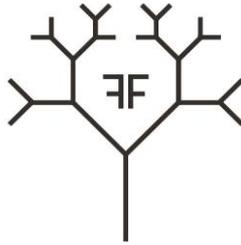


# SHADOW CURSED

---

A FRACTAL FORSAKEN BOOK



J. LLOREN QUILL

Copyright © 2016 by Jason Quill

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, without prior written permission.

Published by Jason Quill  
[www.jllorenquill.com](http://www.jllorenquill.com)

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Cover design and map by Abby Haddican  
Editing by Ben Barnhart  
Book Layout © 2015 BookDesignTemplates.com

Shadow Cursed/ J. Lloren Quill -- 1st ed.  
ISBN 978-0-9979887-3-4

For my parents, who have helped me celebrate  
all of my successes and supported me through  
all of life's misadventures.



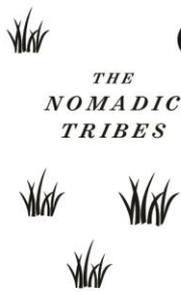


PILLAR

# THE KINGDOM OF MALETHYA



MINOT



THE  
NOMADIC  
TRIBES

Ispirtu

Darik's Palace

Bellator

RAVINAI

Arena

Slate's Apartment

Infirmary

Catalpa Grove

Regallo Estate

Rue St

A winding river flows through the center of the map, passing by these landmarks.

PORTSWAIN



THE  
DISENITES

An arrow pointing from the text towards the bottom right corner of the map.



## REFLECTIONS

Hunger. The farmer fights hunger during a long day working the fields. A traveler fights hunger with carefully packed rations. The glutton fights hunger with eager excess. Like the land of Malethya, hunger inspires people to fight. They fight for different reasons, but they all fight.

Rosana Regallo contemplated hunger while examining the plate before her. The blight had spread to the southern provinces, and it was difficult to find food untouched by the disease. Spots of wilted brown lifelessness mottled the fresh red tomatoes. The speckled rot touched everything on her plate, and she carefully carved around the sickened food with her throwing knife, conscious of the fact that this corruption was her fault. She had used blood magic to save Slate Severance and blood magic came at a cost. This time it was the blight. Even knowing the consequences of her actions, she would have made the same decision again. Her brother ruled the kingdom and enslaved the minds of all who opposed him. Rosana needed Slate's help to stop him.

If the people of Malethya needed to pick at their food and fight hunger, it was a small price to pay. Their concerns paled in comparison to Sana's hunger. Food could not quench her hunger. She set the tomato down and pushed the plate away. Her hunger ran deeper.

Some people had the slow, burning hunger for

power or wealth, insatiably striving for more and more. Theirs was the hunger of greed. Her hunger ran deeper.

Others fought the hunger of addiction. Their hunger changed to a physical need, a necessity of life that must be fulfilled. But even they could fight and overcome the hunger within.

Sana looked at her hand. Black specks periodically interrupted the smoothness of her skin. The blight slowly devoured her from within. The inevitable hunger of the blight devoured all that it came in contact with, spreading until there was nothing left. The blight's hunger could not be satisfied. The more it devoured, the hungrier it became. It would kill her, and she bore this burden by choice. It was the only way to save Malethya. If she were given the chance, the opportunity, to relive those decisions, she would make them again.

The Sicarius Headmaster did what needed to be done, because others lacked the strength to do so...

## DECEPTION OF THE INFIRMED

"Who are you today?" the infirmary wizard in charge of her care asked. Rosana contemplated that same question with every sunrise.

Rosana sat in her padded room and obediently answered. "I am the sister of the blood mage that rules Malethya from the shadows." Rosana could convincingly masquerade as any Malethyan, but the truth was often better than a lie. "He is controlling King Darik and will bring ruin to this land."

The wizard from the mental health unit of the infirmary scribbled notes on a piece of paper. He had introduced himself as Master Meikel, and he had been in charge of Rosana's care since her recent, voluntary admittance. Meikel raised an eyebrow slightly while writing. Rosana read the mannerism as part academic intrigue mixed with pity and the slightest bit of contempt for his inferiors. After contemplating the mental state of his patient for a while, Meikel delivered the professional, slightly exaggerated smile that he reserved for masking his emotions while addressing the insane. "There hasn't been a blood mage in Malethya in centuries. They are terrors from campfire stories told to frighten children. You have nothing to worry about."

"You are right." It was impossible to argue with someone who thought you were insane. "If I'm not the sister of a blood mage, who should I be?"

"That is a question for you to answer. I am here to listen and to help. All I can tell you is that you appeared at our doorstep several days ago with symptoms of schizophrenia. So far you have claimed to be four individuals: the lost relative of a blood mage, a former member of a covert spy ring, an assassin employed by the king, and the lover of a notorious criminal. After observing you, I worry that your mind has been lost to your own fantasies." Meikel thought for a moment and then came to a decision. "Treatment will begin tomorrow. Maybe then you will regain enough of your faculties to tell me your name."

The summary of her life did reek of fantasy, but she had never anticipated that it would get her labeled insane. Rose Regallo was the compassionate sister of Lattimer, but as she grew up, she rejected becoming Rosana Regallo, splitting the older version of herself into a different part of her mind to keep the compassion of her youth alive.

Her father, Brannon, noticed her internal conflict and enlisted the aid of his Ispirtu wizards to heal her. After months of experimentation, rumors of the troubled Regallo child reached the Sicarius Guild and the Headmaster contacted her. He viewed her condition—one in which she could split her personalities but access either of them at a given time—as a rare and wonderful gift. Rosana escaped to the Sicarius Guild and became Malethya's most deadly assassin. The necessity and brutality of her craft troubled Rosana and Rose, so they created the Sicarius Headmaster, a nameless figure who did what needed to be done regardless of the means. During the travels of the Sicarius Headmaster she met

Lucus, a wizard searching for an apprentice. Seeing the opportunity for training outside of Ispirtu's walls she created the personality of Sana, whose logic and attention to detail helped her studies in pattern-based magic.

Now she was Rosana, Rose, Sana, and the Sicarius Headmaster. Her personality changed for any given situation although disagreements between herself did arise occasionally. Right now, Sana's plan required a diagnosis that kept her in the infirmary, and jumping between herself while talking to Meikel was a simple way to execute the Sicarius Headmaster's mission.

Rosana leaned forward in the chair that was bolted to the floor to show her eagerness for treatment. She gripped the front of her shirt in feigned trepidation and pleaded with the infirmary wizard for information, asking, "What type of treatment? Will it help me?"

"The infirmary has made dramatic strides in the areas of mental illness by applying variations of our techniques for healing other parts of the body. For typical injuries, like stabbings or blunt trauma, we use probing spells to diagnose injuries to muscle or bone and then heal the patient. We cast these spells and move very methodically through the injured tissue without lasting consequences to the patient. In our studies of the human mind, we have discovered that some patients with cases similar to yours can benefit from probing spells conducted at high frequencies. It won't hurt, so I recommend you get a good night's sleep and try to relax. We will begin the treatment in the morning."

Sana was intimately familiar with probing spells from her training under Lucus, but she

wasn't familiar with this technique. It sounded like the infirmary wizards used the probing spell to jump back and forth within the brain to scramble the signals. When the spell stopped, hopefully whatever signals were crossed in the schizophrenic mind became untangled. Sana didn't want to find out what the spell would do to her brain. Rosana, Rose, and the Sicarius Headmaster agreed.

Rose looked out the locked window of her room into the courtyards surrounding the infirmary and admired the immaculate gardens with their flowers in full bloom. It reminded her that a full winter had passed since her brother, Lattimer Regallo, had seized control of Malethya. He was the first blood mage in Malethya for centuries, and he grew in power with every second that passed. *But he was the little brother who snuck into my room at night during storms because the thunder scared him. I don't want to think of him as the blood mage who has subjugated King Darik's mind and controls the kingdom's armies from his Ispirtu tower, choosing to rule through Darik and keeping the citizens unaware of the danger they face.* Sana looked at the beauty of the flowers in the gardens. *How long will it be before darkness covers the land. Time moves too quickly. The Sicarius Headmaster needs to act before all the beauty in the world disappears.*

Rose asked Master Meikel with sweetness and innocence in her voice, "Could I take a walk in the courtyards? I'm nervous about the treatments tomorrow and walking through the gardens may help me relax."

Meikel smiled at her, and this time Rosana knew it was genuine. "We believe in many forms of healing in the infirmary and encourage our

patients to explore our gardens as a holistic form of therapy. I will ask an orderly to escort you." Rose smiled in gratitude as the wizard left the room.

In her few moments alone, the Sicarius Headmaster hurried to her bed. A room in the mental ward of the infirmary provided precious few opportunities to hide anything, but the frame beneath the feathered bed had a small recess where the rounded pieces of wood formed together. In that recess she had hidden a length of string painstakingly chewed from the drawstring of her hospital-issued pants after the lights went out at night. She then remade her bed and sat in her chair until the orderly knocked on her door.

The orderly entered, looking at her chart. He said, "Good evening, Miss...umm..." He scanned her infirmary records for her name and blushed after failing to find it.

"I would like to take a walk in the gardens. Would you escort me?" Rose asked politely. The orderly held the door for Rose and led the way to the courtyard entrance. Rose stepped out into the failing light of day and headed toward the gardens. The orderly followed her until they reached the garden paths and then Rose requested some privacy. Sana's plan required it. "Will you wait here for me? I start a new treatment tomorrow and would like to spend a few moments by myself. I just want to stroll through the gardens and watch the setting sun." Politeness went a long way with orderlies accustomed to behavioral issues in the mental ward.

The orderly appeared conflicted. "I'm required to accompany you, but if you stay within my sight at all times, then I think it

will be ok."

Rose thanked the orderly and walked casually through the gardens, stopping to smell flowers and idly gaze at the setting sun. The centerpiece of the gardens was a hedge of rosebushes that encircled a catalpa tree. Sana scanned the branches inside the hedge and found the object of her search. Deep within the thickest part of a rosebush was a small bag. The Sicarius Headmaster plunged her arm into the thorn-covered bush to retrieve the bag while Rosana maintained a look of tranquility so as not to alert the orderly. When she pulled her arm back, the thorns had scratched and cut her forearm up to her elbow. The superficial wounds were just deep enough to draw blood, and attention.

Sana tucked the bag into her pants, securing it with the drawstring. She then tied the string she'd retrieved from her room to the rosebush. Simultaneously, she lowered her head to smell a rose blossom to maintain appearances. With this stage of her mission accomplished, she returned to the orderly at a casual pace while squeezing her arm above the elbow in an alternating pattern to increase the blood flow. Her posture was normal, if slightly hunched, as she exited the rosebushes in the gardens and came back into full view of the orderly.

He caught sight of her bleeding arm and rushed into the gardens to help. "You're bleeding! What happened?"

Rosana looked down at her arm soaked in blood and answered for Rose, who hated to lie, "I didn't notice. Isn't it pretty though? It looks like the roses in the garden." Politeness had its uses, but so did insanity. The orderly

concentrated on Sana's arm so much that he never noticed the slightly hunched posture concealing the bag she'd hidden at her waist. After rushing her back to her room and dressing her arm, the orderly left her alone again while mumbling about finding a new job.

Once he left, Sana stashed the bag and pressed her ear against the wall. From the adjacent room, she heard a man singing softly. The next room belonged to Ibson, a famous wizard throughout Malethya who had suffered a tragic fall that left his brain permanently impaired. Ibson's legendary intellect was reduced to simple rhymes and a childlike demeanor. The song Sana heard through the wall had perfect pitch and a melody too complex for such a condition. Sana's resolve hardened, and she waited for her medications to arrive.

In short order, a new orderly brought in a dark liquid that Sana recognized before it was explained. "This is wormroot. We give it to all our patients who possess the ability to perform magic. The wormroot temporarily blocks your ability to access the spark and prevents you from accidentally casting a spell that could harm you or those around you. Please drink it." Sana pretended to swallow and smiled with a closed mouth. The orderly left the room and Sana spit it out. By the time the infirmary wizards discovered the small pool of wormroot on her floor that signaled her disobedience, she would no longer be a patient in the infirmary.

With her last visitor gone for the night, Sana retrieved her stashed bag and laid the contents on her bed: a lock pick, a knife, and a piece of smoothed wood that fit nicely into the palm of her hand. Only the lock pick was functional. The dull knife blade collapsed when

she applied pressure to it. People throughout the kingdom feared the piece of wood known as a shockstick, but it was a tool of deception. The shock that people feared came from a spell cast by Sana, a spell she couldn't cast if she had swallowed the wormroot.

Sana ran through the plan in her head and listened against the wall for the singing to stop in the adjacent room. Long after the stars were the only light in the sky, the singing turned to silence and finally the silence turned to snoring. It was time.

In the mental ward, doors locked from the outside, so the Sicarius Headmaster used the lock pick to exit. It was a standard lock, and she made quick work of it. A soft click signaled her success and she opened the door slowly, peering into the hallway. Orbs lit the hallway, but the orderlies had finished their rounds, so the corridor was empty. The Sicarius Headmaster slipped into the hallway, entered the adjacent room, and left the door slightly ajar to expedite her exit.

Inside the room, the sound of snoring and the familiar layout of the room led her silently to Ibson's bed. The Sicarius Headmaster pressed the knife against Ibson's throat, rammed the shockstick into his stomach, and whispered, "Listen to what I say or die. I know you drank wormroot and are completely defenseless. You are at my mercy." *That last part was a lie. Any mercy that Ibson receives will be from Rose.*

Ibson's eyes opened wide and his body went rigid, fighting his instinct to bolt upright because of the presence of the knife. He stammered,

Knives are mean,

Knives are scary,  
My soul is clean,  
Don't kill-

The Sicarius Headmaster interrupted his poem, "Save the nursery rhymes, Ibson." Then she changed the inflection of her voice to alternate between high and low octaves. "Do you know who I am?"

Recognition of the distinctive style of speech invoked a fear that broke through Ibson's façade. "Yes. You are the Sicarius Headmaster and the wizard's apprentice that I once knew as Sana. What do you want from me?"

"Your life means nothing to me, since you have failed to live it. You choose to hide your recovery and ignore the world. Information, however, is valuable to me, and I believe you have been hiding information." The Sicarius Headmaster spoke. *Rose must ignore the deeds the Sicarius Headmaster carried out in the pursuit of information.*

Ibson protested, "If you need information from me, then I am in no danger until I tell you what you want to know..."

Sana appreciated his deductive reasoning, but she countered with her own. "I disagree. You locked yourself away and pretended to be mentally ill to protect yourself from the threat of a blood mage. You value your life, and this knife can take it, regardless of my motives. Stand up slowly. We are leaving." Ibson rose from bed slowly without resistance. He was an old man, and he fought with magic. Without the spark, he was simply old. "Take the knife," Sana commanded. A surprised Ibson reached for the knife at his throat. Before he reached it, Sana applied some pressure to the

blade and caused it to collapse. "Don't get any ideas. This knife is harmless and you still have a shockstick to your stomach. Just play the role I tell you to play." Ibson grabbed the knife and nodded. Sana twisted so that her arm was behind her back but still pressed into Ibson's gut. "Grab my waist and hold me tight against you. Place the knife against my throat with your other hand. Now walk out the exit to the gardens. If anyone tries to stop you, threaten to kill me."

Sana, the hostage, led Ibson to the door and opened it. Ibson walked dutifully toward the exit, while Sana pretended to struggle against him. Ibson's wide-eyed, frightened stare even passed for a crazed hostile attacker. Halfway down the hallway, an orderly rounded the corner. Before Ibson could speak, Sana yelled, "Help, help me! He has a knife!"

The orderly turned and ran. Sana said to Ibson, "You are now committed to this ruse. You are a mentally ill patient holding a knife against someone's throat. No one will believe otherwise." Somewhere ahead, the orderly triggered a security orb and the alarm rang throughout the infirmary.

They rounded the final corner and saw three infirmary wizards barring the exit to the gardens. Master Meikel was in the lead and tried to reason with Ibson. "Put the knife down. You are a good person. Whatever you are dealing with right now, we can help you through it. Just let the girl go."

Ibson played his role to perfection by saying.

Step aside,  
Step aside,

The girl won't die,  
If my words you abide.

Sana tried to influence the critical decision in front of the wizards. "Do as he says. He's not himself. He could do anything..."

Master Meikel assessed the situation and commanded the infirmary personnel. "Allow him to leave. We can't risk harm to the girl. He has taken wormroot, so we can follow him safely. He won't get far." They stepped aside and cleared the path to the gardens. Ibson backed through the doorway, shielding himself with his hostage as the ruse demanded.

The wizards followed them into the darkened gardens with the infirmary alarms fading behind them. Ibson whispered to Sana, "Now what?"

"Walk toward the rosebushes and get behind the hedge." Ibson obliged as the infirmary wizards continued their attempts to negotiate with Ibson from a distance. Sana strained her eyes in the darkness and saw that the string she placed earlier in the day had been removed. *Help is here.*

A figure appeared on the roof of the infirmary, outlined by the ambient light from the building below but shadowed by the night sky. "Ibson belongs to me!" The pitch of the figure's voice alternated between words and pierced the night sky. A second later, a thick cloud of smoke enveloped the infirmary wizards.

The Sicarius Headmaster mimicked the alternating tones of the rooftop figure, "I am the Sicarius Headmaster!" Dense smoke reflects sound and makes it difficult to pinpoint the direction of the source. By speaking from two directions, Sana knew it would be virtually impossible to identify her or Ibson's location.

She turned to Ibson and whispered, "Our extraction point is in that direction. Move as fast as you are able. I will catch up shortly." Sana pointed toward a tall building just outside the infirmary grounds, within the capital city of Ravinai.

The figure on the rooftop said, "I defy King Darik by my continued existence. He tried to kill every member of Sicarius, his sworn servants, but I am not so easily killed. Now I serve the people of Malethya, although they are blinded to the dangers they face. I rule the world of shadows. Follow me tonight and you will never see the light of day again."

Following that bit of theater, Sana chased after Ibson, catching the old man quickly. The infirmary wizards were too disoriented and busy coughing from the smoke to give chase, but the real danger still awaited them. Up ahead, the headmaster located a tall, balconied building and quietly commanded Ibson, "Head for the alleyway just left of the building." The Sicarius Headmaster could hear the distinctive sound of soldiers marching toward the infirmary in response to the building's alarms, but they were still a few blocks away. *We made it.*

Inside the alleyway, Sana threw a canvas cover off a wooden platform. "Get on," the Sicarius Headmaster commanded Ibson. He climbed onto the platform while Sana unhooked a rope hidden amid the intricate architecture of the tall building. The rope attached to the four corners of the platform and disappeared somewhere above. The Sicarius Headmaster grasped a second rope that led to a knotted anchor against the alleyway and climbed aboard the platform. "Hold on tight. It might be a little bumpy at the top." She pulled on the

rope, which released the knot and the platform started to rise immediately, gaining speed at an astounding rate. Halfway to the top, the counterweight passed them, plummeting to the ground. Their speed continued to increase and the Sicarius Headmaster jumped gracefully onto the building's balcony just before the counterweight smashed into the alleyway below. The sudden end to the platform's rise jarred Ibson, but the Sicarius Headmaster reached out to steady the suspended platform as it swung from a pulley overhead. She guided the old wizard onto solid ground.

"You played your role well, Ibson," Rosana complimented the wizard. She wanted to establish authority over Ibson, and compliments for following orders reinforced the hierarchy.

"You left me little choice. Why did you go to all the trouble of breaking me out of there? I was perfectly happy avoiding the world." Just then the Sicarius Headmaster saw motion on the rooftops, and a figure jumped gracefully from rooftop to rooftop to crouch above their balcony.

"Hello, Annarelle." The Sicarius Headmaster greeted her protégé, dressed in her likeness. The series of black wraps blended into the night, allowing for a great deal of flexibility and, most importantly, innumerable folds and pockets for darts, knives, and other tools of their craft. Annarelle also wore a Sicarius mask that made it difficult to look her in the face. The mask absorbed all light, creating a void in the visual signals the brain normally interpolates. The brain fills the void using information surrounding the mask. In practicality, this meant that the wearer of a Sicarius mask would be seen as a servant if

they dressed in servant's clothes, a wizard if dressed in robes, or a soldier if dressed in armor. The Sicarius Headmaster was used to wearing and interacting with others wearing the mask, so its unsettling effect was muted. "Your timing is impeccable. I take it you found my string?"

"I left the package in the rose bush the night you were admitted and checked at sundown every evening for a signal. When I found it, I contacted Villifor, and he had his rebels occupy the army's attention tonight." Sana looked at the skyline of the city and saw smoke from several fires burning, which probably slowed the response time of the troops when the alarms at the infirmary were raised. Annarelle continued, "I'm happy it didn't take longer than a few days. How did things go inside the infirmary?"

The Sicarius Headmaster thought of the ease with which she had been diagnosed and admitted to the infirmary. It had all gone according to Sana's plan. *But I don't want to describe how easy it was to get a diagnosis and be admitted.* "I located and extracted our target before they tried to administer therapy to me."

Annarelle laughed. Most people would mistake the meaning of her laugh as jest at Sana's fear of therapy. Only a fellow Sicarius Guardsman would know the laugh's real meaning, which indicated Annarelle's relief that Sana didn't have to kill the wizard who might have attempted to treat her.

Ibson tried to take control of the situation by demanding answers. "Pleasantries aside, when do the questions start?"

Rosana waved Ibson toward the balcony railing that faced the infirmary, while Annarelle

disappeared to scout for approaching trouble. Below their balcony, soldiers scoured the infirmary grounds in response to the alarm. Rosana addressed Ibson, "The Crimson Guard fights for justice throughout Malethya. The armor of the Bellator Guardsmen reflects the starlight in proud proclamation of their place in society. The robes of the Ispirtu wizards are hidden in the darkness, but you can imagine them scurrying around in a righteous display of power. I once stood in their company as a stanchion of Malethya and protector of the kingdom. Now the very people I strive to protect fear me. You let this happen."

Ibson responded, "It's true that I suspected a blood mage in Malethya, but you can't blame me for your troubles. I was put in charge of investigating how our friend, Slate Severance, the tournament champion, ended up with iron in his hand during his championship bout. During my investigation, it became apparent that he was a victim of blood magic. The blood mage attacked me in the arena and nearly killed me. I hid my recovery to protect myself, so that the blood mage couldn't come back to finish the job."

"You didn't hide from the blood mage," the Sicarius Headmaster scolded. "You hid from the world. You hid from responsibility."

Ibson shook his head in bemusement. "Responsibility is always shared, but self-preservation is the right of every man. Besides, I listened as you, Slate, Rainier, Lucus, and Lattimer worked to identify the blood mage. Slate found evidence implicating Brannon Regallo and stormed Ispirtu. I hear Brannon has been defeated, the threat of blood magic is ended, and the people of Malethya are

safe. If your actions resulted in the loss of the Sicarius Guild, then the responsibility lies with the Sicarius Headmaster. Don't delude yourself."

The Sicarius Headmaster knew her own failures, and Rose mourned the loss of the guardsmen every night. "People who fail to act are adept at identifying fault in the actions of others. I will not take criticism from you." The Sicarius Headmaster's scorn permeated her words. Groups of Bellator Guardsmen and Ispirtu wizards combed the infirmary grounds below, searching for the notorious Sicarius Headmaster. Rosana explained to Ibson, "You are as blind as the rest of Malethya. We didn't defeat Brannon the blood mage. We defeated Brannon Regallo, the Ispirtu Headmaster and protector of Malethya. I stood at his side and fought with him before he was killed by his son, Lattimer. Lattimer took control of Ispirtu and the mind of King Darik through the use of blood magic. The armies loyal to Darik fight for their king, unknowingly doing the will of Lattimer. Meanwhile, Lattimer has been growing his own army of loyal subjugates. They look and act like normal soldiers until they attack. Then their eyes turn red and they attack with pure, unbridled aggression. They attack as Furies."

Ibson blanched at the mention of Furies, foot-soldiers from the days of Cantor when blood mages fought incestuously. Ibson refused to accept Rosana's story. "No, Brannon was the blood mage. Lattimer was never clever enough to accomplish what you say. It is an impossibility that he controls the kingdom and an army of Furies. Besides, Furies are mindless. Their aggression stems from a single desire to kill

placed in their head by a blood mage." He pointed to toward the soldiers in the infirmary grounds. "Those soldiers aren't mindless."

"No, they are not. They attack with the aggression of Furies but the training of Bellator Guardsmen and Ispirtu wizards." Sana paused to let the reality of that threat sink in.

"I tire of your lies. Let's end these questions," confronted Ibson.

"I have told you the truth. As for questions, I have yet to ask one. However, you did ask me when the questions would start, and I have avoided answering in the hopes you would believe me. Since you refuse to see the truth, the questions will start just as soon as you wake up." The Sicarius Headmaster reached out with her shockstick and Sana cast a spell that sent a small jolt of electricity through the wizard. Ibson fell to the balcony floor.

Annarelle rejoined her and picked up Ibson's legs. "I hate this part of the operation."

Sana, Rose, and Rosana agreed with Annarelle, but the Sicarius Headmaster knew it was part of the job. "We are Sicarius Guardsmen. We need to move and hide bodies once in a while."

As they prepared to move Ibson, a large contingent of Guardsmen and wizards entered the city grounds below. At the head of the pack, a wizard carried himself with an arrogance that dwarfed the gaudiness of his robes and scepter. Even if Lattimer wasn't her brother, she would have recognized him from a mile away. It was Lattimer's first public appearance since seizing power, and he had apparently taken up their father's sense of fashion as well as his air of authority. *Despite the physical similarities to her father, his appearance only*

*inspires hate. Lattimer killed her father. He was responsible for the deaths of Lucus and Slate's parents through the actions of Magnus. Now he has enslaved hundreds, if not thousands of soldiers to do his will. For any of these atrocities, he deserves to die.* The Sicarius Headmaster pulled out a throwing knife while Sana cast a spell to guide and speed it. The knife flew straight and actually sped up as it neared Lattimer, reaching the speed of a falcon just before its talons grasp its prey.

At the last second, the knife flew off course and embedded in the ground at Lattimer's feet, harmlessly diverted by whatever magic surrounded Lattimer. The blood mage looked down at the knife and then directly at her, locking eyes with his sister. He pointed at her as the soldiers and wizards around him turned into Furies. The soldiers sprinted toward their building and the wizards readied fireballs. Lattimer himself readied a spell and the Sicarius Headmaster didn't want to wait to find out what kind of spell it would be.

"Go! Now!" She yelled to Annarelle. They flung Ibson's body onto the next rooftop. Beneath them, the building started to shake. Lattimer planned to take down the whole building. Annarelle and the Headmaster jumped onto the adjacent rooftop just as the building was hit with a series of fireballs. It collapsed a second later in a cloud of rubble that mixed with the smoke of wizard's fire.

They gathered Ibson and used the smoke and dust as a screen to mask their escape. When they were safely away from the collapsed building, they took the time to carry Ibson more comfortably. "Well, we learned one thing tonight. My throwing knives are useless against

Lattimer."

"And if we get close enough, we run the risk of being captured and subjugated like King Darik. We need Slate. He is the only one who could ever resist Lattimer." Annarelle talked while she unwrapped a portion of her outfit around her leg. It had two long straps on either end of a fine mesh of fabric in the middle to form a makeshift stretcher.

"Slate could only resist Lattimer for a short period of time, but you are right. It would be long enough to attack him. Unfortunately, he hasn't recovered fully from his first encounter with Lattimer. We need Slate, but we need to fix him first. Maybe Ibson will hold the key." They rolled Ibson's body atop the middle portion of the stretcher, and Annarelle slung two straps over her shoulders. The Sicarius Headmaster tied the other two straps around her waist and the two set off with their cargo.

They carried him across the rooftops of Ravinai, and while the Sicarius Headmaster handled the physical exertion, Rose and her other selves were free to look at the city anew. Rose's heart warmed to the sounds of merriment that floated up from the taverns below. Rosana knew it wasn't the sounds of drunkards spending their last dime on a drink but the laughter of citizens with extra change in their pockets. Sana noted the clean streets and the quality goods displayed in the store windows. The alleyways were clear of the homeless and new construction confirmed the affluence of the citizens. Ravinai's prosperity brought conflicting emotions. When Lattimer seized power, he promised to recreate the golden age of Cantor with his unlimited power. It appeared that he was living up to his

promise, but Sana knew the golden age ended in bloodshed with the blood mages subjugating citizens and using them as mindless weapons in their never-ending thirst for power. Rose hoped she could get answers before the prosperity ended and the bloodshed began.

With the fear of the future refocusing her efforts, the Sicarius Headmaster checked on Ibson. He was still unconscious as they approached an abandoned warehouse. The Sicarius Headmaster had a network of safe houses and informants in Ravinai and throughout Malethya. When King Darik destroyed the Sicarius Guild, she relocated her headquarters to this warehouse, one of her more secretive locations. The warehouse's proximity to the infirmary's morgue proved to be an advantageous location for some of Sana's needs.

The Sicarius Headmaster and Annarelle hauled Ibson's body onto the rooftop of the abandoned warehouse and toward a ventilation shaft that served as the hideout's entrance. The shaft hid a ladder and a winch, which they used for supplies or, in this case, a body. They hooked the straps of Ibson's stretcher to the winch and lowered him into the darkness until the winch stopped. The Headmaster and Annarelle descended the ladder to a small platform that hung inconspicuously from the rafters of the warehouse.

Annarelle lit a small oil lamp that cast a dim glow over the warehouse below them. The floor of the warehouse was covered with row upon row of shelving that once served as a distribution center for the king's supply of grain and stores. The offices suspended from the ceiling, so that the king's clerks and foreman could oversee the workers below and

keep stock of warehouse supply. The stairwell that originally connected the offices to the warehouse floor was destroyed in a fire extensive enough to cause the building to be abandoned. The result was the perfect hideout—the warehouse offices were isolated and difficult to infiltrate. They were also heavily modified to fit her needs.

Sana reached up to a pulley system that connected the platform to the offices. She hooked Ibson's stretcher to the pulley hook before disconnecting him from the winch. "Annarelle, can you welcome our guest?" Annarelle smiled and swung freeform across the rafters, easily bridging the gap between the platform and the offices while Sana worked the pulley system. Ibson's body hung lifelessly as it traversed the span into Annarelle's waiting arms. She disconnected him and the Sicarius Headmaster swung across the rafters to join them. "His room is prepared for his arrival. Please tie him to his chair and meet me in the anatomy room."