

SHADOW OF THE TOWER

Part 1 – YARNIK

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A New Assignment

Enthralled by the blades flashing between three jugglers, the market patrons paid little attention to the cloaked figure weaving through the crowd. The marvellous abilities of the performers from Tesak had spread throughout the city and the plaza was packed.

Try as she might, there was very little chance Leonie could remain indoors for long. She'd have to make doubly-sure to avoid any clerics, regardless of which temple they belonged to. Leonie's high spirits to be outside reflected in the ease with which pouches came into her possession.

To continue the impression of her death, Leonie obscured her feline features by wearing a hooded, dark-green cloak. It was long enough to hide her tail while the hood covered her ears. Oversized clothing concealed her arms and legs while allowing deft fingers when required.

A pair of glins'ool, their long avian necks craning here and there, proved little challenge. Leonie nimbly passed, plucking a small pouch from beneath a wing along the way. Her keen nose picked up a musky scent from another individual, reminding her of Feiron. The eyes of illios were cosmetic; it could be studying her for all she knew. She casually moved on. Pickpocketing a shapechanger made for a short vocation, and sometimes a shorter life. She wondered how Feiron's enrolment into the Guild of Investigators was going.

Emerging from the crowd, she flicked a small part of her recent wealth into the performers' basket. The gold coin glittered as it spun in the torchlight before it clinked with others.

"Thank you," the nearest juggler said in his light Tesakian accent. "Glad you enjoyed the show." He neatly snatched a whirling blade from the air, tossing it back to one of his companions. His voice reminded her of Philbert. *Can't wait to see them again next week.* She was keen to immerse herself in the sensation of flying with the wyverns again.

Continuing on her way, two street urchins chased each other around the market place, their mayhem knocking over a barrel here, or stepping on someone's toes there. When they got closer, the boy ducked behind Leonie, using her bulk to stop the other from tagging him.

"Evening Helen, Sam." She smiled. "One day these stallholders will put a stop to your antics. It's bad for their business."

"Well," Sam replied, leaping around her as Helen lunged at him. "They have ta catch us first!"

"Good evenin', Leonie," Helen panted, watching Sam intently. She pretended to make another lunge to the right. Sam leapt away, getting tagged when Helen swiftly sidestepped to the left. "Got you! Hah!" She burst with childish glee.

"Now Sam," Leonie admonished gently. "Learn to watch the foot placement."

"How can I watch where 'er feet are if I'm s'posed to be watchin' 'er eyes?" he whined.

"You'll learn with experience. Take it all in. Use your peripheral vision."

"But I don't 'av perifal vision!" he wailed. "I want slit-eyes, like yours."

"Unfortunately, that's beyond me to give. I can only advise you on how to use your round-eyes better." She tousled his black hair.

"More like he'll get dizzy and trip over his own feet!" Helen called as Sam chased her again. She dodged through the crowd and doubled-back. "By the way," she added, "Jade wants ta see ya."

Leonie nodded at the message, noticing the guards beyond the young girl's view. "There's a new stall on the west side," she continued, "with wonderful scarves all the way from Lyhosa. Best you go that way." She pointed, indicating the approaching guards, angry merchants in their wake. She tossed both youngsters a silver piece. "Now, be off with you both."

The two youngsters sprinted off giggling, dodging through the crowded market place. A couple of stray dogs, sensing a chance to play, yapped excitedly in their wake.

Keen to find out what Jade wanted, Leonie angled away from the guards, stooping slightly to blend more with the crowd. *It better not be a surprise farewell party.*

Her path took her close to the Opsyss temple. Bamboo scaffolding surrounded it. Three nights ago, five Woorin fanatics tried to save a half-rrell sacrifice. Sadly, she wasn't able to save Pasha, her long-lost childhood friend.

The attack resulted in the death of many clerics from both sides and caused massive damage to the temple. Her use of the Jart'lekk blade had diverted any suspicion of the death of Alen, one of the temple's priests. Now the Deathers were hunting assassins; the Flamers thought her dead, putting her in the clear.

Always on the alert for unwanted scrutiny, she took a circuitous route towards Jade's office, the warm evening air another reason for a crowded market. Stallholders called out, and the tumult of hundreds of people wandering the plaza soon faded. She found the sounds of the evening along the waterfront much more relaxing, the creaking of mooring lines as the ships gently rocked with the swell, and the gulls cawing from their perches high up in the rigging. All this quickly faded to silence with the twists and turns of the narrow back streets of the Web, her padded paws soundless on the boardwalk.

Leonie was so engrossed in her thoughts, she almost walked past Jade's office. She ducked down the lane and concentrated. It would be bad enough to be late, let alone having to admit to getting lost. She gave a coded knock on the wooden panel and stepped into the dim interior where Ro, Jade's bodyguard, kept watch. Waving a greeting, she bounded up the stairs, knocking and opening Jade's door at the same time. *No party. Good.*

The new additions to the décor made her wince. The table and chairs were inlaid with silver in a style fashionable about one hundred and fifty years ago. Too ornate for her tastes.

"These are nice," Leonie said, choosing one to sit in.

"Liar." Her boss didn't look up.

Rich tapestries covered the walls, illustrating a variety of scenes from different countries. One showed Plenari, the capital city of Tesak, located in a forest of giant trees. That was a place she'd like to see with her own eyes, and again she considered her pending departure.

Jade glanced up. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." Leonie tried to get comfortable in the chair and failed.

"Ready for your trip?" Jade asked.

"I've got my gear together, and a bit more travelling money from this evening's takings." She placed a pawful of gold coins in a bowl. "And here's the Taker percentage."

One of Jade's eyebrows raised. "Do I need to count it?"

"No point. I didn't." Leonie grinned.

"Seriously though, after the run-in with Dianah and Brendon ... their news can't have been good to hear."

Leonie paced the room. Her efforts to gain information about her heritage led to frustration. The answers received during her encounter with Dianah and Brendon created more questions. "Not much I can do about it. Being created as part of an experiment, and not having any real parents is a shock, but ... I have to move on."

"And you're happy with that?" Jade asked.

“Of course not. They deserved their deaths and I’m glad I was the one to do it. That will have to be enough.” Leonie realised she was clenching the carpet with her claws. “I’ve got to be practical. I am what they created – unique. I’ll have to learn to live with that.”

“And this trip?”

“Too many memories here and no telling what those temples are going to do next. Best for all if I move on. As I recall you saying a short while ago, ‘There’s a whole world out there.’ May as well go see it while I can.” She changed the subject. “You wanted to see me?”

Jade hesitated. “I’ve recently accepted a difficult task. I don’t want to give it to you, but it’s short notice and under the circumstances, you’re the best available.” Jade stood up with a grimace and hobbled around the table with a walking stick.

“What happened?” Leonie asked, surprised.

“I tripped on the stairs. I’d rather not talk about it.” She waved her hand in dismissal. “But clearly, I’m unable to do it. I was hoping you might consider it before you leave.”

Leonie suppressed a smile at Jade’s reddening cheeks. “I don’t know. My boss says I should keep my head down. You know, stay out of trouble—”

“Pfft. When did you ever listen?”

“True. Okay then, I’ll do this last job, since you’re getting too old.”

“Be nice.” Jade stopped by an open window overlooking the eastern sector of the Web to peer out. “There’s a ship in harbour, the *Tearful Revenge*.” She pointed as Leonie came closer. “See it? Blue and white flags. From Ghalena. It’s by itself out along the mooring points of Central Canal, though there are still vacant berths along the docks. I’m thinking someone doesn’t want any visitors. It also means there’ll be a degree of water travel involved.” She turned to look at her feline friend. “You’re aware of the risks this involves?” Jade continued at her nod. “I’m told there’s a particular item on board, a black crystal formed into a sphere the size of a small ball.” She made an ‘O’ with her finger and thumb.

“It’s called the Nightsky Orb,” Jade continued, “and inlaid with a lot of small but high-quality gems, each one flawless in every regard. The client requires this as soon as possible and is prepared to pay very handsomely if this could be done by tomorrow. Needless to say, anything else you might happen to come across is a bonus. No need to worry about any Taker percentage for this job.”

“Hss, it doesn’t leave me much time to come up with a decent plan. Why the rush?”

“He has to leave town tomorrow night, and the ship’s leaving in a day or so.”

Leonie shrugged. “It’ll have to be something simple.” Hearing a noise beyond the human audio range, Leonie turned to face the door. “Do you know anything about the ship? How many guards and crew?” She waited to see who entered.

“The client informs me—” Jade stopped when the door opened.

Netoha walked in carrying a tray of refreshments consisting of wedges of cheese, slices of meat and a pitcher of ale. Leonie went to the table, moving the scrolls to the side as Ro’s wife set the tray down. She thought the plainswoman was looking rosier than usual.

“I reckon there’s something someone didn’t tell me? When are you due, Nettie?”

“First week in autumn.” Netoha beamed.

“Ah.” Jade joined them. “We’ve been so busy of late I forgot you didn’t know.”

Leonie embraced Nettie with a smile. “At least it’ll be a bit cooler for you. I know how you hate this southern heat.” She noticed Jade waiting. “You better take good care of her, big boy,” she called to Ro, standing by the door. Leonie reached out and clawed a small slice of meat.

‘Leaving them to their work, Netoha nodded to them both and took her husband by the arm.

“The client informs me they’ve been at sea for a few weeks.” Jade hobbled back to her chair. “The crew are keen to go ashore, so there will most likely be minimal men remaining onboard. The item we’re after is under lock and key in the captain’s cabin. I’ve got a rough sketch of the vessel’s layout here somewhere.” Shuffling through the scrolls, she handed Leonie a scrap of paper.

“And how accurate is this?” Leonie continued eating, studying the crude hand-drawn map.

“Our contact was a recent passenger.” Jade shrugged, mumbling around a mouthful of cheese. “The only other thing he can tell us is the ship-master, Jorak, dislikes anything magical. Some sailor superstition I suppose. Which is good for you, there should be no magical traps to deal with. Ironically, he *does* have a device that warns him of magic – so you can’t go there with your ring or harness.”

Leonie rolled the sketch and slipped it in her belt under her blouse. “Fair enough. I shouldn’t need them for this; the harness is only good for up and down anyway.” She grabbed another slice of meat. “If that’s all, I better check out the area and come up with an idea on how to pull this job off.” With a wave she headed for the door.

Jade called to her. “Get back in one piece and watch out for yourself.”

“You worry too much. This place won’t fall to pieces without me.”

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