from the scene of the Baron, he expected. Self-consciously, Azrael backed out of the intersection, restricting the angles from which the Lion's Sons could approach him by. One of them was distracted with their injured member, hollering and trying to keep the bleeding boy conscious; the other two Sons moved forward with grim caution. They were older, better-experienced. Azrael quickly judged that they were well-familiarized with one another. The space they afforded each other promised that they wouldn't be getting in one another's way, but even so, they approached in close concert. When they struck, it would be with practiced timing and careful cooperation, enough to overwhelm nearly any defender.

At his best, Azrael would be only minutely concerned of such a challenge – but as he stood now, he observed the coming onslaught as excessively dangerous. To face it with just his knives, the injured man would be forced to surrender or retreat – but fortunately, Azrael had one trick that the Couriers hadn't taken from him that could save him from the situation.

While he still had several yards of space yet to play with, Azrael exchanged his left-hand stiletto for a long block of carved yew from his left sleeve. At a glance, the purpose of the wood was difficult to divine; its strange form looked like nothing so much as the stock and trigger of a small crossbow, lacking bow. A small switch was set under the trigger, easily pressed as Azrael drew and leveled the device at the leftmost guard. Curved steel prods pressed against springs, concealed against and held in place by prongs affixed to the sides of the tiller, were released to swing along metal hinges and click into place. The loose string was brought forward by this mechanism, catching on the loose nut, then almost instantly being pulled back by Azrael's right hand as he slipped a bolt into place.

This entire process took less than half a second, giving the approaching soldiers no time to rush forward and interfere. The fully functional hand crossbow was recognized as a threat too late; the lawman in its targets shouted alarm and jumped to the side, hasty to get out of danger's way, while his comrade began to push ahead with the attack. Stepping back with his right foot, Azrael reoriented the crossbow to the charging man and triggered it.

The unfortunate man was committed to the attack, and was too slow to realize how quickly he'd been made the one in danger. The string released with a sharp snap, and almost instantly, the guard's feet went out from under him, killed by the bolt's piercing impact with his face.

His companion was pressing forward again, already nearly within the range of attack. Without time to produce another bolt from his inner sleeve, Azrael abandoned the crossbow to the side and rearmed his left hand with his stiletto, retreating a step back to avoid the first quick jab from the guard's blade. Azrael was slow, though, and he paid for it with a painful cut on the back of his right arm. The guard's second swing was angrier, made heedless to danger; Azrael took advantage of the man's sloppy form to duck past the man's guard and into fighting range for his stilettos. The watchman brought his elbow swinging at the side of the knife-wielder's head, preventing Azrael from making more damage than a light, short cut along the side of the man's ribs before being forced back.

The threatened guard backed off several steps, holding his weapon in front of him as he felt the wound with his hand, far from grateful for its lack of seriousness. "Murderer!" The Son accused venomously, pacing forward only enough to keep Azrael from retreat.

"I am," Azrael agreed with crafted calm, continuing to seek distance from the man with careful, purposeful steps. His nonchalant answer brought renewed fury to the watchman's face, but was not sufficient to provoke him to a new attack. *No good*, Azrael noted grimly. He needed for the guard to either give up the confrontation or attack, or else more of his ilk would arrive to give him the advantage – and if he wasn't going to budge on his own, Azrael had to either be incite or persuade him.

"Or..." Ceasing his cautious retreat, Azrael elected to hold his ground instead, watching as the guard halted several yards away in hesitant watch. "How much coin would it take for you to believe I'm not?"

The surge of affront filling the militiaman's eyes told Azrael everything he had to guess about how to manipulate the man. That small voice that begged with him, *is this the right thing to do?*, was shunted aside without regard – survival came before ethics. He'd be only be able to worry over his conscience if he was still alive later. Besides which, weren't those qualms were twelve years too late to do any good for him?

"Ah, you've already taken someone else's against me, I understand," Azrael answered regretfully, inventing insult from feigned assumption. "Noble of you to keep to your word like that, I suppose."

"Scum like you, I kill for the pleasure," the man spat back, advancing and jabbing with his sword.

Ducking to the side and blocking the sword from following his motion with a stiletto, Azrael forced a smile, disassociating as best he could with the sickened feeling growing in his stomach. As sweetly as he was able, he simpered back, "Not *too* much pleasure from scum, I hope. That might make things awkward with your wife."

It was as perfect a delivery as he could imagine for such a blind insult – Drake would have been quite proud of him, undoubtedly. And in the heat of the moment, it pressed just the nerve that Azrael had hoped to find. The militiaman snapped, and shouted rage, and *lunged* – oh, he'd lost it, he'd lost it badly, to throw himself forward like that! For a moment, the wicked point of his sword was trained on Azrael, a well-placed attack. But then the tormentor moved – he was gone – he was somewhere – he was *behind* --

One knife stabbed up into the infuriated guard's back, and the other wrapped around in front of the man's face. The militiaman had time only to change his ferocious snarl into an anguished howl of fear, and the blade found home, slicing downwards across his face and neck. Still holding the body as it dropped, Azrael turned to face the street behind him, letting the last attacker fall sprawling in front of him where he could see it and survey the whole of the situation.

Three of the Lion's Sons lay in the street, none of them rising again. The last - the soft-hearted man that had distracted immediately from the fight to help his companion - was staring up at him in fearful awe. He was another young one, Azrael noted - he might well be a friend of the first watchman that had confronted him with recklessness. This one had better sense, at least. He wasn't rising to try and fight Azrael now that the rest of his party was dead, lacking either the single-mindedness or lack-mindedness for the task.

The survivor wouldn't interfere with him, Azrael judged. But that didn't mean he wouldn't talk. Calculation was already flooding Azrael's mind; the moment the shock of his friend's slaughter passed, this one would go to find help. He would give a perfect description of the man that had killed the Lionmane and butchered his comrades. By morning, the entire city would take up arms.

It was bad enough that the Couriers would be watching the gates, hemming Azrael in – he couldn't afford for the city militia to be chasing after him as well.

Quietly, Azrael walked to retrieve his hand crossbow from the alleyway, thinking his options over as he stepped over the slain body of the last fighting militiaman. There were thousands of ways to kill a man that didn't want to fight. This one was barely a man, even, still more a boy; any slight trickery or unexpected strike, would take him unaware. Azrael recovered the weapon; it might provide the easiest method. Load a fresh bolt, point, pull the trigger. It was just that easy, and just that callous. The youth wouldn't be dodging – he probably wouldn't even realize what was happening, by the look of confusion still on his face. It would be merciful, maybe; quick, in any case.

So the real question was – what was stopping him from doing it? Watching the youth coldly, Azrael couldn't say that he felt any strong sense of sentiment to leaving one life stand after taking so many others. But if he were going to do it, he ought to be done with it already. The hesitation baffled him; that was the way, wasn't it? Protect his identity, dodge the label of murderer, it was... the only option, and... it was....

It was not worth another man's life.

His breath caught, and he stared at his crossbow in rapt fascination. Reason returned to him at last – *true* reason, not the twisted logic he'd been running off of. The swamping chaos of the night had touched his head, and he was falling into Courier training he'd only meant to pay lip service to. He wasn't serving anything but self-interest now, and as much as he wanted to protect himself... killing someone that was no immediate threat to him was not how he would do that. Wasn't that everything he hated about the Couriers?

His frozen stare made the guard draw back; the boy looked away, bending his head over the body in his arms and moving his lips without sound. Azrael imagined that he was praying - for himself, for the souls of his comrades, for revenge. Watching him, the man knew his mind was made.

Swallowing, Azrael took the braver of the courses laid before him – he turned and ran.

As he turned the corner of the street, he could hear, or could imagine hearing, the guard calling weakly for help, trying to draw others to the scene of the slaughter. There wouldn't be anywhere in Riviem that Azrael could run to after this. He'd meant only to kill one deserving man; but in the aftermath, he'd killed the Baron, two of his men, and three militiamen that tried to serve their city by bringing a murderer to - and oh, how that word stung him! – *justice*. No hole would be deep enough for him to hide from retribution. Seeking the cover of the city's gnarled depths, chased every step by doubt and guilt, he could only delay what was to come.