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# THE EVIL EYE

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## THE STORY SO FAR

The sunrise over the city of Tarnach is a beautiful array of warm, bright colors, but such things never gave you pleasure. Certainly not on a morning such as this, with tragedy and injustice in the recent past, and conflict to come in the near future. It's not that you are an inherently dour man, it's just that you prefer beauties of a more solid and tangible nature. Like Annalisa. Annalisa, with her soft skin and vibrant laughter. Annalisa, who smells of peaches and tastes of honey. Annalisa, kidnapped from your home last night by a man who, if you have anything to say about it, will not live to see the next sunrise.

Absent-mindedly, you twist and turn the small, simple gold ring on your finger, the symbol of your mutual devotion to your wife. Twenty years it's been. Twenty years since the two of you traded in the open road for marriage and a townhouse in the capital city. Twenty years since you stopped being Cally the sellsword and reclaimed your birth name, Calvus Farrang. You've never regretted it. Annalisa needed to take a break from travelling, and she found that the life of a court mage was much more amenable to her than the hard bedrolls and stale bread that went with an adventuring career. You, too, found work with the royal court. King Joachim had need of someone who could blend in with crowds, look harmless, and listen with keen ears. Calvus Farrang was the man for the job. Hardly a month goes by when the information you bring him doesn't help defuse some major or minor crisis. Your sword-arm doesn't get as much exercise as it used to, but you like it that way -- battle is always so uncertain, always such a roll of the dice. Nevertheless, you have kept both sword and arm in the best repair you could. And this is fortunate. You will have use of both before the day is done.

From outside, a voice calls for you. Your son, Merrick. A grown man -- he will be twenty in two months' time -- he is making his own way in the world, but has not forgotten his parents. He shares a meal with you every other day. Today is breakfast. You call for him to enter and he pushes open the door, tramping lightly but loudly upon the floorboards: the stride of a young man with a bright attitude and confidence in his future. Despite the dire situation, you can't help but smile. When he was a child, Merrick wanted to be like you; travelling the world seeking adventure and excitement. But you saw that he was educated instead, brought up to a better life than his parents had. Today he works for the king as an import clerk. A menial job, but an important one. Barring usurp of the throne, he would have a peaceful and secure life, and grow into a cheerful old man. The road would have killed his optimism, the same way it did yours.

Immediately upon entering, he senses something wrong. A quick glance around the sitting-room confirms his impression. "Where's mother?"

Not bothering to meet his eyes, you gesture casually to the parchment sitting on the table. He picks it up and his voice trembles as he reads it aloud. "We have your wife. She is unharmed, and will remain so as long as you follow these directions. The king is going to ask you to look into the Ruthgart affair. You will agree to investigate, and convince him that Duke Verdigan is responsible. In the meantime, you will explain your wife's absence as a serious illness that has her bedridden. When the matter is resolved in our favor, your wife will be released. Cross us and you can plan for a reunion in the underworld." Merrick steadies himself against a chair. He is used to court intrigues, but not of this caliber. "Who did this?" he asks.

"Is it signed?" you reply.

"No."

"Well then, I guess it's a mystery, isn't it?" You chuckle mirthlessly. "It doesn't matter. I already know. Not everything, but enough. It's Duke Barrington."

"Wait a minute, father. Ruthgart? As in Baron Ruthgart? I thought his death was a suicide."

"It looked like one, certainly, but that was a little too convenient, and I've been looking into it for the king. This letter confirms my suspicions. The three of them -- Ruthgart, Barrington, and Verdigan -- control roughly four-fifths of the kingdom's northwest province between them. Ruthgart had no heir, so his lands go to auction. Verdigan has two sons, but if he's convicted of murder for profit, his

holdings are forfeit and also go to auction. With the right political manoeuvring, Barrington stands to triple his wealth."

"But what does mother have to do with all this?"

"This isn't about your mother, Merrick, it's about me. My job is a secret from the masses, but well-known among the nobility. Barrington knows that I'll turn up the truth sooner or later, but by holding your mother hostage he hopes that he'll be able to make me his accomplice. The king trusts my judgment implicitly. If I tell him it's Verdigan, he'll believe me, and once that lie is set into the court records, revealing the truth will have me brought up for treason and perjury. Barrington aims to frame Verdigan and neutralize the threat I pose at the same time."

Merrick speaks through clenched teeth as he crumples the parchment in his hand. "The villain! We should tell the king about this, Barrington must be brought to-"

"No!" you yell sharply. "Think this through, son. Yes, we have to get Barrington, but we have to find your mother first. If Barrington decides to cut his losses and get out, he might decide that she's a liability he can't afford."

"Then what do we do?"

You think for a minute before answering. "Go to the king. Show him that letter, remind him of the work I have done keeping his kingship secure for so many years, and tell him to arrest Barrington. He must do it secretly. Nobody must know that Barrington has been imprisoned, nor must he be allowed to send any messages to anyone. If word gets out, Annalisa's life is in danger." You rise from your seat, a steely determination written on your face. "In the meantime, I'm going to find your mother."

"Are you sure, father? If Barrington already murdered Baron Ruthgart..."

"Then he's dangerous. But he is not infallible, and more than that, he is not intangible. He'll leave a trail, and if anyone can dig that trail up, it's me. I'll meet you at the castle as soon as you're mother's safe. We will both need to give testimony, and you may be called to as well."

With the calm, practiced slowness of many years, you make your way towards the back room of the house, towards the secret closet that holds your street clothes. Halfway to the kitchen, your son's hand grasps you by the shoulder. "Let me help you, father."

You shrug off Merrick's hold. "I am not so old and infirm that I cannot still get around my own house, boy! Nor do I need your help to raise my sword. I will rescue your mother, and I will make the man who took her pay! You just do your part."

"I know. Just...", he trails off.

"Just what, Merrick?"

He sighs. "Just be careful, father."

You smile. "Don't worry, son. Calvus Farrang has some fight left in him yet."

## HOW TO PLAY

*The Evil Eye* is a gamebook using the traditional *Fighting Fantasy* rules. You will have three statistics: SKILL, STAMINA, and LUCK, which will be tested at various points in the story. They will rise and fall, but can never rise above their initial value, and the initial value cannot rise above the absolute maximum.

SKILL represents your fighting prowess and physical fitness. The absolute maximum value of your SKILL is 12. When ordered to test your SKILL, roll two dice. If the result of the die roll is less than your SKILL value, you pass. Otherwise, you fail.

STAMINA is a measure of your constitution, endurance, and "hit points". It will probably rise and fall the most over the course of your adventure. If your STAMINA ever reaches zero, you are dead and the story is over immediately. When ordered to test your STAMINA, roll four dice. If the result of the die roll is less than your STAMINA value, you pass. The absolute maximum value of your STAMINA is 24

LUCK is, reasonably enough, a measure of how lucky you are. The absolute maximum value of your LUCK is 12. When ordered to test your LUCK, roll two dice. If the result is less than your LUCK value, you pass. After testing your LUCK, you must deduct one point from your LUCK score, regardless of whether or not you succeed. You can't get lucky all the time. (You can be smart every day, though.)

**Unlike some gamebooks**, your statistics will not be determined by die rolls. Instead, you start off with 8 SKILL, 16 STAMINA, and 8 LUCK. Before starting the book, you may distribute 6 extra points among these stats as you see fit, although no stat may be raised above its absolute maximum. Points put into STAMINA count double. (So, for example, two points put into LUCK will raise it to 10, but two points put into STAMINA will raise it to 20.)

Your character sheet (see below) will help you to keep track of your statistics over the course of your adventure. It will also allow you to keep track of items and clues you have collected.

Combat is conducted as per the usual *Fighting Fantasy* mold: For each combatant, roll two dice and add their SKILL. Whoever rolls the lower total loses 2 STAMINA. Repeat until one combatant reaches zero STAMINA, at which point he loses.

When you are ready, turn to 1 to begin your adventure!

## CHARACTER SHEET

NAME: Caldus Farrang

SKILL: \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ (current/initial)

STAMINA: \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ (current/ initial)

LUCK: \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ (current/initial)

INVENTORY:

CLUES:

## 1

The secret underground tunnel from your townhouse is pitch black, but with practice, experience, and good memory, a path can be walked just as easily in darkness as in light. Although age is starting to slow you down, you nevertheless move swiftly along the stone corridor, knowing the various twists and turns like the back of your hand.

Finally, you reach the short stone staircase leading to the old, splintery wood door at the end. Pressing your ear up against the door, you listen carefully for any sign of life on the other side. Hearing nothing, you release the catch and inch the door open ever so slightly. Not far enough that anyone could see out or in, but enough that you can listen better. You hear the bustle of the city streets some ways distant, but that is all. Satisfied, you quickly duck through the door and close it behind you. The other side of the door is plaster and paint done up to resemble a red brick wall. It lies at the end of a curved alley between several merchant and tradesmen's buildings near the city square, completely out of sight from the main road. The perfect place to conceal a secret door.

As the door swings shut behind you and the latch clicks back into place, you right your street clothes and get into character. You have traded in your town clothes for rough wool and a heavy cloak, plus a walking stick and broad-brimmed hat. The latter casts a persistent shadow over your eyes, concealing them from view and making you a hard person to read. You look like the kind of man the city folk would ignore or turn away from in revulsion; a drunk, a transient, or perhaps a blind old beggar. Easy for them to pay you no regard. Easy for you to be a fly on the wall. But with your sword concealed safely within the folds of your cloak, any cutpurses who take you for an easy mark are in for a surprise.

You quickly review the facts of the case. Barrington is not likely to have gotten his hands dirty. More than likely, he hired someone to do the dirty work for him. You remember being awakened last night by her calling for you and the sounds of a struggle downstairs, which means the actual break-in must have been silent. You're not sure how Barrington's agent could have subdued her. You consider for a moment that she may have been in on it, but the idea is preposterous. Perhaps twenty years of the sedentary life of a court mage has dulled Annalisa's reflexes -- being able to command the flow of ether doesn't mean someone can't get the drop on you.

You can think of two people who might know something about this. One is Struckald, a wealthy merchant who deals in art, curiosities, and -- unofficially -- information. He has a network of spies even more extensive than the king's, one which reaches into both the estates of the nobles and the depths of the gutter. And he owes you a favor. The other is Westing, Annalisa's young apprentice. The third son of a minor noble looking to make his own way in the world, he cleans house and does various odd jobs and errands in exchange for his lessons. This means he has the key to your house and, much as you hate to admit it, that's probably how the kidnapper got in. He hasn't shown up for his lessons in a few days, suggesting that he's involved somehow.

Of course, you can always gather information the old-fashioned way; roam the marketplace and streets of the city and see who's talking. It's a bit of a gamble to find information on a specific subject this way, but it's the way you've done your job ever since settling down, and you're good at it.

If you wish to visit Struckald, turn to **82**

If you'd rather confront Westing, turn to **63**

Or, you can spy on the people roaming the city streets by turning to **8**

## 2

"C... Calvus?"

You place the tip of your sword at his neck. "Where's Annalisa?"

"Peace, Calvus! I don't know where..."

"I know that you helped kidnap her, Westing! Why else would you barricade yourself in here, if not because you had something to hide? Talk!"

"Peace! Peace! I'm sorry, Calvus! I admit I gave them my key, but..."

"And what did they offer you in return? Money? Land? A cushy new position in Barrington's employ?"

"Nothing! They forced me into it, I swear!"

You sigh heavily, forcing yourself to calm down. Westing is even younger than Merrick; just a boy. A small, scared boy who's in way over his head. Idly, you trace your fingers over the object in your hand. It is a small round stone with runic writing on it that you recognize. "Is this a thunderstone?"

"Um... yes, yes it is. My... my best work to date." Despite the situation, there is a bit of pride in his voice.

"Idiot! You planned to use it in an enclosed room like this with no cover? You'd have been lucky not to blow yourself up!"

"I... I've been under a lot of stress lately, Calvus. I guess I'm not thinking clearly."

You purse your lips in annoyance and slip the thunderstone into your pocket (Mark it on your Character Sheet). This kid will just get himself killed with it.

"Talk, Westing. Start from the beginning."

Turn to **46**

### 3

Hearing the commotion, Dalamir storms in from the main room. "What the hell is going on back here?!"

He stops short as he takes in the sight of Black Freddy lying face-down on the floor, unconscious.

"It turns out the filthy half-ogre had a brain in his head, after all," Georgina quips.

Wasting no time, you search Black Freddy's body for anything that might be a clue to Annalisa's whereabouts. You find nothing of interest, but he has a pin on his shirt that is unusual. It's a small pewter pin carved in the shape of a snake with a glass orb in its mouth. You run your fingers along the carvings delicately -- though the materials are cheap, it is rather fine craftsmanship for a street thug to be carrying around. (Add this Serpent Insignia to the inventory section of your Character Sheet.)

"What shall we do with him?" Dalamir asks. "Truss him up and send for the guard?"

"Truss him up," you answer, "but do not call the guard. This matter is very, very sensitive. Lock him in the cellar instead. I'll send the guard around to collect him tonight." You stand. "I must continue my investigation elsewhere. Thank you both for your help. Miss Georgina, I am terribly sorry for having put you in danger."

Georgina scoffs dismissively. "Nothing to apologize for. This one isn't man enough to deal with a woman like me."

Smiling at that, you exit.

Record the number 27 on the clues section of your character sheet. Add this number to any other clues you have and turn to the indicated section.

### 4

"Enough with the games, old friend," you say. "We both know that you have information that I need, and if you're smart you also know that I have the king's ear on many things. You have to stick to your code of good business. I respect that. But think for a minute. I already know Barrington is involved, and what I know, his majesty knows. One way or another, Barrington won't be giving you any more business. Do you really want to alienate me over a matter worth so little to you?"

Struckald's chair creaks as he leans back, pondering the issue.

Test your LUCK

If you pass, turn to **32**

If not, turn to **68**

5

Regrettably, your strength is not quite enough. The statue rolls down the corridor, beset on all sides by lightning bolts, but halfway down it loses momentum and slows until it tips over. Cursing, you dash down the hallway, sprinting through the last few traps and just barely avoiding their payloads before reaching the master bedroom and colliding awkwardly with the doorjamb.

The delay has given Westing time to prepare. You hear his voice frantically yelling some magical syllables. A small object clatters to the floor and you hear a high-pitched whining noise. You recognize it immediately as the sound of a magical runestone designed to function like a bomb.

Test your SKILL.

If you pass, turn to **71**

If you fail, turn to **81**

6

This is not your day. The crowd has been spooked by the arrow, and the blood leaking from your shoulder only worsens their panic. By the time you make it across the street, the assassin has vanished into a long, winding alleyway. Nevertheless, you persevere, following the sound of his frantic footsteps.

Test your STAMINA

If you pass, turn to **35**

If you fail, turn to **20**

7

The wall of the townhouse is made of brick and mortar, so the gaps provide crude handholds. The climb is still tricky, though. You have to move fast enough that you won't be seen, yet careful enough that you don't fall.

Test your SKILL to see if you make it.

If you pass, turn to **60**

If not, turn to **29**

8

You spend some time wandering the main thoroughfares of the city, stopping in at various taverns. All of the bartenders know you, although most know you by an alias. Few know your job, but you imagine astute barmen can guess that a man who orders an ale, sits drinking it for half an hour, and then pays for it and leaves with his mug still half-full is more interested in the conversations taking place around them.

It's cliché, you know, but that's because it works. People who are habitually up to no good need cheap vices, and drink loosens their lips. Sometimes you converse, to coax a particular bit of information from someone, but more often you just listen. Keen ears, developed over a lifetime of listening to everything, ensure you can pick out the main points of three different conversations halfway across the room in different directions at once. All you have to do is sit there, concentrate, and lose yourself in other people's problems.

When you have nothing better to do, you can spend a whole day moving from bar to bar, often



uncovering problems the king doesn't even know he has yet. Today, however, you are impatient, so you move on every thirty minutes or so. Word of Annalisa's kidnapping should not have gotten out to the public, which is good; otherwise rumors would be flying, and finding reliable information would be difficult. But it also means that tracking her down will be hard.

You've been to four different taverns and are about to give up when you strike pay dirt. It is in the Angry Mule, a small establishment catering to the city's rough-but-honest working class. The owner is a fair and respectable sort named Dalamir, known for running a clean business. Nevertheless, the place is sometimes frequented by the city's criminal element. Dalamir permits it so long as their coins are real, but he makes it known that he won't hesitate to call the guards on someone who gives his place a bad reputation. He owes you for clearing his name in an uncomfortable matter several years ago, and so always keeps a stool open at the end of the bar. From that seat you can listen in on the entire room, including the far corner where the seedier patrons gather to converse in silence. You pick up a pair of them talking:

"...get some action, there, maybe?"

"What are you, stupid? The way she carries herself, she's got to be a noblewoman. If she's got a scratch on her when she goes back, the whole city will be calling for my head!"

"Might be worth it, though. Can you imagine laying a noblewoman? Probably got some prissy little dandy of a husband and never had a real man her whole life." A lecherous chuckle follows.

"You're dreaming, friend. This new guy we're working for, he'd never stand for it. Besides, this girl wouldn't be any fun. She's all wrinkly and grey."

"Probably fight it like an alley-cat, though."

"Gods above, man! If I ever have children, remind me to geld you as a precaution. Fighting a woman for it is neither fun nor worth the risk. What's wrong with you?"

"Hey, you asked me if I knew where you could get any."

"And I should have listened to the little voice in my head telling me that was a bad idea."

"Heh. Why'd you snatch her, anyway?"

"Wasn't me. The new guy did it; he's just using our place to keep her locked up."

"What for? Ransom?"

"Leverage', he said. Noblemen and their stupid schemes, who can figure?"

The dialog would turn your stomach even if they weren't talking about Annalisa. As it is, it leaves your blood boiling.

If you wish to confront the speaker immediately, turn to **83**

If you'd rather wait until he leaves and accost him in the street, turn to **49**

Alternatively, you can work with Dalamir to waylay him by turning to **70**

**9**

You maneuver carefully through the dark, unaware of whether or not Westing has set any traps.

Test your LUCK

If you pass, turn to **73**

If not, turn to **84**

**10**

Your final blow sends Black Freddy reeling into a wall, where he cracks his head. He drops limply to the ground, thudding like a sack of potatoes.

Victory is yours, but a hollow victory. With Freddy knocked out, you are unable to question him further on Annalisa's whereabouts. You quickly search through his body, finding little of interest. He

is, however, wearing something unusual on his shirt: a pewter pin in the shape of a snake with a glass ball in its mouth. It's an unusual adornment for a street thug, so you pocket it, sure that it means something. (Mark it on your Character Sheet as a Serpent Insignia.)

This area is a very bad part of town. Fearing that someone will see you and call the guards (or, worse, a neighborhood vigilance gang), you leave quickly. While this hasn't been as illuminating a venture as you hoped, you still managed to gather some useful intel.

Write the number 27 on the Clues section of your Character Sheet. Add this number to any other clues you may have and turn to the indicated section.

## 11

Westing avoids your charge, but trips and falls. The object he holds in his hand clatters to the ground and you hear a high-pitched whine. You recognize it immediately as the sound of a magical runestone designed to function like a bomb. Quickly, you dive away from the noise, then duck and cover your head with your hands. The room explodes with the sound of lightning as electrical bolts fly everywhere, burning the air. You take several direct hits.

Lose 6 STAMINA and 1 SKILL. If you are still alive, turn to **57**

## 12

Shortly before dusk, you return to the warehouse. The guardsmen are massing in secret a few blocks away, awaiting your signal. All that remains is for you to get in and release Annalisa. Tarnach's warehouses tend to be large windowless affairs, so the only real entrance is through the front door. You have to bluff your way in.

If you have a Serpent Insignia, turn to **39**

If not, turn to **74**

## 13

Twenty minutes later, you are kneeling cramped in an empty cupboard in the back room of Dalamir's, eavesdropping on an animated conversation between Black Freddy and Dalamir's barmaid, Georgina. Georgina is a vivacious woman, and exceedingly clever. She is well acquainted with the practice of flirting with men to coax them into buying more drinks... or, on rare occasions, to gather information for the bits of skullduggery a tavern can become embroiled in. You listen in as she gets Freddy to tell her about his misspent youth, the travails of working for a smuggling gang, and so forth, all the time plying him for more with her feminine wiles and Dalamir's ale. After nearly an hour, she works the conversation around to what you want to know.

"So, where is it you work exactly?"

"Ah, it's boring," he responds. "You wouldn't want to come there."

"Well, I don't know. Maybe I might want to pay you a visit some time?"

He chuckles. "Well, you can visit my flat if you want. It's down by the wharf..." he gives her directions.

"Well, I'd certainly love to see it, but what if you're not there when I'd like to see you? I'm an impulsive woman, you know. I don't like to be kept waiting." You can just imagine the pouty lips and alluring stroke of his arm that accompanies that one.

"Ah, you wouldn't want to meet my co-workers. They're bad news."

"Aren't you?"

"Yes. Which is why I'm keeping you to myself."

Georgina laughs with him. Then she adds, "Seriously, where do you work?"

A misstep. It's way too obvious. You can clearly hear the suspicion in Black Freddy's voice as he answers. "You ask a lot of questions."

"I'm interested in you. I want to know everything about you."

A chair creaks. Black Freddy, leaning in? "You want to know something, I think, but I don't think it has anything to do with me. Come to think of it, isn't that still your first mug?"

A hint of nervousness is in Georgina's voice as she answers. "Oh, it's at least my third. Maybe you weren't watching when I refilled?"

"Bullshit. What's your game, wench?"

"Freddy... can't you figure it out? The only thing I'm playing for is your heart."

"My mother's ass! What are you up to?!"

"Freddy, let go of my hand." Georgina's voice is even, but the tinge of fear is readily apparent. You curse under your breath.

"Tell me, bitch!"

"You're hurting me."

Test your SKILL

If you pass, turn to **30**

If not, turn to **53**

#### 14

Outside, Dalamir is livid. "What in the name of seventy-seven hells is wrong with you, James!" he screams, calling you by your generic alias.

"He has information that I need."

"Well, you're not getting it now, are you? He'll be out for hours, and when he comes to his brains will be more scrambled than a plate of eggs early in the morning! Heaven and hell, James, I never thought I'd be reminding you that I don't permit rough stuff in here!"

"Your patrons seemed disappointed it didn't last longer."

He scoffs and starts to walk back inside, but you catch his arm. "Dalamir, wait. I'm sorry for the commotion, but this is personal. That man has information I need."

He tries to shrug off your grip, but you hold fast.

"Listen, I pulled you out of a bind a while ago, right?"

"Yes," Dalamir answers, "you saved my business. And now you've gone and ruined it all over again."

"All taverns have bar fights on occasion. It's not going to keep anyone away. Listen to me, Dalamir. That man is involved in the kidnapping of someone very close to me. I need to know where she is and who's keeping her there."

"I don't get involved with the affairs of my customers, except as necessary to protect my business."

"But if that man is a regular, you'll have overheard something about him."

Dalamir does not respond.

"Please, old friend. My wife is in grave danger."

Dalamir curses under his breath. "Take this information and don't come back. The man's name is Black Freddy. He's a smuggler, and he runs with the Redhands. Or he used to run with the Redhands, his continued employ with them might depend on whether or not he's in command of his senses when he wakes up. That's all I know. Now get lost!"

He marches back inside, leaving you alone. You had hoped to gather more concrete information here, but it will have to do.

Write the number 27 on your Character Sheet in the clues section. Add to it any other clues you have and turn to the indicated section.

**15**

The assassin may have a head start, but you are fit enough and experienced enough to close the gap. He must see the futility of escaping, because he stops dead in his tracks and speak a magical incantation, which is followed by a whooshing sound. Your jaw nearly drops in surprise. That spell is one you recognize. It's a rune-spell Annalisa casts from a bracelet on her wrist. A bracelet which, you suspect, rests around the arm of whoever this is.

Little does he know that it won't affect you. Without slackening your pace, you draw your sword and charge onwards. Now it's his turn to be surprised, and he clumsily draws a dagger to engage you up close.

ASSASSIN

SKILL: 6

STAMINA: 6

If you win, turn to **87**

**16**

Struckald's information is valuable, but not so much as you hoped. On the one hand, you now have some idea of what you're up against; a professional assassin backed up by some hired muscle, with Duke Barrington pulling the strings behind it all. Barrington should be taken care of, but Annalisa is most likely with Vincent. Barrington wouldn't risk keeping a kidnap victim on his estate.

So, to resolve this mess, you will have to find Vincent. The question is, where? Struckald said he was using the safe house of some local thugs. But which one, and where?

Too many questions. You still have a full day's work ahead of you. Choose your next line of inquiry:

To speak with Westing, Annalisa's apprentice, turn to **63**

To search the streets and taverns of the city for information, turn to **8**

**17**

You manage to tackle Westing before he can finish his spell. Pinning him to the ground, you grab at his wrists. He is holding something in his right hand, which you twist free. It is small and oval-shaped -- probably his last line of defense.

Hoping he doesn't have any other magical tricks up his sleeve, you yank Westing to his feet and throw him roughly against the wall. Drawing your sword, you close in on him.

Turn to **2**

**18**

You are lucky. Most of the thugs in this room are either too drunk or too poorly-skilled to be a threat, even attacking en masse as they do. And they seriously underestimate your own skills. Within a few minutes, most of the riff-raff have either fallen or fled in disarray. Two of them, however, are skilled enough to provide a more substantial challenge.

PAIR OF THUGS

SKILL: 7

STAMINA: 12

If you win, turn to **55**

**19**

"This is my wife we're talking about, Struckald. Yes, I know, business is business, but business isn't everything, is it? Some treasures, they can't be put in vaults. Will you rob an old man of his great treasure for the sake of Barrington's gold? Do you really want a crime like that keeping you up at night?"

Struckald laughs again, this time with a trace of mockery in it. "You're getting sentimental in your old age, Caldus. You should know that I am a practical man above all else, and betraying my customers' confidences is marvelously bad business sense."

Turn to **68**

**20**

This is REALLY not your day. Between your injuries and the assassin's head start, you fail to catch him. You run the alleyway all the way to the end, only to find that the assassin has vanished, probably into some random building with an open door. You slow to a stop and steady yourself against a wall, breathing heavy. Frustrated, you stomp your foot on the ground. He's gotten away.

Turn to **45**

**21**

You hope Westing will find his way to the palace safely. While his betrayal still stings, if what he said is true he had no choice in the matter. Besides, his testimony might be useful when Barrington goes to trial.

Let the king handle Barrington, though. Right now you have to find Annalisa. Westing has given you an important clue: a warehouse by the wharf. But there are a lot of those at the Tarnach docks, and you can't just go breaking into each one. You have to narrow things down, not to mention gather more intelligence on this mysterious man Harold. Choose your next line of inquiry:

To talk with Struckald the information broker, turn to **82**

Or, to canvas the streets for information, turn to **8**

**22**

You are wandering through a crowded street when you hear the distinctive twang of a bowstring going off and instinctively duck. Just in time, as an arrow sails through the space just recently occupied by your head, embedding itself in the wall of a nearby building. A woman screams and the alarm is raised. Alerted to the assassin, you quickly determine the direction from which the arrow came and charge through the crowd after him.

Test your **LUCK**

If you pass, turn to **89**

If you fail, turn to **78**

**23**

Reeling from deflecting Black Freddie's last blow, you steady yourself for the next one. But it never comes. Instead, there is a sharp crack of wood splintering and Black Freddie drops to the floor, his huge frame limp yet heavy like a sack of potatoes. Ale pools on the floor by your feet, its smell heavy in the air. You step back, in shock.

"Georgina?" you ask.

"Right here," she says with the air of someone suffering fools less than gladly.

"Did you just...?"

"Break a half-full table cask of our best ale over his head? Yes, yes I did. What, you thought these thick arms of mine were just for pushing mops and carrying drinks?"

You have nothing to say to that.

Turn to 3

24

"I do remember," Struckald says. "You handled that situation very well. Of course, you do realize that in my business, the value of everything is negotiable. Even my favors."

"Indeed. Perhaps I would have been better off taking my payment in coin, as you suggested."

He laughs. "Now, now, Caldus. I gave you my word, and I assure you my word is worth as much as that of any businessman of my stature."

"Do I detect some self-deprecating humor there?"

"Well, of course I might have to consider if your request is going to derail any of my other business ventures, but it would be poor business indeed if I became known as someone who reneges on his promises. But out with it, man! What exactly do you need?"

"Information. Annalisa was kidnapped last night."

Struckald gasps. "Kidnapped?! Annalisa?"

You nod slowly.

Struckald mutters a curse, dumbfounded. "I am deeply sorry, my old friend. I swear, I know nothing about your wife's abduction. But I can promise you that if I learn anything at all, I will send a message immediately. How exactly does someone manage to abduct an archmage of such repute?"

"That's a mystery. I heard her scream and investigated, but by the time I got downstairs, she was gone. The front door was open and there was no sign of any struggle, which suggests she went willingly. But in that case, why the scream? It makes no sense, and I was hoping you might be able to shed some light on the situation."

Guardedly, Struckald replies, "I'm sorry friend, but I know nothing."

You frown. Struckald is lying; you can hear it in his voice.

If you want to accuse him of holding out of you, turn to 66

If you'd rather try to coax information out of him gently, turn to 38

25

To the thug's great surprise, you manage to catch his blade and stop it dead in midair. Stubbornly, he puts more force into it, hoping to break your grip and knock your sword away. You match his brawn until he's applying more force than you can bring to bear. Then, with a twist of your wrist, you release him and his mighty swing flies past you, knocking him off-balance. You capitalize swiftly by striking him in the temple with the pommel of your sword. He drops to the ground, dazed. A second blow, to the forehead, causes him to slump weakly onto his back, unconscious.

Just in time, as the Mule's bouncer tackles you from behind and you both fall atop the unconscious thug. As you struggle, your hand brushes something metallic on the thug's shirt. You quickly examine it with your fingers. It seems to be a small pin, made of pewter and shaped like a snake with a glass orb in its mouth. On instinct, you rip it from his shirt and conceal it in your hand. It could be the only clue to his identity and allegiance. (Mark it on your character sheet as a Serpent Insignia.) Dalamir is immediately in your face, berating you. Ordering his bouncer to drag the big thug into the back room, he grabs you by the arm and escorts you out, sword still in hand.

Turn to 14

**26**

While you see nothing at the upstairs landing, your other senses tell you volumes. You can feel the heat in the air, hear the soft buzzing hum of cloaked magical energies, and smell the sharp tang of ozone in the air. Rune-wards -- dozens of them -- are planted in the upstairs hallway, invisible to view. Westing may have skimmed on the ground floor, but he made up for it in spades on this corridor. There are enough traps here to make even the god of thieves wary. Paranoia, you wonder? Or simply an awareness of the fact that conspiring against Annalisa would make him powerful enemies?

Whatever the case, you are certain that Westing himself will be found at the other end of this corridor. The question is how to get there? It would be impossible to traverse it without setting anything off. There's a delay between the time a rune-ward is tripped and the time it goes off, suggesting you could just sprint down the hall. That would be a tall order, though.

You lean back against the wall to consider this problem and bump into a large statue you hadn't seen before. It is heavy, but wobbles somewhat. You could probably lift it.

Hmm...

You have an idea to get past the hallway, but it will require a lot of brawn. You're not entirely sure if you're up to it.

If you want to give it a try, turn to **58**

If you'd rather bank on speed to get you past, turn to **75**

**27**

Your investigation is not off to an especially good start, but you have gathered some useful clues. You now know that the Redhands were involved in Annalisa's kidnapping. Unfortunately, what you really need to know is where they are keeping her, and on that point you are still somewhat helpless. You wish you had been able to properly interrogate Black Freddy, but... well, what happens, happens.

Having spent nearly three hours eavesdropping in the taverns, you feel it is time to pursue more solid lines of inquiry. Choose one:

To talk with the information broker Struckald, turn to **82**

To speak to Westing, the apprentice mage, turn to **63**

**28**

Before the giant can even throw one punch, you have drawn the dagger you got from Struckald and plunged it deep into Tark's side. It's a lightning-quick move, and some of the onlookers gasp. Tark, however, doesn't even wince. He just laughs. "My father was an ogre, fool. You think a little kitchen-knife like that will hurt me?"

You don't bother to look. While Tark not even noticing a blow like that is worrying, it's not the dagger that he has to worry about; it's the sedative that it just discharged into his bloodstream. You step back, smiling. Thinking this will be an easy fight, Tark advances on you swinging his fists. You dodge and weave, waiting for the drug to do its work. It doesn't take long. Soon enough Tark's blows became slow, laborious. Tark himself also slows down. You hear Vincent cry out in surprise, recognizing his dagger. "How did you get that?" he bellows.

You don't answer, and a second later Tark collapses and doesn't get up.

Turn to **79**

29

Surprisingly, you manage to make it all the way to the window, but the window is stuck and wrenching it open while hanging on to the wall proves difficult. You put some muscle into it, and are rewarded as the window swings wide with a rusty creak.

Unfortunately, you put a little too much muscle into it. The sudden jerk of the window opening throws you off-balance. You lose your grip on the wall and wind up hanging awkwardly in midair from the now-open window. Cursing your luck, you hold on and try to maneuver toward the windowsill, but your hold gives out and you fall to the ground, landing hard on your knees and barely stifling a yelp of pain. (Lose 2 STAMINA.)

You rise to your feet and dust yourself off. You are not seriously hurt, but dare not try that again. Every minute that passes is another chance for some oblivious pedestrian to see you and raise the alarm. You decide to try the back door instead.

Turn to **65**

30

In a flash, you leap from the cupboard, knocking over the table and sending it flying into the air. Black Freddy curses and you swing a fist at his throat, hitting him in the chest. (He's bigger than you thought.) You draw your sword and swing at him, but the swing goes wide. He stumbles about, holding his liquor admirably but still a little too tipsy for his own good. He finds his weapon -- a big, spiked club -- and swings it at you full force, forcing you to dodge backward. You raise your sword just in time to catch his next blow.

Turn to **23**

31

The library is full of books and papers, but as you can't read a mage's writing, none of it is of use to you. However, you do find something interesting; a rope ladder is stashed under a small reading desk near the window. Westing must have had the idea of using the window as an escape route, if necessary.

A faint humming sound pricks at your ears as you search. At first you think it's your imagination, but when you focus you realize it is very, very real. It takes you a second longer to place it: the buzzing of cloaked runes. It's a very, very soft sound; most people wouldn't hear it, but your ears have always been sharper than most. Actually, even with your keen hearing, it's usually way too soft a sound for you. There would have to be several runes in the area for you to pick up the noise.

The noise seems to be coming from the hall. As you open the door, you are immediately thankful that you took the time to proceed with caution. Once the door is open you can hear that the buzzing is much more intense than you thought. Not only that, but you can smell the ozone in the air. Westing has turned the hallway leading to the master bedroom into a corridor of death, festooning the short span with dozens of cloaked runes. Something has got him in a panic.

If you remember correctly, the master bedroom is on the same side of the hallway as the library, but at the other end. From your knowledge of Westing's limited talents, you suspect that the corridor is a gauntlet. Running it will not be an easy task, but you're probably fast enough to pull it off. Probably.

If you want to chance it, turn to **75**

If you'd rather search the room more thoroughly, turn to **61**



## 32

Struckald sighs deeply. "Alright, old friend. You're right, Barrington did come to me for help, but I swear I had no idea he was going to kidnap your Anna."

"Then what did he tell you?"

"He claimed there was a hedge-wizard on his land causing trouble, and he suspected a rival lord had hired him for sabotage. He asked if I knew of anyone able to take an archmage into custody alive and unharmed."

"And did you?"

"I did." He rises from his creaking seat and pads over to a cabinet against the wall. He unlocks the cabinet and withdraws one of the items, tossing it lightly on to the desk. You reach out and pick it up. It is a small dagger in a smooth, undecorated scabbard. "A professional assassin who calls himself Vincent the Viper. He is well-known in the eastlands, but apparently became a little too well-known. He came to Tarnach a few months ago, and paid me to keep an ear out for any business that came his way. That dagger was supposed to serve as proof that I was his associate."

You run your hand up the hilt of the dagger. It seems to have been carved with a decorative pattern suggesting reptilian scales. At the pommel, it widens into a snake's head, which holds a small pewter orb. You recognize the design; it's an assassin's dagger. The orb is a reservoir that holds poison, and the act of stabbing someone with it trips a device that pours the liquid out of a hole in the tip, into the victim's bloodstream.

"Is this primed?" you ask.

"It is, but only with a sedative. Getting caught with one of those filled with actual poison might earn me a trip to the gallows."

"Hmm. And you arranged a meeting between this man Vincent and Duke Barrington?"

"Not directly. He didn't tell me where he could be found, you see. He said was that if anyone wanted to know about him, go to any tavern in the slums and post a message on their bulletin board saying 'Snake-charmer wanted', plus a contact name and address. He would be in touch within the week."

"I don't have a week to find him. You don't know where he is?"

"I do not. He is meticulously careful. The rumor is that one of the smuggler gangs is offering him protection in exchange for money and services."

"Which gang?"

"I don't know."

If you have a Serpent Insignia, turn to **42**

If not, turn to **52**

## 33

You plunge into a long, winding stone tunnel, dark but easily navigated by those who are used to living in shadows. This is the reason for the warehouse having a basement: a smuggler's tunnel. It leads out to a cove somewhere along the coast, one of several routes by which illegal goods are brought in to and out of the city. The Redhands don't just own the building; they built it, and have used the tunnel to move their goods into and out of the city for some time. Ahead of you, you hear Vincent yelling to someone, demanding that "the woman" be brought to him immediately. You quicken your pace, until finally you burst out of the confining corridor into a large cave, with fires crackling in the salty sea air. A familiar voice calls out your name. Annalisa. You rush toward her..

"Stay back!" Vincent bellows.

"Get your hands off me, you thug!" Annalisa protests.

"Stop squirming, bitch, or I'll cut you open!"

Defiant as always, Annalisa retorts: "You try it, and Caldus will cut you open!"

"If you're so concerned for me, then stop resisting!"

Annalisa is silent. The light in the cave is dim. There are other people here, but you are not sure

how many. For a moment you dread that this is the location of the big job you overheard the Redhands talking about earlier, but no; there's far too few for that.

"Alright, Mr. Farrang," Vincent says. "I suppose you are a little surprising, after all."

You hear the sound of swords being drawn. "We'll deal with this, Vincent," says an unfamiliar voice.

"Not yet," Vincent says. "I have something I want this stubborn old goat to hear first."

"The only thing anyone's going to hear is the sound of you screaming for mercy, Vincent," you boast. "Release my wife and I might let you go in peace."

You can practically hear the wicked smile in his voice. "Look me in the eye and say that, Caldus Farrang."

"Caldus, no!" Annalisa yells. But it's an act. A good act: even knowing her all these years, you can barely hear the bit of smirking amusement in her voice. Vincent and his men probably don't hear it at all. But it's there. She knows the same thing you do: Vincent is powerless against you. He has lost, and he doesn't even know it yet.

You raise the brim of your hat, exposing your eyes to his gaze. "Release my wife. And I might..."

You stop in midsentence. You don't know how Vincent's victims act, so you'll have to play by ear and hope he doesn't detect anything wrong. You stand bolt still, mouth hanging open, as if mesmerized. Vincent laughs.

"You see?" he says. "I have a few surprises of my own. Your wife discovered this one a little too late. It's too bad that she figured out how to resist it; mages sometimes do, after the first time. If she hadn't, I could have set the two of you against each other and had some fun. Still, I can do the next best thing, I suppose. Come here, Caldus Farrang."

"Caldus, look away!" Annalisa yells.

"Shut up!" Vincent bellows, practically right in her ear. "Caldus Farrang," he repeats, "come over here now!"

Slowly, playing your part as best you can, you walk across the cave. All the time, Annalisa is calling to you, begging you to stop, all the time carefully masking the true feelings in her voice. You advance step by step, until you are standing right in front of her and the cowardly assassin holding her from behind.

"Good dog," Vincent says. "Now, if you would be so kind, take your sword and cut the lady's throat."

You raise your blade, again with precise slowness. While Annalisa continues to yell, you place the blade against the side of her neck, pressing in almost enough to draw blood, but not quite.

"Yes, good boy," Vincent says. "Go on, kill her."

You take another step and push your blade forward, running it along Annalisa's neck, being painstakingly careful not to break the skin. Vincent chuckles a dark, hollow chuckle, savoring the moment with perverse glee. So enraptured in his own sadism, he doesn't notice how close your sword is until it pricks his ear.

You smile at him.

You strike swiftly and mercilessly, putting all your strength into one mighty blow not against Annalisa's throat, but Vincent's. You cleave right through both arteries and the windpipe. Shocked, he lets go of Annalisa and she wrenches herself away, covered in the spray of his blood. It's not a decapitation, nor is it an instant kill, but its close. He has less than a minute. Enough time for him to look into your eyes again and see just how full of surprises you are.

You've kept it secret all these years, ever since you were a child. You were lucky; while the affliction is in full force, the outward signs were not as pronounced as with some. But at this close distance, if one is perceptive, the signs can be seen. And in his last moments, Vincent the Viper sees them, and comprehends his fatal mistake, one that he never even considered. He sees the eyes of Caldus Farrang, which look back at him with disinterest and ignorance, the same way they have looked on everything since the day you were born.

"You're... blind!"

With those inglorious last words, gurgled nearly inaudibly through his ruined throat, Vincent the

Viper falls to the ground dead.

His comrades in crime, however, quickly recover from their stunned silence, and the sounds of swords being drawn echo through the cave. "Get them!" someone yells.

If you have Annalisa's Bracelet, turn to **59**

If not, turn to **72**

### 34

The assassin is obviously young, and his skills are no match for your years of experience on the city streets. You catch up and tackle him, causing you both to sail into the brick wall on a nearby house. You grapple, attempting to subdue him, but he is persistent in his resistance. He grabs at something his wrist and speaks a few words of magic, which are followed by a whooshing sound. The spell and the whoosh are both familiar to you: it's one of Annalisa's favorite combat tricks, which she casts from a bracelet with hidden runes. Fortunately, the reason it's one of Annalisa's favorites is that it doesn't work on you.

Enraged, you grab the assassin by the chin and smash him against the hard brick wall. He pulls a dagger and jabs at you with it. With a strength born of fury, you grab his hand, twist the blade away from him, and thrust it into his own chest. He dies in seconds, struggling to the last.

Turn to **87**

### 35

Despite the assassin's large head start, you are experienced and manage to keep him from lengthening his lead. Eventually, he realizes running is pointless and instead stops, deigning to make a stand. He speaks a magical incantation, which is followed by a whooshing sound. Your jaw nearly drops in surprise. That spell is one you recognize. It's a rune-spell Annalisa casts from a bracelet on her wrist. A bracelet which, you suspect, rests around the arm of whoever this is.

Little does he know that it won't affect you. Without slackening your pace, you draw your sword and charge onwards. Now it's his turn to be surprised. But he has enough of a lead to recover his senses before you reach him, and so raises a dagger to meet your charge.

ASSASSIN

SKILL: 8

STAMINA: 6

If you win, turn to **87**

### 36

You set the cart in motion and it flies down the corridor with the speed of a juggernaut. There are crackles and fizzes as thunderbolts go off all around it, and then a crash as it plows into the wall at the other end. Your plan is a success. Wasting no time, you make a mad dash down the now-secure hallway towards the master bedroom, grabbing the doorjamb to aid your turn as you swing inside.

Westing is indeed in the room, and your noisy approach has alerted him. Above the bedlam, you hear the sound of a chair clattering to the ground. Westing begins a magical incantation, but you tackle him before he can finish. Pinning him to the ground, you grab at his wrists. He is holding something in his right hand, which you twist free. It is small and oval-shaped -- probably his last line of defense.

Hoping he doesn't have any other magical tricks up his sleeve, you yank Westing to his feet and throw him roughly against the wall. Drawing your sword, you close in on him.

Turn to **2**

37

It is now past lunchtime, and as hurried as you are you can't sleuth on an empty stomach. You set out through the city streets, toward the marketplace, pondering what you already know. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that this man Harold whom Westing told you about is actually the assassin Struckald mentioned, Vincent the Viper. The other information matches up, as well. If Struckald is right about Vincent engaging the services of one of the local smuggling gangs, then a warehouse by the wharf makes a perfect hideout. Unfortunately, this is still far too much ground to cover, and you've now exhausted your only solid leads. You'll need to figure out which gang Vincent is working with, and-

Test your SKILL

If you pass, turn to **22**

If you fail, turn to **92**

38

"Nothing?" you say. "Well, that's unusual. You see, the villain left a letter, the contents of which lead me to suspect a certain nobleman was involved. Your knowledge of the city's goings-on being so extensive, he would naturally have come to you for help in planning a kidnapping. Now, probably he didn't say that you were helping him abduct my wife, but he would no doubt have needed your knowledge of the seedier elements of the city. Perhaps he needed to be put in touch with someone who had the skills to subdue an archmage without a noisy fight?"

You can practically smell the sweat off Struckald's brow. "Well," he replies, clearing his throat, "that's possible, certainly. I do often put nobles in touch with less... fashionable individuals. But that's just the thing, my friend. I do a lot of matchmaking of that sort. And I make it a point not to question my customers' requests. If I did introduce someone to someone with whom they could plan your wife's abduction, then..."

"Barrington," you say. "Duke Barrington. He's the one who was behind it."

"Barrington," says Struckald. "Well, I... that is to say, I may have worked with him, or I may not have, but if I did or if I didn't, in either case, it would certainly be bad business for me to divulge such information to the king's agent. My customers expect discretion, after all."

If you decide to sympathize with Struckald's concerns, turn to **80**

If you think you'd have better luck intimidating him, turn to **4**

39

The guards note your insignia and react confusedly. "You're not a Redhand."

"I'm a friend of Vincent's," you reply.

"He wasn't expecting any visitors."

"I wasn't expecting to have to visit. But complications happen. I have to speak to him immediately. Let me in."

"Uhh..."

"If you don't want to let me in, that's fine. I could always catch up with him later, after it's too late, and tell him about the incompetents who refused to let me see him when there was still time to set things right."

That seems to get their attention, and they allow you to pass. "Stairs to the left."

Smiling to yourself, you enter, find the stairs quickly, and head down.

Westing described this place as the common room of an inn. While there is no apparent bar and no music, it is a surprisingly apt description. The sound of mumbled conversations and dice games greets

you as you enter, and the smell of spilled ale hangs in the air. This is a hangout. Someplace where criminal ventures can be discussed freely. There is no sign of Annalisa. Before you can think of your next move, you bump into a very large, well-muscled man, with a bare chest.

"What are you doing here?" he demands.

"I'm here to see Vincent. I'm an old friend."

He grunts disapprovingly. "Too bad. Members only, get lost."

"You see this?" you say, pointing to the insignia on your chest. "Where do you think I got this, if not from Vincent?"

"Don't know. Don't care. Nobody sees Vincent without his say-so."

"He'll want to see me, I can promise you that."

"Actually, I don't", says a voice from behind him. "Although, I'm not averse to a little face-to-face chat."

Vincent the Viper is here. While you are confident that you will be immune to his powers, nevertheless you turn down the brim of your hat as a precaution. You cannot see his goatee, but you are aware of well-made boots and a sly, hissing voice not unlike a snake. A longsword swishes as he cuts through the air dramatically. "Well, well," he continues. "The esteemed Mr. Caldus Farrang. I've heard about you, although I didn't expect we'd meet."

"Where's Annalisa?" you ask.

Vincent laughs. "Oh, she's here. Not that you'll get to see her. You are resourceful, Mr. Farrang, to track me here. Resourceful, but foolish. You're surrounded in here. No chance to get out alive. You should have just agreed to my employer's demands."

"I'm not the kind of man who takes it lightly when you kidnap his wife."

"Respectable. But you should temper your devotion with some good sense. Do you really intend to fight through all of us to get to your lady? An old man like you? You're a good spy, so they say, but you won't last five seconds with Tark here, let alone the rest of us. And then I'll have no more use for the old woman."

"You might find us old men are full of surprises."

He laughs again. "Not that many surprises, friend. But why waste one's breath on the dead? Tark, if you please?"

The large man in front of you cracks his knuckles.

If you have an Assassin's Dagger, turn to **28**

If not, turn to **51**

#### 40

You duck into the alley beside the townhouse. You recall from a previous visit that the house has two potential entrances through this alley. The simple one is an unobtrusive side door which provides access through the pantry to the rest of the house. The less-simple entrance is a window above the door. It is small, but large enough to squeeze through if need be, and it has no lock. Westing's skills are reasonable, but focused on elemental magic, particularly lightning. A locking or barricade spell is beyond his abilities. The entrances should be relatively safe, then.

The door is simple, but also obvious. The window, however, requires first climbing the wall, then maneuvering inside. At one time, this would have been simple for you, but lack of practice will make it a challenge. If you can do it, though, you will have the advantage of surprise.

To try the door, turn to **65**

If you'd rather chance the window, turn to **7**

**41**

A furious roar is raised as the numerous rune-traps along the corridor go off around you. You manage to outrun most of them, but just before the door, you slip and get struck from behind by a blast of lightning. You are thrown into the doorjamb and fall, steadying yourself on your knees. (Lose 4 STAMINA.)

You pull yourself to a standing position just in time to hear Westing's voice frantically yelling some magical syllables. A small object clatters to the floor and you hear a high-pitched whining noise. You recognize it immediately as the sound of a magical runestone designed to function like a bomb.

Test your LUCK.

If you succeed, turn to **71**

If you fail, turn to **81**

**42**

You fish the insignia you took from Black Freddy out of your pocket. Holding it and the dagger side by side, you examine them and confirm that the carvings are identical. Struckald notices. "Where did you get that?" he asks.

"Off a Redhand thug that picked the wrong place to run his mouth."

Struckald laughs. "Well, I suppose that answers that question."

Turn to **52**

**43**

It is now past lunchtime, and as hurried as you are you can't sleuth on an empty stomach. You set out through the city streets, toward the marketplace. On the way, you ponder what you've learned thus far. Between the information from the Angry Mule and from Struckald, you now have a very good idea where to look for Annalisa and Vincent the Viper. Unfortunately, you don't have a good enough idea. The Redhands are a rather prominent force in the underworld of Tarnach, and they have several safe houses scattered around the lower-income areas. You can't just canvas them hoping for the best. You need more solid information. The second the Redhands are alerted to your investiga-

Test your SKILL

If you pass, turn to **22**

If you fail, turn to **92**

**44**

Struckald's voice grows annoyed. "Yes, you did, and a nice mess you made of it, too. I would almost have been better off dealing with the matter myself."

"You ended up on top in the end, didn't you?"

"Thanks to my own ingenuity. But it went far less smoothly than I would have wanted." He sighs deeply. "Nevertheless, I suppose I do owe you a favor for fulfilling your obligations. So, just what are you here today to discuss?"

"Annalisa has been kidnapped."

Struckald's chair creaks as he leans back. When he speaks again, his voice is surprised, but guarded. "Kidnapped, you say? I find that hard to believe, friend. I mean, overpowering a court mage is no easy task. Are you sure she didn't just... run off or something?"

Your fingers clench around the armrests of the chair. You certainly didn't come here to have Struckald question your wife's fidelity, but you stay calm for the moment. "I found a letter from the

kidnapper. A letter that gives me a good idea who he was working for and what he is up to. What I need to know from you is where she is and who did the actual job."

"I am sorry, old friend, but I haven't a clue. Even my talent for gossip has limits."  
You grit your teeth. Struckald is obviously lying.

If you wish to appeal to his humanity, turn to **93**  
To opt for a more confrontational approach, turn to **66**

**45**

You stop in a corner of the busy marketplace, slumping against the wall. Tangling with that assassin took a lot out of you, and you need a moment to catch your breath and rest.

The vendors in the marketplace have fresh bread, succulent fruits, and meat pies on display. The collage of aromas is mouth-watering even from your tiny little corner, and you are reminded how badly you need to eat. You often skip lunch on the job, but it's been a while since you've had this much physical activity. You've been running around for half the day searching for clues. Fishing a few small coins out of your pocket, you buy a savory-smelling pasty and find yourself a hard wooden bench to take a seat on.

Your muscles ache as you sit. Someone here is selling peaches, and from your seat the scent wafts over, dredging up old, cherished memories. Annalisa sometimes perfumes herself with an extract that smells of peaches. She was wearing that scent the day you met, in fact. You were both young, just past the verge of adulthood. A good age to take to the roads in search of adventure. She was a mage, very adept in the arts of runemastery but only just starting to build a name for herself. You were a year older and a bit more experienced, but less known. That's how it should be. For your vocation, it is bad to be known. If you are doing your job right, you are unseen, unnoticed, concealed. You are secret, and you keep secrets. One in particular you take great pains to keep hidden. And you do. Most of your close friends don't even know it.

Annalisa, though... from the first time you felt her hand fall gently upon your shoulder, heard her charming voice in her ear, you knew that she could see it. You knew that she understood. She had an uncle who bore the same curse. A proud man, he took the greatest of pains to keep it secret. Ignorant people think less of you, once they know. It's hard for any man, but it makes finding work as an adventurer nearly impossible. But Annalisa was kind. She kept your secret. No, she was -- is -- so much more than just kind. She has shared with you pleasures you never would have dreamed of. She has been by your side again and again, in the worst times and the best. She has offered you happiness, and trust, and love.

You sigh a deep, tired sigh. You're getting old. Worse than that, you are old. You try not to think about it, but that's what you are. A tired, sentimental, melancholy old man, slave to fading memories and moments long past.

Annalisa is getting old, too. Oh, she has as much life in her as she always did. So do you, actually. You celebrated your twentieth anniversary two months ago, in the usual vigorous manner. You have decades left together, potentially. But the days in memory are more prominent than those in imagination. You know she feels it. You know every last curve of her body, and though you don't speak of it, you have both noticed the curves slowly becoming corners. Her warm, soft hands are beginning to feel bony to the touch. Her hair once slid easily through your fingers, but increasingly offers resistance. Is she going grey? You never noticed, nor would you care, but you're sure she both notices and cares.

But you are not worried. Not yet, anyway.

Time is slowly eating away your body, that is true. In time, you may live to see it eat away your mind, or your happiness, or the world you live in, but there's one thing time can't devour. It can't devour your love. The life ahead of you and Annalisa is hard, but the life behind you was never easy. There was always pain; the hardships of the road, infrequent poverty, and fear of a violent death are

omnipresent in the life of an adventurer. Settling in Tarnach didn't make the hardships stop, only changed their form. Now you deal with the intrigues of court, the tedium of regular work, and the persistent frustrations of living in such a crowded place, with so many people. And through it all, she has been by your side. And you, too, have been there whenever she needed you. None of the trials you've faced has diminished your love, and the march of years won't either. Love -- real love -- can only be strengthened by adversity.

You rise from your seat at the bench. You have had your meal and your rest and your moment of melancholic introspection. Now you have a job. You will find your wife.

You have pursued two potential leads. You should have one still left:

If you need to visit Struckald, turn to **82**

If you need to talk to Westing, turn to **63**

If you've done both, you'll have to search the streets for additional leads. Turn to **8**

#### 46

"A man came to visit me. He was slim and well-dressed, with a goatee. I'd never seen him before. He showed up at my door about a week ago, in the middle of the night. Said his name was Harold, and he had a message from Annalisa. I let him in. As soon as the door was shut, he grabbed me by the chin and forced me to look into his eyes. When I did... I'm not sure what happened. It was like a fog settled over my senses. Everything became muddy. I heard his voice order me around, and I couldn't disobey. I tried, but my body was responding to his commands rather than my own."

"And what did he order you to do?"

"He wanted to know how to get into your house. I told him I had a key, but it is runed to be useable only by one person. He asked if I could copy the runes, and I said no. He ordered me to get the key, get dressed, and follow him. He led me down to the docks area, to a warehouse by the wharf."

"Which warehouse?"

"I'm sorry, Caldus, I don't know. I'm not familiar with the area, and even if I was... he had me walking like I was in a haze."

You nod slowly. "Hmm. And what happened when you got there?"

"He led me down a set of stairs into what looked like the common room of a tavern. We sat down at a table and stayed there for a while... I don't know how long, but he sat right across from me, eyes locked on mine. Not saying anything, just staring. I was only dimly aware of what was going on around me. I remember an old runemaster taking the key from me, and then later giving it to Harold, along with a copy runed for Harold himself. Harold pocketed the copy and gave the original key back to me. Then Harold led me home and ordered me to go to bed and awaken in the morning having forgotten everything that happened that night. On the off-chance that I couldn't forget, remember that if I told anyone, he'd find me and kill me."

"But you didn't forget, obviously."

"At first I did. I was having flashes of memory the next morning, but wrote it off as strange dreams. Then around noon I went out and a neighbor asked me who that man was at my door last night. She described him to me, and that started to bring things back. Harold must have some kind of magical talent to compel others to do his bidding. As a mage -- uh, an apprentice, rather -- I would have some resistance. That's probably why he kept his eyes on me the whole time; he had to keep the connection strong."

You nod again. "So why the traps? If you were afraid for your life, you should have come to me, or the city guard, or the king. We could have offered you protection."

"And what kind of guard is going to defend me against a mind-controlling murderer? I couldn't trust anybody but myself. Besides, if I told you, you might think I sold you out!"

You shake your head sadly. "Westing, you should learn to have faith in your friends. Leave here and



go directly to the king's palace. Ask to see my son, Merrick, and tell him what you've told me. Merrick will allow you to stay in the palace, where you should be secure. By the time the sun sets, the man behind this will be no threat."

"What? Caldus, do you intend to confront this man?"

"I intend to rescue Annalisa, and to make him pay for his crimes."

"But... that's suicidal! He'll take control of you the same way he did me! He'll force you to slit your own throat!"

You can't help but chuckle. Even spending as much time in your house as he does, Westing still doesn't know your secret. "We old men are full of surprises, boy. Now go, get out of here."

You depart Westing's townhouse and vanish once again into the city streets.

Write down the number 21 in the clues section of your character sheet. Add it to any numbers already there and turn to the indicated section.

#### 47

Exhausted, the thug keels over, falling to his hands and knees. You smack him quickly in the back of the head with the pommel of your sword and he drops limply to the ground, thudding like a sack of potatoes. A pyrrhic victory, as you didn't get the information you needed out of him. It gets worse when Dalamir's burly bouncer tackles you to the ground, making you wince. You are soon pulled to your feet so that Dalamir himself can berate you for disturbing his tavern's peace. Taking you by the arm, the haggard bartender escorts you roughly out while his bouncer drags the thug in back for first aid.

Turn to 14

#### 48

It is now past lunchtime, and as hurried as you are you can't sleuth on an empty stomach. You set out through the city streets, toward the marketplace, pondering what you already know. Your inquiries thus far are confusing. They point in different directions. The information you gained from Black Freddy suggests the Redhands were behind Annalisa's kidnapping, whereas the information from Westing suggests this man, Harold. It's probable they could be connected, but you're not confident in acting on just suspicion. Annalisa is too important for you to gamble on circumstantial evidence. It's time to pay Struckald a visit. Maybe he'll be able to shine some light on-

Test your SKILL

If you pass, turn to 22

If you fail, turn to 92

#### 49

You take your drink and move to a table by the door, where you can hear your target more clearly. You sit there for an hour, nursing your drink and looking inconspicuous. The thug prattles on about various subjects, but says little of use to you. You learn that his name is Black Freddy. He's with the Redhands, a prosperous gang of smugglers that work out of the city's seedier districts, and they've recently taken in a new ally. Not an official member of the gang, but someone trustworthy who may help expand their business. He refuses to say anything more about this mystery man.

Eventually, you hear the creaking of a chair behind you as Black Freddy gets up, saying farewell to his companions. You wait until he passes through the doorway, then get up and follow him out. The streets are crowded today, but Freddy's heavy footsteps -- he is a big man -- allow you to tail him easily. Eventually, you wind up following him into a long, narrow street that heads to the slums.

Absent crowd cover, you move in the shadows instead, hugging the walls in search of the cool darkness of doorways and niches.

Ahead of you, Freddy stops and you quickly conceal yourself. After a moment, he moves on. A block later, he ducks into a narrow alley and quickens his pace. You have been spotted and the chase is on.

Test your STAMINA

If you pass, turn to 77

If not, turn to 62

50

You remember the neighbor's warning about Westing's growing paranoia. Anticipating booby-traps, you move slowly and carefully, feeling out each step beforehand.

Turn to 73

51

You draw your sword. Tark draws no weapon of his own, but swings at you with a large, well-muscled fist. You seem to have the advantage -- until you cut straight across his chest and he barely flinches. "I'm Half-Ogre," he says. You'll need more than a little butter knife to hurt me.

"Actually, this 'butter knife' will do just fine. I just have to use it right."

TARK

SKILL: 10

STAMINA: 12

If you win, turn to 79

52

"How exactly does Vincent keep his confederates from blabbing his secret location?"

"The same way he captured your lady love without a fight. He has a... talent, you see. A magical ability called the evil eye. By looking into a person's eyes, he can get inside their minds. Order them to do something, and they must obey. Even an archmage can't resist it, although their superior willpower allows them to develop a tolerance. That's why I recommended him to Barrington. I wouldn't advise a face-to-face confrontation, Caldus. An ability like that could render him unbeatable."

You chuckle softly. There are some things even Struckald doesn't know. "I think I shall be able to deal with him, my friend. Thank you for your assistance. Our debt is settled." You hold out the dagger towards him, pommel-first of course.

"Keep it," Struckald says. "As my apology for unwittingly putting your wife in danger. Besides, if the king is getting involved in this business, I don't want anything around here that could connect me to our mutual friend Vincent."

You grin and bid Struckald farewell.

Add the Assassin's Dagger to your inventory, and record the number 16 to the Clues section of your character sheet. Then add up all the numbers in the Clues section of your character sheet and turn to the corresponding page.

53

You burst dramatically out of your hiding place in the cabinet, but the element of surprise is lost when you stumble and land flat on your face on the floor. Black Freddy curses. As you rise to your feet, the tell-tale whooshing of air signals you to duck aside. A large, heavy club swings through where you were a moment before, impacting the floor hard enough to crack the floorboards. You draw your sword and prepare to fight. Your opponent is slightly inebriated, but still dangerous.

BLACK FREDDY

SKILL: 6

STAMINA: 8

After three rounds of combat, turn to **23**

If you win before three rounds of combat have passed, turn to **3**

54

You step boldly out into the hall and regret it a second too late. There is a fizzing noise as you set foot in the hall, and then a crackle of electricity as a burst of lightning springs up from the floor. You flinch back and just narrowly avoid it.

Through the now open door, you can hear a low, soft buzzing sound and feel a heavy heat in the air. The hallway is full of cloaked rune-traps. Dozens of them, if you're reading the signs right. Just how paranoid has Westing gotten?

Whatever the case, he will hear the sound of that trap going off and come to investigate. You must decide on a course of action quickly.

If you wish to sprint down the hallway, hoping to find Westing at the other end, turn to **75**

If you'd rather wait here for him to come to you, turn to **67**

55

The last Redhand thug falls. The room is silent, save for the sound of footsteps echoing from the far side. Vincent is taking advantage of the commotion to flee, and you hurriedly give chase.

Turn to **33**

56

You pull the Thunderstone out of your pocket and speak the incantation to activate it. It glows hot in your hand as you toss it to the ground before diving behind a table for cover. With a great crash, the Thunderstone goes off and lightning fills the room, striking and everything and everyone that doesn't make it to cover. One bolt strikes the table you are using to shield yourself and blows a hole in it. You keep calm and wait out the storm.

When the storm dies down, the smell of ozone is thick and heavy in the air, and the people in the room are silent, except for a few moaning in pain and a few others scampering for the exit in panic.

Across the room, Vincent -- who seems to have remained unharmed -- curses and flees through a door at the far end of the room. You waste no time pursuing him.

Turn to **33**

57

When the dust settles, Westing proves to be an astonishingly poor tactician. With little cover in the room, he got caught in his own blast and took the brunt of it. You find him on the floor, unconscious. You verify that he's still breathing and search his body for any other magical surprises, finding none.

Then you tie him to a chair using his bed sheets before bringing him around with repeated slaps to the face.

"Wake up, boy!" you say gruffly.

Groaning, he comes around.

"Where's Annalisa?"

"Caldus? I... I'm sorry, C..."

You hit him again. "To hell with the pleasantries, where is she?!"

"I don't know! I wasn't there, I don't..."

You strike him twice more. Hard. He doesn't speak, and spits blood from a cut on his lip.

"You're an idiot, Westing. Do you know that? First you betray your master, and then you barricade yourself in this place and make it obvious that you have something to hide, and then you nearly get yourself blown up by your own weapon."

"I've had a really stressful week, okay! I'm not thinking clearly!" He hangs his head and speaks to the ground, disappointed in himself. "Dammit, I'm not thinking at all lately."

You cross your arms and sigh deeply. You remind yourself that Westing was probably coerced into helping Barrington in his scheme. But if he had warned Annalisa instead of cowering here behind his traps in fear, things would have gone a lot better for all concerned. "I don't want to hurt you, Westing. You're not much younger than my own son. I don't believe you betrayed Annalisa willingly, and you're certainly not the criminal type. But I have to find her, and you don't want to place yourself in my way. Come clean. Start at the beginning."

"Cut me loose and I'll tell you everything."

You consider. It seems foolish to cut loose a prisoner that has shown such keen intent to harm you. But then again, you've already proved that Westing's meager ingenuity is no match for your skills, and without any runes or spell casting gear he should be harmless. Besides that, a show of faith might speed things along.

You draw your sword and neatly slice through Westing's bonds. You can practically hear him flinching from the closeness of the blade.

"Talk."

Turn to **46**

**58**

You head downstairs and retrieve the tiny cart that almost killed you earlier. It is a simple matter to carry it up the stairs. Loading the statue takes somewhat more effort, but you manage. If you can push this down the corridor, it will set off the traps as it goes, leaving it safe for you to pass. However, pushing it ahead of you won't work. You have to give it a big shove and hope your might is enough to propel it to the end of the corridor.

Test your **STAMINA**

If you pass, turn to **36**

If not, turn to **5**

**59**

Quickly fishing the silver-and-iron band from your pocket, you hand it over Annalisa. "Would you care, my dear?"

"It would be my pleasure, love." Annalisa adroitly snatches the bracelet and speaks the words of the spell held therein. With a whoosh of escaping air, the entire cave is filled with impenetrable darkness. So long as she maintains the spell, the Redhand thugs are as sightless as you.

"How many?" you ask.

"Six," Annalisa replies.

You smile. "Good odds, on my home field."

REDHANDS

SKILL: 6

STAMINA: 14

If you win, turn to **94**

**60**

You make the climb with relatively little difficulty. Getting the slightly-rusted window open is a bit more difficult, but you manage it and slide easily inside.

The room you find yourself in is cold from lack of torchlight, and carries the musty odor of paper and leather bindings; a library. Thinking back to your previous visits, you remember that the upstairs hallway has four rooms off it: Master bedroom, guest room, storage closet, and this library. It was originally a nursery, but when Westing took over he converted it. As always, you must maneuver in the shadows, and as usual you are up to the task.

If you wish to head immediately out into the hall, without wasting any time, turn to **54**

If you'd rather search the room first, turn to **31**

**61**

You give the room another once-over, hoping to find some way to deactivate the runes, but find nothing. Except for the rope ladder near the window, there's absolutely no indication that this library belongs to a paranoid mage. By the time you finish going through everything, you are quite impatient. Annalisa is in danger, and here you are messing around in a library!

If you want to brave the corridor of death, turn to **75**

If you're convinced there must be another way to find Westing, turn to **85**

**62**

You are able to track Black Freddy through the maze of twisty streets by following the distinctive sound of his footfalls. However, you are not as swift on your feet as you used to be and you can't quite catch him. The chase ends when you bumble into a moving cart you didn't notice, spilling the owner's wares and tumbling to the ground yourself. You get up and continue, ignoring the owner's screaming about his lost goods, but it's too late. Black Freddy has made good his escape. Cursing, you head back to the main thoroughfare. This area is dangerous, and you are loath to spend more time here than strictly necessary.

Despite the inglorious ending, your canvas of the taverns has been a modest success. You managed to gather some reliable information from eavesdropping on Freddy earlier. Hopefully it will help you catch Annalisa's captors.

Write the number 27 on the Clues section of your Character Sheet. Add this number to any other clues you may have and turn to the indicated section.

**63**

Westing lives in a townhouse. You have visited there occasionally; you remember a well-furnished top floor, and a hopelessly cluttered first floor. Westing hopes to turn it into a shop someday, the same as many of the city's businessmen. The townhouse was paid for by his father out of Westing's inheritance. Actually, it was probably more than Westing's inheritance. His father has four sons and

not enough estate to go around. Probably he financed Westing's house and training in the hopes of him building a prosperous business and giving dad a return on his investment. Unfortunately, that plan looks like it might not work out. Westing was a reasonably apt pupil, but betrayal tends to sour the master/student relationship, and once the word gets out he'll have a hard time finding another master.

A thought occurs to you as you approach the house. Westing is neither a fool nor a criminal. What could he have gained from turning Annalisa over to her captor? More likely the young man was coerced into it. If so, you certainly don't want this to end in bloodshed.

Standing on the front steps, you take a moment to consider how to approach this.

If you wish to simply knock on the front door, turn to **91**

If you'd rather find a way to sneak in, turn to **40**

## 64

With the information you have now, your next destination is clear. The Redhands have several safe houses around the city, but only one lies near the docks, and only one has the lower level Westing mentioned. You head over and case the area briefly, observing two guards and a steady stream of individuals coming and going. You sit in an abandoned house nearby for an hour or so and tend to the injuries you've received during your day's work. Safely out of sight, you eavesdrop on the people heading to the warehouse. You manage to overhear a few things of interest. The place is indeed a Redhand hideout, and their mysterious new associate -- Vincent the Viper, no doubt -- is holed up inside. Because of that, only people carrying his insignia are allowed in; one man has forgotten it and is refused entrance, despite protesting that "you know me." You also learn of an important shipment of contraband coming in tonight. A large number of Redhands are to be on the other side of the docks to help offload it. That will leave this area relatively clear. Finally, someone mentions "that woman" is inside. You smile. Vincent has probably used his unique skills to make sure his minions don't give away any major details or their operations, but they can apparently still speak indirectly.

Now possessing the where and the when of a rescue plan, you set out to arrange the how. Captain Yarrow, a guardsman with whom you are familiar, agrees to set up a raid on the warehouse for just after dusk. You can't take the risk of Annalisa still being captive when it goes down, however. That could result in a dangerous hostage situation. The plan is for you to sneak in, free her, and then call for the guard (Yarrow gives you a runic signal stone for that purpose.) The guard will then attack and arrest the remaining smugglers.

It's not the best plan, but it will work. If you can get past a horde of street thugs and a professional assassin.

But hey, you only live once. Might as well make it memorable.

Restore 8 STAMINA due to rest and recovery (remember that you cannot exceed your initial value.) Then turn to **12** to begin the rescue mission!

## 65

You try the door. It is locked, but you keep lockpicks on you for just such a purpose. You seclude yourself in the doorway, back to the street, and work on the lock for a minute or so. Your fingers aren't as nimble as they used to be, but they are not arthritic either. Soon the lock makes a satisfying click and you swiftly duck inside.

The lack of any kind of light, magical or physical, leaves the inside of the building cold and dark. But this is no problem for you, used to living your life in the shadows. You make your way slowly into the house. You remember that Westing spends most of his time in the master bedroom upstairs. Navigating by memory of your previous visit, you head for the stairs leading up.

If you tried the front door before coming around back, turn to **50**  
 If not, turn to **9**

**66**

"Struckald, don't take me for a fool. You know as well as I do that every bit of intrigue in the city is known to you."

"It is true that I am privy to many things that are not common knowledge, but I think you seriously overestimate my talents, friend. Omniscient, I am not." He says this in a slightly pleading tone, indicating that you have successfully put him on the defensive.

"Oh, I think you know this thing, friend. Let's cut to the point, shall we? Annalisa was kidnapped last night. The abductor left a letter, from which I know Duke Barrington is involved. Like most of the nobility, he doubtless came to you to gather information for his scheme. Now, I have reported Barrington to the king, so there is no way you will be able to keep hold of him as a customer. In other words, you have nothing to lose by telling me what I need to know."

"Hmm. Well, that's a good point, friend, but there is still the matter of professional conduct. A man in my occupation cannot have it known that he betrays his customers' confidence routinely."

If you try to intimidate Struckald further, turn to **4**  
 If you'd rather offer him a way out, turn to **80**

**67**

You take up ambush position beside the door, expecting Westing to come through any minute. Upon a minute's consideration, this strikes you as a somewhat dubious prospect, given that he'll have to come through his own traps to find you. But your caution proves fruitful, if not exactly in the way you expected. You hear the heavy whirring of wood on rollers, and then a bookcase clatters to the ground. Westing clammers over it into the room, muttering a stream of curses under his breath. Suddenly he gasps, seeing you, and starts frantically calling out a series of magical syllables. You lunge forward to tackle him.

Test your SKILL

If you are successful, turn to **17**  
 If not, turn to **11**

**68**

"I'm sorry, old friend, but I truly know nothing about this unfortunate incident," says Struckald, lying through his teeth. "But, as I said, I will gladly pass on any information I come across on the subject." He rises and walks to the door, opening it to usher you out. "If you'll excuse me, I have a business to run."

You grit your teeth, anger and frustration burning hot in your veins. Nonetheless, you rise from the chair and walk to the door. "We shall have to settle our debt at another time," Struckald says. "Thank you for dropping..."

You cut Struckald off by placing your hand on his chest and shoving him with all your strength. The fat man flies backwards, colliding with a shelf and knocking several items off it before tumbling to the ground. "Damnation, Caldus! What do you-"

His is cut off again, this time by the slamming of the office door and the distinctive scraping sound of your sword being drawn from its sheath. Weapon in hand, you advance on him menacingly.

"Are you a common thug now, Caldus?" says Struckald, his bluster almost managing to conceal the

fear in his voice. "Because that role doesn't suit you, I promise you that." He groans and starts to get to his feet, but you swing your sword at the shelf and chop halfway through it. He recoils and falls again to the ground.

"I've been a lot of things, Struckald," you say, "But never a common thug. You don't know what it's like, though, to lose someone you love. Such an experience can change a man."

"You can't do this!" Struckald says, bluster quickly replaced by desperation. "This is cold-blooded murder, Caldus. The king will have your head."

"Possibly," you say. "But then again, name one major figure in the nobility or underworld that you haven't helped to thwart at some point or another. Everybody will be a suspect, Struckald, and nobody will wonder at the motive. You know too much."

"You... you're mad, Caldus! This is suicidal!"

"So what if I am? Last chance, Struckald. What do you know about Annalisa?"

"Nothing!"

"Then you're no use to me." You pull back your sword to strike.

"Wait!" Struckald yells. You stop your sword in midair, inches from his throat.

"Talk fast," you say.

Struckald does so. Babbles, almost. "It was Duke Barrington. I didn't know he was after Annalisa, I swear! He just said he needed someone to subdue a mage unharmed, and I don't ask questions."

"And who did you direct him to?"

"Vincent the Viper. A relatively new face in the city underworld. He's a freelance assassin."

"I hadn't heard of him."

"He stays well under the radar. Pays one of the smuggling gangs in the slums for a safe house and other services."

"Which gang?"

"I don't know."

"Smuggling gangs have loose lips when the ale is flowing."

"I don't know, I swear! He keeps them from blabbing the same way he abducted your wife."

"How?"

"He has a psuedomagical talent. Mind control. He can order you to do whatever he wants just by looking into your eyes. It's called the evil eye."

You have heard of the evil eye before, but thought it was a myth. Then again, it does explain how this Vincent the Viper was able to capture Annalisa without a fight. True or not, it shouldn't be a factor when the two of you come to blows. Your own special attributes would trump such a talent. You press your blade into Struckald's neck just enough to draw blood. "If you're lying to me, Struckald..."

"It's the truth, I swear!"

"Count on me to be checking on that." Satisfied, you re-sheath your sword and turn back to the door. Struckald breathes a deep sigh of relief. "Consider our debt settled," you add before walking out.

You will obviously not be able to count on Struckald's help in the future, but you have found the information you came for. Record the number 16 in the Clues section of your character sheet. Add this clue to any others you have and turn to the corresponding page.

## 69

As you sprint down the hall, the traps go off all around you, the clamorous sound of explosions and electrical crackling nearly deafening you. Dodging any given trap is pointless -- you'd just barrel into another one. Instead, you focus on speed, hoping to outrun the chaos. Fortunately, your legs are still up to this task. Grabbing the doorjamb to aid your turn, you swing yourself into the master bedroom, pursued by a cloud of dust and debris.

Westing is indeed in the room, and your noisy approach has alerted him. Above the bedlam, you hear the sound of a chair clattering to the ground. Westing begins a magical incantation, but you tackle him before he can finish. Pinning him to the ground, you grab at his wrists. He is holding



something in his right hand, which you twist free. It is small and oval-shaped -- probably his last line of defense.

Hoping he doesn't have any other magical tricks up his sleeve, you yank Westing to his feet and throw him roughly against the wall. Drawing your sword, you close in on him.

Turn to **2**

**70**

You call Dalamir over and talk to him in a hushed tone.

"That man, over at the corner table. You see him?"

The bar being crowded, Dalamir has to crane his neck to see over the heads of the other patrons. "I see several men there. Seedy-looking bunch."

"The deep-voiced one."

"Oh, he's big. Real big."

"Do you know him, by any chance?"

"Comes in here every once in a while. Name's Black Freddy. Muscle for the Redhands. Why do you ask?"

"He's involved in a very serious matter. I need to get information out of him."

"I'm not going to stop you. Just keep it outside." He turns away, but you catch him by the arm and pull him back.

"I need your help to do it, old friend."

"Whoa," says Dalamir. "You know that I don't get involved in the affairs of my customers."

"Yes, I do. But I also know that you still owe me for saving your business."

"Excuse me? I thought I was paying you back by letting you come here every week and eavesdrop on my patrons?"

"That's interest. This is principle."

"Really? James," he says, using your generic alias, "how serious is this?"

"Very serious, both to the king and myself. Not to mention my wife."

"Wife? I didn't know you were married."

You smile. "There's an awful lot you don't know about me, old friend."

"Apparently so." He thinks for a moment. "You know, when he came in he asked if I could find him a woman. I told him I don't run that kind of business, but... I've got an idea. Slip around back."

Turn to **13**

**71**

Having no other alternative, you dive back into the hallway, hoping that you haven't left any traps still active. Luck is on your side. Not only is the hallway now safe, but the wall protects you from the massive thunderstorm that shoots through the doorway in a crackling cacophony, scorching the air inches from your face.

Turn to **57**

**72**

You hear the sharp scraping on steel on stone, followed by the swoosh of a sword cutting the air from right beside you. You surmise that Annalisa has taken Vincent's blade and intends to fight beside you. Just like old times. "How many, dear?" you ask.

"Six", she says.

"So, one for you, five for me?"

"Oh, come now, love, I can handle three by myself."

With a war cry (which tells you exactly where he is), one of the thugs comes charging right at you. You wait for the swish of the blade, then nimbly duck and strike him down.

"How about four and two?" you ask.

"How about we just fight?"

"Good idea."

REDHANDS

SKILL: 9

STAMINA: 12

If you win, turn to **94**

**73**

You find no traps, with the possible exception of a small ankle-high cart used to cart around heavy objects. It lies at the base of the steps, waiting to trip up the unwary, though whether this is protection or simply carelessness you know not.

You silently ascend to the top of the steps, where you discover just what Westing has been doing with the time saved by no-showing his lessons.

Turn to **26**

**74**

To get past the guards, you have to have Vincent's insignia. You are not quite sure what it might be, but you know that you can get one from the people going in and out. You wait patiently, crouched in the same abandoned building as before. Before long, you hear the sound of the door opening and a voice bids the guard goodbye for the night. You chuckle at the coincidence. The voice is familiar to you.

You wait until he passes, and then slip out of your hidey-hole and tail your quarry for a suitable distance, until you are sure that you are out of earshot of the warehouse guards. Then you strike. He has good reflexes and blocks your first blow, forcing you to duck as his spiked club sails over your head. Seeing who you are, he laughs. "Well, well, well. Looks like I get some payback."

BLACK FREDDY

SKILL: 8

STAMINA: 10

If you win the fight, turn to **88**

**75**

With no alternatives presenting themselves, you prepare to run the gauntlet.

Test your LUCK

If you pass, turn to **69**

If you fail, turn to **41**

**76**

You catch his club on your sword, but his strength surpasses yours, and you are knocked aside and go tumbling into a nearby table. (Lose 4 STAMINA.) Dalamir yells over the ruckus for you both to stop, but the battle is already on, and it won't be stopping until one of you is dead or out cold.

BAR THUG

SKILL: 8                      STAMINA: 10

If you win, turn to **47**

If your STAMINA is reduced to zero, do NOT end the game as usual. Instead, turn immediately to **90**

**77**

The streets in this area of town are a confusing, chaotic maze, and Freddy tries to evade you by taking blind turns. But you can follow him, as before, by the distinctive sound of his footfalls. Between this and your greater foot speed, you manage to catch up to him. With a cry, he wheels around on you and you duck as a large, heavy club whooshes through the air where your head was just moments before. Winded and out of breath, he nevertheless maintains his fighting spirit.

BLACK FREDDY

SKILL 8                      STAMINA: 10

If you win, turn to **10****78**

You have a difficult time maneuvering the crowd, especially since they are still reacting to the sudden intrusion of an arrow into their day. You rudely push and shove people aside, but make slow progress. By the time you reach the other side of the crowd, the assassin has escaped into a long, twisting alleyway. Not dissuaded by his head start, you plunge in after him.

Test your STAMINA

If you pass, turn to **15**If you fail, turn to **35****79**

Sword ready, you advance on Vincent. He does not retreat, but nor does he make any move against you. Instead, he calls out to the room in anger, offering twenty gold to whoever brings him your head. Immediately weapons are drawn. The dozen or so men in the room like that offer.

If you have a Thunderstone, turn to **56**If not, turn to **18**

80

You give Struckald your best smile. "Look, old friend, there's no reason we have to involve the king in this. Just as it's bad business for you to reveal information about your clients, it's bad for everyone if you go out of business. I rely on you, as does nearly everyone of importance in the city, and even the king himself. But I'm sure you understand also that I love my wife very much. And thinking of her locked up somewhere, terrified for her life... well, I'm obliged as her husband to do something, and I take that obligation very seriously indeed." After a pause to let that sink in, you continue. "Think of it like this: I'll figure out where she is and who kidnapped her sooner or later, so what you tell me here today doesn't really matter. But it will expedite things; so... essentially, you can lose Barrington as a customer, in exchange for clearing your debt and keeping me in your good graces. Or, you can refuse, lose Barrington as a customer anyway when he's arrested, and make an enemy out of me." You shrug. "I'm not much of a merchant myself, but I would think the choice is clear, wouldn't you?"

Turn to 32

81

You dive back into the hall, hoping you set off all the traps in your mad dash, but you aren't quite quick enough. When the runestone goes off in a furious barrage of thunderbolts, you catch several in the chest before managing to get to cover.

Lose 6 STAMINA and 1 SKILL due to your injuries. If you are still alive, turn to 57

82

Struckald's shop is somewhat off the beaten path. Not in some darkened back alley somewhere, but not in the center of the market either. It has a reputation for being easy to spot: visitors to the city are told to look for a wood building, walls painted bright red with white trim on the windows, and an energetically illustrated shingle outside the door reading *Struckald's Curios*. As a child, Merrick always begged and pleaded to come by here and take a look whenever you or Annalisa took him shopping. For her part, Annalisa always thought the place was expertly decorated: impressive, but not so much as to be ostentatious. You have little interest in such displays, although you admit that the fragrance of the flowers that Struckald keeps by the windows always makes you nostalgic for simpler times.

The sharp ringing of a bell announces your entrance, but Struckald, up at the counter, takes little immediate notice. He is deep into a haggling session with a customer over something or other. Unworried, you weave your way into the maze of shelves and bookcases to the left of the entrance, eventually finding a place you can hide and pretend to be examining some cheap bauble or other. You wait. Finally, Struckald and his customer come to an agreement, with the young man paying significantly more than he wanted to. His footsteps sound dejectedly on the floor as he walks to the door, the ringing of the bell declaring his exit.

With the shop now otherwise empty, Struckald ventures into the shelves and finds you. "Caldus Farrang, my old friend!" he declares gregariously. "It's been awhile, how are you this morning?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid. Annalisa is having some hard times, but I imagine you've probably heard already."

The surprise in Struckald's voice is genuine. "No, my friend, I have not! Is she ill? Because I may have something that can help her, you know..."

"You might. Perhaps we should continue this discussion in private?"

"Of course, of course. Step into my office."

You've been in Struckald's office before. Among the clutter common to tradesman's offices, it contains a large desk and two matching chairs: one behind the desk, the other in front. You take a seat in the latter, running your fingers over the ornate carvings on the armrest.

"So," Struckald asks, "What exactly brings you here, Calduus?"

"You owe me a favor, and I'm here to call it in."

"A favor?" Struckald asks.

"Two years ago, you asked me to help you deal with an unsavory individual named Barnabas Crow, you remember?"

Test your SKILL to see how you handled the Barnabas Crow incident.

If you pass, turn to **24**

If you fail, turn to **44**

### 83

Having heard quite enough, you rise from your seat and cross the tavern's floor with swift but careful steps. Engrossed in the conversation, the crook doesn't notice you until your hand lands on his large, meaty shoulder.

"What?"

"I don't like the tone of your conversation."

He snorts. "Then go somewhere else."

"I think you should be the one to go somewhere else."

The conversation in the room slowly dies down as the patrons begin to notice a fight brewing. The floorboards creak as the man slowly gets to his feet. He's bigger than you expected. You can practically feel his eyes on you, taking stock of your prowess and finding you wanting. "Piss off, old man. Unless you want to get smashed into pulp."

The air is tense, thick with the customers' anticipation of some action. "Hey!" Dalamir calls out from behind the bar. "No rough stuff in here! You wanna scrap, take it outside!"

"There won't be any scrapping here, barman," you say. "I'm leaving just as soon as this thug tells me about the woman he mentioned."

When he speaks again, his voice betrays a hint of surprise. "You ask too many questions, old man. Get lost now if you don't want to get hurt."

"What I want is answers. Where is she?"

With a dismissive grunt, the thug reaches for a weapon. You dodge backwards as a large spiked club whizzes past your face. Drawing your sword from its concealment at your side, you bring it up to catch his weapon on the flat of the blade.

Test your STAMINA

If you pass, turn to **25**

If not, turn to **76**

### 84

After moving through the pantry and kitchen without incident, you get overconfident and slip up. Right near the stairs, you step up what appears to be the first step, only to find it sliding away from you as soon as you put your weight on it. You try and maintain your balance but fail and fall head over heels, landing hard on the wood floor. (Lose 2 STAMINA.) You feel around in the darkness and find the culprit: a small ankle-high cart, little more than a few planks of wood with wheels, which was placed right before the steps. Westing is a clever and inventive trapper. Or perhaps just a careless housekeeper.

You listen carefully for sounds of someone coming to investigate, or any other indication that the sound of your fall has attracted attention. You hear nothing. Two minutes pass until finally you are

satisfied that your pratfall has gone unnoticed. Turning your attention again to the steps, you ascend with renewed caution, until at the top you come face to face with the product of Westing's ingenuity.

Turn to **26**

**85**

You smack yourself in the forehead for not realizing it sooner. Westing planned to escape through the window in this room. But what good would that do if he had to run through his own corridor of traps to reach it? There must be a secret passage in here somewhere.

The wall between this room and the master bedroom is lined with bookcases. Most of them appear to be nailed one together, but a quick test reveals that the center one is unsecured. Quickly but silently, you empty it of books to make it lighter. Then you pull it away from the wall. Behind is the outline of a door frame. The wood within the frame is new: smooth to your touch while the frame and wood outside are old and splintery. Probably the door is a remnant of the time when this room was a nursery and the mother required easy access to her children.

You are no stranger to secret doors, and running your hands along the frame quickly turns up the catch which causes the door to slide back into the wall. You reach for your sword in case Westing notices you, but smile as the sound of snoring drifts through the open door. You brush past the tapestry hanging over the other side of the door and pad softly over. The young mage is asleep at his desk, which is fine by you; you want him alive and talking.

Your hand lands on his shoulder and he starts awake. Quick as lightning, you grab him, cover his mouth, and yank him to his feet. Yelling muffled screams into your hand, he elbows you in the gut, winding you long enough for him to get loose. There is a clattering noise as he lunges for something and knocks over some objects on the desk. You shove him down and pin him against the desk with one arm behind his back. He continues to struggle, and you grab his other hand. He holds a small, egg-shaped object, probably some kind of magical weapon. You twist it out of his hand before yanking him to his feet again and throwing him against the bedroom wall. Confident that he is now disarmed, you draw your sword and close in on him.

Turn to **2**

**86**

You are strong enough to bully your way through the crowd, but your injured arm slows you down. By the time you make it across the crowded street, the assassin has escaped. You hear the sound of his footfalls, frantic and panicked, heading off down a long and twisty alley. Wasting no time, you give chase.

Test your **STAMINA**

If you pass, turn to **15**

If you fail, turn to **35**

**87**

The assassin lies dead, the stench of his blood already starting to befoul the alleyway. As you suspected, he is wearing Annalisa's bracelet, a wide band of silver-plated iron inlaid with semi-precious gemstones. To be sure, you check for and find the engravings on the underside: the precisely energized runes holding its spell and a short, sentimental inscription: "To Annalisa, my guiding light through a life of darkness." It was a birthday present from you, back before you two were married. She

loved it. As beautiful as it is practical, the same as her.

Shaking off these nostalgic thoughts for the moment, you quickly search your assassin's body. You are surprised to find that, under a large, concealing cloak, he wears the garments of a noble guardsman. His dagger is standard issue, but his bow is a cut above; probably a rampart archer. Pinned to his chest is a small copy of the crest of Lord Barrington. Your heart skips a beat. This man is one of Barrington's personal guards. If Barrington has heard of your investigations, Annalisa could be in even graver danger than before. But no. If the king followed your directions, Barrington has been in custody and isolated since mid-morning. It's not possible he could have sent word to his co-conspirators to tie up loose ends. More likely, this hapless soul was ordered to stake out one of Barrington's confederates, and when he saw you mucking about he figured he should do something to earn his master's favor. You shake your head sadly. Poor young man picked the wrong horse to hitch his cart to.

You have no time to worry for his soul, though. You were firmly in the right, acting in self-defense, but you will still have to answer some uncomfortable questions once the city guard shows up. Hence, you depart quickly, make your way back to the main road, and vanish into the crowds around the market stalls.

Mark Annalisa's Bracelet on your character sheet and turn to **45**

**88**

Having dispatched your foe, you search his body and quickly notice a pewter pin on his shirt, in the shape of a serpent with a glass ball in its mouth. A viper. Confident you've found the insignia you need, you wipe it clean of blood and pin it to your shirt before heading back to the warehouse.

Turn to **39**

**89**

Being perfectly rested, you shove your way through the crowd, eventually finding yourself at the entrance to a long alleyway. The assassin flees with sharp steps, almost panicked. Not a professional. You give chase.

Test your STAMINA

If you pass, turn to **34**

If not, turn to **15**

**90**

You are awoken by a splash of water in your face. Still dazed, it takes you some time to get your wits about you. You are lying on your back on a hard, rough mattress. Over the ringing in your ears, you can hear the sounds of revelry nearby. You must be in the back room of Dalamir's.

"You alive, Jimmy?"

It takes a minute to realize Dalamir is talking to you, using one of your generic aliases. You are lucky; his presence might have stopped that oaf from killing you. (Restore your STAMINA to half its initial value.) "Yes, yes," you mutter. "I'm not ready to die just yet, old friend."

"Well, that might be a problem, because I'm about ready to kill you! What's the matter with you, Jimmy? You know I don't permit fights! And against a man nearly half a foot taller than you? What were you thinking?"

"He didn't seem so big from where I was sitting. Besides, I ... I got mad."

"Oh, that's a great excuse! 'I got mad.' That one never fails, nope."

"This is personal, Dalamir."

"Then you should have taken it outside!"

You suppose you should have. Age has made you impatient.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you, James," Dalamir continues. "I owe you for saving my business, but you know I have a reputation to uphold."

You rise to your feet uncertainly, hoping you don't look as disoriented as you feel. "I'm sorry, old friend."

"Sorry is neither going to get you the information you need nor repair my business's respectability!"

"All taverns have bar-fights occasionally. It's not going to keep anyone away. Listen to me, Dalamir. That man is involved in the kidnapping of someone very close to me. I need to know where she is and who's keeping her there. Is he still here?"

"I kicked him out, the same as I'm about to do you."

"Where could I find him?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"If that man is a regular, you know something."

Dalamir does not respond.

"Please, old friend."

Dalamir curses under his breath. "Take this information and don't come back. The man's name is Black Freddy. He's a smuggler, and he runs with the Redhands. As to where you could find him, I don't know. Now get lost!"

Not willing to stay around for a second beating at Dalamir's hands, you do so.

That went less than favorably for all concerned, but you did get some useful information out of it. Write the number 27 on your Character Sheet in the clues section. Add to it any other clues you have and turn to the indicated section.

## 91

You ascend the steps and rap on the solid wood of the front door. Receiving no answer, you knock again, louder. Then you call up to the second floor, in case he can't hear you.

"HEY!" calls an unfamiliar male voice from the street. "Can't you read?"

"Read what?" you reply.

"That sign in the window to your right! The one that says 'NO VISITORS' in big, red letters?"

You look to your right. "Oh! Umm, I'm sorry, sir, I didn't see it. Why no visitors? Is the master of the house ill?"

The unfamiliar pedestrian laughs. "Yeah, ill in the head, maybe. He locked himself in there three days ago, and refuses to come out."

You gently prod the man for more information. According to him, Westing has been up until all hours of the night, and the neighbors have heard worrying sounds: the crackle and hiss of powerful magic, and even an explosion or two. In daylight, the house is as silent as the grave. The local rumor is that Westing's barricading himself inside the townhouse in mortal dread of something.

You thank the man and walk away. At the corner, you turn around and double-back to the townhouse. What is Westing afraid of, you wonder? You, or the person he betrayed Annalisa to? Or maybe someone else entirely?

Whatever the case, you won't be able to get in by the front door.

Turn to **40** to look for another entrance.



92

Your walk has taken you near to Tarnach's town square. Lost in thought and with the chattering voices of the townspeople all about, you fail to react quickly enough when you hear the distinctive twang of a bowstring. Fortunately, the bowman's aim is less than stellar. He nicks your forearm (Lose 3 STAMINA), but you remain standing. The arrow thuds into a wooden wall behind you. A woman screams and the alarm is raised. Wasting no time, you determine where the shot came from and charge off into the crowd.

Test your LUCK

If you succeed, turn to **86**

If not, turn to **6**

93

"This isn't some petty burglary or nobleman's adultery we're talking about, old friend. My wife is in danger. Do you really want whatever happens to her on your conscience?"

Rather than being intimidated, Struckald laughs. "My friend, I don't know what illusions you harbor about my business, but I do not share them. Do you think I don't know what kind of things the information I give people is used for? Regardless, I can assure you that I do not know what you want to know."

"Bullshit. I know who was behind this, Struckald. It was Duke Barrington. And the whole city knows that your business is providing information to dukes and barons engaged in less-than-legal ventures. Barrington came to you for information, and I want to know what you told him."

"I'm sorry, Caldus, but you are mistaken." Struckald's voice is wavering. You have an advantage: he knows you know something.

If you wish to use it as leverage to intimidate him, turn to **4**

If you implore him to do the right thing, turn to **19**

94

In the end, only four men (five, including Vincent) lie dead. The others make the wise choice to flee back down the tunnel.

"Should we go after them?" Annalisa asks.

"No need," you reply. "The guard will take care of them." Remembering, you pull the signal stone from your pocket and activate it, signaling Captain Yarrow and his men to come in and commence the mop-up.

You feel the distinctive touch of Annalisa's hand on yours. You hadn't realized until now how much you'd missed it. Before she can ask if you are injured, you pull her to you and hug her. She softly encases you in her own arms and rests her head on your shoulder. Her hair, as always, smells of peaches. You sigh in relief. "I have had a very, very long day, my love."

"I know," she says. She has no further response, but just lets herself melt into your arms.

By the time you've worked your way back to the warehouse entrance, the sun has set and twilight is turning to evening. The bright spectrum of the sunset means nothing to you, but the coolness of the air is soothing and comfortable. The guards have chained most of the remaining smugglers, and the area outside the warehouse is a crowd of muttering guards, prisoners, medics, and onlookers. Amidst the hoopla, you hear a familiar voice calling out.

"Mother! Father!"

You hear the clapping of Merrick's shoes on the ground as he runs over. Annalisa steps forward and receives his embrace. "Mother," he says, "thank goodness you're all right. We were worried sick."

Annalisa smiles. "You were worried sick, perhaps, but your father was out and about, doing something about it."

"Now, now, love," you say. "Merrick did his part. Right, Merrick?"

"I did, father," he says while nodding. "Duke Barrington is in custody, and the King has already stripped him of his title. This will end at the gallows for sure."

"Serves him right. What about Westing? I sent him over to you."

"He arrived safely. He was quite shaken from his experiences at first, but now I think his major feeling is boredom. He was hassling one of mother's co-workers for advice when I left."

"Oh?" Annalisa asks. "Which one?"

"Meridia."

She frowns. "What kind of advice could Meridia have for him?"

"Well, actually... I rather think he fancies her."

"Oh, dear," says Annalisa, laughing. "That boy... so eager to learn, and yet so unaware of his limitations."

"It goes with his age, I imagine," you opine. "Merrick, will his majesty have need of us tonight?"

"He requests testimony from you both. But he said it could wait until morning."

"Hmm. Then I think this old man needs to go home and get some dinner. What about you, my dear?"

"I think that is a marvelous idea."

You bid your son farewell and link arms, walking side by side through the city streets towards your townhouse. To any who pass, you seem to be an ordinary middle-aged couple out for a walk. They don't see the subtle nudges she gives you to signal pitfalls and obstacles, and to guide you through corners and intersections. They don't know the intense concentration that you need to walk normally, when you are walking alone. You always walk faster with Annalisa by your side. Your light in a life of darkness. In more ways than one.

Boldly, you step in front of Annalisa. She gasps as you grab her and push her up against a wall, pinning her there as you kiss her deeply and passionately. She moans gently in response, pressing her grasping fingers into your back.

After a few long seconds, you withdraw. "Caldus!" she says, shocked but not at all offended.

You smile at her broadly. "My beloved Annalisa, when we get home, I am going to make you feel young again."

She laughs loud enough for the whole deserted street to hear. "Why, Caldus, are you sure?" she asks, running her fingers over your chest. "I'm not sure a man of your age could handle a woman like me."

"Pfft. I am not dead yet, my dear, and neither are you. There is some fire within me still, and I intend to enjoy it while it burns!"

She giggles, burying her face in your chest. Then she looks up into your eyes. Blank, as always, but not dead. "I love you, Caldus."

Someday, you may have to hang your sword up for good. Someday, you may truly be too weak in the muscles and too brittle in the bones to keep walking these streets. Someday, you may cease being someone your loved ones can rely on, and instead be someone who has to rely on their charity.

Someday, perhaps. But not today.

THE END