

NECROPOLIS

BOOK ONE OF THE MALICE CYCLE



Bruno Massé

Bruno Massé uses his black as coal but highly developed visionary imagination to weave an alternatively delightful, magical, disturbing and profoundly damning social critique of contemporary society and the future that conceivably awaits us. The book explodes with passion and longing, love and rage and limitless fantasy. - *Norman Nawrocki*

A Neo-Gothic milestone that stretches the boundaries of dark fantasy.

- *Joseph Vargo,*
Nox Arcana

Couldn't be more timely.

- *John*
Zerzan

Gothic fantasy with an anti-civilizational edge.

- *Jason McQuinn*

Bound to be considered classical anarchistic fiction. - *Subversify Magazine*

ISBN 978-1-300-13929-4

90000



9 781300 139294



NECROPOLIS

BOOK ONE OF THE MALICE CYCLE

by Bruno Massé

Photos by Candace Barbieri - Candylust.org
Model: Aleksandra Lillie

Published by LuluPress, 2012.

Text © Bruno Massé 2012
Artwork © Candace Barbieri 2012
ISBN 978-1-300-13929-4

Visit Raven's Lair at
www.daemonflower.com

PRAISE FOR BRUNO MASSÉ'S NECROPOLIS

A must read. Bruno Massé uses his black as coal but highly developed visionary imagination to weave an alternatively delightful, magical, disturbing and profoundly damning social critique of contemporary society and the future that conceivably awaits us. The book explodes with passion and longing, love and rage and limitless fantasy. Challenging and provocative, heartbreaking and endearing, it is also captivating and full of action. This is a remarkable accomplishment from a masterful story teller. It reveals yet again the talents of one of Canada's brightest from the new generation of the global anarchist literary scene.

Norman Nawrocki

Internationally acclaimed musician, speaker and sex educator. Author of *Rebel Moon*, *The Brain Food Trilogy*, *The Devil and the Anarchist do Cabaret* and many more.

Necropolis is a mordantly gothic tale of a goth enclave believing itself the last Dystopian city of Man, lost in the midst of a vast unknown void... In it the mutant heroine, Malice, is sickened by the suffocating expectations of an increasingly superficial, hedonistic population in a decaying, semi-anarchic city governed by the Tenets of Dystopia. The story recounts her turn from passive victim to author of her own bloody destiny. If you enjoy futuristic, gothic fantasy with plenty of blood and gore, conspiracy and betrayal, this story delivers it with an anti-civilizational edge.

Jason McQuinn

Alternative Press Review / C.A.L. Press
Editor of *Anarchy: A Journal Of Desire Armed* magazine

Necropolis is a Neo-Gothic milestone that stretches the boundaries of dark fantasy to challenge the flawed conceptions of conventional society. Author Bruno Masse masterfully weaves a darkly imaginative and intelligent story, rendering it with lush, poetic language to create a complex and compelling Dystopian mythology filled with moody landscapes and a fascinating hierarchy of characters.

Joseph Vargo

Member of Nox Arcana, one of the world's leading dark ambient bands. Author of *Tales From The Dark Tower*

Tangled in a twilight zone that slumbers between science fiction and fantasy, with bold, poetic strokes, it paints a haunting background and an unforgettable character in Malice. Be among the first to collect the beginning of what is bound to be considered classical anarchistic fiction from a very memorable writer.

Karla Fetrow

Subversify Magazine

Bruno Masse may indeed be 'Canada's darkest author' but this ravaging civilization we all find ourselves in is darker. So I am happy that he pushes on with his ambitious writing. Necropolis is an ancient tale - and couldn't be more timely. Bravo, Bruno!

John Zerzan

Internationally acclaimed speaker, host of Anarchy Radio
Author of *Elements of Refusal*, *Future Primitive*, *Against Civilization* and *Twilight of the Machines*.

The refusal of community might be termed a self-defeating isolation but it appears preferable, healthier, than declaring our allegiance to the daily fabric of an increasingly self-destructive world. Magnified alienation is not a condition chosen by those who insist on the truly social over the falsely communal. It is present in any case, due to the content of community. Opposition to the estrangement of civilized, pacified existence should at least amount to naming that estrangement instead of celebrating it by calling it community.

The defence of community is a conservative gesture that faces away from the radical break required. Why defend that to which we are held hostage?

In truth, there is no community. And only by abandoning what is passed off in its name can we move on to redeem a vision of communion and vibrant connectedness in a world that bears no resemblance to this one.

Only a negative "community," based explicitly on contempt for the categories of existent community, is legitimate and appropriate to our aims.

“The Nihilists’ Dictionary: 2) Community”.
- John Zerzan, *Future Primitive*.

...	ye
...	aw
... Login: CH405	jst
... Pass: *****	pk
... ----- w31c0m3, 5yph3r	srk
... ini sys: unlock	zp
... ini num: override	ny
... ini hub: 000001	ta6
... /ch405/u53r/4dm1n/m41n/5yph3rpr0t0c0l	ar
... .long _SINWrap0, _SINWrap1, _SINWrap2,	vb
... _SINWrap3 .long _SINWrap4, _SINWrap5,	xof
... _SINWrap6 OFFLINE, _SINWrap7 .long	p3
... _SINWrap8, _SINWrap9, _SINWrap10,	6q
... _SINWrap11 .long _SINWrap12, _SINWrap13	me
... OFFLINE, _SINWrap14, _SINWrap15	9i7
... loading_	44
... loading_	k7
... loading_	eb
... CIntVNum db 34h ; starting with int 34h	um
... StartIt db 13,10,'Interrupt Install Util	6t7
... Version 01.01b'	nq
... db 13,10,' Finding unused Interrupt vector	s4
... number... (starting with 34h)',13,10,0	43
... NoFndOneS db 13,10,"****Didn't find an unused	b3
... interrupt vector number****"	pr
... FndOneS db 13,10,' Found an unused interrupt at:	wg
... 0000:',0	q5
... IntNumS db 13,10,' Interrupt number: ',0	e9
... Hex db '0123456789abcdefghijklmnpqrstuvxyz'	bh
... loading_	ac
... loading_	4q
... load complete systems 67% operational defer	a3
... multiform referential minUnit:X	ur
... WRITING /ch405/u53r/4dm1n/m41n/inilog.000	5r
... ini aeon.construct.v9876538ty-closedsector	un
... _aeon.construct loaded	65
... closedsector parameters: '105=k6jx, '106=l59d, '107-	yu
... 214 offset, *.000001	7d
... transmission intercept_	wt
... : analog stdrd milsat hash logarithm :	hb
... begin reconstruction_	tgr
... decryption protocol.*914-ui 2048k	bd
... error_ ICE nodes; 0954, 1397, 9574	od

...	cluster data corruption_	wn
...	reconstruction failed_	itp
...	display/	j3g
...	h8zg3g7iv79sgtrdih7htjmhdqyhrjgc74pyzfnrmkmsmn	k9
...	6oz3fvvwhb7cdq7rkomhz8b5rhbd9w89m8iwxbebtia97	u7
...	xxdi4c2peur8a26iakhx2qrpqrg7ghds8jezvc3ze8p7yyi9	7et
...	d47u8r2bmw6p9xh2imxfq5wwpb6ezv46z358x4did3fu	ao
...	odykhj56war9ifxgj7c382dc8s9io3fu5su9qvg34uhpxd7	o2
...	wugn6347vagy7hdzz88sh9tjuffrt8hmdwuqdh4amyyx	wk
...	xexo9nzp8uvhopgofkzravicygc96zid8w2vrhkg3vmtbb	ea
...	mjv87vp5hmmwwwc3b .subject.10487b.alias.balafre. .	wa
...	research.division.yt7.submitted.anomaly.hypothesis.	za
...	.ws.immunity. .scanlab.tests.inconclusive. .insufficie	8y
...	nt.data. .invasive.datum.acquisition.authorized.by.th	55
...	e.ordermarshall. opgofkzravicygc96zid8w2vrhkg3vm	e8
...	tbbmjv87vp5hmmwwwc3byeawjstpskrkzpnnya6arvbxof	xp
...	p36qme9i744k7ebum6t7nqs443b3prwgq5e9bhac4qa3	pgi
...	ur5run65yu7dwthbtgrbdodwnitpj3gk9u77etao02wkea	2m
...	waza8y55e8xppgi2m395g75ikc5kimayauraagedgotwr	39
...	aqt .executive.override.comply.protocol.nl54. .impla	5g
...	nt.remote.tracer. .success. .implant.killswitch. .succ	75i
...	ess. .behavioral.modification. .fail. .subliminal.comp	kc
...	osition. .fail. 4mjbh8y5rcmtkw89kk7niw2tb2x58gny	5ki
...	8vpk5ucsosyui68ox98qfonargcwzsg83cspongyazf82fgq	ma
...	63r5oizbijgceskbmt7xpjemnkss8wi79se5uxo3rjpo3n3	ya
...	pe3zkzzo9y3. heightmark.komturei.appointed.to.lead	ur
...	.yt7. .subject.10487b.moved.to.nonroom. .motion for	aa
...	termination.declined. .motion.against.isolation.declin	ge
...	ed. .new.security.act.in.place. .all.scan.data.seized.a	dg
...	nd.redacted. .eidcbdnzb9v8far64hfnu3fcek4ifudy8u8	ot
...	24ugw5daqueuudd49szfr2iisfc3bb4t3oqgmo687ynstwez	wr
...	h2gui9s5c8yhukn7bit9sd2yn3uihum89vwfv42t8nkxo	aqt
...	8hhoxrqcuk92am7uijg3e5hsij9u5qy89ekhf2kkkgzqtih	k3
...	s78tb4xkc493queyrskdetdu7z9ahxsxop9e4ntc5nz85tr	db
...	n3u5mc32h972sjxuur5tg5omqcy4eftrmtezetfusiwwg	h5
...	6dhc3qist. .field.report.5674.198. .outland.convoy.10	x9
...	9b. .destination.classified. .convoy.intercepted.en.ro	6x
...	ute. .distress.signal.lost. .9.operatives.terminated. .	9jr
...	test.subject.10487b.missing. .activate.remote.tracer.	44t
...	.fail. .activate.killswitch. .fail. .o7anvjuq8t9vkme	mc
...	ogbqxbjgw74a48vi8mgk44obfjw4gkr732z3tafb9jc94a	85
...	miswr5b6nm8qeacx5rbhgzbxrzzmvea7d4g32r6rc82cc	9b
...	xxikjhnjyrcw54pwnmpevc386ggc95efvhxwjh4dwciiwz	psr
...	u7icgrpuvq6hn3jmhjf6859jwjadtf96b5agf8cn4di5an8d	4m
...	a6aq7s94u6th7armejsvwm75qzue7jxwc6zq5hmibupq	i7q

...	vpp7aawc657kfqt36yjzw66bc2xiuah4hraw6nnyz5usb	58
...	nepww9zy5xj8yu7v8bcv9gonqpwy6yaaj5rqcni8b6szw	ow
...	7ddwruu5dgmsf782dv3j7e3xcv2rauuegavkzm6wsiqdp	txt
...	dsx .cortex.scan.spectroanalysis.initiated. .departme	3c
...	nt.personnel.recalibration. .awaiting.directives. .pra	dk
...	ise.luminon ps6oxeq945yxg37nik45fgk2iyibjcenuv3h	ojx
...	5rvqoqoo7o	7k
...	/end transmission	n4
...	.	9tf
...	.	84
...	.	aa
...		wi
...		cu

Ouverture. Triste Amour

“Can’t believe it, Mal’. I won’t,” moaned Triste as he slunk in the old mirkwood chair, his face pale like alabaster. “Non. I simply can’t”.

In front of him stood the great love of his life – Malice, youngest of the Morbid daughters – leaning against the polished granite windowpane of the study, looking out the parapet into midnight Dystopian bustle. And there: praise and song, laughing courtship, the echoes, the vanity – the dark society, myriad mournful denizens locked in eternal night.

“Won’t you,” she pleaded. “*Pauvre* Triste, first to know and last to go”.

She gleaned at him in utter displacency, the left eye fashionably purple, the other – red – lifeless in its socket, ocular muscles loose. Her features were outlined by otherwise common traits: thin blue veins trailing like branches from the edges of her mortuary visage, fading into milk-white neck, cheek and temples.

Adamantly, she added, “you have no say in this. Please accept my gratitude”.

Triste gulped a mouthful of Daemondrought – spiced wine laced with noxberry paste. Not a lethal dose, just enough to get her attention.

Yet again, thought Malice. And desperately, at that.

“Careful, love,” she said.

“But I,” moaned the man, his musical voice atremble. “I’ve told you before...”

Malice shook her head disapprovingly. It was all theatrics, a habit of sort. Meanwhile, Triste drained his jeweled glass and reached for the crystal decanter.

What a wretch, thought Malice, *what a beautiful wretch*.

A long black skirt over knee-high boots, iron soled. Red chemise unbuttoned, aslant over the young man’s deathly chest. Hair long, crimson-dyed, freely cascading over tight shoulders. Fair to say, he was the epitome of their kind: sensual, deceitful and sensibly withered.

“*Exactement*,” Malice countered, “you told me. Words, Triste. Soliloquies and baseless intent, mistaking me for one content of abstract tidbits and shiny trinkets. *Dis moi*,” her steady voice betrayed a hint of cruelty, “would I sooner bed vague imagery than the morsel of a man?”

Triste flinched and blurted out frantically, “it’s just so... unseemly!”

Malice recoiled at the accusation. More insulting terms could scarcely be found. But Triste pursued nonetheless, reckless as the substance coursing through his veins. “The way you’re discarding me, no one will understand. No one. Don’t you get it? They will look to me as refuse!”

There was some truth to this assertion, Malice knew. His renowned charm would suffer... for a time. *Various strata of anguish*, she mused, *but mine the greater*.

“You are aware,” he added, shaking, “this whole disgusting affair breaches protocol, yes?”

Malice simply shrugged, as yet unmoved by his plight.

“Most”.

Seeing this, Triste’s readily frail composure failed utterly. A grimace twisted his face. Tears welled up. “*Pitié*,” he begged. “Please don’t go. *I love you*”. Twin diamond drops rolled down his cheek.

The sight triggered old reflexes in Malice, which she painstakingly suppressed. She used to console him, then.

She'd done so, countless times. But no more. *There's no going back*, she thought.

"There's no going back". Her voice echoed perfectly. "You should acknowledge this. Go. Twirl that witty arse to some other wench". For a second, she withheld her last stinging remark, then let go. "Or lad, as it may".

"Do you *jest*?" He was squirming in his double-lined seat, unable to withstand that ghastly mien.

"Should I call one of your boys?" Malice insisted. "Damien, mayhap, or Yan? The man's got that quaint little perk, he's been eying you ever since you dyed your hair red. Must be something about your complexion. I wonder... does he know Scarlae tends to rub off? Should you become the object of his affection, mind you not to get any on his... he'd get such a rash, the poor bastard".

"Malice!" He was weeping openly, now.

She scowled. "*What?*"

"Please stop". Tears smeared the back of his free hand, spotting his linen cuffs. "You know I love you. *Je brûle pour toi!* I only... *played* with these companions... And I recall you watching, once, looking not at all displeased with the manner of our savoring".

"Certes, be that as it may". A *smoke-screen*, she thought, *I need some diversion, quick*. Suddenly she elected to quote one of the Tenets. "Consider the Void". *There*, she mused gleefully, *chew on that!*

But Triste was beyond metaphysics. "Ah, *bien sûr*, Hemlock's daughter," he merely interjected. "You would contradict my ache with cheap sophistry! And I thought you despised the old laws".

He then paused for a second, weighting the implications of his next move. Gaze troubled, pulse erratic, he gulped down the last of his Daemondrought and merely spat: "Morbid warned me, you know".

Malice winced at the very mention.

"No. Mother doesn't come into this".

“Said you desired nothing but elusion. Anything and anyone, for long as they remain out of reach! All you cannot have, Malice! ‘Trollop’, she called you. ‘Flakey little trollop’”.

Though it cost her plenty, she remained surprisingly calm. “We have our differences”.

“So you disagree?”

“I don’t know,” answered Malice, on guard. “Are you trying to make me angry?”

“I’m trying to bring some sense into you”.

A certain twist swiftly overcame her demeanor, as thought she had tapped new inner reserves.

“Wouldn’t like it the other way around, would you?” She smiled, then – a very disturbing gesture. But Triste didn’t catch on.

“What ever do you mean?”

“You know,” she grinned, “bring some *me* into sense?”

“You mean...” he pointed hesitantly out the window, but both of them knew, his designation lay way beyond the streets, the high towers, the Eternal Gardens and dark woodlands. “Out there?”

“Aye,” she blurted out joyfully, “leave this festering hole for good! Off with the Tenets, off with Merveille and Morbid and their sickening grace! You and me, Triste, straight into the Void?”

Her scarce proposal crashed into the man’s outrage. He raised himself up completely, swinging the empty glass as he did.

“Simpleton!” he raged. “You would share Malheur’s fate? Yes, waltz down to nothingness, like your dear sister? Forego this society of darkest night? And for what! Poetry? Repose? Nay – not the Thirteen, they are long gone – hence can I only wonder...” A rigid frown dawned on his brow. As the realization hit, his lips spelled the word slowly. “Exile...” Bracing wide, he raised his empty glass at her, in mockery. “You wish for *exile*! At Noctem! Ah, you hollow,

irremediable sot! Tell me, has that... *disease* marred your judgement as well as your sight?"

At which Malice finally intervened. Crossing both arms under her breasts, she uttered, very softly: "Assez. I'm sorry, Triste. This has gone long enough".

Yet as the man refused to move – still braced on her pity, still deaf to her pleas – she was forced to use the proper form, the old maxim, which was as formal a dismissal as there ever was in the land of Dystopia. And as she spoke the words, Triste's last hopes were crushed, forever.

"I wish to be left alone".

Apathy aghast, 'twixt failure hast,
Chanced to graze these lips again.
As loss is mine, so sorrow thine;
Thou malicious, yet ever so vain.

- Triste de Sanbourg.
Dirge XI.

I. One Tired Act

Malice set forth unto Necropolis, specks of fresh blood showing on her neckline.

Like some hounded wraith she stormed out of the three story manor that was poor Triste's abode, and walked sternly, bodkin secure at her side, albeit ignoring the flock of selfsame shadows who'd swarmed in at her summons. Like a murder of crows, these disappeared into the black enclosure, hastening up the stairs to succour the pale wretch who lay there bleeding to death.

And in what state will they find him, she wondered.

Waves of angst simmered beneath her skin, underlined by pangs of sheer sorrow – it was all over, now, this love, and everything it entailed.

“*Carpe Noctem,*” she whispered for comfort. And as she stood on the final stair leading down into the street, Malice held Necropolis entire, with one eye purple.

Varying shades of dark made up the Last City of Man, as its denizens soared beyond the Witching Hour to scheme and celebrate. Here and there, small fires shimmered from high windows, casting brazen honey light which contrasted against the *noir* canvas that was the old architecture – towers, mansions and abbeys, all built from black stone and mirkwood, raised close like old giants hunched over the narrow streets coursing through their midst. Ominous, their pointed roofs stood against the Dystopian heavens like so many blades poised to strike.

Heavy skies trailed overhead – thick clouds floating to forever, crackled by some paler lines, hinting at varying depths. The patterns thusly drawn were reminiscent of broken mirrors, both random and suggestive. In fact, one could stare into the rolling mass for hours on end, never seeing the same form twice.

But direct light would never spill through.

“Spread the curtains,” muttered Malice as she strolled down the last step and off into the nearest street. “Here we go again: one tired act”.

The paved way embraced her then, concealing her silhouette amongst the dark movements of the other denizens – these roaming habitants, all blackly clad in luxurious garments: robes and cloaks, dresses and blouses, corsets and finery, all velvet and lace, with the occasional flash of pale flesh coursed by thin blue veins. Their features ever refined, their stance elegant and mischievous. To these nocturnal creatures, each movement was like a swirl of dance, every laugh an act of grace, and every comely smile foreshadowed dark thirsts longing to be quenched.

Soon the rumours will spread, thought Malice. And I the object. The red-eyed. The dastard-unfit.

She had reaved liberty from the wanton clutch of that self-infatuated leech, but the newly found taste was increasingly bitter. In spite of all plotting and primal intentions and the vast amounts of strength she’d conjured up to attain this feat, Malice was left to ponder, at the very last, if anything was *truly* different. No. For all the veils she’d torn, the lies, the pleas, the meandering twists of affection and jealousy: the parting shreds revealed no secrets. *Rien*. Nothing had changed.

The world was still the same.

Every which way they went, the ghostly silhouettes, to and fro, around and front and behind, seemingly absent, yet subtly aware of their surroundings, searching – she knew – for distraction, thrills, anything to raise their

wrecked spirits from the blackened pits of daily Dystopian despair to different heights of sweet revelry. Eerie passions coursed freely through the hordes of Necropolis, each and every soul harbouring secret desires longing to be met, and so they rummaged through song and dance, arts and craft, play and argument, cuisine and brewery, and cloth seaming to suit all tastes, though these were most always black, with the occasional length of crimson, deep blue or violet as a mixture of both – the only dyes available on the isle.

“Demented shadows in the dark,” murmured Malice. “Jesters at the End of the World”.

There she crossed Perpetual Court – the marble-columned hall where most well versed courtiers gathered to gossip and debate. When important disputes arose, though they seldom did, here is where matters would be brought forth, stated and settled amongst those willing to partake. But more often than not, it merely served as playground to feats of tongue and appraisal. The hall itself was open, devoid of ceiling, and most importantly, round, so Hemlock said, to remind all denizens they were and could only be equals.

Next to Court spanned the vast Hallows: most extensive structure of Necropolis, whose lower levels dug deep into the bowels of the earth. Avertedly, it was the most desolate place of all, as it only contained dead matter, books and parchments and written lore, records of Dystopia and its ancestry, poorly documented though it was. Few denizens expressed lasting taste for scriptures, save for Spleen, who knew these dimlit halls best.

Malice hastened past these places burdened with memories, tracing an elaborate arc around the most familiar areas she despised for their repetitive character. The Demon Den growled somewhere over there, the ill-infested catacombs of depraved sloths – rightly named, for all intents and purposes. Father Hemlock’s dwelling lay farther yet, but hurriedly though she tread, it occurred to

Malice she might as well take a moment's rest to cool her temper. Rushing off without proper care was considered... unseemly.

She stopped short of her favourite agora – a quaint little opening bordering on the shores of the Ashen Strait. There several stone tables were laden with victuals and oils and stone wares for the taking. There were twoscore places like this around Necropolis, but this one she fancied for the river – oft had it soothed her mind in times of unrest. She secretly hoped it may do so again. Her heart lifted when Malice saw here was no one in the agora – she was alone, at last.

Nearing the food platters, she merely picked a piece of chourrée – bread roll mixed with ground nuts and dried berries from the Eternal Gardens – and settled next to the river, her naked feet dangling in the cool waters.

Farther on the other side rose the odious Tour Noire, heart of Necropolis. It stood ten floors up, highest creation in the Last City of Man. An observatory, though scarcely attended, upon which the keen eye could survey Necropolis whole, even glance at the Gardens and the dark woodlands stretching yonder. On a clear day, one could even grasp the edge of the Void circling Dystopia – an impenetrable fog, everchanging and bleak, which in all honesty was a listless sight if there ever was one.

Faint flickers from a far-off lantern revealed a slight reflection on the surface of the water. Between mouthfuls of the hearty bread, Malice gazed intently at her mirror-self. The frail composure, the thin onyx-black locks of hair freely cascading down. Yet she saw more blood than she'd imagined, it'd splashed unto her neckline and some tiny specks spread across her face, as high as her brow. She flinched at the sight.

Her stomach turned.

Instantly she reached into the Strait with both hands and gently scrubbed her skin with a handful of dripping

loam. Feeling the fresh waters was invigorating, sending tingles across her supple flesh. But when the troubled waters finally set still, Malice was appalled at the renewed image it cast. The stern expression, stricken with dismay, lips atremble, sorrow graven into her very features.

The blood had washed off, but she felt empty.

The red eye hung laxly in its socket. Mocking her. *Irremediable sot*, Triste had called her. *Diseased*. And she knew the truth of it. His profane eloquence had spelled it out at last, if only brashly so. Disease. Rot. The dead-eye, dastard-unfit.

An unnatural taint, that, which she was told had brought lengthy debate at the moment of her birth. Simple question: could such a one be permitted to live? The old laws were quite explicit on the matter. The unfit could not live. They would be sent At Noctem – exiled into the Void or Advented, which is to say, slain without pain. An act of mercy, according to the scriptures. And explicit though these were, her condition, on the other hand, was altogether new, ergo the lack of precedent. Surely, missing hands would have posed no contest. Neither crippled legs or even blindness to both eyes. But just the one?

It wasn't that Malice didn't grasp the concept. But somehow, she felt the issue wasn't really *settled*. They were insistent. The elders. Some of the young, too. Watching her. Analyzing her. Familiar faces, smiling faces... but fatal if she proved unfit. And she would be sent At Noctem in a manner of nights.

It came to this. Even Triste, supposedly her greatest love, had deemed fitting to reflect her flawed nature. The Void, it seemed, was on every corner. For the most part of Malice's existence, *it* had stared her with its implacable expanse as possible – and most probable – outcome to her condition. It was everywhere, gazing into her.

But of late... she'd begun staring back.

"What – " She yelped suddenly. "What is *that*!?"

For a second there, she thought she saw something move beneath the waters of the Ashen Strait... a *darker* shade of black, slithering and fey, not too far from her post.

Impossible!

Malice nonetheless yanked off her feet from the chill waters, reached for the bodkin at her side and leaned head forward. There was something down there, for sure.

"What is it," demanded a light cheerful voice behind her.

"Ah!" Malice nearly fell head-first in the Strait. "Don't creep up on me like that!"

"So sorely sorry, sister," laughed Merveille as she came closer. "It's only dear old me". Somehow she'd slunk across the agora to her side, lithe footing on bare ground. A huge grin ran across her face, and there was a certain spring in her step, always bouncy and willing. She wore thick make-up as usual: charcoal streaks over white paste fond, her blithe shape suggestively espoused by blacklace corset and embroidered silken skirt. Her raiment, as a general rule, left little to the imagination.

Malice finally caught her breath. "You startled me!" Subtly, she replaced the bodkin at her belt.

"Aye, darkling! Ah! What is it? *Syllia*? Or did you drop something?" Merveille was laughing uncontrollably, relishing fright like a savoury dish.

"Nothing," snapped Malice, confounded. "Why are you here?"

Merveille strolled around the agora, mimicking the steps of a two-timed waltz. "Well, I was looking for *you*, my dear Morbid sibling, as I need help for a fitting. Simple and all, tit for tat, you know. You see," she went on, oblivious to her sister's dismay, "the Grand Bal is nigh upon us, and I can't quite possibly get my head around these three delicious fabrics, they're so exquisitely fashionable and yet, I wonder, which one would... *advantage* me best, you see, naturally I thought of you, my sweet..."

“*Ma soeur*,” interjected Malice, “It’s just –”

“Ah, pretty please, won’t you *help* me? I’m ever so desperate, all alone and just going over these dresses again and again and again and I’ll just *die* if I make the wrong choice, and you know how much I absolutely *love* these balls and last time I promised myself I’d be the prettiest, most ravishing, most *haunting* lady of the –”

“Listen,” Malice cut in, “I just abandoned Triste”.

“You *what*?” Merveille stopped dead in her steps.

“I did. Had to”.

“But *why*?” The sister acted completely dumbfounded. Convincingly, even, but Malice knew better.

“You tart, you know why. It’s just that he took it rather... sourly, to say the least”.

“Was that all the ruckus I heard coming over?” Merveille was catching on.

“Yes. I’m just on my way to see father”.

“Oh, you poor princess, what did he do?”

“Well,” Malice began nonchalantly, “when I told him I wanted to be alone, he... blabbered something about me being selfish and vain. Then he broke his glass and slashed his wrist. Pretty deep, too, must have severed the tendons because he couldn’t switch hands for the other one”.

“Do you jest?” asked the other, unbelieving.

“Nay, not now”.

“Then what?” Merveille lost her smile.

“Why, I... *helped* him”.

“You mean, you called out?”

“Yes... no, I mean, not right away. You don’t understand, sister, the things he said... he was unkind to me”.

“And what *did* you do?”

“I took the glass shard away, and – oh, there was so much blood...”

“And?”

“And,” admitted Malice, “I slit the other wrist”.

Our ancestry was led by gamblers – men who wished all from nothing, instant but artificial. Their ultimate pleasure would reside in loss and dismay, until affliction took the form of existence and despair fuelled extreme resolutions. By travailing in spite of empirical evidence, they killed every chance of fair becoming.

We are flawed, outcome of vain ambition: may we never forget that.

- Codex Mortem, 7-6

II. Hemlock

The old chess board was set perfectly. The carved wooden pieces were worn nearly beyond recognition, but Malice knew each one intimately.

“Sorry for the wait,” she spoke, sitting down next to her ailing father. “I was delayed,”

Hemlock was bed-ridden, sitting upright on half a dozen pillows, thick woollen blankets laid up to his waist. Thin wisps of hair fell down his balding head. And though his eyes lit up as she sat next to him and dry lips turned a beautiful smile, his long beard failed to hide leaning cheeks.

“So I’ve heard,” he spoke in kindly tone.

What years had spared his autumn years the illness was now liefly raking in – he seemed close to the end, grown so thin and fragile, merely the shadow of his former self. To think he used to be the strongest, wisest of them all. The man had overseen the training of the Thirteen, even. Forty years ago – a lifetime ago, it seemed.

“There you go, sweetling,” spoke Josy as she handed Malice a steaming cup of Scarlae, otherwise known as *Blood Tea* for its deep crimson hue, which she in turn accepted gladly.

Josy, Hemlock's leman of twenty years, tended for him at all times, loved him unconditionally, and Malice was not unlike a daughter to her. A pristine creature she was, fair-haired and hazel-eyed. Gentle beyond reckoning. *So unlike Morbid, realized Malice, the opposite, even, if such a thing is even possible.*

She returned Josy's radiant smile as best she could and watched attentively as Hemlock pulled faintly on a wooden pipe. Blue smoke whiffed up.

Bakhra, thought Malice. Black lotus, to ease the pain. And how atrocious must it be.

The only light came from a chandelier on the nightstand. All around him lay sprawled books and parchments, inks and copper-tipped feathers. He'd been composing Ethos Noir for the better part of the last decade. Reflections on Dystopian ethics and negative dialectics of the Codex Mortem – the laws of the founders. Soon to be complete.

His life's work, or so he claimed.

But, Malice mulled, his time is running out.

"I don't know what came over me," she finally admitted.

"Well," started Hemlock, "countless reasons can drive one to violence, Malice. Fewer suffice to steady the aching hand. 'Do no harm'," he quoted the Tenets – "I can understand the impulse, but justification is scarcely met".

Down on the wooden board, the engagement had begun. Malice picked her pieces hesitantly, weighting every move forcefully. Skilful though she was, Hemlock was a formidable opponent.

She'd never won a single game.

"But," Malice protested, "the Tenets also state we must 'live freely'".

"Your point being?"

"I dismissed Triste, yet he refused to comply. Ergo, he denied my freedom and invited aggression".

“Oh,” Hemlock grinned, “debatable at best. Some would agree with you. Your mother, for one. But not I, nor would any sensible Dystopian. The matter is clear: the man did not keep you physically. Words are abstract. We use them for sport. They mean nothing”.

Back on the board, Malice’s peons hastened fast. She loosened her forces without restraint, gaining ground, pushing on every flank. Even managed to lunge her Bishop at an idle Tower, gladly removing some of the straight-line support Hemlock favoured so.

“Perhaps not in the flesh,” argued Malice, “but we know harm comes in several forms, nay?”

“Ah,” sighed the old man, “*bien vrai*. Was he so unkind to you, then?”

“He failed to quench my thirst. Like all the rest. Play and song, frolic and deceit. I loved him, yes... but he made me miserable. How can that be?”

“Ah love... so much ink has thusly flown, sucked in parchments that fade and turn to dust”.

“Seems so easy for the rest of them. Merveille thrives in such decadence. She’s invariably giddy, it’s almost sickening. And I’ve tried, too, but I can’t. All I see is empty jest in a finite world”.

“Alas, daughter, I’ve heard such lament before!” Again he quoted the Tenets. “Remember. ‘Consider the Void’. Meaning, we come from nowhere and will return. In the meantime, cultivate what you will and keep humble. There is joy to be found, though it be the very last”.

By the fifteenth move, his daughter had the upper hand. The old man sent out his Queen in an effort to pierce the main line. She sallied forth and took two peons before Malice could double-back her twin Knights and counter the onslaught. Relentlessly these cavaliers harassed the Queen from crooked angles, until Hemlock was forced to beat in retreat.

Astounded at her own success, Malice dared cross new ground. Softly, she asked: “is that why Malheur left us, then, why she crossed into the Void? Maybe she wanted more than *this*. Maybe it was better for her”.

The old man’s eyes filled with tears. He stayed his hand and pulled at his pipe without raising his gaze from the board.

“That,” he whispered, “is difficult for me”.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” blurted Malice regretfully. “I didn’t mean... *pardonnez-moi*”.

After a while, Hemlock lifted his head and managed to smile. “So close to the end, and yet I see myself in you, my beloved daughter”. His watery eyes gleamed, filled to the brink with souvenirs. “Your fire burns brighter than most. I wouldst hope, if hope availed for aught, that your volition not fell on barren ground. But I fear that it will, Malice. It makes a cruel lesson, that emptiness. Not one I would sooner learn than merely see you living, and laughing”.

Chastised, Malice kept to the board.

“I understand,” she said, “somehow I always thought the Thirteen would come back. At least one. Everything would have changed, then. Instead we are *bound*. Locked here in this... eternal darkness”.

“A costly mistake. Had you seen the Black Knights, I fear these murky doubts of yours would drown you now. Better you haven’t”.

“How long has it been?”

“Thirty-seven years, four and elevenscore nights by Aurielle’s reckoning”.

He sighed.

Malice knew the tale by heart, more myth than history, it seemed. *The Black Knights*: thirteen men and women trained for a thousand nights in every possible craft and talent, given extensive resources and sent out on foot into the Void across thirteen directions. One purpose only: explore the Wastes and come back. The subtext, however,

was clear: find other traces of life and bring the knowledge back.

"They might still be out there," chanced Malice at random.

"A groundless assumption". His tone was firm but not harsh. Clearly, he'd gone through the issue so often, the subject seemed entirely remote.

"Could it be, they found a better place and decided to stay?" *An innocent question*, she thought. *No harm in asking*.

Back on the game, Malice was vying to take advantage of her superior position. She scuffled against the enemy Queen with everything she had, lunged at her from all sides, somehow expecting Hemlock to overturn the situation. When she managed to lock the Queen in a triple-sided attack, Malice nearly hollered out.

The Queen fell.

"Well," answered Hemlock, "our plan was conceived carefully. The most incisive courtiers of Necropolis were involved. Your mother and I the most eager by far. Somewhere along the way, it occurred to Morbid that the expressed insistence of the Thirteen to return was anything but a static variable, which could very well jeopardize the entire project. Whilst facing the unknown, we became increasingly mindful of failure, to the point of despair".

"You speak as though you yourself had failed. But you succeeded, you and Morbid and the other elders, *you sent them forth*".

"Ah, beloved daughter, you do not understand. Assuming either one survived the ordeal, he or she would have been *compelled* to return. I know, because we took steps. Wicked, *hidden* steps". He waited a while, contemplating the chess game, though Malice suspected a greater play was on his mind.

"A secret," spoke she, catching on. "Which I imagine a single few possess".

Following the enemy Queen's demise, Malice stormed the rest of Hemlock's forces. She took three peons, one Knight and one Bishop before she even realized victory was within reach. Hemlock's numbers were thinning at an alarming rate. She couldn't believe she was actually going to win. But the sudden rush was immediately met with a pang of sadness. Was Hemlock weakened so? Had his mind started to fail? Somehow, Malice couldn't bear the thought of winning.

However, he would know if she played a little below her abilities and threw the game. The humiliation would be far worse. She had to keep going.

"Aye," answered Hemlock, "so very few. And none of the Thirteen. In this have I, have we *all* erred. Our greatest endeavour, unmatched, save by the catastrophic failure it proved to be. *Non*, we are not worth the answers we so wrongly strove to attain. Daresay I, better bury the questions and be done with it".

Malice suddenly thought about the black form squirming in the Ashen Strait. "You think *something* else took them, then?"

Hemlock laughed out loud, wholeheartedly. Sadly, the exertion caused him to cough out and retch. *How much time does he have*, wondered Malice mournfully.

"Oh, if you'd only *seen* what they could do... you would believe, like so many still, that nothing in this dying world could effectively stop them. There is no doubt, not on this side. In point of fact, herein lies the greater danger. The only real threat left".

"Anticipation?"

"Hope. It can drive you mad. Faced with failure, the jagged peaks of our pride turned to bottomless pits. Four years after the Embassy's departure, Mikel's twin girls set off into the Void to find him. Sots. Needless to say we lost *them*, too".

Meanwhile, the chess board had become a hunting ground. Malice stretched her line wide in order to finally break Hemlock's one bastion of defense and reach his King. The old man proved a *redoubtable* tactician to the end, even his last reserves and pockets of resistance were arrayed efficiently, forcing Malice to loosen her forces unevenly in order to trap him completely. Yet in doing so, several holes opened up through her lines – openings she did not anticipate. It was Hemlock's turn. Before Malice's glaring eyes, an enemy Tower suddenly rumbled all the way across the board and landed on her foremost line, engaging her King directly.

She was shocked. *No matter*, she thought, and was about to displace the crucial piece when she noticed her father's last Bishop cutting off all retreat, from a hole *she'd made in her own lines*. She was beaten before she even knew it.

Checkmate.

"Dear daughter," spoke Hemlock wearily as he drew once more from his wooden pipe, "would you please light some more candles?" He smiled, ever so gently, then murmured soft. "These old eyes are growing tired".

T'offrir des baisers
Chauds comme le sang,
Et te mordiller
La nuit durant

- Léandres Desforges
Notes personnelles.

III. Le jardin des ombres

The Eternal Gardens were rightly named for their timeless nature. Myriad circles of meticulously arrayed bushes and trees and plants flowered into wider patterns which in turn encircled Necropolis whole. Each species densely set against the other, espoused in moist complacency over soft earth. Every which way they coiled: tree-trunks thickened, roots drank deep, leaves spread wide.

The Gardens lived and breathed, forever.

Its nightly flowers spewed poignant aromas into the air, an odoriferous melange of stark sweets and wonderfully noxious smells. Their petals gleamed fey colors against the black, clouded heavens – red and purple, a rare few darkly blue. Together entwined, countless perfumes commingled in a sensual symphony of musk and rosery.

Baleful, they bloomed in a sunless world.

Denizens usually swarmed the Gardens at night to pick fruits and seeds, dig up edible roots and harvest potent plants which would later be used to tend wounds and calm fevers. But day was dawning fast, and so, as ghosts they'd all fluttered back to their gloomy havens amongst Necropolis.

All but one.

Malice trod her lonely way amidst the crooked path, wrapped in a woolen cloak of ebony black. In her left hand she held one lantern aloft, flame burning low. The other she used to part branches and leaves from her pallid face.

Unerringly she walked: the recesses of her mind knew the Eternal Gardens well, for she loved them much.

Every barefooted step landed lithely as the undergrowth welcomed her in its soft, suckling midst, whilst sweet nectar dripped from darkly curled leaves, trickling lovingly unto her naked outstretched hand.

And yet her heart was heavy.

This play was drawing to a close, although its conclusion drew no relief, only bitter taste and sickening notions of loss and dismay. Mordant reflections drowned every pathway, it seemed.

All but one.

Malice nigh came to a clearing amongst a spacious woodlet of mirktrees. Tall grass tickled underfoot, wet moss gleaming near a spring flowing discreetly amongst the rocks.

The glade was silent and dark.

For a moment's breath, Malice feared this daring tryst, as fitting conclusion to one such disastrous eve, would collapse all the same. Luckily, a pluck of strings wrung her out of reverie. It came from above. *C minor six*.

He sat perched on a high branch, his vestments trailing down like so many draperies unfurled. The lute held in his delicate grasp, locks held tight in a formal bow. Pale eyes pierced nightly blackness.

There he was: Léandres, poet of the Old Tongue.

"*Par ici, jolie dame,*" quoth he playfully. "*Je vous attendais*".

A smile dawned on her lips. He'd come at last.

At once, Malice snuffed out the lantern and placed it down, and then, ever so liefly, ascended the mirktree, barefoot on bark, hands reaching for bumps and crannies, and hauled herself up. In a few agile pulls she managed to gain his side and sit next to him on the high branch, back to the heavy trunk.

As she snuggled close to his broad chest and the softness of his satin vest, an all too familiar scent overcame her senses across the multitude of the Eternal Gardens. An intimate feel she retained from the past.

Yet as relieved as she was to see him again, her anguish shone blatantly through.

“*Sans offense, Malice,*” Léandres began whilst absently picking at the strings, “*mais t’as pas l’air bien*”.

She rested her head on his shoulder.

“I’m not,” she answered dispassionately. “One tired act, and I mere masquerader, stumbling through tangled lines. *J’ai mal de vivre*”.

Malice recognized the tune. Jothriel’s Lament, though he was playing it in a different key. It was some lesser work of Dystopian ancestry, with all the classic figures: Jothriel, of course, and Aurielle la Pure, Gaël des Vers and Anne-Marie, better known as La Fourbe – the traitor.

“*Je suis désolé pour Triste,*” he added with compassion.

“Are you?” she wondered, “it’s over, at least. And the bastard will live. The world goes on, bleak though it is”.

He didn’t show it, but she knew Léandres would welcome the news. He’d always shown great affection for her, and deeply despised the other man. She could tell looking through his eyes: they betrayed him.

Always holding back, thought Malice. *Always.*

Poet of the Old Tongue: meek and constricted.

“*Vrai,*” he admitted, “*mais tout n’est pas perdu.*”

Meanwhile Jothriel’s Lament was drawing to a close, that last theme when the Founders came upon their great Deus Ex Machina: an inexplicably thriving isle amongst the Wastes, where they finally mourned the passing of the Old World.

A tale better fitted for children and theatrical plays.

“*Trite,*” she cut in, “*useless gabber*”.

“*Mépriserais-tu les fondateurs?*” he asked, whilst reposing the tight-stringed lute to his side.

“You cannot hate the dead”. As much a statement as an accusation.

“*Et alors?*” he merely countered.

“I am simply... weary. Exhausted, love. Beyond my say. Beyond words. And beyond the ken of simple merriment”.

Léandres sighed, seemingly vexed that his music would bore his leman so, though he failed to hide it.

So much restraint, she mused pensively. *But why?*

Taking resolve fast, he produced a bottle of dry port wine from a leather sac, pulled the cork out with his teeth and handed it to her. She gladly took a swill. It tasted of oak and cherries, and the potency of the drink surged in a second’s lapse – it burned in her throat all the way down.

She handed it to him, grimacing, and they passed it back and forth, perched all the way up that sylvan height.

“It occurs to me,” he chanced in a soft tone, “you have not been yourself for quite some time”.

She nodded, reluctantly.

“True. I need to find answers”.

“Theoretical?”

She slouched against him, befuddled.

“Mayhap”.

Swiftly, Léandres seized the moment.

“Vapid wonderings, then,” he stated confidently, “such abstract puzzles ill become you. Why trace around eddying lines? Life is *here*, Malice, and only now. It can be whatever you will, so long as you will it”. He paused for a while, then added: “the night is vast. You need not be lone”.

Such volition struck a sensitive chord within the wretched Malice. She felt inner strains finally give. But surely, it couldn’t be *that* easy? Just open up, let go?

It can’t, she knew. *It can’t*.

“My father is dying,” she wailed, “my sister is gone, and –” And, she wanted to add, *there’s something else. I’m seeing things*. “I’m slipping, Léandres. Do you understand? I

almost *slew* him. I broke one of the Tenets. I'm unfit, they'll cast me out, I know –"

"Hush," he whispered, "they'll do no such thing. How can they? Triste won't utter a single word. Trust me. I am here for you, Malice. Always have. Always will".

And she wept, then, because it was true, it was all true. He'd always been there for her. *She* was the one who'd kept him at bay as mere leman. She'd favoured Triste instead, for his open waywardness, whilst gentle, self-restrained Léandres had kept to the shadows.

What a fool I am, she thought. Red-eyed. Dastard-unfit.

She huddled close to his side as dark desires rose in her breast. "*Oh, prends-moi,*" she sobbed, "hold me, love me". She shivered. "I feel so cold".

And as they embraced each other with the full force of despair, dawn ramped across the Void and grey dullness seeped through the cloud-thick heavens from afar, shedding anaemic-pale luminescence over Eternal Gardens.

Malice sunk into Léandres' arms, shying away from the light.

Youth – mistakes such as I could not conceive in the making, yet Time hath made me wiser, elsewhither taking my strength. When I could I knew not, now I know and cannot. Aye, Life's sarcasm is rather quaint – now let's hear Death's rebuttal.

- Jothriel. Memoires, p. 134
Hallows Archives.

IV. Mille Merveilles

“Ah! *Non, non, non!*” shrieked Merveille in an unnervingly high-pitched tone. “This one's way too bright! It won't go with my sandals! Off, off!”

Two girls laughed in unison whilst they carried the magenta silk to the heap on the bed and hurriedly sorted through various lengths of fabric laid carelessly to the side. Eglantine and Kalian, ages six and eight.

“Please,” begged Malice as she slumped on the bolstered couch, “watch the rumpus”. Her head felt like it was about to split. She was dizzy just standing.

“How 'bout this one, *Mer,*” asked Kalian as she handed Merveille a piece of crimson dark velvet.

The median child of the three Morbid daughters stood in front of an oval mirror raised on a pivotal iron frame. She was skyclad – naked but for chestnut-hued sandals, red-tinged earrings and a ruby pendant nestled between firm breasts, her bare flesh bathed in chandelier flame-light. But instead of the signature charcoal streaks over ivory-white cream, her visage wore a rather sober *maquillage*: black eyeliner and purpled lips.

Eglantine held out the piece in front of her, smiling wickedly.

“Arh,” yelped Merveille, “it’s so disgustingly bleak! *Au secours!* Do you really want *me* to attend the Grand Ball in this bland catastrophe?”

The younglings’ laughter broke out across the bedroom, sending Malice’s headache splintering.

“Oy!” Merveille called across the room, “you sad excuse for a corpse, what do *you* think?”

“Oh, most definitely without question,” mumbled Malice, “this one, yes, no contest here, it’s perfect, suitors will leap down from high balconies at the very sight, and their mistresses will scream for your head”.

“I’d almost believe you,” protested Merveille, “if your eyes weren’t shut so perfectly tight”. She turned to the girls. “*Les filles*, would you please raise dear old Malice from her tomb? Her indisposition to assist me is rather taxing...”

Kalian started running first, closely followed by a giggling Eglantine. They jumped the nearly-slumbering Malice with abandon and started tickling her sides with their tiny hands, at which she couldn’t help but howl. They were quick, these two.

“Please! *I surrender!*” pleaded Malice, vanquished, whilst both reached for her every opening, laughing uncontrollably. In an effort to break free, Malice wrenched herself up from the couch and seized wee Eglantine by the waist, then swung her lithe body on her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. The little one beat her hands and feet, yelping. Kalian was trying to succour her friend when Malice grabbed her all the same and raised her up, kicking and twisting, under her free arm.

“I got you *both* now,” growled Malice, still reeling from the strain. “Yer done for!”

“No!” screamed the girls, “*put us down! Down!*”

“Oh,” Malice answered as she strode like a giant across the room, “I’ll put ye down o’right!” Malice took three long steps and just swung them both on the bed, screaming.

They landed and slumped sonorously – a chaotic heap of giggles, cushions, outstretched limbs and assorted fabrics.

“Now, see what you’ve done!” whined Merveille as she noticed the clambering mass, “we’ve to start all over again!”

The girls somehow fell down the bed, dragging the duvet alongside, jumbled in velvet and linen, laughing as they did. But when they finally got up from the bundle, Merveille’s half-discomfited stare brought them to a staggering blush and they darted off, hailing the sisters heedlessly as they went.

Malice couldn’t help but smile.

Such pure strength of heart, she mused as the wee ones scrambled on, *such beautiful innocence*.

“Such a fitting”, complained Merveille, eying herself continuously.

“Oh, cheer up,” rasped Malice painfully as she sat upon the hardwood floor next to the mirror, back to the stone wall. “Besides, why stress over that Bal, you’re in no lack of company...”

“Speaking of which,” graciously evaded Merveille, “I take it these racked bones of yours owe their tenderness to more than ample winery?”

Always the inquisitive one, thought Malice, *at least where flesh is concerned*.

“Perchance,” she merely answered, “or should one such as I not drink herself to a stupor?”

Merveille checked herself from different angles, pouting. “I don’t understand, really...”

Malice yawned. “*C’est-à-dire?*”

“You had him *heeled*, sweetling sister, Triste hung on your every word and whim and whisper, and yet you cut him loose... literally”. A hint of reproach in her voice. “May I ask why?”

Malice snarled. This rather pleasant eve was going sour. “I could swear we had this discussion already”.

“Ah, so could I, were it you’d ever met my query”.

“Sister –” Malice started sternly, at which Merveille stopped her short.

“Apologies, darkling, I know it’s none of my affairs and we... well, evidently we don’t see eye to eye on matters of thrill and revelry, you and I, but I do *care* for you, you know, and with everything that’s happened, I –”

“Careful, now...”

“I thought Triste could have helped you through. I know he’s a bit finicky, but he really loves you, you know”.

Malice calmed down.

“I was more alone *with* him”.

“I see,” said Merveille thoughtfully. “We can find you better company, I’m sure”.

Malice crooked an eyebrow.

“That... is not necessary”.

“Oh, shush,” the other countered as she turned sideways to the looking glass, examining her figure attentively. “You should be quite comely, given enough consideration... though we would have to... *travail* a bit... do something about those rags... put a bit o’chance on your side... you’re readily the *plainest* creature in Necropolis by far –”

“Why, *thank you*,” interjected Malice sarcastically.

“Simple matter of... evening the odds”.

“That sounds *irrévocablement* horrible. How scathing must that tongue be when actually *aimed* to wound, I wonder”.

“Just think about it”.

“I’d rather not”.

Malice woefully regretted getting out of bed when a tentative hand came tapping at the chamber door.

Merveille’s traits lit up glaringly.

“*In a moment!*” she yelled across the room.

“And who in the Void –” started Malice, dumbfounded, “would *that* be, dear sister?”

“A present, lovey, just help me dress, will you?”

Merveille reached for a piece of thin black finery she rolled around her waist and fixed with an iron pin. She then squirmed into a loose scarlet corselage and turned her back to Malice.

Again the knock was heard.

“*Un instant!*”

The high-pitched tone made Malice’s head throb with pain. And as she started to lace up Merveille’s eyelets – and not too gently at that – she grew increasingly suspicious of her gleeful sister’s intent.

“One more thing,” this one added, confirming Malice’s doubts, “Mother wants us to dine together, all of us. Says she misses her daughters”.

Malice flinched at the very mention of Morbid.

“Must we?” she pleaded whilst willfully pulling the lace too hard, and the suddenness of the pull squeezed the air out of Merveille’s lungs.

“*Erh,*” she retched, “come on, darkling, *please?*” The corset was now tightly laced. “Now, for that gift..”.

And what, thought Malice ruefully, could you possibly give me that I want?

“Just you wait,” said Merveille as she hastily replaced her hair in the mirror before strolling to the door to meet her guest.

Yet as she opened the enclosure, the median child of the Morbid daughters paused and turned back, grinning.

“Wait and see what’s in store, dear sister”.

A-merry we go, my Mikel,
No fear, nay, never –
I know
Eras transfixed in beauty
Aeons locked in a kiss
For thee,
For thee.

- Jeanelle Després
Stanzas.

V. Syllia Swamps

It was day.
Grey, as always.
The fog was setting in.
And rain came down hard.

“Calonio, you little *cunt* –” swore Malice as she raised herself from the mudslide a third time, “you might have *mentioned*, you know,” fingers sinking into clay, several nails broken, “somehow, contrived to divulge, out of sheer *clemency*, mind you –” one tattered dress clinging to her flesh like bruised skin, “just this tiny, wee bit of a *detail*, nothing really –” again, she slipped down unto bare knees, soaked with grime and rain-thinned trickles of blood, “Malice’, you would have said, ‘I almost forgot to *mention*’,” taut muscles strained under the weight as she hauled herself up again, teeth-clenched, lips turned blue from the cold, “‘somewhere along the way, there’s this patch of *land*, you know’ –” rain flittering down the elm branches, mixing into big drops that pounced icy chills down her neck, “‘how do you *call* them? Swamps, yes, *marécages*, deathly, wet puddles of rot and toad-shit, yes?’”

Malice clung desperately to whatever scraps rolled beneath clawed hands, but these gave way almost instantly.

Pace by pace she ramped through the bogs, hissing. When a single patch of higher, harder knoll of earth rose at the foot of a gnarled elm tree, she threw her shivering flesh there and rolled unto her back.

“Calonio, *petit con*,” she murmured, “I’ll skin you alive and throw you down the salt pits...”

The rain-curtain filtered through the leaves and drew some of the mud down her sides, revealing frayed black satin, pale sodden flesh and bloody, scraped skin.

With one purpled eye she gazed up, catching her breath, trembling all over, jaws clinkering, hugging herself for warmth.

Beyond the canopy of lichen-thick tree branches ran the grey, faint daily heavens, dismal light cast upon every surface, disfigured at the touch. Only then did she notice several white spots amidst the trees. Some dangling in thin air, others slowly crawling on bark: Syllia. Albino spiders.

Malice felt her pulse racing. She looked around. Nothing, no immediate danger. But she couldn’t tarry on. *Just a little while*, she thought. *I need to rest*.

She was exhausted.

When she was six, there was this boy, Marc-André, who’d been bitten by Syllia. They were playing hide and seek in the attic. He’d sneaked behind a large dresser near the window. She’d found him too late. His lips already turned black, limbs contorted like straws, spasms tearing his flesh from the inside. She’d cried out for help and his parents had come and carried him off. Did their best. But he’d quickly come down with a horrible fever. You couldn’t shake him out of it. The boy would hallucinate, scream at the top of his lungs, and laugh, sometimes, which was worse.

And he’d stayed like that, suspended in madness for three nights before his heart finally gave.

Now, the spiders seemed to leer down from high posts. Half a dozen, at least. Big as a fist and white as teeth. They

stared at her with all the neutral violence of the wild: selfless and *hungry*.

Weakness settled deep within Malice's bones, unchallenged save by constant shivering. But sleep in the bogs meant certain death, mayhap preceded by long hours of excruciating insanity.

It occurred to Malice, then, looking up at the prowling hunters, she might not entirely make it out of there.

Calonio, she thought, *I underestimated you*. Malheur might as well be dead. Clearly, the man had deliberately sent her to a trap. His exact intentions were not clear. Did he simply seek to teach her a lesson? Or was there more to it?

Albeit, she needn't wonder *why*.

Oh, she knew exactly. Merveille had forced his hand. And she'd let her.

It had happened so fast.

"Here," Merveille had presented him, after letting the man into her rooms, "is young *Calonio*".

So *he* was the gift. Malice had seen him before. But she'd always found him rather bland. Aesthetic and rash as any denizen.

"We are acquainted, he and I –"

Merveille had shrugged. "Well, be that as it may, some elements always pertain a measure of privilege, nay? Prithee, fair *Calonio*, have a sit and do please oblige my broody sister".

He'd sat down, confusedly. Obviously, Merveille had invited him to her place on rather *different* pretence, and he was weighing the implications of her deceit. His tone became rather formal, then. A feint, for sure.

"How am I to be of service, darkling *Morbids*?"

"Well," had started Merveille as she'd strolled 'round the room, "you could start by telling dear old Malice what you so diligently disclosed, this past, most ominous eve.

I'm unabashedly convinced she would prove most indebted to your clemency".

Calonio'd stared them down back and forth. "I –"

Merveille suddenly snapped, "now, lovely, *scandalous* Calonio, you stand amongst friends, here, and not uncouth friends at that. Do not spare such costless pleasures".

An imperative form. Wanton. Malice remembered growing uneasy: it was wrong.

"Merveille," she'd intervened, "mayhap you would tell me why you torture this young man? 'Tis unseemly to extricate what he wouldst keep – these are not our ways and such ill doings have rueful consequences".

"Yes," had blurted Merveille frantically, "you would not share our eldest sister's demise, and I revere your chaste spirit, my Malice, though in point of fact, Calonio here has *seen* the late Malheur, not two score nights ago".

And Malice had lost it, then. Her dear sister, *alive!*

"*What!?*"

She'd fixed Calonio with burning eyes, whilst he'd basically churned in his seat, mumbling: "I – I had only the most pleasurable intentions, *vraiment*, I can assure you –"

Merveille, seeing her sister thusly angst-stricken, had seized the reins tight. "Silence, *whelp*," her tone suddenly ironwrought, "you can not lay claim to the virtue of deception, not here, and not in the face of Morbids: we deal in truth and heart, not petty secrets aloft Perpetual Court. Isn't that so, kinly Malice?"

Merveille's tone was unlike anything Malice had ever heard. Words alone meant little, but the underlying fire raged above everything else.

"Easy, sister," tried Malice amidst a roar of conflicting emotions, "you can nay rule a man, cowardly to convey though he is". She'd then turned to face him. "Calonio, I pray you, do tell me the whereabouts of my sister and I will..." she'd wished to say, *spare you*, "overlook the stark waywardness of thy nature". As an effort to soften her

demand, she'd added: "we all err from time to time, in tongue and mind and hand. Doth Malheur still breathe, I wouldst see her".

Calonio must have felt cornered then, as was he. Doubtless, he would have heard the rumours by then, this story about Malice and Triste, how she'd gashed his wrist with broken glass, nearly killing him? Never mind the fact he'd started it, this one was dangerous.

Desperately vying to find a break, he blurted:

"But she does not wish to see you!"

Yet Malice could not be daunted.

"Alas, love," she shook her head, mindful of the laws, "she must speak that piece herself, if so she wishes. Malheur need only dismiss us, yet she hasn't. Hence are we right to seek her out. *Live freely*".

Calonio seized the reference and countered.

"Ah yes, the Codex Mortem, tell me, *femme*, where is it writ one fit as I should yield to the *red-eyed*?"

A rush of blood surged across her veins, but before Malice could even react, Merveille stepped forward and raised a commanding voice.

"*You daft!*" she'd screamed, "I'll drag your sorely arse to Perpetual Court myself if I must! *Imbécile!* If you'll not cleave to reason, so face the consequences, but do what thou wilt, *still shalt thou cleave to the Morbids*".

Utterly shocked, Malice didn't know where to turn, this lying wretch insulted her but she cringed at her sister's fallacious pretence. Where in the Void could Merveille even conceived such logic was anything less than sheer aberrance?

Nonetheless, those insufferable words worked on young Calonio. He'd swallowed hard. A dab of sweat tinged his forehead. At last, he'd conceded.

"I'll tell you, I will... but you shouldn't... you shouldn't go there".

So there it was.

Impossible.

Malheur, living, breathing.

Somewhere along the coastline, all the across the Isle.

Malice had left before the night was through. When everyone was sleeping, she'd sneaked off the alleys and into the woodland and pushed on. Daylight and rain had soon followed, and with it, the fog.

Now she was shivering all over, damped to the bone, grimy locks clinging to her temples, the edges of her dress torn and ragged. Syllia loomed patiently overhead. For a moment, Malice gazed around, trying to gauge her position and figure out which way to go. Footprints in the mud were already fading.

That's when she noticed, from the corner of her eye, a swift movement, shadowing – that of a silhouette, sneaking behind a tree. It retreated from sight instantly, but she could swear there was someone there.

Someone had *followed* her!

Oh, *Calonio*, she thought, *you devious half-wit*.

"Come out!" she screamed, the echoes snuffed out by the suckling, wet swamp. "I see you!"

The fool had trapped her. *Trapped her*, no less!

She unsheated the bodkin at her side, seized the handle in the crook of her palm and concealed the thin blade along her forearm. Surely, that was uncalled for. But so was all this.

She stood still, listening.

No answer. Just the trickle of rain on soft earth and the rustle of leaves as they swayed in the wind.

"Enough!" yelled Malice, "this is demeaning for both of us!"

Still, no word.

Ah, *d'accord*, she thought, *fair enough*.

By paces slow, she arched left passed the elm, ten strides away, then crept forward, feet suckling into mud, drips rolling between the eyes. With every aching nerve she

sought to calm her shivering, though goosebumps spread over her arms and neck. She bit on blue-tinged lips to steady her breathing. Silently she went, until she'd traced around a bush of thorns and out to that hiding place, expecting to surprise however dared stalk her.

But it was empty, there was nothing: no trace, neither there nor anywhere yon. Just the cold, the bogs and ravenous Syllia on the prowl.

Surely, surely there was *someone* there?

"Fuck," she murmured, "*fuck*".

Too late.

Just then she perceived the resounding susurrations – a whisper, hoarse and wet with blood. It encircled her from every direction at once, pervading her very mind.

"Malice," rasped the voice, "*Malice...*"

Language: only words.
Mathematics: even less.
Poetry: a caged bird.
Culture: lying *together*.

- La Fourbe.
Recovered notes - 11.
Hallows Archives.

VI. Ô, Malheur!

“Malice,” called a voice, “*Malice...*”

She woke to the remembrance of death.

It’d all happened so quick.

Malice had lost it, somehow. She remembered the fog, the rain – recalled the moor and the suckling death-swamp, and how she’d recklessly sped off without aim, scrambling through thorn-bush, splashing across toad puddles and wet bogs – away, away from that terrifying sound. And she’d lost it all, completely.

The thing must have *caught* her.

“Malice,” insisted the voice calmly, “how do you feel?”

“I...” Malice struggled to open her eyes, “I... *ah!* –”

Flashes of memory surged up suddenly, striking her senses dumb – she gleaned the atrocious strokes beneath her flesh, the pain that rose ‘til she couldn’t feel anything but – and that agony had projected her through leys of glass, shards tearing her mind asunder, though beyond lay a span of unknown impressions, ethereal sentiments – troubling, *impossible* emotions.

“*Aide-moi!*” croaked Malice, powerless.

“Aye, easy now,” urged the familiar voice as a dab of cold water gently pressed across her forehead. The maddening dance receded, retreating beyond reach. Slowly but surely, Malice felt a sense of time and space return.

She strove to see where she was, yet as she opened her eyes, grey light beamed into them, atrocious and unbearable.

“Day, again?” she mumbled faintly, “can’t be...” She flinched, hiding from the insufferable thing.

“*Du calme, ma soeur,*” whispered the other, “you are not well”.

Malice’s vision cleared, painfully. For one, she felt comfortably dry, save for the thick, wet cloth at her brow, and unsettlingly easy – lying naked in worn but soft linen sheets, tucked under thick woollen blankets raised up to her neck.

Then she saw *her*, sat on a round wooden stool next to the small bed: Malheur, eldest of the Morbid daughters.

She recognized the regal mien and high brow, oval face and thin lips, all recurrent to her bloodline, with violet eyes – though these were her own – ever caring and affectionate, yet veiled by a darker shroud: sadness which knew no bound.

Malheur, the exile.

Something was different. Instead of the opulent finery with which she’d espoused dystopian ways for years in the days of yore, Malheur now garbed in some rather unseemly fashion: leather jerkin, brown trousers and sheepskin boots. Even the legendary, luscious long hair which used to make all courtesans growl in envy was but merely tied back in a knot. And, unlike the sharp but small bodkin most denizens kept at their waist, there hung a blade long and wide enough to gut wildsheep in a single stroke, sheathed to the hilt.

“Malheur,” managed to speak the bedridden Malice, “you live”.

“Ever the observer,” smiled the other, “though one of us came closer yet. I would be one to scold you *sore*, little one, but my heart warms to see you”. There was laughter in her tone, though it didn’t fully surface.

It never did.

Malheur reached for an earthen cup and handed it to her sister. Malice dipped her lips in. Scarlae: Blood Tea. And something else. Her grimace was met instantly by Malheur.

“Sea salt and sheep’s milk. You need both”.

“What happened to me? How did you...”

Malheur sighed. She was expecting that question.

“A storm hit the coast yesterday. My herd panicked. I was off to them when I heard your screams. Found you close to the edge, mad as a loon. Almost leapt off, too, right in front of me. Brought you in, kicking and screaming”.

“How long,” her younger sister barely managed, “how long was I out?”

“Well, the entire night for one, and the better part of the day. To be honest, sister, I feared you wouldn’t wake up. Syllia prey seldom do”.

Was that it? Malice thought to herself. *Spiders? But how?*

“You’ve got about two dozen cuts and some fairly colourful bruising. Lost some blood, too. Not much”.

Malice took time to place her surroundings. The cottage itself was roofed by stacks of mud and hay, upon walls of overlaid stones and pitch. It was composed of one sole room, small by Dystopian standard, but cosy, high-windowed to one side, parsimoniously furnished and warmed by a simmering peat fire which roared in a compact enclave. The earthen smell filled the room with comforting aromas.

Outside, a crash of waves resounded, splitting against a cleft of rock. spurts of water flared up, mirrored sparkling white all across the horizon.

The coast, remembered Malice. And beyond, the Void. A vigil at the End of the World.

“You know,” started the ever mournful Malheur, “you might have attempted the crossing in something more than that *négligé*. Near suicide, that”. Tongue-in-cheek. “In point

of fact,” she went on, “I must confess, I expected you sooner”.

“Your lackey was most sparse in directions, dear sister, let alone counsel for proper attire. I made such alacrity as could contrive”.

“Calonio?” Malheur gazed through the grey mist swirling outside. “He is hardly keen to me. We have our arrangement. *Désolée*. I could ill travel to Necropolis. Doubtless you understand”.

Malice felt a pang at her throat. She sipped at the warm mixture instead. There was no point in weeping, she knew. No point at all.

“I don’t”.

“Oh,” murmured Malheur as she placed a warm hand over hers. “I think you do, love. Plain enough to see. They do not accept you. They never did. And it’s killing you”.

Then why did you leave me? Malice wanted to cry. *With them?* – the question burned still – *you left me with them!*

“Understand,” continued Malheur, “my despair dragged me to extreme resolutions. For years I wept idly, dying for joy I couldn’t find. They arraigned me with song and play and dance – trialed me for despair. Nothing could sate my ache. Morbid had *plans* for me, she both loved and hated me and nearly killed me inside out. Eventually, death seemed sweeter than a fortnight in their midst. There lay but two paths – one ahead, one below”.

Malice understood instantly.

“At Noctem, then”.

“I needed unfettering”.

“Weren’t you free?”

“Not *from* them. Not from Necropolis. The... *fester*ing bowels of that city, frozen in *danse macabre*, locked for all eternity through eddies of pain, intoxication, gossip... and *rutting*, yes, that ever-tempting wretch Merveille suckles so. No, I’ve lost interest. Don’t misunderstand me, dear sister, long was I culprit to feverous flesh, a little-death

enthusiast like the next courtier. Many a suer reared unto me, all the more reason I loathed. That *place*,” she turned to her sister, then, “is fittingly named. But a tomb, Malice, and few outgrow its walls whilst they live and breathe”.

Her younger sibling felt ill at ease. That road seemed clogged thickly enough. And to think she’d hoped!

“I lament your leaving,” Maliced contrived, swallowing back the tears. *Father is dying*, she spoke inwardly. *I need your help*. It was a formal request in Dystopian protocol. “I would have you by my side”.

Malheur sighed. She closed her fingers over Malice’s hand and held it tight.

“Do not despise me. I was born thus”. Then she paused and added, half-absently, “*après tout*, my name is Sorrow”.

Malice drained the cup and felt new strength flow into veins. For a second, her reeling mind settled and things started making sense. It could very well be that Malheur spoke the truth. There was courage in that, perhaps more than she cared to admit.

Shedding all grievances aside, Malice outstretched her arms and hugged her sister close.

“Let it pass, then. I’ve missed you”.

This one returned the embrace whole-heartedly.

“And I you. Say, would you fancy a bit of fresh air?”

“Please,” she urged her, “and something to eat. I’m famished”.

“Good to hear,” spoke Malheur as she busied off to a corner shelf. Malice discovered the old dress neatly folded on the back of the chair. It was clean, the blood and the mud all vigorously washed off. Her older sister had even mended the rips, by hand, carefully, though she’d used a thick brown thread that contrasted with the ebony-black satin.

As she raised herself up, Malice braced an arm on the wall. The sudden rush left her dizzy, knees aquiver. And for once she saw the damage done, barely containing a

twitch of revulsion. Vying to overlook the red-rimmed cuts and blue-yellow bruises, she squirmed back into the old dress... shamed it couldn't hide them all.

"So it's true, then," Malice asked to distract herself whilst she straightened her hair, "what Calonio said. You've become a daywalker?"

"An oddity, I know". Malheur went and filled her cup anew. "But I prefer living during the day. I find it soothing. And it's painful at first, but your eyes get used to it... eventually".

Malice gladly accepted the drink. The stuff raised her spirit, so much she even chanced to ask, "what about the young chap, then? What in the Void could ever convince you to entrust him with *anything*?"

She was handed a bowl of stew – lentils, carrots and potatoes, spiced with wild herbs she didn't quite recall.

Malheur slung a leather sac over her shoulder and lead the way outside the cottage.

"He was within my reach. Very few are. I arranged our meeting through other channels. He took it for chance, as I knew he would. And then I bade him swear secrecy, though that alone guaranteed his spilling out entirely. Question of time, simply, though I must say, he held out longer than I expected".

And as they stepped out unto the grounds, Malice's eye winced under the overt luminescence, so well into midday that she was forced to squint to avoid losing balance altogether.

A foggy coastline came into focus as her pupil painstakingly dilated – the dark woodlands on one side, hills and valleys and poisoned glens, the rocky moors stretching out to the edge, cleaving down into the vast sea below and all nothingness beyond – an ethereal sight, as though suspended in dream.

Malice noticed the surroundings, one modest garden to the side, an outhouse, drift wood and lumber, one rusty axe

planted in an old stump. There were wildsheep grazing in a field walled by stacked stones. An unusual sight, that. Animals were usually not restrained.

Both sisters traced around back and sat down on a couple of overturned wood logs, face to the lifeless sea. The landscape stretched into infinite shades of grey. Gusts of wind whistled up from the lapping waves a few hundred paces below.

A certain poetry, that, Malice admitted to herself, *a deadly sight indeed.*

“So you deceived him,” said she before gulping a mouthful of the hearty stew.

“A mere jest in time. I have lost much to the folly of men already. Calonio was a feeble tool I would not exert heedlessly. If I’d been any more straightforward, the lad would have harboured suspicions upon my designs – so many subtleties I no longer even remotely relish”.

“Aye,” agreed Malice, “he would have gone to Perpetual Court and have the matter settled in public”.

“Yes, and *they* would have swarmed here. To think of it, an exile, still living on the isle!”

“Calonio may yet spill out”.

“That he may. Even dear sister Merveille can nay hold one lover’s tongue for ever”.

“You may not have long”.

“No matter. I have already outlived myself, by far”.

Malice felt a sudden break in her chest. That fine chord had been struck. *You don’t care, then,* her mind wavered, *you really don’t care at all.*

“Father is dying,” Malice uttered, sternly. “He will undergo the Advent in a matter of nights. He weeps for you, Malheur! Yet here you linger, some watcher at the End of the World... cruel in absence. *Et comment?* How can you?”

But Malheur merely looked away into the Void. Her tone enwrapped in misery – a tone Malice knew only too well. *Sorrow*, she'd said. *My name is Sorrow*.

"Denizens are deception incarnate. Hemlock as their ideal figure – another path in the maze, no more. Dissembly, Malice. The man's been ill ere you'd even grown to womanhood. And it was I, sister, *I* who gleaned into that shadowplay long before the lot. He kept it secret nonetheless, afraid our merciful society would urge him to relieve his suffering, and I was compelled to obey, *moi*, the obedient daughter".

"But he is *dying* – "

"You do not understand. He merely *waits*, Malice. He waits for them still".

"The Thirteen?"

"Aye, his precious heralds. The Black Knights of Necropolis. He wants absolution, for he has harmed them in a very wicked way. If they finally return, then he's atoned, and his life will not have been in vain. But it is fruitless, that, and barren will he perish. One the more to baffled millions before, *non*? How can you even try to overcome such misplaced pride? I can not stomach it".

"He misses you!"

"We have bid farewell already. He has made his choice, and I have made my peace. We all die alone, dear sister. And so will he, with you by his side or not".

Malice didn't want to believe it.

"You could ease him still, if only you willed it –"

But Malheur countered, dispassionately, "you shall learn, in due time, that will alone does not avail. Certain wounds can not heal. Mountains do not move to your whim, nor can you possibly overcome the absolute. *I was hurt beyond reckoning*, now all I want –" she whispered mournfully, "is to live out my life in peace".

Malice was reminded of the heavy scabbard hung at her sister's waist. Violence simmered under her dramatic

posture. That blunt character forced the youngest Morbid daughter to acknowledge her position. For a second, she was back in that room, with Triste, his Daemondrought and the gush of blood. Schemes unfolded before her eye, plans within plans, intentions and meditates. At the end, chaos twirled back upon itself.

Suddenly, everything became clear.

“There is a reason,” Malice started stoically, “why you summoned me”.

Malheur looked into her, expressionless.

“There is”.

“You seek peace. But somehow it escapes your grasp. You require my assistance”.

“I do”.

“Very well, beloved sister”. Malice reposed the empty bowl upon her lap. “*Dis moi*”.

Malheur took a deep breath. Evidently, this was a moment of great significance to her, such as to instil vibrancy to an otherwise implacable mien.

“There is something I have come across during my wanderings. Something unique”. Malheur reached for the leather sac and produced a bundle of cloth. “It troubles me greatly. I do not know the nature of the thing, nor do I understand how it came to be, nonetheless it... haunts me, day and night”.

Malice felt her blood pulse with renewed fire. She saw the artefact unravel before her gaze.

“And why is that?” she inquired diligently.

“Because,” replied Malheur, “it is a token of *hope*, Malice. Hope... and not certainty”.

The last fold of cloth slipped down to reveal a book, bound in creased leather and tied with a long black string. It looked ancient, battered and weather-beat, half-eaten by rot and cracked on all sides.

Malheur undid the string and carefully opened the tome. A few pages fluttered past – they were dried and

flaky, but scriptures lay on both sides of each: thin pale lines penned by human hands, though she couldn't possibly make out the characters.

Suddenly, the pages flipped to something inlaid at the very middle, and as the book spread wide to reveal the fragile artefact, Malice lost her breath completely.

"What," she spat, mouth agape, "is *that*?"

A press-dried flower, the stem petrified against stained parchment, twin shrivelled leaves, a center from which eight petals stretched outward, delicately. But the color was unlike anything they'd ever seen on the isle, unlike anything that had *ever* graced their sight.

Yellow. It was a bright *yellow* flower.

"Novelty, dear sister," said Malheur, voice crippled by dismay, as though she suffered every syllable. "A new world altogether".

I dreamt of such luminescence as scorched my eyes, and woke up screaming 'why is there such pain in the skies?'. Such horrors even *I* dare not paint.

- Jacques Laroche,
Aphorisms, p. 56

VII. Mère Morbide

"Oh, I do feel ravenous," sung Morbid as she waltzed in the dining hall, her motherly figure graced by a luxurious gossamer gown – crimson dark, which overflowed down her sides and trailed behind every clunkering heel step. "It all smells so very *délicieux*, nay?"

Malice sat lone at the great mirkwood table, literally surrounded by the feast: platters of victuals, steaming honeysauce, truffles, freshly baked bread, spicy flowerseed oil, not to mention a ridiculously vast array of cheese and *pâté*. Besides these stood one large crystal decanter, filled to the brim with wine, and two glasses.

Richly scented aromas filled the air, perhaps overly so, their intensity coupled with scorching heat from the hearth fire, raised high in its stony hollow.

The dining hall itself was immense. Torches burned on every wall, three chandeliers on the table, with all candles lit, and polished cutlery, iron-framed mirrors and, most importantly, the paintings of Morbid's leman – Jacques, the infamous artist – surreal images of abysmal depths, shades of black upon faint water hues of grey, as though he'd captured – at least on canvas – the very essence of the Void.

Every single detail of this place spelled opulence.

Needless to say, Malice felt uneasy.

She'd given her word to Merveille. Of course, she'd have settled for a measly piece of chourrée and the company of Léandres. Instead, *this* –

“Oh, my beautiful love,” urged Morbid as she sat down on the other end of the table. “I’m so thrilled you came!”

She poured them wine, rings glittering on her fingers. Facial features lean, much like Malice’s, though worn by the years and veiled by subtle make-up.

“To your health, my sweet,” Morbid toasted, “and to new beginnings!”

Here it comes, thought Malice as she dipped her lips in, *any second now.*

“Mother,” she started formally, “I see two glasses here, am I to understand Merveille and Jacques won’t grace us with their most pleasurable company?”

“Sadly,” Morbid countered expertly, “your sister was brashly whisked away to attend certain... *interests* of a most lascivious nature”.

“Off to Communion, is she?”

Communion of Flesh, that is: mass decadence.

“We must forgive her, really,” chuckled Mother, “after all, she is made of fiery stuff. One can not liefly circumvent the pull of raw desire”.

Double-meanings, always,

“And dear Jacques, then,” asked Malice, “is the painter tending his brushes, or perhaps translated he to Communion as well?”

“Ah, so quaint of you to mention,” Morbid was gazing straight into her eyes, as if to defy further inquiry, “we were taking a stroll in the Gardens when zealous Jacques was suddenly taken aback by a slant of flamelight on pearly petal dew – doubtless the sight made much of an impression on him, the man’s so creative, it’s feverishly wont, yes, but ever so rich, think you not?”

“Most certainly,” concluded Malice as she realized, at her own expanse, how she’d been *set up*, yet again.

“*Alors,*” started Morbid, ploughing away at some wild mushroom dish in creamy sauce, “how are *things*, deary?”

Not I, mused Malice, *but things!*

“Oh, splendid I assure you”.

“Is that so?” doubled Morbid, clearly dubious.

“Can’t complain”. *I hear you*, she thought, *of course I hear you*.

“Tragic business that, leaving that poor man to a bucket of tears”.

How dares she?

“A bucket of blood, you mean?”

“All the same, love, though the latter will run out first, best not squander it recklessly, nay?”

Malice had to admit, if she possessed any skill about the play of words – bland though it was – her mother surpassed it by far. Decades at Perpetual Court had wrought her into one mercilessly efficient orator: every single phrase pounded upon different layers of meaning, so much that certain assertions would come to contradict themselves over time, though not to the naked eye. She poisoned compliments, set traps at every turn, undermined judgement and drilled holes in every affectionate gesture.

And through each conversation, never mind the years, wine or circumstances: she never forgot a *single* word spoken.

Very well, thought Malice. *Counter*.

“Honestly, mother, I bear no grudge in the matter. Whether vain ambition shared, affections lost, your poor counsel to Triste or his attempted suicide, I’ll let the leaves fall where they may”.

Trollop, you called me.

Morbid was unmoved, as expected. “And such naiveté befits you well – it’s quite charming, really. But frankly, Malice, aren’t you a little old to keep pretending?”

Flakey little trollop.

Malice felt her knees quiver. She placed the fork down.

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“Triste was an adequate mate”.

Of course. Malice had seen it coming. *Attack*.

“Is this your punctus, then, your point? What this meal is all about?”

Steady, she thought. *Steady now*.

But Morbid unravelled her wall, stone by stone.

“He loved you”. *Estoc*.

“An insubstantial assertion”. *Feint*.

“You were unkind to him”.

Malice raged. Her resolution fell.

“You are unkind to me”.

She’d opened a window, now. Too late.

“Rest assured,” Morbid sipped her wine peacefully, “you have nothing to fear. The incident –” Malice felt blood rushing to her cheek. So *she knows*. “...will remain secret. Triste’s silence has been secured, as is most courteous considering the... displeasurable circumstances of your parting”.

My eye, thought Malice. *The unfit. How dare you bring this up!*

Seeing her daughter’s resistance give, Morbid’s maternal care gave way to prideful indignation. She merely uttered a handful of words, only four, but they spelled as much an accusation as a formal inquiry.

“You are not content”.

Malice squirmed in her seat. What a cruel predicament, if her own life-giver threatened to take it all back –

“I... I’m –” Malice mumbled.

And how cruel!

“No,” pursued Morbid relentlessly, “there is something else at work here, *oui*, something of a different nature entirely”.

Malice stared down unto her plate. She’d barely touched the copious meal, and it was getting cold.

“You were recently gone for two nights, yes, nowhere to be found, neither at your house, Merveille’s, Hemlock’s, even Triste’s recovery bed, and as a matter of fact,

Léandres was seen looking for you, and doubtless the old poet would have known *where* to look, and who to ask –”

She’s checked up everyone, every single one of them. How? Malice was dumbfounded. Léandres! What a shameless wench, to harass my leman thus!

“No way to elude suspicions on your Tenet-breaking, you... near-murderer,” Morbid pouted the words, espousing the very form to her heart’s content, “which brings one to question, in truth, *what* you are up to, little one”.

Malheur, thought Malice, *the strange flower, ah! Impossible!* Her very mind reeled, chances sinking into fear, *Calonio!* She wanted to scream. *Treacherous scum!*

All of a sudden, it hit her.

This whole thing was *never* about Triste.

But she’d figured it out too late. Never mind the incident. That was just a smoke screen. Morbid had used the pathway to *unsettle* her countenance and subvert her outrage. It wasn’t about words, but emotions. And she’d revealed her frayed volition. Morbid had sought to glean beyond her defences. And she’d succeeded.

What you are up to, she’d asked, but if Morbid even named the question, it meant she already knew the answer.

Nowhere to turn.

“My dear Malice,” spoke Morbid, reverting to a most maternal tone now that she had won, “I’m sorely worried about you”.

“Why... why?” Malice braced herself to ask.

But Mother Morbid merely smiled.

“Darkling... you show poor judgement in everything”.

And where will you find strength?
Where will you find courage?
All roads have led us here
Don't you see this is the End?
There is no way out
There is no way out

- Anne-Marie Desvents
Recueil de La Fourbe, p. 87

VIII. Malice Through The Looking Glass

The door slammed so hard the hinges almost gave.

"You *hag!*" screamed Malice amidst blinding tears.
"You whore-mongering *hag!*"

Tremors shook the lobby as she broke through her two-story manor – dark, desolate and cold – and sped across the floor to an austere staircase. She barely heard the crash of a faded vase under the whirl of her reckless passing, faded jasmines sprawling upon the floor, and as window curtains gently swayed on their pole, the youngest Morbid daughter flew up the stairs and disappeared into the utter blackness of her apartments.

No light traced her way, she tread shadow upon shadow. *Hatred* resounded at every step, painful sobs snuffed by stony walls, choked by taut muscles and clenched teeth.

Faint Dystopian glow seeped through the chambers as she burst through the empty place. A thin film of dust covered everything, from the floor to the windowpane, her simple furniture – dresser, couch, bookshelves – and the round looking glass upon her wall; polished and wooden-framed.

The house was virtually abandoned: lifeless and shunned by its sole inhabitant. Too many memories, too

many lovers come and gone, and the stench of her failures clogged the very air thick.

“Deceiver! *Salope!*” she cried, “pus-guzzling wench!”

Malice threw herself upon the four poster bed and broke into a fit of hysteria, tears burning down her swollen cheek as she tore at her hair, fists clenched so tight the nails dug into her palms, drawing blood. Pain wouldn’t do, it wouldn’t, she’d gone too far in.

“Ah!”

Agony spelled each and every verse.

As few breaths before, she’d stormed out of Morbid’s mansion in complete shame, holding back from wailing in horror, vying desperately to keep appearances and not warrant further encroachments into her readily plagued intimacy.

But when she’d passed the Ashen Strait and climbed the granite stairs to her dwelling, convoluted sorrow had stricken out across her being, and she’d whimpered in pure anguish.

“How dare you...” she wept, “*how dare you?*”

It came to this. There was nowhere else to go.

Nowhere safe, nowhere home.

Morbid triumphed in everything. She had gone to such lengths to make sure no *thing* and no *one* escaped her. And naught ever did. She was the living embodiment of Dystopian society – proven, time and again.

And thusly, the horrid lead to all Malice despised.

She wept into her dusty pillow until moments of sheer angst finally lapsed to exhaustion. Her breath steadied by paces slow, clawed hands loosened and she merely braced them around the back of her neck, huddling for comfort.

Hearken, now, she thought, *calm down...*

Time flittered across the manor’s dead space, unchallenged, until she finally found the will to stand. With each trembling step, she gathered bits here and there:

one greasy lantern and some matches, a bowl of still water, some old dry bread and linseed oil.

Armed with the bland force of habit, she stepped to the mirror to try and regain composure. The low flamelight cast contrasting shadows upon the grimy room. For a second, Malice missed the dark entirely.

The mirror cast a revolting reflection. Crackled lips, swollen from her bites. One purple eye, sore and bloodshot, the other implacable, as though impervious to her sorrow. Those tears had drawn paler traces down the grey dust that clung to her skin, but only to one side. Also, her hair had come undone: black locks scrambling erratically down to her elbows. Meanwhile, all across her face, thin blue veins were overlaid by thick, puffy pink lines – everywhere she'd ploughed her nails – witnessing compulsion to hurt.

A disgusting sight, really.

With trembling hands, she dabbed a handkerchief in the water, intending to sooth her skin and bring down the swelling.

Hearken, now, Malice, she repeated to steady her hand, you'll be fine, you will.

There had to be a way out.

She wrapped the dripping fabric around her middle finger and pressed gently against her cheek. The coolness of the water sent sparks across her inflamed flesh. Tiny drips rolled down her neck.

The yellow flower, she recalled, the book. There, in the bookshelf, discarded, almost. A promise in malediction – terrifying. She didn't have to courage to face it. It had to be false. And even then, her mind recoiled from the implications. Who would go to such lengths? To what avail? All pieces conflicted, and the sense brought from the ever-changing pattern eluded her. The situation was changing, but how? Variables qualified differently – she needed to calculate chance, evaluate implications, weight the matter every which way –

But a new world altogether?

"No," she murmured, "it's impossible, all of it – and yet..."

They'd betrayed her. All of them.

One by one the pieces came together...

And collided.

Hemlock had lied – he'd concealed his illness, kept more secrets even so close to death, now he was dying and *nobody* cared... except Malice... and dirty Calonio had set a deadly trap, she'd nearly died, but that was nothing – her *sister* – yes, her sister – she'd proven worse yet, selling her to Morbid for one night of orgiastic muck... that tart! And how to forgo Triste – that rodent – he'd just *squealed* to Morbid, making everything worse... and bargained with her for a good word, even. What a cruel and mislead weakling, vaunting selfish need to her expense! As for Malheur – strong, death-pale Malheur – well, she only wanted something *from* her, which she couldn't possibly refuse, and couldn't possibly give. An impossible dilemma: and that's how it always was, she'd fail either way...

Where to go, then?

Malice might have found *some* comfort in Léandres, the poet of the Old Tongue, but now that was dead and done for sure. Wasn't that what it all came to? The *ultime* stroke, dealt in kind by Mother Morbid... and what a masterful blow: no *thing* and no *one* was out of reach, forsooth. Not Malice, not Léandres. Morbid would break the poet in an instant if she so wished. That was the one message: *I see everything*.

The realisation made Malice squirm. The handkerchief fell back in the earthen bowl. Her jaw locked up.

In a way, it all made perfect sense.

They won't leave me be.

Tears welled up again.

I'll never be free.

Lips atremble, once more.

My own flesh and blood.

Hands curling into claws –

My own!

And as Malice raged in front of the mirror, she witnessed her own lips twist into a ravenous grin, her head tilting slightly to the left, and the lighting changed – suddenly the puffed and bloodied traits overtaken by darker shades, and she stood, horrified, as her own visage became someone else's.

“Exactly,” spoke the face in the mirror, each word curled past that wicked smile, “Tool, more likely. Wench-maid and puppet”.

It was the eye – the red eye – it was *fixed* upon her, she could swear she saw the pupil dilate, the muscles tighten, the lid peel up, all coming into clarity, exactly like the other, as though it really *saw*, for the first time.

Wait –

Malice's pulse began to race.

But as she took a step back, the reflection stayed in its place, living, breathing, *grinning* –

“You can't trust anyone, Mal'. So much is... *painfully* obvious...” It was the voice. *That voice*: hoarse, wet with blood. “La Fourbe said it better, I believe. But that is not really the issue, is it?”

Her heart was beating too fast, temples throbbing from the sudden rush, it was impossible –

“The real question,” continued the other self, eerily mocking her, “is this: can *you* trust yourself, darkling Malice, and if so, to what extent?”

It can't be, thought she, reeling, *it can't*.

But the voice kept on, it rasped with such assured malevolence, as though it *knew* her intimately: “the self-doubting are ever in poor company, no matter their following”.

Malice's life blood coursed like ice through thin blue veins. The entire bedroom spun around. *Some twist of the mind*, she presumed, *I must be ill. Those Syllia...*

"Oh, *s'il-te-plaît*," doubled the image in the mirror, "we both know those things didn't bite you. Even Malheur suspects as much, though she didn't mention it. You don't realize how much you *scare* her, after that mess you've made... oh, but you don't remember, and she didn't mention it, either..."

Cold sweat ran down Malice's neck, she couldn't believe it. Still, the livid eye dug into her. "What..." she barely managed to ask, "what are you saying?"

To which the other replied, ever so confident, "I'm saying – this isn't the first time we meet".

"Fuck," mumbled Malice, "fuck..."

I'm losing it, I'm losing it, I'm losing it –

It was the black shape at the bottom of the Ashen Strait, that stalker in the swamp, the echoes. Now her dead eye was alive.

"Anon," Malice's blood started to boil, "anon, you wretch, how dare you *even* –"

"Listen, Malice," it urged her, oddly reassuring, "you need to hear what I have to say."

But it was too late, so suddenly had Malice's fear dissolved entirely, replaced by pure ravishing anger: yet again, someone was trying to get inside her, *to break it's way into her mind* –

"Hist!" she screamed, "*no more!*" at which she lunged forward and drove her fist straight into the mirror. Instantly, the looking glass shattered into pieces, her hand gashed upon the wreck.

And as the shards fell down the frame and broke into a hundred more pieces, the fragments reflected myriad images of this lone woman, torn by conflicting emotions – one eye dead, red like the blood oozing from her slashed

knuckles, as it dripped down her hand to the hard wooden floor.

A velvet voice echoed in the room, all at once.

“Rejoice, darkling,” it said lovingly.

And as Malice spun around, she immediately looked upon her own shadow, cast to the opposite wall by the one greasy lantern at her back. *It* seemed to leer in her direction. Couldn’t be. But it was.

The shadow was moving on its own.

And as she gazed at the impossible thing, Malice feared she would succumb to madness entirely – she clenched her bloodied fist and bit down upon her lip to keep from screaming out in pure horror.

“Now,” the creature murmured, “you’ll never be alone”.

Oh, malediction,
Wreath me true salvation.

- Triste de Sanbourg.
Dirge XXIII

IX. The Demon Den

One murderous crow slipped unseen through the dismal Dystopian streets. She flew with madness on her heels, black robes freely fluttering at her hind. The shadow-creature tailed her every step – she knew.

Onward.

“Fuck,” she murmured. “*Fuck*”.

Back to the Hollow, across the columns of Perpetual Court. Forward to the mad sanctum of the Demon Den. Onward, and on.

One hand wrapped in a dirty cloth. The other poised on the bodkin at her side, ready to strike. Breath short and wheezing as she pounced, barefoot on polished granite, advancing in a straight line.

“I need to... *I need* –”

As she turned a bend to reach the safety of the catacombs, Malice was disheartened to behold so many wretches clogging the path, *standing in her way*, nonchalant as ever – decadents, all of them, would-be-courtiers, young men bursting with pride and garbed in satin red and leather boots, long raven hair hung loosely down. The women, though mayhap softer to feel, shone treacherous yet: all corselets and gorges bubbling with death-pale curves, damask finery, hands gloved and necks laced, their charms heightened by pouting crimson lips and wanton, cruel stares.

Eager signs betrayed their very intent... and she could decipher them easily. Some said *flesh*. Some said *angst*.

And some said *death*.

As the youngest Morbid daughter came 'round the way, these dystopians cast subtle gestures, non-verbal codes of forewarning to each other. A couple of conceit dames dared look in her direction. The nerve!

Couldn't they see the *thing* behind her?

Malice looked on, reckless, staring them all down with one purple, blood-shot eye. And seeing her battered so, these quickly turned away, and quite discreetly, many little smirks were replaced by feigned ennui. In a second she hastened past, somewhat fortunate her kind preferred the mask of cosmetic cold over outright aggression.

"*Qu'importe*," she whispered as she hopped down the tunnelling stairs beneath the streets.

A trance-like tune spiralled audible as familiar smells rose up from the steel gratings – burnt flowers, scented oils, broken casks of mead mingled with the odious mixture of oozing pores and worn welcome.

Liefly, Malice crossed into the Demon Den. There, her already raw nerves were assailed by the lustful spectacle of the place, both pungent and sensuous. For they were drawn to see: passions darks and unquenchable thirsts, wine flowed freely, and drops of sweat dribbled down incandescent skin.

The catacombs stretched out beyond sight, and at the center: one circular hall, low-roofed, with stone walls roughly carved, ornamented with crimson tapestries. There were couches, tables and leather chairs, thick myrrh incense and four braseros glowing with embers that sent scorching heat against the cool underground air.

Everywhere, young, comely dystopians sprawled and flirting, all clothed in revealing assemblages, transfixed in lustful terms, fawning over each other to a daze in this *danse macabre*. To one corner, some painters hacked abstract motifs on a vast canvas of virgin white. On the other side, musicians arrayed in a half-circle, violas, lutes and

tambours, one *castellin* in their midst – a shaft of curved iron, man-sized, against which were raked twin bayonets forged with etches, sending crystalline droplets of sound as well as low, agonizing growls.

Their tune was rhythmic and sorrowful, as was customary, though one light singer raised her voice in chant. She was a lithe, young effete with round cheek and puffy black lips. Had a proper voice and managed to sing in key, thought it was evident she performed well under her full range.

What you could do, thought Malice, *if you only knew true suffering?*

All around, the decadents danced, lasciviously, carelessly, ensnared and intoxicated beyond their wits, as unlike the harmonious array of a Grand Bal waltz, this mass was broken on itself – each one to his or her own, though myriad they were.

Allez

Berce dans l'antre de nos transes

Délire de vautre, nectar d'autres

Lèvres en plaies, peines sanglantes

Baisers de lame à l'orée infâme

Malice hastened to the nearest of several split casks of ruby red wine and plunged one grimy tin cup down to the wrist, it came back dripping and she drained it down fully, laughing as she did, so sweet and rich and bitter was the taste.

More, she thought, *more!*

As she drowned her cup into the keg once more, a small ceramic bowl caught her attention – it was filled with berries, black, round and juicy – noxberries, all, and so delicious. Instantly, she grabbed the bowl in an ill-bandaged, blood-soaked hand and dragged herself to one empty counter of shiny onyx finish. Under the weight,

some of the cuts opened anew, through the pain she smiled – it was fitting, yes, so fitting.

The berries tasted acerbic, much like the wine, and they mingled sweetly, one after the other, yes – their effect instantaneous, powerful, *noxious* – “I need,” Malice murmured to herself, “I will, *oui, encore*, I – yes, *more!*”

Wherefore? a raspy voice hissed in the back of her mind, *this is most unwise, yes, stupefying yourself thusly.*

To which Malice merely drained the cup dry and clunked it down on the reflective black counter.

“I didn’t hear that, I didn’t”.

Her jaw locked spastically, fingers etched into her palms, breath hoarse, blood racing quick – all around they were, the dark creatures, lustful, alluring, the scent of myrrh and flashes of honeyed skin under black lace, the pulsating tune of the Demon Den, caustic, reeling too fast for the eye to see.

Distinctly, she couldn’t help but notice two delicious young men sat on a low couch on the opposite side of the hall, one had cunning, sharp eyes and the other’s lips were red – blood red – and they were kissing. Every now and then, one of them cast an inviting glance in her direction.

Allez

Verse le vin noir de nos absences

Aux affres encore, aux espoirs morts

Oublions l’hier et le sort (de demain)

Notre ère, la vipère et son venin

“Mal’,” ushered a female voice nearby, “is that you, darkling?” A warm hand reposed on her shoulder, softly. “I hardly recognized you...”

Malice couldn’t help but flinch at the touch, then she saw this fae next to her, thinly robed in rare dark blue, raven hair hung back in tresses, and these matching eyes, *too pale*, somehow –

“I –” she barely uttered through clenched teeth, *more*, she raged inward, *I need more!*

“Here,” this one answered as though she’d read Malice’s longing, “let me get that for you”. And she brought an opaque decanter to fill Malice’s cup.

Whence do I know you from? she wondered. Whence?

“You look ill,” the woman murmured caringly while she sat next to her. There was an ebony pipe in her hand, long and slender. She kissed the piece lovingly and there escaped some faint blue smoke from her lips.

Not from... not from...

“I’m... there’s just...”

Malice glimpsed the neckline, the cleavage hinting at her very curves – and the very scent of her, it was overwhelming, this familiar expression – *and how...*

Malice blushed when she recognized the woman. Ilsa, that was her name. She tried to raise the cup but her hand started shaking, she’d spilled half of it before she’d even had a taste. What a mess.

“Here,” spoke Ilsa as she neared and gently stroked her backside, “this will help”. Malice tasted her saliva on the spout and inhaled deep, exhaled sheer ecstasy and drew again on the sweet *bakhra*.

Hearken, you dimwit, spoke the blood-wet voice in her mind, there is no time. This is more perilous than you know. Leave, and leave now. There is no going back, that’s what you told Triste, didn’t you?

It was too late when she realized the counter’s black, onyx surface shone an entirely wrong reflection, that *other* self, that perfect red eye, the twisted image – *it spoke*, it spoke again...

“No,” cried Malice in dismay, “no! It can’t be!”

The cup fell from her blood-caked hand.

“What’s wrong, darkling?” whispered Ilsa, dangerously close to her face.

Malice closed her eyes and bit her lip.

“I wish,” she started, in the formal dismissal, “I wish to be left alone”.

For a single moment she tried to get a hold of herself, but it was everywhere at once, those black lotus vapors crept their way into her conscience, her grasp on reality eroding at each beat of her poisoned heart.

When she opened her eyes, Ilsa was utterly gone, but the tainted image was not, and as Malice looked for the exit, there was triumphant Triste walking down the stairs into the Den, flanked on either side by Damien and Yan – his boy lovers.

Allez

Gerce mes ténèbres de ton silence

Chaque heure rancit mes pleurs (de toi)

À voir, à rire de l’aube au soir (durant)

Je jouis du crépuscule mourrant

Strut, strut, do as you must
Lust, lust, and turn into dust

- Gaël des Vers
Personal notes, p.367

X. Sharp Eyes And Blood Lips

“Surely, we’ve gone far enough,” spoke Sharp Eyes as he led the party across the dark hallways of the catacombs, chandelier in one hand, scotch bottle in the other.

“There’s one here,” doubled Blood Lips, pointing at one curtained enclosure – a recluse bedroom of the Den.

“Quickly then,” pressed Malice from behind, urging on the lot, bracing her one good hand to the wall to keep from falling, a devilish smile borne on her lips – vision blurry from the lotus, blood inflamed by the noxberries – stricken between rage and complacency, near delirious –

But they were so *quaint* – so very scandalously comely, these two: both wore black linen shirts opened at the front, black skirts and iron shod boots that sent echoes on the granite floor. So alike, twins almost, but Sharp Eyes had these *eyes*, and Blood Lips had those *lips*, and she could already savor them from afar –

The three burst into the dark room and slid the thick velvet curtain right behind. It was richly laid, this place: a thick, crimson carpet stretched upon the rock, oils and dried flowers upon a dresser, mirrors everywhere, a large bed in the center, covered with soft, black draperies, and there was even a stone hollow on one side, to make for a hot bath, if need be...

The boys had little time to place their surroundings ere Malice fell upon her prey. She took off both their shirts and they were taken aback – she traced their flesh with clumsy, clawed hands – one bloodied enough – but they swiftly

came to their senses and repaid her kisses in kind, and when their three tongues touched Malice took a step back to contemplate the amorous lock of the two.

Her mouth wet with envy.

Blood Lips grinned at her, his visage oddly aslant in her blurry sight. "Show her," he called to his friend, "I bet she's never seen it".

"Aye, mayhap," answered Sharp Eyes as he dug into his pockets. "Ah," he purred, "it would be *bliss*".

Malice watched as the man produced a small phial of clear liquid and some small tool: twin needles welded together at the end in a tight, thumb-sized V. He was right, she didn't know what it was – novelty, such a rare treat!

"*Petite Mort*," cooed Blood Lips, "hurry, I want to feel it, *now...*"

"Yes, let's," urged Malice impatiently, suddenly overcome with desire to feel this... newness. "*Allez!*" The room was spinning around her, everything misplaced, with these appetizing morsels of flesh at the center, her will aching to *seize* them, *take* them, *spend* them every which way –

Sharp Eyes had done this before. Swiftly, he raised the needle by the wedged part and plunged the double ends into the phial. They came back shining with a pearly, creamy substance. Without hesitation, he sprang toward Blood Lips and punched the needle straight into his neck. This one yelped and turned back, clutching at his throat. The punctures were ridiculously small, but so deep into the bloodstream, there had to be something *else* –

Then he came towards *her* with that thing.

"*Vite*," she urged him, "*maintenant!*"

Everything told her she should have ran, but no – it was too late, she clenched her teeth, *everything would burn*, yes, she'd expiate her own mortality, that she would –

The V plunged *in* her jugular and *out*. She didn't feel it. It was too late. No time left. Before the spell enwrapped

itself around her mind, Sharp Eyes had injected himself and rejoined Blood Lips on the bed.

It had begun.

Petite Mort, they called it. The Little Death.

And she smiled, though the room was spinning and she could barely stand on her feet – as in a dream she saw *them*, these exquisite creatures, undressing before her ravenous eyes: kicking off these boots, kneeling on the bed, embracing each other, the way their tight silhouettes gleamed in candlelight, consumed with lust aching to be released...

“*Oh oui*,” moaned Malice as she dragged one heavy mirkwood chair near the bed, “let me watch you...”

Both slipped out of their garments and turned towards each other, slightly angled to make sure she saw them – and she did, settling in the comfortable chair, right next to the bed, devouring the spectacle unfolding there, and she started to unlace her dress.

Unreal – she could *feel* them from a distance, it wasn’t her view, *it* – Sharp Eyes grinned like a devil as Blood Lips kissed his neck and suckled on the wound, even let out a cry of pleasure – yes, she thought, *take him*, and it was easy, she knew the intricate pathways by heart, any second she would hike up the folds of her dress, yes, feed from the sight, let her hands run wild, abandon herself – *on*, she mused, *don’t stop!* – Sharp Eyes’s muscles grew taut, his very shape luminescent against the flames, subtly he stretched an arm out and reached for a bottle of oil –

Malice knew it, sensed it... but then, *then* –

Everything turned red.

In a sudden shock, her senses coiled back into themselves and out, utterly corrupted to wilful transience: tinged *blood-red*, it was all red, the boys, the candles, the room, blood-red, *blood* –

She could see. It was everywhere.

She was everywhere.

And she *laughed*! Pure lust coursed through her veins, a sudden surge of exhilarating power, she *laughed*, such puissance as never barely conceived, blood-red, *blood* – the candlelight was way too bright, it insulted her, the flames, their warmth – an abomination, so she willed them snuffed, and they went out instantly, but there was no more darkness in the room... even lightless could she *see*, see it all at once – the two boys, how they'd stopped and sought her in the dark, fearful as she rose up to her full might, and the chair cracked and splintered behind her, and she stood forward, laughing and *laughing*.

Their frightened thoughts echoed in the room, and she bade them cry for help, yes, and what beautiful, delicious chant they made – *blood-red*, all of it –

Tortured screams rose high in the catacombs.

And Malice laughed and laughed.

Fit, unfit, where do we drawn the line? Physical concerns are easily settled – but what of the mind? Answer: where lays sufficient grasp on objective reality as to enable levelled interaction. Can any one of us err from reason? Yes – but we must find the way back, somehow, or our kin must set us on the way out.

- Codex Mortem, 18-3.

XI. Many A Glorious Thing

A fresh morning breeze flowed from the high windows, ever so delicately, scented with jasmine and fresh basil from the gardens below. Gently, the silk curtains swayed to and fro, and it was the first sight Malice held when she awoke: the dancing fabric, moved to the tune of cool, night air.

Outside, faint luminescence had infused the black sky with taints of grey. Dawn was coming fast.

Where am I, she wondered. What happened?

The place was familiar. A circular bedroom, walls of rough stone. Little to no furnishing. A lute near the window. *A lute?*

Everything hurt, when she looked, when she moved, her head ached horribly, her own pulse impossible to endure. Muscles felt like ash, her mouth dry, lips crackled.

“Look here, Malice”. That hiss, yet again.

She looked around in confusion, and there it was, the shadow-creature. It loomed upon the ceiling – a formless shape, hazy, hovering some distance above her.

“This is Léandres’ room,” it spoke in a reassuring tone, “evidently. You used to come here, remember? Many memories, some actually pleasant. How could you possibly forget?”

Malice looked around. Her clothes were gone, in their place, she wore a single nightgown – satin. One of her own, even, though she hadn't seen it in a while. Could it be she'd left it there?

"You did," answered the creature, "not to mention other... scandalous implements".

Her hand, it had been cleaned and bandaged properly. Only then did she realize how much it hurt.

"You," she finally spoke back, painfully. "What did you do to me?"

"I tried to warn you, darkling. Thrice. Did you listen? Ah, *non non*, you pounced on regardless. Now your skull is about to split and here we are chatting".

"What happened to the... are they well?"

"Ah," the creature let out a snarl, "those two, poor ducklings, do you even know their names?"

"I..."

"Well, they *breathe*... still. At what *cost* is another matter. Would you believe it was Triste who came to your help? Of all people?"

"Triste?"

"Aye, squealing, squirming rodent-Triste. *Why* he brought you here is a mystery in itself. Perhaps it occurred to him – out of some miraculous bout of genius I'm sure – that someone *else* might be better suited to aid you... or... he simply fears and resents you too much to expose himself again. What thinks you, love?"

"I think I want to know *who* in the Void you are".

"You assume I am someone," the creature laughed.

"You have a name?"

"I have none. Call me what you will".

"So you're a figment of my imagination, then?"

"Perhaps".

"Are you saying you don't exist?"

"I merely mean to say, if I did, you wouldn't be able to tell. You doubt the reality of this conversation, even now I

see unbelief stir within you. And yet... through some unexplainable leap of *faith*, you find yourself unable to ignore me. Ergo, it is pointless to wonder, though it may entertain you”.

“Aye, humour me, then”.

She sought to test the apparition. It may after all just be side-effects from the... from whatever she'd taken in.

“Oh, please, I'm no delirium, at least not from such cheap vanity,” *how did he* – “maybe... I'm a sentient current of the Void, chosen to incarnate a plausible figure in order to ensnare you. Ooh, yes! But to what end? Or then – yes, yes – a manifestation of the Dark underlying Dystopia, born from your sorrow. Because you *are* sad, are you not? Or then I might just be a spiritual guardian of your ancestral bloodline – Jothriel, Aurielle or... what's her name, Anne-Marie? – sent through time to prop you for some eerily prophetic task, the nature of which I verily shan't disclose 'til the theatrical outcome. Ah, ah! Or maybe, just *maybe* – and that's not an easy one – I could prove to be one freakishly disturbing symptom”.

“A symptom, of what?”

“Decay. Insanity”.

“That's jolly”.

“Bottom line is: do you trust me?”

“Evidently not”.

“There you go. Before you ask a question, make sure you want the answer”.

“So then – ”

“Wait,” the shadow-creature cut in. “Wait, they're coming. *Conspiring*. Listen”.

Malice could hear footsteps in the corridor. The door was shut, but the vibrations raced across the stone. She heard a man speak across the hall.

“*Ça ne se fait pas, je vous en prie. Il est de mon avis qu'elle a besoin de repos. Tout cela peut attendre. Elle est entre mes mains, vous avez ma parole*”.

Before she even realized, Malice was out of bed and heading towards the window. But her legs felt like rags beneath her weight, and she fell to her knees on the spot.

Another voice replied to the first. A woman, older. Unmistakable. It was *her*.

“Naturally, dear poet, should your verses fall short of expectations, please do *not* hesitate to summon my attention, I would be rather... vexed, should you not. We share common interests, you and I, best you not forget it”.

None other!

The blood-wet voice echoed behind Malice as she painfully hauled herself up to the parapet. “You have to play along, we need more time, do you understand?” She leaned her head outside, only to remember the four-story drop. Vertigo seized her in a swoon. “Fuck,” she spoke, seeing the garden some thirty vertical paces below, “there’s no way –”

“Hush, Malice, they’re coming –”

“Wait,” she cut in whilst scrambling back towards the bed, “don’t leave –”

On the other side of the door, Léandres was dismissing his interlocutor fast. “*Entendu...*” he said sternly, “*au plaisir*, Morbid. Fare thee ever well”.

The shadow-creature echoed in Malice’s mind as it flittered away. *Oh, darkling*, it said, *I can’t go, ever*.

“At least tell me”, her voice heavy with remorse as she slipped back under the blanket, “should I fear you?”

And as the shadow hovered off into nothingness, the door burst open. While it did, the creature breathed its deadly, velvet susurrations.

Alas, yes. I am the end of many a glorious thing.

Ere the Collapse, men spent their entire lives trying to steer one another this way or that, so long as they steered. Many forms of selfsame control emerged, and the dulled parts mistook pale variations of the whole as extreme transfiguration.

Ah! Where is it writ the keenest ruler even knew what he held lest he crushed it?

- Codex Mortem. 14-1.

XII. Poet Of The Old Tongue

Léandres had brought a black rose, plucked from the Eternal Gardens. The flower lay on her breast, its scent cleanly refreshing. The poet sat next to Malice on the bed, gently caressing her brow, his other hand locked in hers.

A warm, capable hand.

“Vous m’avez fait une de ces peurs, jolie dame.”

These pale grey eyes stared into her, so gently, so amiably, they shone with such care and affection... but she *knew*, somewhere, this constriction, holding back deeply beneath the surface...

“I’m sorry,” she confessed, “I’m so sorry, I never meant to... scare you, or hurt you, *non* – I don’t know what happened, Léandres”.

Did it matter? Could he love her still?

“I’ve looked all over for you. And so suddenly, *he* brings you here, unconscious, and battered like some old disjointed doll, at first I thought it was *him*, that *he*’d done this..”.

Triste, she thought. So *it’s true*. How ironic, to think she’d seduced those boys just to get away from him, and yet he’d been the first to come! Or perhaps he was spying on them?

Léandres continued. “Those bruises on you, Malice, it’s horrible!”

Ah, she almost slipped, *but those are not from yestereve.*

Still, he went on. "But I looked at him, *tu sais*, and there I saw nothing, if not a broken man. Malice –"

She was suddenly overwhelmed with regret. *What have I done*, she thought, *what have I done?*

"I pray you, my dearest, darkest love," he continued, "please, will you tell me what's going on? I can help you, I will, trust me, *je t'en prie...*"

But I can't trust anyone, she brooded, *I can't –*

"What was Mother doing here?" she asked, vying to ease her doubts. She remembered Morbid's words, they were implicit, the Poet had *cleaved* to her –

"She..." he mumbled, surely he wasn't expecting that, "she came to see you, of course, imagine, her own daughter found half-dead in some shady crypt. She is your mother, after all".

Malice couldn't help it. That was off-bounds.

"She is *not* my keeper".

"I know how you feel about her, and in point of fact, darkling, I did stop her from entering, did I not? It took every trick in the book, you know, to say she's *pushy* –"

"... would be one extravagant euphemism," she cut in.

Play along, the shadow-creature had said. *We need more time.*

"Tell me, what ever happened to those... men?" she brought herself to ask, somewhat ashamed she never got their names, but it was too late now, anyway. Suddenly she remembered something else the shadow had said: *before you ask a question, make sure you want the answer.*

She knew she didn't the second Léandres spoke.

"Comatose, both of them. Several fractures, though it maybe argued these were self-inflicted. It was said they'd taken some *Petite Mort*, quite the foolish play, that. Little Death indeed. Now, they may never wake up".

Malice wondered if the punctures showed at all. *Did I do that*, she asked herself? *Could I have done that?*

“It’s all a blur...”

“*Petite Mort* is diluted Syllia venom, did you know that?”

Syllia!

“Please,” he kept on, “Malice, you can say it, I know...”

What do you know? How can you possibly understand! I’ve hurt these men!

“*Je n’y comprends rien,*” he admitted sadly, as though powerless before her implacable stance, “how many tenets do you intend to break? Do you *want* to be sent At Noctem? Triste was witness, yet again. It is most *unwise*, that, depending on a man you have scorned so. What happens when he ceases to... love you? Or when he realizes such attention as his must go unrequited? What then?”

Tears welled up in her eyes. Could that be *it*, then, his restraint finally giving? Léandres showing his true face?

“I don’t know what to do,” she wept. “I don’t”.

“Your answers, Malice, that night in the Gardens, you told me you were looking for answers”.

“So?”

“Did you find them?”

He wanted to help, he did. But she saw it all unravel before her one good eye whilst she wept: the book, the yellow flower, sister Malheur, the shadow-companion, the blood-sight – that potency, such incredible awareness...

Yet there was sense in such doubt.

“No,” she admitted, in all dreadful honesty, “what I’ve found were only... *more* questions”.

And it was true.

“Then perhaps you should search elsewhere. There is something I think could help you. *Someone*, actually”.

“What ever do you mean?”

“A Healer, Malice. You should see a Healer”.

Now, there was one revolting idea as any. In an instant, her tears dried up. *One despicable Healer!* she raged inward, *now that’s rich! Would I demean myself so?*

She answered bluntly. "I think not".

So much sorrow in these pale, grey eyes.

"It's going to get much worse, you know," said Léandres.

"Why?" *How can you say that?*

"Hemlock," he murmured, "he is dying fast, Mal'. Some say he won't live to see another night. Many elders are planning to wake by his bed tonight. The Advent can't be far".

Malice stopped breathing. It couldn't be.

Everything is wrong, she thought. *Everything.*

For a time, she looked out the window, still searching for a way out, somewhere through the thick Dystopian heavens, somewhere, far away from here.

Only then did she notice a certain tension in the air, electric. It felt heavy with consequence.

Yes, she knew. *A storm is coming.*

A boy went missing, once, it was forever ago, and I was but a child, yet I remember well. They'd searched for him three nights over, fearing the worst, and finally found him on the western shore. Next to him, a raft of mirkwood logs, masted with a sail sowed from three of his mother's old dresses. When they harangued him, young Hemlock stood nonplussed, anchoring his makeshift vessel, and merely replied, "there really is nothing out there".

- Charles Lapierre, aka Spleen.
Mémoires. Ch. 1, 16

XIII. The Company Of Elders

Night had just fallen, but the storm had been raging for most part of the day, that rain-curtain washing over Necropolis without relent, and it'd lashed at stone and bitten at flesh, drowned the city streets 'til it swelled the Ashen Strait. Thunder rumbled low, sheared by lightning white, and those merciless flashes sent fear into the hearts of most denizens. It dazed their eyes and they resented the light, each and every one... save those closest to the end.

"Out," Malice screamed as she burst through Hemlock's door, soaked to the bone. "Out, you leeches!"

She'd donned a woollen redingote, buttoned to the neck, and black sheepskin boots. Her hair hung tight in a long string cordon.

"Malice!" wept Josy as she sped across the lobby, fair-hair sodden, face swollen and contorted by sorrow. Hemlock's leman fell into her arms without care. "They will not leave," she sobbed, "none of them – and I have not the heart to cast them out. How can I? They are his friends, they..." she confided, voice low, "*were* his friends".

The house was indeed bustling with folk. Twenty at the very least, and she could hear no few of them whispering, as ever, plotting, *scheming* – elders, that pathetic lot! They’d swarmed the hallways and chambers and kitchen and their smell was everywhere: parchments and dust and opiates. *They are the diseased*, Malice realized, *not I*.

Josy would not let go. She hugged Malice close and muttered so as not to be heard, “am I so vain, then, to wish him all to myself? Eternity does not suffice. He will be gone from me and I cannot keep him! *I cannot!*” Undone, she wailed against her step-daughter’s embrace, frail bones shaken by spasms as she wept.

“Hold on, my dear,” started Malice, “hold on –”

Her comforting attempt went interrupted when a certain Bastien veered towards them – one of the eldest, an austere character, lean and stoic, clean, beard cropped short, nonetheless betrayed by hints of decay: a certain limp, one crooked back and some missing teeth.

“Malice,” Bastien started, “you have come to honour your father’s passing, it is indeed most virtuous on your part, and I for one celebrate your coming in these horrendous times”.

He reached out an arm towards her. It trembled. Surely, he’d heard the rumors by now.

Delicately, Malice removed herself from Josy’s grasp and merely strode forward to Hemlock’s bedroom, ignoring Bastien’s gesture. She at least nodded in his direction, acknowledging the man’s presence. Protocol didn’t require her to be especially affectionate in this situation, though if anyone should be slighted, it was her, and she knew as much.

She climbed the stairs two by two and hurdled through the attendance – and none too gently at that – till she reached the place and stepped in. Josy followed in just behind: little more than a wounded bird in the background.

And there he was: Hemlock, pale like a ghost, bedridden, thinner still, half-open eyes staring at the ceiling. Nine elders were cramped in the place, standing over him. The rest clogged the hallway at her back. There was pale blue smoke hovering in the air. On the nightstand, burnt pipes and a solid pound of *bakhra*. They'd drugged him severely. Black lotus, and what else?

By the Void, she mulled, he's half dead already!

"Hist," she barely contained, cutting over the low chatter, "I'll have no more of... *this!*"

Lighting ripped the sky, distant thunder rolled.

But the olden didn't bulge, and instead of silence, more murmurs became audible – they hunched over themselves, wrinkled lip to wrinkled ear, *it's her, the unfit, the red-eyed!*

Malice was certain, many of them must have *called out* for her death, some twenty years ago. And yet here she stood. It wouldn't be so easy *now*.

Protocol, first. She raised her voice high.

"Blest denizens, you have been most kind to visit my father in these trialing nights. Such courtesy warms my heart, doubtless beloved Josy feels equally touched and honoured. Yet if you please... *je vous prie de quitter ces lieux*. Hemlock will need his rest".

There. That should have done it. Yet none of the elders moved. Surprisingly enough, they stopped conniving and merely stared in her direction. Something was amiss.

"Darling Morbid daughter," started Bastien behind her, "a word of caution, if you will?"

Ah, it's you, then, thought Malice, they've appointed a Speaker. Should have known in the lobby.

The old man moved into the center of the room, as though in Court, facing her. He'd been appointed, yes, but to what end? Surely they did not intend to Advent the poor man *tonight?*

"Caution?" *Come, old man, reflected Malice, I'll draw you out. "Do speak your mind"*.

“Well,” started Bastien in a most musical tone, “the matter is indeed painful, and we have come to express our bottomless sorrow, as our dearest, most revered friend is passing, and it is with great sadness that –”

“Punctus,” Malice spat, “elder, what is your point?”

I will not be cheated by decorum, you dolt.

“It grieves me you see fit to interrupt me so, precious Malice”.

“Time is running out, as you should *all* be aware”.

Take that, the lot of you!

“Indeed...” the man was baffled, she’d unsettled him. Time to strike.

“I am calling you out. *Out*”. She’d struck low, he would aim high. *And do so, you doddering corpse!*

“We... simply seek to ease his suffering, as should his dearest daughter”.

How dare you! she repressed an urge to scream.

“Benevolence carried by cruel mediates. Trite”.

“It is unseemly to keep him thus. Let the man pass. He is ill”.

Clearly, Bastien was not prepared for this. He’d underestimated her. *Good, the mused, let them think I am weak. The higher shall they fall.*

“There is life within him still”.

“And how low does it simmer, Malice”.

“It burns still”.

“Hemlock is in atrocious pain”.

“It is too soon to Advent him. Do you hear?” Here it comes. *“I challenge your word”*.

“We simply –”

“Off, you leeches!” she interjected, yelling, “Off!”

The elders looked to themselves, dismayed, some started to move, the others mumbled half coherent offences. Bastien was losing his flock. He blurted out:

“But, but –”

Still she met him squarely.

"I confront your pretence and shall oppose such claim by tongue and hand if must be".

She placed a hand on the bodkin at her side. It was generally thought all denizens kept one on their person, as was strict protocol, but it was *never* implied –

"Doubtless, this is uncalled for!"

"Hardly," Malice had won, she knew. They'd rue this night for long. "The matter will be brought for debate in Perpetual Court. Hitherto, you will not step foot in this place. Neither you nor these snivelling pests. Hemlock has had a long and noble life, what ever is left of it should reflect the height of his achievements, not the basest moral concerns he has ever sought to eradicate from Dystopia".

Bastien spoke no more. His rabid stare locked on hers, thoroughly insulted. And to think he'd been chastised by some near unfit! This *one*, at that, shrouded in half-truths and gossip, yes –

But they were forced to leave, everyone of them, dragging their feet as they went.

It was over, for now.

Relieved, Josy slunk down in a chair besides her love, holding her own head in her palms, tears streaming, somehow relieved to see the vultures go.

"They'll hate you for this," she said through her sobs, "they think they have more claim on him than either of us do".

Malice strode to the rain-lashed window as yet another lighting strike assailed the Last City of Man. Thunder soon followed, pulsing to the very ground below.

"They feel bound together by the Thirteen, I know. What now?"

"We wait. For sure, we can't avoid this, Malice. Tomorrow or a fortnight from now, they'll come and take him to the Advent. And however we feel about it... he shouldn't pass in his sleep. That's no fitting death for such as he, for anyone. We'd be blamed, too".

“At least we have some nights until Perpetual Court”.

“And you’ll lose”.

“Of course, but I may gain some more time”.

“It will be scant”.

“Still I must try. He... defended me before”.

“Thank you,” Josy said, looking up, hazel eyes gleaming, “what you have purchased here is dear beyond words, though like all things it cannot last”.

Malice was taken aback by the kind words... she wasn’t used to them. Not honest ones at least.

“Tell me,” she asked, “did he ever finish Ethos Noir?”

“Almost...” answered Josy, grievously, “but no. It pains me to think he won’t get to complete *that*, either”.

“*S’il-te-plaît*,” Malice placed a hand on her shoulder, “can I have some time alone with him? I only need a few moments”.

“*Bien sûr*,” started she, getting to her feet, trying to put some order in her clothes. “I’ll make some tea”.

Before she went, Josy paused in the doorway, reflective.

“I have to say, your bloodline is a wayward one,” she admitted, “but I feel fortunate to have shared its splendour. Hemlock always found the right words, you know, save when he tried to tell me how much he loved you. But I hope you know”.

“I do,” murmured Malice. “I do”.

And there they were.

Still, and much to her surprise, being alone with him proved harder than chasing out the elders. The sight of Hemlock thus unmanned was difficult to bear.

She sat next to him on the bed and took hold of his frail hand. “Please don’t go,” she started, though tears welled up in spite of everything, “*please –*” it all came to this, at long last. “You’re my only friend”.

And it was, true, she knew.

“*My only friend...*”

So much left undone. The scraps of Ethos Noir scattered on the worktable. The Black Knights through the Void.

“You have to tell me about the Thirteen. I have to know the secret. And I could have told *her*, you know, Josy, how I know you were ill *longer* than anyone thought. How you hid it from us, to spare us. And you know, it never made sense to me until tonight, when I realized I couldn’t tell her. Couldn’t bring her anymore sorrow. Because that’s the way we’ve always been, father, just miserable creatures, and you wouldn’t add to that”.

Hemlock gazed at the ceiling still, his eyes glazed over, out of focus. His breath was short, his cheek hollow. There was no telling how long he’d last.

She bent over him and whispered in his ear.

“Things are *happening*, father, and I don’t know what to make of them. I’ve seen unearthly sights. I’ve been talking to... *something*, it came to me, it knows things. But more importantly, I’ve seen Malheur. *Malheur*, father! She lives yet. Never left the Ilse, just hiding away. Of course, she won’t admit it, but I know she regrets the way she left, still I’ve failed to bring her back, or get her consent, I’ve...”

Tears rolled down her cheek. It was too much –

“I’ve *done* things, too, it came over me, everything was veiled in blood and it was terrifying and enthralling and I fell into it, but I’ve hurt... some of my friends and I couldn’t stop and I don’t know if – and I can’t... I can’t... I don’t know what’s going to happen...”

She tried to smile, at least, show him she would be strong, that she could be –

“I’ve seen a *flower*, father! One flower of such impossible color, it shouldn’t exist, shouldn’t, and still, here it is, and I have it with me. It’s possible the plant came from outside the Ilse. Do you understand what that means? A few more nights, father, just a few more nights...”

She squeezed his hand, hard. He couldn't go. Couldn't leave. She would show him, he would have peace, at last, she would give him that – he couldn't go, not yet, she was so close!

And then Hemlock *squeezed back*. At first she didn't believe it, but she felt his hand tighten, if ever so faintly, though he did, *he did* –

“Hang on,” she whispered soft. “Oh, hang on...”

Scotch-a-drop, honey-dew
Sing-a-tongue n'pour me two
Nae loe fae twist m'low –
Kiss me black to *faux*

- Gaël des Vers,
“By the Ashen”, III

XIV. A Moment's Peace

The storm was still blowing when Malice finally came home. She'd walked adrift as the elements raged at her back, pushing relentlessly, and as the wet and cold truly bit, she became lost in vapid recollections of simpler times, enamored by the refuge of ignorance.

Somewhere, she knew, lay the gaunt shape of her father, left to his crumbling love, his drugs and a most ascertained fate.

Now, the *real* storm was brewing. The upcoming night would see a skirmish of tongue and verse in Perpetual Court the likes of which had scarcely been heard in years, her desperate plea at the very center. Debate would soar on, motions would be carried. Soon would it unravel, as she'd called it out, and then she, the dastard, near-unfit would do her best to save Hemlock from peer-imposed death.

And she would fail.

No turning back, now. Until then, she would elect the most reasonable course of action: rest, regroup, then sally forth the Hallows and make preparations. Perchance she'd glean sombre secrets to launch against her detractors. Spleen would be there, for sure – the dirty old scholar, who possessed these dark halls at the point of his gnarled, yellow fingertips.

That he *could* help was not to be doubted.

But would he?

Such thoughts twirled their way into oblivion as one weary, brooding Malice crossed the entrance to her manor, hanging a still-dripping redingote on a hook to dry. Sighing and lone, she set out to put some proper sense into the place. Half-minded she went, tending the main rooms, lighting a dozen candles, changing the sheets on her bed.

Soon enough, a good fire roared in the hearth and the manor once again shone with a bit of life. Next came the cooking, one hearty dish on the iron stove: wild mushrooms and Garden vegetables, stir-fried in linseed oil spiced with marjoram, complete with a fresh baguette from the Agora.

Only after setting waters to boil for a bath did she settle at the kitchen table, eating calmly whilst going over the leather-bound book. Her hunger only picked up after the first bite, it didn't occur to place the last time she'd eaten, no – there was always something more important, more pressing. And now, caught in the eye of the storm, this book, this *thing* – all characters weird and unearthly, estranged to the livid eye, rolling in a pattern she couldn't possibly grasp, let alone conceive. Any madman might have scribbled this in a swoon, truly, on and on it went, so detailed and oft erratic, yet the hand that had held the plume had been a steady one. And wherefore? Travesty and drollery, all of it, until the middle page finally flipped over to reveal that dissembling, impossible flower – which, frail though it was, hammered iron nails into every certainty that ever built the Last City of Man.

Silently Malice munched, turning the dry pages over and over, their secrets locked fast. When at last she felt full and sated, the book went back upon its shelf in her study, where she left it there, painfully aware of the troublesome nature of the artefact. Only then did she understand Malheur's anguish towards the relic. How many nights – rather, days – must she have spent, utterly bent on that

piece, only to be placated with the grim dullness of the unknown, again and again –

But it was late, too late to turn back.

Surfeit, Malice brushed these thoughts aside as best she could and retreated to her *salle de bain*.

Fittingly, no candle shown in the humid enclosure, drips of condensation beading down the stone-walled surface, and as she closed the door behind it became pitch black – an absence of light she welcomed in good sooth. Slowly, she peeled off those sodden clothes one by one, hung them on a chair and liefly surrendered her naked flesh to the hot waters, stretching her aching limbs. Breathing heavy air, she scrubbed her skin with loam from the Ashen, cleaned the red-rimmed cuts, surveyed her fading bruises, then merely soaked there, a moist cloth over eyes and forehead, listening to the distant rumble over stone walls... and lingered, for aeons it seemed, until the waters turned cold.

The fire was down to embers when she strode off to the living room, wet hair loosely down the shoulders of a black satin bathrobe, naked feet lithe upon crimson carpet.

A couple of mirkwood logs sent sparks flying up into the dry air as she lunged them into the blaze. The flames licked up the timber lavishly, feeding, burning higher, sending gushes of renewed warmth across the manor.

Malice sat cross-legged in front of the hearth, absent-minded, staring into the fire. The colors twirled, ever changing, flickering, reminiscent of the impossible flower – yellow, bright and pure. The flames danced and danced as their warmth engulfed her weary flesh, devouring the night, crackling, casting tortured shadows across the room... none of which her own.

And her gaze fell lost to the flames, one blood-red eye shining in the dark.

Chaos. Ceaseless becoming, entailing a near-infinite number of variables, all comprised of mostly hidden value. Present existence is a seemingly endless strata of truths and untruths, the quality of which we are ill-equipped to determine. Thus faced with the implacable – and quite merciless – unknown, humans have always reacted with one, or sometimes both of the following emotions: fear or wonder. But History – meaning linear time and the death thereof – has served one purpose and one purpose alone: to exhaust the lure of impossible ends, eventually giving birth to a third, more accurate stance: strict indifference.

Codex Mortem, 1-6

XV. Deep Hallows

“This... is an obscene waste of time,” hissed the shadow-creature, creeping not three paces behind her.

Malice sighed as they wandered aimlessly through the dimlit aisles of the Hallows. “Quiet you,” she murmured in the dark, “I need proper counsel, not peevish bleating”.

Tonight, she’d chosen elegant finery, delicately laced sandals, a black matte satin skirt that wrapped around her calves at an angle, then a tight yet sober silk blouse, closed to her gorge where hung a single amethyst pendant. The bodkin she’s strung on the inside of her left thigh, out of sight from peering eyes.

“If what I’m trying here,” she added low, “is beyond whatever arcane skill you allegedly possess, please understand I will take no great slight in desertion. Either play the part... or simply *fuck off*. Are we clear?”

Her voice, albeit soft, resounded far into the underground library, the winding archs rendering acoustics prevalent, shrouded though the place seemed.

“Oh, most, milady,” rasped the ethereal creature, vividly amused, and suddenly sprang out: “oh, but look yon, there goes the wretch now, off and away...”

Beyond the dimlit row she was trailing, a crooked figure stepped fast – skittered, almost – across the way and behind a high shelf of rolled parchment scrolls. She couldn’t make out his features through the darkness – there were few sources of light, for obvious reasons – but as bent and broken and miserable as he looked, this here could only be one man.

“Spleen!” whispered Malice as she hastened forward, her voice flittering through the arcades. “Wait!”

A few paces and she came to the end of the alley, only to be met with more dusty volumes of forgotten lore. The old scholar was nowhere in sight. Confused, she trod the way he went, stretching her neck to glean beyond the endless labyrinth of shelves.

“Phooey,” spat the eerie presence at her hind, “he flees the very sight of you! Is it possible he knows?”

“Listen here,” retorted Malice, vexed, “I really didn’t beg you to come along”.

“Oh, I am but a shadow, *très chère*. Where there is light, I follow. Where there is none, I am everywhere”.

“And yet, nowhere near useful”.

“*Au contraire*”.

“Well then,” spoke Malice as she stopped at an intersection, “which way?”

“Why, left, of course”.

And as she turned, the crooked figure reappeared through an opening. It was Spleen alright, looking over his shoulder: flat face and flaring nostrils, brown teeth, skin a sickly hue and gnarled, yellow fingers – stained from years of rubbing parchment paper.

When his scrawny eyes met hers, the old scholar simply hunched over and limped off into the darkness anew.

Malice found the chase disheartening, for a moment she considered letting go, as the Tenets dictated. Any sensible denizen would have given up by now.

But she needed help.

“Well, make a right,” urged the shadow, “and then cut him off”. The creature squealed. “Go on, *now*, before he falls and breaks his bones!”

The next instant she disappeared in a series of alleyways, first right, then left and straight ahead, until the greasy scholar shot out of the blackness and nearly bumped into her unawares.

“Prithee,” he whined in a measly voice, clutching at his heart, “you Morbid, leave me in peace...” there was fear in his every feature. “I’ve no qualms with you”.

“Nor I with you,” murmured Malice in the most reassuring tone she could muster. “There’s hearsay about me, no doubt, yet I only come as loving daughter to a dying man who was once your dearest of friends”.

“Hearsay?” Spleen recoiled in shock. “*Hearsay?* Much more than that I’m afraid, yes, you’ve been trouble from the womb, you and your lot, the Morbids, and so it’s been ever since – no, I’m best to stay here and read, yes, so much to catch up, nay, no time, no time at all...”

He was about to turn away when she placed a hand on his shoulder. He flinched at the touch. *How long has it been since he’s felt a loved one’s warmth*, wondered Malice, overwhelmed with pity.

His wrinkled mouth trembled as he retorted. “I wish to be left alone”.

Malice could hardly believe it. *The old form, with me?* Protocol dictated she left. To insist now was against the Tenets. But her need –

“Please, old friend”.

He made no effort to remove her hand. His heavy-lidded eyes bulged wildly. "For Hemlock I can do nothing. He is going back to the Void, and so we all –

"But you can help *me*".

Spleen seemed to calm down for a bit, even managed to look at her directly. His nose sniffed accusingly in her direction.

"So wilful, you and yours, think you can barge in on old Spleen whenever you fancy".

So *I'm not the first*, thought Malice. *And who else?*

"I thought Hemlock was your friend".

"That he is, still".

"So everyone tells me, yet I am the only one to defend him".

"Against the Advent?"

"Against death".

"Ah, I see..." Spleen directed her to a marble table nearby, where she sat as he lit a lantern fixed on the adjoining wall. "Delaying the inevitable, such a rare endeavour in a society bent on eternity. You know I am no courtier, the old laws interest me solely from a historical perspective. In Perpetual Court, you will need dialectics. Were you to possess a tithe of your mother's grasp on rhetoric, you could hold your own against the best, I'm certain".

"But my problem lies not in Perpetual Court".

"Aye, *bien sûr*, Court won't avail against our appointed fate. It will, however, hinder your purpose. Which begs the question, *what* seeks you?"

"This I cannot speak. My intentions for delaying the ceremony are mine and mine alone".

"And yet you would subject us all to them. Delaying an Advent without reason. So barbaric. We despise pain and suffering, Malice, not death". He mulled for a second, then concluded. "Your plea will fail. It is wanton and vain".

"I cannot win either way. This is an aporia".

“An impossible dilemma. Naturally, you will seek another angle, a new perspective”.

“Hence my seeking you out. You have delved deeper than any living denizen into the origins of our society. Doubtless, you hold the answers”.

“Some, mayhap. If anything, I hold questions, and they’re a heavy lot, those. Do tell”.

Malice hesitated for a second. It was difficult to form.

Tell him, pressed the shadow-creature, *go on...*

“For centuries,” she began, “our society has circled endlessly, locked in eternal present. We have records of the past but we do not value them. We embrace change, and yet stay exactly the same – our way, our laws, our food. Most do not even leave the city. We drink, eat, revel in flesh, burn out and fade”.

“But a flicker in the Dark, Malice”.

“The Last City of Man”.

“A flame which could be snuffed out anytime. ‘Consider the Void’”.

“But you see, this is exactly it. I have. My condition...” she shied away, “well, the founders came from the Wastes. Are there no record of life beyond the Void?”

“There are few, and only before the Collapse”.

“Ah yes, children’s tales, the Fall of Man, the Great Wandering, and then the Founding. We all know the legends, the songs. They don’t say much”.

“The writings are vivid if scant. Should you read them, I doubt you would find them satisfying. They speak of dying and rot, billions piled to fester, soils marred beyond hope and desolate clouds smearing the heavens grey”.

“No much non-sense”.

“They left a dying world behind”.

“And then they found this place”.

“Well, it is writ their numbers had dwindled to a few score wanderers when they landed on the hazy shores and found life. They never understood why the Isles thrives so.

But they gave a name to their ignorance and called it Dark. The Dark underlies the Isle, giving it life amidst infinite spans of wasteland”.

“Still, I doubt the founders intended for us to waste ourselves to oblivion”.

“Oh, my dear child,” Spleen rolled his eyes, “that was their sole design precisely. An eternity of darkness. Our ancestors built this place with one care alone – what other purpose they carried died in the Wastes. Balance is what they sought, harmony if you will. They put limits to growth, our numbers to stay at three thousand, for the Isle could not support more. It may be a given to you, or anyone else here, but the scriptures tell of a plague of man, when they multiplied carelessly, piled the unfit thick until they were stuffed knee-deep in sweat and bile and gnawed at each other’s bones. Whatever mistakes the Collapse signified, the founders were careful not to repeat”.

“They crystallized us entirely”.

“It is my opinion they rather wished a... *pleasant* existence upon us. Great care was taken in building the city, every dwelling here and every street way, all made to last and outlive us all. And they arrayed the Gardens to ensure minimal care. These sustain themselves for the most part, and we have but to pick the fruits. It is writ, ere the Fall of Man, damned societies travailed constantly, day and night”.

“Impossible”.

“Aurielle once said ‘a time will come when our children rue the memory of us, call us liars and weaklings, but the ways we instil shall long outlive our very names.’”

“She was confident enough”.

“They were anarchists, Malice. So are we all, bowing only to reason, cleaving only to nature. Live freely, do no harm, but consider the Void. We only have three laws. The old societies had millions. Ours come together in the notion of collective liberty, which is essentially a negative

condition – merely a status of greater possibility. Negative, in that what we assert is ours to dictate”.

“And yet we should yield to the Tenets”.

“They are but *words*, Malice. A meaningless symbol, until you perceive the reality in which we must co-exist. Think of it as a seal, a salve to hold collective liberty. Freedom of the only one is subjugation for all, and the founders knew this quite well”.

“But we are not all the same!”

“Ah, Malice, we are equals nonetheless. Our differences are merely there to allow mutual help”.

“Yet we are not free. We can not leave”.

“There is an exogenous contingency, the barriers we have not made and cannot break, though we wished – nature, in a word, and the Void as it is. Here is the one question of humility, without which we would collapse also. Therein lies the sole fixed variable. Lifelessness on all sides, and we must measure everything from thence, accept that we are headed straight back to the blackness which spawned us”.

“It is insufferable”.

“It is objective truth. Yet inside those standards we can do whatever we fancy, be it delve into books, squirm in fleshy pleasures or simply gorge down Daemondrought ‘til we choke on our own blood”.

“In that order, I hope?”

“Point is, we are negative creatures. The sooner you realize this, the better off you’ll be. I’ve seen many a tormented wretch storm these halls, scorched internally by questions to which there are no answers. You would do well to bid your time and enjoy what you may”.

“So everyone tells me”.

“And yet you insist on breaking the rules, harming your fellow man, opposing our traditions –”

“The Advent is cruel!” interjected Malice “and being sent At Noctem is harsher still”.

“Across the Wastes, our ancestors could not suffer the lame and diseased. The weakest links endangered the whole chain. These could not be kept”.

“And why shouldn’t we?”

“Because we actually *value* life. Everyone travails, as little as required. Those who can not must not stay. We can not breed in weakness, nor allow some to work while others don’t. They do not have to die, but they can not stay. And if they so chose to die – we make it painless and pleasurable”.

“You think the Advent is as ecstatic as people say?”

“Doubtless. I have seen more than enough to know”.

“All that is well and good, but it can not last”.

Spleen paused for a second. “You are referring to the Thirteen?”

“I have seen the implicit purpose of the Black Knights. Unsettle Dystopia. Break the order. This was Hemlock’s deepest wish. And it drove my sister to exile. The Thirteen were an exercise in chaos”.

“Exactly. And be thankful they failed so miserably. Can you imagine if even *one* had made it back? The implications are vast... and disastrous”.

“But you can not ignore their support. From what I understand, Necropolis nearly buzzed with joy to send them out”.

“Well yes, but I think you misjudge the project altogether”.

“What ever do you mean?”

“They were not required to return to fulfill their task. The implicit objective – the one few have dared expose – was to expiate a growing sentiment of guilt. Chastise our overbearing pride”.

“You mean we sent them out for nothing?”

“A sacrifice, I imagine. And why? Because we are irremediably *content* in this existence. Too content, perhaps. We have so few dissatisfactions, indulge in nearly every

excess imaginable, just to wring any kind of thrill into our bones. It was just a question of time before we got bored”.

“This is as sordid an assumption as I’ve ever heard”.

“Think on it. I wouldn’t be surprised if the experiment started over again... not now, of course, we need to forget first. A hundred years, maybe? Little more? Ah, we are wanton wretches in an even worse universe. Too well off. We need to fight ghosts in the dark, legends like the Voivode, or Dominae. Conjure up visions unattainable, and resign ourselves to a life of blind hope”.

“I don’t believe you. Hemlock said they’d weighted the chance the Knights deserted them. He said they’d gone a long way to make sure they’d return”.

“Is that so?” Spleen lips twitched convulsively.

Malice took her chance.

“Speaking of which, do you know what... *precautions* were taken to ensure their return?”

The old scholar’s wrinkled eyes widened, gleaming bloodshot white.

“Ah, so the Morbid daughter comes into her own”.

“Will you tell me, then?”

“You know I will not”.

“That saddens me...” Malice feigned. “Perhaps I will go see a Healer?” *There you go, she thought, take the bait.*

“Do these exist? I’ve only heard rumours...”

“Why, don’t you condone acts of benevolence amongst peers?”

“Well,” started Spleen in an uncharacteristic verve, “division of labour is proscribed in the Codex Mortem. Were there to be such folk, they would be... chastised, I’m sure. Knowledge and skill are shared, not hoarded. The term ‘Healer’ refers to a specific ‘function’, a ‘specialty’ – archaic terms, these, and outruled for good reason. If there is relevance to one ‘Healer’, then should we all be ‘Healers’. And if we are all ‘Healers’ the word loses significance. We are. Plain and simple. Those who would distinguish

themselves in title – raise themselves above the others – are enemy”.

Malice, hissed the shadow, *we are running out of time.*

“I see,” sighed Malice, “but there’s one thing you still haven’t told me”.

Spleen smiled faintly, brown teeth in lantern light. She dared to ask.

“Why do you do it? Why spend so much time here, with these books, these scrolls? From what I understand, you think very little of symbolic terms”.

“Indeed,” he spat. “Symbols are non-existent. Abstractions are non-existent. Time means nothing. History means nothing”.

“Then why?”

“Oh,” he grinned in the lamplight, “you of all people should know the answer to that”.

“I should?”

Hurry, dear, spat the eerie creature, *we have to go!*

“Please,” continued Spleen, “come back when you figure it out”.

“I shall,” spoke Malice as she got up, “thank you, friend, I won’t forget this”.

And as she strolled out of the faint light and out to meet certain failure at Perpetual Court, the images flittered through her mind and she couldn’t help but feel it all so vain, this search, these pursuits in dimlit hallways...

Sarcastically, she sang:

“Tant pis pour la condition humaine!”

And somewhere in the dark, Spleen bursted out laughing. “And what makes you think,” he giggled, “we are even human anymore?”

Were it not for the Collapse, would we have tread together? Were it not for the Void, would we dare huddle closer? I can not see your consensus for the votes, Speaker. This city is a tomb: I care not for the chattering dead.

- Anne-Marie Desvents
"At Court", transcript.
Hallows Archives.

XVI. Perpetual Court

Triste waylaid her moments before the Witching Hour. He'd been creeping outside the Hallows. Waiting.

It was a narrow alleyway, choked in black wet walls. He'd stalked his way quick – one ghastly silhouette in the nightly fog. She recognized the sound too late: fluttering velvet, boots on polished stone. Uneven, still.

"Do not go," he pleaded through the mist.

The softness of his voice froze her in place. Gone were the harsh accusations, the caustic tones. He'd suffered unrequited love, and *pity* oozed through his every pore.

"Would you come to the Grand Bal with me? I would have you by my side," he stressed in the formal expression. "*À mes côtés*".

Malice wheeled round. His outlines glowed in the dark. Lean, pale. Loose crimson hair that fell to forever. One hand locked behind his back, *hiding something* -

"Glad to see you are well," she sighed. "Yet I must be off. Much to be done".

The shadow at her hind lay silent, as though holding its breath. *Get rid of him*, she pleaded in vain. *Get rid of him now!*

On cue, Triste took another step forward.

"Gossip is *spreading*, Mal".

He was getting close. Dangerously close.

"I must, *I must* –" she hastened, "some other time perhaps?"

Malice was about to turn tail and run when the wretch of a man took one step more, faint light shimmering on blue-veined cheek. His visage shown demented in the dark.

"But I, I have gleaned the truth of them –"

Blood rushed to her face. *What does he know?* "Verily," she argued, "court nigh begins, my fondest apologies..."

Triste stopped not three paces away, trembling still. He raised a hand to her. It held a slender, black rose.

She double-backed and darted off into the night – running, running away and anon –

"*Do not go,*" lamented he miserably, "*do not...*"

That anguish died out behind as Malice ran, broke out on the stony streets, footing fast and lithe and she bit her lip to keep from looking back.

"*Ouste, et encore,*" urged the shadow-creature. "Liefly now, darkling!"

Breath short, she burst into the main boulevard like a wraith on the hunt, sandals slipping on glistening stone. Denizens clogged the path as usual, loitering, wandering, and she pushed them out of her way. *No more time for niceties*, she thought. These bared their teeth and leered back disdainfully – her, the red-eyed, dastard-unfit...

"Silence, you," she murmured low, "or I'll be drowned in Aian rot myself, and where will *you* go?"

"Steady now," hissed the ghastly shape, teetering along, "you'll need a full head for this one, breathe in – anger shall not avail –"

She'd just flown across the Ashen Strait bridge – a lowly arch of pitch and limestone – when her senses suddenly reeled in shock. The shadow screamed in blood-wet rage, but it was too late.

She never saw the hand that drew her away.

It seized her by the arm and nearly dislocated the shoulder, yanking her off to the side. She struggled in vain, screams muffled as a second hand locked over her mouth – and it was soiled and grimy. In an instant, she lunged her whole weight backwards in effort to unsettle her assailant, and the next thing she knew their footing slipped from stone to wet earth, and they both fell headlong into the mud slide.

The hand came off her face as she tried to scream, but they were rolling down the bank and the sudden force of the blow pushed the air out of her lungs – the world reeled for an excruciating while until they splashed headlong into the Ashen Strait.

The waters were icy cold.

Malice felt a surge of blood course through her veins as the crystal rush raked her senses and she nearly choked altogether.

A hand grabbed hold of the loamy river bed, one foot strayed on wet grass from the shore – she raised her head above the waters and sought frantically after the treacherous scum.

There. He'd fallen flat on his back, aslant upon the bank of the Ashen Strait.

Calonio.

“Oh, you little *cunt*,” groaned Malice as she pressed back the black locks sticking down her face, “you dirty little *cunt*!”

The man struggled to his feet, surprisingly quick. There was a confident look about him, so odd –

“Easy, *du calme...*” he said, wiping mud from his brow. “I’ve good reason, now”.

Malice looked around. They’d fallen under the bridge. There was no one about. She had one foot in wet earth, the other one secure on the bank – her senses recoiling still, dizzy from the fall. She caught up slime.

Malice reached to the inside of her thigh. The bodkin was gone.

"We have to talk," the man spoke, stooping down her side. "Forgive me, honestly, I want this no more than you do, it simply can't go on..."

Thoughts and instincts all clashed in an instant –

"It was wrong," he insisted, "all of it, I can see that now..."

And as Calonio drew next to her, she felt something break down deep inside, a hidden string was struck. Flashes of Morbid and Hemlock sped across her mind. Suddenly she realized, it wasn't confidence.

He was afraid of her.

In a heartbeat, her entire flesh tensed up – she shot out of the river in a splash of water, made two steps and chopped the young man in the throat.

It was over in a second.

He drooped down, gasping for air, clutching at her skirt, asphyxiating. The most horrible moan escaped his teeth as he collapsed: a deathly groan, thick with despair.

"Should have told me about the swamps," she sneered as she kicked him to the side, then started up the bank on all fours, dripping wet and mud-stained. There was no time...

"Your blade –" whispered the shadow-creature, looming over her, trailing left and right.

"Later," she interjected through clenched teeth. "Or never".

Back on the street, she limped to the nearest agora, avoiding looks from the passers by, and sought to put her raiment back in order as best she could, but it was soon obvious she'd be courting as some soot-stained wretch. So much for the elegant finery.

"This doesn't bode well," mused the shadow-creature through hoarse susurrations. "Not well at all".

Malice washed her face, laced her sandals again. There was mud everywhere. She tried rubbing it off but it just ground deeper into her clothes. The black matte satin skirt clung like a shroud, the silk blouse torn at the seams. Even the amethyst pendant hung like dead weight at her throat.

She shrugged and went off all the same.

Denizens filled the path yet again, clearly they all converged to the marble columns of Perpetual Court. Decadents swarmed over the place: rich robes, fluttering in the midnight air, delicate black lines of make-up and white fond, sharp rings and earrings aflame, tight corsets and bustling gorges. Blue veins, laughter, the gleam of fangs in the dark. Here and there, a tight mesh shirt over ivory-pale skin, a blacklace décolletage, some naked feet on wet stone. Whispering, all of them, in a soft, musical tone. A few parted ways to let her through, but most were too absorbed in their own vaunted reflections yet. These she must push off and slide in.

Onward, Malice told herself. *Onward...*

And as she squeezed through the thick crowd, faces spanned manifold, all ablur – tens, scores, hundreds to all sides, so many, so very many...

Beyond, the high columns of Perpetual Court rose. One voice boomed over the assembly, an old, ascertained voice, skilled in all the decrepit ways of courtship.

Bastien, Speaker for the elders.

So it had already begun. And without her.

The steps were nearing as she pushed on, ever closer, rubbing shoulders with countless denizens, so many black and crimson and purple fabrics brushing against her own, limbs all contorted in the odd display of mass movement, scents commingling together, breath and perfume and sweat, hair and neck and shiny coloured lips.

As Malice climbed the first step, she looked upon the attendance with her one good eye. Familiar faces instantly emerged. Merveille, glowing to the side, blithe Kalian and

Eglantine. And there, Ilsa, all blue. And Triste, melancholic Triste, who'd shown up again.

And then Malice came to the last step and saw Jacques the painter, loosely following Mother Morbid, she who necessarily stood closest to the inner circle of Perpetual Court. There the elders had gathered, and Bastien stood in the middle, orating to the courtiers in a loud, commanding voice.

And then she saw her love, Léandres, adept of the Old Tongue, and her heart sunk in despair to see him standing all the way to the opposite side.

She'd never reach him.

"Remember what we discussed," whispered the shadow-creature, "remember, now..."

Malice pushed and pounded on, but the way was tightly knit and most courtiers wouldn't bulge, she slid and pressed and begged for room, begged for air –

Too many, there were too many, she plunged in every opening, forced herself against shoulders and elbows and stepped on feet and raged against countless passive wretches... and somehow in this black forest of flesh, this labyrinth of erect bodies, there came a presence to her side, stepping over marble stone, and she did not notice the shadowing shade until the very skies seemed to darken overhead.

Somewhere up, she saw the three Tenets, etched in marble stone. *Consider the Void. Do no Harm. Live Freely.*

"Malice!" screamed the shadow. "Malice!"

The blade plunged in her side to the hilt, twisted round and slid out instantly. *Stabbed.* Malice yelped in vain and fell to her knees, and as gushes of blood spewed forth from the wound, the crowd closed in around her.

She reeled back, clutching at the wound, and all the faces looked the same, all the clothes, the jewellery, the pale blue veins, calm in the midst of ferocious agony –

They – Malice recoiled in pain, they... Who!

She put a hand to her right side and pressed it there, but blood spilled still, dribbling out between her fingers, steadily, like a heartbeat.

“*Malice!*” Instantly, the shadow was everywhere around her, she could see the black mist thickening as her lifeblood slowly ebbed away. “Calm down, you need to calm down!”

Nobody moved. Bastien spoke on. Everywhere else, everything had stayed the same. Whatever happened, only she was aware.

Her sight tinged pink now, smearing back into blood-red agony, alacrity burning anew through her very flesh. She turned around. That sicker was hiding in the crowd. *They*, she raged. *I can't, I have to – how could... no! No!*

She got up to her feet, trembling. Everything was tainted red – blood-red, blood –

“You can’t,” screamed the shadow-creature, “not here, calm down, *Malice!*”

“They’ve betrayed me,” she hissed through clenched teeth, “How dare they!”

“Think,” the creature protested, “focus now!”

And she could sense it, yes, through the blood-red storm, it was painfully obvious, the bodkin – her right side, she was trapped every way: either she fled Court right now and dropped her cause, or she broke out in rage and was instantly dismissed, either way she lost, either way they won, whoever they were –

“Onward,” she whimpered low, limping forward, clutching her side, one elongated dark stain growing down her blouse and skirt, black on black.

Scarlet red haze shifted to pale pink as she pushed on the crowd, miserably aware she could do nothing but go forth, lest another blade got stuck in her back.

And as she fought down the urge to murder, the courtiers finally split every which way, parting at each painful foot step – they’d recognized her, now, and gossiped again, schemed, *plotted* – and she’d slay them all,

yes, scatter their broken bones to the four winds, and their blood, *the blood* –

“I,” Malice croaked, standing at a crooked angle now, all the way in front of the assembly, facing Bastien in the inner circle. “I demand the floor. I, Malice, youngest of the Morbid daughters”.

Her rage subsided for a time, it seemed, as all eyes turned to her now: sympathetic, accusing, soft and cruel and unjust.

Morbid stood there, shouldered by regular sycophants. It was impossible to tell what her eyes saw, they gleamed thick with ice.

Bastien was stopped in mid sentence. He gazed at her and frowned. Evidently, the man had prepared well, and this time he wouldn’t underestimate her. Naturally, he bowed in her direction and yielded, taking two steps back.

“Hail and well met, Malice, thou hast come at last. As is customary, the floor is thine. Please, do go on”.

For a moment there, a smile.

Malice paused to catch her breath. Vertigo beat her senses like a ram, pain reaming her flesh, sending burning waves lapping up to her neck and down her thigh. If anyone noticed she was bleeding, it didn’t show.

Confrontation, she thought. *It is time*.

“I have..”. she started, her voice faint over the marble-floored Court. “I have called this out yestereve, upon the deathbed of my father, our dear and wise Hemlock. *He* –” she stopped suddenly, a spasm shaking her through and through – “I must beg forgiveness... of you. The loss of my father is... it’s more than I can bear. He... means the world to me...”

Bastien’s eyes widened. Morbid took a deep breath. Hundreds of courtiers and denizens watched her in silence.

“I have been... *weak* to brave the laws of our founders and... oppose the relief of my father’s sufferings”.

Surprise flared across the assembly, followed with gusts of incoherent chattering through the marble columns. Her words had struck deep and confusion ensued.

Malice's frail countenance was overwhelmed by the noise, and she was vying to find the strength to go on when Léandres suddenly burst to her side, taking her in his arms. His affection took her aback, reaching beyond the veil of aggression she was so desperately trying to avoid.

Over the clamour, he whispered to her. "*Belle amour*, you are not well, please, do not do this!"

At which she tried to push him away – failed.

"I'll be fine," she murmured. "*Laisse-moi faire*".

She turned to the frantic crowd and raised her voice as much as she possibly could.

"I ask..." her tone broke, but she started again, "I ask for three nights to... prepare for the Advent... by which time I will..." a violent pang shook her altogether, sweat beading on her brow, "I will step forth and feed Hemlock the Aian drop myself. *Voilà tout*".

An uproar blazed through the crowd, some applauded, others yelled out in anger, and in the middle old Bastien stood completely baffled, elders swarming him on every side with stark demands, fingers raised and accusations drawn.

When Léandres released his embrace, gaze roaming from the blood on his hand to the dark stain on her side.

Pale grey eyes searched for hers, horrified.

"Please," Malice whispered as she nearly fainted back into his arms, barely audible through the roaring crowd, "please take me home".

Something about an invisible man in the sky who hated everyone below, and ruled without proving his presence, save *after* life, or so thought his followers when they still lived. Ah! I've read non-sense plenty in the Founders' recollections, but this – this is most entertaining.

- Charles Lapierre, aka Spleen
Dissertations. "Of God".

XVII. Communion Of Flesh

The wooden cane sent echoes through the arcades of Ruby Den as the youngest Morbid daughter found her lonesome way through the antechamber. It was an apparently modest piece: polished mirkwood with a tin grip, slightly curved, but sturdy, and she was forced to lean on it at every step, tired and wounded as she was.

Instead of customary Den raiment, Malice wore but a plain, long black robe, tailored high up to cover her neck. The low end revealed iron shod boots, laced to her knees, clasping ankles tight. Her features worn and without makeup, hair drawn back in a single knot.

She walked, cane and step, and cane again.

The rooms she thusly crossed were richly furnished, all velvet couches and soft carpets, bubbled glass work, low lamplight and purple drapery – though empty, one and all, deserted in favour of the main hall which rose but a few steps yon.

The Ruby Den hall.

Somewhere ahead, drums beat in unison.

It's about to start, she thought. *Forsooth*.

"Desire in motion," echoed the ethereal presence, "an appalling thirst, though lurid lust should never blind you to the obvious, dearest one".

Yes, she could smell it now, overwhelming – this simulacrum, this spell, this... *rut*, alluring, beastly, winding down murky depths of depravity, heady with the scent of braseros heat, incense smoke and freshly cut flowers.

“*Bien sûr*, the obvious,” she answered mockingly, “and other such luxuries. And what’s so irremediably lush you’d feel licensed to taunt me so?”

The voice reverberated amidst the lurid ambiance. “Well,” it said, “you are no safer here than in Court, and dear Léandres can not protect you from afar”.

Malice thought of the hidden blade reaching down from the handle of the sword-cane. “I’m safe enough,” she merely countered. “Besides, if I am to have my way with her, he can not weight in. Best he stayed at the door. This is a Morbid matter”.

“Well put,” sighed the other, fading away.

And there were the heavy crimson curtains in the middle, draping an enclosure at least ten paces wide, but that entrance was for those who *partook*, not the likes of those inclined to further subtlety... and treason.

The drums beat quicker as Malice slowly limped her way to a side door, wooden and short, and let herself in. Instantly, she drew to a staggering halt.

There rose the shadow-creature, right in front: a black shape, vastly drawn, translucent. It hissed vehemently, the blood-wet tongue rasping everywhere at once.

“You can’t trust her,” it spat.

But Malice shrugged and merely stepped right through the dark haze, and off into the corridor side-lining the Ruby Den hall.

The shadow swirled on itself. “You sot!”

At the very edge of sight rose the appealing silhouettes dressed in pale scarlet luminescence – honeyed skin bathed in flame light, pearls of sweat trickling down arched backs and taut flesh – threescore at the very least, though an

entire horizon of succulence espoused the hall, from one end to the other.

As she walked, careful not to lose her gaze in the swaying trance, the dark spawn flittered on the wall to her side, tip-toeing to the pace of the lustful drums.

“She is all fame and deceit, this one, you know her”.

Malice didn’t answer, but strode on. Step and cane, and step again.

“You... *envy* her”. The shadow laughed.

Turning away from the sneering thing, she caught a glimpse of the Den and blushed away.

Walls draped heavy from side to side, a canvas painted with oil motifs of dead branches gnarling upwards – a veritable forest surrounding the hall, and beyond the woven canopy roared dark red skies, woodlands set aflame upon a most exquisitely perverse display.

Globes of blood crystal hung on the ceiling, two dozen at least, casting a pale crimson glow. Braseros stood in each corner on heavy iron frames, filled to the brim with simmering embers, pulsating.

And at the center – thick woollen carpets the color of sand, cushions purple and blue scattered here and there, and some low tables covered with bowls of creamy salve, translucent oils, jars of scented jellies.

Drummers encircled the very end, eyes all shut, lost to the rhythm, sweat trickling down tense muscles as steady hands beat instruments all varying in sound.

The Ruby Den swayed in trance-like bliss, and so flaunted the temptresses on all sides, here and there and everywhere: shapes soft and curved and comely, their bodies intertwined amidst an instinctual dance to which all movements coursed under skin – a rivulet of *want*, bound by shores of *take*, whence each and everyone slaked their thirst to *here*, aching for more, and *more*.

Corsets unlaced, blouses unbuttoned, shirts peeled off, straps melting down ivory white shoulders, robes loosened

and limbs flashing bright, garments fey under scarlet flame. Under the faint hall light, blue veins looked like black scars. Here, lips pouting, and there, serene smiles... sharp fangs all aglow.

Eventually the drums would stop, Malice knew, soon to be replaced with yet *another* rhythm – more insidious, this one, and no less enthralling.

Taking a deep breath which tore at her side, she hastened to the back of the hall where a table laid with fresh water casks, chouffée rolls and steaming pots of Blood Tea stood next to the image of twin crooked tree trunks. A subtle cut between the two, invisible to the untrained eye.

Malice seized a pot and two cups in the one hand, slid her cane in with the other and slipped into the loge as though she was stepping through the woods.

“Oy, lovey!” she cheered into the dark room.

The other was sat at a low table, facing an oval mirror, her reflection lit sideways by a single red candle. *Maquillage* almost finished, the white paste fond complete yet there lacked those signature black streaks.

Merveille didn’t so much as blink.

“*Bonsoir, ma soeur,*” she spoke dispassionately, “I hope this night finds you well?”

The place was ridiculously small, more cupboard than chamber, as opposed to the opulently wide Ruby hall – hence were its uses limited. There, one might prepare oneself, merely wait, clean off, switch clothes... or simply sit and *watch*, as it may –

“Well enough,” answered Malice, leaning heavily on her cane. “Fancy a sit down?” she added, “cup’o tea, *peut-être?*”

Merveille nodded silently.

Her younger sister placed down the pot and took the only other chair – a torturous little piece, oddly gregarious

for such a debauched scene – then braced the cane between her knees.

Giving you the solemn treatment, croaked the shadow-spawn flitting across the walls, *oh, she's in league with 'em for sure, Mal' !*

“Pour you some?” broke in Malice, trying to shut out the voice inside her mind.

“Prithee,” whispered Merveille as she traced down deep lines down her eyes with strips of burnt wood, “I’m just about ready – ”

“Oh,” Malice feigned outrage, “won’t keep you, darkling, no more than should a sister in *need*”. She emphasized the last word, perhaps overly so.

Morbid’s median child looked directly at her, wry smile on painted lips.

“That was some trick you pulled last night,” she confessed, “I’m surprised mother didn’t choke the life from you”.

“Unseemly business, that, I agree”.

“What,” began Merveille as she lowered her gaze, “happened to you?”

Liar! hissed the shadow, *she knows – she's in league with them –*

Malice shrugged. “I sprung a muscle”. *You didn't see that, she reflected, nobody did.*

“Well, does it hurt?”

“Only when I move... and about every time I breathe”.

“Oh, dreadful, and Grand Bal right around the corner. Perhaps you should unwind a bit, stretch those legs. Might do you right”.

I'll pull a stitch, she thought, jesting.

“I’ll be fine, dear sister”.

Just behind the tapestry, fever was spreading. Fingers turning into claws, kisses into bites, caresses shifting to pull –

“But,” kept on Merveille, oblivious, “we’d have to do something about that getup, that...” she rolled her eyes disdainfully, “*hideous* robe, I swear, sometimes it feels as though you’re just *asking* to be the dumbest creature in the Void...”

“Really,” stressed Malice, “there’s no need”.

“Well,” began Merveille, pouting, “serves you right, always so glum, and sullen. This thing, this... burden, or whatever’s riding you, it’s carrying you down. Making you ill, *belle chose*. Why not leave it?”

Malice mistakenly glanced in the mirror and saw her other self leering back, face contorted in glee, both eyes ablaze with pure malevolence. Yes, *tell her, Mal,’ it whispered, tell her why you’re holding on, see how much your mislead trust can actually cost the both of us -*

“I need answers,” she bore herself to admit, “only father can provide”.

Outside, a young woman’s cry arose above the rhythm, result of a sudden jolt of pleasure, as able caresses found their way across the map of her flesh, surprisingly swift –

It had just begun.

The drums beat in unison.

Merveille’s eyes widened, catlike. Her entire body tensed up as she realized she was missing out. “Well anyhow, sure you don’t want to come with?” she blurted out impatiently. “You used to love Communion, I’m sure we can find some few sweetlings to... *renew* that interest of yore? I can make sure they’re gentle with you... or not, should you feel *adventurous* –”

Although Malice was tempted by the lure of release, the pang at her side tore into her nerves. She was forced to pause, fearing the wound might open up again.

On with it, urged her demented mirror-self, *neither one of you can stay her ache for long -*

“I’ve something to ask,” contrived she, flinching, when all of a sudden, the drums ceased completely.

As though stricken into motion, Merveille got up and walked three steps to the tapestry, parting one side with the back of her hand.

The waning reverberations gave way to subtler sounds, whimpers, moans, laughter even, drawing vivid images: flick of tongue and shifting limbs, the brush of velvet against bare skin, lips suckling in kiss, soft cushions crushed under coupling bodies –

“This,” murmured Merveille absently, standing in the enclosure, “most exquisite embrace...”

Quickly now, spat the distorted vision in the glass, she’s leaving –

Malice raised her voice adamantly.

“I need your help”.

The other sighed, nearly vexed.

“What can not wait?”

“Death, unless you heed me”.

“Oh,” Merveille smiled, “I see. That gut-wrenching announcement at Court – the tears, the pleading tone, knees all aquiver?”

“Performance, merely. I needed time”.

“And I applaud your theatrical skills, but what can you possibly hope to accomplish in three nights? Father could pass at any moment. And his suffering is... I can’t stomach the sight”.

They were innumerable, the slow simmering sounds, the chuckles, beastly groans, gently whispered admonitions in lust –

“You are correct. This leaves but a small window”.

“Which you would have me widen, I suppose?”

Malice’s heart darkened at the speed of her sister’s reasoning. Was she that transparent?

Too late, she thought. Too late.

“For the Advent drop,” she explained, “we use a salve of Aian mycelium”.

Merveille grimaced. “Fluorescent cave rot. Filthy. Do go on”.

“And... I know you’re in good terms with one of the courtiers recently delegated to attend the reserve”.

Her sister caught on instantly. A brilliant smile shone on hungry lips.

“Oh, *coquine...*” she cooed, “and I thought you were such a bore”.

“Maxine is her name, right?”

“Ah, she is a savoury plum, indeed, and wet as the Ashen, but she has...” she paused for a second, trying to come up with the proper form. When she found the words, they ringed as a sort of abstract accusation. “She is plagued with rather *unseemly* tastes”.

Malice was taken aback. It never occurred to her such a one might shy at such matters. She couldn’t help but ask.

“What is it, then? Rope and cuff? Whip and pad?”

At which the other shook her head dissipatedly. “Get on with your point, love. The wait’s excruciating”.

“Well, I need you to arrange an accident. Keeping Aian mycelium is tricky at best, the slightest change in temperature and humidity can spoil the entire lot – ”

“Of course... it’s happened before. No few passed in needless suffering ere the stock was filled anew”.

Malice kept on, her plan unfurling. “Scouts will be dispatched to harvest more. But with the last storm, most of the caves will be flooded. That might give us a fortnight, maybe more”.

Merveille nodded. “I hear you”.

“But whatever happens, this *cannot* link back to me, do you understand?

They’ll hunt me down, she thought, and this time aim straight for the heart.

If Merveille even weighed the matter, it didn’t show. A second had lapsed before she smiled back to her sister’s reprieve.

“Fair enough, darkling. However...”

Here it comes, rasped the shadow-creature vehemently, tit for tat, poison seeped in wild honey.

“Yes?” cut in Malice, disappointedly unsurprised.

“You will do one thing for me”.

I knew it, she mulled. Plans within plans.

“You will go and see a Healer. I worry about you, dear sister”.

“Léandres already suggested that”.

“And it’s time you listened. Give you a fresh angle. I’ve lost one sister too many, Malice”. *Malheur*, she thought. *Sister Sorrow*. “Don’t make the same mistake”.

“I won’t”.

“Well, then,” she beamed, straightening her locks, “*au plaisir, très chère*”.

Yet as Merveille stepped one foot across the painted woodlet fabric, Malice placed a hand on her shoulder, which stopped her short. The sudden move extracted a painful groan from Malice’s lips and she weighted tremblingly upon her cane. “Is that how you do it?” she dared ask, “how you survive in this wretched place?”

Beyond, the perverse play was deeply set, breasts gleaming, crimson-lit aureoles swaying under trickles of warm oil, subtle figures bewitched in an indistinguishable mass of desire, locked, meshed together, writhing, climaxing –

“I let go,” whispered Merveille, laughingly. Her chest heaving as she inhaled the intoxicating scents bursting through the opening. With each breath she seemed to come into her own, growing stronger, and brazenly so, more beautiful than ever –

“Maybe one night,” she softly sang, “you will too”.

Let's not get into that now. No, what you learn matters little for now. Learning *how* to learn, however...

- Charles Lapierre, aka Spleen
"Upon teaching the Thirteen".
Hallows Archives.

XVIII. Debate With The Shadows

The two of them were trailing up the stone-paved slope to Priton the Healer's mansion. Malice wore a plain matte blouse and linen pants, more work attire than anything, really. The cane-tip clashed on polished granite as she made her way, one pale shadow trailing at her hind, all wicked and beastly. It crept from one side to the other, frantic.

"Oh, this is most unwise," the creature had been arguing repeatedly, "most unwise indeed. But you know this already. Say, sweetling, are you completely deaf?"

A gust of chill wind suddenly blew up, dreadfully damp, it sliced through and she felt goosebumps crawling up her neck.

"Great," she murmured, "*more* rain".

The cane-tip slipped upon a round stone and she tensed up from fear of falling. The sudden jerk tore at the wound and sent a lighting of pain up her side.

Malice was surprised to catch herself laughing.

Yes, she'd heard the rumours as any, how a certain window had stayed open for too long, and three whole casks of Aian rot had been tainted – so little remained unspoiled, in fact, that the best distils could not produce one Advent drop, try though anyone may, however skilful. Hemlock's passing would have to be postponed. Needless to say Maxine – the delegate – was openly put to shame, and scolded for such negligence, yet as gossip went, the

woman had other... *priorities* in mind, and it was obvious to see, she couldn't care less about reputation.

Still, the shadow-thing insisted.

"Spleen spelled it out entirely at the Hallows. Enemy, he called them. And this Priton can be no exception. Why, I wonder, do you persist on such exuberant stupidity? Do you revel in pride so much you can not hear the truth of me?"

"I'm doing this because people I love asked me to. And if the notion of good faith does not woo the likes of you, well, consider the fact I need their support more than yours".

"You mean, you owe Malheur a favour".

"She pulled through. Shows what *you* know".

"Ah, the light-thighed courtesane, yes," sneered the black shape, "pulled and pushed and what else, you think?"

"This is called mutual help. It is the crux of Dystopian society".

"There's many names for it, actually. Most of which your decrepit culture's readily forgotten. But *madness* comes to mind".

"So says my imaginary friend".

The thing shrugged off the accusation with a roll of pale vapour. "Besides," it argued, "you have a tryst with Léandres 'round the Witching Hour. Why not ditch this scene and warm your bones with the poet, a sonnet and a glass of whiskey?"

"There is time. He'll be glad to know".

"*Naturellement*, the way you reeled him in, he... well, let's say you've set a precedent in earnest. Tell me, did Communion strike a special chord within that bosom of yours?"

Meanwhile, on the top of the hill rose the Healer's mansion: a ridiculously vast construction, even by Dystopian standards. And as she neared the opulent abode,

Malice realized some parts seemed somewhat off from the main building aesthetics. Similar, yes, and yet...

"New wings," she realized. "Recently built. Awfully strange, that".

"Indeed," answered the shadow. "Hence shall I repeat myself, milady. *Don't go in*".

The youngest of the Morbid daughters stopped in front of iron gates leading to the double oaken doors of the mansion. Vines crawled up the old façade, obscuring small cut glass windows, all red and purple. Fines works, these, pity you couldn't see half of them.

Malice braced herself on the gate, checked the sword-cane. It was secure. Would it suffice, though? It had to. It was a surer defence than that... whatever happened at the Demon Den. And it was too late to turn back. No matter this extravagant place, that evil wind. There she was. *Whatever lies behind those doors, she thought, can't be worse than denying Léandres and Malheur yet again.*

"Is it?", doubled the shadow-creature, reading into her mind. "Oft we regret whence we lose, and lose after we hold. There are lower depths than this, you know".

That was the last straw.

"Alright, you stupid imp," she hissed, losing patience, "I've had enough of your... *opinions*. How about using reason for a change?"

"Ah," hummed the eerie thing, "*facile!* Knowledge, Malice. The one thing you lack. Not beauty, intelligence, charm or power. Nay – hence do they loath the very thought of you. Nay, says I. It is knowledge, darkling Morbid daughter. *Knowledge*".

Malice sighed. "I've a fair idea".

"No," the other countered without hesitation, circling around her figure, "you really don't. Can this 'fair idea' reveal *who*, or even *why* you were assaulted at Court? Pah! Your ignorance is appalling".

"And your arrogance taxing".

“Both Triste and Calonio tried to warn you beforehand, did they not?”

“Now, you sound just like my mother”.

“And Morbid, the most invasive strut in all Necropolis, well, she didn’t even blink. Seems everyone knows something you don’t, making moves you can’t see. Though in retrospect, you are the one with the secrets: Malheur, the flower, the book... What’s certain is...”

“Ah yes, certainty, I could use that”.

“What’s certain is, you have enemies, Malice, they’ve drawn your blood and shall drown you in it lest you become *what you are*”.

“Oh, half-truths and puce observations. Think on it. Whoever stabbed me, and for whatever reason, the goal was not murder. Fright, mayhap, but the cause is all the more contingent. Whoever elected such course acted on *impulse*. I shall find the culprit,” Malice paused, eyes raised to the bleak heavens, “and justice will be made”.

“*Alors*, any names yet?”

“I would not make assumptions. One stroke must do the trick, lest I strengthen the opposition”.

“And yet you may not have the luxury of warranted truth.”

He was right, for once. Painfully right.

“Thence, risks should be weighed more carefully”.

“By the Void,” jested the other, “she’s catching on!”

“Like going to see this Healer”.

“*Exactement*”.

She sighed. They were completely alone in this ghastly weather. How long was this supposed to go on? *Back to square one*, she thought impatiently.

“But I can’t know unless I go”.

The shadow-creature shrugged, a formless head shifting from side to side.

“Debatable, at best. Trial and error is much of the former and more of the latter”.

Malice paused again. She thought of her last game of chess with Hemlock, then smiled.

“*Merde*, I understand, now. You’re stalling me. I’m running late, and you know I’ll ditch this thing sooner than my tryst. Hence, this trite conversation”.

Holes in my lines, she realized.

“Oh, silly me,” the other sneered, “I guess I was. Congratulations, you’re getting better at this”.

“You’re a pest, you know that?”

“Ah, yes”.

“And useless as fuck”.

The dark, misty shape bowed, hovering low.

“I try to help”.

“Well, quickly then,” groaned Malice as she stepped through the gates to Priton’s mansion, “let’s entertain the gallery”.

Survivors of the Old World? Pah! We died on the way, we did – this face, these lines, this pale hand, they belong to a ghost, and revenants have but one purpose: to dwell in the past. I haunt. I sleep. Everything is still... but I do not know the meaning of peace.

- Malheur Clairevaux.
Diary, p. 87

XIX. Despicable Healers

Twin boys met her squarely at the door – children, no more than ten. She couldn't recall their faces. Strange. Both dressed in pale linen, grey – a faint, disgusting hue, though they smiled and shone like a pair of lilies. *Too clean*, thought Malice. *Too polite*.

She presented herself in common fashion, leaning heavily on the cane, but they failed to speak one word: merely led the way in, and in she went.

As in the same second, the mansion swallowed them entirely. Oaken doors clunked behind, the architecture unravelling its mazelike congruence: hallways turning to stairs, and stairs leading to hallways, and back into stairs – down, further down, past *vitrails* of coalescent artwork, then up and down and across: away, away from the familiar curves of Necropolis.

Malice felt disoriented, nauseous even, her attention thrall'd to the horrible décor – asymmetric tapestries, irregular paintings, misshapen jars and thick, multicoloured carpets. Mirror fragments glued to walls. Dolls hung by the foot from checkered ceilings.

All sense of direction was lost.

“Wait!”

The silent boys scurried off while Malice recoiled from the odious design, and as they disappeared into the disparate angles of the place, she found herself alone, standing in the doorway to the consultation room, as described in Malheur's instructions.

Instinctively she sought for some back door, any way out, and there was one window to the side, half-open, but it was unfashionably small, too small to crawl through. Three sticks of incense at been poised on the windowpane, spewing circles of perfumed smoke into the place.

The room, however, was grand, greater than most dining halls and yet furnished heavily, so densely in fact, with tables and desks and chairs and bookshelves, that little walking space remained, and the whole thing looked unseemly beyond comprehension.

"Please," sung a warm voice nearby, "do come in, my child".

She'd been too distracted to notice the sire of this accursed house. Strangely enough, he'd managed to blend into the misplaced assemblage well enough to catch her off guard. She gripped the sword-cane with redoubled vigour.

There he sat: Priton the Healer.

"You're early," he stated in a rich, deep tone, "necessity begets ambition, that is well and good".

The next instant, fear and bewilderment were replaced by sheer disgust. She saw him at the center of the place – in a way, he *was* the center of the place – sat on a leather armchair, a heavy man, with thick girth and bloated limbs, short wisps of hair hung back, and clothes all loose and ample and *brown*, all of them – undyed fabric, probably linen. But it wasn't the lack of fashion sense or his otherwise repealing, saggy flesh that appalled her, no, it was the ringed fingers, swollen under silver metal circlets, as he dipped them into a bowl of gelatinous, red muck, and scooped the dribbling stuff past his puffy lips and into one gaping mouth.

It looked like a mixture of blood, gall and guts – face and hands stained red and there shown tiny morsels forgotten through the macabre feast as they spilled through ravenous fingers. And he slurped without a care, licking and sapping and *devouring* –

“If...” she mumbled, “perhaps I’d better come back?”

Run away, she thought. This is no place of healing.

“*Mais non,*” he retorted reassuringly, “as I mentioned, you’ve come in earnest, I was merely dining. Please,” he repeated as he reached for a wet towel that hung to the side of the bowl, “have a seat”.

And as she started the few steps to the opposing couch, the shadow-creature hissed across her mind, veiling her consciousness like a shroud. The suddenness stopped Malice in her tracks. *Wait, it urged her, something is wrong, wrong, yes!*

Brushing the intrusion aside, she finally took a seat facing Priton as he placed the bowl away.

“Kencherries glazed with honey,” he said smilingly, “a regal delicacy, but they’re so tough to get just right, you know? Boil them too little and they’ll give you heartburn, too much and the taste is utterly spoilt. A subtle balance, that. *This one...* was just right”.

“Yes,” answered Malice uncomfortably, “I’m sure”. The scent of incense was overbearing. Sandalwood. “I apologize for coming early, but I’ve other engagements and hoped you would understand”.

Priton grinned, puffy lips stained red. “Ah, but I do”. Surprisingly enough, Malice was ready to believe him. He was quite convincing. Something simple shone in the man, as though he was truly *there*, and not merely scheming or filtering.

It’s not right, the eerie voice kept on, not right at all.

Malice closed her eyes and breathed in. *Silence, she snapped at it, the sooner I get this over with, the sooner we’re out, now hush!*

“This mansion,” she started, “is fairly unorthodox, would you say?”

The Healer looked at her attentively, nodding. His gaze was fixed, *fixed* on her every word –

“We require privacy, Malice. These matters are... best kept from peering eyes, this house was... enhanced to ensure your *safety*”. He paused for a second and added, “with *me*, you are safe”.

Safety, she thought. *Now there is the lie.*

“Well,” he started, “what would you like to talk about?”

Talk about! What in the Void?

“I don’t... know. I’m afraid I’m not fully cognizant of your, shall we say, hum, interests?”

Priton sliced into her gaze squarely. Blue. His eyes were blue. “That is understandable, do not worry,” he spoke empathetically, “but tell me, why do you *feel* you have reached my doorstep?”

What are you getting at, you bloated goat?

“I was sent – ”

The Healer cut her in midsentence. “Yet you are here of your own volition. It’s plain to see, you have the force to make decisions, and in good sooth”.

Malice buzzed with impatience. Just more circles to trace. This absolutely could *not* take all night. She flustered, “I was *sent* by my sister, who appointed me, and in fact, lauded your skills with such intensity that I was tempted to doubt the nature of your agreement”.

Again he dodged her comment altogether.

“Were you troubled by her remarks?”

Questions, more questions.

“Of course I was. She *is* my sister”.

“And how did that make you *feel*?”

He was relentless.

“I don’t understand,” blurted out Malice, nonplused, “is that *it*? *C’est tout*? Has the process begun? Is that how you ‘heal’ people?”

But Priton remained unfazed. He crossed his hands. "You are confused, that is understandable". Again, that sandalwood stench, every time Malice breathed it was *there*, creeping into her senses. Meanwhile, the man kept on. "Again I will ask, *why are you here?* You were sent, yes, but why?"

"They are worried about me, I guess".

"And *why* do you feel that is?"

The shadow-creature rasped inside her skull. Wrong, wrong, it insisted, *it's all wrong* –

"Bullocks," spat Malice, "answer me one, then, *monsieur*, what in the Void is *this?*" She flailed her arms about, and quite exaggeratingly so. "I was never schooled in the matter of Healers, though I now understand why your practice is deemed illicit, it seems wasteful beyond reason". *Chew on that, you cretinous blob. Throw me out and at least they'll know I tried.*

But the Healer was unmoved. He blinked once. Twice. Then merely answered:

"This is called transference. It is an old method, but quite efficient I assure you. For the most part, we simply talk: I ask you questions, you answer, and slowly but surely, we reach the heart of the problem which lies dormant inside your subconscious mind. Only then can the healing process begin. Think of it as a mirror. It's impossible for you to see clearly without reflection".

Malice thought of her demented image in the bedroom mirror... just before she punched it in –

"I do not like mirrors," she admitted.

"Oh, they are but devices. What you truly fear is what they reveal, but it is only you, Malice, *only you*. If the sight of them inspires such disdain, could it be there are things you would rather not see?"

Aye, it would have been easy to believe the man was honest. There was *something* in his voice, something genuine. For all she knew, here was a person – a stranger,

no less – who actually cared, for one, without a hint of self-interest. And *that* was unsettling.

Another whiff of sandalwood smoke twirled past Malice's nose and she twitched involuntarily. And then, so suddenly, she heard herself confess:

"Yes, sister Merveille sent me here, but I suspect my mother is behind it".

What are you doing? stressed the shadow-creature, pulsating through her brain. *What are you doing?*

Priton the Healer smiled faintly. Twin blue eyes gleamed in the consultation room. "I see," he commented gently, "and this upsets you?"

Fuck! Malice screamed at the eerie presence in her mind. *You tell me!*

"I don't understand," she mumbled, trying to double-back from the door she'd opened, "why people make themselves suffer so much". Though she meant to say, *why I make myself...*

The man leaned forward slightly, features smoothed in tenderness.

"I understand," he said.

The shadow-creature veered left and right, Malice's temples buzzing. *Cut this off, now,* it raged, *this conversation is done for!*

The thing was right, for one. She had to get out. *Think, think... ah yes, estoc, riposte, parade.* Ideas were streaming freely, there were many ways to evade conversation, and she knew them all –

"Is that why you are here, then? Why you... heal?" *There you go,* she mused, *flattery hung on a jagged hook.*

Priton seemed happy to answer. "This is only the human condition. People have always needed kinship, commiseration. Understanding. They want to feel as though they are not alone. There is no shame in this, we are all built this way. Coming here was the first step to your recovery, my child".

He's biting, laughed the shadow triumphantly, now reel him in, ditch this scene and go see your poet.

"And you offer this to lots of folk?"

Steady now –

"Lots, as you say. They are most eager for treatment".

Now, test the wire.

"Many denizens currently argue that... Healers much like yourself should be openly chastised".

This time, Priton failed to keep his calm. A blue vein bulged along the side of his neck. To this he simply replied, "these poor souls are the ones who suffer the most".

Keep going, pressed the shadow-creature, he's in!

The sickening smoke billowed around her face, yet Malice kept on. He was going to break one way or another.

"They say," she kept on, "whether or not you can actually heal people is irrelevant, on the one hand if you are indeed able to alleviate our suffering, you should share that knowledge and not hoard it, however, should you prove unable and your practice be vain, then you are being purposely deceitful..". Go on, say it, "and quite the opposite of what you claim to be, that is, not a saviour, but a leech".

Priton clenched his jaw from apparent vexation. Yet he struck back fairly predictably.

"And how do you feel about all this?"

Let him have it, squealed the shadow. Attack!

"I find it pervasive".

There, she thought, just say it and watch me storm out!

"All the more reason to speak with me".

Riposte. Estoc.

"And what happens afterwards?"

The Healer reflected for a second, looked around the room and laid back comfortably. "You will be free".

The air stank of sandalwood now, it was thick, heady, nearly vomitous, yes –

Images of Malheur stumbled across her mind, then. Something she said on the coast, gazing into the Void.

Malice almost lost it then. *How dare he make such outrageous claims?*

“Free,” she spat, “and from what? My self? Dystopia? The human condition? Certainly not free of you? I should keep treatment, nay?”

“I sense you have a lot of anger”.

More inane gabber.

“Does that unsettle you?”

Be done with it, be done with it –

She felt tired... dizzy, even.

“Does it you?”

That’s it, she thought, to hell with appearances.

Malice sighed.

“This is *pointless*. Sir, I find your... mind games childish and base. You are most displeasurable”. She then slowly uttered the formal dismissal. “I wish to be alone now”.

She waited a second to ready herself before storming out of the place. She could almost picture Léandres’ face, the warmth of his breath, the softness of his lips against her neck –

But Priton changed his stance slightly, looked at her with an entirely different face, one she couldn’t conceive lay behind that benevolent, if only ignorant, visage.

Yet suddenly hateful.

Stained, puffy lips uttered three words in a harsh, commanding tone. “You do not”.

The invective struck her like a fist. Incense smoke slipped around her like chains. The shadow-creature cursed out – but a faraway echo, now.

“I beg your pardon?”

Malice felt infuriated. Without hesitation, she leapt up from her seat – the suddenness tearing stitches from her wound – and unsheathed the sword in one swift motion, casting the cane out unto the nearest wall. Trickle of warm of blood spread across her side and she winced in pain.

A ghostly susurrations rose up all around. *Kill him, it said, kill him now!*

She held the bloated man at sword-point, just below the chin. Her hand was unstable. Sweat oozed on her brow. The stench was unbearable –

The blue eyes shone with fear.

“You have come here,” he was shaking, “out of despair, mind you, please, do not leave until you have regained hope. Which I can, I can give you hope”.

“No,” she interjected, “I told you, I was forced!”

Kill him, urged the eerie presence, kill him and begone!

“Not quite,” insisted Priton, “Merveille might have sent you here at your mother’s pleading, and Morbid’s arm is lengthier than most but even *she* could not coerce you, save through one channel, and one channel alone. Listen, child, I will explain why”.

No! screamed the shadow, Malice, listen, the incense is poisoned, there’s something else in the mix, the room, it was designed for this, the wind flies by your seat, it carries the taint – kencherries, they’re just the antidote!

“It’s guilt,” spoke Priton victoriously, “guilt which you submit yourself to. Unconsciously, you believe to deserve unfair treatment, and so expose yourself to harm. Self-loathing ensures the adequacy of your fears, so used to sorrow you’ve now become your worst enemy. Needless to say, such is costly behaviour”.

Malice knew she should strike him down, now, stick him like the sick beast he was, prowl away into the night, no one ever need know she was there – but she couldn’t, she just couldn’t –

“Do no harm’,” the Healer quoted even as the sword fell from her hand, “have a sit. You’ve come to the right place. There is hope, my child, hope and deliverance for us all”.

And she sat down, the pain in her side but a distant memory now, entranced in the meek, blue eyes.

Malice, wake-up!

Priton was right, she knew. He'd been right all along. Tears streamed down her face, but she was laughing all the while. It was so clear!

Malice!

All the years of torment roared up like a flood and burst through the gates of her resolve, and as they did, she felt this incredible weight lifted off her shoulders. Quite simply, she let go, opened up, and it felt so good to give in, finally!

Questions came like laps as hours flitted yon the Witching Hour, and she answered as best she could, there was no reason not too, after all – and she spared no detail, about the book, Malheur, Calonio and her part in the Aian sabotage; unravelled *all* those secrets, those heavy burdens: the evil voice – oh, that *evil* voice! – and Blood-Lips and Sharp-Eyes, the attempt on her life, and her eye, her blood-red eye –

Malice!

And Priton finally retorted – he was so gentle – that she was wrong in everything, and she *believed* him – it was easy, because it was so true, so clear – and she needed leadership to be healthy, but he was going to help her, because he really cared, and she wanted him to, had never wanted anything more than to be *healed* at last –

Obvious, he said, how deep down she really missed Triste and felt bad for mistreating him; Léandres was the bad man who'd led her astray; obvious how she was indebted to her mother and must accept Hemlock's passing; yes, it was all her fault, it'd *always* been her fault and she could see that now; but it wasn't too late, no, all that mattered now was *forgiveness*; which she had to earn, yes, but with forgiveness the shadow would disappear; she would be free, *free*, free at last...

Night fell through whilst the youngest Morbid daughter cried and laughed and wailed in happiness, huddled in the

middle of a crooked mansion. *It's over*, she thought to herself, *it's finally over!*

At the end, the Healer licked his lips satisfyingly and bore himself to ask, “and tell me now, dear child...” voice warm and comforting as he removed the rings from his fingers, one at a time, “how fares you... sexually?”

Malice, a faint voice resounded from afar.

Malice, it wept, *oh, Malice...*

We are the broken remains of the Last
Empire of Man. Here, eternally lost.
Eternally found.

- Hemlock. Hallows Archives.
Embassy Speech to the Thirteen,
lines 212-213.

XX. Rape Resin

Yes, why of course!

Low alleys at noon, the bowels of Necropolis curling
left and right, rivulets of muck amongst the stones, scraps
of rotten leaves carried against the mud, towers spiraling
upward like spikes shod into the heavens.

One tired eye looking up to the dim grey light.

Yes, yes, by all means.

Dizzy now, and giddy, light-hearted and bleeding
internally, one path so clear but footing heavy, no sense of
time, no direction. There, maybe. Absence. Or here.

Everything is good, everything is –

Yes, oh, yes –

It hurt, everything hurt, agony paved the way in and
out, everywhere and deeply so: perfect, so great and
magnificent, like needles piercing skin, threads sliding side
to side, tightening their hold, joining ends to a whole: it
was pain, pain and absolution.

I will, aye.

Hope and *wrong* and forgiveness and *wrong* –

Laughter at dawn. Necropolis aslant.

Meaning and sense, an eternity of bliss.

But it hurt, it hurt so much.

Yes, yes, and yes...

Ah, ah! You can't hear the screams, I know, you can't see the river of blood, but tell me, my nightmare, is it therefore the less here?

- Anne-Marie Desvents.
"Notes discovered in Manoir Desvents".
Hallows Archives.

XXI. A Perfect Night

"Looky Mal', so pretty!" said Eglantine whilst leaning into a bush of bright Radians.

"Aye, 'tis a beaute," sung Malice as she waltzed over the flowers of the Eternal Gardens, purple gown overflowing like wings – an icon of bliss, bursting with life, and thusly she reeled, eyes open wide, cheek taut with smile, teeth flashing pearly, hair hung back with red ribbons.

One hand was clamped around a dozen flowers, the makings of an arrangement: Black Hyacinth, Violets, Hyperions, Wild Yaons and Thylems, all diverse and exquisite, corollas of fine lines into subtle patterns. Only the best flowers for the *bon bouquet*, the very best bouquet –

"Pluck us a pair, will you deary," she cast over her shoulder as Kalian jumped over stones crossing a crystalline stream, one by one –

"Yea, and *those*, and these too!" Eglantine was rummaging through the gardens, her little nose powdered with flecks of pollen, tiny hands fumbling against the bushes.

"Yes, yes," laughed Malice as she hugged the wee one close and kissed her on the brow. "More flowers, more!"

Kalian finally reached them with the knife, gently pressed the Radians stem between edge and thumb, pulled slightly and felt them give, then handed a kneeling Malice the twin flowers.

“Splendid!” The youngest Morbid daughter squeaked in pure delight. The colors were so vivid, so *real*, they were perfect, yes, it was going to be the right bouquet, she could feel it. The Radians slipped into her hand with the others.

And yet, raising herself back up, she couldn’t help but feel somewhat *sore*, certain places scraped raw, sensitive if she moved this way or that –

“Lookey here! Beckies!” called Eglantine as she hurdled through the mirk trees to a patch of purple Rudbeckias. Malice instantly forgot her pain and danced halfway to that spot, whilst Kalian trailed behind, dagger held aloft.

“Oh, won’t it be lovely, girls?” she hummed into the flowers, breathing deep, filling her lungs with the sweet smell of the Gardens –

“*Si jolie*,” answered Kalian.

“*Oui, oui!*” added Eglantine.

Malice laughed, mesmerized. “Almost done, now, fetch me a Crawler branch and two of those Horror Lilies we found by the pond that way. Quickly, now, off you go!”

The younglings paired off down the path, heads bobbing as they went, blond locks aflutter. Kalian was leading the younger by the hand, blade in the other.

A perfect night, she thought. *Just perfect*.

The Eternal Gardens stretched every which way: moist, poignant, intoxicating. Malice’s head reeled with joy: there was beauty here, and lightheartedness, and merriment to warm a thousand hearts over – and she twirled on herself to the tune of a fresh new song, gown swaying as barren feet kissed soft earth, every step lithe as she circled on, petals bursting with dew on her way, a canopy of trees arching overhead, like so many outstretched arms, comforting, protecting –

“Is that it, Mal’?” asked young Eglantine as she handed her both branch and flowers to complete the set.

“Yes, love,” gleamed Malice as she undid the ribbons in her hair to tie the bouquet together, “you did well, my

precious sugar plums, well indeed, but *wait* –” she stopped as her gaze found Kalian’s worried expression, then down to her hands. This one was holding her wrist tightly, blood trickling down the thumb.

“It slipped on the Crawl, I’m sorry Mal’,”

The bouquet finally complete, Malice nestled it down upon a glistening patch of moss and reached out to comfort the little one. “Oh, you poor creature, come here”.

“I’m... it’s o’right, Mal’,” countered she, “just stings a bit is all”. But Malice cut in, laughingly. “Oh, hush now”.

She brought the girl’s hand to her face, smiling all the while. “A kiss will make it all better”.

Kalian cringed as the hungry mouth fell unto her thumb, and she looked instinctively to Eglantine for help, but the youngest one merely stared powerless, not knowing what to do. Malice looked up as she sucked on the wound, and there was something odd with her face, she was smiling, yes, but Kalian knew, she wasn’t *really* smiling, the eyes, they were *empty* –

“Now,” Malice started, lips crimson wet, “we’re off, girls, come along”. She seized the bouquet and made for the old path, hopping as she went, there: the road she’d trailed a hundred times before, the one that lead *there*, where everything began... to make amends, such wrongs only the best bouquet could hope to right.

But Eglantine nodded to Kalian, once, then twice. It was agreed.

As Malice turned for the path, both immediately double-backed and slipped into the shade of a mirkwood tree, into the darkness and out of sight.

“Perfect night,” sung Malice as she went, completely oblivious. “A perfect night for us, my love”.

Fabricated benevolence here, vanity tenfold
Tepid pool fro here to there anon and again
O, free me from now to then
And from then to never.

- Triste de Sanbourg
Dirge XIV

XXII. Family Fitting

“Non non, *du tout!*”

“Why not? Suits my eyes plenty. Well, one of them at least”.

“Yes, I rather like it”.

“It’s a bathmat”.

“But look at the weaving, mother –”

“It’s a rag, love. A rag is for snot and spittle. Not waltz and madrigal. *Not Grand Bal*”.

“Yes, I suppose. Anything in silk?”

“Right, moving on...”

“Moving on!”

Three oval mirrors stood at different angles on iron frames, and Malice in the middle, on tip toes, naked completely, whilst Morbid and Merveille buzzed right and left, to and from the dressers and wardrobes and everything tossed there on the bed.

Lamps and candles and roaring fireplace shone honey flames on every curve and shape of the fitted as the others presented dresses and gowns and skirt and blouse and whole fabrics in front of her, pressed there against her breasts in the luminescent reflection. There were dozens of pairs of boots and sandals at her feet, scores of jewelry scattered on the desk next to glass jars of makeup, fine brushes and other delicate finery.

Merveille’s rooms, predictably, offered much in the way of a fitting, though the place looked different tonight. For

some reason, she always moved the furniture around. As for the clothes, well, these were plenty without say.

"Silk sends the wrong message, think you not?" argued Morbid, "Linen's infinitely wiser, yes".

Merveille shrugged. She was about to reply when there came footsteps down the corridor. Malice merely stared blankly into the mirror, careless of the tell-tale noises, but Morbid's otherwise implacable composure hinted on fear, and she nodded to Merveille, who instantly leapt off, gripped the doorknob and disappeared from sight.

Malice shrugged.

"Linen is for gardening, mother. Not courtship".

"How about satin?" countered the other, "I'm sure we can find *something*".

Flamelight revealed everything about her daughter's figure, comely curves and inviting flesh, but nasty scars too, trailing along her right side, hardly healed. Knuckles cut and scabbed, pale patches of ecchymosed flesh spotted here and there, overcast with the milky whiteness of her skin and the blue veins freely lining the edges of her face. The red eye lay dead in its socket, but Malice smiled beyond the battlefield that had become her body, *oh, how she smiled* –

"Or *someone*," blurted Merveille as she strolled back into the room. "Communion is only hours away". She came grinning from behind her sister's shoulder, fumbling with a bra strap.

"Is it? Oh, we better hurry then". Malice was blushing. "Say, who was that outside? Do we have a visitor?"

"Oh, no one important I'm sure," started Morbid from a rear dresser, "and Mer', let's give the young man a chance, yes, at least in the way of quality until we think of *quantity* – "

Malice laughed, wiggling into a dress two inches too tight. "Triste and I feel quite content to... *explore* various possibilities".

Mother approved. "That was a nice *geste*, those flowers. I'm glad he forgave you these... misconducts. I've always fancied his way in wit. A quick lad knows what's best, and more importantly, who's best to know – "

"Yes," echoed Merveille, "a brilliant move, darling sister".

Thoughts suddenly surged forth in the youngest Morbid daughter's mind, though she couldn't recall their source. "It's never too late," she repeated mechanically, word for word, "there is hope. Forgiveness is really all that matters".

"Oy," jested Merveille, "and a proper size to follow!" then she slid the dress down, quickly replacing it with another one, different style this time, satin and matte black.

"Delicious," stated Morbid from the side, eyeing up and down. "Like second skin". Both straps rolled up on her shoulders and Malice took a step back from the mirrors, awe-stricken. It was *short*. Half-thigh, and cut down to her lower back, the front in ample cleavage – so revealing, in fact, Malice waited for the rest of the dress to come on when she realized that was *it*.

Merveille bit her lower lip approvingly, when all of a sudden, in a stroke of genius reached for one black underbust corset – buckled in thin leather – tied it up around her sister's waist, squeezing her sides as with pliers.

Malice gasped, both exposed and constricted.

"Exquisite," concluded Morbid.

"Rather," echoed the other.

"Yes," approved she finally, inhaling painstakingly, though thoroughly enchanted by the sight. "But not perfect just yet. Something's amiss".

Merveille clapped her hands, giddy. "I know, I know, you need shoes!"

"Yes," answered Malice, "get those boots, there, knee-high – no, the other ones, we need heels for this".

"Oh, yes, we do –"

"As for the legs, I was thinking..."

“Bare?”

“Nay. Fishnet, tightly knit, I want seams like Syllia webs”.

“And a necklace, that we need”.

“Bloodstone pendant mayhap?”

“I know, let’s get a chocker, something thick, one that begs attention –”

“Blacklace. Silver hooks at the back, and the vine motif?”

“Yes, yes!”

“And earrings, too, I’d see some black pearls”.

“Amethyst”.

“No, rubies. Something discreet”.

“Like these?”

“Yes, brilliant”.

“See, they do bring out your eyes. Well, one of them anyway”.

“It’s perfect,” concluded Morbid. “My love, you look absolutely delicious. See?”

Malice looked at herself, spell-bound. The reflection was so strange, so unreal. Left, center, right: three sides of this sensuous, fatal creature, black and white and flashing red. It wasn’t her. Wasn’t her at all.

“Perfect,” she echoed, and her own smiling lips formed the word. “I can hardly wait”.

“Now,” murmured Merveille as she produced a small wooden coffer from under her bed.

“Ah yes,” purred the youngest Morbid daughter as she gazed at this strange, dark self in the glass. “*La touche finale*”.

Pure darkness, you'll see! My name will not pass in vain, it can not, you will keep it and end me in the flesh so I can live forever. It must be this way: your idioms are but rings of deceit, Dystopian ways weave them to a chain by which this very city will choke. Don't you see? Victory was mine from the start!

- Anne-Marie, la Fourbe
Journals. Undated entry.

XXIII. Carnal Mass

Silhouettes swayed on every side, enchanted by the mournful tune of *castellin* and viola. The melody warped itself around the lustful heaps of flesh garnered to themselves on every side, burning skin shimmering in braseros flamelight.

In that low-lit room, smoke patterns seeped up from a dozen sandalwood sticks, perfumes overwhelming, evocating souvenirs Malice's broken mind could no longer recollect.

And she lay, sprawled carelessly on the cushioned floor, locks loose and spread around her head, whilst wearing but a loose black silk robe closed in front with a simple sash of cloth, nakedness nigh erupting under gleaming sheen.

One delicate wooden pipe hung in her hand, stuffed and simmering with black lotus leaves. And as she pulled again and again from the eldritch substance, blue-tinged smoke twirled up, conjoining into the grey plumes already whisking freely into the air.

Meanwhile, the erotic silhouettes ramped closer, writhing, tumbling, reaching, *reaching for her* –

Soon, they'd be upon her, and she knew, oh, *she knew* –
But that...

There was a creature here, some black *shape* across the ceiling, an indomitable shadow, frightful, dreadful – one purple eye devouring its course, though lax nerves failed to respond, and she wanted to shy away, turn tail and run from the... creature, that bad, mean, *evil* creature, but... all strength died away to the spell of the *bakhra* dream and she could do naught but lay there.

There.

Malice espied the monster on high, helplessly whilst delicate caresses finally made their hungry way to her toes, but a second's while 'til they found her body whole.

Absent-mindedly, she undid the sash at her waist and both flaps slid gently down her sides, revealing milky white skin to myriad pairs of lustful eyes in the dark.

The shadow stopped dead in its vaporous tracks. The suddenness of the halt triggered Malice's taint anew and she reacted accordingly, on cue. Soft darkness engulfed the world as she closed her eyes and fled the sight of that horrifying creature.

Mordant flesh soon joined hers from all sides as the silhouettes twined to themselves and hers in a swoon. Lips kissed her neckline, quickly shifting to fangs sinking into stinging bites – these drew sudden moans from her arching body, ivory neck soon drowned in licks to sooth the fiery skin.

Sensations flew concomitantly voluptuous: a whirl of delicious tides swaying her here and there – from caressing hands to muscular limbs, sweat-beaded breasts to taut lower-backs – curved fingers finding their way across the map of her languor, as countless lovers traced her every secret fervently, roaming, searching, *finding* –

Malice squirmed under the repeated assaults on her naked flesh though every trance-like move snared deeper into the carnal mass, swallowing her volition entirely, aching for *more*. Sloppy tongues flicked against hers, silky saliva pearling like dew unto her gaping mouth.

She didn't expect the oncoming waves of pleasure so soon, *didn't* – it struck so swift, so strong that she buckled under the delectable shock, only to be held tighter, *closer* as she veered, her every limbs encased against the swarm of writhing bodies.

But there was no repose, even as her flesh gave at the height of ecstasy, the rhythm merely shifted: innumerable caresses pursuing new grounds of sensuality, arousing darker yearnings within, and settled there, pulsating into her, *deeper*, until she heard herself scream for more, and more –

Doubling strokes forced a willing push from her waist as she welcomed its presence in pure abandonment, stronger tides roaring up slowly, steadily, until moans turned to hoarse screams, fingers curled into claws and wet kisses turned to gnaw – pleasure surging ever forth as feral lust coursed freely through her veins – the waves increasing, mounting up, and *up* –

And as the tremors shook her entire flesh asunder, igniting every sense aflame, Malice's vision returned abblur: one tearful eye opened into the incandescent display of Communion. It was *he*, she gleaned: long red hair cascading over tight shoulders, bare chest ivory white – smiling in the flickering light.

One thick scar across each wrist.

Shadows congregate in firelight
Swaying to part and expiate
Centuries coursing through Time
Blithely true to Grand Bal

- Triste de Sanbourg
Dirge XVI

XXIV. Grand Bal

Manoir Desvents hosted Grand Bal on a crisp and clear evening. There were leaves twirling outside the high iron gates, ivies strangling the stone façade thickly, and from these emerged stained-glass windows glowing faintly blue.

Three stories high the manor was, and coiffed by a pair of black steeples, which made it one of the highest, save for doleful Tour Noir which dwarfed them all from the banks of the Ashen Strait.

Thick crenels arched the paved way to the courtyard, where torches flared in iron frames upon the outer walls, one flower-wreathed well to the side, a stone garden to the other, main gate in the middle: twin mirkwood doors opened to the richly furnished vestibule, and there, beyond, the lugubrious dance hall.

Few dwellings were vast enough to hold Grand Bal, fewer yet were larger still, but this one stood out for good reason: frayed records in the Hallows claimed it had housed Anne-Marie Desvents at the very end of her existence, when the Gardens were young and Necropolis stretched but a few acres wide. Ever since the days of the Founding, balls held there were deemed especially wicked and fey.

This one would be memorable, for sure.

Nearly one thousand masked denizens would congregate tonight, secretly longing to steal a tithe of forbidden lure from that cursed place. And *nothing* was

more scandalous than association to La Fourbe, the great founding rebel of Dystopia – the last enemy of man.

The celebrations were well on their way when the couple finally made their entrance, fashionably late as ever.

They walked in, hand in hand, stepping through courtyard and twin doors to the vestibule: Witch and Jester. The Witch's loup-mask was ivory white, and purely so, thin hooded eyes lacquered over a nose cut like a knife, with a hint of rouge on cheek. The effect was staggering, as she strode in extravagant guise: lips painted black, lace chocker, ruby pendant, underbust corset and thigh-high skirt, under which shown fishnetted thighs and high heeled boots buckled to her knees.

The Jester's mask was checkered gold and silver, lips deathly blue. He'd donned a long velvet redingote, crimson red like those cascading locks to his backside. Articulated rings hung on his fingers like metal claws. Thick heels thumped on every footstep, and he treaded confidently so, the fae creature at his side like a near-naked trophy he boasted unabashedly.

And they burst through the manor like a gale.

Circles swayed there already, masked dancers locked in invisible bonds across the luminescent hall, rounds of gowns and capes aflutter – comely curves exposed, gorges sinking down to forever, slender legs light on the polished marble floor, and they reveled in dance: one thousand denizens without a face.

To Grand Bal: monsters, demons and beasts.

Music resounded everywhere, entrancing, from the wine-wet casks, the crystal decanters and iron chandeliers to the musicians arrayed on stage like some macabre display, and the combined melody of lute and viola, tambour and *castellin* waved to the crowd like a spell, enticing them to flow, like ghosts, aerily on the floor, and weave themselves into the somber tune. Like leaves

scattered to the wind, they twirled and laughed carelessly, coalescing into one great mirthful play.

Some few lay to the side: more eldritch creatures both fell and fair, all half-masks and delicate finery. They chatted and smiled and greeted Witch and Jester as these came about with raised glasses and gloved hands.

“Ah, my love,” sang Jester to his companion, “’tis indeed a poetically fated night. And you are more beautiful than ever, truly, a vision from dark and feverish dreams”. He paused to kiss her cheek, one smile hooked on blue-painted lips. “Care to join me?”

And she lowered her head, complacently.

“Always”.

Witch took the clawed hand and followed blindly through the masked creatures amassed, waltz slowly paving way to courante, gathering momentum all around, dance steps skilled and light, corsets tight and capes aflutter. In a whirl the music took over Witch’s senses, it was everywhere and in everything: the inescapable appeal of forward and back, gliding sideways and eddying, attack and retreat, and attack –

Jester’s checkered motif was locked into her soul as with heavy shackles, he would not let her go, she was *his*, and *theirs*, and *there* in this Bal forever –

So many masks under binding light: animals, devils and succubae, subtle glances in Witch’s direction, lapping up every detail of her fatale demeanor like flames, and she burned in the very middle, lost in deliquium, laughingly. The masqueraders hoofed and stepped in every direction, and there was one in particular, oddly familiar, a Demoness clad in a dark purple dress with a tightly-laced bodice, gorge overflowing, milk-white neck clasped in leather, and she swayed lasciviously, courted by half a dozen suitors orbiting ‘round her figure like wasps.

And there were others, too, high on the balconies, one crimson-clad Owl of regal mien, august as she surveyed the

intricate scene, sided by a grim Gargoyle, robed in a pale-grey surcoat. These two were perched like overseers, distant and imposing.

Courante quickly gave way to saraband – a slower dance, but no less elaborate – and the masqueraders shifted accordingly, in a second, nearly one thousand dancers rearranged to the new movement, as perfectly versed as they were, and Witch’s buckled feet found their way instantly, doubling Jester’s own agile steps.

She felt lightheaded, giddy: so much beauty therein, such effortless grace, culminating through this Bal in a state of sophisticated bliss. It was perfect, *perfect* –

“Oh, Triste,” she burst through the dance, “it’s all so amazing, this, I –”

But Jester merely grinned, as though it all came naturally, expectedly. “No, my love,” he countered, “it is plain to see, *you* are the true wonder here”.

And only at this very instant did Witch notice *another* figure in the Manor hall, a dark, austere figure –

But Jester went on, unknowing. “In truth, a creature so fair, the heavens themselves wouldst weep teardrops of rain, humbled as they billow to your very sight..”.

It was him, this man, *this...* tall, foreboding Crow in the crowd, immobile, stoic, thought everything swayed and turned around him – didn’t move, didn’t bulge.

“...and all fabled stars beyond could pale in envy, should they ever shine once more upon this broken land..”.

Black, frayed feathers in a *full* mask, broad shoulders, something strangely out of place. A long woolen cloak draped thickly about him, but muddled and torn, concealing his form but for a long bundled shaft protruding from his backside. What *was* that?

“...and I shalt be with thee forever, my darkest love, for thou hast bewitched me, and I am thine utterly”.

In an instant, the Crow disappeared from sight, swallowed in the shifting saraband. Witch felt her heart

skip, then, and as her pulse began to race, the piece jumped to a close and all dancers slowed delicately, then stopped altogether, bowing to their partners solemnly. Some clapped hands, other burst out in praise.

Through the tumult, Jester took Witch in his arms and pressed her close, squeezing almost, tightly, desperately, as though he feared for something –

“I will fetch us wine, my darkling”. His eyes sought hers from behind the mask, found them, locked in. He was hesitating. “Do not go,” he asked, betraying his concern.

Witch seemed to remember those three words from somewhere else but couldn’t replace them. Obediently, she nodded, which made him smile. And it was right that he smiled.

But when he was gone, the Crow reappeared through the jumbled assembly, as though on cue, and static, though everything moved around, and he was – *he...*

Witch was moving through the crowd before she knew it, merrily, thrilled to the unknown, all the while confused by that stranger, though he... *there was* –

“Malice,” a man hissed into her left ear, “*Malice!*”

Somebody snuck up from behind, grabbed her by the arm – and not too gently at that, and he was taller, stronger.

“Do not make a sound,” he ordered with muffled rage, “you are coming with me, *now!*”

The sudden violence jerked her instincts inside out, suddenly Witch didn’t care to find the Crow, but she was being told what to do, hence she couldn’t resist... wasn’t supposed to. It was not proper to fight. *There is hope*, she thought. *Forgiveness is all that matters.*

“Faster, now,” the man commanded. “Quickly, before they see us”.

And she obeyed.

Yes, *why of course!*

Yes, yes, *by all means!*

The man was a Wolf in a double-breasted outer coat, velvet black, with a bag slung over his shoulder. Uncontrollably, Witch's conditioning wavered and she thought to yank herself free, but Wolf seized her by the waist and dragged her forcefully, further away down the main hall. He whispered something else but she couldn't hear him through the bustle of the courtiers.

There was side-door, there, manned by one malicious looking Imp in plain jerkin. He, too, was familiar, but *how*? And when he saw the two come around he merely nodded in Wolf's direction and opened the door, handing out a lantern as he did.

Before she could react, Witch was pushed inside the room, and Wolf followed right before the door was closed.

Outside, the music picked up again.

It was another waltz.

True for now, and well enough, though I tell you: a time will come when our children rue the memory of us, call us liars and weaklings, but the ways we instil shall long outlive our very names by far.

- Aurielle la Pure
Dialogs. Hallows Archives.

XXV. The Hall Of Mirrors

Yes, yes, yes!
Why, of course!

Malice's mind was tearing at the seams by the time they made it to the Hall of Mirrors. Yes! She'd taken off the mask somewhere along the endless maze of pitch-black corridors. Yes, yes yes! Didn't want to trip. Made herself so pretty for Triste, he'd be so angry if she wasn't pretty anymore, and Merveille, and Morbid, and – *she'd fail, be bad again, the evil thing, it –*

"We're here," spoke Wolf as they burst through the opening. "We don't have much time".

It was a circular room, low-ceilinged, carpeted thick, and completely unfurnished. The air was heavy with dust, the weight of centuries bearing down hard. But there were no walls, just *mirrors*: mirrors on all sides.

"They've probably seen us," he went on as he removed his mask, "Calonio can stall them for sure, but not for long. *Et puis*, they have to find us".

The low lantern light reflected a thousand times over, his face revealed in every reflection.

Léandres, poet of the Old Tongue.

Malice heard the door shut behind – and then, it was just another mirror. Soon enough, she couldn't tell where it was anymore, so there was no way out, and she *loved* that, oh, how she absolutely loved it –

Yes, yes, yes, *by all means, of course!*

"It is said," Léandres continued, "La Fourbe spent a lot of time here, though the reason was never quite understood. Some texts speak of long conversations in the dark... here... by herself".

Malice let the wooden mask fall. She was smiling uncontrollably. Somehow, she knew this man, but *moreso*, there were things she knew *about* him, the way he could touch, the way he kissed – details intimate, tempting, *confusing*.

"There was a man," she blurted out, "a Crow, he was wandering through the dance, but never struck a step. Why is that? Who would refuse to dance?"

Léandres set down the lantern and came towards her. His traits shown clearer, now. He was weary. Cheeks hollowed out, eyes bloodshot, lips crackled. It looked as though he hadn't slept in days. The bag slung on his shoulder looked heavy.

"There are reasons for everything, Mal'. Reasons to dance, reasons to stand". He looked so tired.

"I know you," she stated. Suddenly she remembered was she was supposed to say. "I don't like you".

But Léandres merely sighed. He was standing in front of her, close, *so close* –

"We've been taken for fools, *mon amour*. I should have never sent you to that Healer".

The term sounded familiar. It raised mixed feelings inside. Feelings she didn't particularly enjoy.

"You understand, of course, Morbid didn't ask me directly to send you to that mind-flogger. That's not how she operates. She gets *others* to carry out her will. By the Void, had she come to me, I would have known, or even someone close to her, like Jacques, or even Merveille –"

Malice couldn't understand. She looked at him, dumbfounded.

“*Je suis un imbécile*. Should have known when you didn’t show. I sooner doubted you than suspected that man. I’m an idiot, and a sore one, to say the least. Morbid traced the path from afar. Sprinkled the term. I followed, but why? Because I didn’t trust you, my love. Now *he...*” his voice broke all of a sudden. “No matter”. Léandres unslung the bag and brought it down. “Calonio came to me with this. Brought me in. Broke into your house before they could get to it. Says Malheur lives. Says she can help you, maybe”.

Bafflement struck on every side. For a second she lost her trail of thoughts. She was shaking her head from side to side, *no*, she thought, *I can’t* –

“Malice, something is afoot, we need you. What they did to you – that resin. The damage is done. You may never be right again, do you understand?” Tears started streaming down his eyes. “I will... always love you, *mon amour*. We will find a way, somehow. Maybe we can restore you somewhat... *fools*, all of us! But...” his voice found itself again, stronger now, renewed, and she might have seen, somewhere from afar, in his eyes, that dammed river breaking, a flood of conflicting emotions spilling through at long last.

“They’ll pay,” he swore. “I’ll kill them all”.

Malice could not understand. *Yes, yes, yes! By all means!* She remembered words, mechanical, gestures past, instructions, sound and clear.

She smiled to him. Then slowly, slyly unlaced her corset, eyelet by eyelet, loosening garb under his horrified stare. The leather contraption fell to the ground as black painted lips grinned, and soft fingers avidly reached for the first shoulder strap. It would slide down her naked flesh, soon, and reveal herself to him, her charms, the fatale creature red and black and erotic. She stepped closer, but a breath away from that sensual prey, and Léandres’ will nearly broke, though he bit his lip, faintly at first, then hard enough to draw blood.

“Love me,” she pleaded, pouting. “Take me”.

Léandres sighed. “You are not yourself”.

“But I am here,” she begged, “here, for you...”

“*Pardonnez moi*,” he interjected remorsefully, then swallowed hard, lunged forth and *struck* Malice across the jaw with all his might, sending her reeling across the floor of the Hall of Mirrors. The full force of the blow sprawled her unto the dusty carpet like a broken doll, splattering blood.

In an instant it was over: she lay there, wailing out in pain, vanquished completely.

Léandres’ tears scalded down as he looked on his broken love, clad like any Den wench and beaten so effortlessly. And it was *his* fault.

But when he got down to pick her up and carry her away, she *opened* her eyes and *stared back* at him through sweat and spittle and scrambled black locks. Both eyes locked into his. One was purple, and one was red, *alive*, black pupil dilated inside a crimson iris, deathly focused and gleaming with hate.

Malice’s vision blurred. Everything, the Manor, the poet, the mirrors and her demented self reflected a thousand times over.

Blood-red.

Blood –

Go, ye will'd ambassadors
Pierce the Void with truth
Offer Life a second breath
And Death a second death

- Bastien Cheveraux
Ode to the Thirteen

XXVI. Shall We Go?

Darkness complete.

From the recesses of one broken mind to the Void circling Dystopia – pure and utter black, empty, eternal and *complete*, until a very shapeless form spawned from the deep wavered forth to the surface and echoed slow, hissing in a blood-wet tongue:

“They’ve *used* you”.

Ageless, cold, malevolent.

“You were poisoned,” it insisted, “a toxin. Rape Resin, or so the name goes. Forbidden, but so are Healers, *and so is vengeance* – ”

Present, implacable.

“Malice! Are you *completely* deaf?”

From the carrion pit she sallied forth, stealthfully, by mental paces soft and slow, until absence took shape, gained awareness and cognition. Her senses wheeled relentlessly, remote, and she swam her way back to them, until sounds and images on the shore melded as one with conscience, and there she *felt* something at last.

And it was agony.

Knees scraped raw, fishnet ripped, dozens of tiny glass bits ground into her skin. Lower lip cut and swollen, blood oozing down her throat like molten wax. Nerves torn like strings, sides bruised by leather straps – and her left shoulder smouldering like a torch, the bone squeezed out of place like clay, disgustingly painful – her half-naked body

bent like some ragdoll thrown in a ditch and left there to rot.

Now she could *hear* the muffled gasps and convulsions bubbling right next to her, thought she couldn't see their source, no – she could see petals, *yellow* petals, scattered on the carpeted floors amidst specks of broken mirrors. The book had flown open, its pressed flower now broken into pieces: a cascade of impossible color now lost forever amidst silvery shards and droplets of half-caked blood.

In a larger blade-shaped piece she saw her *other* self reflected perfectly.

“Wake up, you *daft*!” An evil face contorted furiously, both eyes locked perfectly. “Can’t you see? It’s not over, Malice, it’s not! Still here – they’re here, and sooner than you know. Fuck! Quickly, now, or never!”

And she tried, she did – the one good arm poised against the floor, more glass shards sliding into her palm like fire, and as she shifted her weight to get on bare knees, a thin filet of pink drool dripped down her swollen mouth and unto the carpet. Tears welled up.

The pain was unbearable.

And yet the voice insisted.

“You are to seek revenge soon, Malice. And you want to *save* him while he still lives. Two purposes, yes, but one road alone: so up, up *now*!”

The yellow petals held her sight. Such tragic beauty. The effort nearly tore her in half but she managed to lean back against the wall and sit. Soon she might even try to stand, but the full sight alone stopped her dead: the Hall of Mirrors came into full view and Malice wailed in horror.

The mirrors had been shattered, all of them: millions of bits sent flying into the room, dimlit now by dying flickers from an overturned lantern on the floor. And there, few inches from her, Léandres, flat on his back, choking on his own blood, gagging convulsively, eyes overturned in their sockets.

No, she heard herself scream. No, *it can't, I -*

Flashes of broken memories came rolling up, tearing her thoughts to shreds. That fat, bloated men in some stench-ridden salon, rubbing stubby hands up and down her thighs. These hungry eyes, that moist, fetid breath - frightened children in the glade - doorsteps, Triste's surprised face, the bouquet - piles of writhing bodies, wet tongues lapping at her breasts - madness, *madness* - dancing figures masked, the eerie figure of a Crow - Léandres' tears streaming down, everything turning red, blood-red, *blood* -

"Priton," she whispered through clenched teeth.

And as the images avalanched through her tortured mind, the door to the Hall swung open, revealing a particularly malicious Imp with a burning torch. The mask was soon replaced by a familiar face, though its features were twisted by fear beyond description.

"By the Void," he trembled, "by the Void..."

"Calonio, you *little cunt*," forced Malice through cut lips, "do something! He's dying!"

The man swiftly closed the door behind and jumped at Léandres side, who was coughing up great gouts of blood, which in turn trickled thickly down his cheek.

"Fuck," Calonio mumbled, "*fuck!*"

He pushed the man to the side, trying to save him from drowning. He quickly surveyed the room, unbelieving. "What happened?"

Malice struggled to her feet, slowly but surely. She braced herself against the wooden wall and urged him on.

"Get him in a sitting position, fast. If he doesn't stabilize... I don't... *know*".

"Curse you Morbids," moaned Calonio as he dragged the quivering body along the floor. "We risked everything for you - "

"Priton," she cut him short, "the Healer, is he here?"

“Well yes, of course he is, but you can’t touch him, not here, believe me, we’d have tried already”.

Coward, she mulled. Dirty, rotten coward!

“Why are you helping me?” her voice riddled with angst.

Calonio sighed as Léandres’ head finally rested against the wall, bubbles of blood dribbling down his chin. “Because she asked me to”.

Malheur, she thought. Scheming from the edge of the Void!

“And how,” she bore herself to ask, “fares the exile?”

He snarled. “Well, you did tell on her. Word got around quick. She fled. Fuck, even *I* don’t know where she is now”.

Liar. You play every side at once.

He shoved the ancient book back into the bag and handed it to her. “Here, this is yours”. From his waist he produced a small blade – her bodkin. “That too. You may need it still”.

“My father,” she cut in, “does he still breathe?”

Hemlock, how I’ve failed you!

“I suppose. Last I heard”.

“I’m sorry about the throat,” she added half-heartedly.

“By the Void, I was only trying to warn you. Malheur said you never listen – ”

Can’t trust you, she mulled, you or anyone.

“You can all scold me later. Now, you will take care of him, you understand?”

Calonio looked about, nervously. “I have no choice”.

Malice reached for her arm, it was completely numb.

“Last thing,” she said, “my shoulder. It’s dislocated”. She lifted the bodkin to her mouth and bit on the handle. “Go on,” she mumbled.

Calonio grimaced as he took hold of her wrist and prepared to pull.

All of a sudden, one black formless shape appeared in the middle of the room. The eerie voice, the shadow-creature. And Malice welcomed it at long last.

Her shadow. It was pointing the way to the exit.

Calonio struck hard. The bone clicked back into place, white lightings of pain searing through her entire torso – she bit on the handle and blood started trickling anew from the cut lip. Sweat oozed on her brow. The entire room started to swirl and she nearly fainted.

Shall we go? Malice heard the velvet susurrations across her mind.

Atremble, she seized the blood-smeared bodkin and slid it in her boot. “Aye,” she replied in a hoarse tone, plucking a few jagged shards from her hands and knees. “We shall”.

“Shall what?” wondered Calonio, dumbfounded.

“Never you mind,” spoke Malice as she finally strode towards the door, everything suddenly bathed in a red-tinged hue, the shadow trailing at her hind.

“Hold on, you can’t go... it’s not safe”.

“You’re right”. *They’re all going to die.*

“But how come he... how did you... make yourself whole again?”

She opened the door. “I didn’t”.

“Please wait,” he broke out at last, exasperated, “you’ll need a lantern to find your way. It’s a maze out there”.

“Oh no,” Malice spat as the darkness of the corridor swallowed her whole, “I can see perfectly *now*”.

Decades of travail saw the founding dystopians' memories of the Old World flittered into nothingness – sunlight and faith and hope they relinquished to forget, though one memory they kept, that of the Collapse – not to mourn Civilisation, but to ensure it may never rise again.

Codex Mortem. 1-2

XXVII. Your Days Are Numbered

“Left,” hissed the shadow-creature. “Now right”.

Malice was dragging herself desperately, dripping blood on the way, carrying through the tears and the spasms, *vengeance* locked on every crooked step. Flashes of tainted memories beating down her mind like a ram –

“Steady now, keep going...”

Utter blackness spelled the underground maze of Manoir Desvents, just another trick in the defiler's heritage. They were getting close, baroque melodies reverberating through the stone foundations.

Malice fumbled with the mask as she strove to put it back on. Somehow, her fingers couldn't catch the strings. Nothing made sense, *nothing* –

My fault, she brooded, lost, they're gone – oh, Léandres!

“Darkling,” whispered the creature, “you may want to reconsider that *direct* approach –”

“*Shut up!*” she screamed back at it. The eyes, Priton's eyes, they were everywhere in the dark, his warm, rank breath, that stank of ale and festering fruit. She muttered, quivering, “they'll pay for this, I swear”.

Inhaling deep, she finally found the ends and attached the Witch mask tightly on her face. With a bit of luck, she might go unnoticed long enough to catch that Healer and

disembowel him live. And how long would that take? *Give me a moment's breath*, she thought, *and I'll strangle him with his own guts.*

"All well and good," doubled the shadow, knowingly, "though I beg you to ponder the implications".

Flashes hit from every side.

Dastard-unfit, blood-red agony, *oh, how they'd rue the day*, but Léandres – *oh, sweet, sweet poet!* – he was somewhere back there in that hole, dying, *all because of her* –

"No," she countered, implacable, "we're doing this, we're doing..." tears started streamed down beneath the painted mask. She struggled in a red-tinged sight.

At once they burst through the hall.

One broken Witch stood forth, neckline smeared with blood, the edges of her mask frayed and crackled, limping heavily, one arm lax whilst the other was clenched into a fist – with that shadow stretching at her rear, all horns and claws and crooked black wings, disproportionate, like a wild demon chained to her feet.

And there, blinding white light revealed Grand Bal at its crux: one thousand masqueraders twirling together, entangled, seduced with abandon by the eldritch spell of *danse macabre*. At first, they did not see her, intoxicated by the majestic play and the vapours of wine, though when she slid into their eddying ranks, beasts and devils squeaked alike in pure disgust, then stepped back clumsily and collided into each other.

The broken Witch smiled under her mask. The way was open. She scanned the crowd for signs of that bloated sicker, to no avail.

"Do you see him?" She whispered, tightening her good hand.

"Across the hall, look for the Ogre," the creature hissed. "Mal'," it broke urgently, "they're on to you. *Look*".

But she knew that already. Far to the right was that purple-clad Demoness – Merveille, as beautiful as she

willed, forcing her way as best she could to intercept her, six suitors shouldering her like guards. *Too late!* And she could hear the shouts from behind, Triste's wailing summons, the Jester's pleas drowned by string melodies overcast by a snarling chorus from a hundred repulsed dystopians.

Malice limped her way tile by tile, close, so close –

Limb from limb, she kept repeating, *limb from limb!*

When all of a sudden, the melody stopped. Twoscore musicians stood from their seats at the end of the great hall, clearly ordered into silence. The dancing ceased almost instantly, and nearly one thousand masqueraders were pulled from their trance.

"There," yelled the shadow. "See!"

Yonder *he* was, and not twenty paces away. The Ogre in a thick blue velvet overcoat. He was stretching his neck out, searching the commotion in her general direction, one flagon of wine shaking in his hands.

His stubby little hands –

Malice was reaching into her boot for the blade when she heard a voice resound from on high, encompassing the entire hall. She may have been surprised, but not from *her*, no – if anything, she wondered why Morbid hadn't intervened sooner.

"Hearken, citizens of Necropolis!" she called from the third balcony, in Owl mask with the Gargoyle – Jacques, no doubt – solemnly at her side.

"She can't stop you with words," urged the shadow-creature. "Go on!" And Malice forced her way with renewed vigour, bumping into courtiers like flies, smearing their clothes with dried speckles of blood, minuscule shards of glass falling to the floor like silver dust.

Morbid raised a jewelled glass to the Bal. "Yet again, we celebrate the legacy of Dystopia, land without light, life without end, dark dream of the Last Empire of Man!"

Some in the crowd took to applause, but most stood clearly troubled: such interruption was unorthodox, most unorthodox –

Malice could see the wretched bastard, he was close, so close! She slid the bodkin fully out and pressed the blade along her wrist. The handle was slick with blood.

“We raise our glasses,” continued the fabled orator, “in praise of bliss, such intricate pleasures we so aptly weave, and laud the passing of Time if we can but wreath ourselves in joy for yet another night! Hearken, say I! Let life be sweet, let death be quick, and let us greet this eternity of darkness with wine at our hand and a smile on our lips!”

At once, cheer and applause doubled all around, so gifted she was to rear the assembled mass, and even as Malice slipped forward to the very edge of the hall, already tasting the sweet savour of vengeance, she became aware, as the praise declined, of a single clapping, insistent, unending, insolent –

It was oddly out of place.

The shadow growled.

What is that? Malice mused, somewhat taken back.

Even Morbid was seized unaware, hand still outstretched in toast, but unwilling to continue. Everyone lay silent, the whole Manor was still, if not for that pestering clap, on, and on –

The courtiers moved in every direction, awe-stricken. At the center of the hall, a hole had been dug from the crowd as all denizens retreated. There was a man, there, alone. He was clapping, forcefully, mockingly.

The Crow.

Malice stopped in her tracks. For a second, she hesitated. And when she glanced back at her prey, *he was gone*. No sign of the Ogre.

Fuck!

“Touching,” a hoarse voice rose into the air, “eloquent, a-almost”. It was stuttering. “Eternity, y-you say. And how little do you know, how v-very little”.

He was there at the very center, cloak charcoal and grimy, hooded upon a full mask of frayed black feathers, that bundled shaft still standing out from his backside.

But his voice – it was unlike anything Malice had ever heard. There was sorrow in those chords, and madness, for the syllables wavered at every word, and the mere act of speech seemed harrowing to the man.

Another voice rose in the room, this one she recognized. “How dares thee,” it said, “interrupt a toast at Grand Bal?” It was Bastien, Speaker for the elders. “Have you no manners, no respect for protocol?”

And the Crow laughed – a low, twisted laugh, filled with remorse and bitterness.

“Ah, puppies!” he croaked, “t-truly, you do not understand a *single* thing”.

With an amazingly swift gesture, the cloak and mask came off entirely and flowed to his feet. He pulled a piece of cloth from his back and the bundle came undone. Malice squeezed tighter to try and see who stood there. She gasped, stricken silent.

She couldn’t believe what she saw.

There stood but an old man, broad-framed like an oak but frail and gritty, all stained with dust and grime. Clothes were half-rotten and holed, boots charred and torn. His left forearm had been cut to a stump on which hung a curved armblade, deadly but rusted, and fixed there by leather clasps that were severely cracked. A belt of throwing knives circled his chest, though most were missing. One bastard sword hilt shown from a sheath slung on his back, onyx-jewelled, which was the only thing that still shone about him.

His face was battered hard. Broken nose, scars from temple to neck and brow to chin. Eyes pale like clouds and

as watery. Some missing teeth, a balding head from which greasy grey hair fell along his back.

Clearly, he was not well. His entire face twitched, nerves tightening convulsively, again and again, sinews pulled from invisible tensions, couldn't stay still.

He was *unstable*.

The entire Manor lay dead-silent. It was impossible. Even Morbid was dumbfounded behind her mask.

Not after all this time, winced Malice, *no – not now, not...*

And it was Bastien, schooled and versed at Court, who replied, as reflexively trained to counter and finally breach the silence.

"You would tell us, dear sir," he started, taking off the Harlequin mask, "indeed, who you are, that we may know, at least, who addresses us upon this most auspicious eve?"

And the stranger bowed his head, more in sorrow than respect.

"I... I am b-but a doomsayer".

Impossible, thought Malice, *impossible!*

The crowd started to hush to itself, hundreds of dystopians amassed there, unbelieving. One by one they followed the elder's example and started taking off their masks. Beasts and demons gave way to pale-faced, blue-veined necropolitans confounded in awe.

"But you..." chanced Bastien, finally recognizing the man, "you are..."

"I was Balafre," the other cut in, steady all of a sudden, "eldest of the Thirteen. Appointed to the sixth direction, sent out thirthy-seven years, six and twelvescore nights ago. Now," his voice shook anew with remorse, "b-but a madman c-come home".

Gone were the fated armour, the boiled leather creases, backpack and toolkit. Gone was the glorious figure, the unflinching resolution.

Gone.

No one dared speak, until a quivering Morbid addressed the entire hall from on high.

“Surely, surely you are weary, O great traveler! Pray thee rest, until we can hear you out at Court, in good sooth. You must forgive us, for the years have weighted heavily, and we only begin to realize. Let us rejoice, now, for there is time, time aplenty to share in your discoveries. This is indeed a blessed night for Dystopia, nay, for all mankind! Be at peace, thou honoured friend. You are home, now. *Nous avons tout le temps du monde*”.

At that, the old man spat viciously on the floor. Something broke within him. He stumped once and yelled, resolve suddenly broken, and shook as he addressed the entire congregation.

“Ah, but you are wrong, M-Morbid – yes, Morbid, I remember you! Your judgement errs as ever, ignorance befouling every word you s-speak. I will deliver my message, for I have but one, ‘ere I can f-finally lay these bones to rest – and t-then will have my *true* peace at last, the one you p-promised me”.

A shiver ran through the crowd. He kept on.

“Your days are numbered”. He cleared his throat, steadier. “They are coming, and fast. Not tenscore days from now, the Isle will be but a dead and barren land, its Gardens burnt to cinders, the Ashen turned to mud, the great houses molten to a crust, Dystopia torn asunder and her people slain or enslaved to the pens. Those who fare best will suffer worse and perish on the lab tables. This...” the Black Knight broke off, lost his thoughts - twitching, found them again. “This is the end”.

J'irai te trouver
Au seuil du levant –
À l'aurore d'un jour;
L'idylle d'un temps;
Fragment pour toi,
Quoique je t'aime.

- Léandres Desforges.
Notes personnelles.

XXVIII. Wrack

“Six, seven, eight”. Malice counted back on her fingers. “I’ve been out *eight* nights”.

Baleful view from the rooftop: Necropolis at dawn, all spirals and twisted pinions in pale anaemic light. Perched on the lacquered rooftop she was, cross-legged, a bottle of Daemondrought in one hand, bodkin in the other, surveying the tortured domain that had become the Last City of Man.

The shadow-creature sat by her side, translucent.

A cold breeze was flowing, and deathly so, but she clung to the sensation, wind scathing the still untended cuts. It was pain, yes, but more importantly, it was *life*.

“I tried to warn you,” confessed the creature, in an unusually comforting tone. “It is apparent now, my intent might have been misleading. I apologize for my deficiencies. But I must be what I am”.

To think of all the bustle, the entire Isle in uproar, a *Black Knight come home*, at last! That was probably the only reason no one had come for her, or if they had, didn’t bother to check the parapet –

“I understand, so must I, though the underlying truth of that assertion baffles me still”. She turned to the creature. “You have my thanks, whatever you are”.

“So, shall I remain nameless?” it asked, mockingly.

Malice suddenly thought she heard something down in the street. She leaned over. Nothing. Necropolis was deserted at dawn, but people would congregate indoors a while yet, no doubt, to plot and speculate. She took another swill of the violent drug. *How much time do I have*, she thought. In her mind, they were barging down the door, every second, *again and again* –

“What happened,” she contrived to ask, “while I was out?”

The shadow groaned. “They had their way”. It paused a while, vaporous in the morning air. “Are the images returning?”

“Vividly, but broken, incoherent. Like nightmares chained to my path”. Her hands started to shake. It was all coming back, piece by piece. She hit the bottle again. “They turned me into a living corpse. And what they *did*...”

“Clearly, that assault at Court was not enough. You did not relent, and neither did they”.

“That old hag is behind this. I know it. The maggot said so himself”.

“Aye, everything you told him she may know by now. The elders would deem you broken and fit for Advent, obviously – the crimes you confessed to, and your mentioning *me*, of all things. That is, assuming Priton even repeated a single word, who knows, he may have been seeking levers all along. You do not know the nature of his trade, or that of their arrangement”.

Yes, ramifications galore, links and details – Malice knew the lot of it, but as she gazed out unto Necropolis whole, something *else* became obscenely apparent.

“But *they* let it happen to me. All of them, these somnolent aesthetes. Blind, or unwilling to see. Wouldn’t react. Allowed the Healer’s despicable lot to flourish. Didn’t stay the fists that ground me to a pulp. And why? Wasn’t it most freakishly apparent I was in dire need of *help*? What abominable society is this? ‘Do no harm’! Pah!

Three thousand sots sleeping, and only one stepped forward... and I... I..”.

“He may yet live, Malice”.

“No,” she broke in, “you’re right. I truly *am* broken. I see now, La Fourbe, her Hall of Mirrors – she was tainted also, and they shoved her into the Void to die”.

“I might take offence to that,” the creature jested. “oddities, us two, mayhap, but no sooner ill than that Black Knight waiting yon”.

It pointed a hazy claw toward Tour Noire, which rose solemnly at the heart of Necropolis. “Fourth floor,” it continued, “trapped very much like ourselves”.

“Protocol,” she argued, “it was decreed long ago. The suites were appointed even before my birth. The denizens are merely honouring the agreement, pampering the envoy like some triumphant hero: delicacies, massages and willing leman hand and foot, though he condemned us all to croak”.

“He may as well be a prisoner”.

“We could go and see for ourselves”.

“You don’t believe him?”

“He seems crazed”.

“Sounds familiar”.

“Obviously, the elders are taking reserves. They’ll hold Court on the matter *without him* first, I’m sure. Which brings an interesting question to mind: had they not anticipated the Thirteen to return, if at all, stark raving mad from the Wastes?”

“Spleen may have been right all along. Maybe they were never required to return to fulfill their purpose”.

“It is too soon to gauge the crowd’s reaction. Fear comes second, denial first. Balafre must produce proof, but they are keeping him”.

“Still, the implications, Malice. Think on it. They all surely will. Can’t you hear them now? This city is restless”.

"I've thought long enough. I've seen the flower. The smallest of those petals spelled it out entirely: my entire life has been a lie. There was *something* out there all along".

She gulped down another mouthful of Daemondrought, vying to kick some sense into her mind. The flashes were insistent, there was no escape. *Say something*, she thought, *anything at all* –

"Will you tell me," she asked the creature, "what you are, exactly? Your real nature? After all this, I feel we are past holding secrets. And so far, you've been nothing but".

"Indeed," its eerie shape bowing low, "though truth be told, I know not myself. Such notion is beyond my ken. But my ignorance is not complete: I know *you* through and through".

Stone wall, Malice reflected. *Another way around, for sure.*

"Then pray tell, *why* in fuck are you here?"

"Oh, is that not blatantly evident? I'm here to help. Reinforcements, in a way".

"In *what* way?"

"Support. My means are limited, but not yours, though you doubt it still. Perhaps I can ease these doubts, and counsel you, for what it's worth".

"Ah, puce logic, think you not? I may as well be talking to myself".

"Conversation is arguably my most important skill".

"Like I need *more* words?"

"But you need someone, Malice".

"And why?"

"Because: you are lonely".

You're right, she thought. *And how!*

"If you're not real, then I'm one sickly tart".

"Yet I retain my worth".

"Being? Rhetorical debate?"

"Nay. Try alacrity. Awareness. If I am you, then you are powerful beyond words. If not, best appreciate the extra hand. Tonight, all dancers take leave from the puppet play,

now you are seeking the shadows. But whence does the light originate? That is the sole question. And I have not the answer. With my help, though, you may have time enough to find it”.

Malice felt her throat tighten. The poison flowed freely through her veins, it was the closest she could come to wakefulness.

“They’ll be out for my blood, you know. Soon enough. When the dust settles, they’ll realize I’ve circumvented whatever trap they’d laid out for me. So here we are. *Perdu*. Léandres is lost. Hemlock will die in torment. Malheur will be found. Death will claim us two, and I may never have my vengeance. Isn’t it obvious?” The bottle swung again. “I’ve successfully destroyed everything I ever cared for”.

The shadow-thing sighed. It then seemed to draw closer to her side, shouldering her somewhat. “Have one for me,” it whispered, “will you?”

Silence settled on the rooftop.

“Wrack,” she spoke at last, a bitter smile drawn on her lips as tears welled in the one purple eye. “I will call you Wrack”.

Naysay loe to be, bathe me silently
‘Neath the Ashen for my breath
I’ll ne’er glean the clever rapt
Fro twin black eyes of ebony

- Gaël des Vers
‘Ebony’, 12-16

XXIX. Ethos Noir

Rain pounded on the window of Hemlock’s rooms whilst Malice waited patiently through midday.

The air had something solemn to it, heavy as it was with encroaching death. The furniture seemed dull, even the curtains wailed out in pallid languor. The old man’s wheezing breath spliced into the rumbling rain-curtain like summons to the underworld. His features ever more ancient, crackled almost, paper-thin and hued with gray. Beard cropped neatly by Josy’s infinite care, though for all her love she could not keep him here for ever.

Malice sat by his side, one frail hand in hers, and she waited still, striving to find peace. She’d cleaned and bandaged her wounds and wore simple linen pants and blouse under a silk-black cloak, the bodkin secure at her waist in traditional fashion. Dark crevices stretched under her eyes from lack of sleep.

“Say now, darkling,” spoke her twisted reflection in the bedroom mirror, grinning as ever, “you really think this will work?”

Hemlock’s study was filled with the scattered papers of Ethos Noir – essays and notes and annexes, jumbled just the way he’d left them, ere his once revered mind had been sacrificed to the painlessness of an opium dream.

His life’s work: trapped in the sort of chaos he could no longer put into form.

“Damned if I know,” finally answered the youngest Morbid daughter, “damned still if the appointed Hospitalier can’t tell left from right and proper missive from cheap forgery”.

“You realize,” countered Wrack, “if we shake this cursed tree hard enough, something’s likely to fall arse-first down and hard?”

Malice sighed. “Any *other* means to barge in on the Black Knight?” *If at all*, she added to herself, *and I don’t get lynched on the way*.

The creature laughed in the mirror. “The only way out is further in. I agree: *we* surprise them for once. My dear, how I laud your cavalier charge into enemy lines, albeit may I merely suggest a pinch of *caution*, this time?”

Malice snarled. “Oh, you boring old thing. Sure, why not”.

Another voice called from beyond the doorway. “Here it comes,” spoke Josy as she walked up the stairs, “I had to whip this up in a rush, ran out of marjoram at the last second so I turned to basil, it’s not the same thing, but...”

Malice hurriedly stuffed some papers in a satchel before Hemlock’s leman walked into the room, carrying a tray of smoking soup and hearty loaf of bread. Her weariness shown, so far into daytime, but she was smiling. “I hope it’s to your liking”.

“Thank you,” spoke Malice, her stomach screaming for sustenance, “sadly, I have to make this quick”.

For him as well, doubled Wrack in the mirror.

“Oh,” replied Josy, unable to hide her disappointment, “your presence ever warms by heart, but I understand if you must go”.

“I’m meeting the Black Knight, you see”.

Her host’s eyes widened instantly. *That would have been Hemlock’s duty*, Malice thought, *if only he knew!*

“You are?”

“Yes,” she replied, both to her and her dying father,
“time waits for no man”.

Wrong, right, good, evil – archaic notions.
Pleasure, displeasure: that we can truly
sense.

To say we fled the ethics of the Old World
would be false. Is it these which have
failed us. When life became aporetic, death
presented itself as the only solution.

We, in truth, are all that remains.

Codex Mortem. 27.

XXX. Hospitalière Sylvaine

“Do you jest?” asked Hospitalière Sylvaine, nonplussed and cross-armed in the oaken doorway to Balafre’s suite.

“I assure you,” sung Malice in a most conventional Court demeanour, “the man has appointed me to this task, and I very well intend to honour his trust”. She was waving about the roll of parchment she’d stolen from Hemlock’s desk. “His explicit words, *madame*, concerning the return of the Thirteen. *I must speak to him*”.

Malice had flown up the double helicoid staircase of Tour Noire to the fourth floor, cloaked raven black – unnoticed and unhindered, until that wench had sprung out to oppose her feeble lies. There would be aides close, Malice knew, some of which would also tend the day shift.

Now the Hospitalière was tapping her foot impatiently. This one showed all the characteristics of a hawk: lean-faced, keen-eyed and implacable. An elder, and how unsurprisingly so –

“I have lately visited your father myself,” she argued, “I was there when you... *challenged* our Speaker. You are misguided, my child: Hemlock has not spoken since”.

She is being over-zealous, whispered Wrack. *Chastise her!*

Malice breathed in deep. "In point of fact," she countered, "he wrote this piece in a moment of lucidity, and instructed me in the great care by which it should be delivered. You would understand, I am sure, the gravity of the situation".

But Sylvaine could not be swayed.

"Fatuous tripe, youngling. You can not see him".

Malice cringed. The day was late. She was exhausted.

Attack, she thought, *riposte*.

"Hospitalière," she began in formal tone, "you have been appointed at Perpetual Court to this duty, though I confess my attention was taken elsewhere at the time. Would you be so kind as to tell me your explicit mandate?"

Sylvaine sighed in exasperation. She recited, almost by heart: "I have been appointed to the care of the Black Knight come home, as dictated by the protocol of the sending".

Counter. Estoc.

"Which is?"

Again, the Hospitalière complied half-heartedly, also showing signs of weariness. "Returning Black Knights will be housed at Tour Noire and cared for, in every way necessary – flesh and mind – to ensure the greatest extent of pleasure and well-being, for as long as deemed necessary by both Court and Knight. One appointed Hospitalier, deemed aptly versed in the ways of hearth and pleasure, will oversee all details pertaining to the task".

Ah, squealed Wrack, we have her!

"It is known to me," Malice's voice betrayed a hint of triumph, "that Balafre and Hemlock were indeed the best of friends at the time. Think you not," *you dusty old hag*, "that news of the old man would cheer our most revered ambassador?"

The Hospitalière paused for a second, surely she was conjuring another way to get rid of the pestering girl.

Now, instructed the shadow-creature, *push her overboard!*

“Mother Morbid,” continued Malice, “has ever voiced discord on the matter of loosely interpreted mandates, and I have been most impressed on her teachings. Assuredly, you understand that zeal will be frowned upon by any sensible denizen, most of whom were not present in the nights of the sending and do not *presently* share the secret bond of elders and Black Knights”.

Sylvaine’s traits darkened at the subtle threat. There was a painful secret, indeed, and Malice was tearing the old scar back into a wound. She lowered her voice and launched every word like punches into the Hospitalière’s iron countenance.

“You are accountable here, and though my father will soon pass, his fiery blood is mine, so I pray thee, do not think for a second I will *stay* hand or tongue, when the time comes, to deface you in public. One’s existence need not end in shame. By honouring his will, you honour your own. Mark my words, and mark them well: the alternative would be quite *unseemly*”.

And only when Malice mentioned public humiliation did the old woman start to smile. It was an ugly thing, for sure, and rarely seen – gleeful but wicked, as though she knew something the other did not, and the curse could not escape her lips farther than that twisted grin.

She stepped aside.

What is she hiding? wondered Wrack. *This is not good.*

“*Très bien*, by all means,” Sylvaine bowed extravagantly, “I would not oppose one Morbid daughter... *unfit* though she. Go in, you carrion bird, if he will have you. What little time you still have is yours, so squander it as you wish”.

Malice rolled her eyes, immediately stepping through the mirkwood door. That beaten old snake was still rattling, but she could not care less.

When Wrack warned Malice, she already knew the truth of it. “Little much. Now she’ll send for Morbid, that’s

certain,” it hissed violently, reverberating through her mind, “and they’ll listen in all the while. Hasten up, darkling. We have but a few moment’s breath”.

Malice murmured as the door swung open to the Black Knight’s suite.

“If any”.

We rarely speculate as to the Fall of Civilization. It makes for unseemly conversation, we are told. Few will admit to it, but I know the reason – it is only the middle of the story, and ere we consider the true ending, we may yet ponder as to why, if indeed at all, the nightmare ever began.

- Charles Lapierre, aka Spleen
“Of the Last Empire of Man”

XXXI. But A Madman Come Home

Malice could not be prepared for that meeting.

What would a man, come home from the Wastes after thirty-seven years, choose to do, and in what order? Indeed, she'd expected to find him slumberous, so late in the day, assuredly with a fresh young leman or two – panties and finery scattered on the carpeted floor with an overpowering smell of *rut* in the air – or mayhap bloated on honey truffles, stupefied with mead and all-round intoxicated beyond reckoning. He might as well be swinging madly from the chandelier, perched on the mantelpiece or hanging from the window like a loon.

But no – when Malice barged in the suite unannounced, she found the old Black Knight sitting naked and cross-legged in the middle of the salon, surrounded by tools and equipment, working patiently to mend the heel of one crackled boot. His ragged clothes were laid out on the couch nearby, but what came as a shock was the suite itself, it was as though he'd barely used it: one ridiculously generous tray of food cooling on the kitchen table, apparently untouched. The bed perfectly made. Everything clean and in place, yet he'd been there for a night already.

Balafre's flesh, however, was all but intact. It was covered with thick scars and patches of burnt skin, like a road map to the Void beyond: random and painful. He'd become lean, and deathly so, but for what remained of his former stature, muscles stretched rope-tight and ready. Worse were his nerves, crippled and shot: eyes and neck muscles twitching uncontrollably, the one hand erratic as he vied to mend the boot together.

Malice strode in, suddenly hesitant.

The Black Knight did not so much as raise his head.

"Enough a-already," he mumbled in a gnarled voice, "by the Spindle, I've need of n-nothing".

Careful now, cautioned Wrack, *the puppets are listening*.

"Honoured Black Knight," she began unsure, "forgive my intrusion, I understand how tired you must be from such a journey, yet must I humbly request an audience".

Balafre chuckled through the spasms at his neck.

"*Understand*, that is q-quaint, child, I've agreed to s-speak at Court, and I shall, now l-leave me in peace".

Now, urged the shadow-creature, *now!*

"My name is Malice Clairevaux, daughter of Morbid and Hemlock. I come to you in friendship".

The Black Knight raised his head at the name, eyes pale and watery. The other continued. "My father awaited your return, patiently, though he has grown tragically ill and can not welcome you himself – but I know, should you hold the Old World's secrets in your palms, or merely tales of Wastes and dust, he would have wept tears of joy to see you breathing here again".

"Hemlock," repeated Balafre absently. "Yes, I remember Hemlock".

Malice chose this time to get nearer. If he was even remotely aware, it did not show, but doubtless he did not need much room to react in the deadliest way. She crossed the salon to his side and sat down by him, trying to push down the thought. She noticed his arm had been cut off

mid-forearm, cleanly so. The armblood lay next to him, with the sheathed sword, the knife belt and a dozen other strange implements she couldn't recognize. His trembling hand picked at the boot heel with a small curved blade, trying to detach the sole altogether.

"One of us should make you a new pair," she suggested amiably, "these look worn out completely".

He shrugged. "No, I like these. They are different, Symbian. Worse... and better".

Silently, she produced a sheet of parchment from her satchel, followed with copper-tipped feather and inkwell. "So," she asked as she started scribbling, "are they treating you well?"

She slid the paper in his direction, upon which he looked with twitching eyes. It read in fine print: 'they are listening.'

"Too well," he replied wholeheartedly, and wrote back in thin scrambled characters: 'I know.'

Malice followed unto trivia by discussing this myrtle pie recipe she'd learned from Eglantine's mother, upon which he commented nonchalantly.

'You are in terrible danger,' she wrote hastily, then brought out the crackled book from her satchel and showed it to him.

'Hemlock coming?' he wrote. 'Told he is comatose.'

'He is. I'm sorry.'

Meanwhile, they voiced vapid chat in the room.

'Advent?' he asked.

'Soon.'

'Enclave coming. My fault.' He paused, then added frantically: 'Soon.'

Malice felt dizzy all of a sudden.

'Who are the Enclave?'

He listed frantically. 'Death. Light. Slavery. Order.'

'There is life in the Void?'

Balafre looked sad. 'Yes.'

‘Hostile?’

‘Avid.’

‘What can we do?’

‘Nothing.’

She felt tears welling up. It was too much to handle.
None of it made sense.

‘Why have you come back?’

He looked at her, wearily.

‘To find peace.’

Like Hemlock, she thought.

‘Can you read this book?’

He looked at the first page, closed the cover.

‘No. Cipher. Not mine. Not my key.’

Hurry, interjected Wrack, *hurry!*

Malice felt her pulse race. She fought down the urge to
cry.

‘What will you do?’

‘Court.’

‘But they’ll kill you first.’ She underlined *first*. ‘You are
not fit.’

Balafre shrugged. He pointed to the weapons at his side.
‘They can try.’

Something struck Malice while she wrote. She added, as
fast as she could: ‘Something is wrong in Necropolis.’

Balafre smiled. ‘True. Others should be here.’

Others? She wanted to scream. *Others!* Her own hand
was now shaking. ‘How can I help?’

Balafre paused, looked at the suite. For a second he
seemed to focus, get his thoughts together. A little while,
he stopped twitching, then wrote with a steady hand.

‘Where did this come from?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Find out, show Hemlock. Bring him back.’

Back?

‘How?’ She underlined *how*.

‘Neghlin. Three quarts. Mortal.’

The word sounded vaguely familiar. Some kind of useless tanning oil. *Insane*, she thought, *stark-raving mad!*

Balafre was writing again when there came a powerful knocking at the door.

Too late.

Malice signalled to the fireplace, at which he nodded and showed her what he'd written, convulsing as he did, smiling through missing teeth.

'Praise Luminon.'

Absent here, mindful there,
I would have you true
Lo, 'tis my wretchedness to wait
Lo, 'tis my damned fate to hate

- Léandres Desforges
Notes personnelles.

XXXII. Face To Face

Sicker! screamed Wrack, *despicable Healer!*

“Ah, Malice,” spoke Priton as she answered the door, “what a beautiful surprise, and at such *untimely* hour, truly serendipitous...”

He stood there, full gloat, Hospitalière Sylvaine at his side, practically glowing.

She dared!

Malice looked left and right, face burning with rage. The shadow-creature was circling around, berserk. *Run, run*, she thought, *no – run away, no –*

“Is the good sir Knight awake,” asked Priton, “the aides tell us he’s barely broken his fast, and hasn’t shut an eye all day. The poor soul doesn’t seem to rest – how unequivocally dramatic, don’t you think? Now, would you be so couth as to tell me what your most unorthodox *visit* could possibly be about?”

Sylvaine interjected. “Malice, have you not that fabled missive from the hands of a man long overdue for Advent? Oh, let me guess, was it just burnt in the hearth?”

Malice took a deep breath. “As per Hemlock’s will”.

Too many witnesses, rasped Wrack, *get out, now –*

“*Bonjour, mes amis!*” hailed a cheerful voice down the corridor. “What a day, what a fateful day!”

Fuck, Malice squirmed, *fuck –*

Morbid had arrived in Tour Noire. Her generous curves and overflowing crimson gown angled into sight at the end

of the hallway to the suites. The Hospitalière jumped to meet her squarely.

In shock, Malice hesitated a second too long. The Healer turned to her and spat out low so that only she could hear: “no matter, little strumpet, you have some tricks, I’ve *all* Necropolis at my feet –”

Overtaken, she started fingering the handle of the bodkin, ready to strike –

“Tell anyone what happened,” he continued before the others could overhear them, “or delay the next session, I’ll run to Court and have you staked like the abomination you are. Then we’ll find your half-exiled sister and turn her into my personal *pet*. You can’t fight this, you whore. No one in their right mind would believe you anyhow, not over *me*”.

Morbid fluxed unto the pair before Malice could even take a step back. Sylvaine had blinked out of sight, but certainly, her minions would be within earshot: all shining young denizens aching to prove their worth.

Mother was singing happily, overbearing with joy.

“Ah, my darling, most precious daughter, *here you are at last!*”

Malice felt her throat tighten. She looked to the nearest window. *I’ve thought about that*, echoed Wrack, *forget it, it’s too high, besides this side leads down the pavement, you’d snap your neck on the rocks.*

“Well met, Mother,” barely uttered Malice.

Priton grinned from behind his flaccid mien. The bastard was enjoying this.

“We have been most worried about you, my love. You literally disappeared at Bal, and so has darkling Léandres, the circumstances were so dim, I was afraid Triste would see his heart cleft in twain anon”.

“That arrival,” doubled Priton, “has indeed been trialsome on many of us, neither did we get any sleep. Some level of confusion is only human”.

“Sweetling, that poor, sodden Triste has sought you long and hard, naturally knocking at my door for council, and what else could I do, but worry myself sick? By the Void, Malice, your inconsistencies will be the death of me”.

Malice bit her lip with muted rage.

“If I may suggest,” offered a very diplomatic Priton, “a private session with the lady, in order to pursue treatment further. Clearly, there are issues which need to be addressed properly. I would be more than happy to assist”.

J’aurai ta tête, cursed the other, *your time will come*.

But Morbid was hardly keen to the invitation.

“Yes yes, but now I hear,” she brashly cut in, “a letter from Hemlock himself, delivered to the auspice of our battered ambassador, in the middle of the day? Honest Sylvaine has confirmed the destruction of the note, hence I can only fathom the ill-conceived designs which travail you, my daughter”.

“You are in dire need of help,” concluded Priton, stubby hands rubbing together.

“Oh,” interjected Morbid dramatically, “it pains me to see you so, Malice. *À l’aide*,” she begged the ceiling, “what am I *ever* to do with you!”

“There is hope, you will be glad to know – ” stated Priton, when Morbid cut him on again.

“– yes,” she began, “you will be glad to know, some things are looking bright ahead”.

“Bright indeed,” doubled the Healer.

Oh no, mulled Malice, *not that* –

“Our scouts have returned with Aian mycelium from the caves. The distils are now working tirelessly and we should have the drop in two nights’ time, at which Advent will be held at last”.

Two nights!

“This time,” added Priton, “there will be *no* accidents”.

Malice was stricken dumb. The shadow-creature veered from left to right, powerless. Everything unravelled like a

nightmare. Morbid's regal face had shifted, surreally, from entire spectrums of emotion seamlessly: joy to outrage, concern to shame, anger to hope. And like the all too talented orator she was, her final expression was the most accomplished one, her *coup de grace*.

Heartfelt compassion.

"You can finally fulfill your word," she announced, "don't you understand, Malice? *Finalement*, you can earn back the trust of your fellow denizens and take your rightful place in Necropolis. Everything will be right again".

"Yes," concluded Priton happily. "There is hope, Malice. Hope and deliverance for us all".

City of the Dead, mournful eternal
Content in the Dark, unmasked by dawn
We know not what we lost
And can not remember to forget
What we find

- Gaël des Vers
Stanzas sans nom, XIII

XXXIII. Hallows Historian, Part II

“Pour me one, will you?”

The old scholar shrieked and nearly spilled his cup over, and the beaten table went rumbling with teapot and parchments.

“Malice!” he groaned, “by the Void! What is it with you?”

“*Désolée*,” she flustered, “didn’t mean to startle you”.

“What,” he turned around, looking over her shoulder in the pitch black Hallows, “no lantern?”

No, she thought, *I can see in the dark, now*.

“I know my way,” she merely replied.

He poured her a steaming cup of Scarlae. She took off her cloak, sat calmly by his side and kissed the edge gently, welcoming the warmth of the eldritch substance.

“Oy,” started Spleen, deep wrinkled eyes locked into hers, “haven’t slept in ages, have you?”

I have nowhere to sleep.

“Well, ever since Bal... I mean, the Black Knight came back. It’s just, I don’t know. There’s a world out there, Spleen! How can I ever rest again?”

“Ah, well, you see now,” he sipped his tea, “that is another question altogether. You ask so many. The last one I bid you answer yourself. Now, what of it?”

She remembered now. “I asked why you do it, why you go through all that if you don’t *believe* in it”.

“And?” He licked his lips.

“I understand now. There is *no* reason”.

Spleen’s gnarled face lit up, yellow teeth gleaming in the pale lantern light.

“There is no noble cause,” she continued, “these books, these annals, tales and codes of conduct, you read them for distraction. And you don’t believe, precisely because you know them so well. There is little to gain, if only means to kill Time. In a word, you’re bored”.

The old scholar clapped his hands, laughing through the cavernous library. “Excellent! Now you see, there are reasons for everything, but we can’t assume these are always legitimate. Veils are veils, pure and simple, what lies behind is pure speculation: there may very well be nothing to find”.

“Like the Void?”

Spleen sighed and sipped noisily. “Like the Void”.

“But what do you make of Balafre? Thirty seven years, Spleen! And the man is *here* at last. You knew him, did you not?”

“Aye, that I did. Mind you, we were contentious idiots, back then, or moreso at any length, the Black Knights, myself, your father too, I regret to say”.

“Oh,” the realization hit Malice, “you don’t believe he speaks the truth”.

“Please understand,” hurried Spleen, “I know *he* thinks he is. There was never an ounce of dishonesty in Balafre. Granted, he was the *cockiest*, most stubborn Knight of the Thirteen, but truthful, if only brutally so, and I partook in his training myself, like so many others”.

“All you elders mistrust him now. Why is that? I thought you’d rejoice, at least pretend like you’re grateful”.

“Oh, we’re pretending alright. Understand, Malice, we are both thrilled and mortified to welcome back one of the Thirteen. The years have taken their toll on us, all but Hemlock had abandoned the notion of their return. Our

regrets weighted in, and now..." his voice faltered. Decades went running through his gaze. "It's like being faced with a ghost. We are not ready, though we must. Aren't you glad," he giggled, "you get to see the company of elders squeal like children?"

Malice paused a while. She'd reached that brick wall yet again, Spleen would keep the secret still. Her mind was blurry with somnolence, she couldn't contrive a subtler approach. She could still envision the mad twitches of Balafre, sat naked in his opulent suite.

"Why such regret," she launched straightforward, "what did you do to them?"

Spleen smiled at her. "So you keep asking. But I can not say, Morbid daughter or no".

Malice breathed in deep and brought out the satchel, emptied it on the table. The decrepit book fell out, heavy as a rock. Spleen drained his cup then seized the book in both hands. Twin bulging eyes started devouring the edges, the spine, the cover, then first page, second, third.

He closed it and stared back at her vehemently.

"Are we alone?" he spurted out.

She shut her eyes and wondered, *well, are we?*

Wrack materialized instantly, spawned out of thin air and towering over them both in scattered shades of grey, torn wings arching wide. Its entire shape bowed low at Malice's feet. "You are," it hissed in blood-wet voice.

"We're safe," she confirmed. "So you recognize this?"

"Where did you find it?"

"Answer me first, please".

"It is coded. Though I recognize the characters".

Balafre was right, she thought.

"Do you have the key?"

"I... maybe. I designed the ciphers. Thirteen different keys, for as many envoys".

Pieces unravelled in Malice's mind. The shadow-creature writhed at her side.

“Tell me,” she urged Spleen, “Hemlock said you’d taken steps to ensure the Black Knight’s return. What were they?”

Spleen was staring down at the tome, already miles away.

She charged again.

“What did you *do* to them?”

“You must understand,” he was baffled, “the texts, the scriptures, they tell of a horrible world, *that’s* –” Spleen lost his trail of thoughts, gaze fixed back on the book.

Malice felt the need to pounce on, break him, shake everything from his bones and have her way. But she knew, when she looked at the crinkled old scholar, so bent and forlorn – there was no need to be harsh.

She poured them both some more Blood Tea, dragged her chair next to his and stroked his back gently.

“It’s alright,” she chanced and the softest tone she could muster, “everything’s changed, we have to adapt. You have your secrets, you have your ghosts, and I have mine. I respect you, my old friend, as I always have, and wouldn’t come here meddling if I wasn’t convinced a peril greater than us both looms on Dystopia”.

She paused for a while, then continued: “We are loners, us two. I hope you can understand my plight, as I strive to comprehend yours. This has befallen me and I don’t know where else to turn”. *Everything’s dying around me*, she wanted to add. *And I can’t control myself*.

“That world,” Spleen rambled in, “the Collapse of Civilization, the Founders left some recollections, poor in detail but stark in sentiment – it was murder, and rape, and defilement of flesh and life for the profit of artifice, their minds were trapped and ensnared, and *no one*, by all accounts, no one was free in that world, and it crumbled slow and agonizing, and the torture of the masses as they expired engraved itself deep into the tomb of the Last Empire of Man. Billions left to rot, eating the dead, then

the living, devices so articulate and so cruel we can not even conceive them, powers at play beyond our reach, and devious, for they betrayed the wielders on and on, though they clung to such sophisticated means like addicts suckling on death's black teat. True, most texts recount the lost children of man – our ancestors, who left the dying world behind and wandered – yes, we all know the tales, the poems, the songs. But some scripts from Anne-Marie's own foul hand say they were not survivors but rather *exiles*, cast out and hunted by the ruling caste, and some of the Founders did not seek to contradict her”.

“It could be both”.

“Nonetheless, we had reason to doubt the Collapse may not be absolute, and though the Wastes stretch without end, poisonous and fey, and spans of Void may snuff out any chance of life upon the despoiled ground that once was potent – even with darkened skies that never part, there was a chance, a chance... which turned into doubt, into fear, into *obsession*”.

“You were lead astray”.

“Some of us, like your mother, argued strongly in favour of guarantees, as we put ourselves into the Thirteen, all our talent, our craft, our deluded hopes. It was never enough, for we didn't know what lay ahead, but moreso, it was possible they'd be turned against us, should they find a better place and shun us entirely. The Thirteen became invaluable. We were jealous. Combat, poisons, all manners of physical prowess we taught, but it was not enough. We delved into shadowy lore, found some forgotten skills which we then sought to regain. A handful of us delved deeper yet into crafts deemed wrong by the Founders, but still within reach. We discovered new means to train the Black Knights, or so we thought”.

“Was Priton involved?”

“His father, to name just one”.

“And you feel you wronged the embassy?”

“Our first crime was faith. We were blinded by ambition and could not accept failure. Our second crime was elitism, for we turned the Thirteen into a superior lot, imbued with more rights, more purpose and more powers than we could ever hold. Our third and last crime was torture, for what we put them through, a thousand nights over”.

“To ensure their return?”

“That is surely the quaintest way to spin it. It reached further than that, I’m afraid, far more invasive than mere pillow talk after love play. We wanted control. *Certain* control. For this we developed an elaborate conditioning technique, mixing purified drugs and repeated suggestion, by paces slow, night after night. Slowly but surely, we engraved boundaries and edicts upon the most primal level of their subconscious. Set their minds so straight, in due time our intended design became second nature”.

Malice remembered that session with the Healer. Her stomach turned.

“Could they not,” she had to ask, “I mean, what would happen if they broke their conditioning?”

“I doubt it, but if so, their minds would collapse”.

“And why did just the one return? And why so late? What was the chosen time-frame?”

“Ten years. Give or take”.

“So you took them for dead”.

“Don’t you *understand?*” Spleen was growing frantic, “they could *not* even have made it that far, let alone succeed in facing whatever lay ahead: we’d broken them ere they ever left. Oh, the *others*, they thought our scheme was perfect, but I walked the Thirteen through the ordeal, and it was evident, whatever we did to *make them better* crippled them on such innate level they nigh risked complete insanity. No autonomy. No self-determination. No free will. And that was our greatest flaw: we were so frightened of the unknown, we broke the very tools we sought to use.

We took away their *freedom*, Malice. We turned them into slaves". His voice started shaking. "We broke all three Tenets and doomed the very endeavour that was meant to save Dystopia from itself".

Tears welled up in his weary eyes.

"We can not believe what the Black Knight says, because he is mad. And he is mad... because of us".

When he'd finished, the Hallows had become solemn as the grave.

Malice rose from her seat, stepped next to Spleen who was now weeping openly. She hugged him close, like an infant.

"Find the right key," she whispered soft, "make sure the book is safe, and I will do what I can".

You would not understand the notions of Hope and Faith, of Light and Virtue as decreed by the Last Empire of Man. These putrid scribbles can rot for all eternity: we have dispersed the shackles of linear thought and can never spawn them anew – thus have we damned kin restored dignity to the mortal condition.

We can we fear of death, now that we truly live?

Codex Mortem. 41.

XXXIV. Doomed in *absentia*

“Yes, but what *proof*?”

“We need proof!”

“He *is* proof, we need no more – Dystopia is under direct threat and we must *respond*!”

“You’ve seen him, you’ve all seen him!”

“Let’s call him out, at the very least – ”

“This matter is for us *first*, we are Dystopia”.

“Not for long, if we are to believe – ”

“But a madman come home! He said so himself!”

“Blindness is mad, deafness is mad, if we ignore this, then it is *we* assembled dystopians – not that poor man – who are truly unfit!”

“Enough!”

Perpetual Court had been trailing for the better part of the night, just round the Witching Hour then: nearly two thousand denizens congregated chaotically upon the marble circle steps. There had never been so large an assembly, and Court was not designed to host so many speakers. They squeezed and pushed and raised their arms in roars of support and indignation.

Malice and Wrack surveyed the scene from afar, perched upon the steeple of a chapel two blocks away, nearly sixty paces high. She stood, fully wrapped in the woollen cloak, gazing down unto the incoherent play of politics and dialectical discourse at hand. Mother Morbid, Bastien, Jacques, even Spleen attended, and all familiar faces, elder or not, save those who were too young, too ill, or lost in Den debauchery.

The Black Knight himself had not yet been solicited, as had been pushed by the elders, to ready the adequate questions, leave the man recuperate and spare him fruitless hullabaloo. A sensible decision to some, though others accused the motion of being over protective and indeed wasteful, if his initial warning had any grounds whatsoever.

The debate was now circling the drain.

“They’ll move in soon,” reflected Wrack, hovering next to her, “label him as unfit. The conclusion will take time, but they may succeed. Morbid has already laid most of the preamble. *Stuttering. Unstable. Confused.* She navigates this crowd like a chef for a *soufflé*. Soon, one of her lackeys will connect the dots and make claim. It’ll seem like pure genius to the others, and they’ll scream for his head”.

Malice laughed cynically. Far though they were, watching this theatrical piece wasn’t any less difficult. The consequences could be disastrous. And should the Black Knight bustle die down two moments in a row, the crowd may yet state Malice’s case openly. It would take but a few hot-headed opponents – which she had aplenty – and they’d send her At Noctem, like they had Malheur, so long ago. It could be Priton, or Bastien, or even Triste – if the wretch wanted revenge, he could pluck it like petals from a flower.

“I wish I could be down there,” she admitted openly. “This is one battle I would have loved to fight”.

“Better to keep to the Dark, for now”.

“Yes, doomed *in absentia*. What a joke”.

“But wait,” cut in Wrack, “look down, see this little rabble-rouser?”

And the shadow was right, someone had pierced into the inner circle and was waving hands about exaggeratingly.

“Hearken,” one frail boyish voice rose, “hearken!”

Morbid’s majestic tone rose over the assembly. “Speak, young man, but best you have grounds to barge in on Court!”

“Balafre!” he yelled over the rumbling chatter, “the Black Knight! He’s coming *here*! Now!”

Disorder gained the congregation like wildfire. Breach of protocol: Balafre could not be heard, lest deemed rested and timely – that was the will of Dystopia.

And from her post, Malice could see what the others could not: this dark, solemn shape moving fast through the nearest Agora, followed closely by half a dozen skittering aides and one panicked Hospitalière, hounding him with acerbic invectives and pleas to reconsider.

She smiled. Balafre had taken his old garb again, blades flashing, and inflexible as he strode.

They couldn’t stop him.

“Well well,” sung Wrack in a hoarse tongue, “this will be interesting”.

Malice gripped the rusted iron steeple tight, vying to secure her footing though weariness ate through her bones.

Down below, the assembled sought to see the oncoming one, and those nearest to the edge struggled to part ways and let him through.

He walked on like a force of nature, back straight, squared shoulders, tatters of cloak fluttering at his hind, the curved armlade at his side, knives and sword sheathed, boots crackled but sure upon the pavement, and thus stepped forth to meet two thousand frightened denizens.

“Lo!” he called out, voice surprisingly steady, walking down the steps to the center, silencing the masses instantaneously. “Is the night not beautiful as ever?”

“Dear sir,” one called out – Bastien – “we have not yet elected to receive you, we are not ready – ”

But he has every right, raged Malice, he’s one of us! We are all equals!

The Black Knight called out confidently, expressing the old form of Court: “I, Balafre, demand the floor”.

Morbid yelled out, incredibly swift: “This is not the way, we implore you, go back – ”

And as his feet reached the inner level, Bastien waved a hand in signal, and three young men and a woman immediately shot out of the crowd to flank the Knight, left and right, arms outstretched as they sought to escort him out.

The old envoy halted just a fraction of a second. Translation into battle-stance occurred so quick, Malice barely realized what was going on before it was over. The first blow Balafre struck without even looking, kicking the nearest man straight across the knee, crushing the articulation, already wheeling round before the man could come towering down. The woman he sent reeling with a broken jaw, then shifted gracefully down to dodge a clumsy hook and arched the armblade upwards, three fingers flying as the wretch recoiled in shock, clutching at his severed hand and screaming in frenzy.

The fourth one froze mid-way, an inexplicable expression locked on his face. Disbelief, for one, shifting to pure horror. He stepped back as his comrades wriggled in pain on the Court floor, all bone-splinters and freshly flown fluids.

The entire crowd roared in disgust.

Blood at Perpetual Court!

“Halt!” screamed Balafre at the assembly, “you will not deny me! I know your treacherous ways, Dystopian scum,

even as I rowed to shore three of your..." his voice broke again, the twitching returned, "p-peons assaulted me, escorts they said, b-but the first one who t-tried to stab was c-clumsy – their bodies are r-rotting on the northern s-shore, now".

Bastien came forth, shaking as he pointed a finger at the Knight. "Disarm, now! You have despoiled this Court!"

"You c-can not deny me," he insisted, "for I have s-seen the glorious fire orb a-atop the Spindle of the Archon and have basked in the infallible l-light of Luminon. I have climbed the m-mountainous underground that stretch to the meek Symbii-kin – "

Bastien countered, starkly. "There is nothing out there! You are crazed!"

"The Old World was d-dead, for the most p-part, but after c-centuries they've r-rallied into the Enclave, and they kn-know we exist now, because of you".

Morbid stood forth to stand besides Bastien. More elders flocked to her back. From on high, Malice could see how they stood together, bound almost, as a single, cohesive faction.

"Old friend," she began diplomatically, "you have suffered much from this taxing endeavour, forgive us, you speak words we do not understand. Clearly, if you have been wronged on our shores – "

"Hist!" Balafre spat, pointing the curved blade in Mother's direction, at which Malice's heart stopped, to see *someone* oppose Morbid so fiercely – "Hear me, and hear me well: this I take by word of Heightmark Komturei, as decreed by the Ordenmarshall, whose will is absolute, it is straight and ineffable and *narrow*".

The elders were stopped short.

"YT7 im-implanted me with... things you c-could not understand, in my a-arm, so I... *removed* it, ah! Only to b-buy you *ingrates* m-more time, which I r-realize, you will s-squander recklessly – I have s-slain mongrels knee-thick,

m-murdered my way b-back to you, p-piling b-b-bodies t-thick on the p-path wherever I walked, and a-after th-thirty-seven years, s-seven and t-t-twelvescore nights, I have d-done my part, f-fulfilled my p-p-purpose, here – I am here, I have r-returned, *you will not deny me my peace!*”

Silence settled over Court.

“What does he mean,” asked Malice, “what peace?”

“Malice,” interjected Wrack, “Calonio is coming up on the vines”.

“I know,” she said, “he’s *late*”.

Down there, the Black Knight stood as a one man army, twitching heavily, nerves pulling at random, but deadly still, crimson droplets glimmering on his blade. The entire assembly speechless, save for a handful of elders who hushed in low amongst themselves.

Calonio’s head suddenly popped from the other end of the chapel roof, in the darkness, scrambling amongst the vines running up the façade. His face was dabbled with sweat and he was cursing through taut lips.

“And where in the Void have *you* been?” she asked half-minded, all attention focused on Court.

“Well, near-Void, actually, a dreary sight, that,” he voiced as he rolled unto his back, exhausted. “Would that you were happy to see me, Mal’, if only when I actually bear *good* news”.

“Let’s hear it, then”.

“I’ve word from Malheur, she’s moved to an alcove down south by the bay. Sends her regards”.

“Excellent. Would you take me? There’s much to discuss, and little time. But no swamps this time, agreed?”

“Fair enough, we can go right now if you like”.

Sleep, she lamented, *if only I could sleep* –

“And what about him?”

“Well,” he started, painfully, “weak enough, but still. I’ve put him in my cellar like so many bottles of wine.

Won't wake up, Mal'. Tried everything. Don't know what to do".

Not surprising, hissed Wrack, *they never wake up –*
"We need a cure".

"Don't we ever," jested Calonio.

The shadow laughed. *And a miracle!*

"Hush". She urged them both. "*Listen*".

Perpetual Court had begun anew, as the wounded were taken away, elders retreated to their place amongst the crowd and the Black Knight remained alone at the inner circle, blood still wet at his feet.

When a semblance of formality had returned to the assembly, Mother Morbid raised her voice on high, presenting a most commanding tone.

"I hereby move that Balafre, eldest of the Thirteen, be allowed to recount his message. He has proclaimed a direct threat to our survival, and should make an explicit account, so that we may judge for ourselves. It is my sincere hope that he can thereafter teach us everything he has learned on his travels... if there is time".

When none opposed the motion, she continued unabated. Few people ever attained consensus at Court, but Morbid swayed them all flawlessly.

"This is Necropolis. Do no harm. Live freely. Consider the Void". She turned again to Balafre, who was convulsing feverishly. "I apologize to you, old friend, for the disheartened behaviour of our people. Should it please the Court, you will have your peace. We owe you much more, but that we can provide".

Seconds lapsed aeon-still
Effortless beauty
To glean
And not to hold.

- Triste de Sanbourg.
Notes. Unlisted entry.

XXXV. Waylaid

“Come out, *maintenant*,” she called into the dark, bodkin held tight inside the woollen cloak. They’d just crawled down the chapel wall, but she could see the hunched shape in a corner down the alley, huddled like a child, though it was pitch black.

“What is it,” asked Calonio.

“Don’t you see?” She was grinning. “Heir Triste lurking in the shadows?”

“You left me,” the worm snivelled from the hole. “you left me *again*”. His faint silhouette started creeping towards them, clumsily, on all fours.

Something’s wrong, stressed Wrack.

“Dominae promised,” insisted Triste, slowly coming into the light of a side-torch, “she *promised* me, she said we’d be together, *together* at last, and forever – ”

Malice felt a pang of revulsion. After everything! She could still see him at Bal, those blue lips, that checkered mask – his naked flesh in the Den...

Something broke inside.

“I don’t love you!” she screamed. “I *never* loved you!”

“Calm down,” said Calonio, putting a hand on her shoulder, which she immediately shrugged off.

“You don’t get it, you turd, I was drugged, *drugged*, you hear me?” Blood-red rage seeped up again, like fire.

Triste’s battered shape crawled forward, long locks falling to the ground, gathering mud as he slithered on closer.

“But Dominae, she – ”

“Fuck!” she cried out, “should have bled you dry when I had the chance, you cur: you don’t get *it*, there was only one way you could have had me, just *one* – ”

You had your way! You all did!

Her vision had already turned red by the time his face had come into the flamelight, but then she saw his distorted features: the convoluted muscles, pupils stretched wide, and so much blood, trickling down his throat, the *veins* – all veins meandering into his flesh turned black, utterly *black* –

“I didn’t want...” said Léandres. “Not like that. She tricked me”.

“What have you done,” mumbled Calonio, taken aback, “oh, by the Void, Triste, *what have you done?*”

The wretch coughed up great gouts of blood and bile, bubbles ebbing down his mouth. “Jean”, he blubbered out, struggling to get nearer, “and Florien, they’re dead, *dead*, did you know that?”

Sharp-Eyes, whispered *Wrack*, and *Blood-Lips*.

“You murdered them,” Triste continued, “you’re an assassin, I know, and I’d tell them, I’d blurt it all out to Court and watch you run, yes, run, like the rest of your treasonous family!”

“What’s he talking about?” risked Calonio, slowly backing away.

Triste’s arms could no longer support him, his elbows flexed, he started going down, slowly, obscenely. “Dominae said no,” he squirmed, “but *I said yes*, I said yes!”

“We have to get out of here,” snapped Calonio, “can’t be seen together, he’s done for”.

They’re coming, Mal’, broke the shadow-creature. *Down the west end.*

“Who’s Dominae?” snapped Malice. “Who?”

“But I didn’t,” spewed the wretched as he lay face down on the pavement, oozing blood through the cracks in the

stones. His whole backside was arching now, overtaken by the poison. “I didn’t... I could never”.

Echoing footsteps resounded in the alley. Calonio grabbed Malice’s hand, pulled hard. The sudden jolt in her once disjoined elbow reeled her back to reality.

“I love you,” she heard Triste mumble through wet, scrambled locks, eyes slowly closing, as she ran away into the dark.

“I love you”.

Ask without want, truth without aim,
Lust without object, changeling same,
Run without moving, and stop, and stop –
There's no point, love. All is in vain.

- Gaël des Vers. "À Aurielle".
Hallows Archives.

XXXVI. Conspiracy At The End Of The World

"You need to rest, Mal".

The sisters were sat on a crest of rock, naked feet dangling in black mirrored waters. A faint drizzle had just begun, pinching small circles on the surface. White fog moved in quick, forming hypnotic patterns over the horizon, like a wall – the Void ever-changing, and ever so bleak. Thin plumes stretched all the way to the shore, ghostly, the mist swaying with the lapping waves, sensuous and cold.

Dawn was rising at a languid pace. There was an eerie, ethereal calm to the bay.

Besides the waters were wildsheep, grazing in an enclosure made of stacks of wood and frayed rope, bleating occasionally. A miserable yurt had been raised besides the herd, and they could hear Calonio snoring from behind the walls of clay.

Malice hunched forward, dipped both hands in and splashed her face a few times.

"Loving, how long since you've slept?" insisted Malheur, hugging her sister close. "You're white as Syllia".

Twin violet eyes observed her attentively, sorrow seeping from their depths. Hair still hung back in a single knot, leather jerkin and trousers that were rolled up to her knees. At her side hung the heavy blade, sheathed to the hilt, and next lay a hunting bow. Her resolution was iron-

clad, and that in itself was as much a source of comfort as any.

“Now I understand,” started Malice, struggling to stay awake, “why you left Necropolis. The place is a waking nightmare”.

Malheur sighed.

“There is indeed something inherently wrong with the city. It is not fit for us. Can not *suit* our nature. We are made of another substance altogether. What the Founders fled, I fear they have merely replicated. One Black Knight can not change this – can not change anything”.

“I’m so sorry,” cut in Malice, overtaken with remorse, “that you had to flee your home. It was my fault, I should have never...”

Malheur squeezed her closer. “Don’t you worry, little sister. The fault is mine. I have burdened you with the book, asked what you could not give. Desires oft lead us to stray. I’ve had time to ponder the loss. No more, beloved sister. *Je m’excuse*”.

Malice looked around, splashed more water on her face. “This place is dreary enough”. She laughed.

“I have seen worse. Besides, keeping the herd is my only trial, but it’s of no consequence, compared to what you’ve *suffered* –”

“I wonder,” cut in Malice to evade the subject, “why you hold these? Why not let them roam?”

“Lone as I am, there is little choice”.

“But are they well?”

“I care for them, and yes, though I did lose one not long ago. An accident, of sort”.

“What happened?”

But Malice somehow already knew the answer.

“Oh, dear sister,” confessed Malheur, “not what, *who*”.

It was me, Malice realized, horrified. *I was crazed*. “That night I came to you. When I woke up I saw that look in your eyes. You wouldn’t tell me, but it was there. You were

afraid. And,” she paused remorsefully, “so should you. I am not well”.

“Well enough,” countered the other, “we all nurse demons”.

“You don’t understand, I... see things no one else can. There is a creature, a... shadow-friend. It comes to me, tells me dreadful, cunning things. It is always there, nearby, even now I can feel its presence”.

“But you were bitten – ”

“I wasn’t. It’s not venom. When it takes me, I lose control. I can see. With *both* eyes, do you understand? Everything. It’s terrible, it’s too much. There’s power, it’s overwhelming. I’ve hurt people. Innocent people”. *Léandres, my poor poet!* “I’ve killed – I can’t control myself”. Then it hit her. “It may be better if I was dead already”.

Malheur embraced her still, gazing into the waters. A few moments passed. They sat there, silently, perched on the edges of a lifeless sea. Aeons whisked away into nothingness.

“So,” began the eldest, mournfully, “we are here at last, my darling sister. There is nothing left for you out there. I say, leave this city behind. Leave the machinations of our mother, the image of our ailing father. Forget the blundering old Knight, forget revenge, forget conspiracy. They will never see truth, because they sustain themselves on lies and fabrication and would sooner slay than falter. So be it, then, may they *all* fester in that cesspool. I bid you, *stay with me*. Whatever peace you require, I know you will find it here, housing enough for you – and your demons. I fear them not”.

Malice snarled.

“And become a daywalker?”

“You do not yet know the silence of the Void, the great calm of the sea. It is *here*, every night and day, drifting solemnly into eternity. Without the Gardens, it is hard

work and meagre living, but it is *living* nonetheless, until we see the final outcome unravel, together”.

“You wish for death”.

“I do,” Malice admitted at last, “death of everything. Surcease of sorrow. The coming of the Voivode: the Final End”.

Malice considered the offer.

“More non-sense”.

“Anne-Marie foretold the coming of the one, the Great Ender. Voivode; that who would deliver Life from its last clutches and complete the World into Void eternal. An act of mercy, Malice, for we suffer still, though the Last Empire has crumbled, our kind rots here in wait for that exactly, though they refuse to see it. They seek Death partial. Look what they have done to me, what they’ve done to you – ”

But Malice stopped her short with a wave of the hand. “No,” she starkly replied, “evidently, you have strayed long from Necropolis, and fail to remember what obstinate cruelty these people can contrive. Priton has *claimed* me, Malheur, and if I fail to show, not only will he have me banished at Court, but he will reveal your existence, and they will scour the Isle for you. There will be no poetry, no more symbolic verbiage: we’ll both be forced to the Aian drop and that’ll be that”.

“But – ”

“No, father is appointed in two nights, and I will stop this anaemic violence before it’s too late. The Black Knight has shown me the way, and I shall follow. They both seek peace. Well, *I’ll* reunite them both and see what happens”.

“It’s madness,” concluded Malheur sternly.

“I’ll save them. Léandres, Hemlock, Balafre. *I’ll save them all*. There are terrible powers at my hand, and I will teach Necropolis the meaning of humility”.

“Malice,” started her sister, “you are sleepless. Please reconsider”.

“Neghlin, three quarts. Can you procure this for me?”

“I...” Malheur failed to reply, bewildered. “I can. I will”.

“Now tell me, *where* did you find that book?”

She looked away into the distance, broken memories surfacing.

“A former lover. She was... unkind to me. I took it as compensation”.

“It belonged to one of the Thirteen. I need to know why she had it. *Where* she got it. Don’t you understand what this means?”

Malheur shrugged remorsefully.

“I knew not her name, as she did not mine. It was the only way for me, to – I was lonely”.

“*Peu importe*, nevermind,” concluded Malice as she hopped down the rock and upon the shore. “Calonio,” she then called out, “up, you slug! We’re going! *Now!*”

“Wait,” interjected Malheur, “where are you going?”

“Is it not plain to see?” spoke Malice as she dizzied off to the yurt, scuffling left and right. “I need treatment”.

“Consider the Void?,” coughed La Fourbe.
“No, my brethren. Consider us, rather.
Consider we are flawed beyond repair.
Consider the Wastes’ most impressive
nature. The Void stretches real: whilom
we are duller than the bleakest speck of
dirt”.

- Interview.
Inquisitive Council. Ch. 19.

XXXVII. Crooked Mansion

The mere sight of the mansion sent shivers down her spine. It rose against the cloudy night like some vast fantastic creature, perched lonely and foreboding on top of the hill.

Necropolis was literally buzzing with early evening gossip, feasts and courtship. Every Agora filled with dystopians hungry for food and hearsay. They crowded the streets, alleyways, roundabouts – so many beautiful faces in pale torchlight, fierce and comely.

Two cloaked prowlers advanced by paces light and calculated – wilful shadows in the dark. When the time was right, they both stepped into the outlying bushes and kneeling deep into the flowerbed, huddled against a basement window barred with iron.

Malice reached into a pouch at her side and stuffed a handful of noxberries into her mouth. The poisonous berries had sustained her so far, pale blue veins gorged with the toxin, muscles tensed tight.

“You know this stuff will kill you,” mumbled Calonio from under his hood as he unrolled a set of tools wrapped in thin leather. “Mess with your head, too”.

“Anything to get the taste of kencherries out of my mouth”. *Plus*, Malice thought, *I get to stay awake*. “Just you mind the lock”.

She yawned as the skilled hands got to work. It was astounding. All dystopians felt particularly inclined to this craft or that – nightly travail demanded as much – but few openly discussed the subtleties of breaking in unannounced. And here was, as clear to anyone, an over elaborate contraption.

“About that,” whispered Calonio, pulling on a shaft of welded iron, “you said the mansion was ‘built with security in mind’. Priton’s exact words, eh? *Et bien*, that’s a bit of an understatement. Looks like blunt overkill to me. What’s he so afraid of?”

Malice yawned again. “Can you get me *in*?”

“Succinct, are we?” he jested. “Sure. Broke into *your* place, didn’t I? Just you wait”.

She felt her insides turn. Raw kencherries were rare delicacies when it came to worms and birds, not human consumption, and not on an empty stomach.

“Are we even sure he’s inside?” she hastened to keep her focus elsewhere.

“Not in the slightest”.

“When you go to Spleen, tell him about the human condition. He’ll know I sent you. Should have that key by now. We’ll meet at your place and I’ll waken Léandres. I mean, I have to try again”.

“He’s hurt bad, Mal’. What can you possibly do that I haven’t tried?”

You don’t want to know.

“You have your talents. I have mine”.

Calonio carefully pushed the pang of his cloak against the tight enclosure and hammered through the fabric, the noise somewhat muffled. Two iron bars were soon dislodged. These he laid to the side and bowed low.

“There, you can squeeze in,” he stated, wrapping up the tools again. “Be safe, my friend”.

First time, she realized, he calls me friend.

She pulled her hood back and hugged him close. “Thank you”. The murderous urge was slowly coming back. It was close, *so close* –

“See you soon,” she said, “tell Spleen to be careful. *Nos ennemis sont nombreux*”.

Calonio closed the cloak about him and scurried off into the dark.

We have been reduced to this, she mused, shadows, one and all. Hounded. Lone.

Hurriedly she slipped into the opening, sucked beneath the ground and into the crooked mansion all at once, as in a nightmare – one she hoped she’d never face again.

Save for the window, the room was lightless. A study, poorly furnished, filmed with dust. The air hung heavy.

Swiftly, she unsheathed the bodkin. Her grasp on the handle brought back the full focus of her design, all through the weight of slumber. Anger pulsed through her veins anew, entire vision tinged red. The darkness immediately lifted and she could *see* everything at once.

“You and me, you sick fuck,” she whispered. Liefly she turned her thoughts inward. “Wrack!” she called, “I need you, *now*”.

Translucent vapours formed out of thin air, swaying into shape right in front of her. Frayed wings and spikes like blurred water colors on canvas.

“Murder,” hissed Wrack, “at long last”.

“Let’s go,” she urged, “you check the rooms. That sickie can’t be far. We’ll gut him before dawn”.

Her stomach turned again before she could reach the door. Everything veered. *Not now, not now!* She clutched at the walls for support. Spat down. Frantically reached for her pouch and gulped in a handful of noxberries. The acrid taste filled her mouth. She swallowed hard.

Vertigo grasped in a swoon as she barged through the hallway, vision blood-red, blade flashing. The shadow's susurrations soared as it flitted vengefully, through every opening, back and forth, to no avail.

The place was a maze.

Doors left and right in every direction, some painted on, some opening to reveal blank walls. Staircases went up and down and some stopped midway for no reason. Rooms angled impossibly large, others tight like cupboards. Everywhere, the stench of sandalwood, laced with Rape Resin, lingering in the air: in the carpet, the hardwood floor, the draperies, the couches and chair and *baldaquin* beds. Checkered patterns here and there, cutglass windows thick and blurry, the coalescent artwork, asymmetric tapestries, grotesque paintings.

The mansion's surreal congruence slowly took the form of pure dementia. Malice double-backed, again and again, wandering aimlessly, and only Wrack's constant instructions kept her from getting lost altogether.

Finally they burst through the session hall, deserted. Flashes of burnt memories hit Malice's tortured mind, she recoiled in shock. The Despicable Healer was nowhere to be found.

"On!" urged the shadow, "beyond, and *now!*"

She fought back the tears and strode across the nightmarish room. At the back they discovered an entirely different wing, mostly void of décor and windows, dim-lit, walls wood and stone-raw, little to no refinement.

"Truth behind the stage," observed the shadow.

Shivers ran down Malice's spine as they saw the outlines of a main circular hall. It had a heavy mirkwood door, locked from the outside.

"He's not in there," confirmed Wrack restlessly.

But Malice went in still.

Her blood froze.

It was a dungeon. One room, but vast: there at the center were three pivotal tables on thick mechanical wheels, all with iron clasps on all four corners. Chains fell down from the ceiling. Cuffs hung on the walls. On a side table lay different sizes of pincers, assorted lengths of rope, thick leather collars, whips, gags and other sexual contrivances. And on a bright silver tray, hooks and blades of all shapes.

The rough granite floor was stained with dark patches of what must have been blood.

Everything stank of old sweat.

Malice squeezed the bodkin grip tighter.

"He needs to die," she stated in the doorway.

"Malice –" started Wrack.

"He's *not here*," she heard a young voice echo behind.

"Not here," doubled another. "We are sad".

In an instant Malice wheeled round, blade flashing. They just stood there in the hallway – the twin boys, dressed in pale linen, almost white. Smiling like morning flowers.

"We know you," spoke the one on the left.

The other repeated: "we know you".

Their eyes hollow, cleft beyond reckoning. Smiles graven there as upon a slab of rock.

"Where is he?" Malice demanded, as calmly as she could.

"Not here," answered the first, to which the second repeated, "we are sad".

Broken dolls, Malice, hissed the shadow, they're too far gone. You can't help them.

"Why are you here?" she asked, voice atremble. "What are you doing *here*?"

"This is our home," said the first.

"We live here," said the second.

"But –" Malice chanced, disheartened, "this man, he's... *hurt* you, can't you see?"

She was met with twin square smiles.

“We love daddy Pri”.

“We love him”.

“Why...” *the eyes, so empty, reft of joy forever.* “Why has... daddy Pri’ gone?”

They shone like vases on a shelf.

“No more special spice”.

“We need more special spice”.

Gone to harvest Resin, whispered Wrack, out in the wild.
We’ve few chances, but we must go now.

Malice fought back the tears.

These children, thoughts of Eglantine and Kalian coursed through Malice’s mind, I can’t leave them here!

But her mind was already made up, and Wrack knew it quite well. She reluctantly closed the dungeon door behind and started in the hallway.

The children let her walk past, like ghosts in the mansion.

“We know you,” repeated the first one.

But the other remained silent.

“*Burn it down,*” urged the shadow-creature as Malice darted back to the opening. “Burn it all down!”

“Can’t,” whimpered Malice through muted tears, “*I can’t...*”

We do not hoard. We share. We do not rule, we simply are. As night bathes us eternally, so our sorrows should be few, and all desires fulfilled accordingly.

There are other ways to live together, we know as much. But there are pains in existence we need not suffer – anymore.

Codex Mortem. 23-I.

XXXVIII. Stalker

It was past the Witching Hour ere they made it to the woods. At that point, Malice was struggling just to keep up. Wrack scouted out ahead, hovering as he went. Every other moment, a black, smoky claw stretched in her direction, waving in.

“Just a little further,” she heard the blood-wet breath reverberate across her mind.

It was a cool night. They were a few hours’ walk from Necropolis, significantly higher ground – too high in altitude for mirktrees, Black Hyacinth or even Thylems. In their stead, majestic pines lined all around, stretching up out of sight, trunks wide, earth soft with needles stacked three feet deep, and these choked out most of the undergrowth. Lower branches, dead and dry, shot out from the trunks at eye’s height, pointed like daggers. Erratic rocks, man-high and oft larger, dotted the horizon like so many grey spots.

The canopy blotted out what faint light the clouded night skies might have delivered. It was a dark forest. One renowned for the rare plants and fungi that preferred acidic soil. No wonder *he* came around here.

They'd picked up Priton's lantern light an hour ago and had been trailing him ever since. Malice's cloaked figure just another shade of black, on the prowl.

Third night without sleep.

There was a quick snap in the distance. Broken twig or branch.

"He's nigh," stated Wrack.

Malice was nodding away.

Don't sleep, don't sleep.

She stepped on soft ground and paused behind a large stone to catch her breath. Everything was spinning. Water, she needed water. But it was true: there were flickers of flamelight seeping through the trees. Where was he?

How far? she asked the shadow.

"Hundred paces. Little more. Collecting bugs from rotten logs. Dirty business, this".

"How many?"

"Just the one bloated goat".

Malice smiled in the dark. It was time, at long last.

He's helpless, she thought. Not a living soul within earshot. Can't possibly outrun me.

Wrack echoed confidently. "Gut him".

Like a gust of wind she darted out from behind the rock and made for the Healer's back, her sight engulfed in a thick film of blood.

He was hunched over a stump, glass lantern on the ground besides him. In the crook of his arm he held a jar buzzing with crawling things.

"Oy!" she groaned vengefully, blade flashing wildly, "daddy Pri', remember *me*?"

The Healer shook from head to foot, shot up with lantern raised. He squinted in her direction, carefully stepping back.

"Why, my child," he mumbled nervously, "what do you... *think* you are doing here? What can you possibly hope to accomplish?"

The jar fell at his feet and the lid came off. Dozens of insects ramped out.

The shadow laughed.

“More questions,” insisted Malice, “you perverted *fuck!* Go on, *say on*, I’ll cut your tongue out first!”

She was getting dangerously close.

“You *can’t* do this,” he hastened, regaining his composure, “you don’t *want* to do this. I’ve written down the information you gave me. All your secrets. Should anything happen to me, they will come out”.

Her figure slowly came into light, features twisted, one large grin drawn like a cut across her face.

“They won’t. Not the way they’ll find your body”.

Priton swallowed hard, scanned his surroundings.

“Should be thankful I didn’t say anything,” he countered, “didn’t want to compound your problems. Even protected you, but you don’t want to see it, *no*. I understand you were wronged by these people... these codes, these Tenets. You deserve to live just like everybody else. See? I don’t think you’re unfit. Don’t you realize I’m different from everyone else, *just like you?* I’m just... trying to cope with it”.

He’s going at it again, Mal’, warned the shadow. This time, we don’t hesitate.

Malice felt inner cords tighten. “You had no right”.

Priton was backing up against a tree. “What choice did I have? I *normally* don’t recourse to Resin, that’s not how I heal people, usually we just talk, but they – they told me to *fix* you. ‘Fix you’, that’s what they said. But you can’t be fixed, I know that much. It’s just – if only the... treatment had held, you’d have been *happy*, Malice, and there would have been no need for any of this senseless violence, I swear”.

“Turning me into a puppet! Everyone’s *plaything!*”

“I shouldn’t have, *I shouldn’t* – ” his voice started shaking, “it was too hard to resist, I’m so sorry... it’s just,

no one will *have* me,” tears bubbled in heavy lidded eyes, “all you people think I’m so disgusting and repulsive. You talk about pleasure always, so thin and perfect, but you don’t share with the likes of me, you make us feel miserable, inadequate, all the time – and you were so beautiful, and you hated me with such passion, I couldn’t – I’m so sorry..”.

In a selfsame second Malice hesitated. The blood-red rage subsided and she let her guard down slightly. Wrack wheeled to her side, wings fluttering, screaming incoherently.

When Priton cast the lantern in her direction, she lunged to her side a second too late. It broke on a rock behind and splashed flaming oil all over her cloak. A burst of agonizing light shot into her red-sight, blinding her momentarily. Retching on smoke, she fumbled for the brooch at her throat, unclasped it frantically, then freed herself and jumped towards the Healer, ready to strike.

The first flechette whistled past her temple before she even realized what was happening. It was impossible to see now, everything was dark from the overbearing flames: there were shapes, left and right – which were trees, rocks, where was *he*?

She plunged two paces forward, trying to shield herself as best she could. The second flechette bit right into her forearm, full inch deep.

Malice recoiled in terror.

“What?” snarled the Healer, his voice echoing from all sides. “You think I don’t know what you are?”

Poison, hissed Wrack, *Syllia venom!*

She heard the cord snap this time, rolled left, the third flechette missing her by a fraction. She crawled up against a tree trunk for cover, wheezing, gasping for air.

“You’re an abomination,” continued Priton from afar, “we know your kind. We’ve seen it before. La Fourbe spelled it out, centuries ago. *Abomination*. Should have

choked you straight from the womb. That red eye. Just like her. Should have known”.

Quickly now, pressed the shadow, do it!

Biting on her lip, Malice pulled out the dart in one stroke. Blood welled up from the wound like a spring.

“But there is no Voivode, no Great Ender” Priton continued, “only sick minds waiting for therapy. Would that I could have saved you, my child, what succulent saps we’d have suckled together”.

Sweat ebbed on Malice’s brow. She reversed her grip on the bodkin, pressed down unto her skin – two cuts, like an X. More blood seeped up from the gash. She clenched her teeth to keep from screaming out in pain.

“Why you even do this,” taunted the Healer further, “is quite the object of speculation, my child. Your resilience is as fraught with pride as it is unambiguously vain. We *knew* Malheur was still on the Isle, and where, but were quite content to leave her to strengthen the ranks of the Smugglers. Now you’ve forced our hand, and we’ve sent a scouting party...” He started laughing from the distance, a disgustingly hearty chuckle. “She’d be dead by now”.

Dead? fumed Malice. *That can’t be!* Fighting back spasms along her neck, she bit down on the open wound and started sucking the blood out, spitting and sucking again –

Priton’s voice was trailing off.

“You can’t fight Dominae, you sorry sot! Her veiled hand rules absolute. A true dawn is rising, a New Era. The Black Knight’s dishevelled psyche is merely icing on the cake. Perfect, almost”.

He’s getting away, hissed Wrack, *after him!*

Malice scrambled to her feet, desperately, clawing at the earth with the blade, chin slick with venomous blood, agony lapping up her arm. Her pupils dilated woefully to the firelight, but she managed to see again. The ground was not on the level. All sense of direction lost.

For a second she *saw* him there, gloating, all flaccid and obscene. When she lunged forth and stabbed, the bodkin bit into wood. Chips fell off.

He was everywhere – everywhere at once.

“*Maintenant je dois m’excuser,*” she heard from a distance, “I’ve Perpetual Court to attend. Couldn’t heed my warning, so be it. You are soon to be declared unfit and enemy of Dystopia – you and all those who take your side. Pray for death before they find you here. Should I feel that tasty bosom of yours again, it will be locked in my special room, no one will hear you scream, and I’ll have my way, as I always do, Dominae willing”. He added then, but an echo in the dark forest. “*Fais de beaux rêves!*”

Malice fell to her knees, tears streaming, scalding down her cheek.

Wrack stood at her back, spreading black vaporous wings around her. She hugged herself as the hallucinations garnered strength on all sides.

The images came swift, Léandres, Josy and Hemlock, and Malheur, Triste, Blood-Lips and Sharp-Eyes – and Mother Morbid towering over them all, judgmental as she reaped away everything Malice ever held dear, like wheat for the harvest. They swarmed her beaten shape like revenants, all begging to get *in* –

When everything, the trees, the visions, the night skies were drowned in blood –

Blood –

Burning red rage engulfed the woods, swept arching up the soil and into the starless heavens, the oil fire and its despicable luminescence readily snuffed out at once, those phantom figures immersed with circles of searing blood-flames, and the waves engulfed the very forest, again and again – sent pounding, splintering, *breaking* and scorching everything in their path – until the great pines tumbled over themselves in shrieks of torn wood and a storm of

broken needles, *away* – away from the screeching haunt in
their midst, screaming –
 Screaming for retribution.

Errance trombe à l'orée des cieux
Clair de sang, perdu par les médusés
À scander hors et large, 'nous sommes perdus'
Mais ensemble –
Ensemble et jusqu'au bout.

- Jothriel's Lament. I-II.
Hallows Archives.

XXXIX. Betrayed

“Calonio,” Malice called in the doorway, “please tell me you’re here – ”

A few moments seemed to have passed. Might have been hours. Difficult to tell. She’d regained her senses amidst the acid smell of scorched earth and bark, everything burnt and laid to waste ten paces in every direction. The wound in her forearm swollen and pulsating without relent, smeared black with blood down to her fingertips.

“Please,” she repeated, “not you *too* –”

Wrack had sheltered her throughout the entire ordeal, dark malignance wrapped around her broken figure like a shroud. When she finally came to her senses, she’d immediately donned the charred woollen cloak and scurried back to Necropolis.

“We have to go,” pressed the shadow behind her, “they would be looking for you now”.

Fuck, she whispered. *Fuck*.

The house had been ransacked.

Malice stood in the vestibule. Door unlocked – they hadn’t barged it down. Pulling back the hood, she stepped through the rubble, unbelieving.

Tables overturned, entire bookshelves cast down, papers strewn all around. Glassware broken entirely, shards speckled and crackled underfoot. Carpets discarded to the side, floorboards laid bare.

Sodden embers smouldered low in the living room enclave – whatever took place, it was recent.

No sign of Spleen at the Hallows. And now *this* –

“They’d have him,” deduced the shadow-creature, trailing around the rooms, “probably, or he’s gone into hiding. Might not even have the book. By the Void, Malice, how many steps ahead were *they*?”

“I have to know,” she replied absent-minded, wandering through the chaos. *I have to know if he’s here.*

“I have your back,” spoke Wrack in a reassuring tone, posting itself in the doorway. “Just you hurry”.

Like a corpse she dragged her feet into the kitchen at the rear of the house. Pots and pans tossed upon the floor, broken plates and shattered glass.

Can’t be, can’t –

The basement hatch had been hacked open, planks of wood cleft apart and iron clasps twisted asunder. Some pieces had even been wrenched from their hinges altogether.

She climbed down the jagged remains and unto the cold staircase. Cool darkness welcomed her into the wine cellar.

Gone. He was *gone*.

It was a fairly modest cave, mirkwood racks lining three walls. Stoneware stacked to the side. Two kegs of whiskey and a few dozen bottles. In the middle, a makeshift bed had been laid out hastily: blankets and a soft pillow next to jugs of water, chamber pot and some healing salves in bowls of clay. In the corner stood a lute, forgotten.

They’d *taken* him.

Malice’s hands curled into fists.

Kinship to hate
Supple to rack
Whisper to scream
Purple to black
And hack
And hack

- Anne-Marie Desvents.
Poèmes. Unlisted.

XXXX. Blood Of My Blood

Tenebrous revelries had reached a crux when Malice and Wrack stormed the Demon Den.

They'd dashed through the streets and into the catacombs like a murder of crows, she, cloaked and hooded, and the shadow-creature, winged darkly at her side. They flew quick and indomitable to the bowels of Necropolis.

Assembled courtesans cackled oblivious on the steps to the enclosure, naked gorges milk-white, delicate lace and tight claps, crimson lips and pale ghastly fond, eyes locked on every seductive glance and gesture – careless to heed the black hooded figure hastening by.

When Malice landed on the prime tier of the Den, she cast back her hood, showing off iron countenance. Marble columns rose left and right. Sloths and decadents had swarmed the place thick that night – sprawled over couches and cushions and stools, alluring, deathly pale and sullen. Four large braseros of smouldering coals across the room, glowing dimly.

She surveyed the lot for the *one* she sought.

Castellin creaked to the side, cellos and drums at unison whilst the shadow rasped in her ear. "There, leftside corridor. Communion of Flesh".

But one flimsy succubae had already caught her sight. The woman came up to Malice – young, long slender legs,

short satin skirt, purple blouse half-buttoned to reveal a tight leather choker over perky breasts.

Accusing eyes landed on hers.

Dastard-unfit.

The wench was about to holler out in indignation when Malice broke rank, seized her by the throat and rammed her head into the marble column.

Just once.

The vixen fell to the floor like a rag.

Malice's vision swirled sanguine red as she smiled.

Invisible lightning struck the Den when the hollow *thump* echoed across the main hall. Myriad intoxicated eyes rose up to meet the outcast. All music stopped at once. They watched, confounded, as the outcast raised her blade, arm glazed with dried streaks of blood. Her other hand, squeezed into a fist, wrapped in thin coils of metal chain.

Time lapsed tensely as she walked, step by step, scanning the hall. Fear gripped the onlookers as they turned to one another, panicked beyond reason.

Whispers ignited furiously.

"At Noctem," some said.

"Exile".

"*Murderer!*"

She'd almost made it to the other side when one of the wretches ditched his *bakhra* pipe and jumped in her direction, both palms outstretched in a feint of sympathy.

Wrack hissed like a snake.

Malice stepped to the side, slid up to the unwary man and jabbed the blade between his ribs, in to the hilt, turning the edge with a flick of the wrist, then pushed him away.

He fell in a gush of blood, one muted scream wheezing out as he gasped for air he couldn't find.

Blood red, blood –

A distinct clash was heard when a second man, no older than she, seized a bottle of Daemondrought by the neck and smashed it on the stone wall. He swung once, twice –

jagged glass arching to the air. Malice dodged painstakingly and hooked a metal punch across his temple. The broken bottle bit into her thigh as he crashed down.

Malice screamed as both fabric and flesh were torn. She squirmed out of his hold, then held him down, squeezing both knees into his stomach as she beat him repeatedly with one iron fist, blood splattering across her face as the blows fell hard and fast, again and *again*, crushing his teeth in –

“Malice,” shrieked the shadow, “Malice!”

They were *all* standing now, bodkins flashing, tens poised in every direction, eyes glowering with rage.

She stood up, face contorted, blue veins speckled with crimson droplets, laughing, *laughing* –

The chain was slick with blood as she unrolled it, five feet long. In the very second the intoxicated, sultry courtesans started for her, Malice slung the chain down around one of the braseros’ triple feet, then *pulled*, pulled as hard she could –

The iron-welded bowl keeled over, burning embers spilling out in every direction, hitting carpet, tapestries, cushions, wooden kegs –

Fire roared as she darted, limping into the side-corridor, soon followed with screams of outrage.

Wrack flittered, giggling hysterically.

Inside the treacherous maze, torches lined the way, yet as her veins pulsed madly with bloodlust, so did Malice will them out, and they were snuffed instantly, spilling rancid smoke into the air. Pure darkness embraced her silhouette as she sped, bleeding profusely, yet unopposed across the catacombs of the Demon Den.

Pursuit couldn’t be far behind.

“Flesh wound, never you mind,” croaked Wrack. “Up ahead, then left”.

But she knew the way by heart.

Twin black curtains parted slightly as Malice slid into the recluse room, air heavy with lust and all aromas of flesh. The shadow rose behind her, fanged wings outstretched, claws spread sharp, outlining her own fierce features.

Before Malice's demented stare enacted the height of Communion of Flesh: in the damp circular room, twenty naked bodies writhing as one indistinct mass of swaying rhythms, ardent caresses, tongues and fingers and limbs entwined, pushing in, and *deeper* still –

The very ambiance was heady with a melange of freely flowing desires, kisses wet, spirits drenched in every shape and twist of pleasure – and low flamelight from torches to the sides shown splashes of lust on taut skin, slithering again to quench an insatiable thirst –

And at their center, the median child of the Morbid daughters. Her signature charcoal streaks, like tears, over white-paste fond – smudged all over.

Malice breathed in deep.

“Delectation without a care!” she yelled, stepping forth as the first few recognized her. “Whilst others churn and torment, our dear sister wouldst drown herself league-deep in skin! And how fitting, for a *harlot*”.

Fear spread through Communion like wildfire. Screams reverberated through the stone walls of the catacombs, smoke from the hallway already blowing in.

“Pray thee, cyprians,” called Malice mockingly as some naked partakers stood up, “run back to the witless haunts that spawned you. We Morbids need to *talk*”.

Parting bodies crawled up from their state of bliss, fleeing in earnest, revealing more and more the one in their midst.

“*Sister* – ” Merveille protested, naked skin slimy with sweat, oils and the sweet nectars of prolonged desire. Her eyes burned with confusion and anger.

But Malice towered over her.

“How *could* you?” spat she vengefully.

My love, my precious love, and everyone!

When the other tried to get up, Malice merely kicked her down, flat on her back, stamping her under one boot.

“They’ll be here any second,” warned the shadow.

“Fine,” Malice replied over her shoulder. “Find me another way out. Now”.

“You’re, you’re...” Merveille chanced, terrified beyond her wits, “talking to it, aren’t you? That *thing*?”

“Hold that honeyed tongue!” commanded Malice, pressing harder unto her sister’s chest. “I asked a simple question. *How could you?*” Blood was ebbing from the wound in her thigh, trickling down unto milk-white breasts.

“I, I –” Merveille was gasping for air, the full weight nearly crushing her ribcage, “had no choice”.

“You *lie!*”

“I’m not. I love you, Mal’, please go, I’ll stall them – ”

“Non! You traitor! You told them everything!”

“They knew already, *I swear*, I would never –”

Malice pressed down harder, more blood welled from the gash in her leg.

“Arh!” Merveille squirmed underfoot, suffocating.

“Where have they taken *him*?”

“Didn’t – *sah*, didn’t say”.

“Who’s Dominae?” she screamed, “*who is she?*”

“No *who*, not some – *rah*, an – idea, *arh!*”

“What! What idea?”

“Pl-ease, I – *arh!*”

“Tell me!”

“Struc-ture, ord-er, just – *arh*, I’m not – *sure!*”

Wrack wheeling in suddenly besides Malice, one clawed hand stretching out to the opposite wall. “There,” it hissed, “antechamber, closet, narrow passage. Best hurry, darkling”.

“You *betrayed* me,” she turned back to her sister, “sent me to that... that *violator*, squealed to Mother at every turn, and now me, and Malheur, and Calonio and Léandres, we’re done for, Dystopia will fall, and *Father* – ah, curse you! You’re rotten to the core, Merveille – I wish you a long and pestilent life”.

As Malice released her hold, the other shrieked and rolled to the side, hugging her chest in agony, retching out.

And while she stepped into the side-room, the youngest of the Morbid daughters called out into the Demon Den.

“Adieu. You’ll never see me again”.

“Live freely, do no harm,” – treat each other with respect, always. You may not be friends, but do not become enemies. You are only ever as free as the people around you... near or far.

- Aurielle la Pure.
Reflexions. Ch. 3, p.43

XXXXI. Despoiled Grounds

It was a miserable fire, fed on bark scraps and dead leaves. Faint smoke whiffed up in spirals, fading softly into the canopy of evergreens.

She'd elected to rest and break fast at dawn, sheltered on the sparsely forest edge which lead to the seaside. Three beadrolls of chourrée, one waterskin taken from an Agora. A pouch full of noxberries she'd picked from the bushes on the way.

Eyes bloodshot and puffed from tears and sleeplessness, face pale as death, cheeks hollowed out – all expressions dulled, like a living corpse. Linen pants torn at the thigh and caked with blood, blouse stained and sodden.

The gashes in her forearm were swollen and rimmed with red. Trickle of pus ran down to her wrist: the infection was spreading.

Wrack sat besides her as she waved a dull blade through the feeble flames.

“Naturally,” he kept arguing, “you shouldn’t... assume she spoke a single word of truth”.

“I *had* her,” brooded Malice, distantly. “She would have cracked. If she knew, if she did – ”

“Faux. She lied. And we know this because she kept in character. We’ve yet to see the *real* Merveille, the one hiding *behind* the getup, behind the hunger”.

The shadow was right, Malice knew. And despicably so.

“It may be all there is to see of my aesthete sister. To claim more is presumption. Wrack: I’m at a complete loss. *Table rase*. Tonight is Hemlock’s demise, and I can’t stop it, I’ve laid out plans – plans *within* plans, as you counselled me, though in every direction they were merely *waiting*, and in full force”.

Through the trees, they could see the terrain sloping down to the beach bordering the cliffs, and there: the charred remains of Malheur’s refuge, still smouldering, and besides the ruins, an entire herd massacred – blood and guts and entrails left to rot. And no sign of Malheur.

“If only I could *sleep*,” Malice’s voice trembled, “leave this wretched place behind, like they want me to, but how, and to go where, *where*?”

The edges of the blade were now glowing red.

“I’ve lost, *lost* – there’s nowhere, and nothing, and death and despair stacked thick for anyone to see, ‘one candle in the Dark’, said Hemlock, which could be snuffed out at any time, but don’t you see it Wrack; I don’t know the flame, only the smoke, and the grey, all around is lifeless and trite and weak – ”

Everything was grey. It was always grey. The skies, the sea, Wrack, the smoke, the Void –

“Since birth. Defective. And now I fully understand *why* they slay the unfit: *this*,” she admitted, “is no life to live”.

All at once Malice took the blade out of the fire and stuck it flatly against the wound. Searing pain shot out up her arm and into her neck. Infected flesh wheezed rank vapours.

“I remember, not so long ago,” began the shadow-creature, “a game of chess by candle light. There was a caring, gentle man, who loved you unconditionally, and he was wise beyond all ken. Victory seemed eminent but hubris blinded all calculations to the end. Hemlock showed you the weakness of aligned superiority, as constantly

tangled in its own webs – one piece can break the entire force if sent behind the lines at just the right angle, the right moment”.

Malice bit her tongue. The sudden adrenaline rush drilled her senses awake.

“He said, you should all be equals. You’re not the abomination. *They* are”.

She dipped the blade into the flames and pressed the burning iron once more, savouring the sensation.

“They’re everywhere,” continued Wrack, “but they can’t see you. You can bring it all down. Twist the ends of their sordid plots round all ankles and necks and *pull*”.

“Neghlin,” intervened Malice, “is a useless compound. Fuck, it’s barely even used for tanning anymore. I don’t want to poison Hemlock, better he had the Drop than some foul stifling muck”.

“The Black Knight knows”.

“He’s insane. And in any case, there’s no time. Neghlantha roots are fed from lightless upland cesspools. Hard to find, long to make, and *three* quarts, at that! Malheur *failed*. No time, don’t you understand?”

“If you go now, you could make it to the Hills and back by sundown. They think they have you on the run”.

“But they do. There are scouts in the forest”.

“I can help you slip by. If you strike at the heart of Necropolis, it won’t matter anymore”.

And she could see the truth of it. Pieces poised to ensnare, all around, to and from and back and front, but they didn’t know, *they couldn’t see* – the fell power, the blood-red agony, so fierce and indomitable. Her vengeance in motion.

“Malice,” insisted Wrack, “now is the time”.

“*D’accord*,” she concluded, “*d’accord*”.

Rallying her composure, she gazed deep into the flames. They rose higher, *higher*, soaring at her will – deadly bright.

“They had it coming”.

O, Dystopia, fated land of night, such beauties thou art!
Thee we hold aslant, yet found in thee secure – prevail!
Many leagues of death have cowered us hither, and we fear,
The greatest taint of old lieth not in Waste – but within.

- Gaël des Vers.
“Upon seeing Dystopia”, II

XXXXII. Hawthorn Hills

Thick fog nestled Hawthorn Hills, blanketing deep,
pale vapours spread ethereal, these treacherous woodlands
caught in a dreamlike state.

Malice and her shadow made their way silently,
accompanied only by the suckling wet earth and droplets of
dew on thorns three inch long as they fell, one by one,
echoing crystalline pure. A marriage of beauty and cruelty,
the branches arched at man-height – she had to duck her
head and keep a hand in front to dodge the merciless
needles.

For hours they trekked, lost in the surreal atmosphere.
The hawthorns were in bloom – all white flowers and black
berries, moist and tender. The way wound up steadily, oft
sloping down to valleys where cool rivulets ran wild
amongst rounded rocks, to which Malice drank avidly,
splashing ever more water on her face.

Like a wraith she walked, enwrapped in her tattered
cloak, meandering through the ghostly fog, thoughts adrift
and footing heavy, the cuts on her thigh burning acid-like.
She felt weak, spent, barely able to put one booted foot in
front of the other, when Wrack suddenly broke the spell.

“Wait,” it cut in, “look yon”.

She shook off her reverie. It was there, not too far away,
a sort of clearing in the distance: one path lining through
the crooked trees.

Why, she mused slumberous, *who would even bother?*

“Someone who could likely trail the way”.

We could go faster.

“And risk it?”

“I don’t care,” she spoke out loud, bringing the bodkin to her hand. “Sure, anyone this far is out for truffles or wild honey. No threat to us”. She laughed, dizzy with fatigue. “Maybe even feel inclined to *share* the lot”.

Malice steered unto the path, relieved to stand fully upright. Without hesitation she started on the way, making haste though limping slightly.

“Scout ahead,” she asked Wrack, “would you?”

“Aye,” the black shape hissed as it flittered forward at an alarming speed.

She felt the first pangs of hunger then – all this talk of sweets and mushrooms. All supplies had been exhausted now, save for the waterskin she’d filled at the first stream. It’d make for a meagre lunch, to say the least. The effect of the noxberries had long worn off, leaving all muscles raked and soggy with sleep. Now the entire body swayed on the edge of breaking down, aching for sustenance. She would need to feed. And soon.

Violets grew on the path sides, purple with a crest of blue at the very center of the corolla, like veins fainting into each petal.

Malice thought of the yellow flower.

It was impossible, she realized, to conceive another place – another land – that was not exactly the same. Indeed, there would be trees, and wilderness, and flowers too – and how could anything pleasant be any different? If a tithe of the Founder’s scriptures were true, the reality of the other world would be nothing short of a waking nightmare. And yet, Balafre had called them ‘Dystopian scum’.

The Hawthorn Hills are beautiful, she thought. *Beautiful and vile, like each and everyone of us.*

In the distance, thunder rumbled.

A storm was coming, and fast.

Wrack rose blackly before her, frayed wings outspread.

“Come. You’ll want to see this,” it rasped.

She could already see the glade amongst the trees, an opening at the end of the path.

“Deserted?” she asked, nervously, gripping the handle tight.

“It is. Not a soul in sight”.

Malice walked forward, emerging from the thick, thorny edge into a circular space no more than twenty paces wide, cleared of trees and undergrowth.

A camp – out in the middle of nowhere.

Makeshift shelters of interwoven branches, cot beds rolled up and loosely tied. One fireplace in the middle, run cold, and a small smithy to the one side, ashes still warm.

“Empty,” spoke Malice, dumbfounded.

“Though not long ago”. Wrack was surveying the surroundings. “And it would be, if they were all out hunting for you. How ironic we’d stumble unto such a place unmanned”.

“How unnerving”.

Malice glimpsed a cage of small welded copper strings, covered in a dirty blanket. When she looked inside, the very blood froze in her veins.

A dozen Syllia, feasting on dead crickets.

Myriad bubbled eyes stared at her, gleaming with feral intensity.

“By the Void – ”

To the side lay a crate filled with empty glass vials and small corks. Some rusty tweezers lain carelessly in the faded grass.

“Here,” called Wrack, “there are scabbards long, all empty”.

“Swords? For what?”

“Let’s not find out, shall we?” the shadow’s blood-wet voice reverberated across the camp.

“Wherever they went,” added Malice when she found a stash of food still warm, “they went in a hurry”.

In a leather sac: one flagon of wine, lentil pâtés with crushed seasonings, three loaves of flat bread, then a mush of potatoes and carrots mixed with chickpeas, all neatly wrapped in a bundle.

Her insides squirmed at the sight. She packed the whole thing frantically, save for the wine. It was too heavy, and she had trouble staying awake as it was.

Thunder rolled on once more, streaks of lightning splitting the sky to the East. The air grew charged with electricity.

“I’m missing something here,” she brooded. “*Pourquoi...* it doesn’t make any sense”. Her mind was drawing a blank, fogged like the Hills.

The shadow-creature rose up next to her.

“Malheur never did say *where* she got the book”.

“Priton spoke of Smugglers. Said they let her join their side. They were happy to do so, whoever in fuck *they* are”.

“And Balafre was waylaid on the shore. Three of them. Like they were posted there on purpose”.

Pieces were falling in Malice’s mind, like leaves.

“Petite Mort. How it’d come into *their* hands”. Images of Blood-Lips and Sharp-Eyes, convulsing, half-naked on the bed. “Even so... why? *Why?*”

“At Noctem? Like Malheur?”

“Well, clearly they must have helped her sustain herself, there, all alone. Her... leman of sort. But so many of them – impossible. There have been few exiles. And most couldn’t possible fend for themselves, or so I’ve been told”.

The shadow shrugged.

“Maybe Malheur deceived you, darkling. Could she have been in league with the elders all along?”

No, no, *it can’t be* –

“No, no, she didn’t know – didn’t know what the book was. Just stole it. And she was armed, she was... scared. She wouldn’t have lied”.

A curtain of rain suddenly started falling from the skies, hissing in steam as it hit the smithy. Droplets rebounded off deep dark leaves, sliding down thorns and pale white flowers.

Meanwhile, Malice stood in the middle of the clearing, lost in thoughts. She pulled on the hood and pressed her cloak tightly, mechanically.

Ignorance, she mulled, makes unwitting liars of us all.

“The rain will clear the fog,” urged Wrack. “It’s not safe to linger. You’ve found food, let’s be grateful. We must hurry now, quickly”.

On she went, bewildered completely.

It’s impossible, she thought. All of it.

“The Caves can’t be that far,” pressed the shadow, “but rain means flood, so time is of the essence, unless you can breathe underwater”. It then stretched out a slender, vaporous black claw up North, higher up into Hawthorn Hills, and concluded: “you will not like the way”.

Stand as one and thus against many, sleep
and bask in leeching company – so many
answers the social question has eradicated.
Forsooth, here we are, free at last. Now
what shall we do with so much of us?

- Jothriel.

First hearing at Perpetual Court.

Transcript, Hallows Archives.

XXXXIII. Ci-haut, ci-bas

“How far,” Malice gasped as she seized another cleft of rock and hauled herself up, “is this *bloody fuck Cave*?”

Lightning streaked the sky as she battled her way through the storm, clambering up the jagged edges of the hillside, rain pouring down like nails, stinging her face. It was a furious storm – gales pounding from the North again and again, whistling into the waning light as though the very Isle wailed in torment.

At this altitude, there were no trees, only bushes of thorny heathers sprouting from cracks in the rock, flowers all purple to black, shreds of lichen hanging like locks of grey hair from the branches.

Malice cursed through clenched teeth. Night was coming fast, time was running out. She braced herself on all fours, hooded, shifting balance right to left, and left to right, dreadfully slow, hands death white and numb with cold, while the cuts on her thigh had opened anew and pink trickles oozed down her leg.

Wrack stayed close as always, imprinted into the stone, flowing upwards effortlessly at her side, like some intangible spectator, as Malice struggled for her life.

Little more, she thought. *Little more* –

“To think,” started the shadow-creature, blood-wet voice winding through her tortured mind, “Aurielle wrote a nice little sonnet about the place, quite catching if I recall”.

"This is ridiculous," argued Malice whilst regaining her footing from a stone that had just dislodged under her weight, rolling down the hillside and out of sight. "I'm never going to make it, let alone in time".

Wrack continued nonetheless.

"It went something like *j'irai me promener, d'or et des prés...*"

"Yes, yes," she cut in acerbically, "we all know the rhyme. Must you, really?"

"*Jusqu'en terre de gré, ci-haut, ci-bas, ci-haut, ci-bas...*"

Malice moaned as a pointy rock bit into her stomach.

"Vapid tart that she was".

"Kindest of Founders, it is writ," sang the shadow, "and none too simple - coined most of the Tenets, you know".

"Shows what she got about any fuck thing".

Another gale stuck unto the hillside, screaming as rain curtains lashed on like needles.

"You think the Tenets are to blame," asked the shadow creature. "Or is it merely the individuals who fail to equal their worth? Tell me, wherein lieth the fault? Human nature? Apparatus? Reification?"

Malice knew - Wrack was only trying to keep her mind busy, get her thinking about something else. Simple strategy to resilience. A sweet gesture. But as soon as Malice gleaned into it, its aim failed completely.

"I don't..." Her spirit wavered. "I really don't care anymore".

The shadow paused for a while as the storm roared on.

"True, you don't seem well".

She smiled, nearly faltering.

"I'm soaked down to my kidneys, thank you".

"*Sérieusement*. Think you can make it? This isn't the easiest path, but the others - well, caution over speed, for now".

Cold water mingled with drool dripped down her lower lip, instantly sucked into a patch of deep green moss.

“Everything’s dizzy. It’s getting worse. I feel ill. Weak. So, that’s a maybe not”.

Wrack shifted his tone to a lighter stance, which seemed oddly off, considering the scathing nature of his tongue.

“Could be much, much worse”.

Humouring me, she thought.

“Could be better. Infinitely better. *Dry*, for one”. She burst out laughing, unable to control herself. “Oh, a little fire and bottle of rosé, satin sheets and supple young flesh to play! Ah!”

The jest made her think of Léandres, and she was horrified to realize how much she missed him, there, lost in the middle of nowhere and shivering all over – and hopelessly so – as though oceans of emptiness kept them apart, and they stood entire worlds away.

Tears filled her eyes, unseen amidst the rain.

“Fuck this,” she murmured, stricken with remorse, “forget it, just let me die here. Go and be someone else’s little delirium tremens. Think I’ll just stay here, enjoy the view”.

“You won’t,” Wrack countered stoically.

“What a rotten way –”, she started laughing again, unheeding, near hysteric, “what a rotten way to go!”

“Malice,” hissed Wrack, “you see that faille rising over there?”

She did, she’d been trying to get there for what seemed like aeons – this dark line rising up into the rock like a wound.

She coughed into her sodden sleeve, spat.

“Hard to miss”.

“Might just be the one,” countered the creature.

“We’ve passed a dozen like this – shallow, dead ends”.

The shadow remained silent: one black formless patch on her side.

Malice looked around, dark lands drenched and slumberous, flowers and thorns in every direction, the

storm-clouded heavens like a shroud over Dystopia. Everything hung on chance: her life, merely a single thread woven with others, a tress into the Void, lost if she let go, and damned –

Fuck, blue-tinged lips formed, soundless, *fuck*.

Malice shifted her weight again, punching through vertigo – dug another hand forward as the world reeled around, sought for stable footing – found some, pressed onward.

Closer, closer still.

“You know,” she said, “I hate you so much”.

I have stared into the Dark, and what have I seen: nothingness *in motion*. What if we gazed, not into the bleak, but from within it, looking out? How would the world seem then?

- Malheur Clairevaux.
Diary. Last entry, p. 85

XXXXIV. The Dark

She was up to her knees in muck when Malice realized the tepid pools where Neghlantha hydrophytes grew were leech-infested.

“Bordel!”

Running her hands through rank waters in search of the roots, she felt some of the slithering pests slide through her fingers. Some might have already latched unto her legs – sucking, and she knew, since they injected numbing venom, she wouldn’t feel the bites... just yet.

No matter. The cave was flooding fast – she had to act, and quickly. A pair of roots already lay glistening to the side of the granite pool, but she needed more, Balafre had said three quarts, so that meant – that meant...

She was in a small chamber, walls glowing pale blue with webs of Aian mycelium, broken by black openings every which way. The Hollow Hills were rightfully named: entire networks coursed under the mountains, it was from this stone that the Founders had erected most of Necropolis. But this place was far from the mines of old, it was a forgotten mire, where everything stank of old rot and festering filth. The rumbling storm outside lashed rain in, which in turn cascaded down the rocks and fed the odious pools.

The waters were rising at an alarming pace.

But such was to be expected. The only thing unaccounted for were those eerie vibrations reverberating across the stone walls – echoing, pulsating, buzzing into her skull.

Leeches unto skin.

Time, too little time.

“How much,” Malice muttered, hacking at another root with her bodkin, “how much do I need, if I can’t – can’t refine the stuff, it’ll be raw, so three quarts, that means –”

But no answer. Just the thunder and that strange ringing. Darkness, all around, save for random lighting flashes, but she should feel the shadow, somehow, if it was there –

“Wrack,” she called. “Wrack, answer me!”

Nothing. *Nothing* –

“Wrack,” she yelled out, dislodging another root. “Wrack!”

That despicable *hum* –

“Oy,” a voice suddenly called through the caves, “aren’t you a sight for red eyes!”

Malice wheeled back when she saw honey light beaming off the rough walls. She recognized the man instantly.

Wrack, she pleaded, *please, where are you?*

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I’m alone”.

Calonio.

Malice instantly crawled out of the pool, dragging a sixth piece of Neghlantha. She skittered back on the sodden cavefloor and hiked up her already tattered pantlegs. Disheartened, she beheld a dozen black elongated shapes dotting her ivory skin – suckling and already bloated.

Her stomach turned.

“You left a mighty blatant trail,” spoke Calonio as he hopped down the steps. “By the Void, I’m surprised no one else found you already”.

“Wrack,” she murmured half-minded, “Wrack – ”

The light from Calonio's lantern was blinding and Malice averted her eye.

"Oh, calm down now," said he in a reassuring tone, crouching at her level. When his bodkin blade first glared into the cave, kind, loving eyes met her disconcerted stare. He gently wedged the tip against a first slug.

"Don't want to upset the little buggers," he explained, "they'll regurgitate into the wound, give you a fever and what not".

That ringing, that incessant *ringing* –

"Calonio," Malice started, confounded by the surreal apparition, "what happened?"

Are you really here?

"Saw them break into my house, carry Léandres away. I'm sorry Mal', there was nothing I could do. Sought you out, couldn't... well, it took me a while to find you. You moved faster than I would have expected, considering – but no trace of Malheur, so I figured you'd left with her. I thought to myself, 'Calonio old chum, if we've learned anything about the Morbids'... and damned be, I was right. You're all craftier than the next".

Wrack, Wrack!

"What do you mean," she chanced, atremble, "'left with her'? Where is Malheur?"

"Oh, it's a wee bit of a secret, but I thought you knew". Another slug came loose, twisting frantically. He tossed it back into the swelling pool. "Malheur's kept a boat all this time. A boat! She built it herself, can you believe that? Small thing, but sturdy. And full of supplies. Hid in a small alcove by the South bay, out of the way, and only accessible at low tide. She'd made preparations, you know, just in case, because she thought the hour might come when she'd want to go At Noctem for real, and well, die out in the Wastes. But she never did set sail. Couldn't find a reason I suppose. Well, until now".

The final leech detached, curling up on itself.

Malice knew she shouldn't ask.

"And Léandres?"

Calonio's eyes darkened. "Well, they have him. Like Spleen. And the old Knight. Only one place they could have taken them".

And she already knew the answer. "Tour Noire".

"Aye, heart of Necropolis".

Too much, it was too much – and that hateful buzz, on and on and on and on –

Oh, Wrack, I pray you, please –

Malice launched herself into Calonio's arms and slunk there, weeping. "I'm losing it," she spat, "I'm losing everything, and everyone – running through my fingers, like sand... too hard and I crush them, too soft and they fall – *I fall*, and we all die! *Quel terrible sort*, Calonio!"

Caught off guard at first, the man soon regained his composure. He answered her embrace, clasped her close, stroking her wet locks back, offering clumsy comfort, but honestly so, which was refreshing. "Now, Mal'," he tried as best he could, "you're not alone. I don't understand everything, *mais je vais t'aider*. Whichever way you want to go, alright?"

Wrack, she called to herself, *Wrack...*

"You're not insane," he insisted, helping her up. "In fact, I'll do you one further and prove it".

"What... how?"

"Let's hurry though," he started off, "we haven't much time 'til this storm turns us into fish".

As he sped off into one of the dark openings, Malice stuffed the roots into her bag and paused for a second, calling after a shadow-creature that wouldn't show. Meanwhile, the waters kept rising. Whatever opportunity this was, it was then or never.

"Quickly," called the lad from the mouth of a second chamber. "Over here!"

As she finally rallied herself to follow, Malice realized the buzzing was coming from that very source. Crevices stretched up and beyond, tunnels arching this way and that, dug by centuries, mayhap millennia of running waters, though Malice and Calonio hadn't ventured far into the hollows.

The ringing shifted increasingly, hum to roar, roar to screech – and that was that.

Fair to say, the Dark was not apparent at first. Low lantern light was rendered utterly lost in the last chamber they trekked, it may yet have been but another precipice in the Hills. Calonio had stopped dead in his tracks, frozen: looking fast into the black. Malice was left wondering what the hullabaloo was when she suddenly realized that was exactly it: an absence of light, radiance from the lantern no longer reflected on the rear wall, though there seemed to be *something* there. No, rather, it *felt* as though something was there. Intangible. Transient.

The buzzing was intolerable.

“What in the Void,” Malice called, “is *this*?”

Vibrations shook her through and through, knocking her senses into motion. As her blood-sight adjusted involuntarily, she sensed blurred shapes in the black, forms swaying into one another, coalescing impossibly, bubbling on their own. The unnameable stuff coursed through the mountain like black blood in veins of rock, swallowing all light on its way.

The Dark: inexplicable life of Dystopia in a world of death.

Calonio had become somewhat solemn. He'd puffed his chest in a rather ominous manner and was about to speak when Malice stopped him short, lifting but one finger.

“*You*,” she started accusingly, “have knowledge beyond my ken, Calonio”.

If he heard her, it didn't show.

“The Wastes, Malice,” he said, “this entire world is done or dying, but for the Isle, and the Founders said this was the reason, though they couldn’t tell, merely named it thus, and left it. We owe everything to this eldritch power, but we do not know what it is”.

“So the writings are true”.

Malice played along, but other designs had formed behind her gaze. Calonio continued, unaware, or merely careless.

“If *this* is possible, it would be fair to assume many more things are possible. Phenomena we must reckon though they humble us... though they frighten us. *You* can be possible. ”

A rush of notions were falling into place, interlocking with dizzying speed.

“*You*,” Malice repeated, overwhelmed by the weight of her realizations, “you know way more than you should”.

The other turned, muted by this last repetition. A veil of fear overcame his traits.

Malice kept on unabated. “I understand now, the secrecy, the intrigue, so many skills in circumvention. You’re one of the Smugglers”.

Calonio nodded, dumb stricken. Malice continued.

“The camps, the weapons, the lies. You are building something outside of Necropolis. And in. A network, of sort: hoarding knowledge and craft. It was no accident – ”, the realizations hit violently, “we met through Merveille. Malheur is in it also. This is how she obtained the book”.

He interjected suddenly, “but we never meant harm for you or your sisters. Please understand, Dominae is taking control of Dystopia, if we don’t stop her – ”

“It was your men who waylaid Balafre on the shore, yes? For her! *Morbid!*”

Genuine sadness overcame Calonio, a sight she did not know. “Dominae probably *is* Morbid, I’ve suspected as much. And by proxy we do work together... sometimes.

But these three were my friends, good men, one and all, if only presumptuous. We were trying to wring power *away* from the elders, away from Dominae”.

“You’d subvert the Tenets of Dystopia!”

“We are no fools. The Thirteen are tainted. And these decrepit ways you name Tenets can not go on forever – your survival, Hemlock’s success in sparing you from the Advent, are all hallmark of our transition into the future”.

“And Healers?”

She raged. *Violators, rapists!*

“There is a reason for everything,” countered Calonio.

A reason for everything!

Malice laughed. “And what are yours, little *cunt*? Why would you ever go to such lengths? What do you seek that the ways of freedom couldn’t readily procure?” The notion hit her bluntly. “Don’t you see that all those I have loved will *die* because of you?”

Calonio sighed. “You think me so vain? Yet I have given you much, I have – and though I may yet fail you in words, in hand have I been sturdy as any, and probably more. Rather, it is *you*, you Morbids who toyed with me plenty – yes. Malheur loves only women. Merveille loves everyone... and no one. And you, well, you only love those you can’t have. Those who actually wait on you hand and feet, you’d sacrifice without a care”.

Malice started to shake. *You simpleton!* Rage broke through, unchallenged. The cave chamber, the Dark – all bathed in shrouds of blood.

“I have seen,” Calonio chanced anxiously, “I’ve seen what you can do. The horrors – though there is a reason for that, too. Malheur may have been right after all, and you are the Voivode, the Great Ender”.

Malice could hardly contain her murderous urge. “Then should you not slay me now? Am I not *abomination*?”

Calonio's eyes betrayed him as he looked out behind her. "Ah, I see," she confirmed, "there are others outside the cave, waiting. More Smugglers – and armed likewise".

He acquiesced remorsefully. "We need you".

"You would use me". Malice took a step forward, simmering with bloodlust. "Like everyone else".

"I'm not your enemy, Mal'".

"I can't trust you," Malice wavered for an instant before repeating. "I can't trust you!"

The water had risen to her ankles.

Her volition struck first.

Scarlet veils infused the air. She willed him gone, and her power rose with the full force of cruelty. But as intangible cords snapped taut and she projected an indomitable will to rake the life from his bones, a second lapsed but a moment too late – she hadn't seen him pick up that rock on the way – though it wasn't in his hand anymore, but hurtling towards her head.

Like pale stars in the Dark, they both fell against the black.

Words – so many I can not tell the one from the other. I know nothing, because nothing *is*. And if I did, I could not express it. Would that I could, still I should not know the words. And if I did, you wouldn't understand.

But please, ask as many questions as you like, your arrogance amuses me.

- Interview. (La Fourbe)
Inquisitive Council. Ch. 1

XXXXV. Lost

Formless clouds trailed on anaemic and effortless in the bleak Dystopian heavens, carried by ageless winds, like drapes sheared off against their will, but mute and defenceless – and on they went, still hiding the fabled skies above, with their stars and blinding light, for no reason, no purpose whatsoever.

Foot in front, then the other.

On the clouds rolled, forever upon Hollow Hills. But where to?

Foot in front, then, then –

Malice erred solipsistic, lost in a maze of failing thoughts and broken memories. She remembered waters wild, bubbling on themselves, currents reeling her in – the fierceness of the blow, and sparks from the edges of her sight, then time had been suspended indefinitely, as she'd sunken unto the cold, wet stone –

Then, then the other.

Malice limped, corpse-like, into the night. Streaks of half-caked blood down her cheek from a gash on her temple. Shivering, lips a cool shade of blue. Cloakless, clothes shredded, all soaked wet and dripping, barely

covering the bruised and sodden flesh beneath. She went barefoot on yellow grass, hands laxly at her sides, blade in the right, satchel in the left.

Shadows congregated, black and impenetrable, with the sweet, sour taste of impending death.

Malice, they said, Malice, can you hear me?

She remembered voices and lights – atrocious lights – in the cave, they were calling for Calonio, on and on, and she let it all go, somehow.

Malice!

Yes, somehow, flowing – effortlessly, propelled by undercurrents in a dark maze of tunnels, circles eddying up like crystal shards, pink in her pulsating blood-sight.

She remembered suffocating.

Malice, I'm here.

Calonio and Léandres had said there was a reason for everything.

She wanted to laugh but there only came a hoarse chuckle. Blue lips formed one word, silently, starting with a dry tightening at the back of her throat, to a tongue reaching up against her palate. It was *chaos*.

Listen, insisted the shadow, please listen. I couldn't take form, it was beyond me.

“No reason for anything,” she admitted, grinning in the dark. “None at all”.

Do you understand why, asked Wrack, looming over her.

Malice gazed up at the formless vapours, dubious. Nothing made any sense, it was true – so much that everything actually did, the pain, the atrocity – meaningless and there, and she couldn't stop it, but bend the shapes to her will, if only for the coming hour.

Chaos, always and ever.

Malice suddenly realized that her steps, grudgingly enough, were leading her towards Necropolis, to enact that final jest.

One foot, then the other.

“Of course,” she finally answered, gaze lost in the waning horizon. “You *are* the Dark”.

Consider the Void: perhaps there is nothing absolute in reality, and variables may change however significantly, yet we acknowledge certainties as framework to existence. First and foremost: there is nothing out there.

- Codex Mortem.

Addenda: "Of the Three Tenets".

XXXXVI. I'm Sorry

A first, then a second roof tile dislodged itself under pressure, scampering down the sides of the manor. With it, Malice came tumbling unto the rear balcony, limbs loose as those of a puppet cut from its strings. Moments passed unchallenged as she lay, sprawled out against the marble floor, gaze lost in the clouds overhead, pain showering her nerves with acid.

The creature hissed snake-like, unrelenting. "*Up!*"

Fastidiously, she rolled unto her side and blood started seeping into her one good eye. When she managed to get her palms on the floor and gain some leverage, trembling lips formed the word *fuck*.

"Someone might have heard," warned Wrack, floating slowly down.

This is it. At long last.

Seeking resolve, Malice rose trembling to her feet, braced on the railings, then, ever so painfully, limped to the balcony door and let herself in.

The room was quiet as the grave.

Father Hemlock still as a corpse.

He lay there, pale as the linen sheet, nearly dead himself. For everything, it seemed, this room seemed locked in stasis, timeless, as though yesterday she'd played

chess there – and lost. But it was warm, and that was a blessing in itself.

Malice wiped the blood from her eye and, shuddering with anticipation, crossed to the opposite side, grabbed an old mirkwood dresser and slid it against the door. Then a second one.

Satisfied, she went to his bed table and grabbed the stone and mortar, scooped out whatever foul opiate lay smudged there in a paste, then took the Neghlantha roots and mashed them, one by one, into the bowl.

Her hands were unsteady and bloodless from the cold. She'd lost all sense of time. The elders may come and carry him away now. No contraption of hers would keep them – not for long.

Honour – a futile gesture, it seemed, a mere luxury. But she had sacrificed, *would* sacrifice everything for truth, elusive though it always is.

Pounding the fibres to a brownish muck, Malice had one last thought about a crazed, naked man covered in scars and made to feed Hemlock the mix. Tears rolled down her swollen cheek as she did, some tinged with red.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. “*I’m so sorry*”.

The drug oozed putrid liquids and reeked of old rot. Her own stomach turned as she forced the stuff down Hemlock’s constricted throat, harshly and fast, though she wept all the while.

When it was over, she closed his mouth in some vain attempt to keep the man’s dignity, but knew perfectly that was the very thing she had just taken away.

For truth.

Malice hastened to the study, seized a blank sheet of paper and inker and started writing.

Father, it read. Please forgive me...

Tragedy: existence disincarnated from itself, willpower reduced to narrative mechanisms. Be your own subject, not some plot device in cheap theatre. Do not act, just be – that is well enough to live fully.

- Aurielle la Pure,
Upon taking the Aian drop.
Transcript, Hallows Archives.

XXXXVII. Je ne t'oublierai pas

For a moment Malice lay there at the bottom of the tub.

All sounds snuffed out, her body suspended effortlessly, everything still and insulated. The warm waters' subtle pressure enveloped her flesh in a comforting way, as though the world entire had ceased to be and there remained only softness and purity, gently caressing the surface of her skin. And everything could be contained in that one minute's breath: means and ends conjoined at last, no sense of time or place or purpose. Just simply there in peace.

Forever.

When Malice finally came up for air, she rubbed her weary eyes and rested her head on the end of the tub, waiting for something she could not name. Black, wet locks tumbled over the copper edge to the worn wooden floor, which was slick with blood.

Slumber called relentlessly, everything dulled and sluggish. How many days since she'd slept? Rather, how many days since she'd even gone to sleep wholeheartedly, and glad, without the bitter taste of remorse? Before this debacle, it was wine and toxic vapors, and the fever of lust which dragged her to lose consciousness, and now she

couldn't quite recall a time she'd ever found repose without first battering herself half to death.

There was a time, yes, when she was just a child, and she played in Eternal Gardens without a care, swam in the Ashen 'til her lips turned blue, hurtled through the woodland and ran out of breath laughing. And as she learned the various crafts of her kind, weaving, cooking, ironwork and the rest, she reveled in all things that *were*, and could not envision a life more full. Everyone looked at her strangely, for the one dead eye, but she didn't know what *strange* and *familiar* truly meant.

Then the first offense had paved the way for a thousand more, and everyone around had bared fangs and turned into predators, hungry for things she could scarcely give and feelings she could not share. The unfit had become the very stigma they chose to elect, and now, all she could see, all she could hear, and everything she could think about were things that *weren't* there, *weren't* said, *weren't* done.

Shadows, everywhere, and never mind who or what they were attached to.

Yes, all these years of searching in vain, until she'd forgot what she was looking for, and then merely wandered, like they all did, from one appetite to the other, looking to the bleak Dystopian heavens for change.

How ironic, she mused, that she'd discovered a semblance of truth some nights before the very end of her miserable existence. Is this what it took, then, to outline such intangible shapes in the dark? Horror? Murder and deceit, slavery and betrayal? How could she – how could anyone be so blind? Had the Collapse not irremediably sufficed? Had they not been chastised enough?

What a waste, she thought. *What a terrible waste.*

No –

No sleep just yet.

Soon, and ever, but not yet.

Silently, Malice reached for a lavender soap – her favorite – and scrubbed herself all over, cleaning the wounds on her temple, knees, knuckles and side. She felt stitches tight under her fingers, soft scabs and swollen cuts. Weak now, drained of substance and strength altogether, but her will remained, and that would have to do.

The waters were getting cold. It was time to go.

Sitting in the tub, she pulled back her hair, the ends dripping rosy circles at the surface of the water. Gripping both edges and shifting her weight forward, she managed to bring herself up in a resounding *splash* – pale, blue-veined flesh bruised and scared all over.

Malice stepped out without a towel. Below, the puddle of blood had expanded, drying slowly. The wretch lay sprawled there two feet away, dead – face young and comely, but the neck twisted at a disgusting angle, one white bone sticking out like a claw.

Her naked feet left red foot stamps as she walked all the way up the stairs and through the ransacked chamber.

The bed had been shredded into bits, all furniture overturned and shattered, her gowns carelessly thrown about the room. They'd rummaged through the entire mansion like they'd done Calonio's, hatefully, if not meticulously, directing so much anger at things when they could not get to *her*.

She'd caught the sentry going through the wreckage on all fours, reading a scrap of paper with fierce intent. She wasn't sure what to do until she realized it was one of Léandres' love poems.

Now before she set about preparing for the end, Malice swallowed a last handful of noxberries, all the while knowing their eldritch effect would be much blunted at this point, then started setting herself straight. A larger shard of broken mirror she set back upon the side of what used to be her desk. She then hung her hair back with a cord and then went through her things, slowly, salvaging what she could.

First, she went for sturdy linen pants, tucked under a fresh pair of knee-high steel-caped boots. Then, her favourite finery: an overbust corset and lace chocker, clasped in the back with silver hooks. Finally, a long, woollen overcoat, complete with hood – everything dyed perfect black.

Second, she loosened the silk ropes from her bed posters, rolled and stuffed them into her backpack. Followed sewing kit, waterskin, stone and mortar and a few candles.

Third, she slid two claw rings into the fingers of her left hand, filed razor sharp, and seized her bodkin, Léandre's sword-cane in the right.

When Wrack materialized in the midst of the wreckage, she was finally ready.

“How many,” she asked wearily.

“Four”, the shadow hissed. “And feisty”.

Downstairs: footsteps on broken glass.

“It ends tonight, old friend,” she whispered, unsheathing the long blade. “Help me”.

The creature bowed extravagantly, black wings spread out vaporously.

“As always, my lady”.

And Malice bit her lip.

All light waned out from the bedroom as the men broke through the opening, brows a sweaty sheen, hearts pounding, bodkins aloft like cold fangs aching to sink. *Eager to serve*. Yet stricken blind by the Dark, they stumbled clumsily, urging one another, pushing further still, welcomed into the abyss of night by a woman with nothing left to lose.

Necropolis denizens will travail two nights in three, for the sixth part of the night, at whichever field they deem the more fitting, pleasurable and useful – garden or craft. All shall work unless they are unfit. And if one is unfit for an unreasonable period of time, one will be turned At Noctem – either exiled into the Void or brought to the Advent. In either case will they cease to be, for we can not breed in weakness.

Thus is the sole Dystopian contingency.

- Codex Mortem, 2-1

XXXXVIII. Tour Noire

Malice burst out from the manor in a near state of shock.

She sped down three stairs, pale as a ghost, then flung herself to the wall and vomited into the flowerbed.

Unlike the retches of pain meandering within her insides, the night was still, cool, with all the grandeur of Necropolis beyond the Witching Hour. Some denizens walked here and there, in the distance, like veiled hunters on the prowl, or decadents in trance.

Malice scratched her nails against the stone façade as the last spasms shook her asunder.

So much blood –

“We have to go,” urged Wrack at her side, “before others catch on. Every exertion of your power, every surge of your will –”

Blotches of blood on her face and neckline – thick, telltale lines, like so many streaks of guilt.

“*Je sais*,” she cut in, wiping her mouth with the back of a clawed hand, “it weakens me, I know”.

Five mangled corpses behind.

“Be wary, lest you forget. You’re an outcast, now. Those sent At Noctem do not get to appeal Court. The accusing eyes of yore will translate into screams and clenched fists. There’s nothing – and no one – to hold them back”.

Malice took a deep breath, donned her hood, sheathed her blades, buttoned the woollen coat and started walking, the malevolent creature at her hind like a gale in the twisted Dystopian streets.

There was a slight limp to her stride as she went, though she did her best to hide it. She knew, in this society bent on superfluous details, everything else – the cane, the backpack – could just as easily give her away.

Wrack was right, she wouldn’t last.

I can do this, she told herself half-heartedly, *I can do this*.

The manors, the abbeys, the torturous spires of the Last City of Man gathered all around her, towers and pinions like so many jagged teeth to a trap, waiting to snap.

Don’t look, don’t –

On she went, under flamelit windows, into this alley and that, crossing familiar faces in the dim, and courtiers left and right... past the Hallows, past Perpetual Court, past the Demon Den and half a dozen agoras, until she gleaned the centre, the black spike driven through the heart of Necropolis: Tour Noire.

It rose, insanely high, and lopsided, crooked in and out.

Twin mirkwood doors formed an acute triangle at the base, and these, like most doors of the city, had no lock.

“Voilà,” changed Wrack in a poisonous tone, “simple as that, one way in, and one way up”.

Malice took one last look about her, the stillness of night, the beauty it all. She thought about Malheur, Sister-Sorrow, leagues away by now, as she would have sailed, lone and graceful, deep into the hazy Void and the desolate

shores yonder. Lost, and doomed: as much a suicide as kissing Syllia.

And Malice thought about Kalian, too, and Eglantine, how sweet they were, and sorrow engulfed her spirit when she realized she wouldn't get to see them grow. And then she also understood, she wouldn't get to say goodbye either, and to them, she would become an ugly scar in some distant memories – how strange she'd turned, and how she'd disappeared, like some kind of stranger who didn't love them, though she did... though she did.

And then it hit her: *this* was how she was going to go. Miserable. Shunned, disgraced and feared, though she endured suffering to no bound, humiliated at Court, hounded across the Isle, and after all this, they would scorn her name again in the Archives, like they did Anne-Marie, and give her names and titles to impress on the coming generations.

Malice hesitated.

If the Black Knight spoke true, Dystopia would fall in a matter of a few score days. Their fate was sealed, all of them, no matter what she did. Her friends, they were locked in there, yes, that is, if they were still alive. Evenso, could she save them? Would they rather she ran, cut her losses and fled?

Spleen, Balafre, Léandres –

Oh, Léandres!

But she remembered the others, too, the elders and their like, Priton, and what he did to her, in his room, with his stubby fingers, puffy lips and fetid breath – and Morbid, traitor of all traitors, soaring over the city like the very heavens of Dystopia, plotting to rearrange people like furniture, scheming against her own flesh and blood, always.

And Malice smiled, because she remembered a chess game, and tangled lines of peons, and now she understood, at last, that she *could* run, could take flight and leave, but

then she'd live out her days in remorse, broken like *this*, and they would keep what they'd *stolen* from her.

Innumerable variables stacked up. Chaos. Pathways to every direction. And, she knew, there may not be reason for much, but there was for this: if she was to know peace, then there had to be silence, there had to be space, there had to be freedom.

There had to be blood.

Behind her, the shadow-creature swelled and grew, wisps of black vapor pluming upward as it spread fanged wings wide. A venomous hiss reverberated across her mind.

"In, Malice".

Slowly, she cast the hood back, hands trembling with fatigue. She started unbuttoning her coat as the muscles around her red eye awakened and tightened. A few weary steps and she slid past the doors into the main hall, gaze filmed scarlet, blades flashing.

The first aide turned tail and ran – merely a boy, and scared beyond his wits. If the second was frightened at all he failed to act upon it. He was somewhat older, broad-chested and blond-haired, with a certain smug satisfaction that must have warranted this position under the elders. He raised his palms and took a step forward.

In a moment's lapse, Malice was limping towards the vast, helicoidal staircase at the center of Tour, and the man had fallen to his knees, eyes overturned in their sockets, clutching at his temples and gasping for air he couldn't breathe.

The floor, the walls, the ceilings cracked as she passed, small fissures spanning in every direction –

Chaos.

"Up," rasped the shadow. "*Up!*"

Malice's muscles screamed under the strain, every joint creaked, minuscule tears in every fiber of her being pulling in unison, to which vertigo answered in kind, and the halls

veered relentlessly, swinging round her in a nightmarish way. Oft times she clung to the peeling walls so as not to fall, and there were noises – clambering above and below – so many she couldn't count.

"Where is Morbid," mumbled she through clenched teeth.

"Seventh floor, some old study," answered Wrack, "I think. Should I have a look? There are other ways to go".

A woman's head suddenly popped up from above in the entryway to the third floor – an Elder. There was something the crone wanted to say, something heinous, all the lines of her wrinkled face bent on insult, but the sounds never came, and Malice sent her reeling back, convulsing against the clutches of death.

Chaos.

"No," Malice cut in, "stay – stay with me..."

And up the trembling stairs she went, one by one, foot in front of the other, then the other –

Black Tower used to be a forlorn place, useless, almost, an observatory few ever visited, and the suites built there for the Knights had not been used in nigh twoscore years. Now, it was buzzing with life, and agony, with people screaming, the echoes of footsteps on thick carpet, all around Malice as she came closer, closer yet.

"Mother could have ran away ten times by now," countered Wrack, indecisive for once, "this double staircase is a clever contraption".

"She'll stay," murmured the somnolent daughter, "this Dominae, she will remain, if only to gloat over my carcass". *Hubris*, she though, and smiled, then, faintly, hanging on to the railings for support. "Rejoice, old friend. Now we get to pull out her honeyed tongue".

A sudden, familiar croaking voice called from above in urgency. "Child," it interjected, "you know not what you are doing!"

"Seventh floor," confirmed the shadow-creature.

And Malice trod on grudgingly, blades loose at the end of lax, ashen arms.

Hospitalière Sylvaine was right on post, slowly walking back from the bloody demon. Her gaze wavered up and down, desperately trying to reassess her position. "Child," she pleaded again, "have you gone entirely mad? By the Void, this is wrong, *wrong* – 'Do no harm', youngling, remember who you are!"

Old hatreds surfaced anew within Malice's breast. "Why, insect," she spat, painfully climbing up the last steps, "how dare you lecture *me*?"

The hawk-faced elder was bracing herself, moving away as carefully as such frail bones permitted, yet still implacable, though her own aides were scattered around the Tower like flies caught in a storm.

"This is beneath you, if – "

"*Hist!*" screamed Malice, "your lot have called high and low for my head ever since I was hurled into this festering world, thence wove death into my very name, sent me At Noctem, yet see me now, doddering fool: *I am death!*"

Blood-sight subdued Malice's entire vision as the Hospitalière turned tail and ran down the corridor. The very flesh bent, bones shattered, veins rent open, and the old woman fell headlong unto the damask carpet, screaming as she did – a high-pitched, horrible sound that pierced through all ten stories of Tour Noir.

Chaos.

In an instant, Wrack's dark shape was hovering over the carcass, extending one long, jagged hand at a door to the side.

There!

But the youngest Morbid daughter swerved, legs trembling, flailing at the wall for support, and fell to her knees in a clatter of blades. Her sight was blurred by a swirl of scarlet tides and black sleep: one tortured spirit vying for consciousness in the grip of exhaustion.

“Not now!” croaked the shadow, “she is here, I can *feel* her. *Encore un peu, allez!* We are so close!”

Fuck, fuck –

Malice crawled a few paces on all fours then braced herself on the sword-cane, and rose, painstakingly, to her feet. Everything was twirling around, the hallway spinning out of control – and the screams, up, down –

Forward. She squashed over the broken body without care, launching her weight against the door as she pushed down the brass handle.

When it flew open, she nearly fell again, but caught herself at the last second when she recognized, at last, the crimson gown, the regal mien, there, waiting for her – smiling.

Remember us, for we will wait, and we,
blest ambassadors, will never forget.

- Morbid Clairevaux.
Black Knight Address, 15.

XXXXIX. A New Era

The room used to be a salon, but it was hard to tell what they had turned it into. It was vast, perhaps overly so, yet felt much smaller, for the windows whereupon the onlooker would see Necropolis unraveled, the Gardens yon and mayhap the very edges of the Void – they had been boarded shut, with iron, and the door itself was reinforced from the inside, though it'd been left unlocked, for *her* –

Tables and lanterns on all sides, with parchments scattered here and there, inkers and plumes wet for writing, and *objects*: strange trinkets laid out from bundles of dyed linen cloth. Metallic, and reflective, welded seamlessly, unearthly –

Two dozen at the very least.

And what are those? interjected Wrack, fluttering through the place.

“For shame, loveling,” started Mother Morbid, comfortably in a leather seat, sipping ruby wine from a crystal glass, her jeweled hands glimmering in flamelight. “You can barely stand”.

Malice took a painful step forward and closed the door behind, sliding in one of the heavy locks. She braced herself against the frame, trying to stop the room from spinning as sweat ebbed on her blood-spattered brow.

“Well met, Mother,” she snarled, “and how does the night find you?”

The fabled orator kissed her glass with feigned ennui. “Vexed, I must admit”.

"Then," chanced Malice through muzzled breath, "let us make this quick".

But Morbid smiled, wryly, and spoke naught.

Malice insisted. "I could end you where you sit".

She's weaving her web, cut in Wrack, tear it down, take control, she has to tell us where they are!

"I know," replied Malice, "don't you think I know?"

"Oh," cooed Morbid as she refilled her glass from a lapis-incrusted decanter. "he is here, your little friend, is he not?"

"You would be well advised to consider *me* first".

Let me search for them, pleaded the shadow, Mal', she's unchanged, slay her now and we may still find them -

"No!" countered Malice, "stay with me, I can't do this alone!"

Morbid sighed in exasperation. "My greatest failure, and to think, everything I invested in you, the very fruit of my womb, spoiled, rotten - "

"Enough!" screamed Malice, stepping forward as the door at her back splintered and cracked, the red eye burning bright, knees quivering. "Dominae, give them back to me, *now!*"

And Morbid hurled her glass at the wall, then the decanter with both hands, which all shattered in a hail of broken shards and crimson droplets. "No, *you* listen to me, you flakey little trollop!" She rose to her feet, scarlet gown fluttering, majestic. "There is only one way out of this, and it is mine. I hold them in my palm, your pathetic retinue, your secrets, that defiled blood coursing through your veins and the very future of the Isle: they are all mine, absolutely. I will not take orders from *you*".

Vertigo was choking all sense out of Malice, everything veering out of place - words and meanings and outcomes -

"Lies!" she rasped, "you hold symbols! Smoke!"

"What? You think I have *sent* all these people after you? And why in the Void would I do that? You are the flesh of

my flesh, Malice, I have manipulated my own to keep you into this world, I am accountable for you. And yet you have done everything to make me regret that choice, pretending to be this... this *monster*, going against the Tenets – in *public*, no less – attacking everyone around you like some rabid pet, talking nonsense to yourself outloud, and for what? Digging into secrets you can't possibly understand". Morbid sighed. "You know, darkling, there are *reasons* we bury the truth, something you of all people should understand, and yet you blunder on, making us all pay the price of your double standards, and when we tell you to stop, you just bite harder – blind and violent, like a child, and perhaps that is all you are: a child, endowed with *terrible means*".

Malice was undaunted.

"Perfectly ethical are we? But I have sampled your vile ways, like Malheur, and everyone who won't bend to your whim!"

"No – elders and Smugglers are hunting you, not I. But I know better," continued Morbid, "there is merely a taint in our bloodline, mostly dormant. We share common ancestry with La Fourbe, you and I, offshoots from the Last Empire of Man, who survived the Wastes that destroy everything else, come to live here with the Dark, the fey substance that has warped life to endure in a world of death. You are no abomination, no less than we all. La Fourbe was arraigned because she disagreed with the leading Founders, not the powers she wielded. She argued for the end of *everything*. It is fair to say, we both wish to embrace change. Your potential, your abilities are such that you could readily usher this society into an entirely new era".

"The Smugglers think you are subverting Dystopia".

"Pah! I have *made* them. I have taught them to think outside the given idioms of the Founders, it is only fitting they would in turn look critically upon my designs. I have

introduced the chance of a different order. But their say is irrelevant for now: to succeed, I need not their approval, only their obedience”.

“And Healers? You handed me into the clutches of that... violator! Why?” *Why!*

Morbid paused. There was concern in her tone. For a while, it seemed as though she really cared.

“That errand... strayed. It was unfortunate. Priton misinterpreted his mandate. But rest assured, we can chastise him together”.

“Together?” *What?*

Don't believe her, hissed Wrack, *she's incapable of truth.*

“Yes,” kept on Morbid, “I can give you what you have always sought – revenge, to begin with, and then more: peace and comfort, beauty and pleasure. I can ensure you get the respect you deserve, for ever”.

“And from thence would you conjure such tricks?”

“Acquaintance. Rightful authority”.

“Servitude! You would take from others and give to me. What joy would such leeching possibly contrive?”

“You refuse my clemency?”

“Why would I accept? What I need you cannot steal”.

“Because I'm offering. And because you can. This is called opportunity”.

“It is not freedom”.

“And what is freedom, loveling? When a window opens a door closes, that is the rule of nature. You think you can make any choice you want, but there are possibilities which only come within reach at the cost of others. You can not *be* and *have* and *experience* everything all at once. Qualitatively, we are limited by condition. Once you realize this, you can be truly free and take *control*”.

“Cheap sophistry. I have seen your freedom, it is the old ways described in the Hallows: cannibalism”.

“Ah! Are you so uncouth? You *live*, Malice. You live. Simply by being my daughter have you possessed higher

status in Necropolis, though you were too self-absorbed to notice. The fact that you stand is proof of my virtue. *Spared*, no less, because you are mine. This is the primordial reason the elders fear you – they fear *me*. The one dead eye was just a pretext. I've kept them at bay by keeping them *close*, but you gave them the stick to beat you with. The elders for opposing the Advent, the Smugglers for slaying one of their own in cold blood. Ah! And I hear he was actually *inviting* you in”.

“Fear you? They worship you!”

“One and the same”.

“But you recur to the bloodline fallacy just as well. It is a blatant violation of the Tenets. We are all equals”.

“Call it inheritance. Survival of the fittest”.

“I call it smoke and illusion. Blood is tasteful, not sacred”.

“Unless we make it so. When meaning is shared, it becomes real. This is called culture. It makes us who we are. And it is what I am trying to change, for the better. Because in truth,” her mouth twisted in disdain, “I pity this sorry place”.

Morbid was telling the truth. For all Malice could tell, this was genuine.

Impossible, she thought. *Impossible!*

“But your leniency,” Malice countered, “it will birth a plague on Necropolis, the likes of which it has never seen, nor would it survive the merest onset. The Founders knew, practices are contagious, structures carried as means and ends, once instilled, can scarcely be taken back. They set our course and we'd follow. Yet as the remains of the Last Empire of Man, our very bones are reft of such idiocy. How dare you look kindly on History!”

Morbid dismissed her with a wave of the hand. “Humiliation!” she said, “We go around in circles, transfixed in time, festering, rank, stagnant. *Pestilent*. Why waste such potential in idleness? I would have our people

work harder, *longer*, all specialized into fields like the glorious craftsmen of old. No more rags and pigswill. Proper finery, Malice! But we'd need to break the population cap and swell Necropolis, and that is all the better. Then, when food runs thin, all denizens will beg us to make the Gardens yield more. We'll build new houses – better houses. I will have no more of this mere... *survival*. I would live. Isn't it obvious, my prodigal daughter? We must move forward!"

"But there is nowhere to go!"

"Lest we *become* more".

"By first denying what we are! Ah, now I see the need for Healers. You know quite well we can't move geographically, so you intend to move inward, make us sink into the bottomless pit of our own selves. We will heel and feast on guilt and hope and ambition until our lives are reduced to mere spectacted performance. Cut off from reality, cut off from ourselves and each other, eternally dissatisfied".

And Morbid sighed, bored by a discussion she seemed to have traced a thousand times over.

Now, strike now! pressed Wrack, *she won't say!*

The floor was swaying back and forth under Malice's feet, the last strength fast evaporating from her bones.

"She knows," Malice spoke to the creature, "I'm telling you, she does!"

Morbid, seeing this, took a subtle step forward, frowning with concern. "Do not worry my love, what you mistake for cause is merely consequence, but through no fault of yours, I assure you. Quite simply, you lack information. I'm amazed any of this makes any sense to you".

The sight of her mother translated into a crimson blur as tears filled Malice's eyes, uncontrollably. She stabbed the sword-cane into the ground, bracing herself on the handle,

but slipped and fell to her side, head muffled on the thick carpet.

"This was a bundled mess from the beginning," continued the fabled courtier, "but I have done what I could, and only you can finish what I started".

Get up, screamed a distant susurrations, *she's right in front of you!*

Malice wanted to protest. "But the Enclave - " she murmured convulsively. Sometime ago. Scribbled words on paper: *Death. Light. Slavery. Order.*

"Ah, yes," spoke Morbid in a rather melodious tone, "ramblings from frayed psyches, this talk of foreign foes and mystical warmongers".

Malice! Malice, wake the fuck up!

"But I was surprised to hear Balafre speak of their approach. *Naturellement*, I investigated".

Malice!

"Speculation, no more. But..." there rose a certain tone in Morbid's voice, some distorted impression of joy, "that is not my concern. You understand, we are immune to the Waste sickness. From what I... from what *we* could garner from the Black Knights' tortured testimonies, whatever presence is out there cannot stand the vast lifeless plains. Do you know what this means, darkling?"

What Black Knights? shrieked Malice inwardly. She dug her nails into the carpet, trying to haul herself up - failed. Sweat was dripping into her eyes, stinging. The blood-sight was utterly gone. "What," she barely uttered, "who - "

"Oh yes," sprang Mother happily, "the embassy was a success. Six have returned so far, caught mad on the shores, but breathing. There was one not long ago, we did not expect another - Balafre - so soon, or at all. He caught us unprepared. We were searching for something - a diary, stolen from one of the envoys by a wayward Smuggler. You see, the Black Knights have carried back... artefacts from their journeys. We keep them here. Some are

weapons, others tools. All are said to hold immense power. The Founders claimed these to be inherently... evil. But I see them as tools, neutral – depending how we use them – yes. But their workings are mostly... unknown to us. And the Knights were in no state to teach, hence were we hoping for a guide. Now the diary has surfaced, and we even have the key to decrypt it, thank you very much”.

Six? Malice’s heart nearly burst. Six!

“What did...” *Those poor souls, caged, locked, tortured!*
“What did you...”

“Oh, they were sick, sweetling. Unfit. We could not keep them, not for long”.

Malice, snap out of it! By the Void, do something!

“You...” she fumbled at the floor for leverage, couldn’t find it. “You!”

There was a rattle of metal as Morbid kicked away the blades. She kneeled down and stroke Malice’s hair back, humming gently. Malice felt herself falling, *falling* – deep into the black, just as the shadow-creature squirmed in agony, completely powerless.

“*Mon pauvre amour,*” sang Morbid, “I am not Dominae, though I have indeed spawned the vision of the one to lead us, bold and brazenly, into the New Era. Ah yes, *belle enfant*, together we will build an Empire of darkest night, and we will rule over this desolate land, cold, stark and beautiful”.

Gracefully, she rose up, towering over the broken figure at her feet, and walked towards the door. And as she slid back the lock, Morbid finally added:

“You will meet her very soon... if you survive. Then we can rule this city together, you and I”.

Certainly, I have tread every square feet of this damned city a hundred times or more, and yet every stone, every pathway still seems strange and alien to me. Necropolis does not change, but I –

- Léandres Desforges.

Notes personnelles. Unlisted entry.

XXXXXX. Oubliettes

“What do you mean *half*-dead?”

“I m-mean, not d-dead, b-but not alive ei-either”.

Darkness complete. Voices echoing from the bottomless pit of a dreamless sleep.

“Well, which is it?”

“I... d-don’t kn-know”.

“Well, what do you see then, exactly? Is she wounded? Bleeding, internally perhaps? Any punctures, fractures? Damn it man, I *know* you can tell. We taught you as much”.

“Wounded, perhaps. B-but n-not so r-recently”.

“Ah! Could you be any more vague? By the Void! This is some kind of sick irony. Trapped here without a clue with the most skilled Dystopian alive, and yet I’m stuck here dealing riddles in the dark”.

“She i-is n-n-not *well*. S-spent, overly s-so”

“Well or not, I’ve heard talk of bodies, and lots of ‘em”.

“I-I heard”.

“A ‘trail of corpses’ they said, long as the Ashen”.

“I-I know”.

“I thought she was different, that one, but I could never put my finger on it”.

“I kn-know. And yet Morbid li-lives –”

“So, what do you think?”

“I th-think she is an a-a-abomination”.

“Now, that’s a tad harsh”.

“There is n-no o-other wo-word for it”.

“Well, best you start thinking creatively, my chum, because unless you manage to grow that hand back, this so-called abomination here is just about the only chance we’ve got”.

A moment of silence settled.

“A s-single p-pin could d-do”.

Some heavy shackles rattling on stone.

“Old man, if we had so much as half a fucking needle, I swear by all the poems of Gaël, Jothriel’s dusty lute, and all the scriptures from Aurielle’s naughty, naughty hand – right now, at this very second, those bloody wenches would lay dead in a ditch, and we’d be sipping scotch somewhere nice and dry”.

We will not describe the world before the Fall. Why, you ask? Because these tyrants have wronged our ancestry beyond words, and even though they are no more, we can never have justice, save what little we gain by destroying the very records of their reign. And this is precisely what we intend to do.

-Jothriel. Dialogs, part four.
Hallows Archives.

XXXXXI. Dominae

Darkness. Cold.
The sting of metal circling her neck.
Locked – iron, wrists, ankles –
What? What!

Calm down, Malice, whispered the familiar blood-wet hiss, *don't struggle*.

Suspended, somehow, her own body weighing down her throat. She leered left and right, faced with the black everywhere, until she felt the cord tighten further and realized she'd been blindfolded.

"F-friend," croaked an old voice from nowhere, "hearken, she i-is c-coming to". *Balafre*.

Snarewire, cut in *Wrack*, *wiggle some more and you're done for*.

"Malice!" called another old man, voice echoing on deep stone. "By the Void, you are still alive". *Spleen*.

The wrists were bound to something up high on a rough, wet granite wall, the elbows at an angle, most of the blood drained out, and thus partially numb, weak – unable to pull herself up. She was standing barefoot on a wobbly thing – a chair, maybe, or a stool. Evidently, this contraption had been meticulously calculated. One wrong move and...

An overwhelming urge to scream wound its way up from Malice's bosom, which she barely contained for fear of slipping the noose. Muffled sounds escaped purple, crackled lips.

"Where... are... we..."

Where do you think? mulled Wrack.

"Tour Noire", answered the scholar. "Deep in the bowels of Necropolis. Secret chambers, yes, probably dug by that treacherous scum over the last few decades".

"Trapped," added Balafre, significantly closer.

Malice inhaled through small gasps. Couldn't see, couldn't move, couldn't *breathe* –

How, she thought, *how do I get out of this?*

You don't, countered Wrack acerbically, *without sight or prescience, it's impossible to focus. Bien entendu, you could lash out at the entire room, and your three cellmates with it, but you don't want that, non, non –*

Three? shrieked Malice inwardly, *Léandres!*

"I'm so terribly sorry Malice," resounded a miserable Spleen from across the dark, "they came at me, numerously, scant moments after I'd even found your key. And what could I do? These brittle bones posed little challenge, I am ashamed to say. Both cipher key and book are theirs now, do to what I can barely guess..."

But the Black Knight! The formidable warrior, indomitable, deadlier than –

"Balafre," continued Spleen as though he predicted her concern, "was taken earlier. Remember, they'd promised him peace at Court. There is a phrase which can release him from his conditioning, it was implanted in his training. Few know it, and not I". Something like a sob forced him to pause. "Aye, we are all fools, Malice".

"Fools, yes," doubled the Black Knight with renewed vigour, "but perhaps, with your skills –"

Malice heard herself gasp when rusted hinges suddenly creaked in the dark. The shadow hollered out: "it's *her!*"

And a melodious voice came pouring down like a river, full of notes, accompanied with heavy footsteps in the room and the clattering of blades.

“Quelle belle journée, n’est-ce pas?”

Spleen and Balafre were silent as the grave. Not from lack of outrage, Malice knew, but rather, were studying their foes.

“Oh, puce concern, my pets, should we let our dear Malice look around? I’d like to see that fabled eye for myself, and let it be gentle and snug, lest we rip it out”.

And Malice knew instantly, blind and constricted and suffocating, she knew – and barely hung unto the chains and the wobbly plank, stricken with dismay.

“Please,” pleaded another tongue, this one hoarse and wicked, “it is hardly safe, until she’s utterly bent”.

Merveille, echoed Wrack across Malice’s tortured mind, *more beautiful than ever. That sick Priton, lips bloody wet. With them, three swordsmen. And they’re all looking at you.*

Malice whispered, short of breath and hardly audible:

“*Dominae*”.

Laughter instantly filled the room, clear and crystalline.

“Adieu, you’ll never see me again’,” mimicked Merveille as she walked closer, heels thumping on hard rock. “Ah, *ma triste soeur*, ever so dramatic! Say, you put our dear sister Sorrow to shame – good thing she fled the Isle in earnest. But you have little talent for threats, nor I for niceties, so let us do away with protocol for now. ”

Wrack! Malice panicked. *Wrack!*

“I understand,” purred the median child, “you have gleaned into our little bric-a-brac, yes? And though I lament the thick-headedness by which you have conducted your sordid affairs – murder and all – I must however laud your timing – it is, afterall, exquisite”.

Kill them all and save yourself, urged the shadow at her hind. *Choices, Malice. Choices.*

“We needed diversions to finalize our plans. Nearly fifty years of subtle work have given birth to new pathways, and our network is vast enough to choke out the life of all... disagreements. The bases of Dystopian society are warped beyond recall. Balafre’s risible surprise forced our hand, luckily, your prowess at spectacles and tragedy had all streets buzzing with gossip. Aye, it was like stomping grapes with a hammer”.

But I can’t! Malice wanted to weep. *I can’t!*

“To be fair, it doesn’t actually *thrill* me to see you so, my little truffle. I used to protect you. Triste wanted to call out your Tenet-breaking, and I urged him to reconsider. Even then the elders wanted your heart before Court, nay, I went for the sides instead. And when you came to me with that vapid plan for sabotage, I went and bore the strain of Maxine’s disgusting lechery, *pour toi!*”

If you do nothing, insisted Wrack, your fate is sealed, your friends will be tortured and slain, and this defiler will walk!

“Mother thinks we can rally you to our side, willingly, into the New Era. She says your powers can be harnessed, that you are a mere oddity of nature. I disagree. Back in the Demon Den,” Merveille paused, then picked up again, “you showed me your true face, squashing your own sister down like some kind of bug...”

Free yourself! screamed the shadow. *Kill them all!*

“... though I loved you”.

A cold blade suddenly bit into Malice’s face, tracing slowly down the left temple, drawing blood as it went. One half-muffled scream escaped through clenched teeth, and an involuntary jerk of her knees almost gave the footing away, and as it did the snarewire closed in further, nearly snapping her neck.

“The truth is,” continued Merveille as she cut down the temple and into the cheek with her bodkin, “you have no purpose. Your ideas have no logic, no unifying thread. You live for *nothing*. When addressed, you react, strike back

rabidly, and without a plan – without a cause – careless to hurt those around you, or to foil the carefully conceived plans of people without ever pausing to consider, for just a second – a second, *Mal’!* – that maybe, just maybe, their designs are greater than *you*”.

The blade stopped mid-way down Malice’s milk-white neck, blood dripping down. “Whilst I,” she continued, “I do nothing *but* care. My subjects ache to serve, it is their basest nature – and mine to dominate”.

Balafre’s rumbling laughter broke through the prison like a fresh morning breeze. “You tart,” he sputtered steadfast, “can’t b-begin to understand how w-wrong you are. The Ordenmarshall will t-teach you the meaning of submission, s-soon enough!”

And a resounding *thump* echoed through the room as one of the guards struck him senseless.

Merveille answered musically. “Silence, you loon. You have served your purpose, have some decency! Your predecessors all argued the same gibberish, about Archons and laboratories, and great Luminon high in the sky. Ah, trifles! Needless to say, it didn’t *save* them”.

Some tortured swear rose from the Black Knight as he recoiled in shock.

So he didn’t know, said Wrack.

“How dare you!” cried Spleen frantically, “you have undone us all! A hundred deaths will not suffice for your lot! Necropolis itself shall rise as one, and overthrow your tepid pretense. We shall *live freely!*”

Then he, too, was beaten down in a flurry of kicks.

“Pup-” started Malice, vying for air.

“What is it,” asked Merveille softly, “speak your piece, fledgling”.

And Malice uttered, very faintly, “you... are... Mother’s... *puppet*”.

At which she received a powerful blow to the stomach. Desperately struggling to maintain her footing, she gasped

spastically, wincing from the pain. Soon, convulsive breaths and rattling chains alone sounded through the place, and it seemed an eternity before Merveille finally stated, voice fading as she strolled away:

“I am Dominae. I rule Dystopia with an iron hand, gloved in velvet. Those who know their place cleave to my will and are repaid in kind. Those who can not see the good of my aim... are put to the rack”.

And when the door closed, there remained only Priton’s inchoate mantra, mumbled through puffy lips as he gulped down Kencherry juice. “Let’s see, yes,” he repeated, “let’s see... *la la la*, let’s see!”

Merveille and the three swordsmen were gone.

Oh, Malice, rasped Wrack, powerless. *Malice...*

Some rustle of cloth and metallic clank as the Healer unrolled various tools on a work table.

“Malice,” coughed Spleen through broken teeth, “please, *please*, do something!”

Go on, argued the shadow, *put them out of their misery already, take out the Healer, go after Dominae! Quickly, before it’s too late!*

But Malice was losing consciousness fast. Everything reeled around at dizzying speed. She remembered her lost love, somewhere in the room, and wished she could hold him one last time...

I can’t, she pleaded in vain, *I can’t...*

Priton had had time to sort through most of his gear when the door finally sprung open. But there was little surprise as another stormed in, grunting like a wounded beast, intoxicated with bloodlust. No, rather, it was a sort of disappointment – a sigh – as though the Healer never quite anticipated to succeed, but had waited for an enemy that had simply failed to show... until then, and the picture was nowhere near as poetic as he’d willed it to be.

Few footsteps were heard as the bloated wretch fumbled back, then a swift metallic brattle as jumbled tools fell to

the floor. Hoarse grunts replaced these, filling the air with violence, followed by wet gurgles as Priton the Healer was hacked down to pieces.

Run ye to Gardens, fae kin
Where sweet hyacinths bloom
Dance ye, spread and spin
Seedlings late and soon

- Gaël des Vers,
Stanzas for Eternity, III.

XXXXXII. Defiance

“Father,” chanced Malice, rubbing at her wrists, “father, are you hale?”

The man had not spoken since he’d freed the four of them. He still stood over the carcass of the Healer, one double-edged wood axe firmly gripped in both hands, dripping wet. His frail composure sustained him, and quite formidably so, yet there was something terribly *wrong* about him. It was the eyes. The pupils were dilated so taut, they now appeared mostly black. He seemed lost inside an endless maze, like a ghost, sustained in the earthly realm by invisible strings alone.

Malice looked around. The dungeon was shaped like an S, awkwardly so, meaning it had been fashioned in haste. All sides rough and unkempt, various torture devices – drills and curved blades and nails and wires – rusty and stained, all of them, with straps of all sorts and chains dangling from the ceiling, but few furnishings, save a wooden shelf which Spleen was rummaging through with abandonment. True, the old scholar had been badly beaten, the rat-like face all bruised and bloody, but there was a fierce determination to him Malice had never even gleaned, and she knew that when he’d found what he was looking for, nothing was going to stop him from getting out.

Better fared the Black Knight, who still wore his habitual raiment, and seemed more at ease in this gory setting than any. Rusty armblood locked around the stump,

and bastard sword now unsheathed. He was standing near the doorway, gauging the distance between: footsteps and weapon range.

They hadn't spoken, he and Hemlock. Not a word, just acknowledged one another with a simple nod, as though they'd barely left each other's side, though it'd been almost forty years. They went about their duty, speaking a language beyond words.

There was newfound strength coursing through Malice's veins. She had slept, if only for a little while. Blood poured down her neck and gorge from the gash in her face. It sustained her will to vengeance. And only when she had secured her own blades from the table did she turn to the most difficult task, where the sorry hump lay huddled there in the corner, virtually dead.

Léandres.

The poet of the Old Tongue had been thrown in with their lot like a corpse, which is what he now resembled, though the flame of life flickered in him still. His skin shone pale as ivory, with a greyish hue, and clothes sodden and full of grime. He barely even breathed.

"Mon pauvre amour," whispered Malice as she kissed him on the brow. *"Tout est ma faute..."*

Tears filled her one purple eye. She saw him there: the dying proof of her failures. *And how*, she asked the shadow, *do I wake him up?*

"I have it!" yelped Spleen from the shelf, holding the old book and a bundled roll of scrolls. "We can go".

He's not sleeping, answered Wrack, prone over her like a shroud. *You've sundered the life from his flesh. Can you piece it back together?*

"We need to get him out of here," she thought out loud.

Balafre looked to Hemlock's absent figure, then back to her. "My f-friend, they are w-waiting beyond this door".

He's right, sliced in Wrack.

"But we can't *leave* him," countered Malice, sternly so.

“I’ll carry him,” interjected Spleen. “Perhaps we can make our escape”.

“It is n-not,” argued the Black Knight, twitching, “not e-efficient”.

“... there was a bustle at my chamber door,” finally spoke Hemlock, still caught in a dream. “Banging, incessant, in *my own* house. I had slept... too long. They came. Those who were my friends. But the look in their eyes as I opened mine – why would they turn in such a way, against me, after all... all this... for me to die like some draped buffoon? There was my old bodkin in my hand – someone had placed it there – and I saw the blue flask, the Aian drop, brought for me. I could not find the words. There was one, Bastien – he pretended not to hear me. ‘I’m fit’, I said, ‘let me stand’. There were screams – I struggled. Some black, eldritch stuff coursed through my veins, but I did not understand. I struck. A letter fell down. I struck *again*”.

He paused.

“A letter...” he turned to Malice, “my poor daughter, everything they’ve *done* to you, while I slept”.

Hemlock leered back at the Black Knight, suddenly lucid. “Inefficient, yes,” he concluded, “but we must be who we are. Take him, Spleen”.

As in that selfsame moment, Hemlock crossed over the bloody hump of flesh at his feet and strode to his daughter’s side. Sinews tense, seemingly possessed with dread and dark designs, a fraction of his former self still shone, and when she finally recognized him, Malice let go, and hid into his arms.

Tears flooded as she pressed upon his chest, anguish weighing in, begging for release.

“Everything’s over,” she wept, “*fuck!* I’ve failed you all, Necropolis will fall – ” *Kalian and Eglantine!*

“Hush,” murmured Hemlock, “*hush...*”

“I *had* her,” raged she, curling fingers into claws, “Morbid – I had her before me and I could have torn her limbs from fucking limbs and I didn’t, I *didn’t!*”

“You are no vile assassin, Malice,” Hemlock replied comfortingly, “and more truthful than this society will ever permit. Morbid’s lust stems deeper than you or I could even conceive, because we do not hunger for power. It is difficult,” he reflected, “to uproot what you do not fully understand”.

“But – ”

“Listen,” he pressed her closer, “you have given more than I deserve, my child. To see one of mine return thus, to see you so defiant – warms my heart, and now I can say farewell, as I have beloved Josy, to this darkened land, fighting, if not in peace. What little I can make right before these old bones give way at last”. His voice broke. “You will take *this*,” he spoke as he handed her a bundle of cloth, “Ethos Noir. It may not save this city, but it is yours to complete, if you will”.

“B-brother,” called an eager Balafre from the doorway, “the d-day is *late*”.

“How true,” sighed Hemlock. “As for you, old friend”. He stepped over to the Black Knight and leaned in to usher in his ear. And as he did, Spleen handed her the book and scrolls, which she stuffed into her backpack.

“Thank you,” the scholar said, “for this”.

“But I have damned you,” argued Malice, melancholic.

“Oh no, quite the contrary”. Love shone in bloodshot, yellowy eyes. “The freedom your courage has inspired me, not even death can take away, now that I truly live”.

You must be ready, Malice, urged Wrack, hovering low.

“It is time,” stated Hemlock, gripping the axe tight. Besides him, Balafre stood, but something had changed irremediably. He stood there, radiant, as though years had lifted from his shoulders. And he smiled, sweetly.

He *smiled*.

“Behind me,” he addressed the band without stuttering. The transformation was uncanny. “And hold fast. These catacombs spread wide beneath Tour Noire. We will strike, and we will move. Hemlock chopped his way in, they would have regrouped, and planned their positions. Whoever the traitors are, they are finally showing their faces – they are *here*, and ripe for the reaping”. He turned to the youngest Morbid daughter in pride. “Malice, I have not seen what you can do, but I have seen stranger stuff on my own, and if hearsay rings any truth, I am glad to fight by your side”.

You don't know the half of it, jested Wrack, wings outstretched darkly.

“Father,” asked she, “what is the plan?”

“Why, *ma fille*,” he replied, “we are taking the Queen”.

And at that, Balafre swung the door open.

The first quarrel sped past his head, the second he deflected with an arch of the armblade. In a moment, he had leapt into the darkness beyond, charging, and Hemlock followed close, screaming his warcry.

Malice's bloodsight bubbled up instantaneously and she launched in the foray, blades flashing. Wrack extended vaporous claws left and right, his black shapeless form fluttering behind, calling out the foes that burst into view.

A handful of Smugglers spanned out in a wide chamber punctuated with crooked columns. They wielded longswords flashing new, skirmishing defensively while two crossbowmen stood in the only passage out, letting fly almost blindly. Some familiar faces in the lot: youths with ambition, all of them.

Malice flanked left and sent the first one rolling, disjointed like a ragdoll. Balafre cut his way expertly, patiently, while Hemlock raged on, more monster than man, overtaken by the Neghlin poison. He pounced through, the axe biting into flesh as surely as wood.

Spleen came in last, hurriedly, dragging Léandres as best he could.

The chamber was theirs easily. Before the last swordsmen had fallen, the two crossbowmen turned tail to run, yet one was slower and Malice snapped his neck from a distance, grinning as her red eye pulsed madly in the black.

“Are you alright, brother,” asked Balafre, covering behind a side of the enclosure.

Hemlock was breathing heavily. There was a quarrel lodged in chest, and he snapped it like a twig. “Onward,” he urged them.

Not long before the poison ends him, commented Wrack. *How many more?* replied Malice, clenching the blood-rage as best she could, striding side by side the others into a new corridor.

Wrack rasped gravely. *I can not tell from here. These walls are thick.*

Then go, she ordered. *Find Morbid, find Merveille.*

Concern bled through its tone. *Are you sure?*

I'll be fine, dear friend. Malice tightened her fingers on the blades, knuckles white. *Hurry!*

And as the shadow-creature flittered away, the small band came to a halt. There in the twisted corridor stood a mighty iron fence, with bars two inches thick. Beyond, torches wavering as panicked figures moved to and fro.

“By the Void,” cursed Spleen, wheezing as he laid Léandres down. “An actual prison!”

“Step aside,” commanded Malice, crimson tides submerging her vision entirely. It was there, she could sense the bedrock around them, the minerals aligned within the wrought iron fence, and she willed it all *undone*.

Hemlock and Balafre took a step back as the thing bent and twisted in on itself, unearthly. Then, as in the selfsame second, the very granite splintered and cracked, and the entire contraption shattered away, hurled into the corridor

in a storm of dust and pebbles, cast away by unseen forces as Malice's eye gleamed deadly bright.

"Luminon help us," whispered Balafre, taken aback.

"And who's *he*," rasped Spleen from the strain, "to lift us from this muck?"

Balafre's smile was holed with missing teeth. "Light," he stated proudly, "triumphant Light".

"Go," croaked Hemlock, the veins on his temples bulging dangerously. "The last chamber lies ahead!"

Malice braced herself on the wall, caught in a swoon. No, she raged, *not so soon!* Everything was spinning. *Already*, she thought, *how long can I hold?*

The men were already well into the corridor when she regained her senses and started anew.

Hurry Wrack, she mulled desperately, feeling lost without her shadow-friend. *Hurry back to me.*

Hemlock's demented face leered back at the group before the chamber's mouth. "It is a large opening. Entries left and right. Here they'd make a stand". He turned and sped off blindly, his scream resounding like thunder. "Break the lines!"

Malice realized too late. They had spilled into a vast circular hall, lit with torches, with two staircases carved into the rock – left and right – which must have served as the main service hall for the hidden catacombs.

Fuck.

More than twenty men and women stood guard at each end, some ducked with crossbows behind overturned tables, others poised on bent knees, blades aloft and ready to strike. When the prisoners came into sight these immediately fanned off, forming two fronts to wedge in the small group.

Malice understood their position, the crude strategy. A thousand ideas spun into mind, but it was too late – the death charge had begun. Even bottlenecked and

outnumbered, the band launched forth with the strength of despair and *struck*.

Hemlock charged berserk into one side, Balafre in the other, majestic in the midst of battle. Malice's vision boiled red as she stood in the center, intoxicated with bloodlust. She burned out quarrels shot in her direction in mid-air. One warrior she fell, then another, but there were so many, and she couldn't count get them all.

Spleen stayed close behind, Léandres laid at his feet, the old scholar gripping his rusty bodkin, looking round, confused and fearful.

He was the first to die.

The blind charge had swiftly turned into full-scale melee, where blood gushed high and wretches tumbled low. Quarrels flew and bit into flesh, and one shot straight in the scholar's throat. He tumbled on himself, clutching at a ripped artery.

Seeing this, Malice screamed and forced back three swordsmen, limbs disjoined, bones pulverised as they crumbled on their own disarrayed lines. Everything red, *blood-red*. She was cutting her way through the tangled mass to Léandres' side when the butt of a thrown hand axe struck her in the back of the head.

She fell.

All sounds muffled. A splatter of blood drizzling like rain. Faraway cries of agony, boots thumping at random. The shriek of steel on steel, mingled in the screams of the dying.

Malice crawled through spilled guts and freshly flown fluids, to find him, her poet, her one –

Overhead, a heavy axe swung down into some youth's shoulder blade, then wiggled out and swung sideways into someone's backside – Hemlock was fighting there, protecting her – three quarrels sticking out of him, half a dozen cuts oozing blackly, and he roared on like a madman.

And as they ganged up on him, a flurry of blades lashed through with deadly precision, whirling fast, chopping up with balanced force, every parade doubled with fierce riposte, but the Black Knight's armor was long gone, and he'd been maimed deeply, the old rags already soaked in blood.

The two old friends fought back to back, in their midst, a withering Malice slumped over her comatose love.

Can you piece him back together, the shadow had asked, and she now understood what that meant. For so long she had thought she could only bring death, but no – she could separate the parts, yes, deconstruct, bring chaos where order once reigned – hence she may set them straight, mend the tears and restore – somehow, *somehow* –

Blood-red, blood –

Meanwhile, Hemlock's slick axe had been wrenched from his hands. Instead he wielded his bodkin with stubborn force, slashing out, jabbing into foes as they slowly circled him. At his side, Balafre was swaying dangerously, fighting for his life as all the years finally caught up to him and movements became sluggish.

Malice's blood-sight wavered.

Léandres, poet of the Old Tongue, her precious, most delicate leman. She remembered a night in Eternal Gardens, his plucking of the lute, the low hum of his chant, these pale eyes, their restraint, like a dam over troubled waters, and they had spilled open for her, at Grand Bal. More than passion, more than lust. It was love.

Chaos!

There was flesh, yes, there beneath – and muscle, sinews and bones, nerves and veins – and Malice willed them to flow, continuously, harmoniously – but it *tore* her, broke her – the exertion was too great, too hard – but she willed on, forced on.

Look at me, she begged, *just look at me –*

Overhead, the two great towers were falling, side by side, blades clattering down. More quarrels shot and sinking into flesh, and as their knees hit the ground in unison, a cheer erupted from a dozen frenzied voices, all around.

Malice saw the pale eyes open at last.

Léandres looked up, slowly, filled with sorrow and confusion. He locked on the massacre, and there, the twisted faces, blades gleaming with blood.

He gazed into her eyes.

“*Je t’aime*,” Malice whispered softly, while the swordsmen closed in around them, carefully, savouring the coming kill.

Léandres’ lips formed an incoherent word as he failed to speak, but she saw it, it was *there* –

He nodded and smiled.

Malice shut her eyes.

The *blood* –

“*Au revoir, mon poète*”.

Blood-red, *blood* –

Wave upon wave of malevolence surging up from the deepest well of her conscience, droplets turning into streams, into floods – drowning the chamber in whiplashes of pure suffering, burning, *consuming* – the screams of the swordsmen as they recoiled in agony, charred to the bone – rocks cracking and splintering under the full force of vengeance – everything, *everything* scorched and rent, showered in blood, the *blood* –

A lone whisper in the vortex.

Je t’aime.

Dialectics: three definitions.

1st, starting point: *linguistic means to win over an argument, regardless of the truth of one's thesis. Sophistry.* 2nd, half-circle: *analytical practice by which every conception is met with an opposite rhetoric, every certainty clouded by doubt.* 3rd, full circle: *Negative. The use of critical discourse to challenge and undermine symbolic thought. Anti-mediation. Anti-ideology. Language poised against language – conscience as final affirmation.*

- Father Hemlock.

Notes (Ethos Noir), p. 154

XXXXXIII. Taking The Queen

Explosions rumbled overhead, through the rock, sending tremors down the very foundations of Tour Noire. First one, then another, and Malice regained consciousness.

Body parts lay scattered above and around, seared and smouldering, with a foul, sweet odour she could taste on her pallet. Painfully, she fumbled for her bodkin – found it – regained her footing as the shadow-fiend soared back, floating over the disgusting remains like a wraith.

“The Smugglers beat in retreat,” it proclaimed, “they are outside now, setting fires to the tower, ramming in kegs of whiskey and strange new chemicals that go *boom* in a mean way”.

Malice spat to get the taste out of her mouth. She noticed one of her hair locks had turned entirely white.

Pure white.

Unable to talk, stricken dumb by the violence and the trauma, her instincts took over and she tried to move, to run away from the threat. But her legs gave way, she fell down in a heap of gore. *Fuck*. Again she picked herself up,

went on carelessly, hurdling over the bodies as she went, fighting to suppress the shock.

Don't look, she thought to herself. *Don't*.

"Morbid," broke in Wrack to distract her, "my guess is, she's all the way up there, Mal', all alone. Everyone else has fled".

"Yes, they'd *fear* me now". She resisted a perverse ache to laugh, then. "Desperate means to end the 'abomination', think you not? This tower is made of *stone*".

She crawled up the basement stairs, two by two, frantic to leave the dreadful scene behind, though it was too late.

Wrack was not amused. "The flames are not your first concern," it reflected gloomily, "the fumes will kill you first".

Indeed, when Malice had erupted out of the tunnel and into a rear room of the ground floor, she could see thick smoke already hovering below the ceiling, seeping everywhere and into everything. The air was scorching hot.

"Fuck," she muttered, "*fuck* - "

Her eyes began to squint as she grabbed the waterskin and spilled it all over her coat. As the droplets fell, images came tumbling up: Léandres' eyes, Hemlock, the Black Knight, and Spleen – but she ignored them.

Not now, she thought, *not now*.

"Not gonna make it," she thought out loud, "Wrack, it's over".

The shadow-creature liefly translated in front while she donned the hood and fought back the tears. Vague traits blurred on the eerie face, almost human-like. "You walk," hissed the creature in a blood-wet tongue, "you walk and you don't stop".

You don't stop.

Vision veiled by tears and a scarlet sheen, Malice brought her sleeve up to her nose and crossed into the lobby. There were flames everywhere – the twin mirkwood doors had been barged down and heaps of driftwood and

broken chariots burned there instead, the carpet slowly catching, the paintings, wooden frames, everything –

As she ran for the stairs, another explosion hit the tower, spewing more rancid fumes into the air. But Malice could scarcely breathe. She fell to her knees and kept crawling up the helicoidal staircase, on all fours –

Fuck, fuck –

Beyond the roar of the fires, licking up the tower walls, voices echoed, faraway: orders barked by vindictive throats, doubled with pleas and cries of panic. Malice was certain, they were calling for her head – she, the red-eyed, dastard-unfit.

“Up,” pressed Wrack, espousing every painful step. “Almost there!”

“I did it,” broke Malice, laughing as she wept, “I woke him up, he was *there*, he looked at me –”

The smoke was billowing up the staircase at an alarming rate, faster than she could crawl. It clouded her sight as she made her way, steadily, painstakingly.

The world was wheeling out of control now, spinning fast, dizzying, she couldn’t breathe, it burned, so much – but there it was, the final doorway, wide-open against the night sky: fractured Dystopian havens rolling on forever.

Malice launched herself unto the rooftop, retching up convulsively. A cool wind was blowing, clean and crisp against her grimy face, hardly recognizable through the soot, the slash trailing down her temple, the lock of purest white –

One clawed hand scratched unto the doorway for leverage, and she hauled herself up, slowly, bodkin raised defiantly, though she could barely see anything.

Malice blinked feverishly, until her vision cleared, and saw there beyond the rooftop of Tour Noire: Necropolis stretching out as far as the eye could see, pinions and abbeys, manors and smaller towers, with their small flame-lit windows like fireflies in the dark.

“Is it not lovely,” started a solemn voice nearby, “my dark kingdom, how it spans so beautiful, so cold...”

Morbid stood at the edge of the parapet, looking away, dressed in a regal crimson gown which flowed in the wind. “Is it not absolutely lovely,” she repeated, her booming, melodious voice lost in the distance.

“Oh, quite – ” answered Malice, coughing. “Like a flower – a *faded* flower”.

She took a few painful steps forward. Flickering lights mounting on each side, hinting higher flames. “I understand your plan now, darling Mother,” started Malice. “Merveille was most wilful, easiest to shape into Dominae. But she wasn’t your first attempt. No, Malheur was nearly driven insane by your scheming, and you drove her out instead. Then you pinned Merveille and I against the other, thinking the survivor would be made stronger. But I wouldn’t play along. Ah! How could I even understand why you’d force Triste upon me, that fucking leech, until now...” *Léandres, mon pauvre amour!* “And what difference it even made to you whom I decided to bed – what you could possibly gain by pushing me? You needed the right trigger to throw me into offence, cast Merveille into the lot and wait for us to go at it. Down there,” she paused, flashes of memory storming her mind, “you figured, it was me or her. Maybe my powers would be more than you knew, or maybe Merveille would do the dirty work herself. You must have told her I was broken, vulnerable, and so she came to gloat, but when I made my escape, perhaps Merveille *too* realized she was just another chess piece in your game”.

Yet Morbid stayed there, silent, looking yon.

“Merveille left you here,” continued Malice, “did she *not*? The blood of your blood, your precious creation?” *And your precious Jacques, the abyss-painter –*

“*What is worth it?*” screamed Malice all of a sudden, the blood-sight returning like a familiar lover. “The dead? The

corpses piled thick at your feet like a mountain, all so that you could have your precious moment, you glory, your bold New Era? What could your slaves possibly give you *now*, now that you wear the same shackles as they? All your exotic weapons are useless, their secrets forever locked. As for Dominae, I shan't gainsay your word, this creation is indeed complete, now that she's turned *against* you".

And Mother Morbid turned to face her daughter, at the very last. Her eyes were red with tears, runny make up down jewellery to her ample gorge. "You think I did not see *this* coming?" she raged, voice atremble for the first time. "What I have set forth, it will live forever. The cycle has started, it will go on, with or without me. I've finally broken through the work of the Founders, I, alone!"

"I *think*," cut Malice unforgiving, "you can pretend as you like. The truth is self-evident: there are consequences to anything – benevolence, ignorance, *arrogance*".

Morbid spat, traits distorted and fey. "Simpleton! The strong prevail, always, and the strong need not *reason* – "

"Ah!" laughed Malice out loud, "would that an ounce of empathy ever coursed through your veins, Mother. You've toyed with me, with us – I have seen your chess board, working through your lines to get here, so many pieces lost, and they had *names*". *Léandres, Spleen, Calonio, and the rest...* "Now I have outgrown these ways".

Disdain twisted Morbid's face in the gloom. "*Look at you*," she hissed snake-like, "*just look at you, kinslayer!*"

And Malice smiled. "Murder! Oh yes, such as you have written on my brow – and murder it is. But *you* sent these peons my way, cornered me, stifled me. And still, indignant, here, at your last breath".

"It was a mistake," Morbid's lower lip was shaking. "I do not recognize you now. Have I ever known you, daughter? You are diseased beyond word".

"I am Chaos," stated Malice, defiantly.

Hemlock's own words: *we must be who we are*.

“The people who leagued with you, they didn’t have to die. Such a waste! Tell me, how did you woo them, for such honourable figures to flock to the losing side?”

“They were my *friends*”.

“You hurt your own, always”.

“I never meant to”.

“Are we so different, then? We stand here both *alone*, regardless of our designs”.

“Not for long”.

Morbid wept, then, tears lost in the nightly wind. “You could have a purpose, you know. You could build something, *anything*!”

But Malice was unmoved. “Yes, I may have come to doubt the Tenets in my own right, but I loath your ways infinitely more. I can not *spare* you, your Dominae, this city... or this world”. Malice paused for a second, then concluded: “I will *not* pretend”.

Morbid’s otherwise implacable mien was undone at the very last, and Malice saw a woman – not a Queen, but a woman – sad and powerless and remorseful. “Then what,” Morbid wondered, emotionless. “What will you do?”

Malice knew the time had come: the fires were getting higher, even then the winds could not prevent the smoke from reaching the rooftop – soon, the flames would swallow Tour Noire entirely.

“I will go my way,” Malice announced. “There was a time, once, when the world toppled under the weight of man’s arrogance, and nearly broke. There was peace, for a while. Now the slumberous beast awakens across the Wastes: the nightmare is resuming. But *I*, I will journey to the heart of man’s Empire and break the circle once and for all”.

“You would stop progress?” argued Morbid nonchalantly.

“I will tear this whole wretched world apart”.

And Morbid turned away, hiding her face in shame. As she did, Malice murmured, her faint voice drowned out by the roaring flames.

Adieu.

Then, all at once, she ran upon the rooftop of Tour Noire: a dark star shooting against the rising flames, and there, leapt off the parapet, with great vaporous wings outstretched left and right, falling down, *down* – flying effortlessly, forever, into the blackness of night.

Oh, fair enough, yes, we've been through this already! No more. I know, I know, we've nigh three thousand idiots at our feet, *biensûr* – but there's more pressing matters, really, which absolutely must be addressed with the utmost consideration... Isn't it obvious? I have no shoes to go with this dress!

- Merveille Clairevaux
Personnal notes, 21.

XXXXXIV. The Voivode

Malice hit the icy waters, piercing the mirrored surface and nearly breaking herself, then falling like a rock all the way down the riverbed.

The shock kicked the air out of her already tortured lungs, currents instantly reeling in, and she opened her eyes to grasp for support, instead to see this vast, slithering shape enfold her – great tattered wings flowing effortlessly in the Ashen Strait.

The cold was unforgiving, it bit into her wounds like so many icy maws, Malice's very flesh screaming as the burning wrung her back into consciousness. Scrambling to swim back to shore, there shone bright flashes above the surface, all rumbling sounds deafened by the waters.

When she finally clawed up to the loamy bank – she heard calls and footsteps in her direction, so many that could not be counted.

They will hunt me down, she thought, to the last.

Malice sought to flee, but her limbs would not respond, the blood-sight washed away, she was at the end of the rope. Her face met round pebbles as she lay down on the shore, failing.

Get up, get up –

Suddenly, someone leapt to her side, heavy feet thumping in the mud.

“*Allez, ma soeur,*” spoke a familiar voice, before steady hands wrenched her up like a wet rag. “Get up!”

Malice strove to steady herself as the world reeled back into place – Tour Noire ablaze, like a burning spike through the heart of Necropolis, and the crowds spilling in the streets, hundreds of bodkins unsheathed, and somewhere, Dominae, with her mask of white paste fond and black charcoal streaks, like tears –

There, in the shadow of the Ashen, gleamed the twin violet eyes of Malheur.

You are gone, thought Malice, *sailing into the Void* –

Yet the eldest Morbid daughter stood there, hunting bow in hand, heavy dagger hanging in the scabbard at her side, solid as iron, battle-ready. Blood speckled her face like mist. However she’d come about, there’d been fighting on the way.

“There is no time,” she stated quickly, “my boat is anchored at the mouth of the Ashen – go”.

Malice nodded confusedly. “What? Come *with me* –”

They’ve seen you, pressed Wrack, *hurry!*

Malheur smiled. “*Ma soeur,* this life ended a long time ago. All these years I ached for the End, and I have found it, *within you, Voivode.* Now go! I’ll hold them!”

Swiftly, Malheur knocked an arrow, cocked the bow, flexed her knees, aimed, shot.

And Malice kissed her sister on the cheek, donned her hood, closed the soggy, mud-stained coat. A new voice filled her throat as she found the words.

“Nonsense, sister. I need you. There may be death aplenty, but not here, not for you. Come. Together, we can bring about the End you so desire”. She repeated in earnest. “*Together*”.

Malheur’s throat tightened. She nodded.

The sisters rushed off, cloaked fully, and disappeared, mere shadows in the Dark, now endowed with terrible purpose.

So there I go, at long last. Whether secrets unfold, or dreary death ten leagues over, the purpose is fair and true, though I shall return, to you, my girls, and my beloved, my friends – I dare not look upon thee more, dark Dystopia, lest I abandon my quest and cower back to thy bosom, for see: the Void beckons me, and I have but two feet.

- Mikel Durivage
Black Knight of the Thirteen
Appointed to the 10th direction.
Diary, p.1

XXXXXV. At Noctem

Dawn had risen by the time the two Morbid daughters had made it to the edge, where the Ashen drifted into the lifeless sea. They broke out of the foggy woodland: but ragged silhouettes in the morn, dragging feet for a destination barely remembered.

The small barque lay there, as promised – waiting, rocking on the waves, glistening with spindrift. Beyond, a thick fog blanketed the waters as far as the eye could see: the Void, merging with the bleak Dystopian skies, grey upon grey – and there, somewhere, vast, endless Wastes.

Malheur lifted the anchor and pushed the boat into the waters until she was knee-deep, then hauled herself onboard and helped her broken sister in.

A miserable sail rose upon the one crooked mast as Malice curled up at the bottom, shivering, covered by a blanket of black vaporous wings – a white lock tumbling out of the hood as she shied away from the light, one purple eye, wet with tears, the other red, dead in its socket.

A faint wind caught the sail while Malheur settled solemnly at the helm, lay down her weapons and held the bar further into the unknown.

And as the boat was swallowed into the ghostly mists of the Void, so did Malice finally close her eyes, to drift into a deep, dark sleep, cradled by the waves.

Translations

Ouverture. Triste Amour

Non... no
Pauvre... poor
Exactement... exactly
Dis moi... tell me
Pitié... please
Je brûle pour toi... I burn for you
Bien sûr... of course
Assez... enough

I. One Tired Act

Carpe Noctem... seize the night
Rien... nothing
Ma soeur... my sister

II. Father Hemlock

Bien vrai... how true
Pardonne-moi... forgive me
Non... no

III. Le jardin des ombres

T'offrir des baisers... to offer you kisses
Chauds comme le sang... hot as blood
Et te mordiller... and bite you softly
La nuit durant... all through the night
Notes personnelles... personal notes
Le jardin des ombres... the garden of shadows
Par ici, jolie dame... over here, pretty lady
Je vous attendais... I was waiting for you
Sans offense... no offense
Mais t'as pas l'air bien... but you don't look too good
J'ai mal de vivre... I find it hard to go on
Je suis désolé pour Triste... I'm sorry about Triste
Vrai, mais tout n'est pas perdu... True, but all is not lost
Mépriserais-tu les fondateurs?... do you hate the Founders?
Et alors?... and so?
Prends-moi... take me

IV. Mille Merveilles

Mille Merveilles... a thousand wonders
Non, non, non!... no, no, no!
Maquillage... make-up
Au secours!... help!

Les filles... girls
C'est-à-dire?... meaning?
Irrévocablement... irrevocably
Un instant!... one moment!

V. Syllia Swamps

Marécages... swamps
Petit con... little cunt
Vraiment... really
Femme... woman
Imbécile... imbecile
Ah, d'accord... alright then

VI. Ô, Malheur!

Ô, Malheur!... what
Aide-moi... help me
Je... I
Du calme, ma sœur...
Négligé... negligee
Désolée... sorry
Danse macabre... dance macabre
Après tout... after all
Et comment?... and how?
Dis moi... tell me

VII. Mère Morbide

Mère Morbide... Mother Morbid
Délicieux... delicious
Punctus... the point
Alors... so
Oui... yes

VIII. Malice Through The Looking Glass

Salope... bitch
S'il-te-plaît... please

IX. The Demon Den

Qu'importe... whatever
Allez... go on
Berce dans l'autre de nos trances... rock in the lair of our trances
Délire de vautre, nectar d'autres... madness of excess, nectar of others
Lèvres en plaies, peines sanglantes... lips like wounds, bloody sorrows
Baisers de lame à l'orée infâme... kisses from blades in a dreary morning
Verse le vin noir de nos absences... pour the black wine of our absence
Aux affres encore, aux espoirs morts... to more horrors, to dead hopes
Oublions l'hier et le sort (de demain)... forget yesterday and the fate (of tomorrow)

Notre ère, la vipère et son venin... our era, the viper and its venom
Gerce mes ténèbres de ton silence... chap the darkness of your silence
Chaque heure rancit mes pleurs (de toi)... every hour spoils my tears (of you)
À voir, à rire de l'aube au soir (durant)... to see, to laugh from morn to eve
(all the while)
Je jouis du crépuscule mourrant... I savour the dying dusk

X. Sharp Eyes And Blood Lips

Allez... go on!
Vite, maintenant... quickly, now!
Oui... yes

XI. Many A Glorious Thing

Non non... no no
Ça ne se fait pas, je vous en prie. Il est de mon avis qu'elle a besoin de repos.
Tout cela peut attendre. Elle est entre mes mains, vous avez ma parole...
Please, that would be unseemly. It's my opinion that she needs rest. All of
this can wait. She is in my care, you have my word.
Entendu... agreed
Au plaisir... see you later

XII. Poet Of The Old Tongue

Vous m'avez fait une de ces peurs, jolie dame... you gave me such a scare,
pretty lady.
Tu sais... you know
Je t'en prie... I beg of you
Je n'y comprends rien... I don't understand

XIII. The Company Of Elders

Je vous prie de quitter ces lieux... please leave this place
Punctus... the point
S'il-te-plaît... please
Bien sûr... of course

XIV. A Moment's Peace

Salle de bain... restroom

XV. Deep Hallows

Très chère... my dear
Au contraire... on the contrary
Bien sûr... of course
Tant pis pour la condition humaine!... so much for the human condition!

XVI. Perpetual Court

À mes côtés... by my side
Ouste, et encore... off, and again
Du calme... calm down

Belle amour... beautiful love
Laisse-moi faire... let me handle it
Voilà tout... that's all

XVII. Communion of Flesh

Bien sûr... of course
Maquillage... make-up
Bonsoir, ma soeur... evening, sister
Peut-être?... maybe?
Coquine... naughty
Au plaisir, très chère... farewell, dearest

XVIII. Debate With The Shadows

Naturellement... naturally
Facile... easy thing
Alors... so
Exactement... exactly
Merde... shit

XIX. Despicable Healers

Mais non... not at all
C'est tout... that's all
Monsieur... sir

XX. Rape Resin

XXI. A Perfect Night

Bon bouquet... proper bouquet
Si jolie... so pretty
Oui, oui... yes, yes

XXII. Family Fitting

Non non, du tout... no, not at all
Geste... gesture
La touche finale... the final touch

XXIII. Carnal Mass

XXIV. Grand Bal

XXV. The Hall Of Mirrors

Et puis... and also
Mon amour... my love
Je suis un imbécile... I'm an idiot
Pardonne moi... forgive me

XXVI. Shall We Go?

XXVII. Your Days Are Numbered

Nous avons tout le temps du monde... we have all the time in the world

XXVIII. Wrack

J'irai te trouver... I'll go find you
Au seuil du levant... on the threshold of the rising sun
À l'aurore d'un jour... at the dawn of a new day
L'idylle d'un temps... a moment's poetry
Fragment pour toi... which means little to you
Quoique je t'aime... even though I love you
Notes personnelles... personal notes
Perdu... lost

XXIX. Ethos Noir

XXX. Hospitalière Sylvaine

Madame... madam
Très bien... very well

XXXI. But A Madman Come Home

XXXII. Face To face

Bonjour, mes amis... good day friends
J'aurai ta tête... I'll have your head
À l'aide... someone help me
Finalement... finally

XXXIII. Hallows Historian, Part II

Désolée... sorry

XXXIV. Doomed *in absentia*

XXXV. Waylaid

Maintenant... now

XXXVI. Conspiracy At The End Of The World

Je m'excuse... I'm sorry
Peu importe... no matter

XXXVII. Crooked Mansion

Et bien... so
Nos ennemis sont nombreux... our enemies are numerous
Baldaquin... four-poster

XXXVIII. Stalker

Maintenant je dois m'excuser... now I must take my leave

Fais de beaux rêves... sweet dreams

XXXIX. Betrayed

Errance trombe à l'orée des cieux... thundering wandering on the edges of the skies

Clair de sang, perdu par les médusés... drained of blood, lost by the mesmerized

À scander hors et large, 'nous sommes perdus'... to proclaim high and low, 'we are lost'

Mais ensemble -... but together

Ensemble et jusqu'au bout... together and till the end.

XXXX. Blood Of My Blood

Maintenant... now

XXXXI. Despoiled Grounds.

Table rase... clean slate

D'accord... alright

XXXXII. Hawthorn Hills

Pourquoi... why

XXXXIII. Ci-haut, ci-bas

Ci-haut, ci-bas... here high, here low

J'irai me promener, d'or et des prés... I'll walk about through gold and prairies

Jusqu'en terre de gré, ci-haut, ci-bas, ci-haut, ci-bas... until fair lands, so high, so low, so high

Sérieusement... seriously

XXXXIV. The Dark

Bordel... shit

Quel terrible sort... what terrible fate

Mais je vais t'aider... but I'll help you

XXXXV. Lost

XXXXVI. I'm Sorry

XXXXVII. Je ne t'oublierai pas

Je ne t'oublierai pas... I will not forget you

XXXXVIII. Tour Noire

Je sais... I know

Voilà... there

Encore un peu, allez... little more, come on

XXXXIX. A New Era

Fausse modestie... false modesty
Naturellement... naturally
Mon pauvre amour... my poor love

XXXXX. Oubliettes

XXXXXI. Dominae

Bien entendu... Of course
Quelle belle journée, n'est-ce pas... nice day, isn't it
Ma triste soeur... my poor sister
Pour toi... for you

XXXXXII. Defiance

Mon pauvre amour... my poor love
Tout est ma faute... it's all my fault
Ma fille... daughter
Je t'aime... I love you
Au revoir, mon poète... farewell, my poet
Je t'aime... I love you

XXXXXIII. Taking The Queen

Mon pauvre amour... my poor love

XXXXXIV. The Voivode

Biensûr... of course
Allez, ma sœur... go on, sister
Ma soeur... sister

XXXXXV. At Noctem

Glossary

Advent: ritual of death by which the subject swallows a mixture called the Aian drop.

Aian drop: type of poison refined and distilled from Aian fungus, of a deep fluorescent blue, growing only in certain chambers of the Caves. It is said to cause a painless, euphoric death.

Anne-Marie Desvents: one of the Founders, known for rebelling against her peers. She was reputed to be insane and violent, renamed La Fourbe and was exiled from Dystopia.

Archon, the: mysterious people met by Balafre.

Ashen Strait: river running through Necropolis.

At Noctem: literally, 'into the night' – designation by which a subject is no longer a member of Dystopian society. The person can either undergo Advent or venture into the Void.

Aurielle la Pure: one of the Founders, reputed for her kindness and wisdom. Author of the Tenets.

Balafre: one of the Black Knights.

Bakrha: paste made from Black lotus, opiate usually smoked in a pipe.

Bastien Cheveraux: Speaker for the elders.

Black Hyacynth: type of flower.

Black lotus: plant used to make Bakrha, opiate.

Black Knights: thirteen men and women trained extensively and sent out in thirteen directions from Dystopia to discover traces of life in the Wastes.

Blood Lips: inhabitant of Necropolis. Real name Florian.

Blood Tea: tea made from Scarlae leaves, known for its dark red tint.

Bodkin: small knife all habitants of Dystopia carry, as much for everyday uses as for self-defense.

Calonio: inhabitant of Necropolis, friend of Malice.

Castellin: music instrument made of metal parts.

Caves: series of caves and tunnels dug under Hawthorn Hills.

Chourrée: bread roll mixed with nuts and dried fruits. Common food.

Codex Mortem: document written by the Founders to extrapolate on the Three Tenets, guidelines for the generations to follow. Contains reflections on history, politics, society and ethics.

Collapse: the fall of civilization, when the Last Empire of Man toppled on itself and was destroyed.

Communion of Flesh: ritual orgies normally held in Dens.

Crawlers, Crawl: type of flower.

Daemondrought: mix of wine and noxberry juice. Toxic.

Damien: inhabitant of Necropolis. One of Triste's leman.

Dark, The: substance coursing under Dystopia which is reputed to enable vege

Den: underground complexes used for entertainment.

Dominae: aspiring ruler of Dystopia.

Dystopia: Small island where the city of Necropolis is located. Surrounded by wastes and devoid of sunlight, it still harbours life because of an inexplicable. It was named by its founders so as to inspire humility in its inhabitants.

Eglantine: child, younger sister to Kalian. Friend of Malice.

Elders: title used for the oldest inhabitants of Necropolis, often referred to as a social body.

Embassy: name to the Black Knights' endeavour.

Enklave, mysterious order described by Balafre as 'Death. Light. Slavery. Order.'

Eternal Gardens: vast gardens encircling Necropolis, arrayed in permaculture, requiring little to no care, hence the term 'eternal'. Otherwise referred to as the Gardens.

Ethos Noir: Hemlock's lifework, aimed at revising the Codex Mortem.

Fall of Man, The: see Collapse.

Final End, The: expression used by La Fourbe to describe the end of all human life in the World.

Fit, unfit: loose terms by which a person is deemed healthy enough to contribute to Dystopian society. General referent to mental and physical health.

Founders: the first people to have established themselves on Dystopia. They were fugitives and / or exiles from the Last Empire of Man. The better known figures are Anne-Marie Desvent, Jothriel, Gaël des Vers and Aurielle la Pure.

Founding, The: Process by which the Founders established themselves into a community on Dystopia, both by fashioning the island and by deciding how their society would be organized.

Gaël des Vers: one of the Founders, known for his poetry.

Grand Bal: greatest social event in Necropolis, with dance and music.

Great Ender: see Voivode.

Great Wandering, The: difficult journey by which the Founders travelled in the Wastes and found the island of Dystopia and settled there. The majority is said to have perished on the way.

Hall of Mirrors: special room in Manoir Desvents where La Fourbe was said to hold counsel with herself.

Hallows: Vast archives where all records of Dystopia are kept.

Hawthorn Hills: a collection of hills in the center of Dystopia, where the Caves are found, named for the prevalence of hawthorn trees.

Healers: individuals rumoured to have unique healing abilities and holding them to their advantage. Referred to as 'despicable'.

Heightmark Komturei: mysterious figure mentioned by Balafre.

Hemlock: father of Malice, Merveille and Malheur, leman to Josy. Known for having lead the Embassy with Morbid. Notable for his wisdom.

Horror Lilies: type of flower.

Hospitalier, Hospitalière: individuals appointed to the care of the Black Knights in Tour Noire.

Hyperions: type of flower.

Ilsa: former lover of Malice, known to wear only blue.

Jacques Laroche: leman of Morbid, known for painting variations of the Void.

Jeanelle Després: lover of Mikel Durivage

Josy: leman of Hemlock, friend of Malice

Jothriel's Lament: ballad of Jothriel that outlines the Collapse, the Great Wandering and the Founding.

Jothriel: one of the Founders, known for his songs.

Kalian: child, eldest sister of Eglantine. Friend of Malice.

Kencherries: sour berries, antidote to Rape Resin.

La Fourbe: literally, 'the foul' – derogatory title given to Anne-Marie Desvents when she turned against the other Founders, wishing to end all life instead of settling on Dystopia.

Last Empire of Man: term used to designate the last stages of civilisation before its collapse.

Last City of Man: see Necropolis.

Léandres Desforges: leman of Malice. Known for his affection of the Old Tongue and his poetry.

Leman: term used to designate a long-standing lover or sexual partner, either in a closed relationship or outside of said relationship.

Luminon: mysterious entity referred to as 'light' by Balafre.

Malheur Clairevaux: literally, 'sorrow' – eldest of the Morbid daughters, who exiled herself from Necropolis.

Malice Clairevaux: youngest of the Morbid daughters, born with one blind eye and nearly slain at birth for it.

Manoir Desvents: Great house known to have belonged to Anne-Marie Desvents.

Marc-André: friend of Malice when she was a child. Killed by Syllia.

Maxine: inhabitant of Necropolis, appointed to the distils used in making the Aian drop.

Merveille Clairevaux: literally, 'wonder' – median Morbid daughter, revered necropolitan and socialite.

Mikel Durivage: one of the Black Knights.

Mirkwood: typical deciduous tree found in Dystopia.

Morbid Clairevaux: Mother of Malice, Merveille and Malheur, leman to Jacques. Known to be the greatest orator and one of the most influential people of Dystopia.

Necropolis: only city of Dystopia, numbering nearly three thousand inhabitants.

Necropolitans: inhabitants of Necropolis, known for their pale skin and apparent blue veins, and following a nocturnal life cycle.

Neghlin: compound made of ground Neglantha roots, mostly used as dye.

Neglantha: aquatic plants used in the making of Neghlin and only found in the Caves.

New Era: term designating a new phase in Dystopian history contrasting with the equalitarian philosophy of the Founders.

Noxberries: poisonous berries used as stimulants. Known to be deadly in great quantities.

Old Tongue: language spoken by distant ancestors of the Founders, seldom used save by a few scholars.

Old World: see Last Empire of Man.

Ordenmarshall: mysterious power-figure mentioned by Balafre.

Perpetual Court: public hall in Necropolis where all formal debate and decision-making take place.

Petite Mort: Literally, 'little death', type of drug made from diluted Syllia venom, used by injection. Hallucinogen.

Priton: 'the Healer'. Inhabitant of Necropolis who performs the illicit trade of counseling.

Radians: type of flower.

Rape Resin: Powerful and debilitating poison made from insects, used in irreversible behavioral conditioning.

Ruby Den: One of the Dens.

Scarlae: type of plant. The name comes from the bright red leaves used in the concoction of Blood Tea.

Sharp Eyes: inhabitant of Necropolis. Real name Jean.

Smugglers: secretive network of individuals said to engage in illicit trade and subversive activities.

Speaker: delegate elected with a specific mandate to represent a large group of people in a litigious situation.

Spindle: mysterious tower mentioned by Balafre.

Spleen: see Charles Lapierre.

Syllia: large albino spiders whose venom is known to be hallucinogenic and extremely deadly.

Sylvaine: inhabitant of Necropolis, appointed as Hospitalière.

Symbii-kin: mysterious people mentioned by Balafre.

Tenets: the three laws of the Founders: do no harm, live freely, consider the Void.

Thirteen, The: see Black Knights.

Thylems: type of flower

Tour Noire: black tower at the center of Necropolis, used as observatory and as housing for the Black Knights.

Triste de Sanbourg: former lover of Malice.

Void: term used to designate the permanent mists around Dystopia. Symbol of the emptiness found in the Wastes.

Voivode: expression coined by La Fourbe to designate the person who will destroy all human life and bring about the Final End. Rumoured to be a prophecy, and the legacy of La Fourbe's own bloodline.

Wastes: endless spans of land where no living thing can grow, filled with various poisons and dangers.

Waste sickness: syndrome contracted in the Wastes, known to be fatal. The inhabitants of Dystopia are rumoured to be immune since the Great Wandering.

Wild Yaons: type of flower.

Wrack: name given by Malice to the shadow-creature.

Yan: inhabitant of Necropolis, one of Triste's leman.

YT7: mysterious expression said by Balafre to be responsible for keeping him hostage and conducting experimentations.



Bruno Massé is a Montreal-based author. Better known for environmental activism and research, he moonlights as a wretched novelist, playwright and poet – heavily influenced, if not possessed by themes of horror, noir, cyberpunk and erotica.

Holding a master's degree in social geography, Massé has published several works of fiction, including *l'Aube Noire*, *Valacchia*, *The Noxious* And *The Daemon Flower* and *Necropolis*.

Member of the Anarchist Writers Bloc and Anarchistes Anonymes collectives, he also contributes regularly to the International Anarchist Theatre Festival of Montreal.

WWW.DAEMONFLOWER.COM