

Hidden Thoughts

Part III

By
Tom Phoenix

Introduction

Welcome to Part 6 of Hidden Thoughts. This will likely be the last part in this series, and that will depend on what happens in the next few months.

On two separate occasions, I have put forth an honest effort to get out of the magic/mentalism world, since creating material went from being a passion, to an unhealthy obsession. I've lost a ton of weight, can't sleep, not eating well, and it's largely due to the fact that I have become utterly obsessed with trying to create new methods, and getting very frustrated with myself when I cannot work something out.

Unfortunately, since I've spent so much time in this field, it's one of the very few things that I'm any good at, and it has become a big chunk of my income. So letting it go means that I ruddy-well better have something else lined up, otherwise I'm stuck.

Over the next few months, I'm going to get back to fitness-model-caliber (where I was about a year and a half ago), do more web-developer projects, get this online marketing agency on the road, and train my face off.

But this time, I have an exit strategy, rather than simply trying to quit. Something I've noticed in this field, is that the industry cannot run without creators, yet it is the creators who always get the short-end of the deal. I intend to change that, and the gears are already in motion. Remember back in Part 4, where I said, "*Something big is coming*"? This is it. Magic will move skyward. Read on.

Do that randomly introducing 2 people on ThatWasEpic's channel. Fill in one person about what you're going to do, and then introduce them to the second person (Person A thinks you're going to lead them into a certain kind of conversation). Except, when you start the conversation, make it about something completely different, to throw off Person A. That would be amusing. Like pre-showing someone to make them think they know what they're supposed to do, then you turn around and do something else.

“A man with no motive is a man no one suspects. Always keep your foes confused, if they don't know who you are or what you want, they can't know what you plan to do next.” – Lord Petyr Baelish

Skyward Magic

For the past few months, I've been building a platform for the magic and mentalism creators. All other magic-selling companies only give the creators between 20% - 60% of each sale.

Think about that: The creator does:

- The demo material
- The explanation material
- Graphic design
- Ad copy
- Marketing

The company does:

- File hosting
- Fulfillment
- Processes payments

(That is all automated)

Creators put in a ton of work and only get less than half or a little over half of the profit.

A new magic-selling platform is here.

The creators do the:

- The demo material
- The explanation material
- Graphic design
- Ad copy
- Marketing

I cover:

- File hosting
- Fulfillment
- Payment Processing

Creator receives:

- **80% ROYALTY RATE**
- A system where they no longer have to worry about filling orders for their downloads.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is my “parting gift” to the magic community – a magic platform where the creators can reap 80% of the profits of their own creations. No one has done this before, and I doubt anyone will ever try it again, as it’s not a profitable business. The other 20% keeps the system running – I do not expect to profit from this. But I’ve grown tired of seeing creators and authors getting such a small return on their efforts.

Click “Contact”. Under “Subject”, select “Apply as a vendor”, and fill in the rest of the information. I’ll approve your application, and at that point, you only need to send me emails with your products, descriptions, and prices. I’ll do the rest and you get 80% of your sales.

Here, take it, use it; I made this with you in mind.

<http://skywardmagic.com/>

"If this is what you do, you BETTER be the marksman."
- Doug Marcaida

The Confusion Reality

What if what they wrote is not what you outright told them to write? So it appears to the audience that you asked for A, and the participant wrote B, which corresponds to the B that someone else was thinking about.

Example: Tell the participant: write a kind of pizza. The audience thinks the participant is writing about pizza. The participant actually writes something entirely different (Lamborghini). A different participant is thinking of their dream car, which is a Lamborghini.

It would require putting person A into a trance and telling them that some information may become mixed – ideas may jump into their head, and they may hear things that don't exist. But follow the instructions. On the paper they are holding is a prompt that says: "What do you call a tropical storm? _____" They write: "hurricane". Force "Lamborghini Hurricane" on someone else. Need to phrase the verbal description of what the trance-person is doing in such a way that it implies to the audience that they are writing about pizza, but to the trance person, it sounds confusing. As a bonus, have a third person who is thinking of a similar word, but in a different context. So have a triple-coincidence of one word which has completely different meanings in different contexts, but one person who divines the word everyone is thinking of.

Need to make their reality different from everyone else's, and do this by covering ourselves with a "trance-state" explanation, where they may easily become confused about what they are hearing, but to *follow the obvious instructions*. On the pad they are holding, there are instructions to "write a tropical storm". Later, we re-iterate to them that they could have written anything, such as: "a typhoon, a maelstrom, Katrina, Hawaiian, some other name, you could have written anything!" The rest of the audience thinks we're name random stuff/names, but the participant understands these as other names of tropical storms. "Hurricane" just happens to be the most commonly named tropical storm.

Perhaps, we could force the shape of a multi-armed spiral on someone else, then do the drawing/name duplication between two participants. Use the spiral as the illustration of a hurricane, and then the other person who "could write anything", ends up writing the word "hurricane".

**When you're depressed, continue doing the things that used to make you happy, even if they no longer bring you any joy.
When you get through depression, and you WILL get through it, you don't want to have lost all your skill in that which once made you smile.**

Spare Kidneys

I'll preface this by saying that I live in an "apartment community". It's intended for students, but anyone can live there. Roommates are randomly assigned, so I don't have any control over who moves in with me.

I got a new roommate and since he hadn't moved in yet, I decided to play a little joke. I took a brown paper bag (the large ones, from the grocery store), put some trash in it to give it some bulk, then rolled the top down and duct-taped it closed. On the outside, I wrote in black marker: "Spare Kidneys". Put the bag in the fridge.

The intention was that I would be around when he moved in (we've never met before, don't even know his name), and he would ask about it, to which I could give an appropriate response..... but that's not what happened.

Instead, I was running errands when he moved in, and by the time I got back, his stuff was there, but he was gone. There was some of his food in the fridge, so I assumed he saw the bag.

So while I was at the store, I spotted a terrific deal: "10 lbs Chicken for \$5!" Welp, can't argue with that. The only catch was, I had to flay and de-bone it myself. Not a problem.

I get back home, see his stuff in the fridge, and notice that the bag had been moved a bit from where it was. I set up my mini butcher-station on the counter (bags,

soap, towels, knives, etc.) and cut open the bag of chicken parts.

They're raw, obviously, and sitting in this bag of bloody water. Well, I get 2 legs completely de-boned, separated, and draining of the excess water and blood, so they look like chunks of meat/organs/other innards, the fat and skin was trimmed off, sitting in a separate pile, and some blood has splashed on my white apron (as usual).

Annnnd then, my new roommate, who I've never met or seen before, walks in the door.

He looks at me, looks at the red splatters on my apron, sees the knife in hand, and this bloody mass of meat that I have my other hand buried in, and then, his head turns towards the fridge, as he remembers the "Spare Kidneys" bag. He asks in a monotone: "What are you doing?"

To which I replied: "... Have you never seen a dismembered body before?"

Until this day, I had never seen someone "go pale as a sheet". I've heard about it, I know why it happens, but I've never actually witnessed it. This guy had all the blood completely drain from his head. I kept it together for a few seconds, then cracked a grin and started chuckling, which quickly grew to a maddening laugh. The look on his face was perfect! He was terrified!

In hindsight, I probably looked like a fucking psychopath: laughing hysterically, with blood dripping from my hands, in front of a bag of skinned body parts. He took a couple steps back and looked like he was going to get out of Dodge. But I dropped the knife, and managed to get the words out: "It's chicken! Don't worry, it's just chicken!"

He had to sit down for a few minutes to collect himself. I washed my hands, left the apron on, and went over to introduce myself. We had a good laugh. Turns out, he's a vegetarian.

Billet Idea

Take a coin envelope and ask them to write something on a billet. Fold the billet and put it inside. You then "close the flap and seal it", but you close in the wrong direction, so you can slide the billet out of the envelope. They sign across the seal, so it can't be switched... Now you have the billet.

Cookie Influences

"Influence" the tough cookie, so that when they disagree with you later, it just looks like they are actually influenced. Everyone else sees what you did to them and now when they disagree with you, the effect looks even better because they are genuinely correct in the fact that they did not write whatever shape was revealed. This allow us to use a drawing switch for a small group of people and not have to worry about the tough cookie exposing anything, as we have "influenced" them to forget what they actually drew. Then the reveal of the drawing duplication is completely covered by the fact that they wrote one thing, but remembered writing something else, and we reveal whatever we "influenced" them to draw.

Can be done using a billet switch – we “influence” them, by going through the “trance-state” process, which is really only a meditation technique. We then hand them a billet to draw on. Snap our fingers while they are drawing, we say: “You’ll find out what happened later.” After they are done, we take the billet and switch it for a different one, with something else drawn on it. That is handed to a different participant for later. We can then double-write what they actually drew, and load that into a prediction envelope.

Through “reading their mind”, we are able to divine what they “drew” on the billet. In actuality, we are revealing whatever we pre-drew. Have the other participant reveal the billet, and boom! We have a perfect drawing duplication on our hands! The tough cookie, however, is going to contest this. But that’s okay, because we show them their signature on the back of the billet: “Is this your signature?”

“Yes”,

“Do you remember when I clicked my fingers?”

“Yes”,

“In doing that, I caused you to forget what you actually drew. You think you drew something else, but that’s your signature and your drawing, and she’s been holding onto it the entire time, so clearly, you have a false memory.”

“No, I didn’t draw that.”

“Well what do you think you drew?”

“Nunchucks”

“....Okay...”

(snap your fingers again)

“Now do you remember what we did earlier, with the stone on the riverbed?”

“Yes”

“Okay, I was inducing a temporary delusion, and it worked, as you drew a cat, but for whatever reason thought you were drawing Nunchucks.”

“But regardless, you believe your were drawing something else. I’ve always been intrigued by the notion of causing a person to do one thing but remember something else. Before I even started the show, I put something in an envelope over here. Could you open this and tell everyone what my prediction says?”

They’ve already stated what they think they drew, so they can’t back-pedal to mess you up. And it appears that not only can you read their mind, but you can also predict what they would later hallucinate.

“A product of genius and madness; two traits too often found in the same mind.” - Peter Hale

“Yesterday I wrote these lines,
Full of hope, full of life.
Today insignificant - discarded,
Today insignificant - unbridled.

A composition arranged in grey -
Disharmonic, mute and deaf.
Today insignificant - discarded,
Today insignificant - unbridled.

All love we felt
All lives we lived,
All thing we planned
Will darken

All hands we shook,

All hugs we gave,
All lovely words,
Will darken.

All plans we made,
All friends we had,
All thoughts we thought
Will darken.

All lips we kissed,
All skin caressed,
All blood we bled
Will darken.

A lonely stranger to myself -
A lonely stranger to my beloved.
A trivial entity - discarded,
A fallen dignity - unbridled.

What once was life means nothing now.
What once was love - a faded vow.
A trivial entity - discarded,
A fallen dignity - unbridled.”

- Last Moon's Dawn – Darken

“The shit's chess, it ain't checkers!” - Alonzo

Oreos

I think I'll make a good Santa Claus for those grandkids. I already have the beard, long hair, enjoy giving presents, and have a love for late-night milk and cookies. Now let me tell you, there's a big difference between those generic, store-brand Select Value Chocolate Sandwich Cookies, and the more expensive Oreos. Trust me, spend the extra 2 dollars and get the quality ones. The Select Value ones have tasty frosting, but the "sandwich" parts taste like cardboard.

There's something about cookies and a glass of milk that soothes the soul. When I was feeling sad or lonely when I was in high school, or middle school, I'd sneak down to the kitchen, watch out for the squeaky floor, take a flashlight, gingerly open the cookie jar, remove 2, and ever-so-quietly replace the lid. Slowly pull out the cup drawer, oh crap, the cups shifted, hope no one heard that. Get a cup, close the squeaky drawer, pour some milk, being very careful to open and close the fridge quietly, and turn off the flashlight. I would stand in silence and darkness to allow my eyes to adjust again, then make my way back up the stairs, past their *open* bedroom door, and proceeded to devour the evidence.

It was a highly covert operation – I even had black pants and a black shirt, specifically for those occasions. Unfortunately, I got pretty good at it.

But, there are some things which even cookies cannot cure.

The following 33 pages contain a story I started writing a few months ago, called "A Single Candle". I do have more of it, but this is all that's organized at the moment. There is one more section after the story, so if you'd like to get to that, then just scroll/flip until you get to the next **bolded heading**.

A Single Candle

As the boy side-stepped and ducked, the sword arced over his shoulder, a blow which would have taken off his head. He then stepped towards the attacker, keeping low, spun his body and slashed upwards – if he were fighting an ordinary thug, that move might have severed an arm – but this opponent was no ordinary fighter. The attacker had dived left and rolled to avoid the slash. The boy advanced quickly, launching a series of blows to the attacker, yet they were all skillfully parried.

A crowd was beginning to gather in the yard – it was common enough to see a drunken brawl or a robber attack an unfortunate passerby, but rarely was there such a display of skill and control in both the fighters.

The blades clanged and flashed in the fading light, the opponents expertly stepped and weaved in front of the crowd, the combat had an element of elegance – a dance of ferocity and desire to kill.

The boy now blocked a hard, downward swing from the man and found himself being pushed down by the man's sword. Before, he had the advantage of being small and harder to hit, but now it was the man's strength against his. He was losing, being pushed closer and closer to the ground. Soon, the boy would have his throat cut by the edge of his own sword. He would have to think of something, and fast.

With the weight and strength of the bigger man bearing down on him, he had an idea: he dropped to his right knee and shot his left foot forwards. At the same time, he twisted to his right, let go of his sword, and hooked his left foot behind his attacker's left ankle. He kicked and threw the man off-balance. With his now-free left hand, he grabbed the man's right leg – now the man was falling and couldn't get away. The boy pulled out his dagger, got his legs behind him, and lunged towards the man's throat. But the man had been expecting a maneuver of sorts. Upon realizing the boy was trying to make this a ground-fight, he too had dropped his own sword and removed a long-knife, more suitable for close combat. The boy came at him, but the man was ready: he grabbed the boy's wrist, shifted his hips, and rolled the boy onto his back. The man now had control of the boy's weapon arm, and his long-knife to the boy's throat.

The two of them were frozen in this moment, panting and drenched in sweat: the man was impressed with the boy's skill, and the boy realized the fight was over and he could not win.

The man stood up, sheathed his vicious-looking knife, and extended a hand. The boy took it and was pulled to his feet. The crowd cheered and applauded, it was a brilliant spectacle of two fighters who were extremely well-versed in combat, and knew exactly what they were doing.

The man looked down and said: "Well son, you're getting much better."

The boy looked up at his father, grinned, and replied: "I almost had you."

At supper that night, they were having stew with bread and beans. Their home was humble, simple enough, and well away from the noise and bustle of the market.

Krom's father, between mouthfuls, asked, "So do you know why you lost today?"

Krom nodded and said, "Yes, I should have stayed next to you instead of on top of you before trying to stab. If I had been next to you, then it would have been much harder for you to hold me down."

"That is correct. And you were much too eager to win – you pulled your arm back too far, which gave me more time to react to the stab. If you had stayed beside me, and kept your arms close, then I couldn't have grabbed you so easily."

"Can we talk about something else?" Krom's sister piped up. She was only a couple years older than Krom, and not much taller either. She had long dark hair, and was well on her way to becoming a fine singer in the royal court, despite her low-born status. She had a wonderful voice, and that was discovered by one of the knights when she was singing to herself on her way through the queen's garden (where she definitely was not supposed to be, but she loved the serenity and flowers and stone archways). The knight had over-heard the song, figured it was one of the spoiled maidens and made his way to remove her from the garden, but instead found a young girl, dressed in commoner clothes. He asked how old she was, 14, she had replied, and told her that her singing was better than many of the clergy members and other musicians of the court. With this one chance connection, she had made her way from singing in gardens, to private parties in the households of the high-born, and was currently taking lessons from one of the greatest singers in the city.

Krom figured the knight was just sick of all the wailing church members that passed for singers... It was, after all, considered blasphemy to criticize their music, regardless of how terrible they sounded. Perhaps his sister would grow up to be a great performer and force all those religious people to quit. Or get better. Preferably the former.

“Every night we talk about swordplay and how to kill someone easier, can we please just enjoy the food without thinking about blood and killing?”

Krom’s father looked down briefly, then smiled and said, “Yes, you’re right. Tonight is a special night. Krom fought very well today, and you, Melena, had a wonderful day as well, yes?”

“Master Revlin told me that I’m ready to advance to singing in the royal court, for the festival next week! He and I wrote a song and I’m going to perform it myself!”

Her father beamed and smiled with joy, “Melena, that’s excellent! I’m so proud of you!”

The night went on with laughter and good food. With busy week ahead, it would likely be the last night they had together for the next several days.

At noon of the next day, Melena went to her voice lessons, and Krom tended to the forge. The work was somewhere between dreary and satisfying – all the hammer strikes became blurred, the process of making a weapon or tool followed the same system, which repeated over and over, lending him time to clear his mind, reach a state of inner focus on the task at hand, and then the ability to think about other things from a new perspective. It was like a meditation, of sorts. The church discouraged solitary worship and other such religious acts, yet demanded solitary devotion. *Perhaps this was because people come to their own conclusions when allowed to explore their own thoughts...* Ah well, time to come back now, the knife has reached the cooling point. Krom grabbed the tongs, gingerly picked up the blade and thrust it back into the oven. He shook his head quickly and pushed away the implication – why did the church want to restrict the knowledge of the commoners? But thoughts lead to actions, slips of the tongue, and these were punishable. Best to keep this line of thinking to a minimum. The blade, the anvil, the hammer and fire – those were all that mattered right now.

In the third floor of the Celestial Tower, Melena sat with her teacher, writing in the pauses, pitches, and tone lengths of her new song. Master Revlin was a kind soul, one who cared more about nurturing talent than the gold it rewarded. His job was to train and develop the court entertainers; the jesters, jugglers, fire eaters, dancers, and musicians were all his responsibility. No one knew where he had come from, only that once he arrived in the River Kingdom, the feasts and festivals had a far more brilliant and jovial flair.

Somehow, he managed to coach and train everyone who needed coaching and training, yet by some sorcery, managed to find time to work with Melena. But how could he not? She had the voice of the angels, and she was only 16! 16! Most singers do not learn to reveal and harness such a voice until their early twenties – Melena was a special case. Such talent needs to be unleashed, brought into the light, and not left to waste away in a small hut somewhere in the lower town. She had to be formally trained, by the time she turned twenty, she will have surpassed the majority of other musicians in the kingdom.

The blades were finished, several hours later. Tomorrow, he would lay them into the handles, lace the handle pieces together, water-treat the leather lacing, and start the sharpening process. Following the sharpening, he would polish each knife to a mirror finish and engrave an ornamental pattern into each, ending with their family signature. In all likelihood, these knives would be given as gifts from one noble to another, and then quickly discarded. None of the nobles *really* liked each other here, but they held councils and feasts and parties out of tradition anyway. The knives would make their way from the high-houses to the gutter, into the hands of cutthroats and other undesirables, and eventually either broken, confiscated, or lost. It was a depressing thought – something which had so many hours put into it would live so insignificantly. But Krom and his father made these blades to put food on the table, and survival is more important than ideals.

Melena did not come home on time for dinner that night, and Krom worried that something might have happened. About an hour later, she came in the door, her whole body was shaking, and she was heavily sweating. Krom jumped up from the table and ran to her.

“Are you alright? Where were you, what happened?”

Melena looked briefly confused and then smiled, “Everything is okay, I just had a long and tiring day. Besides, *you’re* the one who’s training to be a knight, I should be worried about you.”

Krom relaxed and said, “Oh. Well why are you shaking and sweating? Did someone chase you?”

“No, no, Master Revlin brought a small audience to the end of my lesson today. He told me to sing in front of them, and imagine they were the King and Queen and all the Lords and Ladies of the court. I panicked at the thought, and my singing was terrible. So -”

“Okay, but why are you shaking?”

“Krom, if you don’t interrupt, I’ll tell you.... Master Revlin told me that nervousness in new situations is normal. He said there’s not a great way to fix it, but we can learn to work with it. He made me run from the tower, to the market, and back to the tower, and then try to sing the song again. I think he was trying to help me learn to control my breathing even when under stress... It was a good idea and I hope it works.”

“Well I guess we’ll find out next week” Krom replied cheekily.

“I need some food, and then I’m going to bed. Tomorrow, I have fitting for my costume and more lessons.”

The next few days were more of the same: Krom and his father worked in the forge, making weapons for the wealthy (who probably didn’t know how to use them), training swordplay in the area behind the shop, and Melena went about her voice and performance lessons.

What would it be like, Krom wondered, when his sister was an official performer in the royal court and he was a knight? Would they still dine together at night, would he still say bye to her in the morning, would they still talk and laugh and play? Melena and his father were his family, but they were also his friends. And he wanted this to last.

The day before the festival, there was an unexpected knock at the door. Krom’s father was out delivering finished knives, so Krom answered the door. It was his Uncle Marin! Krom’s face lit up in a big smile as he stepped aside and welcomed his Uncle in.

“You’re getting taller and stronger, those ladies will see you as the prize of the city in a couple years! Oh, did I say that out loud?! Well met, nephew, don’t tell anyone I said that – I have a reputation to consider. How is my favorite nephew?”

Krom chuckled as he looked at his arms; they had gotten noticeably bigger since the last time his Uncle visited. “I’m getting better at forging and Father is teaching me how to fight!”

“And he will make a formidable knight, might even give some of them a run for their money!” Krom’s father had just come in the back door, and welcomed his brother-in-law with a firm handshake and a slap on the shoulder.

Uncle Marin had always been the wild-one in the family, preferring to travel from city-to-city, selling foreign coins as holy tokens, drinking ale, discussing philosophy with prostitutes, giving bad ideas to kids, loosing pigs into council meetings, and drinking more ale. And despite all this, managed to maintain a healthy reputation as a wine specialist and merchant. Some of his adventures he told Krom about, and Krom heard about the others from city guards. But it was his Uncle Marin, his strange, eccentric, shenanigan-loving, and wholly harmless uncle.

“So what brings you to Denay, Marin?”

“Well, I heard there was to be a festival tomorrow, and with festivals come masses of fine food, unlimited supplies of drink, and multitudes of whor- women in long dresses!”

The front door opened and Melena stepped in. “Uncle Marin!”

She threw her arms around him, and he cocked a grin at her father. He had almost made mention of “whores” in front of his son and daughter. Not that that would have been unacceptable, it’s just that he hadn’t had enough ale to justify being a bit crude yet.

Krom’s father put his hand to his forehead and shook his head, with noticeable disproving smile. He wondered how this man “Marin” ever managed to convince anyone that he was a professional and not some rogue trouble-maker disguised as a merchant... But regardless, Marin usually meant well, and introduced some mischievous fun into everyone’s daily life.

“Rumor has it, that tomorrow, there will be a great and famous singer performing in front of the entire royal family, would any of you happen to know who this is?”

Melena blushed a little, and her father beamed. “That singer would be this one here.” He gestured to Melena.

Marin looked at Melena, feigning surprise, then got on one knee and said, “The lady has my best wishes and might I do the honour of accompanying you to the stage tomorrow?” He grinned, stood up, and continued, “Always knew you’d do well. Jokes aside, I do wish you the best of luck.”

Krom piped up, “Will you be staying with us?”

Marin shook his head, “No, a few of my companions and I are staying at the inn. They have fine drinks during the festival time of the year, attracts more customers. And they let me stay there free of charge, so long as I make sure their wares are up to scratch.”

He winked and turned towards the door. “I suppose I’ll see each of you tomorrow, when the party begins?”

Krom’s father smirked and said, “Hopefully we see you before we hear about you... Try to stay out of trouble for this one night.”

Marin chuckled and countered, “When was the last time I got into trouble?”

Krom started to open his mouth, and Marin quickly said, “Wait. Don’t answer that.”

After Marin left, Krom’s father let out a sigh, smiled, and shook his head. “Sometimes I wonder how his head is still attached to his shoulders... Melena, have some dinner and get some rest, tomorrow will be a big day for you. Krom, you and I need to get some practice time in before it gets dark. We’re only doing dagger work tonight, so no need to get your practice sword.”

Krom went to his room and strapped on the vest of practice daggers. The vest had several tight fabric loops, each of which held a dulled dagger close to his chest, so he could easily move around and roll without stabbing himself or worrying about the blades falling out. It wasn’t his dream to be a knight, but it sure was a more exciting prospect than hammering away in a shack all day. And he was getting

very good at fighting. He had watched the knights train, and they all seemed to follow the “formal rules” of combat... But those rules don’t apply off the training ground. Krom knew this well, as he had once made the mistake of wandering too far into the lower town, and the thieves who attacked him exhibited neither form nor pattern. Krom was small and quick, though, and he managed to escape with only a couple minor cuts and bruises.

His father was waiting for him in the space behind their home. The sun was starting to go down and the night birds were chirping away. Together, they went through drills and sequences of movements, one attacking and the other defending. The blades clinked together, and arms weaved, as they each sought the upper hand in the fight. Of course, the sequence was designed to push the limits of memory and adaptability to difficult positions a fighter might find himself in. What to do if the opponent held the blade in left-hand reverse-grip? Or, how to turn a blade against the opponent, even if they had their blade to your throat? All the obscure techniques had been mapped out, drilled into memory, and combined in odd ways, so if Krom ever encountered another knife fighter, he would be prepared.

After an hour and a half of constant practice in rolling, stabs, slashes, grip-changes, hand-changes, and sequences, they packed up and went inside.

Krom suddenly asked, “Father, how do you know so much about fighting if you’re not a knight?”

His father frowned, thought for a minute and replied, “That’s a long and unpleasant story, and I’ll tell you sometime. But not tonight.”

Krom looked down for a moment and then looked back up, “I’ve watched the knights practice. They practice with form and rules, we don’t. Those thieves who attacked me didn’t follow any rules. Why do you know how to fight like them?”

His father cocked his head to the side and his tone grew serious, “My father wasn’t a blacksmith. I had a very different and very darker childhood than most children, even those who were born into the lowest families.”

He paused for a couple heartbeats, and resumed, “Not all fighters are knights or thieves, there are those who operate in the shadows, who go unnoticed by everyone except their targets. I will not go into any more detail, as now is not the time. And had your mother not come into my life, I would likely be dead or still out there somewhere, killing men. She showed me another side to life, and I left my

profession. We fell in love, married, had you and your sister, and I left my other life behind.”

Krom sat quiet for a moment, then asked, “If you left that life behind, why are you teaching it to me?”

His father smiled and said, “You really want to know, don’t you? I’m teaching you not because I want to see you go down that road, but because there are other people out there who you would never guess are assassins, and I want you to know how to fight anyone who may take an interest in you.

When your mother was murdered, I blamed myself for not being there to protect her. Had I been there, the robber would never have gotten within 10 feet of her. But I wasn’t. I was out back chopping wood and didn’t hear her scream until it was too late. The order I served trained me well. I won’t be able to be around for you all the time, but I can pass on my skills, so you won’t need me should the time come.

Fortunately, we live in a much safer and better guarded part of town, right outside the castle. And between the incident with your Uncle Marin last year and that last fight we had at the market with the dull blades, I don’t think anyone in their right mind would harm what’s left of our family. Most people have a good idea of what we’re capable of.”

Krom looked at his father with a new-found respect, and slowly said, “I didn’t mean to imply that you were a thief because you can fight like one. I’m sorry.”

His father smiled and replied, “There is no need to apologize. You’re a curious and intelligent young man. If you can see the difference between how the knights train and how the rest of the uncivilized world fights, then that’s an admirable quality. But enough of that for now. Tomorrow will be a very fun and enjoyable day, let us start it with smiles on our faces.”

Melena had a hard time getting to sleep, and she subsequently overheard much of the conversation in the next room. Their home was in a nicer area, and nothing ever happened between here and the castle. Fortunately, those were the two places she spent most her time, and all the guards knew about her, so there was no need to worry about bad people lurking about. Though hearing her father talk about his past experience and the reason he was teaching her brother gave her comfort. With this feeling, she drifted into sleep.

Krom washed himself and climbed into bed. He hadn't gotten quite the response he had expected, but he knew one thing for sure, through a slip-of-the-tongue, his father gave him the answer: he was once an assassin.

The next morning, Melena and Krom were awake and up in record time, after all, today was the festival of the Sun, there would be dancing, singing, belly-full's of bread and cheese and exotic fruits and cakes! And, more importantly, it was Melena's day to sing for the King and Queen.

Before she left to rehearse with Master Revlin, her father gave her a long hug and said, "Melena, I love you. I'm proud of how far you've come, and I know your mother is proud of you too, wherever she may be." He smiled, stood up and opened the door for her.

Krom ran to her, gave her a hug, and said, "Good luck today, I'll be there in the back left corner of the audience. If you're feeling any stress, just look to me, and I'll make a funny face to make you laugh!"

Melena laughed, turned, and was on her way.

Krom and his father stood in the doorway and watched her skip to the castle. Both were smiling ear-to-ear.

"Ahoy, Krom!" A voice bellowed. Uncle Marin was walking up the road towards the castle, and following him were four other men. The smile on his father's face wavered slightly – just enough for Krom to know that something was wrong.

"Good morning, Uncle Marin!" Krom tried his best to keep the concern and confusion out of his voice.

"I'd love to stand and chat with you two, but my companions and I need to get a good lay of the land, so we may pull some jokes as the day goes on." He winked, grinned, and continued along the road.

Krom felt a hand on his shoulder and his father gently pulled him into the house and closed the door.

“What’s wrong with those men? You didn’t look happy about seeing them.”

His father replied, “I don’t want to frighten you. Your Uncle Marin is a fun and interesting man, but when he drinks, he turns into a different person. I recognized those men with him. I don’t want to see you anywhere near those men, even if Marin is around, do you understand?”

“Yes, but why?”

“Some men don’t need alcohol to turn into bad people. Steer clear of them for today, okay?”

Krom was confused, but he trusted his father and affirmed that he wouldn’t have anything to do with them.

His father brightened, “Well now that’s out of the way, I want to give you three things: first is this.” He pulled out a black leather sheath, wrapped with a strap.

Krom unwound it, and inside was a vicious-looking blade, about 8 inches long. It was the same kind his father used for training, only this one was razor-sharp.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“About that conversation we had last night – this was my preferred weapon. It was given to me by a friend of mine, the day before he was killed. I keep it now as a reminder that I have the power to defend what I love, and since you’re so curious about my past, I’m giving it to you. I have many regrets, but all fine blades deserve a better journey than this one had. Use it to defend yourself or the people you love, if the need presents itself.”

He removed a second bundle from his jacket. “And this is also for you.”

Krom unwound the strap and found another dagger. This one had rounded edges. “I don’t understand, how is this different from a regular training knife?”

“That one was given to me by the same person who was sent to kill me. When he realized I was just a boy at the time, about your age, he left me with this instead, I suppose in hopes that I would leave my line of work. He told me these words, which I now pass on to you: “True courage is knowing not when to take a life, but when to spare one.”

His father then pulled out a small pouch, saying, “And this, is the third thing.”

He opened the pouch and dumped 10 gold coins into Krom’s hand. “These are for today, buy yourself something nice or some things. And remember not to carry them all in the same pocket. Don’t want them jingling together and alerting people to how much money you have.” With a wink, he added “The nobles were very impressed with your knives.”

Krom gave his father a hug and set out towards the castle.

Melena was not doing well. Her costume had magically shrunk a size overnight. Either that or she was so nervous that everything seemed constricting. Performing for a noble family in their private courtyard was one thing, but performing *for the entire royal family, all the nobles, the wealthy merchants, and some of the townsfolk all at the same time!* That was something else entirely. The royal family probably expected perfection, the nobles wanted to hear a song they’ve never heard before, the merchants had come all this way and could be her ticket to traveling the world, which wouldn’t come true if she wasn’t good enough, and the townsfolk, well, if she didn’t perform perfectly, they would laugh at her in the marketplace. She wouldn’t be able to show her face again in this city, she would have to move somewhere else, and it was all because she didn’t have perfect control over her breathing!

She was taking a break from practicing, and was sitting alone in her changing room.

Master Revlin poked his head in from the hallway, “Melena, this note came for you just now. It’s from someone named... Marn? Maran?...”

“Marin?” She asked.

“Yes, that’s the name. He had an... odd... look about him. Like he was up to something. Do you know him?”

“He’s my Uncle,” she smiled, “and he’s always up to something.”

She took the note and unfolded it. It read: *‘Melena, best of luck today, there are people paying good gold for you, but if you mess up, that’s alright, they’ll probably*

be too drunk to notice! I'm sure you'll please everyone! Relax and enjoy the experience!"

She laughed and said that had lifted her spirits a bit. But she still felt anxious.

"Melena, you're panicking. What is something you really enjoy doing, apart from singing?"

"I really like playing with my brother. He and I play in the woods behind our home all the time."

"And what exactly do you play?"

"Oh, we see how fast we can run from one area of the woods back to our home, we run climb the trees and pretend there are dragons chasing us. It's childish and make-believe, I know, but it's when I feel the most happy."

Master Revlin laughed and said, "Then that is what you need to think about before you go on stage! You know the music, the words, the motions, you need to think of something that makes you happy, not about what could go wrong! If you're happy, the audience will forgive any mistakes you might make and they may not even notice, *you* are the performance, not the song. Make them see you for who you are, and they will love you."

Melena nodded and set the note next to her mirror. "I need to practice, can you stay with me for a few minutes?"

"Of course, but only for one song. As much as I enjoy working with you, there are other performers who need consultation as well. You're not alone in that." He gave a quick smile and she began to sing.

Krom paid the one gold piece to enter the castle. The entry price was there to dissuade any undesirable people from entering, but that didn't stop thieves. He figured that anyone who really wanted to attend the festival would make a point of saving enough money to at least get in. And each person was given the gold back upon leaving, so it's not as if he was parted from the one gold piece forever. The real money was made by taking a cut of all the merchant sales within the walls.

Once he stepped through the gate, he was among the noisy, bustling market that had been set up specifically for this festival. There were merchants selling ornate rugs from far-away lands, gems, jewelry, clothing, exotic foods, jugglers, jesters, and other such entertainers. There were foreign weapon smiths, armor traders, a rare potion master, merchants selling old archaic books, and what was this? A fortune teller. She was young and pretty and not wearing much. Krom noticed she was flaunting that beauty, probably how she made most of her money, as most of her customers were men.

He walked on, taking in all the sights and sounds and wondering what it would be like to travel to other lands. In the other kingdoms across the sea, did all the households have lavish carpets and window shades? Of course they didn't, but they had more interesting cultures than here, they had to. Items such as these couldn't have been born out of boring cultures.

He looked across the way from her tent, and saw the tent of another fortune teller. This one was staffed by an older man. He had a gray beard, was wearing a long red robe, and in his hands was a large, shallow stone bowl. Krom met his eyes, and a voice in his head whispered words he couldn't make out. He cautiously approached the tent, and the man spoke: "It will be one gold coin to hear a near piece of your future."

Krom narrowed his eyes. He had always been intrigued by the notion of seeing something which hadn't happened yet, but whether this was possible was another story. The festival was only two days long, so it would be easy enough for the man to take the money, give a piece of rubbish information and disappear shortly after. But his curiosity got the better of him. He placed one gold piece into the basket at the man's feet.

The man looked Krom in the eye again and commended, "Cup your hands."

Krom cupped his hands and the man immediately filled them with water from the bowl – which just a moment ago, had been empty.

Krom stared, as the man began to shimmer, as if he wasn't entirely.... there.

No more than two heartbeats later, the water in Krom's hands had vanished, and the bowl was full.

The man looked sad. His eyes began to stream tears, and those tears soon turned to blood. He leaned down towards Krom and began to speak softly. Far too softly to be heard in the marketplace, yet Krom heard him clearly.

The old man straightened and was suddenly pushed over. Krom turned and saw a man standing there with his Uncle Marin. “Why did you do that? You could’ve hurt him! And you spilled his bowl of water!”

His Uncle replied, “These old men scam people out of their gold, claiming they can see the future, and disappearing a couple days later. They’re rotten people. He’s fine, and he didn’t spill anything.”

It was true. Nothing had spilled from the bowl, because there was nothing in it to spill.

Krom looked at his uncle and the four other men. One of them said. “Marin here tells us that your sister is going to put on a show later today. We hear she’s very good and are looking forward to it.”

This one seemed nice enough, but something felt out-of-place. Krom replied, “Yes, it’s her first time for so many people.”

“Well has she performed for one person before?”

“Yes, she’s done performances for many of the high-born families, but never for royalty.”

“Well it’s the same thing. Just more people. Anyway, you run along now and have some fun. And watch out for people like this.” He thumbed towards the fortune teller.

Krom didn’t like those men, so he nodded and hurried away. They seemed to want to intimidate him while acting like they were friendly. He pondered what the old man had said. Was it true, or a trick, or a metaphor? He may have wasted a gold coin, but he still had eight more – nine if counting the one he would get back when leaving for the day.

He stopped at a weapons tent. The owner had several longswords and scimitars and rapiers. As well as five enormous swords, three of them appeared to be about

5 feet long, while the other two were nearly 8 feet. Who could wield such a weapon?

“Hello there, something catch your eye?” The owner was addressing him.

Krom shook himself, he had been in awe of the size of the sword that he had nearly missed what was being said. “I, um, sorry. Yes, where did you get that sword?” He pointed at the largest one. “I don’t think a human could swing that.”

“Quite right, it’s much too large for humans... But I didn’t get it from a human. I got it from a giant.”

“But giants don’t exist... do they?”

“It’s a big world, son. Those two swords are mostly here to attract attention. Maybe a nobleman or two might buy one, but those nobles don’t know the first thing about a regular sword.” He winked. “They would buy it to show their guests and brag of their travels to the North.”

The merchant spotted a handle poking out from under Krom’s jacket. “I see you’re carrying something of your own. Aren’t you a bit young to have a long-knife?”

“How did you know it was a long knife?”

“From the way you’re carrying it. The blade is pointing up, and it’s along the side of your torso. Daggers are usually point-down and carried on the belt, leg, or ankle. Would you mind if I take a look?”

Krom looked left, then right. He was intrigued by the man’s apparent knowledge of weaponry and obvious distaste for nobility. The owner leaned in and said, “Don’t worry – it’s not illegal to have a weapon in here.”

Krom normally would never have pulled out a blade had anyone else asked. But this man seemed... different. Like he wasn’t a simple merchant trying to sell weapons he knew nothing about. He removed the blade only a few inches before the merchant stopped him, “Wait.” His eyebrows furrowed and his voice dropped. “Where did you get this?”

Krom slid it back into the sheath. “It was a gift.”

“From who, might I ask? And why?”

“From my father. Is something the matter?”

“... Best to keep that hidden. Do not let any other merchant see it. In fact, don't let anyone see it.”

“Why? What does it mean?”

“Come into the tent, I don't want anyone overhearing.”

Krom eyed the man carefully and flicked his eyes around the tent. Sensing no danger or ill will, he stepped in.

“That knife is one of a series of weapons, designed for the Order.”

Krom remembered what his father had said: “*The order I served...*”

“What's your name, boy?”

Krom replied: “Alwin.”

“You're a smart one. I wouldn't give my real name to anyone if I found out I carried a weapon affiliated with that group, either.”

“What can you tell me about the Order?”

“Only that they were, and still are, one of the most mysterious and little-known networks of assassins in the world. The few people who have heard of them hold great fear and respect for the Order. The rest of the people know nothing. But you can never tell who is in the Order and who only knows of them.”

“Then how do you know of them?”

“Ah, that is the question, isn't it?”

He gave a quick smile, then continued, “As I said, it's a big world. Go explore it. Don't let yourself get wrapped up in the small world of killing. Now go enjoy yourself, and keep that blade out of sight, unless you absolutely must use it.”

The merchant removed a sword from the rack. It had a similar design as the knife, but was obviously much longer. “And this one here is something you’ll grow into eventually, a bit heavy for you now, but you’ll grow into it young lad!” His demeanor had changed entirely – one moment he was speaking of secret assassin orders, and the next he was trying to sell a sword.

Krom briefly wondered if he had been swindled. The out of the corner of his eye, he noticed two guards eyeing the display. Krom realized what the merchant was up to and played along.

After the guards left, the merchant said, “Look into the blade. What do you see?”

“I, what do you mean, ‘look into the blade’?”

“Look into the blade.”

Krom looked at the blade as if he was looking through a window, and there, just beneath the surface of the metal, was a symbol. It wasn’t visible to anyone except the wielder.

“Good. Now you’ve seen it, and do not forget it. If you truly want to seek out the Order, this is the first step in finding them. Your father gave you the blade as a gift, yet didn’t explain the significance.”

Krom nodded. “I should go now, I want to see at least a couple performances before the day is done. I’m sorry for taking up so much of your time.”

“There is no need to apologize. You’re a curious and intelligent young man.”

As he started to leave, a voice stopped him. “Oh and one other thing.”

Krom turned to see an entirely different looking man in the tent. The man spoke to him, “It was very nice to meet you, Krom.”

Krom’s eyes widened and he hurried away, he was shaken, confused, and more than a little scared. How had the man changed face and clothing? And how did the man know his name? Questions for another time, he figured. Right now, his sister was getting ready to sing.

In her private chamber for practicing, Melena was growing more and more nervous. She knew the words, the movements, the notes, but merely the thought of being up on a stage in front of all those people was enough to make her heart pound so fast she knew she wouldn't be able to sing. One last look in the mirror, and her teacher escorted her out of the chamber, down a long stone hallway, and to the entrance to the stage. He stopped her right before she walked on and gently reminded her, "Remember, don't think about the people, think about the woods with your brother... It has been an honor to work with you, I could not have asked for a better student."

She sniffed once, smiled, and embraced her teacher. Then she turned, walked through the archway, and out onto the stage.

The performance stage was set in one of the lower terraces of the castle. There were large wooden rafters set over the stage and the audience, and they had vines and flowers spiraling around them. The air had gotten much colder during the past few days, and this festival was held annually around this time to celebrate the great cycle of the Sun. This marked the end of the Bright Months, and the beginning of the Gray Months. After which, another great festival would be held to celebrate the beginning of Spring. Everyone was dressed warmly, and now as the sun began to set, and gray clouds filled the skies, small flakes of snow were beginning to fall.

Melena stood on the stage, looking out at the audience, and she spotted the King and Queen in the center. She looked out at the back-left corner of the area, and there he was, sitting on top of a barrel, her little brother. She opened her mouth to sing, and her voice cracked on the first note. There was an audible gasp in the audience.

She regained her composure, felt her heart beating out of her chest, and her breath was coming in short gasps. But then she saw it. And she walked off the stage, down the steps, and into the audience.

Krom was one who had gasped at the cracked note. He knew his sister was nervous, but figured she would make it through with no problems regardless. He grew worried when she began to walk off stage, was she quitting? No, it wasn't like her to quit. Why was she walking into the audience? He tried to meet her eyes and give her an encouraging smile, but she seemed... far away. Her body was here, but there was something different about how she carried herself. Something was wrong, and he needed to go to her.

She had seen it. The wooden rafters and supporting columns, with the hanging vines and flowers. The brilliant red glow of the Sun setting in the West, the frigid air and falling snow. She didn't belong here, on the stage, she belonged in the woods. In this moment of clarity, she reached one of the columns directly next to where the King and Queen were seated. She gently held one of the flowers on the pillar, closed her eyes, her heart slowed, her breath came easier, she opened her mouth and began to sing.

She sang with the trees and flowers, the falling snow gracing her hair and dress. She sang and stepped from tree to tree, twirling with the joy of the forest. She danced through the forest, through the shrubs and ferns, through the snow, for she was out playing with her younger brother, back in the times of magic. Her voice rang out across the leaves, like the gentle autumn wind, she was there, she was a part of it, the majestic winterland.

She soon stepped and twirled and skipped her way back through the trees, back to the same flower, held it again, gently in her hand, and let the last word fade. She sank to her knees, and closed her eyes.

The audience sat, in stunned silence, for what seemed like an eternity. The King was the first to stand, and then the entire audience stood.

Melena still knelt at the base of the column, cradling the flower. She opened her eyes, and found herself back on the terrace. It was deathly silent. She raised her head slowly, and found herself looking directly at the Queen. Tears streamed down Melena's face, for when she was singing, she had seen her mother's face in the falling snow. The Queen knelt, helped Melena to her feet, and the entire audience stood silent.

The first clap came from the back of the audience. Krom understood what had happened. He heard his mother's voice in that of his sister. He stood on the barrel and began clapping, and soon, the entire audience began a thunderous applause. Melena bowed, and the Queen herself walked Melena back onto the stage. The applause continued, and everyone realized they had witnessed a performance which could never be done again.

His sister was swarmed with people wanting to talk with her, to express their gratitude for such a moving performance. Krom managed to get in line to see her.

When his turn came, he gave her a long hug and said, “I heard our mother’s voice in you. She is still with us.”

After the ordeal of receiving thanks, compliments, offers, handshakes, and the like, the feast was moved indoors, as the snow was falling heavier, and the tables were getting too wet to sit at. But for the siblings, this was of no consequence. They piled their plates with delicious food and sat at a table in the middle of the terrace. No one else was out there, and while yes, the benches were wet and cold, there was a certain joy in eating in the elements. Talking and laughing and talking some more...

And then the King and Queen came out on to the terrace, unaccompanied by guards. They approached the table and asked to sit down.

The Queen looked at Krom, then to Melena, “Is this your brother?”

“Yes”, she replied.

“Well my dear, we wanted to come out here and thank you again, without all the ceremony and formality, for such an incredible performance. Though I ought to ask, why were you crying when you finished?”

Melena looked at the Queen, then turned to Krom. He nodded, and she turned back to the Queen. “Our mother was killed several years ago. When I was singing, I saw her face in the snow. And my brother heard her voice in the song. That’s why we were crying.”

The Queen was suddenly sad. “You, Melena, are welcome to come back here to sing any time you wish. And if there is ever anything that either of you need, you let us know.”

The food was heavenly, and the following music and entertainment was excellent. The brother and sister ate their fill, stuffed their pockets with more food, and headed home. On their way through the market area, Krom noticed that all the tents were still there, save for the weapons merchant he had spoken with earlier. Despite the song and food and other performances, he still felt scared and worried about the man he had met. He also couldn’t help thinking about the fortune teller, and that bowl of water, and the tears of blood.

They exited the castle, and Krom got his gold piece back. That system was in place as insurance that someone coming in would not cause any trouble while in the castle, otherwise they wouldn't get the gold back. This wasn't a big deal for any of the merchants or middle-born people, but the low-born were a different story.

"Krom, Melena!" Their Uncle Marin ran up to them. He was shivering, out of breath, and looking panicked.

"What is it? What's happened?" Melena asked.

"It's your father, you had better come see."

Melena and Krom exchanged worried looks and they raced home. They burst in the door, and lying on the floor was their father. His body had been cut to ribbons, his hands and feet were mangled, as if crushed by some great force. A rasping breath escaped his mouth, and Melena and Krom ran to him. They made out the words: "Krom... care... your sister... Run. Run!" And with one last breath, their father died.

They knelt in shock and sorrow, then Krom turned and saw his Uncle Marin. He had a bottle in one hand, and a smile on his face. Krom pulled his sister up and dragged her to the door, "We need to go! We need to run!"

Four figures emerged from the shadows and grabbed the siblings. Krom drew his knife, but he was too late. Hands grabbed his arms and he was tied and gagged, as was his sister.

One of the men hoisted a massive bag of gold from his pack, and passed it to Marin. "50,000 gold pieces for the delivery of this Order Member and his two children. We've already subtracted 10,000 gold, which is what it took to pay off the guards to keep them from asking the hard questions if they find bodies."

Bodies? Krom thought, were these men going to kill them as well? He screamed and shook, but he was firmly tied and all that came out were muffled cries.

Marin started towards the door to leave, but one of the men put his hand out. "Nope, you're staying here with us for a while yet."

The men tied Melena to a table, and then turned to face Krom. “You said earlier that your lovely sister had never performed for many people before, but that she had made her rounds in the private chambers of high-born families, is this correct?”

Krom screamed and rocked the chair, but was unable to break free.

“Hmm, that didn’t sound like a definite yes or no, to me. *ANSWER THE QUESTION!*” He back-handed Krom, nearly knocking the chair over.

Krom frantically shook his head ‘no’.

“Well, that’s a proper answer, but I must say, I don’t believe it’s the same one he gave earlier. What do you say gents, is he lying right now or has he changed his mind?”

“He is his father’s son, bastard’s probably lying.”

“Yes, and good boys shouldn’t lie. That,” he pointed to the bloody mess on the floor, “is what happens when people lie to us. Your father was a member of the Order, and their bodies fetch a *fine* price. I understand he left you his blade. We’ll let one of you keep it, if either survive.” His tone was suddenly cheerful again. “But on to business. Marin! You delivered the bodies, we delivered seventy-five percent of the gold, and we will deliver the rest of it once we’re finished here and done at the brothel later. You will be in your room at the inn.”

Melena lay on her back on the table. She had seen her uncle take the gold in exchange for her, and she suddenly remembered the note: *‘Melena, best of luck today, there are people paying good gold for you’*

She immediately started thrashing in her bonds, possibly in an attempt to break the table to get free. It wasn’t working.

A fifth man walked in the door. He was dressed head-to-toe in black. He whispered, “The perimeter is set, give me the command and I’ll cast the spell.”

“Do it.”

The robed man whispered some strange sounding words, moved his hands, and suddenly a blue outline ran the perimeter of the room, traveled up the walls, glowed for a moment and then disappeared.

“We’ve got 30 minutes. These two could scream loud as banshees and no one outside this room will hear.”

“Ah ha! Magic is a wonderful thing, gents, remove those gags.”

The other men removed the gags from Krom and his sister.

“At last, we can have a civil conversation, without these primitive grunts and nods. Oh, and Marin, you may step out back, but please do not go anywhere or do anything stupid. I will know if you do.”

Marin walked quickly towards the back door. But Krom screamed “*MARIN! YOU COWARD. YOU WILL WATCH WHAT YOU HAVE DONE!*”

“Come now, Krom, that’s no way to speak to a guest in your home! Now, where did we leave off? Ah, of course! We were discussing your sister’s performing habits. You said she had performed in high-born homes, but never for so many people at once, is this correct?”

Krom screamed savage and unintelligible words, yet the man stood there with a disappointed expression and waited patiently for Krom to finish. Krom’s throat was parched and he tasted blood from the back-hand slap.

“Quite alright, I’ll take that as an enthusiastic ‘yes’. Next question, earlier, we asked if the *lovely Melena*” he stroked her cheek, “here was going to put on a show, do you think we’ll enjoy it?”

Again, Krom had nothing to say but terrible and fierce screams. Melena, suspecting what was to come, and her and Krom’s inability to stop it, lay still and silent.

“That is precisely what I thought you would say. Now I and my men have held up our end of the bargain, Mr. Marin held up his end, I believe it’s time for Melena-dear here to deliver her performance.”

As if sensing their dread, the man commented, “Oh, no, we wouldn’t do *that* to her, she’s only a girl.” Instead, he picked up a wooden club. “Arms and legs are fine, but let’s not damage any vital organs, boys! 10 hits each, and we’ll go from there.”

Krom couldn't watch. Melena couldn't scream loud enough. Though after the first three, Melena remembered the rest of the note: "*I'm sure you'll please everyone! Relax and enjoy the experience.*" All of a sudden, she didn't want to live anymore. She didn't scream, she didn't move or resist. The last blows were not even felt.

"How are we looking on time, wizard?"

"You've got about 3 minutes left, so if there's any talking or silencing you want to do, now would be the time."

"I can work with that. Now Krom, I think your sister is well beyond words at the moment, so really the only problem is you. Is there anything you'd like to say to your beloved Uncle Marin?"

Krom was silent.

The man slapped Krom twice, hard. Krom's eyes blinked once, slowly.

"There, that's a start, but I'd like a verbal answer. No answer and your sister loses her legs, she'll have to sing sitting down for the rest of her life."

Krom spat a chunk of blood and bile on to the floor. "I would tell my Uncle Marin to come in here and see what he has done. *He sold his own niece to be beaten! He sold his own brother-in-law to be murdered! He destroyed my sister*", Krom's voice rose in pitch and madness,

"hedestroyedmysisterhedestroyedmyfatherhedestroyedourlives!"

"30 seconds left, is that all you have to say?"

The madness was still in his eyes, but after a moment, his voice was oddly calm, "My father and sister were worth 50,000, I'd ask him how much I'm worth."

"Oh, your father's body is worth considerably more than that. Your uncle heard 50,000 and jumped at the opportunity. He doesn't make much. That amount is enough to buy a whore house and a brewery – his two best friends, and each fully stocked. As for you, we already asked him. You're worth nothing, which is why we haven't hurt you too bad."

Krom began to scream, but it was cut short by a thump on his head, and the world went bright white for a moment, and then all was black.

Krom awoke sometime later, with a throbbing skull. The floor was slick with his father's blood, yet the body was gone. He was no longer tied, so he managed to stand and go to his sister. Her bonds had been removed as well. She was breathing, but only just. Krom brought a cloth and water, and wiped her face and neck and hands. He sputtered her name a few times, but there was no response. Her eyes were open, yet they were empty – there was no Melena behind them. He managed to get her propped up on the table. Her arms and legs were beyond repair, yet her face was entirely unharmed. The room was a blur, except for the task at hand. He got her a cup of water and some bread. The bread he tore into tiny pieces and mixed in with the water. He fed her, and whether she knew she was being fed, or if swallowing the water was simply a natural reaction didn't matter. The task at hand was taking care of his sister. Maybe she would come back from wherever she had gone. But maybe Melena was gone. He stood and watched as this body of his sister inhaled and exhaled. He went into her bedroom and got her favorite blanket and brought that to her, her favorite book, favorite poem, and song, her bowl and spoon she always liked to use. Somewhere, in this pile of items, he hoped she would be attracted to something and come back. The result was a person who looked like his sister, covered in his sister's blanket, with all his sister's favorite things, but no Melena. Only a heap of reminders of who his sister had been.

It was similar to blacksmithing – with extreme focus comes extreme clarity. Telling her about her favorite books, songs, and poems. He was only going through the motions – he knew she couldn't come back. The body had stopped breathing. Melena was gone.

The vision and voice of their mother had gone as well.

A boy of 14 entered the inn, though what exited was entirely different: the figure was dripping blood, a black knife in hand, and eyes cold and dark as the winter night. The boy was dead, and in his place, stood a man, devoid of emotion. Even in the chill of the wind, he did not shiver; he was but a husk of a human, a shell with no brightness inside.

It was true, what the fortune teller had said: “The realm of the dead is walked by countless souls. Some were warriors, others priests, many kings and queens and

knights. Many were merchants or sailors, bar maids, or fishermen, widows, carpenters, and beggars. Yet all these men and women were vastly outnumbered by masses of small, dimming lights – and these dimming lights are the souls of children. The realm of the dead is home to many, but in all our hopes for a peaceful world, it is the children who suffer the most. For innocence must die before avenging the deeds of the wicked.”

His feet crunched on the packed snow, and with an empty gaze, he wiped the blood and gore from his blade. He then went home, to bury his sister.

Black Sun

I don't think I'm a particularly spiteful person. But there is something oddly motivational about people telling me that I cannot do something.

A couple weeks ago, I had one of those "awakenings", where I realized that this magic/mentalism obsession is literally killing me – I'm pushing myself to create things that are not possible, and then getting really frustrated when I can't figure something out.

But the method could be right there! Yes, it could, but Tom, you haven't slept in 3 days. I wake up 18 hours later, lying on the floor with a stack of billets in one hand and a sharpie in the other. Get up, shower, grab a bowl of rice, do some SEO work, and oh, there's a deck of cards. What was it I was working on yesterd- Ah! Yes, the duplication project. I need to get the drawing from here to there without anyone noticing. Would this work? Maybe, grab the tape, glue, exacto, spare cards, shoe, and 12 hours later, I'm dehydrated, dazed, one step closer to an indefinite point of finding that elusive grail. Damn, I missed the gym again. Oh well, I'm already weak and skinny again. That time when I was 180 pounds and ripped feels like a dream, and getting back to the gym is impossible, because gyms don't have close-up pads to work on sleights, just a bunch of rubber weights and. Enough of that, stay focused. Ah – freaking – ha! I found it! I can move a signature from one card to another! I can make an exact duplicate of a signed card right in front of people! You know how many doors this opens? The possibilities? Stooging is no longer needed! I don't have to forge signatures in private anymore, I don't have to keep signed cards and track who they belong to anymore, I can duplicate a signature in less than 2 seconds, under the cover of the deck!..... but what was the cost? It took me 30-odd days to figure that out. My room's a mess, haven't showered in 3 days, had 1.5 meals every day for a month and a half. My arms are sticks again, it'll take me months to get that back. Doing anything even reasonably athletic, such as getting out of bed/off the floor in the morning gets my heart rate up. But guess what? I can duplicate a signatu- crap, I forgot about the other project, the dancing flame, how am I going to do this? How will I get the flame to morph? I could use a sheet of thin, flammable plastic, to get the shape I want, but I have to dispose of it somehow and get it into play, and how to hold it without burning myself, and then 29 hours later, I have a partial method, stiff legs from sitting, dry mouth, bloodshot eyes, and feel like I did that one time

when I lost my grip on reality and couldn't sleep for 5 days straight, wouldn't wish that on anyone. I ought to stretch, get some water, a sandwich, a banana, and get some sleep.

It sounds silly, but that had become the norm for me. There's something about trying to obtain the impossible that captivates me to the point of forgetting to take care of myself. As I said in the Book of Odyssey, this desperate quest becomes our grail. I've never been this obsessive about anything else before, but I do worry that I'll allow myself to fall into this obscenely unhealthy spiral again with whatever comes after magic – maybe the demon I know is better than the demon I don't know. At this point, after months of this, I've dropped 40 pounds, am weak again, I'm good at sleights, I have a ton of partial methods, but sometimes I cannot sleep without having created something.

There's a reason why so many magicians were awkward as teens. Mystery performance is a solitary endeavor – the idea of being able to do the impossible and practicing away from people attracts people who are already accustomed to being alone.

A couple weeks ago, I had one of those “awakenings”, where I realized that this magic/mentalism obsession is literally killing me – I'm pushing myself to create things that are not possible, and then getting really frustrated when I can't figure something out. This whole business of not sleeping, not eating, only creating, is getting to the point to where it is dangerous.

A couple weeks ago, I saw the solar eclipse. A couple weeks ago, I witnessed perfection. The crescent moon transforms into a Black Sun. There is a 2 second period before totality, when it is more-or-less safe to look at the sun. During those 2 seconds, the moon becomes visible, and it moves, deliberately, into place. When it moves, the world goes dark, as the shadow of the moon sweeps across the land. There are faint red and blue flickers around the edge of the great sphere, as it passes in front of the brilliance of the sun. It stops, and the sky goes black, save for a glowing corona of bluish-white light emanating from the black sphere. If I didn't know about orbital patterns and gravity, if I didn't know there was to be an eclipse that day, if I had never heard of nor seen something like this before, I would have dropped everything and worshipped the Sun. In fact, I still might.

Those 2 seconds before totality and the 2 minutes of totality, were by far, the most beautiful, incredible, and perfect moments of my life. It was celestial perfection, nothing compares. I'm a sucker for sunsets and sun rises, I've climbed many

mountains, and seen some truly beautiful sights, had precious moments with Nature, but this eclipse was something else entirely.

A radiant light emerged from the right side of the moon, and this black sphere moved, allowing the sunlight to touch the earth. After 2 seconds of movement, the moon vanished into the sky, and the world was bright again.

I couldn't stand. I went to sit by a tree. My whole body was trembling, but it felt *right*. I called my brother to tell him about it, and found that I couldn't get my mouth and brain to cooperate. I did my best to describe it to him, but words cannot do it justice.

A couple weeks ago, I saw the solar eclipse, and I witnessed perfection. I was experiencing the epitome of awe and wonder, but there was also sadness. As we drove away, I couldn't help but look out the window, into the Sun, hoping that it would happen again, hoping the Black Sun would appear. My brother did not get to come. This was the single most incredible experience I've ever had, and I wanted for him to experience it as well.

We drove several hours, and on the way, I listened to "Darken", by "Last Moon's Dawn" on loop. Between the music, and looking out the window into the Sun, I had a lot of time to process this event. When we got to the hotel, my parents asked what would sound good for dinner, but I told them to go by themselves, I was tired and not hungry. While they were out at a restaurant, I made several recordings, documenting my thoughts and feelings regarding the eclipse.

Something I realized was that the day before, I had had multiple conversations with multiple strangers, and they were very friendly, and we *all shared an excitement for the upcoming eclipse*. It seemed odd, that so many people were coming together, to witness something greater than themselves, greater and older than humanity, yet entirely un-related to our daily lives. It got me thinking, how could we use something like this to unite a nation? People are willing to unite for something greater than any of us. That might be the key to the greatest method of all. That might be worth obsessing over.

When our heads turn to the sky, the problems and struggles of everyday seem to not exist. When our heads turn to the sky, we are all only human.

I am not where I want to be in life. As a kid, I had a dream of being an Olympic swimmer. I got pretty good at swimming (out-swam the life-guards and instructors

at the local pool), and they asked me to be on the swim team. But when I heard that the training time was 5:30 am, I turned it down, due to not wanting to get up that early. Little did I know, that could very well have been the first step in achieving said dream. But I was a kid and didn't put much fore-thought into things.

Reflecting on the eclipse experience has helped me to realize that I need to get myself together. I need to stop the unhealthy lifestyle of obsessing over magic methods, I need to start eating healthy again, get into the gym, go to bed at a reasonable time, get a different occupation, so I don't have an excuse to continue with magic creation, grab a pool pass and swim again.

I talked with a friend of mine about this. He has been dead-set on getting me to smoke weed and take magic mushrooms and DMT with him, to which I've always declined, out of already having issues, and I don't need more. I told him about my dream of being a swimmer, and that I'm going to pursue it again. What he said was an indication that I probably need to get a new group of friends: *"Tom, you can't be an Olympic swimmer, and you're an idiot if you think you can. You're too old, you don't know anything about swimming. You might as well smoke weed with us, because you'll never be an Olympian, and therefore will never need to pass a drug test."*

It'll be a long swim, but I'll get there. I might not be the next Michael Phelps, and I might not even place 3rd, but I will get there, and I will stand with the best.

I don't think I'm a particularly spiteful person. But there is something oddly motivational about people telling me that I cannot do something. Heck, he might be right, but to tell a friend to throw away a dream and saying they're an idiot for even thinking that they can achieve it, isn't the best thing to say. He made a bet: \$1,000 says I don't make it to the Olympics. We'll see how this goes.

Magic and mentalism has the power to change lives, when performed well. But I don't think that's what I need to do anymore. When I saw the Black Sun, something changed in me. I need to start living a life of *real* purpose. When I saw the Black Sun, I changed. I don't feel like the same person anymore, though I believe that's a good thing.

When we turn our heads to the sky,