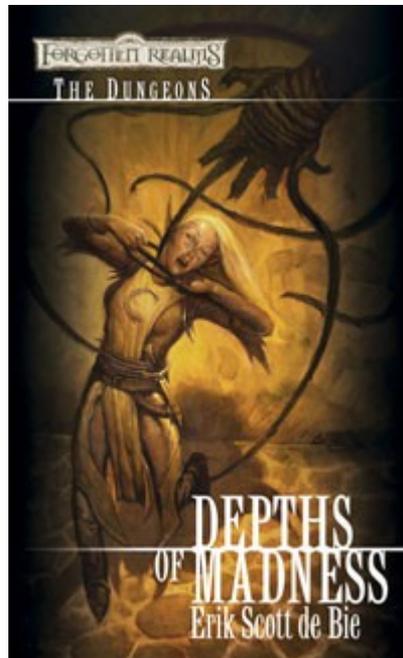


That Time of the Tenday

By Erik Scott de Bie



Why did you kill him?

* * * * *

She woke to a hand on her sweaty throat that pressed its thumb into her windpipe.

Hoarse, bubbling sounds, like the braying of apes or lions behind a curtain of water, echoed around her in the darkness, and died even as light flared in her eyes. She tried to scream but sounded only a gagging wheeze.

No memory -- not even her name. She didn't know who she was, where or why she was, and she had not the slightest idea what was happening. All she knew was that the hand would kill her just as surely as some imagined horror in the night.

Her right arm did nothing. She could not feel it, and must either have slept upon it or awakened without it. She flexed her left hand and found it, just where she'd hoped, at the end of her arm.

Very well. If screaming didn't serve, perhaps the knife under her pillow would. She went for it and slashed.

She cut nothing but air.

Laughter, like an elf giggling, came to her ears -- and with it a sly offer, perhaps.

She fought. "No!" she tried to strangle out, "I don't need you!"

The words didn't come out garbled; they didn't come out at all.

She saw something else, then. A wriggling body, hanged, dangling amidst a dozen strands. A woman, an elf, who seemed her inverse -- the hair pale gold, the skin tanned dark.

There was nothing -- absolutely nothing -- she could do.

She willed the vision away, but the pressure did not relent. That was the dream, this the reality, and she would die if she didn't fight it off.

She slashed again, and the darkness hauled her out of the rented bed and held her erect on her toes, still throttling, and swept her about the room, following her through the shadows as she danced. Black strands flashed across her vision, as of hair swirling. Her hair -- not gold. That was the other one.

In its grasp, she whirled and slashed over and over, wildly, at where she thought it had to be, but she hit nothing. Stars flared and she felt weak. Something -- a scorpion, perhaps, or a fiend -- stung her foot, and she cried out through closed vocal cords that burned with the effort.

Then she turned the blade toward the hand that choked her and cut across its back.

The world exploded in pain and the dagger fell out of nerveless fingers.

* * * * *

The Fox-at-Twilight awoke, kneeling naked in the center of the room, covered in sweat, her hair falling in gangly knots to the floor. Her right hand pulsed as though stung, and she felt a wetness dripping down her arm.

Terrified, she felt along her breastbone. The amulet was not there.

She saw it immediately, near her left toe. It must have come undone and. . . .

She tried to reach for it, but her body wouldn't respond.

"Light?" came a tentative voice. She heard a muscular form stirring on the bed, two paces distant.

With the aid of moonlight through cracked shutters, she saw that an ugly gash split the smooth skin on the back of her right hand. The fingers of her left hand caressed the hilt of a knife, the blade of which dripped something black in the moonlight. Had that knife cut her?

The man pulled himself out of the bed and hurried to her side. Hard muscles glistened and thick hair brushed against over-sensitive skin as he embraced her. She might have found his nakedness distracting, but her thoughts wouldn't connect.

"Aran," she said, uncertain.

"Light, are you -- ?"

She pointed.

Arandon looked down. He frowned at her. "You're cut. Let me -- "

She inched away and pointed harder.

"This?"

She nodded.

He bit his lip. "Very well." He knelt, picked up the amulet, and held it out.

Twilight snatched it and fastened it around her throat. Then she breathed and nodded, bidding him approach.

"Scared me." Arandon shivered. "What happened?"

A strangling sun elf -- not herself.

The half-memory faded, and Twilight shook her head.

"Don't remember," she said, in a thin, reedy voice. Her eyes could just make out the auburn sheen of his hair.

"A nightmare?"

Twilight shrugged. Elves weren't even supposed to sleep, much less dream, though she had done more than her fair share of both.

He reached for a cloth from the pack at the foot of their bed. "Are you injured?"

She held up her right hand. The blood trickled down her very white flesh, over and under a gold ring on her third finger.

"Let me see to that." Arandon's delicate fingers massaged around the cut. Her hand looked tiny indeed, between his giant ones. He dabbed, and she shivered. "Is it the only one?"

She nodded mutely, and he echoed it. His eyes closed and the ranger chanted briefly under his breath to his goddess and touched his rough fingers lightly beside the rent.

Twilight winced, though not in pain.

The pale flesh drew together and the pain lessened. It left a scar that experience had taught her would fade in time.

Arandon furrowed his brow and moved his hands to the right foot she kept folded under her knee. Blood trickled from a swollen gouge. She must have kicked the bedpost quite hard. His prayers healed that as well.

"My than -- " she started.

"Light, your neck!"

Twilight put her fingers delicately to her throat and felt soreness there. It hurt to touch. Bruises, she realized with a shudder.

"Perhaps this is what I get for insisting on sleeping all day and drinking all night," she lied as he chanted for more healing. She knew exactly what this had been -- or would, anyway.

When he opened his eyes again, Arandon watched her and bit his lip. "Was it a spell, or was someone here?" He picked up the dagger she'd dropped -- his, she recalled. She didn't carry knives herself. His eyes flickered, searching. "Is someone still here?"

"I don't think so," she said, distantly. "To all of those."

Arandon let out a sigh. "That's a relief," he said. "I woke up, and you were . . . jumping about, gurgling and slashing with that knife."

Twilight nodded. That was how Arandon understood her shadowdancing, as would anyone who hadn't done it.

He touched her on the shoulder, hesitant, and she nodded. Then he took her into his arms and held her tight. She liked that.

"I thought you'd gone mad," he said as he stroked her hair, "or maybe something was attacking you."

Twilight raised one artfully black eyebrow. "Oh?" She looked at him as for the first time.

His face went immediately distrustful. "Uh, yes," he said cautiously. His dark eyes narrowed. "Why are you looking at me like. . .?"

"You ask, 'why?' " Her voice was calm.

"Um." His arms withdrew slowly and cautiously, as though the nymph he thought he'd embraced had out to be a wild boar, one that had only just started to wake.

Oh no.

Twilight was fully awake.

"You saw all of it?" she asked.

"I . . . I think so," he said. "You were making enough noise to wake Kelemvor's hounds. I'm surprised the others aren't . . ."

"You thought I was under attack?"

"Well . . ."

"And you didn't wake up just now?"

"No -- earlier . . ."

Twilight caught Arandon's ears -- the one scarred and the other clear -- and screeched. "Then why didn't you try to catch me, or help me, or do something other than nothing, you oaf?"

"Oh." Arandon's look of concern turned to one of nervousness.

"I am very hurt by this." Twilight bit the little finger of her left hand. "Very, very hurt."

"I see." Arandon shifted. He bit his lip. "And how can I. . .?"

"I think I am in need of comforting," Twilight said, matter-of-factly. "Voraciously in need." She looked him down and up. "I hope it's not beyond you."

"Um." His cheeks went a touch red.

"A dubious reassurance." She tossed her hair and brushed the loose strands out of her bright eyes, which she imagined burned silvery in this light. "I could always call Telketh to my bed instead -- might fancy a dwarf." The right end of her mouth curled wryly. "Or in addition."

Now Arandon's face went totally red, and not just with embarrassment. "Wench!" he growled. "I'll show you I'm enough for the likes of you!"

Twilight yawned. "Promises."

He swallowed her in his arms and she forgot all about night terrors.

"Just one thing," he said, the voice rumbling against her neck.

"Yes?" She shuddered, right on the verge of release: release of control, release of herself -- freedom in Arandon's arms . . .

"A name you said . . ." he murmured.

"During the dance or after?"

"Before," Arandon said. "When we . . ." He went red again.

"Oh?"

* * * * *

Weatherfall alley stood cold and empty this night, thought Piht the Picker as he rooted through the trash behind the Asp.

Most of the crates old Gorshish the cook used to bring in vegetables and bread from market would be empty, of course, but the big man didn't care to watch the trash now, so the take might be good. The Asp had taken a number of new maids into its employ, including a Chauntean. Followers of the bounty mother loved charity, and so did a convincing beggar boy.

Weatherfall seemed especially quiet this night -- until a window out of the Asp exploded out into the darkness and a naked body tumbled out.

He'd been thrown, Piht reasoned. The man -- for he recognized it as a man -- struck the opposite wall -- of Myrja's Oddities, Piht noted -- and bounced back this way, through lines of clothing hung out to dry. The waif watched as the man tumbled, flailing through Rosalind's smallclothes before slamming into the Asp wall, sliding down, and shattering a crate before sprawling into the garbage.

Piht blinked up at the window, where he could see a wrathful elf woman peering down, eyes blazing and black hair swirling.

A familiar voice in Piht's head: Is that why you killed him?

Piht shuddered at that voice.

There was something about the elf -- something important.

Was she the one?

The elf sniffed at the air and crinkled her nose. "I hate this city." Then she vanished.

Piht shrugged. He'd seen stranger things on the streets of Westgate.

Which was part of why he loved this city.

"You breathe?" Piht asked. The lines had slowed the man's fall, but he'd still hit pretty hard.

There came a moan.

"That's an aye, then."

Piht helped the man up. Far too large, this one, and heavy. And too clean. Whew!

"Last time I let her borrow a phial of might," the man moaned as he felt at the blood running down his forehead. Rotted bread and peels of fruit clung to him. He'd halfway dressed himself in four or five ladies' garments on the way down.

"You can stand?" Piht asked, offering one mud-speckled hand.

"Aye, indeed." He got to his feet, dizzily. Then his face went red, and he covered himself.

The waif shrugged. It wasn't like he hadn't seen a naked man before. "Venturer, then?"

"Aye." He pushed dark hair out of his eyes. "Name's Arandon. I'm staying at the Asp."

Piht looked at the adventurer, then up at the broken window. "See that, actually."

"Adventurer, you say?" said a voice from behind.

Piht looked to see a thug appear out of the shadows. He'd had enough run-ins with the type to recognize one at sight. "'Ware, blade. Tha' one's. . . ."

"Looking for a take -- like you, boy." A crooked, ill-kempt dagger appeared out of the thief's belt. He looked at the man clad in ladies' undergarments and clicked his tongue. "You're in trouble now, my good son."

"But -- but you can't rob me," Arandon argued, quite logically. He stepped forward, putting himself between Piht and the rusty steel. The waif found that amusing.

"Ah, I think you'll see you're wrong about that." The thief gestured, and a second -- this one even burlier and fouler of stench -- appeared out of the shadows.

"Oh aye," said this second. "Oh, we've got the ability. To rob you, that is."

"But I've no gold, silver, or even thre -- " Arandon inspected himself. "These aren't mine."

"Ah, but 'at's not the point," the mugger said. "We owe the Court half a dozen alley brawls a night, you know, and this tenday's been slow. We gots our quota."

"And 'sides," the other thief stepped forward, hefting a club studded with glass shards like a crude morningstar. "'Tis the principle of the t'ing."

"But I've nothing to fight you with," Arandon said. "Surely this will not count toward -- "

A war axe picked that moment to fall out of the sky, bounce off one of the broken crates, slide down the refuse, and clatter to his feet.

"Um," Piht said. "Yours?"

Arandon looked up at the window. "Thank you," he muttered. "Thank you, Twilight."

"Now then?" the one thief said to the other.

"Aye then -- now."

The big man sighed and flicked his axe into his hands with his toes. "Sleeping alone the next tenday," he grumbled as the thugs came for him. "Well done, mouth."

Steel rang out.

Piht settled back against the wall to watch. As he did, the one within thought about this disguise, and decided he didn't like being Piht the Picker, beggar boy and waif, anymore.

Is that why you killed him?

"I had to," he mouthed.

So that's why you killed him.

"I had to," Daltrex insisted. "He'd have killed all the others. He'd have . . ."

So that's why you killed him.

* * * * *

Elsewhere . . .

The blood-smeared beast fled across the sands, pitching in its awkward gait, and the liberator followed it.

He ran, day and night.

A lesser creature would have tired and needed rest, or perhaps collapsed from lack of water and food, but not the Dispossessed. He had a single purpose, and it drove him as no other need could. The story dictated it, and he must bow to the demands of what was written.

He paused on the third day, as the sun began to rise far behind him and a shadow crept over his back. He'd avoided the dark ones easily -- and the scouts and sentries posted throughout the desert -- and it struck him as odd that it could be approaching him from the east without his knowledge. Before he looked back, he dived into the sand and covered himself over, hiding -- as it were -- in plain sight. On the dunes, he became just another rock formation.

'Twas then -- and only then -- that he looked back.

Nothing.

No city, and no scouts. No spellweavers bearing down upon him on the backs of dragons. No shadowy beasts coming to drink his own darkness.

The sky was empty, the horizon limitless.

There.

He saw it, just out of the corner of his eye. A shape -- an outline. 'Twas there, and yet not there -- concrete and dream -- both at once. No mirage, this, but an actual being. At first, he thought it a partially invisible dragon, shifting against the light and bending it just enough for him to see an outline, but the shaking in his limbs told him 'twas more. Its long neck grew ever longer, snaking sinuous into the hazy light, and split into two -- two heads that grinned and laughed and mocked.

A waking nightmare.

Why did you kill him? they asked.

Kill him? he thought. Kill who?

Then he remembered.

A tremor at his ear -- sands shifting -- gave him warning, and he rolled out of his hiding place just before a mighty hammer fell.

"Kill you!" The beast chortled its discordant laughter.

The Dispossessed hefted his black sword.

* * * * *

The Curling Asp, Westgate; Uktar, 1374

"Threw you out the window?" asked Telketh Swordbeard, peering out of his hairy face.

Arandon winced as his bruises remembered the pain. "Aye." He noted Piht the waif across the room, hungrily slurping down his third serving of stew. Arandon gave him a wave, but he didn't seem to notice. "Potion of strength. My pack."

"Cyric's silken corset, that's rough." Telketh looked across the table at Twilight who was, not coincidentally, sitting far from Arandon. "That time of the tenday, suppose."

The long, straight beard -- dyed gray -- that gave him his name bounced against his thick chest. He was a dwarf, or perhaps a very stocky human -- Arandon found him too gruff to tell.

"What would you know of it, bristles?" Galandra asked hotly, her southern blood flaring into her heart-shaped face. "Do you know aught of women other than your own mother?"

"Enough to respect their swordplay," Telketh shot back, with a lewd smile.

Arandon knew better than to cross the Calishite woman, though Telketh never evidenced that particular wisdom. Even worse, Galandra served Sune, goddess of love and beauty, and Telketh walked upon a fragile bridge.

"Lads," Quelin rumbled. The one word, delivered in his charismatic voice, diffused the potential battle. The paladin's face looked no more red than ever it did, though he had surely imbibed half a dozen libations already. "No japes amongst the Six-Stars!"

"Five," Telketh corrected into his tankard. "Dimming by the draught."

Arandon scowled. "Tell that to my shoulder," he said to the paladin. He looked to the dwarf. "And that."

"Six, suppose, if this spell-caster ever gets here. When's he to arrive?" Telketh yawned. "We've delayed long enough, when there's treasure to be had." The dwarf raised his ale.

"Love to be spread," Galandra added, joining her own tankard to the circle.

"Justice to be done," Quelin said with hard eyes and bold tongue.

"Aye!" chimed four of the five. Tankards clashed and returned to ready mouths. The paladin drained his ale.

Eyeing the quiet captain, who stared through her feywine, Arandon raised his cup again. "Opposing blades broken and foes smitten."

"I'll drink to that!" Quelin said.

"You'll drink to anything," Galandra observed wryly.

"Aye!" He gave a hungry roar to the maid, who scurried back toward the taproom.

A sweet elf voice added to the discussion. "And so does justice pass the morn and day with hammer in hand, the dusk with tankard, and goes to bed a happy -- if abstract -- concept."

"Make that two!" Quelin grinned. "Two excellent toasts can't go for waste."

They drank.

Little about the Curling Asp separated it from the hundreds of inns and thousands of taverns across the Realms, and for that Arandon liked it. The redwood walls had long ago lost their luster, covered over by smoke and ale stain. Thick pipeweed and the smell of sweat rose in equal measure, choking the air such that he felt life dripping out his pores by drops.

Near their table, men diced and played at three dragon ante. They danced daggers at tables in the corners or wagered on fighting vipers and rattlers far from where they might inflict collateral damage with their sport. Some men simply drank.

The atmosphere and the two ales he had already consumed gave Arandon a light-headed dizziness, and he enjoyed it. Though he would ever remain faithful to his first love -- the windswept hills and mountains -- a good pub stirred him and wrapped him in a haze of civilization that was both oily and comfortable.

He might have enjoyed it more if he'd had a lass on his lap, particularly his beloved captain, who sat a pace away having her feet massaged, one at a time, by another beauty.

In their bench against the wall, Galandra glanced along Twilight's leg to where the elf perched -- one bare foot in Galandra's lap -- and offered a wry smile and a wink. Arandon did not see if Twilight returned it. They'd forced the menfolk to the stools and took the bench themselves, as usual. Twilight held up a twisted glass of pink feywine that Arandon remembered (with some pain in the coin purse) as rather expensive. He looked back to his dregs, waved to a maid, and thought that at least Twilight could make some show of gratitude for her drinks.

Not as though she had treated him with much more than contempt since last night. This had happened enough times before, in their sometimes -- well, often -- warlike relationship.

As if in answer to his thoughts, he felt a foot touch his leg in not so much a kick but a sly caress. Arandon focused his gaze on their captain as well -- her long legs in black leather and the billowy blouse, her scarlet wide-brim hat and half-cape -- and the way Twilight winked and curled that pretty mouth told him exactly what she thought of his bladework.

Smitten, indeed.

He sighed.

Telketh saw the look and let loose a loud grunt. "Aye, but in all that haste to charm maid's heads and break goblins -- or the reverse . . ." He thumped his tankard down and scowled. He pointed one stubby finger around the table. "Don't you forget the treasure."

"Not all treasure need sparkle, my large friend," Arandon mused into his tankard.

"Are you saying our precious 'Light don't sparkle, tall-man?"

Ale flew from Arandon's mouth and spattered the table. He wobbled and tottered, and his stool screeched unhappily under his weight and shifting balance. His cheeks burned and he shrank under his leather cap. "I don't know what you. . . ."

"Sh'dakal's Wandering Blade, 'And," Telketh chuckled. He knew how much Arandon hated that nickname. It made him feel like just an accessory. 'Light's idea, of course. "We all know who you're talking about."

Arandon felt his face grow hotter as he looked around the table. Telketh smirked, Galandra gazed at him slyly, and even Quelin laughed into his eighth ale of the evening. Twilight herself provided no support, relaxing on the bench, seemingly oblivious but, if he knew her at all -- and so he did, he fancied -- just as engaged and as bemused as the rest of them.

"Uh," he said. "Uh -- the caster. He's late."

"Oh no," Telketh interjected. "You're not getting out of. . . ."

Arandon continued regardless, speaking fast. "That caster you summoned is late, aye? I believe we said the fifth of Uktar, and 'twas. . . ."

"Four days past." Quelin slammed his tankard down. "I agree. Onward!"

Telketh glared at Arandon, and the ranger blew out a sigh. Appeal to order and schedules, and the paladin was sure to pipe up, no matter how deep in his cups he had fallen.

"The longer we delay, the closer winter comes," Arandon said. "Already the cold settles, and travel will be hard."

"Let it settle," Galandra said. " 'Twould be passing well, wintering in Westgate, and saving the blood-shedding and glory-mongering for fairer seasons." The Sunite stretched out her lovely shoulders, bare in her slashed habit. The red contrasted sharply with her dusky Calishite skin. She gave the gold medallion around her neck a little flick, like a cat's kiss. "The Lady's work is best done in spring anyway, for it is then that love blooms."

"Bah," Telketh spat. "What are love and spring beside the good sparkle of gold, aye? Damned romantics." He drank.

Galandra rolled her eyes where another priestess -- one who didn't know Telketh so well -- might have fumed at his blasphemy. "As you worship the possession of beauty, I worship the seeing, but we both worship beauty."

"We agree on something, then. Praises be!"

"Praises be!" Quelin raised his tankard.

They drank. All but Twilight, who held her decanter aloft and seemed lost in thought.

"Spring, winter -- doesn't matter," she said. "He'll catch me whenever."

"I missed that, beauty," Telketh growled, his voice heavy and wet. "What'd you say? Something about the weather?"

"Must delve," she murmured. "Down. Deep."

"Is that a hint about a destination?" Galandra gave the elf a swat on one leather-wrapped leg. "Why 'Light, how out of character! I had expected a surprise."

Twilight shifted her foot down from the priestess's lap and stepped lithely into her waiting boot. Arandon saw Galandra stiffen at the loss of contact.

It seemed that, though he and Telketh were the least subtle, they two were far from the only admirers of their captain. Arandon had long suspected as much, and far from causing jealousy it excited his -- as the sages back in Candlekeep would say -- "manly urges," to imagine the elf and the Sunite in his bed, entangling. . . .

Black silk brushed his stubbly cheek. "Aran?" the elf's voice drifted into his mind, and he fancied it a whisper of ecstasy.

In truth, however, the occupants of the table were simply staring at him as he sat there with what could only be the stupidest of smiles on his face. Telketh's smug grin told him that. He blinked, colored, and turned to Twilight, who stood at his side, her hand -- the right, the scar of last night covered under her red bladechime glove -- idly on the table and the other on her hip. The elf favored him with the most innocent smile that had ever hid licentious thoughts.

Tymora, bless me with the eloquence and luck to see me free of this, he thought. "Um," he said.

Telketh laughed uproariously.

Galandra was still looking at Twilight, heedless of the jesting. She touched the elf on the cheek, lightly, with her lacquered nails. "You seem very weary."

Twilight shook her head and winced. Then she rose. "I think . . . bed." On her feet, she clutched at her stomach, and twisted her face into a grimace, as though she'd swallowed something bitter that stabbed at her insides.

"Do you feel well, lass?" Quelin asked.

Twilight gave him a little, wistful smile. "Yes."

Then she collapsed.

Closest, Arandon caught her before she hit the floor. Twilight weighed barely more than the clothes she wore, it seemed, and she seemed especially frail in his arms.

"Upstairs," Galandra ordered. She rose with a start. "We'll bed this one."

A piece of Arandon heard that as an alluring promise -- "we," as in he and Galandra, would "bed" Twilight. But then rationality intruded and he was up.

"Wait!" Telketh said. "What if this sixth should arrive?"

"Be good," Twilight said dreamily.

"No -- what should we do?"

"Oh." She swooned against Arandon's shoulder. "Try not to kill him. Heard he's a brand."

"Aye!" Quelin toasted the thought, whatever it meant.

They took the murmuring Twilight upstairs.

* * * * *

Elsewhere . . .

He slapped her to the floor.

"I'm late." He brushed away the frilly garments she'd brought -- they carried no interest. "I've a moot, with someone far more interesting."

While she shook her head, sitting there naked, he dressed quickly -- efficiently. That was the way of things, unless he had a servant to dress him. The girl could hardly be trusted to do that -- her skills disappointed him.

It wasn't until he was almost ready that he realized she was speaking.

Why did you kill him?

"What?"

"Costs more, bugger-breath," she said. "Hitting me does."

He scoffed. "Your groveling was hardly sufficient," he said. "Besides -- you were to call me 'Master,' not 'bugger-breath.' I do not feel inclined." He pulled on his left glove.

"Dark your inclinations, pitch-face," she said, standing up next to him. "Dressed like that, you'd think you're Manshoon himself, but you're just another dog -- ugly one, too." Her split lip was pretty. "I do my job, I get paid. You think I'd touch a wretch like you without gold?"

He felt the touch of a blade at his back.

Wretch like you.

He paused, right glove still loose.

"Very well."

He smiled and tightened it.

There came the first heartbeat of a scream. Then, an instant later, there was the sound of a charred body crashing into the wall.

* * * * *

Twilight sighed as they laid her on the bed, with its cool feather blankets. She felt Arandon reach for her boots, but Galandra slapped his hands away.

"She can't very well rest in all those clothes," Arandon said. "If you don't want me to take them off, why don't you?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Twilight murmured. She just blinked when they looked at her, worry on their faces.

Galandra bit her lip, as she often did when nervous. Or aroused. "Go back down to the commons," she said. "Tell them she's well."

"Is she well?" Arandon challenged.

"Am I?" Twilight murmured.

The priestess rolled her eyes. "I need someone keeping sentry over Quelin and Telketh," she said. "They get in their cups and less than advantageous events occur." Twilight almost giggled at her euphemism. Galandra could rationalize anything. "And besides, if that caster shows up, we'll need a cool head about."

"So why not yours?" Arandon asked. "I could watch her. I know healing as well."

"Sharing her bed at night --" Twilight saw Arandon flinch. He hadn't realized Galandra knew about that, she guessed. Twilight herself had told the priestess. "-- does not make you a qualified healer to replace my own care."

Arandon's stubborn possessiveness flattered her -- and irritated her. "She just needs rest," he reasoned. "I can . . ."

"No fears, 'And," Twilight said, sweetly and weakly. "Galandra will be down soon too." She reached out, ever so weakly, and patted his hand.

Arandon hesitated.

Galandra's eyes gleamed and her russet skin burned. "You. Down. Now."

He went.

The two women were alone. Galandra looked down at Twilight, worried, and the elf smiled at her dreamily. Apparently, the priestess took this as a cue, for she took to fussing over Twilight with a vengeance. Despite what she might have said, she removed Twilight's clothes and looked for injuries or welts or stings, as of a spider or other vermin. She left the necklace -- she'd learned enough not to touch that. Twilight reminded herself to thank Arandon for healing the bruises on her neck -- sleeping with healers took away the necessity of concealing scarves.

When Galandra's inspection was finished, she pulled the coverlet over the dozing elf and sat down on the bed next to her. "You seem well," she said. "Whole, and unbroken."

"Thank the gods for that," Twilight said. Of the five, only Galandra knew about Twilight's last business arrangement -- the priestess had been there -- so she felt free speaking of it. "I can only stand so many broken bones in a single tenday, and after Zhent --"

Galandra put a finger to her lips, stopping them. "Don't try to speak," she said. "I think you just need rest -- that and drink. You'd be surprised how much water a body might need."

"No I wouldn't."

The priestess clicked her tongue. "Have you slept well the last nights?"

"Days," Twilight corrected. "And no -- Arandon's been . . . keeping me up."

Galandra laughed. "I have no doubt of that," she said. "But perhaps you are in need of a gentler lover -- one with a certain softness."

"One who will allow me rest, if I take your meaning?" Twilight yawned. "Nominations?"

Galandra laid her fingers gently across Twilight's cheek, and ran them across her thin lips. The elf could not deny a tingle.

"I should rest," Twilight said. "I can feel the Reverie approaching." She watched Galandra's face as she said it, but the priestess gave no sign of disbelieving her.

The Sunite gave a soft smile. "Very well," she said. "Would you like me to stay?"

Twilight made a show of considering it. Then she shook her head, just a little.

Galandra rose to go. When she opened the door, Twilight sighed. "Do you know aught of dreams, Gala?" she asked.

The priestess frowned. "Only that all of us have them," she said wistfully.

"Well then." Twilight closed her eyes.

The door clicked shut.

Twilight opened her eyes. "Thought she'd never go."

* * * * *

Taslin was dreaming.

That in itself did not unnerve her -- she was accustomed to dreams by familiarity if not frequency. Humans dreamed; she had learned of this when first she'd known a human man's embrace. She'd watched as he slept.

By contrast, elves did not dream, or perhaps should not.

Yet occasionally it happened that an elf dipped below the Reverie and fell into the chaotic, less developed mind of the painfully barbaric human. In her youth, she had feared such a mind -- despised even the notion of contact with such a base creature -- until she had left Evermeet and discovered Faerûn, and met her first husband, a human.

She stared at his face now -- young, with a beard red as fox hair and eyes that twinkled like water in a stream. Aging, as well, growing older as she watched. Now he reached his fiftieth winter, as he had two centuries past. Soon he would die and rot before her eyes, while she stood naked and helpless to prevent it.

None of this was possible, but then she was dreaming.

She was watching Eloraad die again -- she remembered those moments nightly in her Reverie -- while another presence was watching her watching him. She stared at him because she saw nothing else, but they two were hardly alone.

Why did you kill him?

"Kill whom?" she asked.

Though rags of flesh hung from yellowing bones as he reached his own second century, Eloraad lunged for her, but Taslin merely raised her left hand. The crescent moon appeared, and Eloraad shattered into mist, which surged around her. It whirled and raged in vain, and Taslin bit her lip in concentration. Then the mist swirled ever faster, boiling away into something -- into her moon. Taslin felt it like a rush of hot blood through her veins -- blood that was alternately scalding and freezing at once.

Then, just like that, he was gone.

She was still not alone.

"Corellon protect me," she prayed in Elvish. "Shield me from those who would do me harm. Deliver me from shadow."

Golden light soaked her, caressing her limbs. Her hair, like straw of gold, rippled and swayed in the winds of her Lord's power.

She heard an awful double-screech -- the sound of twin animals being beaten away. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a mass of shadows -- a beast, perhaps, of black and crimson, dripping with acid and bile -- curling around her and vanishing into the darkness.

The moon pulsed faintly then disappeared.

Taslin took a breath of the dream air and closed her eyes. Soon, she would awaken.

So that's why you killed him.

She blinked.

It wasn't a question, but neither was it a statement of fact. It was a deduction that begged a response -- a contrary one.

"Killed whom?" she asked. "I did not kill Eloraad. He died in my arms of his own age."

So that's why you killed him.

"I killed no one," Taslin said. "I do not know who . . ."

The one you love.

She felt something warm and wet seeping onto the backs of her bare feet. Something like water, but not water.

"Tas?" a soft, weak voice asked from behind her.

"Asson?" After his name, breath would not come.

She turned.

And screamed.

* * * * *

Twilight kicked off the coverlets and leaped to her feet. The floorboards felt cold on bare soles used to going unclad. Though Galandra had left her mostly fresh clothes stacked nearby, she eschewed them for the moment and crossed to the chest at the foot of the bed. This she opened and took the leather satchel inside.

"Honestly," Twilight mused, as she rummaged through her pack, "a little swoon and they fall all over you."

She found the potion within moments, in a pouch sewn into the lining she worked open with quick fingers and sharp nails. She took out the tiny purple vial and contemplated it.

"What is it?" she had asked.

"A gift," Rygillis said as he waved his fingers over the draught. "For dreams."

"I don't," she lied.

"You will need this." Blackness flickered across his pupilless, violet eye. A purple orb, the symbol of his dark goddess, Shar. "In the end of this very year. A dream."

"What makes you think that?" she had asked, sly and carefree, hand dipping into her lap. "What makes you think I won't be here, in your bed?"

She remembered the Sharran's tight smile -- like the face of something not human; not nearly. "I see it in your shadow."

Twilight sucked in a breath and willed the memory away. She didn't overly enjoy thinking of that time. Some shadows should remain darkened.

"The shadows in dreams," she whispered. "Seems I'm seeking them too, priest."

She set the vial on the bed while she dressed and armed. The dusky rapier she drew and set on the vanity table before the mirror within easy reach. After a pause, she set her crossbow beside it. She doubted weapons would be of use here -- this battle would take place in her mind -- but no sense going unprepared.

Whatever had attacked her, it hadn't been her old nemesis. If he'd found her, without the amulet, she wouldn't have awakened -- not here, anyway. She hadn't the slightest idea of his intentions for her, but they couldn't be good. Nothing about him was.

She had to stop this before it started -- before she slipped, and he found her again.

Twilight set the stool before the mirror and sat, wide-legged, ready to stand in an instant.

She took hold of her star sapphire hanging against her chest and paused. This moment meant a great deal. If he was looking for her, at just this moment . . .

"Come to whisk me away to your bower, O my 'lover'?" Twilight asked the mirror. She scoffed at the very idea. "I almost hope you do, so I can spit in your face."

She snapped the chain and slapped the amulet down on the vanity and said no more.

The murky potion slid like syrup into the feywine glass she'd palmed from the commons, and it roiled and curled as though something lived within. She remembered Rygillis's instructions, and lit a tindertwig. This she touched to the surface of the fluid, burning off its own shadow -- a shadow that meant death to anyone of this world who consumed it.

Heeding the warnings of a fiend. Twilight shook her head. What have I become?

But she could ill embark on this journey into Westgate's catacombs -- a maze she knew only too well -- with this nightmare haunting her. She had to see this through -- and do it alone.

Always alone.

"Ever east," she toasted her reflection. "Ever away."

She drank the potion. It tasted bitter and thick -- like blood and wine commingled with the sap of duskwood trees.

Then she sat back, stared at her wan face in the mirror, and waited.

"What would my shadow say to you now, priest?" she whispered as she stared at the mirror. Her words sounded slurred -- weary.

The moving lips did not seem totally her own.

* * * * *

Mirtul, 1374

"It tells you that." Twilight leaned forward across the table in the dimly lit cell. She rested her chin on one hand while the other fell into her lap. "Fascinating."

The candlelight cast more shadows than it repelled, but 'twas not necessary. Either could see just as clearly in perfect darkness. Since his eyes had no pupils, it was difficult to decide where he was looking, but she could tell by his twitching fingers that he saw exactly how much breast she exposed in her black leather bodice. The Sharran's flat eyes might prove unreadable, but a man was still a man, however far removed from his humanity.

"It tells me many things," Rygillis said. "Your shadow is strong, but splintered within. Tiny, hidden cracks that will grow. Even now, it frays along the edges." His blank eyes leered. "You should free it." He reached for her wrist. "I could help."

"My thanks," Twilight said in a way that meant no. She sipped at the Sembian wine -- a gift, Rygillis had explained.

"As you say." He sat back. "A strong shadow will consume a weak heart."

Twilight smiled. What of a heart like black ice?

She set the wine down and swirled it in the shadowed glass. Time to leave.

"You call me frayed and splintered?" Twilight asked. "I knew you fancied me, priest."

His purple eyes seemed brighter in that moment. "A time will come, and soon, where inside will meet outside, and you will unravel," he said. "I can tell you the moment of your death."

"Isn't that radiant?" Twilight said. "I can tell you yours, too."

Her hand came up with the crossbow and she put the bolt between his glowing eyes.

* * * * *

Twilight had stared into the mirror for what felt like hours before she realized it.

Her face was smiling.

She reached up with her scarred right hand, experimentally, and felt at her own lips. Her left hand moved in the mirror, touching what on her own face must be a frown. The image's smile widened further.

Then the image pushed its fingers into its mouth and sucked on them, smiling around the digits. It pulled the damp fingers out and caught hold of its lower lip. Then it pulled.

Red lines appeared at the edges of the forehead and right cheek. Twilight watched as the image pulled its face down and across, the skin catching on nose and cheekbones. Then it drew the face off entirely and cast it down upon the table.

Blood and pus stared at her -- a face so twisted and ugly and putrid, fleshed in tones of madness, that it could not have been a face.

Then the eyes opened -- monstrous eyes she somehow knew and did not know.

"Well met, my love," he said. "'Tis well that -- "

He got that far before she shattered the mirror with the stool. Then she stepped back, trembling, and felt a presence behind her.

Why did you kill him?

She felt wet below -- hot and sticky. She saw that the lower half of her body was soaked in blood. Her hands were black with the stuff -- congealed and clinging. She opened her mouth to scream but found no air.

In the mirror -- somehow whole -- she saw herself, or at least a woman meant to be herself, standing naked and alone, in a world of swirling mists and shadow. Her skin carried a gray, murdered pallor. Hair flowed to her waist and beyond, green like the hair of a pale, dead horse. A rack of graceful white antlers curved from her head, and her eyes glowed red and gold.

Like his eyes.

Then she stood inside the mirror, lost in the mists, in the woman's place.

Why did you kill him?

She whirled, into the face of a man she knew and did not know -- one who was simultaneously a man she loved and the creature she hated. A trickster, a jester, and a torturer.

The dream, she realized. She was in the dream.

"Begone," she said, or tried, for her mouth seemed to be missing. Soundless, she plucked up her sword -- it blazed white like a star -- and drove it through the fiend's heart.

He shattered into a thousand fairies and pixies, which flew in every direction. She stood alone in her room again, panting, drenched in sweat, holding a bloody rapier.

Then she saw the others.

Bodies -- dozens of bodies -- littered the room around her. Men and women she'd loved and hated; faces she did not know or knew too well. All of them dead -- all at her hands.

Why did you kill him?

"I don't know what you mean," Twilight whispered. "I didn't kill anyone."

Why did you kill him?

"I didn't," she said. "I loved him."

So that's why you killed him.

"I loved him!"

So that's why you killed him.

Guilt flooded her -- hatred and self-loathing.

"No," she insisted.

Walking corpses she did not recognize -- yet -- came out of the corners of her world, pacing toward her, bloody hands outstretched. Their dead eyes accused.

"No."

So that's why you killed him.

Twilight screamed. "He killed me!"

Silence.

Once again, she stood alone, this time in an empty expanse of white sand. In every direction, she saw nothing but dunes and sky. She knew that she could walk, or run, or scream for an eternity and never reach anything firm and solid.

She found darkness comforting, but here there was only light.

She turned, and there he was.

The face she recognized but did not know then told her everything. Every face and name that she would see, every truth and untruth she would tell. Everything, up to the moment of her death. And how and when she could have saved them, if only she knew it.

And Twilight knew she would remember none of it upon waking.

She didn't want to hear this. She put her hands to her ears, but the litany of truths only intensified. "Stop it," she demanded, not knowing if the word existed. "Stop!"

The litany continued, but it spoke to her -- she heard its words in her mind.

Is that why you killed him? it asked. To stop him?

"I didn't kill anyone," Twilight screamed. She felt wetness streaking her cheeks and knew she did not shed tears, but blood and black oil from her eyes. She tasted it across her lips. It tasted like guilt. "I didn't!"

So that's why you killed him. To stop him.

The words continued, telling her everything, damning her with the knowledge to avert disaster and stealing her memory of it. Blaming her for all their deaths.

"Stop this," Twilight pleaded. "Take this away from me."

She didn't want it. She didn't want the blame -- the responsibility. She ran without moving, fled without thinking, hid without closing her eyes.

"Take all this away!"

To her surprise, the words stopped.

The mottled face regarded her, then its lips parted like flesh slit open.

"Very well," he said in a voice like a death rattle.

Then his hands, on impossibly long arms, shot to her throat. The fingers closed, pressing tight into porcelain skin. She arched.

There came hoarse laughter from two mouths, like the cries of beasts.

THE END