Substory

In the city of Cathuga, located in the central part of Western Nithrandir, a young reporter steps out of the building he works in. Holding a camera in his hands, he set out to find a new story for the newspaper he works for. He looked down at his prompt sheet, and was reminded that he had been *given* a story to look for.

“The Thieves of Cathuga” said the prompt. There are many thieves in the sprawling city, but one has been seen over and over again, and seems to slip away as if he’s made of smoke from authorities. No one knows this Thief’s name, besides himself of course, and no one has an accurate description of him. A subject of thieves, thought the reporter to himself, could become life-threatening, or at least quite dangerous, seeing as most thieves dislike being followed. Though he had accepted the prompt, it was for the simple reason of money, not interest that had influenced his choice.

The young reporter looked up from the prompt at the red-roofed, bricked buildings that made up the city of Cathuga. Citizens bustled through the streets, buying groceries, tools, resources; while the vendors vied to gain attention to their stands. As the young reporter walked around the corner of one of the buildings, he noticed a commotion on the right side of the street. There was some yelling, female, and a scream; and a figure could be seen climbing deftly up the brick wall of a building, holding some sort of fruit in his mouth. The reporter looked closely, and recognized the messy brown hair and scruff around the chin to be the most common thief. At this realization, the reporter lifted his camera, and fueled Aura into it. The grainy Aura organized itself into a picture of what the lens could see, and stuck into place. A piece of paper was ejected from the top of the camera, and was grabbed by the reporter and stuffed into his pocket as he raced down the street, wanting another picture of the Thief. One surely couldn’t be enough.

He rounded another corner, turning right and running through the crowd. He had to get close before the Royal Guards came by to check out the scene. They had long since given up chasing the Thief, but if they saw a hair on his head, they would rain arrows on the area for a full minute, seeing as King Geth was entirely fed up with the Thief’s antics. The reporter pushed his way through a crowd, keeping his eyes on the roofs of the buildings. The Thief was known to never stay in one place. He looked down for a second, and saw that even now the streets were beginning to become even more crowded with guards from the castle. Eventually the crowding became too much, and the reporter was forced into an alleyway. He decided that he couldn’t just wait around like a hound for its master, so he set off down the alley, keeping an eye out on the roofs still, looking for a way out into the main streets. He rounded two more corners, a right, then a left, and in front of him was a large street.

The reporter smiled, and by chance looked up into the windows on the buildings opposite from him. In a third story window, he spotted a face looking out and down at the people below, unseen to all but the reporter. He gaped for a second, then out of pure habit raised his camera, and snapped a shot of the figure that he was sure was the Thief; there was no mistaking the hollow features of his face. As the reporter took the picture, the figure in the window shifted his gaze instantly, from the street to straight at the reporter. The eyes of this being were not human, the reporter immediately thought; they were something else, more beastlike and ravenous. The reporter held the Thief’s gaze for only a second, until he could bare it no longer and took off running down the street, back to the building in which he worked.

The reporter caught his breath back at the main street, still terrified of what could happen to him. As he composed himself slowly, he knew he couldn’t turn in just the pictures he had taken as a story. After he was fully in control over his breathing and shaking, he straightened up, and began asking random locals if they knew anything about the thieves of Cathuga. Most said that they had been stolen from once or twice, but no one really said what the reporter wanted.

What he wanted, that is, was someone who had seen the Thief’s face. The reporter eventually turned in a rough draft of the next day’s story, and, still feeling as if it was incomplete, headed home as night fell. On the way to his house, the reporter had to cross one of the many other alleyways in Cathuga. This passage had never warranted worry before, for it was fairly short; but on this particular night, the reporter noticed many more strange sounds than just the usual ambiance of citizens preparing for sleep. Footsteps echoing along, the whisk of pants running against each other as one would walk quickly, and the faint traces of breathing. The reporter looked over his shoulder once, then twice, then a third time; always finding nothing was there. The passage seemed to be taking much longer than ever before, and the reporter found he was holding his breath, and slowly released it through his nose; afraid to open his mouth for some innate instinct. Suddenly, he became aware that the fleeting sounds of footsteps were growing ever more constant and equally louder. The reporter froze on the spot, stricken with terror; and then tried to take off at a sprint. Before he could even take a single step, how envied it was, the reporter felt a sharp pain come from the center of his back. The pain, so quick and intense, granted him the pleasure of a gasp of air, and a yell that was quickly muffled by a hand reaching over his mouth. He felt a similar sharp pain in his back thrice more, then his heavy eyes gave in and his body shut down. Blood dripped from his multiple wounds as he slumped to the ground, but these sounds were unheard for the dripping of multiple pipes that encompassed the city. A man backed away from the scene of the crime. Light flickered onto his face as it was turned on in a floor above. The face, gaunt and condescending, appeared as the Thief himself. He backed into the darkness again, enveloping himself in his revenge and hatred. As night wore on, the murder became noticed, and was taken care of.

The Thief stole through the night, dodging people at every turn. He approached to his main hideout, an attic in a mostly abandoned building filled sparsely with the homeless and the insane. He climbed up the stairs to the attic, surprisingly not coming across any of the other residents in the building. He arrived in his attic, and walked over to a desk by the small window that looked out over the main street.

In this uncleanly niche in the sea of rich buildings, there was a bookshelf on the wall to the right of the desk, holding many books, most of which were molded and torn beyond any literacy. To the left there was a ladder which led up to the roof of the building. The Thief sometimes would go up there to relax, and it was also where he had found one of the things most precious to him. The Thief sat down at the desk, pushing the many papers and debris from the slowly crumbling building out of the way to pull the chair out. He put his hands to his head, and massaged his temples with his thumbs. He did not care that he had killed a man; it was a usual thing if anyone got too close to him. But something else was bothering the Thief. Attention was being brought to him; he knew this from the reporter whom he’d seen throughout the day. With more attention, he had two choices: either to become invisible for a while, with no thieving at all, to escape the attention, or to grasp ahold of this attention, and its accompanying fear, and give himself more prominence in the city.

Choices, choices, the Thief thought; and he thought for hours, until the night was old, and stars began to lose their places in the sky. The Thief fell asleep at his desk, still thinking what to do, for he knew it could either be recognition of his placement in society, or an uprising that would change him forever.

As the sun rose, the Thief was awakened from his uneasy sleep by blaring trumpets outside his window. He pulled back a thick curtain from the window to see a parade marching by, mainly with soldiers, and he knew that the raid upon a neighboring village, barbarians, he assumed, had gone well. In a long progression, the prizes of war were shown upon cushions of fine velvet, lined with gold. Goblets, trinkets, lockets, keys, everything imaginable were brought by, most probably gained from other villages by the barbarians.

The Thief smiled, as he realized his mind had wandered towards his craft, as it usually did. Thieves steal from other thieves, to be stolen from.

The Thief was brought out of his thoughts by a flickering light outside. He squinted against the glare, and saw that there was a fist-sized stone; it looked to be just an ordinary pebble, held on one of the cushions. He looked closer, and blocked his eyes from the glare, and saw that the stone was no ordinary rock; but a precious jewel, of such luster and purity that no eye could skip over. The Thief stared at the stone as it was marched by, and arched his neck to watch it more as it moved from his view, towards the castle.

Stricken with its beauty as he was, the Thief knew such a robbery would be suicide. Such a precious gem would be guarded with the utmost security. Yet he could not help but wonder what it would be like to hold the gem, admire its beauty up close. King Nutier mocked him, he thought, keeping the jewel all to himself in his lavish castle, in his lavish city of a lavish state. He had never respected the King, but now the Thief’s loathing was renewed.

And so the Thief plotted, he planned, and he brooded over his greed of the gem. It must be his, he thought; it must be his. Over the next few days, the Thief kept watch from another abandoned attic on a building nearby the castle, watching the guard’s patterns of patrol. On every fifth day, three guards would emerge from the castle, as three more went back inside, from a night’s shift of guarding the main gate. The three guards that came out would walk just outside the main gate, and then two would position themselves on either side of the gate, while a third walked back and forth in front of the walls that surrounded the castle. It would take approximately an hour for the third guard to make it to one side of his defined area to the other, and every five hours the guards would cycle through their shifts; right guard to the left, left guard to patrol, and patrol guard to the right.

Once the Thief was satisfied with his research on the guards’ movement, he set up a new hideout in a small room with one window, facing north, towards the castle’s surrounding wall. So, on the fifth day of the week, the Thief put on only a tunic, a faded pair of cotton pants, and hid a knife in his pocket. That night, he climbed up to the roof of the building nearby the wall, and jumped over the gap between the architecture easily, landing on the wall, silent. He then slid down a drainage pipe on the wall, and ran to the wall of the castle. He found a low window that was locked, and picked it with his knife. The windows swung open silently as well, and the Thief smiled at the irony; of a king having his abode so well kept, would lead to a loss. He snuck through the window, and found himself in what appeared to be a dining room. The table was littered with dirtied plates and half-finished meals, and he scowled at the wasted food, while in some parts of the city, entire families starved. But if the table was not clean, that meant servants would be there any second, so he stole into a room to the right, and saw that it was a display room for the newest prizes of war. What luck, he thought, grinning. The Thief tensed for a second, as he heard the sound of clanking boots turn the corner. The clanking stopped, and he heard a muffled conversation. The clanking commenced, but slowly faded away.

The Thief took this opportunity, and ran quietly into the display room, looking for the gem he lusted for. He found it third from the far wall, kept from him by thick glass. He frowned again, as he realized there was no way to get to it without alerting guards.

But the Thief was not one to hesitate, and once he was sure there was no other quiet way to obtain the jewel, he took out his knife, flipped it around so the blade was pointing skyward, and slammed the hilt into the glass, causing a spider web of cracks to appear. He smashed again, while he heard yells from around the corner, and the glass broke. The Thief reached in, disregarding the spikes of glass that protruded from the hole, and picked up the gem, which seemed to flash with multicolored light as it touched his flesh. He brought the stone to eye level, and examined it.

The jewel seemed to contain something more than just what appeared to be. The Thief could see many of what appeared to be cracks and impurities in the center of the stone, but as he looked closer, he realized that the impurities were *moving*.

The Thief could not admire the jewel for any longer, though, for shouts were coming from seemingly every direction, along with the sound of crashing armor. The Thief closed his hand around the jewel, but before he could put it into his pocket, he felt a force come from the stone, almost like a breeze. Warmth enveloped the Thief’s hand, and he felt a strange sense of invincibility course through him. The warm feeling spread through his arm, and filled his entire body.

The Thief grinned, a terrible sight now, as his eyes danced with madness and the air around him sparked with energy. He grasped the gem tighter and felt more energy come through him. He then put the jewel into his pocket, and readied his knife in his right hand. He glanced at his knife as he held it ready in front of him, and saw that the blade was unnaturally bright, and could see transparent dark tendrils coming off of it, like leaves on a stem.

Soldiers charged around the back corner, which led presumably to the kitchen; and also from a room that led to the throne room, among others. Dozens upon dozens, they rushed to where they had heard the noise emanate, to see a man holding one of the jewels, and grinning manically. The man had a dagger out, and raised it in front of him, the insane look in his eyes growing. The man lunged at the soldiers, his dagger arm moving too fast for any of them to see it before it stabbed one man up from through the stomach. The man gasped, then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed to the ground as the knife was pulled out of him, blood trailing behind.

There was something new in the Thief; a new bloodlust, a new thirst for violence…a new hatred of those around him. Something from the stone, he concluded, as he hacked at the soldiers, grinning as blood ran from his dagger down onto his arm, and dripped farther as he whirled around to dodge sword and spear thrusts by them. He killed, and killed, and killed, until he was at the main door of the grand castle.

The Thief punched a guard in his sword arm, making it go limp, then stabbed him through the chest, and pushed forward, using the dying guard as a shield against a few other soldiers. Yells and screams of pain surrounded the Thief, increasing his enjoyment of the chaos around him. He stabbed two more guards, and then was confronted by a young, frail boy who could be no older than fifteen, shakingly holding a spear and staring at the Thief, fixated on his hateful, morbidly mirthful eyes.

“Hail to the Thief!” The Thief cried, and shot his fist upward to uppercut the young boy, then spun around to kick him into other guards.

With this yell, the guards paled, and some started to move back. This cleared a path for the Thief, out of the crowd of guards surrounding him. He took advantage of this chance, and slashed his way out of the soldiers, still holding the beautiful gem in his hand, as its sparkling demeanor mixed with the splashing blood. The Thief ran, he ran all the way down the main street, as guards and soldiers poured out after him as many vendors and civilians screamed at the commotion, not understanding.

The Thief ran out of the city, and farther into the plains dotted with many large rocks, and eventually outran the guards. The Thief stayed out in the fields, hiding behind one boulder that contained a small cave, a wonderful hiding spot for large thieveries such as this. He stayed out there until the sun had just started to touch the horizon, and red lights in the sky mirrored the blood spilled in Cathuga. The Thief ran back to the walls around Cathuga, avoiding the guards, who were in greater size today than before, and hid by a tree near the wall.

From there, the Thief uncovered a hole in the wall, no bigger than a man of his lanky stature to fit through, by spreading away fallen leaves and a leather tarp. He slipped through the hole, and crawled out of a mirror hole on the other side of the wall. It was a stupidly simple trick, but no officials had found out about it yet, and that was well enough for the Thief. He hid the opening to the hole again, and then headed back to his home, keeping to the shadows as was natural to him. Once he made it to the abandoned building, he went inside and up to the attic. He took the gem out of his pocket, and placed it on the desk by the window. He then sat down on the ancient chair and studied the jewel.

What a beautiful thing it was, nearly transparent, but not quite. The Thief could make out shapes of things by looking through it, but nothing more, for everything was tinted with the dark purples, blacks, and reds that swirled through the stone. The swirling was another note of interest; for the Thief hadn’t heard much of precious jewels, but he was fairly sure they weren’t *animate*. He studied the stone for some time more, until he realized that the tip of his nose was touching it on the desk. He had leaned forward slowly, trying to gaze deeper into the depths of the stone, until he was at eye level with it. As the Thief was about to sit up and think, he suddenly saw a flash of light within the stone, and his eyes were directed back toward the motion.

The Thief heard, not out loud, but echoing in his mind, a voice, unlike any he had heard of before – ancient as it was – laugh once. Immediately the pain set in, sharp and quick, but unceasing, in the Thief’s eyes. The Thief yelped and almost fell backwards out of his chair as the pain in his eyes turned into images, flashing by faster than he could process them. From the pain came amazement and awe, as the Thief stared into the flashing pictures, emotions, and feelings conveyed through them as they whipped past his field of view. He saw first dark chambers, small rooms; but then large expanses of caves and gigantic caverns. Then came feelings of pain and agony, – though not his – and dark red and blacks with people in black cloaks surrounding him. Fields, mountains, temples, statues, anger, rage, and two men dressed in leather tunics, one with blue eyes and one with green, and an overarching feeling of…

The Thief yelled again as the pain set back in, sharper than before, as images of flashing light and more agony came through. Terrible, terrible pain, and with pain the anger, rising and cresting like a wave on a sea torn shore. Many more sets of pain racked the images and the Thief covered one eye with his hand, and got up, trying to shake off the images. More flashes of light, more pain, and soon all he could see was a stark white, with no letting up in sight. The Thief thrashed and threw his head around – he must rid himself of these pictures, he must!

The Thief could take the pain no longer, and he rushed for the ladder that led to the roof from his attic, and climbed up it; and as he did, he noticed in a small space in his eye that wasn’t dominated with the flashing images, that the jewel on his desk was spinning in the air, while books and papers fluttered in orbit around it; and the Thief heard the laughter, echoing in his mind over all of the images. The Thief climbed the rest of the ladder, tears streaming from his eyes, clambered onto the roof, and slammed the hatch behind him.

The Thief sat against a chimney on the roof the building, breathing heavily, and holding his hands against his eyes as they let out sparkling trails of tears that mirrored the skies. He didn’t know what had happened, but he knew the effects of it. He could not shake this feeling of hatred and terrified grief, for it seemed to be melded deeply with his very soul. He could not shake the images as his brain meticulously reviewed over them, the painful feelings reverberating with each one as they became understood. The Thief slowly put down his hands, and opened his eyes to the night. He looked up, at the sky, the stars, and at the world with a new sight. He understood much, much more, but he was not willing to accept it yet, so he pushed the information and thoughts away, to a deep dark corner of his mind.

The sound of a door closing awakened the Thief from his thoughts of pushing the memories away, and he looked around quickly, scared someone had heard the noise he had made. He noticed something, a figure on the roof of a building adjacent to his own. The figure was thin, and he could make out long, flowing white-blonde hair that sparkled in the night. The figure was looking up at the sky as her dress ruffled in the soft breeze; and at that the Thief knew it was the woman he had seen standing on the roof before. He knew not her name, not who she was; but merely that she existed. She would come and stand on the roof to gaze at the stars every night, and the Thief, though he hated to admit it, had fallen in love with her as he stared over the countless nights.

Love is an annoying thing, the Thief thought, as it always would get in the way of people’s endeavors. He had witnessed many a person down on the streets below go from being a powerful noble into a withered homeless man on the side of the road, all because he had committed too much of his life to his love. But yet he could not shake the feelings of attraction to the woman, as they had the same feeling as the memories from the stone.

He stared at the woman, as she stared to the sky, for a long time after, until he was awakened from his dreams by a whisper from the streets below. It was really just a whisper, but somehow the voice, clear and beautiful, reached up to him. The woman who stared at the sky did not seem affected by the whisper, but continued her gaze. The whisper told the Thief, “Your honeymoon is over.”

The Thief gritted his teeth, thinking the whisper was from guards who had found out his position, and were here to arrest him. But wait, the Thief thought; why would the Cathugan Guard bring just a few soldiers to his location? He had committed a crime punishable by damnation, which called for most likely an entire regiment of the guard. The Thief got up and looked over the side of the roof, down to the street. He saw three people, two men and one woman. The two men were juxtaposing, one short and large, and the other tall and thin. The woman had long, black, flowing hair that looked as delicate as a raven’s feather, but at the same time gleamed with some sort of hidden strength. The whisper contacted him again, saying, “We are not here to harm you. Rather, to join you.”

The Thief’s eyes widened at this statement, and he wondered if it was true or not. He looked down at the street again, and was met with the black haired woman’s eyes. Stunning, he thought, as he stared into the boundless strength and knowledge that they carried. The woman looked up at him for but a moment, then strode into the building. Thunderstruck, the Thief fell back and pressed a hand to his eyes, for he felt the familiar feelings that the stone had brought about rising again. Faster than seemed possible, the woman was at the top floor, staring down at the Thief with her wide, focused eyes. The Thief removed his hands from his face, and looked up at her. She extended a hand, the two men beside her nodding their heads down. The Thief hesitated for a moment, then grasped the hand and got up slowly.

“Who are you?” The Thief asked, secretly reaching for the knife in his pocket if they turned out to be enemies.

“We are but mere followers of your trade.” The woman answered.

“Followers of my trade..? You’re thieves as well?”

A glance shot between the two men behind the woman.

“Of a sort.” The woman said. “We have been watching you for a very long time, and also noticed a strange sort of…” She trailed off, looking off to the side, obviously in deep thought.

“They’ve been watching me?” The Thief thought to himself, horrified that he had been under surveillance for any time at all.

The woman’s eyes flicked back to the Thief, and a small grin played around her lips.

“A strange sort of…Aura…about you.” She finished. “Especially…With that stone.”

“How do you know about the st--” The Thief was cut off by the woman.

“We eventually understood that you were destined to become a great leader, more powerful than any man in the land.”

The Thief’s eyes widened once again.

In the blink of an eye, the Thief was in front of the strange woman, holding his knife to her throat.

“Are you playing some sort of sick prank on me?” He growled, scowling at the woman.

Even faster than the Thief had moved, the woman pushed her hand against his chest, and he was pushed back by a force much more powerful than the effort the woman had put into the

attack. He regained his balance a few feet away, and readied his knife for battle.

“Though we didn’t expect you to be such a fool. Yet, I suppose your readiness for tricks and lies is what makes you such a great thief.” The woman said, putting a hand on her hip.

A moment passed between them, as they waited for one another to make a move.

“Listen, Thief, we just want to help you. We feel it is incumbent upon us to help you, and are tired of this king’s reign over the city and the constant conflict between the others. We believe that if you become the leader of this city, you can solve some of these problems.” The woman finished, letting out a sigh.

Another tense moment passed, as the Thief analyzed the trio. Finally, he let down his knife, and let out a sigh as well.

“I will let you stay here, as long as you provide me with some information.” He said.

“Information? On what?” One of the woman’s accomplices, the tall man spoke for the first time.

The Thief kept his gaze locked on the woman.

“On the stone.” He said simply.

A smile played across the woman’s lips, and she said, “Fine then; deal accepted.”

The Thief didn’t move, so the woman walked towards him and offered her hand. The Thief warily took it, and shook.

“If you make one move against me; I’ll have your head on my wall.”

The smile crossed the woman’s mouth again.

“Sure, honey; sure.”

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The Thief and the woman, who had introduced herself as Tsel, along with her two followers; Crentis, the thin one, and Grentir, the short one all went down to the Thief’s attic hideout. Tsel then put down a stack of paper in a folder on the Thief’s desk.

“What are these?” The Thief inquired.

Tsel flipped open the folder, and picked up the top paper.

“Records,” She answered, looking over the paper. “Of a farmer…Rentyr Wynth. He seems to be in some political standing as well. Quite the loud speaker.”

“And how do some farmer’s records help me?” The Thief asked, adopting a bored expression upon his normally tense face.

“It will be a test,” Tsel said. “Of what you can do with the information I have.”

She looked up at the Thief, who didn’t move his eyes from staring out the window.

“We’ll see just how much power we have over people whose information I can get ahold of.”

The Thief’s gaze shifted, and looked down at the papers again.

“How will we keep track of him?”

“I can send Crentis to keep an eye on him. He’s very proficient at espionage.”

Crentis stood up straight, and nodded at the Thief, grinning. He bowed, and spoke.

“I would be glad to lend my skills to this cause, sir.” His voice was rough, and sounded of crackling leaves in autumn. A few of his teeth were missing, a few more rotted and blackened, as were most poor people’s in the city.

“And what of Grentir?” The Thief asked, looking to the short man.

Grentir reached into his pocket, and pulled out a Sren; a newly developed type of miniature cannon. It was loaded with small pellets packed with Aura, made with secret techniques. They were quite rare, and very expensive.

“I’ll take care of th’ suspicious ‘uns for ye, sir.” His voice was deep, and he spoke with a Western accent; and the Thief guessed he had probably been a sailor at one point.

The Thief put his hands down on the desk, and looked to the papers. After a few moments of thought, he looked up.

“Well then…I suppose we have a plan.” He said with a grin.

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As the moon reached its peak on the cooling night, a northern wind whipped slowly through the city, giving a slight chill to everything sleeping in its niche. That is, except for the Thief. Tsel, Grentir, and Crentis had gone to the lower floor in the abandoned building to find a place to rest, but the Thief had stayed up; looking over the documents scrawled in ink about the lowly farmer he would eventually destroy.

As he flipped through the pages, the paper warm and dusty on his hands, a nagging voice at the back of his head brought him out of his brooding thoughts. Something about him disliked the prospect of ruining an innocent man’s life, for a mere test. But another part of him disagreed, and thought that the Thief should do absolutely everything to gain power in this world. For what use is life without enjoyment? Was he really content with being lowly scum who barely survives off the trash of life? No, the Thief thought, he was not. So therefore he would do everything to gain a better place in life. The nagging presence in the back of his mind was still pestering him, but he ignored it and it eventually faded.

The Thief picked up one document labeled “Assets”. He looked at the money connected to the farmer and found that he was actually quite well off, with a bank account filled greatly with gold. The Thief grinned, and took out a blank sheet of paper. He would copy down the farmer’s assets page, but alter a few key things…

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The sun rose the next day, sheeting the sky with reds and oranges, shrinking the shadows in Cathuga. People started to filter out onto the roads and alleys between the buildings, and started another ordinary day of their lives. The Thief woke suddenly from his dreamless slumber by a voice from the door to his study.

“Oi,” Said Grentir, standing in the doorway.

Composing himself, the Thief stood up and looked at Grentir.

“Yes? What is it?” He said, concealing his drowsiness.

“Tsel told me t’ wake ye’ up; that we ‘ave work t’ do.”

“Ah…Well, tell her I’ll be there in a minute.”

Grentir nodded and went back downstairs, the old wooden floor creaking under his heavy step. The Thief looked around, then back at his desk. He scowled when he noticed the long streak of ink left when he had succumbed to sleep while copying down the page. His hand had slipped while writing and the streak lined the paper at the bottom, ruining all his work. He would fix it later he said to himself; for now he had to find out what Tsel wanted.

The Thief walked downstairs, and saw Tsel, Crentis, and Grentir sitting at an old table eating breakfast. Crentis and Grentir both had slices of bread and boiled eggs, but the Thief wondered where they got ahold of firewood for the old rusty stove. Tsel sat at the end of the table, no food in front of her, just a glass of water. Another meal, more lavish than Crentis and Grentir’s, sat at an empty spot next to Tsel.

“How did you cook this?” The Thief asked Tsel, picking up a buttered piece of toast and examining it; looking back to the ancient stove once or twice.

Tsel was silent, and for a moment the room was filled with quiet.

“Same as she always does,” Crentis spoke up. “With Aura.”

The Thief looked over at Tsel.

“You can use Aura to create flame hot enough to cook?”

Tsel smiled a proud grin at the Thief.  
 “Many other and greater things are possible with Aura. I thought you were more aware on the subject.”

The Thief looked away, and sat down.

“It’s one of the things the books fail to explain. They tell me of history of Aura and what technological inventions were created and what great bounds were made with the aid of it; but they do not tell me about *how* Aura works.”

The Thief looked up.

“Can Crentis and Grentir use Aura as well? Has it become more common in society than what I know?”

Tsel looked over at Crentis, and the Thief followed her eyes. Crentis noticed their stare and sat up straight from eating.

“I have some control over Aura, but nothing on par with Miss Tsel here.” He grinned. “I’m a bit of a novice, but I can be useful with it.”

“Aye, ‘nd o’ course I’m good at th’ stuff; y’ gotta be if yer goin’ t’ use a Sren now, dontcha?” Grentir added in. Crentis laughed heartily.

“Why, you’re worse than me, you ol’ lubber!” He lightly punched Grentis’ shoulder.

“Yes, ye’ got controllin’ of th’ Aura over me, but I got th’ power over ye!” Grentis said, punching Crentis harder in the shoulder.

Tsel stifled a laugh.

“Grentir is right, Crentis.” She said, settling the argument.

Grentir went back to eating his meal, as did Crentis. It surprised the Thief how much authority Tsel truly had over the otherwise larger men.

“Eat,” Tsel said, sipping the water from her glass. “It will wake you up more.”

The Thief shrugged and started to eat. The food was actually quite good, the Thief thought; better than anything he had eaten before.

“So what sort of ‘work’ are we doing today, Tsel?” he asked in between bites.

“Don’t you remember? We are going to begin the operation today.”

“Operation? You mean with that farmer?”

“Yes.”

The Thief looked up at Tsel.

“Are you serious? How can we begin such an operation with no former plan?” He asked incredulously.

“Right now I just need you to finish copying down Rentyr’s Assets page, so I can bring it back to the banks. Then Crentis will go and keep an eye on the farmer, and bring information of how it’s going back here.”

The Thief’s eyes narrowed.

“Are you sure it’ll be that easy?” He asked.

“Just get the paper copied.” Tsel said as she got up and headed upstairs.

“How do you know about me copying…” the Thief trailed off. What a strange woman she was.

“Oi, I can go find this farmer’s address now.” Crentis said, putting his fork down on his plate. “If it’s alright.”

The Thief paused for a second, in thought, and then agreed.

Crentis stood up and went to an adjacent room to change into fresh clothes. The Thief guessed they had brought some with them. After a while of silence besides the Thief eating, Grentir spoke up.

“Say, you know ‘ow these Sren work, righ’?” He asked.

The Thief opened his mouth as if to start speaking, but realized that he really didn’t know anything about Sren; along with other Aura-powered mechanisms. He looked down to the side, a hit taken to his pride. Grentir grinned.

“Well, I can teach ya’ to use one.” Grentir said, standing up. “I bet’cha you’ll need one if’n yer gonna be gettin’ yerself in trouble.”

The Thief put down his fork on the empty plate, and got up as well.

“Okay, I’ll learn.” The Thief said reluctantly. “Where will we practice?”

“If’n I’m rememberin’ right…I believe there’s an abandon’d part o’ town just East o’ here.”

“If at all possible, I’d like to avoid using main streets. Are there any direct shortcuts there?”

“I think ya’ can take a path through some o’ the destroyed buildin’s ‘round here.”

The Thief thought for a moment, and then nodded.

“We’ll head out then.” He said.

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Meanwhile, Crentis had started toward the Southwest part of the city, in search of Rentyr’s farmlands. He pulled out of a roll of parchment from his pocket, unraveled it, and slid his index finger across the page. Rentyr’s farmlands, which took up the entire bottom left corner of the map, had been marked with ink. Crentis looked up, and found the street he was on judging from the shops and distinctive buildings that lined it. He took a left at the next intersection, and noticed that the houses were getting larger and fancier, and the shops becoming sparse. This was the rich part of town, he noted. How strange for an otherwise lowly farmer to live in such an exquisite section of the city.

Crentis kept his forward route, blending in with the crowd perfectly. He took another left, walked for a ways, and then took a right. He looked up from his map, and found himself standing at the edge of the city. The buildings stopped there, and the road continued on into a large plot of farmland. On the horizon was a large mansion that looked like it could house at least fifteen people. Crentis walked back and turned right into the first alley he came along. He marked the alleyway on his map, rolled it up and put it back in his pocket; and then casually walked out of the alleyway. Blending with the crowd again, he headed back towards the Thief’s house.

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“Hold ‘er steady now!” Grentir grunted. The Thief shot him a look, and then reloaded the Sren with more of the pellets he had made earlier. Filling them with Aura had been harder than the Thief thought it would be; but he eventually filled up ten. He held the Sren up in front of himself, and aimed it at the empty bottle fifteen feet away from him. He slowly pulled the trigger, and shot the pellet. It shot through the glass with a loud cracking sound, and then a burst of black dust acting like fire shot up from the wall behind the glass, encompassing it and then dispersing.

“Good!” Grentir said after a moment. “Now there’s not much ye’ can do t’ just glass alone, but if you end up havin’ t’ shoot somebody, that’s when ya’ use yer Aura to attack ‘em.”

The Thief put down the gun on a nearby table, and held his right hand, which was trembling.

“Does this…Usually happen?” the Thief asked, grimacing.

Grentir looked at the Thief’s hand.

“Seems tha’ ye’ used a bit too much Aura than yer body’s used ta’. Don’t worry though, it shou’ go away in a bit.”

Consoled, the Thief lowered his hand; though it still shook.

“Well, I think tha’ shou’ be enough fer today.” Grentir said after a moment.

“Okay, let’s head back.” The Thief said.

When the Thief and Grentir arrived back at the abandoned house, they saw Tsel at the dining table, sitting and writing down something on a slip of paper. As they walked in through the back door leading to an alleyway, Tsel looked up, her hair flowing back as if it was water.

“About time you two got back,” she said with a grin that didn’t quite show in her eyes, which were still dark and mysterious to the Thief. “I was beginning to think you had ditched me.”

“We were out at an abandoned area; I was practicing with Sren. Think I’ll have to probably use them if we’re going to run a scheme as large as this.” The Thief said.

Tsel smiled again, and then looked down at the paper she was writing on. A moment passed, Tsel wrote a few final words down, then looked up at the Thief, who had sat down at the table as well. Grentir had gone upstairs to put away his Sren.

“I need your name for this.” Tsel said, not beating around the bush.

“What is it?” the Thief said quickly. Tsel held up the sheet. It was a flyer, with a blank space in the middle where a picture would go, and a blank space above where a name would go. Below where the picture would be, was the text “For equality, justice, and rights to all.”

The Thief paused, looking at the flyer. Tsel put the paper back down, dipped her pen in ink, and hovered over the blank space above. The Thief wondered how the ink in the pen didn’t drip onto the paper.

“Name?” Tsel asked again. The Thief looked down, and stayed silent. Tsel looked up. She stood up, walked around the table, and sat down beside the Thief. She looked at him with her piercing but soft eyes.

“Why can’t you say?” she asked quietly, so that no one else in the building would hear.

The Thief stayed silent, staring at the ground, away from Tsel. The Thief’s eyes suddenly flashed. He turned on Tsel, his hair flying around him like fire.

“Why must you push and pull such horrible matters?!” the Thief said loudly and forcefully. Tsel lurched back at the Thief’s sudden anger. The Thief fell back into his chair, covering his eyes with shame. Tsel slowly leaned back into her chair, and put a hand on the Thief’s back.

“My…My parents left me when I was young, along with my siblings.” The Thief said between gasps of breath. “They came along a large amount of money, and were able to split it into three, keeping some themselves as well. With that money, they all became high royalty. None of them took me with them though; they knew that if they split their money with me they wouldn’t have enough to keep their royal status.”

Tsel was silent, listening carefully.

“I was left here, and eventually ran out of the old family funds. I grew up in the streets, begging. One day I simply got fed up with the horrible people here on this world, and withdrew from society. I stole things to keep alive, and people scorned me for wanting to live.”

There was a silence between the two, save for the sound of people walking and wagons rolling outside the house. The Thief stared blankly at the table, seemingly lost in his own memories.

“It was torturous.” The Thief said.

“You’ve been through a lot, then.” Tsel said quietly.

The Thief stayed silent. He couldn’t look into Tsel’s piercing black eyes.

“I could simply create a fake alias for you.” Tsel offered.

“I would rather do that.” The Thief said, his breath no longer catching.

Tsel stayed for a moment, then stood up and walked over to the sheet of paper. She picked up her pen and dipped it in ink.

“Any suggestions?” she asked.

“Names are rather meaningless to me, so you could choose.” The Thief said, getting up as well and pouring himself a glass of water from the pitcher.

At that moment, Grentir came down from the stairs. He stopped at the bottom of the flight, looked around the room for a second, and then said he was going out to find Crentis.

“Th’ youngster’s late again,” He said with a grin, and headed out.

“What about that farmer’s name? Rentyr Wynth?” Tsel asked, tapping the end of the pen against her lower lip in thought.

“What about him?” the Thief asked, averting his gaze and sitting down across the table.

“I think we could use his name…although we would have to mix it up a bit.”

“So use it as a template? I’d be okay with that I suppose…” the Thief trailed off.

A few minutes passed in silence except for the scratching of the pen on paper, the intermittent chirping of birds outside the house, and every once and a while a person walking by.

“Is this what you do all day?” Tsel asked, not moving her eyes from the paper.

“What?” the Thief asked, taking a drink of water to prolong his response.

“Sit around and ponder?” she asked with a smirk.

The Thief sat straighter in his chair and looked at Tsel.

“As a matter of fact; no, I do not.” The Thief said indignantly.

“What do you busy yourself with then, when you are not scrounging the city for food or drink?”

“I read…Or write.” The Thief said. “I was taught by my eldest brother how to write; and read the daily paper now.”

Tsel looked up from the paper.

“What about the man you killed?”

The Thief looked blankly at Tsel for a few moments, until his memory of the event reappeared. He lowered his eyes.

“He was a danger to me.” He said simply.

“And that is a warrant to kill?”

The Thief gritted his teeth.

“What else was I to do? If I let him publish pictures of me and write an article based on public opinion of me, it could draw more attention to me!”

Tsel was silent, aware she had hit another pressure point.

“Then I would be found out…Guards would find me, and I think you know what would happen if they did…”

“Especially after the jewel.” Tsel added in. “They’re still scouring the city for any trace of you.”

The Thief didn’t ask how she knew, as it was becoming average that she seemed to have such strange knowledge of events.

“I saw the man’s family with Grentir today, from inside an alley on the way to the site where we trained.” The Thief said. “They were mourning the body of that man.”

“Was the man’s young daughter present there?” Tsel inquired.

The Thief didn’t speak, but the look on his face showed what he knew. The Thief grabbed a newspaper left on the table and rapidly flipped through it, to obituaries. He pressed his index finger against the paper and slid it down to the grainy picture of a beautiful young girl of only about fourteen years of age. He didn’t bother looking at the name, but instead looked at the date of death and the way she had died.

The Thief let out a short cry, then pounded his fist on the table with enough strength to make one of the legs crack, but not break.

Tsel was unfazed by the outburst.

“Suicide,” She said. “Jumped out her third floor window. They say it was grief, not the fall, which brought her to death.”

The Thief stared at the tears falling onto the picture of the young, innocent child.

“That…bastard!!” The Thief screamed with anger. “Attacking my mind even after I killed him…!”

“Did you not know that it’s always a possibility when one murders another?” Tsel asked quietly.

“Damn him! Damn him and his family! Let them burn in Onuth’s wrath! Let them feel Nueka’s fire!” He yelled, banging his fist on the table over and over again, screaming of gods he had never heard the names of. Tsel put down her pen at the mention of Onuth and Nueka.

“How do you know those names?” She asked, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the Thief was in such a rage of grief.

“I…I don’t know…” the Thief answered after a moment.

“Was it the stone?”

The Thief stayed silent. He grasped the newspaper, crumpled it up with both hands, and then tore it to bits and threw the clod of debris to the side.

“I only meant to kill him…Only him…He was a danger…” the Thief sobbed. “Why must humans be so weak?!”

Strangely, Tsel smiled at that remark.

“This is what you have to learn to understand, Thief.” Tsel said. “If you ever hope to gain more power, you must learn to kill and understand the consequences, but make sure you are not affected by them.”

“Is this what you do to me…?” The Thief asked after a long pause.

“This is only temporary. I need to get these silly little things you hold onto out of your head so you can focus on the operation at hand.” Tsel said. “I don’t mean to cause you harm, I only mean to bring forth a better you.”

The Thief looked at Tsel, his eyes ringed red from tears. He grabbed a cloth that was set neatly across the table and wiped his eyes, then stood up and walked over to Tsel. The Thief stared at the paper with the blank image on it.

“How about Renyth Wraen?”

Tsel wrote down the name in the blank below the picture, and then pointed to the blank picture. She squinted at the Thief’s face.

“I need you to shave that scruff around your chin.” She said.

The Thief felt around his chin; realizing that his hair had grown a lot since he last noticed. He nearly had a full beard now.

“Okay, I’ll shave it later. Anything else you think would improve my image?” The Thief said half-scornfully.

“You’ll need a haircut as well.” Tsel said looking back down at the paper.

The Thief sighed.

“Fine, fine, but is there anything I can do now?”

“No, not at the moment.” Tsel said. “Also, remember that I’m the one helping you. Not the other way around.”

The Thief narrowed his eyes.

“Remember that you’re the one who proposed all this.” He said, and walked upstairs.

Tsel smiled to herself, and then stood up and walked out the door.

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A few days passed, and the farmer Rentyr went on with his life. Crentis had been keeping watch on the farmer, whilst Tsel had begun to filter small amounts of Rentyr’s money into an anonymous bank account in the city. Crentis reported that Rentyr’s behavior hadn’t changed much at all with the small loss of money. He kept on with his daily routine of farm work, with an occasional outing to a political speaking where he would give speeches. Crentis followed him here as well, and reported that his speeches consisted of rallying his loyal followers to be wary of liars and thieves and scoundrels. He spoke about how the gap of high class and low class was not as big as the city’s people perceived. Being a man of the middle class himself, a farmer and a politician, he saw the gap as good, and believed that low class peasants deserved their placement because it was they themselves that got them there, and it was because of pure skill and aptitude that the high class lived as they did.

Rentyr worked hard on his farm, with help from a few peasants he had pulled off the road one day and trained in how to run a farm. He had a large following, mostly with the upper class. Because of this, he frequently visited expensive parties in the richest areas of the city, and even met with the King once.

Rentyr had a loving wife, and two children. Both children were infants, a boy and a girl. Rentyr’s wife took care of the kids and the house while Rentyr worked on the farm and performed speeches. He owned a very large plot of land that stretched to the horizon from his house near the river that ran through the city. Nearly all of his money was stored in the bank of Cathuga, but he did have a considerable amount locked in a safe in his home.