

Norbert's Notes
The Sting (134)

In which I read a flower, meet with a mirror, and we learn of an ancient curse that threatens this city

At the dinner, things move slowly. I give Reed and Felina lots of time - lots of time for polite exchanges while we are either avoiding or carefully trying the exquisitely flavoured spicy food. But after more than an hour of this, I decide that we have spoken in riddles for long enough. There is little sense in continuing to play this game of subterfuge and diplomacy. Our hosts, native to their playing field, are infinitely better prepared for it. Maybe my companions have made something out, maybe they haven't. I'm sure we all have our suspicions - I myself distrust the Wu Yen the most - but we have no proof, and we cannot get it, even if Nethander seems to be trying to provoke some sort of reaction by displaying unwanted behaviour at the dinner table. Moreover, I fear that if we make no progress tonight, things will spiral out of control and this city will eat itself. And so, having remained silent up until now, I speak to the magistrate directly.

"We offer our services to you, and will try to find out who or what has been causing the disturbances that have taken place over the past days", I propose.

Some of my companions nearly fall of their chair, and I see Grimwald perk up with a look of surprise, followed by a beaming smile. More importantly, the magistrate does not reject my offer, and soon, a cup of rice wine is surreptitiously served to me, presumably, as a sort of recognition. I drink it in one go. My cover, if it was still worth anything, is blown now, of course, at least for the present company. If the enemy is within this room (as they well might be) they will not soon mistake me for a child again. Regardless, I am happy we have stopped dancing around, and are finally being clear. This may not be Tyr, exactly, but if the magistrate is true, it will be a comfort to work for a ruler who provides order for his people, and our investigation will serve both him and the Emperor. And if he is not, we will be in a better position to find out, as he will attempt to target or deceive us directly, giving us a chance to expose him.

I must confess, there is another motive for my directness, this evening. I do well remember the claim laid upon my soul by the pit fiend under whose contract we are now labouring. I have fulfilled my end of the bargain, by travelling with the party on their quest through the Afterlife, and I have bought my freedom. But even if it's now no longer *my* soul at stake, but Reed's, for our own sake, I would be much happier if we manage to fulfill our end of the bargain, again, and return that creature to the Nine Hells, where it belongs. This *would* create a power vacuum, of course, which is why I have informed the Spymaster of Tyr of the remote possibility that this might actually happen.

My companions, no matter the fact that Reed's soul was explicitly put at stake, seem to forget all of this, looking instead to get involved in sword fights, martial arts tournaments,

local scheming, and exotic weapon shops. Such is the nature of adventurers: easily distracted, and unsure of their priorities. But I remember: we have to resolve this puzzle of 'five hills' - and if we are to accomplish *that*, we had better get access to some archives, some maps, and some of the local sages. If we are perceived to be working for the Magistrate, whatever his intentions, this is bound to be easier.

That night, I am roused to examine a black orchid on Reed's bed. This seems like a bad sign. While we determine the flower to be non-magical, and I do not sense any traps around it, I motion my companions to silence, and approach it with care.

I set my mind in motion, considering the flower in all its detail... its blackness, its floweriness, the delicacy of its petals, the out-of-placeness of it being here, on this pillow, in this tavern, rather than where it was before, with whom it was before... feeling it without touching it, sensing it without seeing it, knowing it, without smelling it, I feel my mind connect to the psychic impressions of those who have owned it before it came to lie here. Man, woman, their count of Summers and Winters, the shape and colours of their hearts, and how they gained and lost the flower, I see it all pass before me, and Know:

The orchid was brought here by a young woman, evil in her selfish ways, and stolen by her from another evil person, a fifty-two year old man, who had gotten it from a hundred-and-fifty-year old, deeply evil human who had planted the brush from which the flower had sprung.

This now I knew, and I would likely recognise them if I saw them. But for all practical purposes, I still knew very little. It was only as I discussed what I had seen with the group, that they were reminded of someone called *Mirror Moon*. She is Reed's twin sister, of sorts. For some time, through the chatter, I am unclear on whether she is truly her sister, or was literally born of a mirror, or both. She holds a grudge, apparently. Natural families can be twisted enough. But I am fascinated by what may be at work here: something supernatural, not in the sense of any regular magic, but in the sense of *cosmic balancing*. Can there be something like Reed without an anti-Reed? Or will that void be filled?

There is more than usual sibling rivalry, or estranged animosity between the two of them, at least. Some of the group members fear Mirror Moon may be plotting against us, or at least, against Reed, and she concedes it is a possibility. That night, Reed sleeps in the stables, and I take part in some of the measures of protection. Not for nothing, as one of us notes and disrupts a scrying attempt.

The following day, we are all on alert, at least, as we split up to cover both tournaments, to look for signs of further sabotage. I find myself at the unarmed tournament, overseen by the General. Scanning the crowds, when from the corners of my eye, with her psychic impression still fresh in my mind, I see someone whom I believe to be Mirror Moon,

disguised as a servant girl. She disappears as soon as I notice her. As a good investigator ought, though, I am quick to follow my only lead - though not without notifying the rest of my intentions. I find out later some of them follow me at a distance, but as I sneak through one of the servant's entrances, and venture deeper into the castle, I find myself prepared for anything.

A theory: my companions inform me that the Magistrate read as slightly good, the Wu Yen as neutral. They might be covering, but could the fifty-two year old evil man from whom Mirror Moon took the orchid because 'he was not perfect enough' perhaps be the general? Is she working for him while plotting for herself? I have to little to go on. The ruthlessness of Moon's sister, however, is proven to me soon enough.

Peeking through a missing flagstone, I suddenly see her standing in the room beyond, throwing off her servant's guise. A man is there too. She informs him he has... disappointed her. Then, as she touches his face, flames burst out of her, and she consumes him with fire. A heap of ashes is all that remains.

Her eyes then focus on me. Mirror Moon. My duty to the group may compel me to find out if she is a threat to us, or to Reed, but as she beckons me in, I realise that is not the only reason I am here. *Her balance and her opposite. I see now, Reed's orientation is always - always - towards others, whereas Mirror Moon is always - always - focused on her self.* I have little sympathy for her, but she is *fascinating*. A brilliant piece of the puzzle, perfectly mirroring her opposite, neither of them truly fitting the world. She, by nature, must be as much part of my investigation as Moon is.

I enter the room, and she acts as if she was expecting me all along. Maybe she did, but she also seems amused by my presence. We talk. Though she tries to hide it, she is very interested in my relation to Reed. I tell her I... follow... her sister, making it sound as neutral as possible, without explaining how or why. She looks at me closer, perhaps deciding what to make of me. 'Funny man', she calls me. I ask her whether she put the orchid on Reed's pillow (she freely admits it), and why she is here (she dithers and dallies). Finally, she gives me a warning, and a number of days. Then, she turns around and disappears. I do not pursue.