

Elegy spent sunrise to afternoon pressing garlic. While the sun was still above the southern wall of the Hollicar Drommon she mixed garlic oil into the white in every lamp in the manor. They sputtered and stank while they burned, on the edge of going out and resisting. When the inside of Meherengil was lit, she went outside.

Mt Edys was almost due south with a white-capped head and silver couloir that ran down its north flank. The long-haired old man kept his white hair through summer into autumn. Rhum and Jyves stood on either side of him, connected by tall kols. That wall was the Hollicar Drommon, old Ashirai for 'the old man's cloak' and it looked like Edys was indeed throwing his arms up and out with a dark grey cloak between them. It was long until sunset, but the base of the mountain was dark. There were shadows under there where the sun never came.

Elegy waited, standing the mound of the old smithy. Broken boards were already dry-rotting. The anvil was rusted through. She gritted her teeth and looked south into the shadows. Possibly, just possibly, a well dressed man in silk and wool looked back at her. It was hard to tell, for he would be in the darkest alcove. It was a narrow crag between valley floor and wall that kept the shadows all year. Pine forests ran to the edge of the cloak and tried to climb, but the trees of the alcove were stunted things. There was no light in there, and the only thing that indicated a man not pulled from her mind were his glinting eyes.

Elegy saluted and lit the last of the lanterns. Going back inside, she plugged holes in the wall until nightfall. Meherengil needed a team of servants with a carpenter and stone mason. It was a grand old house. She'd be sorry to see it go.

She was a short, dark haired woman. Fashion in the mountains was long, thick hair, and many women made a point of pride to never cut theirs. That separated them from the peasants, the workers, because it was impossible to go hying off through the brambles with hair past your butt. Elegy's hair was very clean, level with the top of her neck in back. In front it barely made it past her chin. She wore southern leathers in the Ashirai style, outside hard and a silk inner layer sewn in. Likewise she wore Ashirai riding boots and belt. The locals hadn't known quite what to make of her, but that wasn't an issue now. She had eight short knives in her leather, the longest barely twice her pinky length. They had razor edges, not chopping blades, and once she was inside, she used one of Lady Merriam's nail brushes to paint them with garlic oil. She wished she had some silver.

As evening settled on the valley, the sun sank in the south west, and the shadows of the old man's cape reached north. A late frost crept north, ready to kill young grass or animals and painting the ground a gentle white. It crept over broken fences and empty barns to stop thirty or forty yards from the manor. A man whose footsteps didn't crunch paced back and forth outside the lights. The stars were bright tonight with red Madulus brilliant, green Aest and Dhom waxing. It was midsummer eve. The man gritted his teeth and waited. The last of the sunlight in the south west faded. He kissed the air, the lanterns died, and the frost came right to the edge of the house.

Someone had carved, "Baron Oman, you are forbidden to pass this door," on the front door.

The man, the same Baron Oman, smiled and wiped his hand over the inscription. Wormwood took it.

The oak decayed through, rotting apart and falling. Oman tried to take a step and failed. Inside on the mantle above the door was written, "Baron Oman, you are forbidden to enter this home." It was sewn together from many patches of embroidery and fixed with wax to the stone.

He glowered. Frost had crept up the stairs to the door now began to retreat. With the falling of the door, the gold light of many lanterns leapt out onto the stairs, and it thawed the stone where they touched. Oman's cloak floated and flapped. The frost pushed back to the yard and outward to the shadows.

Somewhere inside Elegy heard the clatter of rotten wood. She was in a bedroom where a dark-haired girl slept, mixing something at a sideboard. The sleeper was a classic beauty, hair like an ebony river that draped over the pillows, pale skin, fine teeth, soft amber eyes. She was painted perfect. The old masters drew such women, every line and feature idealized, and no humanizing imperfections. She didn't even have the cold beauty of alabaster, but rather cool skin that called for heated passion. Elegy poured a concoction into a glass and turned as the sleeper sat up.

"Drink, sweetie," said Elegy in a voice of static. The edges of her words were fogged out, and vowels and consonants went silent. "Drink." She pushed the cup to the other woman.

Lady Meher seemed to ignore her, but Elegy pressed the cup forward until Meher had to either drink or refuse. She did not refuse. Once the liquid passed her lips she eased to her feet, and Elegy put the glass away to shadow her. The lady made it four steps, swooned, and Elegy carried her back to bed.

Oman waited at the door until Elegy appeared from the bright lights within and stared at him. "I forbid you entry," she said from the bright light of the foyer. "Begone."

The Baron ignored her commands. "I've already been granted entry. The owner of this house bade me enter many times."

"She does not do so now. Begone."

Oman thought. His eyes narrowed. He sniffed the air like he was smelling the lamp light, and frowned at the woman. "Who are you? You weren't here before."

"Begone."

"Garlic in the lamp oil. Clever, but the garlic's all dead. You don't have any more."

"Begone."

"I can't be abjured after the lady of the house has given me permission to enter," he said. "You have something, a totem, hidden in the light, but you don't have much light. What is your name?"

Elegy swayed. She opened her mouth to speak, and the words twisted on her lips. "Elegy of-" she said and slapped both her hands over her mouth.

"When did you get here?" Oman demanded.

The dark woman said something muffled by her hands, but her eyes moved independently of her lips. They opened wide and frightened. Oman's dark eyes held hers. His were red from the lid to black pupil, and hers had no color. They were gold in the lamp light, but flickered and faded with the movement of the shadows. While he tried to nail down her details, she forced her mouth closed and retreated to the brighter light of the sitting hall beyond the foyer.

"I'll have her open this door, or I'll have you do it for me," Oman said. The shallow red of his eyes deepened and began to twist, circling like storms as currents of sanguine scarlet clouded the lesser reds.

Elegy lurched, fighting not to step, and put her hands out on the walls. Her mouth betrayed her. She said, "You may-" before slapping her mouth closed again, and without the help of the walls, took two steps towards him. She was back in the foyer.

"Come," demanded Oman, and his eyes raged.

The dark-haired woman fled, leaving the lamps burning and stinking of garlic.

"You can run, but you can't fight!" he called after her, but she was gone.

Baron Oman was a very pretty man. He had fine features, slender nose, sculpted jaw line, and wide, expressive eyes, clothes for a party with heeled dancing shoes and tight pants. There was no dirt on him. Once Elegy ran his eyes ceased to twirl, and he pushed a hand against the doorway. Something like water tension held him back. He strained, and his fingers began to burn. Pulling back he reached into the shadow beside the doorway where the walls were frosted and icicles crept down the stonework. His burns froze over, and then the ice fell off healthy, if pale, skin.

Oman waited, and Elegy did not test him at the doorway again.

She had run to the bar. Her boots didn't make noise on the smooth marble. She found a bottle of Padishar whisky, compared the reservoir of a lamp to her mental clock, and poured herself two thick fingers. She drank them in one hit and waited for her breathing to calm down.

"Do you see your vanity?" yelled Baron Oman, echoing through the silent house. "It's not that you're stronger than me. We'll see about that. It's that you think you're stronger than all those others that have stood against me. You think you're the first one with a stout heart, strong will, good intentions, and that all the others were weak? They fed me! You may have learned about me, but did you learn about those that tried and died already? Did you learn how those who tried failed? Or did you think only of yourself, your own powers, like they did before you, and discount them all? The doctor was a brave one, and the prince had old blood. Callasan sent warriors who rejoiced in his name! It takes more than will, Elegy. I am the master of will! Who are you?"

She said nothing to echo back through the hallway.

"The Padishar '43!" he yelled and finally went silent.

Elegy froze and examined the bottle in her hand. Her eyes were wide as his, and her breathing tried to race. She forced herself still.

"You've been here many times," she thought. "You've seen the bottle. There's no way you could smell the vintage through the garlic," but from the doorway his voice whispered, "Are you sure?"

Elegy washed, cleaned, and left.

The first lamp died by midnight. It was one of the foyer lamps and caught the strong crosswind from the door. It burned quicker and brighter than the others, expending the reservoir fast on a thick wick. With it gone only two lit the doorway. They were out within an hour. The Baron tested the door, found it weak, and found the embroidery tucked above the mantle. He broke it and threw the fragments to the frost. Ice crept to the doorway and stopped, refusing to come beyond even when the Baron put a foot over the threshold.

Oman sniffed and frowned. The shadows cast by the garlic light were dark as those outside but flat. He explored one with his fingertips and found nothing. The moon hurtled overhead. Another lamp went out as the lights of sitting room dimmed, and the frost still refused to chase after his feet.

The Baron stepped tick-tock of silvered toe and heel into Meherengil.

In the dead shadows Elegy opened her eyes and drew knives. She stood in a dim ballroom, lit by once eight gold sconces that were now only two flickering pools, wan and arranged to cast deep shadows. Lovers might hide in them. Instead there was Elegy, and the soft rap of Baron Oman's footsteps echoed through the preternatural silence of the manor, heading towards the stairway that lead to Lady Meher's bedroom.

She stepped out of the curtains and listened. Other than the distant footsteps, the lamps hissed and bubbled. The reservoirs were empty, and all the oil was already in the wicks. Soon they would give up the light and cast no shadows. The slim woman stalked the length of the ballroom, ghosted through a dining area to the bar, and let her head ease around the corner into the tea room.

Nothing burned here. All the lanterns were out, and those outside cast only faint shadows through the doorways to be caught on the crystal. It was the crystal that made it so dark. They stole rainbows from the tiniest hints of light and put texture on the pitch dark. They showed her how dark the room was. Oman's footsteps clicked, clicked, clicked, towards the stairs near the far doorway, and Elegy would emerge just behind him. Her footsteps were quieter than the dark, for it was so intense it hummed like a high pitched whine.

She faded out of the deeper darkness, a dark girl without outlines, only a face and teeth, and Oman put his first foot on the stairway. He was beside a mirror he cast no reflection in. She looked through him, saw the almost nothingness of herself, and two burning red eyes in the dark. Lady Meher was awake, behind her, seeing with eyes of blood.

The beautiful thrall lunged at her, and Elegy fled again, throwing herself back through the dining room. Meher's fingers slashed. Oman cackled. Elegy ran, and Meher dashed after in felt slippers, around the corner, into the ballroom, and then into the great hall of shadows. A dozen statues of men and women stood in marble. Meher dashed in and froze, searching.

These statues were new to the house, having been ordered during Winternacht after Oman had appeared the first time. Before Meher's father had died, he would never have allowed them. Each was a man and usually a woman, sometimes two, sometimes another man or some less common coupling, locked in grim-faced passion. They rutted like it hurt. But they were human, white and black, and wrapped in the flat shadows of the garlic-fires from the ballroom outside. Those shadows guttered and danced, and the statues seemed to move. Meher paused uncertainly, and giggling Oman walked in behind her.

"You drugged her? Fool! She slept like the dead, and I am what I am!" yelled Oman into the darkness as Meher came to him. He reached out one arm, and she eased under it, bedclothes pulling tight between her hips as she laid against him. The Baron laughed delightedly. She opened her neck.

In the moment before he bit her, Oman paused, and looked out at the shadows. They moved. Many of them twitched, for the lights were almost dead, but the statues were still while the shadows danced behind.

Oman wrapped a thin hand around Meher's waist and traced her from thigh to throat. She was soft and supple. But the shadows moved, and Oman could not determine exactly which was which.

"Lover," whispered Meher, a loud whisper for so silent a house. The frost walled them in, and Oman stopped talking, he did not hear anything but his lover's heartbeat.

He glanced from side to side. Not a sound but Meher's heartbeat, a familiar drum. He craned his neck, opened wide, showed his elegant, pointed teeth, and heard nothing but Meher's heartbeat. Yet the shadows moved.

There were three doors and many windows. The latter were covered in impenetrable ice, while the two far doors were shut. Those were old doors that rarely opened. With the servants gone and Meher given to the flesh and not the oiling of hinges, those doors wouldn't open easily. They certainly wouldn't open silently. Thus only the way they had come in, the door Oman was standing in now, would allow someone to pass. The chimneys would be frozen closed even if the cold wouldn't come down through the fire places. There was no way out, and Baron Oman heard nothing but the sound of Meher's heartbeat, the heave of her breathing as leaned against him.

Oman looked right, left, up, and down. He glanced at the ceiling. It was alive with movement. The floor was never walked on, still polished, and the guttering lamps cast shadows upwards. By the chandelier a man took a woman from behind. By the frozen skylights two pleased themselves together. A woman's silhouette stood alone, and he snapped his eyes down, but it was only a stone maiden wrapped in her lover's blankets. The hard marble man was creeping up on her from behind.

"Lover," whispered Meher again and offered her neck.

"Lover," echoed the darkness, and Oman couldn't quite figure out where it came from.

The vampire retreated into the light and took Meher with him.

There were eyes in the dark, many of them, and Oman recalled how Elegy had had white, cloudy eyes when he'd born his will against her in the doorway. She had perfectly white eyes, white as his were red. White as milk. White as marble.

"Who are you, Elegy?" he asked and pulled Meher close.

"Lover," whispered the hall of statues.

The Baron glanced around quickly, seeing the lanterns were almost gone. These didn't wear glass shells like those in the foyer. The Baron blew two kisses, and both lamps died. Then the ballroom was totally dark, and Oman faded. Meher lay down and did not move, and one by one the other lamps of the house went dark.

"Lover," whispered a statue in the kitchen.

The frost pushed against the threshold of the door but did not enter.

"Lover," whispered a man in the bedroom.

"Lover," whispered the Baron in the cellar.

"Lover," whined Meher in her sleep on the floor, and there was a dribble, drop, drop, drop of liquid into a glass. It was slow and rhythmic, like a pulse.

"No," gasped the Baron.

"My dear, you ridiculed me for thinking I was different than the doctor Rashak, and the prince, a doctor himself. Did you never think yourself how I might be different from them?" whispered a statue from the ballroom, but the house was so still her voice was everywhere. "Did you never think what I would be willing to do that they didn't?"

Red eyes opened in the ballroom, but it was full of statues. Man and women pressed and writhed, crafted with such skill that they seemed to move. If the eye left them for a moment, they might move. Hard fingers buried into soft hips, all of marble, as lips kissed and bit. Meher lay at the center of a stone orgy.

The red eyes closed, and Meher gasped in her sleep. No footsteps retreated to the front doorway.

Outside the stars cast shadows on the lawn, deep, rich shadows unlike the flat things that were left in the house from the sinking of the lanterns. Those would only last until dawn, and then sunshine would cast new ones. Outside the stars cast shadows from the deep voids of space. The Baron stepped out of darkness and tick-tocked to the front door. Two fast steps and he reached the threshold, and it burned. Outside, over the mantle, someone had stuck a bit of patched together embroidery, "Baron Oman, you are forbidden to pass this door," over the mantle, facing out. His hands burned. He reached to break the warding, but a shadow hissed "Lover."

She cut his wrists, his heels, and his neck, and Oman gurgled as he fell. There was one vial of garlic oil left. Elogy doused the good Baron and burned him in the doorway.

The next morning, Doctor Vincent Valerius Rashak, noted vampire hunter, rode a wagon up a winding valley road behind the Hollicar Drommon, noting it ominously resembled a man wearing a dark cloak. He passed a woman driving a metal carriage, and though he called, she wouldn't stop. She was shrouded in fabric without a bit of skin showing, and with her head down and the horse pulling hard, her carriage thundered past him like a blind panic. There was a bundle like a corpse on the bench beside the driver.

Dr Rashak scowled and rode even faster up the valley towards Meherengil.

Once around a corner, Elogy calmed the horses and set them to a ground eating trot. They wove east, deeper into the Doon mountains towards the higher, inner range of the Jaggerfall. Sometime around noon Lady Meher woke up with a punishing hangover. Elogy gave her some water.

"Where are we?" Lady Meher asked.

Elogy looked over. Lady Meher had more color than before and a freckle. She was still almost perfect.

"East of Meherengil. That's not a good place to stay," said Elogy.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to see my boss."

Meher didn't seem bothered by the stilted replies. She seemed bothered by their movement and horribly inconvenienced by the sun.

"Who's your boss?"

"I can't give you a name. I don't know his," admitted Elogy. "But he wears a lot of yellow."