

Knox pushed the door behind him closed with his foot, his arms too full of preparatory knickknacks and gewgaws to allow the use of his hands. The latch to his humble apartment clicked in obeisance. Slowly, carefully, he let his acquisitions splay gently across the wooden floor, a clickerclack accompanying their dispersal. He turned back to the door, opened it, stuck his head out, peered in both directions of the street below, retreated, threw the bolt, and turned to close the shutters on the windows.

“Damn,” he said to himself as darkness engulfed the room. He pushed the nearest set of shutters back open just long enough to retrieve an old candle from the rickety nightstand near his straw-filled bed, the vermin within it scattering quickly as darkness fled from returning light. For a moment, his eyes lingered on the bed, the one they’d shared. It seemed to him that the bugs that made their home in his rough mattress had only come once she had gone, but he knew this to be untrue. He could remember their shared complaints come morning.

The candle lit, Knox again closed the last of the shutters, the darkness of the single room now pierced by faint, flickering glow, the candle defiant in its radiance. He had just enough illumination to find the other half-spent candles and to light them, leaving their new cousins arrayed on the floor where they had come to rest.

Satisfied with the room’s glow, Knox removed his work clothes: the worn leather belt that held his coin purse (now empty), the robe that marked him as a freelance thaumaturge, the heavy boots still caked with the dust of Asterfaen’s back streets and alleyways, the wooden rings enchanted to glitter as silver and gold in a display of his worldly success. Down to his shirt and small clothes, he folded his removed belongings and placed them on the room’s single table, pushed up against the far wall away enough from the bed to discourage the fleas from infesting his daily attire.

He moved again to the shutters, double-checking that he had latched and secured each of them, squinting to peer downward through the slats at the streets below. Finding nothing particularly suspicious—at least as far as he could see—he now turned himself to the work at hand.

Kneeling, he swept the scattered items into a small pile in the center of the room. From a roughspun satchel he retrieved a small carving knife. This he carried first to the wall to the left of the apartment’s door, selecting a spot between the shuttered windows. He drew the knife lightly over the plaster on the wall, careful to make only a faint outline of a design without punching into the wattle below. He bit his lip, holding the knife by its blade for extra dexterity, as he sketched out the design: an intricate geometry of shapes and stray lines, runic symbols punctuating the empty space between. When he had traced the last angle, he stepped back from the wall, fetched a candle and returned to examine his work in detail. Satisfied, he returned the candle and brought blade to plaster once again, this time deepening the design, but still cautious with the drawing’s depth.

The sigil complete, Knox pressed his hand up against it, furrowing his brow in concentration as he softly but speedily recited an incantation, summoning the Power and drawing it into the arcane geometries of the design he had carved. A

working of obfuscation and occultation, a shield for his work against the prying eyes of the Vigil. *Damn them and their overzealous monopoly on the determination of permissible and impermissible workings.* The thought nearly broke his concentration, but he caught himself and focused on the incantation, the formalization of his will. He spoke the final words and reached out his arcane senses to ensure that the sigil now contained the product of his work. It did.

He now repeated the process on the opposite wall. Midway through his etching, there came a knock at his door. Briefly startled, Knox collected himself with a curse, and glanced about the room. Plaster dust had collected on the floor beneath his sigils. The use of candlelight in the daytime looked suspicious at best. But there was nothing for it; he had no time to tidy up before answering the knock.

Knox unbolted the door and swung it open just wide enough to stick his face through the gap. He squinted at the profundity of the daylight, taking a moment before the face of his neighbor Beatrice came into focus. A pretty woman—or she had been before years of hard living had taken their toll—Knox remembered that she plied her own trade during the night. He had even considered visiting her himself after Wilda had gone, but his sense of loyalty prevented him.

“How do you think I’m supposed’a sleep with you scratchin’ at me walls like some monster in the night? You gonna take care a’ me if I can’t work tonight? Got some spare cuts to pay my time?”

“Well, no—” Knox began before she cut him off with the wave of her hand, sweeping her long blonde hair from her neck to her back, as if removing an obstacle to her impending assault.

“An’ another thing, why’s it so dark in there? And why aintcha workin’ today?”

Knox scrunched his face in a sudden bout of frustration and disgust. Disgust for her incessant and childish questions. Disgust for her profession. Disgust for his own attraction to her. Without even thinking about it, his left hand began to twitch behind his back, forming shifting shapes as an aid to his thaumaturgy.

He looked Beatrice straight in her doe-like eyes, green as summer ponds filled with algae and fallen moss. “You are interfering with my work, girl,” he spat, malevolence filling his speech. “I have no time for the likes of foolish whores too stupid to understand the vagaries of thaumaturgy. Who are you to question me, one who has studied at the universities, has touched secrets you shall never comprehend, has power at his beck and call the likes of which you cannot imagine?”

She stepped away from him on instinct, her back to the rail of the third-story balcony that connected the apartments. But her resolve returned quickly, joined by a fire Knox had not expected. His working had failed—he had been too subtle with it—and only his words had frightened her. *Damn*, he thought to himself.

“Who are you to speak to me that way? Aye, you may’ve been to a university, but you failed there, dincha? You’re a common street thaumaturge, no magus, and not even a good one at that. You wouldn’t be living next to honest whores and other common folk if you could work the Practice with any skill, wouldcha? The only secrets you know are how to drive off a good woman.”

Now, fury welled within Knox—because he knew she spoke true, at least except for her last insult. He had performed poorly during his time as a student; he’d tried several universities before he realized that he’d never be a magus, that his life as a thaumaturgic drudge performing minor workings for those who could afford him had been long before preordained. By the time he had come to the realization, though, the debt he had accrued in his attempt at greatness had forced him into the poverty of the rickety apartment building in the slums of Asterfaen—more so that his creditors could not find him than to save the money to pay them. He had attempted to find employ with the Artificer Houses, where he would have lived a grand life even as an arcane cog in the machines of Artificial production, but the Houses sneered at his modest skill.

He found some employ within the city, using thaumaturgy to enhance the parties of wealthy merchants with illusory spectacles, or to assist some black-thumbed wife of a minor noble with her gardening. But he was the one they summoned when more proficient freelance thaumaturges had already found employment; he lived off the scraps of his arcane superiors. The jobs were few and far between, and he had learned to ration his modest earnings to tide him until his next employment.

Almost he had come to terms with all of this. With a silent resignation, he had slumped defeatedly into the details of his life and his work. Until he met Wilda. A barmaid, sure, but her pleasure in the simple joys of life had simultaneously made him forget the rest and desire to rise above. She had inspired him in all things, supported him in all things, become all things to him. But she was gone now, and Beatrice’s last words stung too deep to not respond.

Throwing the door wide open, he produced the carving knife and held it to Beatrice’s face as he pushed her against the balcony’s railing, lifting her heels so that she rested on the tips of her toes and struggled to maintain balance. Knox found that he enjoyed the fear in her eyes more than he would have enjoyed an apology for her harshness.

He reached behind her and pulled her golden locks taut between their faces, lingering for a moment before sawing at the hairs with the blade to remove a tattered keepsake.

“You know what a thaumaturge can do to you with a piece of your body, yes?” he whispered to her, the lowered volume more malicious than shouting could have been.

“Y-yes,” she said, nodding slowly.

“Good. Then go back into your squalid pen and trouble me no more.”

When he stepped back from her she clutched at her hair as if sorely wounded, sobbing and shuffling away to her adjacent apartment, slamming the door shut and bolting it hurriedly. Knox smiled to himself, at least until he spied in the street below an old washerwoman, stopped in the middle of pouring out a tub of brackish water to mix with all the other refuse and offal slowly wending its way downhill. She glowered at him until his own hard stare forced her to finish her task and skitter back to whence she came.

Nosy neighbors driven off, he returned to the darkness of his apartment, letting the seized hair scatter to the wind before he did. He'd never been a competent theurgist anyway; the ritual with which he now concerned himself would have been unthinkable were it not for his desperation.

The door latched and bolted once again, his eyes slowly adjusting to the flickering firelight, he continued to etch out the sigil in the plaster on the wall he shared with Beatrice. He could hear her sobs, barely suppressed, between the strokes of his blade. Like the first, he imbued this arcane symbol with the Power before making similar designs in the door and the one wall that remained.

He paused for a minute now, trying to recall the next step. Sifting the thoughts racing through his mind proved of no avail, so he stepped delicately over the paraphernalia he'd left haphazardly strewn across the floor as he made his way to his bed. This he pushed aside, exposing the wood floor beneath. With the tip of his carving knife, he pried away the loose board and stuck his hand inside the revealed space, pulling forth a crumpled stack of parchment like some illusionist's trick.

Held up to the candlelight, he reordered the pages until he believed he had set them right again; his nervousness about being discovered with such contraband prevented him from careful organization the last time he had retrieved and studied them. He mumbled the words softly to himself as he worked through the text, seeking his place among the myriad preparatory steps.

Only at great cost had he copied these pages from Cadessia eld Caithra's *A Practical Guide to Deep Conjury*, a book forbidden by the Vigil to all but the most renowned of magisters. He had posed as a student at the University to gain access to the library, though by now his ability to pass for the age of students admitted to the study of the Practices stretched credulity. The dark of night had helped. Upon entry to the repository of arcane texts, he had followed memory to the location of those texts preserved for the most trusted of practitioners—usually vigilants investigating reports for evidence of occult malefice—but barred to general study or reference.

These texts, like those who might employ them, were kept in a dungeon built below the library proper, deprived of both light and regular visitation, with only each other to keep company. Only students of the Practices could enter the section of the library where the scrolls and codices of arcana were kept. The stone archway dividing the library's mundane and arcane sections had been, since well before Knox's time there, affectionately referred to as the Gargoyle's Gate, flanked as it was by two examples of the alchemical prowess of the Old Aenyr (which had long since been quieted of course, though students often complained that the eyes of those stone beasts tracked them as they passed). Gargoyle's Gate always had at least one student being groomed for the Vigil at guard. This, however, had proved a minor obstacle, as the young men and women posted there typically had not yet overcome their anxiety over confronting those who might enter the restricted area. There were always gawkers, mundane students and the like, attempting to enter

that much-whispered-about section of the library through bluster, diversion or sheer bravado.

The texts available in the general repository of the arcane, while useful to those with the Gift, were quite useless to those without the long training and innate capabilities necessary to make sense of—much less employ—the information within. Access to this area, which Knox had visited so many times as a student himself, had been no true hindrance.

But that sunken dungeon where the idolatrous, heretical and blasphemous texts lay under lock and key, magical ward, and active guard by full members of the Vigil, *that* constituted a barrier to Knox’s goal. To access this sanctum had taken all of his cunning. And not cunning alone; he had called in every favor owed to him, spent every coin he could save, stretched his own Gift to the breaking point (and likely beyond) in the acquisition of the pages he held now, carefully cut from the tome that had held them in the few moments he had managed within the treasure house of knowledge.

He had bribed several students to distract the vigilants while he made his foray into the forbidden section, had solicited the help of outlaw practitioners to assault the vault’s wards and protections (he shuddered to think at the favors they would require of him in recompense for such assistance), had learned from thieves and burglars the art and craft of picking a lock.

The cost paid, he held within his hands those yellowed pages that he had cut from eld Caithra’s tome. Ordered, or at least he hoped he had organized them properly, he paced absentmindedly back to the center of the room, his toe stubbing against the heavy sack of his ritual materials.

This he picked up a stick of blue chalk, the result of an ultramarine pigment that would have been far too expensive for him had he purchased it from reputable sources, from next to the sack. His poverty allowed him no such luxury as to question the provenance of such goods.

Glancing back and forth to the stolen pages of eld Caithra’s manual, Knox turned his attention to drawing on the apartment’s floor, a large circle of Power, far more complex and intricate than the minor sigils he had affixed to the walls and empowered through his Will. Complex geometries met with runes the likes of which Knox had never seen—not even during his time at the universities. He quickly abandoned any attempt to make sense of the design with the poor amount of thaumaturgical theory he had retained; he simply hoped that his trust in eld Caithra had not been misplaced.

His circle complete and unbroken, he stood up to compare it against the diagram on eld Caithra’s stolen pages. If any discrepancy existed, he did not see it. A pang of doubt twisted in his stomach, eating away at him slowly, subtly. This drove him back to the bag of essentials, where he fished out a small earthenware bottle. In a well-practiced motion, he removed the cork and brought the lip of the bottle to his own parched lips, drawing a long swig of hard brandy. He returned the cork to the bottle and set it on the table; by the time this was done Knox could feel the liquor dulling the edges of his consciousness ever so delightfully.

Next came the fresh candles. One by one, Knox lit each with a minor sorcery, found its intended location on old Caithra’s diagrams, dripped a small amount of wax onto the floor and pushed the bottom of the candle in, forming a semi-stable base as the dripped wax cooled. Thirteen candles in all, most of them set at the odd intersections of the lines of the circle of Power, but a few in places unexpected in and around the drawn symbols.

The new candles added their own flickering light to the old, changing the forms of the dancing shadows that adorned the walls, turning them into a churning ocean of dark shapes flowing back and forth tumultuously. These caught Knox’s attention for some time; he discerned shapes within the shadows that instinct told him were wrong. He had no explanation for it, too poor an understanding of natural philosophy to dress the feeling in words, but subconscious experience told him that something had changed, that the shadows no longer behaved as they ought. Despite the brandy, fear—not doubt, this time—surged within him, particularly as he guessed at the meaning of the wayward shadows.

For this working, however, the shadows were no mere side-effect of the Power, nor an indication of a mistake made along the way. Quite the opposite; the menacing and seemingly-autonomous forms of darkness occupying the corners of the apartment proved that he had followed his instructions properly. His preparation had worn the Veil thin here.

Another swig of the brandy, this one shorter than the first. He needed to quiet his mind just enough that he would not run screaming from the room once he began the ritual proper, but needed to retain his wits enough for the precise and delicate work of mind and hands that success required. He waited after the drink for a moment, letting the effects sink in, practicing the handforms he used as aids to his thaumaturgical workings to test the dexterity left to him, shaking his head slightly to test his balance, reciting bawdy songs from the taverns he frequented to check the agility of his unsober thoughts.

From this point onward, there could be no haphazard approach; no period for desultory preparation remained to him. Considering the state of his mind, he took one more tiny sip from the bottle, recorked it, and placed it near where he would be sitting for the ritual. He expected hours in the doing of this thing and did not doubt that he would need to refresh his courage from time to time.

He peered through the slats in the shutters one more time, listened for Beatrice’s sobbing at his apartment wall. Neither movement in the street below nor sound from the adjacent hovel met his attention. From the bag he pulled the remaining instruments: a small but ornate wooden knife, its edge sanded fine and sharp, occult symbols painstakingly carved along both handle and blade; a small bronze bowl, plain and utilitarian; a thin clay jar filled with charcoal mixed with the crushed leaves of the elder tree, petals of the bitter nightshade, bits of the weeping greycap; a vial of clear river water; a wide, shallow bowl carved from a single piece of wood; a clay talisman that had been buried beneath the gallows before an execution.

Laying out the items, he sat before the circle of Power. The charcoal mix he poured into the bronze bowl, the river water into the wooden. He set the athame and the talisman directly before his folded legs. Everything readied, the ritual commenced in earnest.

Knox spoke the opening words softly and in a circle, beginning again once he had completed the incantation. At first he read the lines from the page he held before him, but soon he closed his eyes and recited from memory, hoping that his pronunciation would be acceptable to whatever spirits controlled the ritual’s success—it had been some time indeed since he had read anything in Old Aenyr, much less spoken the tongue aloud.

Seven times seven repetitions he made, just as eld Caithra instructed him. His closed eyes prevented him from seeing the frenetic swaying of the living shadows that surrounded him, but he could feel on his skin the candles’ flames flickering, leaning and dancing with greater intensity, reaching out to caress his skin. Several times he felt he had been burned, but he dared not open his eyes to check, lest he misspeak the words of Power, or forget the number of times he had said them.

The initial incantation complete, he opened his eyes to again reference the pages of *Deep Conjury*. He shuffled the pages several times, doing his best to ignore the unnatural movements of both light and shadow around him, before he found his place again.

The next part he had dreaded since first reading it. For a moment, he considered bullying Beatrice into joining him, using her blood to fulfill the ritual’s coming requirement. Shaking his head, he decided against it. She may have wounded him metaphorically, but he found himself unwilling to return the favor literally. Besides, he had committed many crimes simply to acquire the means to perform the ritual; he had to draw a line somewhere or risk losing himself completely.

He moved the bronze bowl into a smaller circle at the center of the ritual design he had created in chalk. Then he took the wooden knife in his right hand. With his left, he positioned the talisman in a convenient spot before him. With a deep breath, he opened his left hand and dragged the blade across his palm, leaving a crimson line that burned hot in its wake. Though Knox had prepared himself as best he could, he had doggedly remained a stranger to pain in his life, and this wound stung deep and sharp. He bit his lip to prevent a string of obscenities from spewing forth involuntarily.

He dropped the knife more than placed it on the floor, squeezing his cut palm against itself and letting the beads of blood that dripped from between his fingers fall onto the talisman. When the face of the talisman had become fully red, he tore a strip of cloth from the sack. This he wrapped tightly around his palm before taking another swig of the brandy, carefully gauging the amount—enough to dull the pain, not so much as to ruin the progress he’d made. Now, at least, he could blame the odd movements of flame and shadow on his own inebriation.

He delicately balanced the bloody talisman on top of the pile of charcoal and plant parts in the bronze bowl. Lifting the page containing the next incantation to his eyes, he began to chant again, this time slightly louder than before. Seven times seven repetitions of the words, spoken without ceasing, the pattern itself becoming a mesmerizing focus. Or perhaps that was simply the brandy catching up to him.

Knox did his best to silence his inner monologue, focusing on nothing but the recitation of the proper words. At this point, the ritual had become truly dangerous. Before, failure had simply meant failure: nothing, no discernable result. Now, though, a mistake carried the potential to call something across the Veil that should not be allowed across that threshold. For such a contingency, he knew he was unprepared. He had no margin for error.

As he chanted, he could feel hands drifting lightly across his back, fingers barely making contact with him in a way that chilled far more than any firmer touch. Without looking, he knew the source of the sensation; the shadows that had been waiting in the corners of the room reached for him, pushing through the Veil just enough to cause sensation, but not enough to truly manifest. Or so he hoped.

When he concluded this latest invocation of Power, the talisman cracked into two halves, somehow causing the bowl's contents to ignite in a gout of blue flame accompanied by an acrid stench. The fire in the bowl, despite settling to a modest size, overpowered all other light in the room, bathing everything in its azure aura. The shadows' touches came now with greater force behind them, as if poking and prodding at Knox to continue.

Continue he did. He moved the bowl of water in front of him, stared into it as he spoke the next words: “Alilvai, Wilda, tasnaqynar. Alilvai, Wilda, tasnaqynar!” For some time he repeated the words to no effect. He began to wonder whether he had done something wrong, misspoken the words. This made him wonder whether, at any moment, some other spirit might pass through the thinness in the Veil he had created and destroy him. These thoughts together threatened to break all concentration. With a great effort of will, he pushed them aside. For now.

He had lost count of how many times he had repeated the phrase. Fortunately, this one stage in the ritual required persistence rather than precision. Finally, the water in the bowl began to ripple of its own accord, as if unseen droplets had fallen into the center of the pool and disturbed it. The wake of these invisible intrusions brought the water to the very lip of the bowl; for a brief instant, Knox wondered whether it would spill over.

When the water settled, a face appeared on its surface, as if it had become a mirror reflecting the visage of the one who looked into it. But it was not Knox's face that appeared in the liquid.

Nevertheless, he recognized that face immediately; many times and in great detail had studied its lines, its movements, the freckles and creases, the ridge of the cheekbones and slightly crooked nose. Wilda stared back at him from within the bowl. But her face remained inanimate, unmoving, ignorant of his presence.

This was no mere séance, and Knox had begun with far more in mind than simply recalling her appearance to a bowl of water. This was a step along the way.

A crucial step, after all the preparation he had done, but otherwise a relatively minor one. Even so, he could not stop his heart beating faster when he looked upon her face again. For a brief moment, he ignored the blue flame, the oddly moving shadow-forms, the scratching sound that incessantly scraped at the edge of his hearing. There was only Wilda, just as it had been when she had lived with him for that too-brief time.

Remembering his purpose, he took the bowl carefully in both hands and, attentive not to disturb the circle he had drawn in blue chalk, which, in the light of the flickering blue flame now seemed to emanate a light of its very own, he gently poured the water containing Wilda’s face into the fire.

A great gout of steam issued forth from the rapidly-evaporating water, though the fire remained unchanged in its form or intensity. Knox stepped back and stood watching as the steam resolved itself into a form, abstract at first but coalescing into an ever-denser structure until the shape of a human woman occupied the space that had been filled only with vapor. When the form became undeniably Wilda, Knox could not make out where the steam had gone, leaving only this person—fully colored though not entirely opaque—in the room with him. He gasped audibly.

Wilda looked around the room and then to Knox, her confusion plain on her face. “Why have you called me here?” she asked.

“Wilda, it’s me, Knox.”

She focused on him, her brow furrowing in concentration, as if she’d been farsighted and had forgotten to bring her spectacles. Recognition washed over her and her strain became a contented smile. “Knox, my dear. You should not have done this.” Her tone remained at once serious and yet tinged with playfulness. She had always been that way, able to call him out and keep him on the right path without scolding.

She brushed his cheek with the back of her hand; it felt as the slow rush of a heavy wind over his face. Intoxicating and yet ephemeral. “You’re sweet, my love,” she continued, “but you know you cannot keep me here. My time Between is nearing its end. I can feel it. Soon, I’ll be born into the Avar anew, to start a new life and continue on the Path.”

“I’ll find you.”

“Don’t be foolish, my love. Not even an archmagus of the Conclave could be sure of the past lives of any soul. And you are many things, many great things, my love. But you are not an archmagus.”

A tear ran down Knox’s face. “I can’t lose you.”

“Nothing is ever lost, my love. Not forever. We may not be together for some time, but in the end, when we have both walked out Paths to their conclusion, when we have ascended to the Promised Kingdom, we will be united. I know it.”

“I don’t know how I’ll make it that long,” Knox complained.

“But you will.”

He knew there was nothing more to say on the matter, nothing either of them could do. He changed the subject, if only in attempt to avoid collapsing further into despair. “What is it like Between?”

“How long have I been gone, my love?”

“About a year.”

“That long?”

“It took me that long to prepare for all of this,” he said.

“That’s not what I meant, dear. It feels like I’ve not been there long at all.”

“So it must be a pleasant place, then. Tell me about it.”

She opened her spectral mouth to speak, but a strange look crossed her face, as if the words simply would not come. “It is on the tip of my tongue, but I cannot describe it to you.” She paused for a moment, if feeling her way blindly through some force that barred free expression. “I can only say that I have been content there, but there is a growing sadness and fear in that place.”

Knox considered the words, let the existential angst of the revelation sink in. “Are you safe?”

She smiled. “As I said, I am leaving soon. You will see what it is like for yourself one day, as you have before and will many times again. But you will not remember everything until the end, when you are finally made whole. It is as we are taught—when in the Avar, it is hard to remember the Between; when Between, it is hard to remember the Avar.”

“Do you mean you’re leaving the Between soon or you’re leaving here soon?” he asked.

“Both, my love. I cannot stay forever. We are lucky that I could come at all. Perhaps it is a testament that we are meant to be together.”

“I—” he began, but a heavy crack against the apartment door stopped him cold. Both he and his paramour turned to look.

The door visibly buckled inward against the strain of the second strike and small cracks in the boards revealed themselves, but it did not break until the third strike. It splintered inward, shards striking Knox and scratching him, passing through Wilda’s phantom without resistance.

Immediately, two cloaked men stepped into the room, swords drawn. Night had long since fallen, but more men stood ready on the balcony, and in the wavering torchlight Knox thought he saw Beatrice, her jaw clenched in vengeful defiance.

A look of surprise briefly passed over the two men’s faces, but this quickly changed into hardened guardedness as they adopted fighting stances and divided their attention between Knox and the shadow-forms that seemed to have retreated into the darker corners of the room, still moving with an unnatural intelligence. Their swords had been engraved with runes that faintly glowed red, a response to the arcane Power that filled the space.

Under their cloaks the men wore a strange mix of gear. Breastplates over black brigandines protected their chests, with pistols tucked into the blue sashes over their waists. But the bandolier that ran over their breastplates held not charges for their firearms but small potion vials, miniature scrolls, and assorted

talismans and arcane devices. Sheathed next to their sword scabbard they carried both wand and rod; the pouches on their sword belts were undoubtedly filled with other occult gewgaws. Knox knew them before they announced themselves, had half-expected their arrival despite his obfuscatory wards.

“In the name of the Vigil—” one began.

Before he could finish, Knox was already moving. Yelling, “I love you; I’m sorry,” he slid his foot back across the circle of Power, smearing chalk and breaking it. The shadows leapt from the corners of the room, unliving but animate, sufficiently manifested in the Avar to attack the vigilants physically.

Chaos broke out; the cloaked men attempted simultaneously to defend themselves with their blades—despite the small space in which to move—and to summon sorcerous power against the dark spirits that assaulted them. The vigilants outside on the balcony began incanting, preparing more powerful thaumaturgies of banishing to assist their brothers. Beatrice’s scream of terror pierced all other sounds.

In the pandemonium, Knox passed through the spirit form of his dead lover, again feeling the density of the air pass around him. He kicked the fiery bowl in the center of the circle hard, bouncing coals and container alike against the room’s back wall. Almost immediately, his bed caught fire, burning bright and blue.

He turned to look behind him and saw that Wilda had disappeared, likely as soon as the makeshift brazier moved from its ritual placement. The life-and-death struggle between the unclean spirits and the vigilants raged and, as Knox had hoped, he had created an opportunity. He moved to one of the windows in the apartment’s outer wall, threw open the shutters and began to scramble his way out of the hole. The crack of a pistol rang out and Knox could feel as much as hear the shotte zip past him and into the adjacent wall. He did not waste any time looking back.

Knox had not done much climbing since he was a child; even then he had not been as capable as the other boys, scrawny and somewhat sickly as he was in his youth. Worse, his head spun with brandy, clouding both judgment and sense of direction. But the adrenaline carried him far enough, and he scurried about halfway down the outside of the apartment building before he slipped and fell. His feet landed in the muddy de-facto gutter that ran alongside the street below, sliding out from under him and rocking him painfully onto his back.

But he hadn’t struck his head on a stone and his sliding across the mud had probably stopped him from breaking an ankle. He hurt, but not enough to stop him from picking himself up and clambering into the alleyways of the slums, into the darkness that surrounded him now like a comforting blanket.

As he walked briskly away, destination unknown, he could see the flames of his old apartment building rising into the night, excited yells and commands flying into the air like so many embers. *It deserved to burn*, he thought. Perhaps a whole world that would take his Wilda from him deserved to burn.