

Future echoes in the dark

By Robert Turner



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Cast of Characters

Past Memories

Borrador - the spirit
Cat - Novice Master
Celene - High Priestess
Cherish - Training Master
Desidra (Desi)
Edowyn - Security
Grete - Alchemist
Harry - The bowyer
Jho
Penny
Petersen
Rozz
Sanarah - Healer
Sergeant Neville Sharpe
Spike - The swordsman
Stuart - The wimp
Vergoth - Maji

Modern Day

Detective Jane Goody
Detective Inspector Marlow
Detective Wendy Lafley
Jenny the Matron - Troll
Matthew Rider - A student
Mick - The chef
Miranda - M.I.5 agent
Tamzin Scott - A modern priestess

Dedication

To my loving wife, whose encouragement, patience and grammatical awareness I have taxed to the limit, I give my thanks. She has supported me throughout this endeavour and without her words of wisdom this may never have happened. Also thanks go to the rest of my family who have supported my mad bouts of writing and guided me to remove a comma or two.

Note: This text uses some terms which are unfamiliar in these more enlightened times. I will try to elaborate on these here.

Majick – Now written as Magic.

Majickal, majickally – something that is of Majick in nature.

Maji – A person who uses Majick to create effects.

Silves – Like an Elf of popular culture.

Darksight – The ability to see heat emissions as another colour (only visible in the dark).

Different text formats are used in this novel to create a difference in the way people speak. What the character Merith hears, and how she interprets the sounds initially, is un-interpreted and then develops into what looks like bad spelling. This is what she is trying to understand (and therefore deliberate) and is part of the text. Finally *italics* is used exclusively for Thieves' Cant.



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Unus - Pullus nocturus

(Radio Cambridgeshire news item)

On the local news this lunchtime, Police are hunting the attacker of a teenage girl who was subjected to a serious sexual assault near a Cambridgeshire village. The 15-year-old victim was attacked and left for dead sometime between 6pm on Monday night and 6am Tuesday morning. Police say her ordeal went on for some time.

Detective Inspector Mike Marlow, who is leading the hunt for the attacker, said; "This was a very nasty assault on a 15-year-old girl who must have been terrified during her ordeal. The man responsible is dangerous and we need to catch him as soon as possible."

Supt Alan Butler, head of operational policing across Cambridgeshire, said; "My officers are determined to catch this man but it is vital that people living in Fulborne help us. I would urge anyone who was out and about in the village between 6pm on Monday night to 6am Tuesday morning to think about anything they might have seen which could help with this inquiry. I want people to come and talk to us, no matter how small or insignificant people think their information may be."

Supt Butler added; "Thankfully, this type of offence doesn't happen very often, but it is understandable that women will be frightened. Our advice would be, 'Don't let it affect what you do but take some sensible precautions. Make sure someone always knows where you are and if possible avoid walking home alone.' "

Anyone with any information is asked to contact Cambridge CID on 0115 4440999 or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

Meanwhile, the victim is said to be in a comfortable state in Addenbrooks hospital. A hospital spokeswoman has reported that she is now stable but has remained unconscious since being admitted. We will update this as soon as we find out more.....

(News item ends)



Blue.... Heart beating.

Blue.... Time passing by.

Blue.... Each beat sending another pain through my already overloaded system.

Blue.... I struggle to open my eyes.

Blue.... Through bleary lids I saw brilliant flashes of blue light. I tried to move my arms but the wrenching feeling of pain and a tremendous weight on top of them, dragging them down, stopped me. Noise blaring of a thousand chattering women, sounds of metal grinding against metal and of stone against stone and then, in the middle of it all, a strange sound filtered down through my consciousness. A strange trilling like a bird, repetitive and high pitched. It seemed unbelievably to match my own heartbeat.

The overwhelming pain began to take over all other senses, crowding out all of the noises, smells and feelings. I sought to meditate, to pass into a trance-like state to shut out the outside world. Slowly I started to block out the pain, my breathing deepened and I began to organise my thoughts. The realisation hit suddenly; all of my memories were gone. I had nothing there to remember. I floundered around in my own mind and had to just concentrate on pain management.



(Further Radio Cambridgeshire news item)

In the local news this evening, police are hunting the attacker of a teenage girl who was subjected to a serious sexual assault near a Cambridgeshire village. The 15-year-old victim was attacked and left for dead sometime between 6pm on Monday night and 6am Tuesday morning.

Supt Alan Butler, head of operational policing across Cambridgeshire, said; "My officers are determined to catch this man, but it is vital that people living in Fulborne help us. I would urge anyone who was out and about in the village between 6pm on Monday night to 6am Tuesday morning to think about anything they might have seen which could help with this inquiry."

He later added, "We have yet to identify the girl. We are hoping a description of her clothing will aid us in finding out who her family are. She was dressed in hand made clothing, in a black robe, similar

to a monk's habit, with a striking emblem of a dagger with lightning sparking off the dagger. The emblem was embroidered in the collar of the robe. This identifying mark must be easily identifiable to the family or friends. She must have had this garment specially made for her, though possibly she may be of foreign origin given the strange clothing and items found at the scene. We believe the assailant or assailants may have been injured in the attack; hospitals in the local area have been alerted to this possibility."

Police feel that this is a vital clue to her identity and are hopeful that they will be able to assist in identifying the victim. Supt. Butler added; "I want people to come and talk to us, however small or insignificant people think their information may be."

A spokeswoman from Addenbrooks has previously reported that the girl is stable, but unconscious, and is responding well to treatment.

Anyone with any information is asked to contact Cambridge CID on 0115 4440999 or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

(News item ends)



The noises continued. I was aware of them now; something had broken my reverie. I felt the pain tighten in my wrist as if something had touched it. Pain lanced through my hand and arm. A voice said something soothing to me and I felt my arm being lowered again. I sensed a numbing flow out from my hand and, as I began to float, a distant voice (the same voice) called to me. I couldn't respond because I had floated away on a beautiful blue stream into the blue sunset.



(Further Radio Essex news item)

In the headlines tonight, Cambridgeshire Police are still appealing for witnesses and relatives regarding the girl found just outside of Fulborn. She has yet to regain consciousness. Relatives are being sought to identify the girl from her clothing.

Anyone with any information is asked to contact Cambridge CID on 0115 4440999 or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

(News item ends)



Pain.... Forced me awake, wracking pain across my chest, arms and legs. Voices called to me to alternately sooth me and shout at me.

The whistling and trilling, confusing echoes which faded then came into focus sharply with a bang. I was aware of many hands on me; was I being tortured again as I had been? The focus slipped from my mind.



(Further Radio Cambridgeshire news item)

In the local news this morning, it is reported that the police are releasing further information to assist in the hunt for the attacker of a teenage girl who was subjected to a serious sexual assault near a Cambridgeshire village. The 15-year-old victim was attacked, and left for dead, sometime between 6pm on Monday night and 6am Tuesday morning.

Detective Inspector Mike Marlow, who is leading the hunt for the attacker, said; "This was a very nasty assault on a 15-year-old girl who must have been terrified during her ordeal. The man or group of men responsible are dangerous and we need to catch them as soon as possible."

A more detailed description has been provided to aid in identifying the victim; she is five foot four inches tall, with long straight brown hair. Her eye colour is blue and she has tanned skin. The girl was dressed in hand-made clothing, in a black robe similar to a monk's habit with a striking emblem of a dagger with lightning sparking off the dagger. The emblem was embroidered in the collar of the robes. This identifying mark must be easily identifiable to the family or friends. She must have had this garment specially made for her, although possibly she may be of foreign origins given the strange clothing and items found at the scene. Police feel that this is a vital clue to her identity and are hopeful that they will be able to assist in identifying the victim.

The assailant or assailants may have been injured in the attack. Hospitals in the local area have been alerted to the possibility.

A spokeswoman from Addenbrooks has reported that the girl has had a difficult night, but seems to have recovered to a stable position and is beginning to respond to treatment.

Anyone with any information is asked to contact Cambridge CID on 0115 4440999 or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

(News item ends)



The searing pain had gone. All I was left with were dull aches. Light filtering in through my closed eyelids had pierced through my fitful sleep. Cautiously, I opened one eye a fraction. The light was blinding and I had to blink several times before I began to focus. The first images and sounds didn't make any sense. Again I could hear the strange trilling I had heard before, but this was accompanied by the sounds of the hustle and bustle of a market place, of people moving around and talking indistinctly. I must have been lying down.

Looking up to the roof I could see flagstones set into it with metal bands, presumably to support them. There were also strange round lanterns set into them, which gave off an odd white glow. I realised they must be lit by a continual light spell, majick. This reassured me, as I realised that I must be in the care of my Temple or at least some healers who employed some great majick. Above my head was an odd white metal cone with a grey ball set into it; it hung off of an arm attached to the wall. Another larger arm (thicker in diameter) held a funny shaped box of white colour, with a black window. This box had what looked like a bone attached to it by means of a piece of rope. Very confusing....

I glanced around and could see wall tapestries draped at the end of the bed and to the side of me. The other two walls were yellow, with white boxes running horizontally across them. The tapestries had woodland figures on them - figures that looked like Silves, dwarves and woodland animals. I couldn't read the story these told (there wasn't a battle or any sort of triumph) and I didn't understand the significance of them. They blocked off the sight of a much larger room, one which must have been maybe four times the size of this little space. I looked around and saw a funny box that was making a trilling sound. There must have been a bird trapped in it, but I couldn't see it. The box was black with many ropes coming off the front of it. Figures flashed on the front with numbers that read "Fifty two" with a red symbol flashing beside them. I realised one of the ropes trailed its way to my finger and ended with a strange box on the end of my finger. This thing seemed to glow pink at its end. I didn't know what it was but it wasn't hurting me, so I left it for now. I turned my hand over and saw there was another odd rope attached to my arm. It was made of a tube-like glass but, as I moved my hand, it moved with it. Very odd....

Behind me there were various odd wooden chests and robes with illustrated drawings on them, which were unlike anything that I had seen before - using strange lettering and symbols. I moved around on

the bed and checked myself over. Someone had taken my robes and slip. The only garment I was wearing was a thin sort of dress, which was comfortable but was not something I was used to. I had bruising across my whole chest as if I had been whacked across it with a flat stick. There was bruising across most of the rest of my body, but I didn't know why. There was no reason to anything here, and it disturbed me that I couldn't remember anything. My head felt foggy as if stuffed with rags, and I was generally feeling groggy. The noise of people was all around, so I called out for help!

The tapestries parted and I could see through them a man holding what appeared to be a large parchment. He was dressed in black and wore a flat black hat. The hat had a black and white trim and a crest on the front, although I only managed to get a brief glimpse before I had the shock of my life. A small black troll (a big humanoid with black rock like skin and tufts of curled black moss) stepped in through the gap in the tapestry. I screamed as loud as I could and tried to get out of the bed. However, the bedding stopped me and as I struggled against it the man shot up and rushed to be beside me. The troll also moved over to me and, in a soothing voice, said words to me that I didn't understand. They both held me down as I struggled to move away. The troll called out something and I could see others coming toward me. This time they were humans; were they coming to my rescue?

I knew I was shaking, I was also too weak and hungry to struggle against them and I slowly calmed down. As I relaxed, they let go of my arms and stood around the bed looking at me. There were four women, all dressed in white, but the sole man was dressed in black; was he the Maji? They looked at me, puzzled, the man spoke in a more urgent voice words which sounded meaningless, "Tel uss ur nam sso as oui chan fin ur parints. Cann u rember ennyfing?" The troll (she was a female) spoke softly to me, with words which made little sense; "Dare, dare noe gerlie shoe gest lie shtill an teel us ur nam hay?" She said as if it was a question, but it sounded so odd. I turned to the man in black and asked him; "What is happening? Who are you all? Are you healers using your majick on me?"

I began to feel emotional about all of this. They are speaking but in a foreign language. I didn't know anyone of them, but why can't they understand me? I could feel the tears welling in my eyes, but I didn't want to let them go yet. "What is your name?" I asked the male, almost pleading to be understood. A name popped into my head and, reassured by this, I pointed to myself and said, "Merith."

They all nodded, the man said “Merith ouate?”

I suppose it was my turn to be confused, I pointed to him and said, “Who are you?”

He smiled as if he understood, he pointed to himself and said “Reg.”

It settled me to be understood for the first time, if only because I said my name. It was my turn to smile, I pointed to him and said, “Reg,” and then back to myself to say, “Merith.”

He fished around in a pocket and brought out a small book; using a coloured stick, he began to make squiggles in it. The others seemed to relax and the troll spoke softly to them and ushered them away. She stood as the man sat beside my bed. He said a few words to me, “Ver doo u leve?” and waited for a response. Then he said something that sounded like, “Doo u spek enne English?” ‘The term ‘English’ sounded like the name used for the county I lived in.

“English?” I replied.

Then he said, “Français?”

I stared back at him and shrugged my shoulders; the name meant nothing to me.

“German?”

I said back to him, “I’m sorry but I don’t know any of them, but maybe if I could remember something?”

He looked at me blankly, turned and said something to the troll; “Zo, Vat doo u mek ov eet? Et zounded ay bid lik English bud ay verry ode vhay ov speking. Ay koodn’t ondershtand enne ov et.”

She said something back, “Nno, mestr ay dun’t noe, aal ay noe ees, nn de lest tem yers ay been verkin ere ay never sin eenytin liker!”

The emotions were getting stirred up again and I felt the welling of tears in my eyes. I could hear them talking but couldn’t understand. As I watched the discussion, tears flowed down my cheeks and I did nothing to stop them. Everything felt unfamiliar to me; it was all wrong, nothing made sense. I looked at them bewildered.

There was a funny roaring sound and then a tiny voice appeared to come from a small black box that hung from his jacket “Base too zeven too, base too zeven too, enythin too r’port Reg?” He picked it up and started to talk into it, “zevn doo doo bese, ahh yez de gane doe en zee do hs voken an es dalking. Hav sdarted preliminary cuestons bud kannot mak zence oud ov er anzers. Name givn bud onnly ay furst nam. Vat ish de ee tee aye onn de innvestagashun tem?” I

realised at that moment, that indeed he is a Maji. Perhaps he was one of the powerful ones that still existed, maybe he brought me here?

The tiny voice started up again. Maybe this was a captive demon, an evil little gremlin who was bound to this Maji's wishes. "Ee Tee Aye prob aan our ayway Reg Kep aan aye onn er fore nowe, leve et up too dhe teme. Over."

The man (Reg?) spoke into the box for a final time. "Roger, vil doo. Oute."

I looked at him and he looked back at me with sympathetic eyes. He drew breath to speak but, before the sound came out, something behind distracted him. Suddenly a blinding flash of light exploded at me, blinding me temporarily. Shrieking, I dragged the covers over my face and curled up into a ball. There was shouting and the stamping of feet near me. A tussle was going on with the calling of questioning voices and more flashes of light. Above it, all I heard clearly the strong firm voice of the troll shouting orders and commanding attention. The troll was strange. I don't remember what a troll was but I knew that this was what my mind was telling me. This troll was something to be feared, she was probably held under the same thrall as the demon in his box and could probably do all sorts of majick.

The noises subsided, the voices calling slowly moved away and the flashing stopped. I stayed curled up for what seemed like hours until I felt someone sit down on the bed beside me. The voice of the troll, so commanding before now, had a worried soothing tone. "Shey gerl, dont ewe vorry bout dose pressmn, dey teem do ave gottn hold ov ay tory an eell deey vant ish vat dey cn ged. Aye hav tome food foer jeu."

The smell of food hit me, I didn't know what it was but it smelled delicious. I lifted my head over the covers to see a well-built man dressed a bit like a fool. He had all sorts of colours on his hat and hose, but his tunic was white. The man smiled a wide friendly smile and proffered up a white plate filled with steaming goodness.

He said strange words to me in an accent different from the others and I recognised a few words - it was like he was from England but with a difficult accent to follow. In a way, he sounded like my own Petersen from back home in the Temple and perhaps he looked a bit like him too. The food was more important and, as Petersen always used to say, it is too important to waste. Greedily I held out my hands to take the plate, but the troll moved a funny table-like thing in front of me. It was wooden but it had a white and blue patterned top, smooth to the touch and slightly warm. The man placed the food on to

the table and offered me a spiked piece of metal and a knife. The knife was obviously blunt and the spike? I didn't know what to make of it.

I smiled at him and moved myself into a more comfortable position, he smiled back and said something to the food. I smelled the food on the plate and grinned back. Picking up the knife, I tried to use it to pick up the tomato sauce. With some success I tucked into the meal, but I began to wish they had a spoon. I realised how hungry I was as I tried to eat.

The man watched me with some amusement. He picked up the spiky thing and said, "Fuk" and mimicked some one putting it into their mouth. Confused, I looked back and then the realisation dawned on me. It must be what they use to eat with. Feeling stupid, I took it from him and began to shovel the tomatoes and funny shell-like things into my mouth. I pointed at them and said, "What are these?" He looked at me strangely as if he understood a little and said, "Pasta schells inn a bolonaise sase ala vegy"

This made absolutely no sense to me but what ever they were called it was gorgeous, but no meat? I repeated back what he said "Pasta schells inn a bolonaise sase ala vegy" to him.

Smiling he said, "Yeass that's goood" he turned to the Troll and asked her a question, "Zao whads er nam?"

She replied, "Merith," and moved towards the end of the bed. I looked up at the sound of my name. She began to pull the tapestries across to enclose me again as she did so.

He turned back to me and pointed at me, "Merith?" I nodded vigorously and pointed back.

"Mick aim the sheff arond herr," he replied.

"Mick," I looked at him and pointed - he nodded vigorously in reply.

He turned and stepped out of the enclosure I was in, pulling the tapestries together as he went. I was left with the troll and the food. I quickly set about eating the meal, although I missed the meat it was delicious and very different to the food I had back home.

Once I finished I felt tired again, I tried to remember anything I could about my past to see if I had any memory of how I ended up here. I knew everything was strange but I didn't know why. It was like I had been scooped up into the air and landed in a strange country. The troll moved the wheeled table out of the way and moved to beside me. She said a few soothing words and picked up from the

wall a box with a clear lid. From inside it she lifted a box with a pointed end. She came forward to me and tried to place it in my ear.

I moved away from her and said, "No!" She said some soothing words, which sounded like she needed to do this, so I tried to relax. She put something cold into my ear and the box chirped. She seemed pleased with me and put it back up onto the wall. She picked up a board at the end of my bed and wrote something down on it. She then lifted up the plate and began to leave whilst speaking to me. Not a word was understood, but I nodded anyway.

On the bed, I sat cross-legged and unconsciously began to slip into a trance. Inside my memories, there seemed to be thin veils all around as I tried to latch hold of a single event or happening. Memories flowed unbidden as if from an orator or a book of consciousness....



Someone once said to me, "Everything goes silent before the storm," and tonight the silence was unearthly. The night was black as the deepest well, as thick clouds obscured the light of the dance of the night sky. Across the town I could see the heat trails of the multitude of houses as they cooled down in the night, with the swirling vortexes of the air trailing off from the chimneys as the fires burned low. The airspace was still, untroubled by wind or even birds. The heat of the day was now trapped under the blanket of clouds, which promised a welcome rain. The thunderstorms, which would follow this gathering, would throw the fields asunder - but the days that followed would dry the crops that were the lifeblood of the land.

The only sound to be heard was my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest. The pounding of the blood as it pulsed through my body, was loud and distinct whilst it pumped in two distinct phases. The roar of the blood in my ears made me certain that everyone within a mile could hear.

I found myself hanging twenty feet up in the air and dangling from a thin ledge with my fingertips screaming to be released from the pressure. The effort of trying to be as silent as the wind while I bore the pain was excruciating. The wall, rough against my ear, was sheer, almost un-climbable for most people.

It wasn't that I had stopped to have second thoughts about what I was doing. The merchant I had targeted was, as I had discovered, far richer than he should have been. Since he was out of town for a while I thought that I might lighten his worries of keeping all of his ill-

gotten gains. He wasn't using this wealth and I believed that I could help him find a better use for it - at the very least, it would be a good sacrifice.

On my part I didn't need the money; I was rich already. No, it was the challenge that I was after. Indeed, I suppose that this was ingrained within me and that I was required to do this every so often to keep up my skills and to please my Goddess. There was also the chance, here, of finding the prize I was after.

No, it was not second thoughts that halted me, it was the Chipping Walden watch. This town was big enough to employ some old buggers who, instead of guarding the town gates, wandered the streets at night. They weren't a physical threat - at least, not to any capable thief. You had to be pretty useless at virtually everything else to become one. The pay was terrible and the hours were long. Many a watchman has been found curled up on the street due to violence or the harsh elements. They were, however, good at running away and blaring a whistle or shouting. One alarm and the whole town were upon you, after you, chasing your heels.

The watchman was standing with his lantern on the doorstep, sorting a pipe out. In the darkness his lantern lit a wide space in which he could see. He stood, almost hunched over, peering down at it. Taking an age over it while knocking it against the doorframe.....

The stench of him wafted up to me, stale tobacco, dried sweat, cheap alcohol, and the worst of all crimes! - Bad breath. He took out a small folding knife and scraped out the pipe bowl. Knocked it out again.... Blowing down the pipe.... Knocking it out again....

AHHHHHHHHHGH get on with it!

I almost screamed with the agony of hanging on. My muscles were beginning to rebel against me so I began to gently flex the muscles to keep the blood flowing. This was something my climbing instructor Cherish had taught me to do. In training, I could keep this up for hours holding onto a ledge smaller than this and have done so loads of times, but not for a while. There always seemed something else to do.

The watchman began to push his tobacco into the pipe. It was a harsh smelling cheap tobacco, probably with several cheap blends (and a bit of hemp within it, no doubt). I never really did get into pipe smoking as it hurt my lungs, and I have only ever done it for show. It was a thoroughly disgusting habit that was obviously doing this man no good. He paused to look around him, seeming to think for a while, and then slowly sat down.

I could have killed him right there. I was so annoyed with him. Killing can be a part of my life. I have been trained to defend myself and move with sharp reflexes; I could easily have taken down a less experienced fighter. In this position, I could have dropped a throwing knife straight into his neck. This would certainly kill him, but not immediately. Besides, if he moved suddenly it could just injure him. I toyed with the idea for some time and, although it would be interesting to watch, I certainly wouldn't want to have it on my conscience. Nor would I like to give up my interrupted opportunity so easily.

Finally, he lit the pipe from the lantern! Son of a AHHHHHgh!!

The smell of the pipe, sweet, cloying smoke curled up from below. How dare he! How dare he light up on duty! How dare he do it whilst sitting on this rich merchant's step? He should be going around protecting the town's property from the thieves and vagabonds – well, other thieves and vagabonds at least! At that moment I hated him for being a lazy old git. He should be getting on with his job, and if I were employing him I'd fire him and fine him his final wages.

Thankfully he stood up. I thought a silent prayer up to Ichmarr for this little task. He stretched his arms out wide, gave a yawn, picked up his lantern and mumbled off into the night taking his light with him. When he was out of sight, I continued to hang tight until his footsteps were only a memory.

Finally the darkness enveloped me; I had chosen this night well. My muscles needed to be flexible for the next movement, so I released one arm and shook it out and did the same with the other. There was a ledge for my feet somewhere and my feet began to feel around. Eventually, they found it and I continued my climb up to the window ledge I had been aiming for. All of the other openings in the building were shuttered firmly shut; some with bars to stop intrusion into the building. This window, crafted out of the finest ash-wood, was small too small for most people to get through and, at this height with an almost sheer face to climb, was practically impossible for most thieves to get to. With a thin blade I checked around the window to find the way to open it. There was a small catch and I pushed it across to release the window. When released, I swung the window open and struggled through the tiny hole. This man was so rich he was able to glaze some of his windows - what luxury! I carefully pulled myself through and placed my feet on to the floor.

No noises, no-one in the room.... I strained my ears to hear if there was any noise in the whole building. Where would he keep it?

Carefully, I moved around the room carefully placing my feet, tensed against the pressure. Time and time again I had practised moving across the ground in specially prepared rooms that had boards set to creak at the slightest pressure. It was in moments like these that this training paid off. I automatically tensed each footfall, sensing whether the board would move and countering such movement. Moving, I continued waiting until the watchman's steps were a distance memory and relaxed. Then, noiselessly in case of others in the house, I concentrated on my search of this room.

I had been in this room before. I had heard from a contact that a merchant, a nobleman, had acquired a special and remarkable hat. This hat, she assured me, would make the wearer appear to be someone else - indeed, whomsoever they wanted to look like. This would be useful to someone wanted in five counties for theft and conspiracy to theft. Not that I had anything to do with it!

The easiest part was to get this merchant's attention. I was blessed with a slim build and a remarkable figure, long brown hair and with some chemical help, sparkling eyes. For me it was easy to lead him astray. We laughed and joked about the other merchants and their woes and, as the evening wore on, he invited me back to his house where he continued to ply me with fine wines. His manners were impeccable and it took real determination for him to forget his wife for the evening. He even showed me the hat. To entertain me, he used it to impersonate important men from the town. It was remarkable; the hat could even change the voice of the individual! The merchant was such a kind man, such a stupid man, and such a short experience.

His servants kicked me out in the morning. He had awakened with a start and had risen quickly from the bed. Without a word, he left the room and I was barely able to open my eyes from my meditative state before his exit. While the servants were locking up the place, they slated me for every evil under the sun; I was a slut, a whore, and a harlot! He deserved this and more, the coward!

Ahh! There it is, a crevice behind a picture of himself. It was so vain of the man to hide his most valuable possessions behind a visage of himself. Was this so that he would still be looking after them, when he was not there?

Only a Silvesi could have found this crevice so easily. Darksight is a wonderful ability to possess and, it is said, that when the gods made the earth they hadn't remembered to light the sky - and only heated the stones. When the Silves arrived, being the first, they had to adapt to their surroundings and they developed this ability to see the

heat from their surroundings. Some fish and snakes have kept this ability and the creatures that developed from them. But, by the time the humans arrived, the gods had remembered to light the world with the sun for the day and the moon for the night.

The picture was fixed to the wall somehow, obviously having a hidden hinge with a catch. Where would he have hidden it? Would it be in plain sight, right in front of me? But where?

His signet ring – he was wearing it when he left me to go into this room, but not when he came back?

On the mantle below the painting, a mason had carved an ornate archway out of marble with a large keystone. This had a large and clumsy brass plate, which seemed out of keeping with the grandness. The brass plate had a depression in it similar in shape to the signet ring. There was a round crack around the depression. In the manner in which I was looking at it, the plate was more pronounced than it otherwise would be. This was meant to be turned, but how, without the ring?

There are a few tools of the trade, which we are not allowed to divulge otherwise the Crown and its representatives would get a little more alerted to us than we would wish. Hard putty is one of these. If they could find out how to make it themselves, they might ban the materials it is made from. An alchemist, many years ago, had first made it, but had stuck her hand to the bench with the first compounded material. Luckily for her, a priestess had been going about her devotions in the bedroom above the workroom and had heard her cries. The alchemist was so grateful for her help that, with a little persuasion, she agreed to join the Temple and work for us making the substance.

The putty came in two different sticks which, when mixed together in equal quantities, made the substance ROCK hard! Mixing it in my hands I placed it into the cavity carefully ensuring that the putty would only stick to the depression and not the rest of the plate. I sculpted it into a small mound and set a chain link into it to form a perfect key. The mixture hardens and turns grey - all I now had to do was to wait!

It is in moments like these that my mind tends to wander off and do a bit of ‘window-shopping’. It is a wonder that I ever get anything done! Around me, the room had luscious red walls finished with dark oak panelling. It was furnished with opulent furniture to make the kind of office a merchant doesn’t really need, but wants to show off to his friends. He had obviously had a penchant for metal trinkets as I

could see that the desk was littered with the gold plated equipment of a lord's office.

From the trinkets' heat patterns, I could tell that they were not real gold. The patterns of how the metals released their heat in the dark allowed me to distinguish which metal they were and, with my Darksight, I could see that the majority looked like lead with a hint of gold. Often, during the long nights of the Temple, I would heat up different materials just to see what they looked like as they cooled. I loved to watch the flow of heat off the metals, noticing the eddies and vortices as the heat rose off from the surfaces. I remember sitting in the dark for hours watching the shifting forms that only a Silvesi could see or comprehend.

Jewels have always interested me in the way that they can look so similar to one another in normal light, but look strikingly different in this lack of light. In daylight, only through careful and patient analysis can they be discerned from cheap paste and glass imitations. For this reason, I avoid taking jewels unless I have a useful heat source to shine through them. In this way, all of the differences become apparent as they do scatter the heat differently.

I left off my reverie to check for traps around the mantle and the picture. This was a necessary precaution as many merchants, nobles and rich people are generally very distrusting of those around them. Once during a particularly easy devotion I opened up an innocent looking chest with a simple ward lock on it, only to be thrown back by the searing pain and force of a blow. A crossbow trap with an incredibly obvious latch, if I'd bothered to look for it, was set on the box. It had hit me in the shoulder. The bolt had luckily passed under my collarbone and gone straight through to hit the ceiling. Merely a flesh wound, a deep one, but at least I didn't black out through the pain. Luck was often made by careful preparation; not found through the roll of the dice. It was, however, unlucky for the owner of that house, as it mysteriously burned down while standing empty that night.

Finding nothing on or around the mantelpiece to impede me I decided to go ahead, but cautiously. This was a worry, with such a valuable cargo and with such an elaborate way of hiding each part of the crevice and lock it would seem stupid to not trap it. So in turning the 'key' I strained every sense to give me a chance to react to.... whatever?

Sensing, rather than hearing, a click! I spun out of the way in time to see three spinning metal discs spring out between the cracks in the

archway. From their starting point I could see that these were meant for the chest of the casual thief. Fortunately, they only hit the particularly unpleasant painting of what presumably was the merchant's father.

I searched again for any traps around each of the stones of the mantelpiece, in the floor and all around the painting. Painstakingly, I looked in vain for any other sign of a trap and, finding none, I continued. Grasping the key again I turned it slowly, with all patience - every sense straining to hear any sign of impending doom. Suddenly, there was a 'click' and I dropped to the floor. As I looked up, I saw the picture slowly slide leftwards out of place to reveal the hiding-hole. Greedily I investigated the contents inside it; I found some papers, five bags of metal coins and a small wooden box. Hmm.... Interesting! I felt into the bags of coins, they were probably gold but I'd have to look at them properly. The box had the hat I had seen earlier in the merchant's greedy hands and I took a moment to dance around the room. The box also had a few jewels in it, which could be useful in the future - big ones too....

Carefully, I recovered the discs that had flown out of the mantelpiece. By close examination of the heat trails and the smell, I could tell that they were coated in paralysing-poison number three, no antidote, expensive and rare. Death within four minutes with the owner of the body choking on his own juices.... Nasty! I left the discs strategically placed in drawers of the desk and in the hiding-hole. I also placed two bags of coins back into the crevice; you have to give the mark a chance to live. I didn't want to steal too much from him and you never know. He might get some of his own medicine. Slipping all of the contents into small pockets in my clothing, I reset all of the mechanisms, replaced the picture and pulled off the makeshift key.

Leaving was even easier. Slide myself back out of the window. Close it tight and wiggle the catch back in place. You might never know I'd been there. It would be a delicious mystery to the merchant to find out that he had been burgled, without any sign of ingress or of access. I picked my way down the wall, slid on a night cloak and made my way back to the Temple. As I landed on my feet the patter of rain began to fill the streets, light at first then the heavier drops began, throwing up the dust of the day into the air.

