

The Violet Stranger

By Gabriel A. Brouillard

Pouring out from across the far horizon, the encroaching light of dawn heralded the beginning of another busy morning in Collegium. With a cascade of painterly reds and oranges, colors seemed to stretch slowly towards the city's waterfront, giving the boats and bulwark a warmhearted appearance. The ocean waters lapped benignly against the docks, disturbing nothing and no one. The dawn air was also pleasantly cool and laden with a thin veil of gray ocean mist. It seemed to simply be a slow start to another calm day. Already crews and their captains were waking and moving about their moored crafts, getting an early start on whatever business it was they pursued. Collegium itself seemed content to slumber, the odd Fly-kindens flitting about, making early delivery runs for the Messenger's Guild. As the light slowly grew, the people of the city picked up their daily momentum, while down at the docks, the hired hands had long since been out and about. Most were Beetles and half-breeds, with the occasional Ant or other odd Kindens thrown into the mix. Working with the ships whose captains were already up and ready to pursue business, the dockhands began their daily task of loading and offloading the crates of supplies that kept the city's shipping business, as some might jokingly call it, afloat.

Lying amidst a pile of the aforementioned crates, a large, immobile mass snored loudly. If not for its throaty and obnoxious sound, the slumbering pile would very well have been left alone. Eventually the sound became too much to bear, and one of the workers gave the giant lump a good kick. Waking with a start the Beetle-kindens Dolan Hamilcar blinked, eyes adjusting to the late-morning light. Taking an instinctual swig from the flask glued to his large, sweaty palm, the man was greeted only by the taste of pungent fumes. Dolan coughed and sputtered, repulsed suddenly by the bitter aftertaste that lingered in his mouth. His face was wet with condensation, and the Beetle's thick frame protested against any sudden movement. "Hammer and tongs," he grumbled, tossing away the flask. It felt as if every fiber in his body was sorely aching, the cause escaping him as the noise of a ship's bell rang somewhere to his far left. After a few passing minutes the large man finally pushed himself off the cold, hard ground where he had apparently been left sleeping. He was large, even for Beetle-kindens, with a paunch barely contained by his leather garb and spilling out over the brim of his oil-stained breeches. The man had bulging limbs, and whether made of fat or muscle, the sheer mass of it seemed enough to deter any sane dip or malcontent. Dolan's face was comically small in comparison to his broad skull and fittingly thick neck. If not for his bushy, gray muttonchops and dirty workman's clothes, the beetle would likely have been taken for a rather noisy boulder. Sighing and scratching the wispy hair atop his head, the large Beetle strained to remember what odd manner of events had occurred to leave him feeling so horrendously battered, with a flask of pisswater in his hand. Searching with fingers numbed by cold, the man swore upon finding the pockets of his artificer's garb barren of their contents.

His tools, his money, everything was gone, and for the life of him, Dolan didn't know why. "Pissin' bolts," the Beetle mumbled, turning his bulk around to scour the ground with his eyes. Still he found nothing and the large man cast an anxious eye out to the dockhands milling around the waterfront. They were hard enough working people and most seemed to be of the honest sort, or at least Dolan thought so. Sure the Waterfront wasn't exactly the place to find the paragons of Collegium's strutting, upper-class society, and there were definitely crooks by the dozen, but there were crooks everywhere in the city. "And it's not like I don't cause my fair share of trouble," the Beetle sighed wearily. It was hard for Dolan to get his bearings amongst all the confusion and forgetfulness, but somehow his feet managed to drag his body out toward the docks. A medium-sized Spider-kindens sailing ship was being tied in by a couple of half-breeds to the Beetle's right, and so with nothing better to do, the big man ambled his way over to them for a better look. Dolan wasn't one of those seafaring artificers; boats and sea business had never been of much interest to him. He had studied in the great college, getting himself some practical artificer's knowledge, before being thrown out for his typically violent errs of college conduct. It wasn't

long after that he began to peddle his talents on being a handyman, employed now by another reject artificer.

“Oh piss!” Dolan exclaimed loudly. His memories of the night before, hazed over by the drink, or *drinks* rather, were all coming back to him. The Beetle had made a tiny flaw in one of his repair jobs, a single cog left a little too loose, which to Dolan seemed far too trivial an err to lose much sleep over. The slip however, had made his employer very unhappy. There had been a shouting match, a chair had been thrown ... and perhaps a desk. Dolan let out a long sigh. He had gone drinking with a couple of sympathetic friends after he was let go, which he now realized had led to this. Being the large, unhappy, creature that he was, one of the bartenders had made a not-so-subtle comment regarding the Beetle’s weight. This had caused Dolan to punch the offending man squarely in the face, inciting a giant brawl which ultimately had the human boulder beaten senseless and thrown out of the bar. Dolan rubbed the bridge of what he hoped to be his undamaged nose with the sausage-like fingers attached to his aching hands. It seemed likely that he had been robbed to pay for the damages caused.

One of the half-breeds shouted something to Dolan, catching his attention. “Aye Beetle, you busy?” The large man shook his head and shuffled his way over towards the half-blood. As Dolan approached, he could see that the dockhand was a motley one, a mix of Ant and Moth and several foreign ancestors the Beetle could not place. At first glance, the half-breed’s skin looked deeply tanned, the center of his eyes holding only tiny, green dots, and his body was grotesquely thin and lanky. The Beetle felt uncharacteristically cautious, unsure as to whether last night’s incident had raised his local infamy to the point where someone would wish to have something *done* about him. “We could use a bit of your muscle,” the half-breed prattled, not at all noticing Dolan’s discomfort. “There’ll be a bit of coin for your help. You are helping, right?” Dolan looked up at the man, gave his rather unnerving appearance a once over and nodded. “What needs moving?” the newly recruited Beetle asked, his eyes sliding toward what he knew assuredly to be the prow of the ship. The half-breed redirected Dolan’s gaze with the tip of his long, leathery finger, pointing towards some crates stacked high in the middle. “Those.” The Beetle sized up the boxes and figured that he could take them all down easily, if only the ship and his own girth would allow it. Dolan nodded once more before walking away towards the thick wooden plank. He dearly hoped it would be able to hold his weight.

“The chief says he’ll pay double if we finish before noon. I’ll be heading out for drinks once we finish up here and you’re more than welcome to come with.” the half-breed called out just as Dolan cautiously began his ascent. The talk of drinks made the Beetle pause, the very word bringing a small frown to his lips. “No thanks,” the Beetle called down before continuing his perilous climb onto the ship. The wooden board thankfully didn’t break beneath the large man’s feet, though it did creak in a rather dangerous manner. Parting the crowd of menials as he got on board, Dolan procured the first of the large boxes and moved ponderously back towards the ship’s gangway. Somewhere, close to the periphery of his vision, the Beetle could see somebody moving swiftly in the same direction as he. It took two seconds too long for the cumbersome Beetle to realize that the wooden plank would likely be unable to handle the combined weight of two men, plus their individual cargoes. With both feet already on the board and no time to take a step back onto the boat, Dolan braced himself for the coming plunge. The unknown man barely made a sound as his feet lightly led him down the gangplank and only when one of the menial workers prodded Dolan in the back did the Beetle realize, embarrassedly, that it was safe to continue his trip.

Setting the large box down near the rest of the ship’s offloaded cargo, Dolan noticed a strange man asking directions from the half-breed who had recruited the Beetle himself. Pausing in his work, Dolan observed the swaying of the man’s flaxen hair, tied back into a short ponytail and noted his pointed, Mantis-like features. “Right up that way,” the Beetle overheard the half-breed direct the stranger with an exaggerated gesture toward the direction of the Great College. “And if you still can’t find it ask anybody you run into

on the way, they'll know." A word of thanks was exchanged and Dolan saw the half-breed wave away the strange Mantis. "Lynaeus," the human medley said as he approached the Beetle who gave the former a rather puzzled look in response. Quick enough though Dolan understood that the half-breed was speaking about the ship's passenger. Something odd struck the Beetle's brain a few seconds after, making him take a look back toward the *Drowned Waif*. Spiders and Mantids had never gotten along famously, at least here in the Lowlands. Something didn't add up and the half-breed picked up on Dolan's uncertainty. "We're not being paid to think now are we?" The Beetle rounded on the man, giving him a long, huffy glare. The half-breed seemed unfazed by the Dolan's wrathful presence and, after awhile, the Beetle sighed in defeat. The next twenty minutes were spent loading and offloading, the mystery of the Mantis aboard the Spider's ship troubling the boulder of a Beetle all throughout.

Further away, in the Great College, another Beetle-kindened paced back and forth in his study, quite ruffled and equally uncertain himself. Master Conagher, a man of middle years, broad shouldered, strong limbed, and with a remarkable head of well-kept, umber hair. He was a seldom thought of and seldom seen, doctor and professor of medicine, teaching his craft to the young of Collegium. Conagher's classes were well liked by the attending students. The reason perhaps was because the Beetle had a fondness in his heart for making use of natural medicines, using herbs and sometimes the products of animals. As a scholar of course, Conagher spent most of his time peddling small discoveries amongst his peers. Recently the Beetle had taken an interest in using fish oil, though due to the fact that fish products were usually snubbed in Collegium, his peddling had yet to go terribly far. There was hope though, seeing as his students remained quite interested despite such prejudice.

Today though, the poor master could have used some medicine of his own. As well liked as he was by the small fraction who knew him, it had been difficult for him to find a decent assistant, one who could help manage the workload the professor was more than happy to share. He had found one such person some numbers of years back, a respectable Ant-kindened woman, a practiced surgeon gone rouge from Tark, but she had been forced to leave her position due to some (un)fortunate circumstances. "Blessings to them both," the Beetle muttered under his breath, slowly burning a hole in the expensive, Spider silk rug which lay on his study floor. In his heart of hearts he couldn't fault her for taking leave with a child on the way and to her credit she had worked through the best and worst of her pregnancy. Things had been difficult for her he knew and he would gladly take her back when the child finally came.

Unfortunately, her absence was sorely missed and Master Conagher was barely managing to keep everything in order. The poor Beetle was a surprisingly disorganized person when left all to himself. Conagher needed some new help badly and so he had put out an ad and even decided to send word to a friend who used to be an Assembler, though the professor could very well have gone himself to press the issue. Master Conagher had little fondness for the bickering and politics though, and was only present when circumstances pressed him absolutely. Of course the Beetle was always sure to pass on his work to others, when he himself was much too busy to take care of it. Othman had always been reliable before and his former station made the prospect of this call for help the most probable of prospects he could manage.

One painfully long week later his prayers were answered as the Assembly met in the halls of the Amphiphos. The men and women of the Assembly talked quietly amongst themselves, all sat down on their tiered rows of seats. There were many quiet exchanges rippling through the air between them, until the gentle rapping of one man's hand against his other stilled the noise. Lineo Thadspar, the Speaker of the assembly, eyed the crowd, waiting until he had their complete and utter attention before he spoke. "Many pardons to you, fellow Assemblers," he began wearily, "but there is some quick business I have been asked to address, before we start with our own agendas." Another small murmuring began, but it died instantly as the old man cleared his throat. "At the request of former Assembler Othman Clearwater, I have been asked to make known an opening in the position of an assistant for one our instructors, a

Master Conagher, who beyond my logic could not be here to make the request himself.” The Assembly made no immediate response and so Lineo continued, “the position is open to those with any family or associates in need of work. Those who find interest in this are welcome to discuss their intents via the post or in person.” The aged Speaker saw some of the Assemblers give the opening a small amount of pensive consideration before he decided to commence with the rest of their meeting. “And now-” Lineo was cut short by the sounds of a heated argument happening right outside the Amphiophos and moments later a hostile looking man entered the building with a small number of Collegiate guards in tow. The strange man stopped before the podium and directed his scathing, violet eyes, up at the old Beetle. “Excuse me,” Lineo spoke calmly looking down at the livid youngling, “but may I help you?” One of the guards came then and took the boy by the arm, from which the lad then shook free. The hostile shouting resumed once more and several of the Assemblers stood up from their spots, as if intending to go help the guardsman against this ill-timed affront. “Enough,” Lineo barked with authority and the man, his golden hair swaying wildly with the ferocity of his movements, rounded on the old Beetle once more. “Enough,” Lineo said again, softer this time, but still with an air of strictness and authority.

Lineo faced down the young man’s glare while simultaneously picking out his unique features. The boy had an angular face, hostile expression, stance, and build that obviously denoted some form of Mantis heritage, though there were some obvious differences. Looking closely, Lineo saw that the lad’s ears weren’t as sharp as was normally seen upon other Mantis-kin. Also his clothes were noticeably un-Mantis-like: A loose robe of blue-dyed Spider silk that was trimmed with golden thread. Most Mantids of Lowlander stock dressed ready for battle, as they always were, decked out in arms and light armor. Lineo blinked, his eyes flicking away from the stunning violet of the boy’s own, seeing the biggest difference between Mantids and this foreign stock: the boy was lacking in the Mantids’ Art-made weapons. The old Beetle was slightly relieved by this, seeing as things could have gone so much worse had the boy been armed in any such fashion. Still, this lad was of no sure Mantis-kin. Lineo had ever known and that opened a whole new venue of questioning that he did not have the time for this day.

“You rule here, yes? This is your court?” The Mantis broke the quiet which had settled over the Assembly. *A poor, confused foreigner and one not shown a shred of Collegiate hospitality thus far.* That was the thought suddenly passing through the minds of those gathered; though old Lineo could only fathom the trouble the man had put himself through to earn the involvement of the guard. “I do not,” the Beetle said. “I am merely the voice of our people and this court-” somebody did their best to stifle a small cough “-this *court* serves only by the choosing of those they serve.” “I see,” the man said, turning to look at the Assemblers. His face seemed locked in a battle of trying to understand such a concept. “I want to work here,” the Mantis said at last and with a slight gesture of his hand, Lineo directed the guards to stand back a few paces. “Here, in Collegium?” “I wish to work at your College. Please.” Lineo arched a brow and turned his attention away from the young man and back to the Assembly. The Mantis hissed in spite as the guards came forth again to forcibly remove him from the Amphiophos.

The day passed without further incident and as night settled over Collegium, Master Conagher set about opening the letters that had been delivered to him in the quiet of his home. There were two notes written from an over-eager student asking about the upcoming assignment in the first, the second a continuation of the same letter filled to the brim with praise and enthusiasm. The Beetle smiled at the thought of his students’ involvement. The next trio of letters came addressed from a few respectable Beetles, and the Master opened them all eagerly. They were, as he had guessed, about the opening. The first of the recommendations was some Master-Magnate’s nephew with an average set of skills, outlined in excessive detail by the sender. The second was for an Assembler’s gambling partner who needed quick cash to pay off his pending debts. The third came from Othman, which gave the professor some small pause. Master Conagher was unsure as to whether his much thanked helper had a family. It took a moment to recall, but the Beetle remembered as best he could the man’s daughter, Elona. She was a student and quite sensible,

though she wasn't in attendance of any of Conagher's classes. Scratching the stubble on his chin, the Beetle opened it to find a letter which read:

To my dear friend and continued patron, the esteemed Master Conagher,

It has been a long day my friend, though I hope it has worn you less than I. Fortunately, I have not sent this letter to further exfoliate my woes upon you, as it would make for bad future business between us. In fact, I hope to be of greater service, by having hunted down another recruit who I feel might intrigue you. Surely you heard about the strange Mantis-kindens who accosted the Assembly right after your message was received? If not, then I would recommend meeting him in person. I have him out entertaining my daughter as I write this. He is strange one. That much I'll say. He tells me that he is not quite a Mantis-kindens, something painfully obvious to most I'm afraid. I almost expected him to be some new breed, perhaps a race having been hidden in our very midst for who knows how long, but I digress, the current withholding of his ancestry leads me to believe that he is simply nothing more than a half-breed. A most spectacular one, but still nothing as special as I had originally hoped. He comes from the Spiderlands; I almost missed him on his way back there. It seems as if our Speaker was not in the mood today. I blame my own persistence in making your request the top of today's list for such misfortune. As usual, good business will be all the compensation I require. The man's name is Lynaeus, if you've yet to hear. He told me much of his story over our dinner together and the cusp of it is that he's on leave from his factor down south, a woman by the name of Illyria. She is apparently quite ill with some fungal malady that I'm afraid spoiled much of our meal. It seems to be eating the woman from the inside out. Dreadful, I know. Whatever medicine the Spider-kindens doctors are using on her isn't working which is why she granted Lynaeus his leave, to seek knowledge from folks who may know more than those currently attending her. He is very interested in meeting you and in taking the position you have to offer. He's a clever man, so you'll not want for conversation I'm sure. Besides all that, I hope you are in good health.

Best Regards,

Othman

Master Conagher chuckled lightly and shook his head, remembering the outrageous story he had been hearing from among his students earlier that day. The tale of a clawless Mantis muscling his way into the Amphiphos had been a rather hot topic, though the professor had not been engrossed enough to remember much of the details. Taking the letters with him over to his chair, the Beetle sat down and considered his candidates. The nephew of the magnate seemed too plain to do anything more than simple grunt work and that was no good as the Master also desired a helper with a good personality. The debtor was also most certainly off the list. With a heavy sigh, he began to consider his third option. This Lynaeus person certainly sounded to be the most interesting out of the three and had Othman's approval to boot. The man being a half-blood was something that Conagher felt he could overlook and if worse came to

worse he could fire the man when his old assistant was able to work again. Truthfully, it seemed plausible that his might work out better as the Mantis half-caste would surely wish to return home at some point, to pay his respects at the very least to the woman who sent him here. With one last twinge of consideration, the Beetle-kindened ambled his way over to his small fireplace and consigned two of his three candidates to the embers within.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Master Conagher found himself thoroughly satisfied with his new assistant. As diligent as any of his students and as amiable as anybody the Beetle had ever known, Lynaeus was the envy of the professor's circle of friends. The Mantis's good looks helped also and the Beetle was happy to parade his assistant around whenever there was a social gathering to which the latter was invited. Through their days together Conagher learned more of his helper's story. Lynaeus was indeed a slave, his family serving as some Spider cliques' personal harem. Lynaeus happily described his master's deadly illness and often was engaged in research with the professor, when both were free of their duties, related to this malady. The Beetle did his best to avoid talking about Lynaeus' past, seeing as the lad was unnaturally touchy about his parentage. As time drew further on, the Beetle began to hear of his assistant's highly promiscuous nature. Master Conagher waved such accusations away, knowing that Lynaeus was a handsome and well-liked man. Whatever his liaisons, as long as it didn't affect his work or become too much of a scandal, then what right had the Beetle to complain?

It was later that night that the Mantis drew into his nest a Beetle-kindened girl by the name of Elona Clearwater. The girl was the only daughter of former assembler Othman Clearwater, whose assistance had won the young man his desired position. It was apparent to most that Elona had a fondness for the strange half-breed, something that went beyond the typical schoolgirl fantasy. They were seen sometimes together, mostly with Othman following close behind. The Mantis had since begun renting a room at an inn by the docks, something his pay could afford while still allowing him the use of any additional necessities that he was like to require. Lynaeus had approached the girl after her classes were out, and offered her a meager night of respite solely at his expense. Elona had been slightly distracted by the dour nature of some of her closest friends. They seemed skittish, inattentive, and just plain boring. Whatever had happened to them it had robbed them of their usual fire. This night out was sorely needed and the girl couldn't help but swoon as the half-blood turned his alluring gaze upon her.

After a good meal and some light conversation, Lynaeus offered Elona some time to spend with him back at his room. The man's very presence insinuated his desire for intimacy and Elona, with all her girlish dreams, could not refuse him. She was a portly young woman like most of her kind, though her body had filled out more than nicely, with tawny hair set in a small bun atop her head and a face as comely as a Beetle's might be. She followed the soft tread of the Mantis up to his loft where he casually locked the door behind them with a simple, wooden latch. Soon she stood before the Mantis in only a white nightgown, her face blushing heavily as the man undressed and stood nude before an open window, facing seawards. The cold seemed to affect Lynaeus very little, though the sight of his body sent shivers down her spine. He turned to her then, his violet gaze focused intently on her face. Something snagged her then, a touch of Art. Without her knowing Elona's heartbeat quickened as Lynaeus crossed the room towards her, the force of his strange Art increasing upon her almost physically. The girl's face flushed deeply and her body burned for the man before her. She found her hands slowly undoing the straps of her gown while her mind's voice screamed against the tide of love and adoration that had somehow consumed her. Lynaeus' hands gently gripped the girl by the shoulders and pulled her into a loving kiss. Elona's mind was lost then and for the rest of the night she let the waves of passion ride over her, the seductive Art of this strange Mantis drowning her beneath his body.

The next day the Beetle girl woke up wrapped around the very same man she vaguely recalled having coupled with. Despite the obvious enjoyment she knew she had felt her waking mind imposed upon her a sense of violation. No doubt she had wanted the man, but the use of his overpowering Art left an

uncomfortable pit in her stomach. She knew of no Mantis or Kinden who possessed such an ability. Something cold brushed against her bare chest and looking down she saw with widening eyes the boney Art blades of the Mantis *growing* up towards her throat. Elona tried to squirm away, but in a flurry of covers and quick movement, Lynaeus straddled the woman's body, pinning her down, the claws of his Art pressed close to her throat. Elona's mouth gaped and tears fell from her eyes. He was going to kill her, but for what? Had she not pleased him enough to warrant his keeping? Did he want to keep the secret of his Art hidden from the world? "I ... I ... please, Lynaeus, I w-won't ... I promise," Elona's sobbing seemed only to aggravate the Mantis and Art blades pressed close to her jugular. "The Silver Rose," he hissed at her, "you know it?"

Even in this fragile state, the question caught Elona off guard and her sobbing ceased with a gentle nodding of her head. "It's a story," she said quietly. It was indeed a story; one passed around between the younger students and sneered at by the older, more learned ones. "Many years after the revolution a Moth-kindens woman came back to her home in Pathis and went back to the Beetle who had been her slave and secret-lover," Elona recited. Lynaeus' face was blank and sullen, so she quickened the pace of her story hoping for a better reaction. "She found the Beetle though had claimed many women and would not recognize her nor let her near his home. In her grief the Moth cursed him for his unfaithfulness and so wherever he went the Beetle found always an ash gray flower near or on his person. It was a rose that reminded him of the Moth and he secretly mourned the end of their relationship. The Curse of the Silver Rose followed him for many months, the internal anguish driving him towards madness. In the end he could bear it no longer and fled to the top of a sea cliff, a trail of roses bursting from each step he left behind. The man leapt from the summit and drowned in the waves. The curse lifted, finally, and all the roses crumbled into earth and ash."

Elona lay very still, she could feel the man's blades quiver slightly against her before he retracted them with an angry snarl. The Beetle quickly collected herself, pulling on some breeches and a shirt before searching out her college robes. Lynaeus also dressed swiftly and was nearly done before she made for the door. He grabbed her hand quickly and pulled the squirming girl close to his bare chest. Elona's eyes sought the blades on his arms but found only a group of bony knobs protruding from where they once had been on Lynaeus' skin. "You are to tell no one of this," he growled in the Beetle's ear. "If you do, I promise I'll know and I promise that you'll be dead come the next sunrise. Do I make myself clear?" Fighting down the knot in her throat Elona nodded quickly and fled the man's house, running home to collect her books. For the next few days she refused to speak, lacking courage to even spark up light conversation amongst her classmates. She knew now what affliction her friends, and many others she now noticed, were suffering from. The fear of death and further violation saturated the very air around these young women, like an unseen chemical visible only to those who had been subjected to its terror. Oh Fire and Forge did the girl need somebody to talk to, but who could she trust? And how did she know that Lynaeus did not also possess the Art to hear through walls?

The Beetle found such a person to relieve her some time later, after being dismissed from one of Stenwold Maker's history lessons. The man was a radical, or so some said, and was seldom present to teach his classes. Today had been one such day and more were likely to follow as he pursued some business out in Heleron and further towards the east. One of Elona's classmates, a beautiful Spider-kindens girl by the name of Altessia, beckoned her to stay back after the other students had picked up and left. Elona dawdled a bit, sorting some papers on her desk, before she was sure they were both alone. "You seem troubled Elona," the Spider spoke softly, tossing her flawless, black hair causally over her shoulder, "you and everyone else." There was no twitch, no sign given, that hinted at Altessia also facing the same trouble running rampant throughout the College, but Elona knew. She knew the girl was reaching out just like her, for the exact same reason the Beetle herself had wanted to. "You have no idea," Elona replied, already falling into the carefully spun webs Altessia had spun for the coming conversation. "Don't I?" Altessia laughed far too easily, but soon stopped with deathly seriousness. "Try me," she

challenged. "I know quite well the man who's put his mark on you. Would it surprise you if I told you that he's marked me as well?" Elona shook her head and Altessia placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. "How about this then? That boy is no Mantis half blood, but some race of Kinden from my old home. They're called Flower Mantids, a breed you Beetles didn't even know exists I'm sure. He was a fool to let me in on his game, but I was a fool to let myself be outplayed." The Spider smiled acidly and Elona bobbed her head lightly in consensus.

The girls talked until sundown, the older girl elaborating on the finer points of her and Lynaeus' coupling, eliciting small gasps of shock whenever she went in too deeply with her details. It seemed that the two had been at odds, Altessia and this Flower Mantis, playing subtle games of attraction, disguised from outsiders as nothing more honeyed words and mischievous glances. Both it seemed were no strangers to this sort of act, and the Spider thought her quarry won when he came leaping through her window clad only in his breeches, a silk sash draped across his bare shoulders. Ready as she was, Altessia was not prepared for the sheer force of his Art, the effects she readily acknowledged still having its hooks in her. Elona honestly didn't wish to know the details, but to bare all herself, the Beetle girl could not stint on valuable information, no matter how perverse the nature of it. By the time they said their goodbyes, both had agreed upon a plot that could very well see half of the student body sent straight to their deaths. The girls needed to expose Lynaeus and his terrible nature; they needed to report his threats and violative Art directly to his employer.

Both girls were sure that if they found an ideal time and resumed their broken acts soon after, Lynaeus would be none the wiser until matters were concluded. The man would hopefully be run ragged trying to find out who let his gnat slip the jar, though neither of them banished the idea that he may simply go on killing spree and strike down every girl he had lain with in the past number of weeks. It was also decided that they needed a third person to help back up their story. When the sun rose and classes began, Elona set her sights on jumpy Fly-kindens from Master Conagher's class, named Flinn and passed her thoughts onto her fellow conspirator. The day went on as per normal, but at the end of it Elona found Altessia cornering the Fly girl with idle conversation. "Flinn," Elona called out causing the smaller, pigtailed girl to nearly bolt away into the air. Altessia's soothing smile however, caught the Fly mid-flight, and the girl hovered for a moment before lightly touching down. "W-What's up Beetle? Y-You um, f-friends with Tessie here?" Elona nodded, taking pity on the dirty, shaky girl before her. It almost hurt and embarrassed Elona to think about it, but Lynaeus possessed either very broad or very poor taste in women. The girl was barely up to Elona's waist, tiny as a Fly could be, and assuredly just as fragile.

The girls talked for a while longer, Flinn babbling, Altessia working her linguistic charms, and Elona interjecting into the conversation only when it felt safe for her to do so. "And so h-he just took me there r-right in the classroom, y-y'know. On the d-desk w-where, oh b-bolts, I f-f-forgot the poor b-bastard who sits there. He's a B-Beetle. Nice f-fellow, never t-talked to him though." Flinn was shaking like a nervous wreck, the effort of disclosing this much and getting involved with her fellows' scheme weighing heavily against the very nature of her Kinden. Elona felt mildly disgusted by this new information. If only she could be absolutely sure that her own desk hadn't been used in such a vile manner, then perhaps she would find reason enough to want to attend her classes tomorrow. "And what of this Silver Rose nonsense," the Spider asked flippantly? "It's an old Collegium story, though your guess is as good as mine as to why he's asking for it." Flinn made some tiny noise and Elona looked down at her wondering what the matter was. "It's n-not just a story. W-When Ly-Lynaeus, when he ah f-finished with me and b-began his asking, I t-told I'd seen something with that n-name in the M-Master's ah study." The girls were all aghast and stunned for a few seconds. "How would you know something like that Flinn," Elona asked worriedly? "It was a d-dare," the smaller girl replied. "I w-went in t-to nick something, something s-small y'know, just as a bit of f-fun. I w-went l-looking through the b-books first and I s-swore I'd seen something about a Silver R-Rose."

It took a moment before the implications of this new development finally sank in, but now it seemed like Lynaeus could very well have what he needed and simply flee without being brought to justice. “We have to find Master Conagher now,” Elona gasped already taking off into a brisk run. Flinn had caught up using her Art-made wings and was now leading the way as Altessia caught up with the both of them. Flinn rounded a corner and at the very end of a dead-end corridor they saw the door to Conagher’s study slightly ajar. Flinn was the first to slip through, her screams echoing back down the hallway, even as Elona burst into the room. Altessia stepped in and joined the other two girls, not understanding the horror on their faces until she herself looked down. Master Conagher lay dead on his rug, blood pooling from around his head and chest, a Spider-kind rapier clutched in his lifeless hand.

Elona was horrified and Flinn was weeping, but only Altessia retained her calm. “He has it then,” she said blandly, “we’ve lost.” “Indeed,” a cruel voice spoke up from behind them, the sound of wood being pushed against the dry stone quickly alerting them to the door. It was no great feat to know who the voice belonged to and sheer terror gripped Elona as she faced down the sparkling, violet eyes of Lynaeus. He had a malicious smile, which cut her to the bone. The Flower Mantis was no longer dressed in his typical robes or in nothing at all, but now had on a piecemeal arming jacket, sewn up in various places and cut just above the shoulder. He wore pale breeches, the kind he clearly seemed to favor, that stopped just above his bare feet. In his right hand was the prize he had apparently been seeking: an old tome, bound within a dusty gray cover. It had no significant markings besides. The girls looked at each other in utter dismay. “I had my eye on you three,” Lynaeus spoke casually, the Art blades growing from his forearms slowly and threateningly. “I cannot allow you to live and jeopardize the health of my master.”

Elona felt tense, ready to barrel through Lynaeus and make a run for it. Flinn was looking out towards an open window, a similar idea in mind. It was only Altessia who seemed willing to fight for her life, the girl’s eyes constantly flicking back to the rapier on the ground despite the quaking of her hips. Lynaeus stalked menacingly into the room and the girls found each other’s eyes, these last few moments lending them an understanding, a feeling, almost as if they had been touched by some Art of the Ant-kind; a plan was concocted between their minds then and there. Flinn bolted through the open window, aiming to find help somewhere out in the city, while at the same time Elona bolted, using her weight and momentum to nearly knock Lynaeus over, tearing the book from his hand. Altessia had gathered herself the dead man’s rapier off the floor and sent the point flashing towards the murderer’s scowling face.

Elona ran hard, whipping through students in her mad dash to escape Lynaeus. In her mind she could almost hear the clashing of sword and bones. The girl’s weight was dragging her down and she stopped to rest in another, nearly empty hallway. There were some Fly-kind students hiding in the corner, puzzling over some trinkets which likely didn’t belong to them. They looked up and it took a moment before Elona’s pounding heart ceased to drown out the noise of quickly approaching feet. A guardsman was coming towards her and the Flies quickly left through a window left open in a nearby classroom. “Elona Clearwater,” the man said firmly. “Yes,” the Beetle squeaked breathlessly as the man removed his closed helmet. He had the stamp of being a Beetle-Ant half-breed, though that mattered little right now. “I’ve sent your Fly girl to find more of my fellows,” the half-blood said, removing a Helleron-made short sword from the scabbard at his hip, “You’ve left quite a trail missy; the bastard’ll probably be here once he’s finished with your Spider friend.” the large man stood in front of Elona, waiting for more guards she assumed or for Lynaeus to appear down the hall. A light wind ruffled Elona’s hair and the half-breed slid his helm back on. The sound of screams and pattering feet were heard well before they arrived and the instant he arrived, the thunder in the Mantis’s eyes seemed all-encompassing. Elona did her best not to look directly at them, fearing that loathsome Art of his.

Elona could see from around the true half-breed’s bulky form the bloodless rapier held in Lynaeus’ hand and the red, human ichor spattered messily against his clothes. “In the closet,” the larger man hissed, moving backwards. “What?” Elona asked confused as she was pressed backwards, the book held firmly

against her chest. "Closet," the half-breed snarled again before pushing the girl into a small, dank, room and closing the door on her. Elona didn't hear the key lock, but she suddenly felt safe knowing that there was no way the Inapt Mantis could get at her now. The sound of steel against steel clashed outside and Elona held herself tight, waiting for this nightmare to be over as quick as it might. A roar of pain sounded from beyond the wooden door and the poor girl shivered, afraid once more due to the stretching of the silence. A figure could be seen standing just outside the door and hope died within Elona, even before an angry cry sounded harshly in her ears. The victor of the deadly skirmish outside began to throw himself against the wooden door. The frame shuddered and Elona screamed. The closet handle rattled violently as the man attacked it with that must have been the rapier. "Please go away, please go away ..." The Beetle repeated the words to herself like a mantra until one end of the handle broke and the door was kicked open. "Why," Elona shrieked at the man, "Why are you doing this?!? Why do you need this book?!? Is it worth killing people over? Is it?!?" The Mantis stooped down and collected his prize from the trembling, runny-nosed girl. "Because," he said, "there is someone very dear to me who needs this book more than you insufferable, ignorant Beetles. I would kill your people in their thousands if I was able, just for her sake." "What?" Elona wanted to curse him, to tackle him down and smother him with her robes, but alas she could not. The sheer terror of the assuredly fatal consequences if she dared to try and the final pitying glance the Mantis had given her drained her of all hostility. Another group of guardsman flanked by a pair of college Masters arrived a short time later to find the mess just as it had been. Elona was still there, trembling in fear, but Lynaeus was gone, no trace yet to be found of the violet-eyed stranger who had inflicted such terror upon her.