

Subj: The Beginning of the Fantasy Serial

Author's Note:

Due to Hilary's brilliant inspiration combined with some writing on my part, we've come up with a wonderfully fun idea for our little drama group: a moving fantasy serial which has varying points of view. Each person in our group is represented by a character. Each person's character's actions in the storyline are e-mailed to them between once to twice a day... These will be different depending on where certain characters are and what groups they are in. In other words, not everyone will get the same aspect of the story...they will be customized by what groups your characters are in.

Here is the character list to date:

Dragonfire, Knight to Lord Jex: played by Jeremy
Talia Jenea, Virgin Huntress Forest Faerie: played by Hilary
Lodan, the Court Jester: played by Nathan
Donoval, Weaponbearer to Dragonfire: played by Chris
Galengran, the Elven Prince: played by Jon
Celestia, the betwixt Sorceress: played by Kate
Darshek, the hired rogue: played by Jeff

And making a cameo appearance:
Joe as Lord Jex

NO Complaints YET!!! Not all of these characters are what they first appear to be, so wait until you have read the first parts your characters appear in to decide whether you like your character. If, after that, you have a problem...or, more positively, a suggestion, just e-mail me with either one. I will try to reflect these suggestions and changes in future installments of the story.

Now, I have included the following which are the first two episodes of the serial which involve Talia Jenea and then Celestia. As these two are now on a team, they will receive their portions of the story exclusively, while other teams will exclusively receive other portions. That way, when the stories connect, it will be really awesome!

Sincerely,
Jeremy T. Hanke

Subj: New Character in the Fantasy Serial!

Note from the Author:

To teams A, B & C,

A new character has entered the story and is soon to unite with one of the three main groups. Her name is Telanna and she is a shapeshifter. She will be played by Bethany.

As always, thanks for your time and enjoyment of the serial!

Sincerely,
Jeremy Hanke

Subj: **An urgent message for Talia Jenea...**

A short, dark dwarf in tattered rags bursts through the door to the small tavern. His back afeather with arrow shafts, he lurches one more step before falling on his chest...blood sputters from his lips as he gasps, "T-talia-a..ughhhhh." His eyes flutter and his form goes limp, blood pooling crimson on the dirty floor around him.

The cloaked forest faerie rise from the table she has been sitting at and runs over to the stranger...too late, she realizes as she gets to him. She notices that there is a scroll of parchment still clutched in his now limp hand. Arching an eyebrow, she pries the parchment from his dead hands and looks at it. It bears the seal of Galengran, the Prince of the Elves... Piercing the seal with a delicate finger, she opens the scroll slowly, reading:

Talia,
Long ago, you swore to my father that, should the elves ever need you, you would aid us. A dark day has dawned and we have need of your services now...a shade from our darkest imaginings has been loosed by the foolishness of one of our numbers. Provided that untrustworthy dwarf we gave this message to brings it to you, please come to the palace at Galfor as soon as possible.

Sincerely,
Galengran

As Talia looks up from the scroll, a huge orc bursts through the door of the tavern, a massive bow clutched in his brutish fingers. Talia's fingers slide to her dagger, her long red hair obscuring her subtle movement. She wonders how she will get away...

-----To be continued...-----

Subj: **Episode 2**

"...to my voice alone,
Turn orc and goblin all to stone"

The voice of one of the most peculiarly fated sorceress' in all Candin

rings out melodically, piercing through the chaos of the tavern to the rampaging orc. The slow brute's mind takes it a second to realize what it has just heard and by the time it does, it's flesh is already turning grey... And then, in a wash of drabness, it's body and clothing is transformed completely...unmoving.

Talia shakes her head at the orc, wondering what has brought Celestia here at this time of day.

As though in answer to her question, Celestia bursts through the tavern door, a green dress hanging to her ankles and a braid of flowers around her neck, entangled in her blonde hair.

"Hi, everybody...isn't it a beau--" At this moment the betwixt sorceress notices the orc. Her knots up in confusion and then abashment, "I did it again, didn't I?" Looking to the faerie, she exclaims, "I didn't know there were any orcs about, Talia, honest... I was just practicing my spell."

Talia arches a brow and her lips perk into a smile, "It's alright dear. The orc bore no good will toward me anyway, and I'm just as glad I didn't have to get my cape all bloody thrashing him."

"OK...just so you know, though, I didn't do it on purpose..." She looks at her handiwork. "Think Montrel will notice?"

"He's hobbit...he notices every new thing that comes into his establishment." Talia chuckles. "But maybe I can sell him on the idea of having a theme tavern... Y'know, call it 'The Angry Orc' and turn the statue there into a fountain. In some of the big towns they have things like that."

"That would be neat." Celestia grins, then frowns. "Sometimes I don't think I'm ever going to get this sorcery thing down. Weird things always happen when I do it."

Talia gives the tall sorceress a hug. "Don't worry, you'll get it."

"Will I?" Celestia shakes her head uncertainly. "I don't know. My mother keeps telling me that I ought to let the matchmaker marry me off. She said she could probably marry me off to the Prince of the Elves." She makes a face. "But I don't want to be married off to any nasty prince... He's probably a horrible old ogre."

"He's not so bad." Talia chucklingly admits... "In fact, I'm supposed to go meet him. That was what that whole orc thing was all about. Care to keep me company?"

"And have an adventure?" Celestia explains, suddenly ecstatic. "That would be so fun!"

"We'll see how fun you think it is, child, but come with me then!" Talia smiles softly. "I think we should probaly leave before Montrel

gets back... We'll explain about our renovation ideas LATER."

"Good idea, Talia," Celestia giggles and the two walk out the door, past the statue and the corpse, into the woods.

-----To be continued...-----

Subj: **Episode 3, Group A: Through the Woods**

Author's Note: Episode 3, Group A: Through the Woods
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Katie)

"How long do ya' think it'll be before we get there, Talia??" Celestia asked curiously, brushing a pine's needly branch out of her way.

"As I said the last time, dear," a hint of exasperation playing through the buxom redhead's voice, "Probably about sunset tomorrow?"

"Do ya' s'pose my parents will miss me? I didn't tell them where I was going or anything...." Celestia added softly. This hike had already been alot longer than she had imagined and, while she loved the idea of adventure, the reality of trekking through this dark forest was basically alot of work. Now that she thought about it, she hoped her parents wouldn't get mad and ground her like they did the time she accidentally disintegrated Aunt Palor's house with that new spell she had discovered. She wriggled her nose.

"Don't worry...I'm sure they won't mind." Talia reassured her younger friend, ducking under a hanging pine bow which managed to whip up and clothesline Celestia. After the sorceress had disentangled herself and sputtered out a few pine needles, Talia continued, "Especially when you tell them you helped save the entire land with me from the dark beast the Elves have released."

"They won't believe me," Celestia shook her head, ducking under the bow and making it this time. "They always tell me it's just my 'magination."

"How often have you told them you helped save the land before?" Talia asks curiously.

"Oh, not more than a hundred or so," Celestia replies nonchalantly.

"HmMMMM," Talia rolls her eyes backwards, her lashes fluttering like a snapping window blind. "And to think, they don't believe you." Sarcasm bites deep in her voice. "Shocking."

"Very funny...But I've saved the land before!" Celestia exclaims, serious. "I've stopped countless monsters and floods and disasters."

"But how many of those things did you accidentally create with one of your spells first?" Talia asks shrewdly.

“About a hundred,” Celestia admits glumly. “Magic never quite works right for me.”

“I know, honey, but it’ll come,” Talia’s voice softens and she momentarily stops to put an arm around her friend.

Behind Talia, a snarling is suddenly heard from the forest. Whipping around, her tresses snapping with the movement, Talia finds herself glaring at slobbering Mrythl, it’s catlike paws poised to pounce...it’s fierce jutting teeth glistening...fire smoldering in it’s gangrenous eyes.

“Don’t worry, Talia, I’ll protect you!” Celestia proclaims gallantly, stepping between the faerie and the beast. Arching her head, the sorceress begins to sing:

“Back...um...in these woods of immortal gloom,
‘Cause...no...er...more destruction but our doom.
Be no more fearsome than our darkest fears,
Or, if you change not, go on to disappear!”

“Celestia, NO!!!” Talia shrieks, realizing the last lines are a tragically mistaken. But her cry comes too late...already, the beast is feeling the effects of the spell.

It grows larger until it is as large as a camel...it’s talons protrude and bony spikes rip forth from it’s fur. It’s tongue lashes out, now edged as sharp as a blade and fire belches from it’s lungs. Smoke from it’s nostrils flares and it’s eyes gleam fierce. Now, it truly is a creature from their darkest fears.

“Oh...this is too perfect.” Talia concludes coldly, ripping her dagger from her sheath.

Celestia's mind whirls, trying to think of a better to spell to somehow negate the past spell...but the knowledge she needs seems to flee from her probing mind like mercury before the fingertips.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 4, Group A: When Danger Looms

Author’s Note: Episode 3, Group A: Through the Woods
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Katie)

"Just a second!" Talia barks, holding her hand against a nearby tree.
"I need silence."

The engorged Mrythl shrieks, preparing to leap...

Talia tries to feel the pulse of the forest...swirling around her.

Unintelligent but still life...connected to the fae immeasurable. Talia concentrates on fusing into the pulse...just a moment. Time slows as she fuses into the pulse...feeling every aspect of the forest around her, the scent Celestia's pheromones which betray her fear, the touch of her own hand against the tree's bark, the clenching of one of the huge beasts claws into one of the trees' roots as the animal prepares to pounce.

Slowly she pushes into the pulse, changing the form of the forest around her... Pain like a combination of ecstasy and agony writhes through her, leaving her breathless. As she pushes into the forests essence, she can feel it brushing her lightly...almost physically... and electrifying nerves as she does. She makes vines ensnaring the trees rip out and lash around the cat, its sudden cries and it is entangled echoing through her mind and the forest. When she finally has the beast securely lashed together with the vines, she pushes free of the forestal pulse...fire lashing through her sinews as she finally breaks free.

"Talia, are you OK?" The voice of Celestia is the first thing she hears with her ears when she breaks free.

"Y-yesss..." Talia stammers, slumping into one of the nearby trees and sliding to the ground, exhausted. It feels like every single muscle in her body is spent and she lays there quivering, gasping for breath. It normally wasn't so exhausting to use the forest...why had it been so hard today? She thought softly as she slowly recovered.

Celestia checks to see if Talia is still alright, then grabs the dagger free from the sheath.

"Wh-what are y-you doing?" Talia mumbles, struggling to sit up against the tree bark.

"It's still alive, Talia." Celestia explains tersely, pointing over her shoulder at the beast who is now tied up in vines, but is struggling mightily. With that, she gets up, runs to where the beast is, avoiding it's claws and teeth, and plunge's the dagger through it's eye, all the way to the hilt. The blood pours from the wound and Celestia winces mightily as the hot blood hits her flesh, but she twists the blade once more to make sure the animal dies. With the last twist, the beast goes limp and Celestia draws free the dripping dagger.

Bending to the ground, Celestia wipes the blade and her arms on the grass, trying to get as much blood off as possible... Standing back up, Talia notices new grass stains on Celestia's dress from getting down on the grass...going well with the yellow embroidered flowers and blood stains already on the gown. For some reasons, the voluptuous faerie finds that quite funny and giggles sporatically to herself...knowing it's only due to her sudden exhaustion that she finds it funny.

"Good job, Celestia," Talia compliments approvingly when the girl brings back the dagger. Talia manages to slide the dagger back into her

sheath, though she is still feeling drained...and thirsty, now that she thinks about it.

"Thank you, Talia." Celestia smiles genuinely, a pleasure visible in her face at the compliment.

"Now, could you get me a drink? I'm parched." Talia asks, smiling softly and clasping Celestia's hand warmly.

"No problem."

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Subj: Episode 5, Group A: Back on the Trail

Author's Note: Episode 5, Group A: Back on the Trail
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Katie)

By the time they awoke the next morning, Talia's strength had returned completely and she was feeling up to her normal high spirits. Celestia, too, was feeling better and was anxious to start the new day, her hopes high once more.

Knowing how scarce food can be on an expedition, even one as comparatively short as the trek to Galfor, Talia has cut out a few steaks from the felled animal and stuffed them into a leather satchel she carries beneath her cloak. Now, with Celestia's help, the faerie finishes burying the nutrient-rich corpse of the beast near the roots of an old spruce, where it will fertilize the tree for some time to come.

"Ready to go, Talia?" Celestia asks, looking through the trees of the morning forest expectantly...as though Prince Charming might be making his way toward her through them.

"You are incorrigible, aren't you, my friend?" Talia Jenea wriggles her nose in amusement at her ever positive friend.

"Yep." Celestia grins, unabashed, her eyes sparkling. "That's my claim to fame... One day they'll call me, 'Celestia the Incorrigible!' Then you'll be able to say you knew me when!"

"Everyone already DOES call you, 'Celestia the Incorrigible.'" Talia laughs softly, refraining from mentioning the expletives that normally follow that statement out of kindness to her friend.

"They do?" Celestia grins from ear to ear. "Then I'm already on my way! Look out world, here I come!"

Had anyone else said something as hoky as that, Talia would've felt it necessary to throw in an acerbic comment. However, despite her often

hardened exterior, she knew who her friends were and she considered the kind-hearted sorceress amongst them. There were times and places for biting comments, but Celestia didn't deserve it and it would only make her feel worse.

And, in a way, Talia could empathize with Celestia...for both of them didn't feel as great about themselves as they could have. The blonde sorceress who longed to be able to do her magic properly...but who had it blow up in her face that she was ridiculed by the whole hamlet and even her family. And, Talia mused, even as a forest faerie, there were things she disliked about herself...things others had cruelly teased her for... With a grimace she shook her head, deciding not to think about it. Better for both her and Celestia if they just kept heading on the trail and Talia took no more time to reexamine her own mind and fears... Better to pretend...both to herself and to others...that she was invulnerable and unaffected than to show weakness.

"Ready to go?" Talia forces a smile to her lips again, readjusting the noticeably heavier purse beneath her cloak.

"Sure." Celestia nods in agreement.

With that, they begin to walk further into the woods, the sun still copper on the horizon and sending shafts of ruby light through the dusty forest air.

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Subj: Episode 6, Group A: The Glen

Author's Note: Episode 6, Group A: The Glen
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Katie)

The sun is high in the air and blazes through the leaves of the now diminishing forest as though they weren't even there. Talia's brow beads with perspiration and even Celestia was more subdued and tired, her body slumps forward now as the sun beats on her. The pine needles which carpet the path they stride upon are all brittle and brown and their water bottles are nearing empty.

They trudge on that way well into the afternoon, the forest thickening and then diminishing as they make their way through it. Near sundown, the two adventurers stumble into a huge glen which is mysteriously barren of pine needles, but grown lush with thick grass. And, as they enter, clouds cover the now coppering sun and the temperature drops instantly...cooling to a lovely temperature. So beautiful does this glen feel that Talia slips free of her slippers and Celestia jerks off her sandals and they both walk along through the thick grass.

Enchantment lingers sharply in the air here and Talia can feel something familiar. It reminds her of fae...but of fae unlike her own. Still...they are fae that she has come in to contact with

sometime...probably in her childhood.

"There is magic here." Celestia's comment isn't a question.

"Yes," Talia smiles, pleasantly surprised to see her younger friend feeling it. "Probably fae... But I'm not sure what kind."

"Shouldn't we leave before night fall?" Celestia asks uncertainly, looking to the horizon as the sun slowly goes down. "I've heard the fae get angry with intruders...and kill them or steal their lives for twenty years or more."

"Only unaccompanied mortals..." Talia smiles softly. "You forget that you wander even now with one of the fae. They shall not touch you so long as you are in my company." She gives her friend a half hug.

"However, while fae DO love to manipulate and trick mortals, we do not kill them. Though, I've known fae who have kept mortals under spell for many years...and I agree with you, that isn't right."

"So you don't agree with all the things that other fae do?" Celestia queries.

"Heavens, no, dear," Talia's lips crinkle in a smile and merriment glances in her deep green eyes. "Fae can be cruel at times...too much so. While there are those that can be played with and not have it hurt them at all, it is necessary to have restraint. Some fae think that they can do all that they have the power to do...but abusing the weak is no different if you manipulate their minds to abuse them than it is if you beat them to abuse them."

"Wise words, Talia Jenea!" A lithe little man with long silken robes and a long, white beard suddenly appears before her. His eyes are the color of violet sapphires and while they sparkle with humor, there is a coldness in them which chills Talia's blood. The type of coldness found in cruel little children that will nail a kitten to a barn door just to hear it scream in agony as vultures descend upon it...the type of cruelty that Talia hated in so many of the fae she knew.

"Geardoisa, I haven't seen you since I was a babe." Talia's voice is brittle as she says it, memories of him flooding back from the past.

"You are still little more than a babe, Talia," the fae condescends, shaking his head. "You are only now about to turn a score of years...you have yet even to live."

"And yet, I know more about living than you ever will, Geardoisa." Talia returns bitinglly.

"Bah...you have spent too much time with weak-willed mortals...such as the one you are with now." The old one dismisses her thought with a wave of his hand. Luckily, despite the fact that Talia can tell Celestia's annoyance, the sorceress keeps her mouth blessedly shut.

"Do you have nothing better to do than find two innocent to mock?" Talia asked sweetly, arching a brow.

"If life were so simple, I would be much happier." His eyes narrow cuttingly. "No...unfortunately, I find it my duty to bear you message that the Oracle wishes to see you." He scowls, and Talia revels inwardly in the arrogant old fae being forced to messenger duty for the Oracle. "If you will follow me, I will take you to the mound here."

"My mortal will be unharmed if she stays outside?" Talia asks shrewdly.

"Of course," the man nods narrowly.

"Upon the Sidhe, you swear?" She reiterates, knowing he could take no such oath unless he kept it.

"Ughhhhhhhhh..." He growls, his eyes narrowing snake slits before he finally nodded. "I swear it...upon the Sidhe."

"Thank you." Talia smiles confidently now. "Now, lead the way, old one."

He rankles under the comment, but leads them both toward a mound that is now visible in the center of the glen.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 7, Group A-1: The Oracle

Author's Note: Episode 7, Group A-1: The Oracle
(Group A-1: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary)

The pegasus' wings beat the air as they fly over the colorful underland of the fae, a trillion shades of amethyst, diamond, jade, ruby, and opal seemed to have made the houses and buildings below. Krénobrăcâ was the most beautiful city the fae could develop and it's beauty has earned it the allowance of being capital city of the underland. The city is just like it's inhabitants, in Talia's opinion: beautiful, magical and amazing, but cold and cruelly sharp, as well.

Geardoisa, on another white pegasus, escorts Talia as well, her pegasus obediently following the other as it wings toward a huge spire that even now can be made out on the horizon: the tower of the Oracle. Faster the wings beat as they draw nearer the wonderous diamondeth structure that reaches high into the ruby-colored "sky" here.

Talia's heart beats in her chest and she wonders what the Oracle wants from her as they approaches. She hasn't seen him since she was a young girl...and that was when she had been brought here by her father. Back when the fae had actually deemed that she was to be banished from living

with the fae in the underland. Even though the forest was the home of the forest fae, most would come to live in the underland, at least sometimes...say for only a few decades or so at a time, but it was a luxury most fae took advantage of. The thought of being banished would be an unaccountable horror to most fae... In her youth, she hadn't understood why the banishment had made her father so miserable...not understanding that he would've done anything not to have his daughter suffer the travesty of being disallowed to live in the most glorious of places: the underland. Nor had she understood the stigma that went with it...how many fae she would meet in the overland who wouldn't even get to know her because of it.

The Sidhe had decided that she was simply too un-fae to be allowed to live in the undercity. That she had developed affectations with humans that could be called friendly...that she tried not be cruel to mortals and in fact generously was kind, at times. Worst of all, she had said that other fae should not be calculating and unrelentingly cruel to mortals... For all these reasons, they had banished her. Her father had managed to get her taken to the Oracle, for him to see her future... However, the Oracle had simply said that one day she would be needed again...and ever after, she would be welcome in the underland. Today, apparently, was that day.

The pegasus finally flaps down into a huge, glimmering mounting bay for the flying horses, its hooves clapping as it lands. The pegasus next to it sets down in similar fashion and Talia and Geardoisa push out of their seats, sliding to the smooth floor below.

“This way,” Geardoisa points toward a huge opening at the edge of the crystalline bay which leads into a large, darkened hallway. Into the darkened hallway they proceed, down it to a staircase, then up that, a turn here, a hallway after, a turn there, up another staircase, around another bend... By the time Talia staggers into the exquisite heart of the tower...the glistening, octagonal chamber of the Oracle, she feels totally lost and confused.

This room--while ornamented with beautiful trinkets, busts of fae and other creatures, and statues of pegasi rising on their hind legs in each of the room's eight corners--is actually fairly small. A throne of pure obsidian dominates the center of the room...appearing as a seat cut from shadowed night itself. Upon this resides an ancient fae in a long purple, velvety robe. His white beard dangles all the way down his depleted chest, across his anorexic lap, and falls to the floor in a heap of curls like fleece. His eyes are a blue like the color of the ocean and are the only color in his sallow face, and, despite his frail appearance, they burn brightly through it, glimmeringly cold as other fae's.

“Greetings, Talia,” the ancient whispers hoarsely. “It has been many years...”

“Yes, it has, Wise One,” Talia returns formerly, unsure of what to say.

“I once told you that there would be a day in which only you might serve the fae people...and on that day you would be able to earn your birth right and be readmitted into the fae.” The Oracle states slowly, wheezing for breath...his chest barely moving beneath the velvety robe.

“Yes.” Talia replies again.

“Well, today we do need your services, for you are the only one who will be trusted now,” the old fae explains. “You see, we have remained so far distant from the overland races that they no longer trust us--”

“They no longer trust you because you torture them when you catch them unawares.” Talia cuts him off sharply.

“I do not approve of all that my kind do...just as you do not,” he concedes. “However, whatever the reason, we no longer have the connection with mortals which is necessary. You do...and you have their trust. It has become apparent that Nyrtzian has been released from captivity by the magics of the Elves... Since you are bound that way anyway, we wish you to capture it and bring it back here. Upon that time, you will be granted clemency and be allowed to live in the underland if you so wish.”

“Why on earth do you want that monster back?...I thought YOU imprisoned it.” Talia asks, her eyebrow cocked.

“Oh, not I,” the Oracle shakes his head. “It was emprisoned long ago. It’s imprisoners have long since been destroyed and we didn’t know how to release it. You see, we wished to do so because one of our wizards believes he can harness the power of the Nyrtzian and using that power for very beneficial effects.”

“I’ll bet,” Talia interjects acidly. “Since I have no desire whatsoever of ever returning to live in this hellish underland of yours...why on earth do you think I will ever consent to help you? You do not scare me.”

“Then, listen, child, and be afraid,” his eyes narrow cruelly. “Your companion--the one who waits for you in the glen--has been enchanted by our most powerful sorcerer. If you have not brought the Nyrtzian back by a year from this date, your companion will die most horribly.” He chuckles icily. “Do not even attempt to use your petty magics to unravel it...if you do, she will die horribly...painfully...choking on her own blood the second you you try.”

Talia’s eyes burn rage, and her fists clench...and she feels as though she is totally helpless--which enrages her all the more! And, even more infuriating, is the fact that the Oracle finds it so amusing...as does Geardoisa, who stands to the side of her.

“You have forgotten how clever your kin are,” the ancient chuckles, then

throws a crystal to her. She catches the diamond-like crystal instinctively. “You are to capture it in this with the words, ‘Rhandon Callo Zaphot’. Now, I believe our meeting is over.”

“You son of a--” Talia’s voice catches in her throat and her rage causes her to shake in place.

“I believe the Oracle is done with you,” Geardoisa says softly, grabbing her by the arm and pushing her out into the hallway once more.

The path to the mounting bay is a blur in Talia’s mind as the rage rides through her soul...she wants to slash out and lay bare everyone in this wretched city. The thoughts congeal like shadows in her mind and she finds the hate for her kin, which she had once imagined now a very real force in her mind.

As they enter the mounting bay, Geardoisa suddenly whirls Talia around...pushing her so hard into the crystalline wall of the bay that it knocks the breath from her lungs. His muscles are surprisingly powerful as one of his hands holds her to the wall and another one reaches up behind her neck.

“You may be still a child, girl...but you look like a woman to me,” the words are riddled with lust and hate and power as the man pushes his rough lips against hers.

Talia’s brain seems to explode with even more rage, the thought of such a thing happening to her frying everything from her but the rage. She tries to struggle, but the breath has left her lungs and she gasps for breath impotently as he forces his hand beneath her cloak...trying to touch her body.

Her lungs fill with the oxygen like fire and the power in her ignites as she slams her knee up into the fae’s groin. He staggers backwards and she slams the heel of her hand into his jaw, knocking him backward, with him losing balance and falling to the ground.

“Prick!” She runs to him as he tries to get up, kicking out his legs from under him so he falls back down and slams her heel into his skull, a clunk sounding as his head bashes into the crystalline floor. He slumps into unconsciousness.

With that, she leaps upon the lead pegasus, which is still waiting in the bay with its partner.

“Go! Ride!” She screams, digging her knees into the wide back of the pegasus. The beast takes to flight, arching into the sky and flying from the bay. Its companion taking to flight behind it, shocked by the sudden departure and having no mind to be left behind.

As they fly higher and higher, Talia hears the sound of alarms being raised and, finally, the whistle of enchanted arrows as they fly after

them. The pegasi's wings beat so hard that they make record time as they make their way toward the high portal which leads to the hill in the overworld. Faster and faster they race toward it, mindless of all else but escape...

The hill bursts forth with an explosive force, the two huge, white pegasi flying free from the otherworldly lair. Dirt and grass blow everywhere as the two flying horses break free and then suddenly bear down upon the Celestia, who still remains outside. Talia gets them to stop in front of the girl, their nostrils flaring and Talia grinning wolfishly, the adrenaline now pumping through her veins.

"Get on and ride, girl!" Talia calls down, her long curly hair whipping backward in the moonlight and a sudden gale of wind sends her cape flapping behind her. The faerie's grin is that of a warrior who has defeated tremendous odds. As Celestia pulls up to one of the pegasi and tries to leap up upon its wide back, Talia urges, "C'mon, my friend...the hounds of hell are on my heels and we have no time to slow."

As though to emphasize her words, five dark pegasi burst from the hillock, their fae riders full of rage and bearing huge swords. At this, Celestia all but leaps upon the pegasus' back, riding just in front of the two wings.

"Away!!!" Talia urges and the huge white beasts flap into the air, quickly overtaking the trees and launching into the skies. The sound of fae arrows whistle behind them as they race toward the moon.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 7, Group A-2: Waiting on the Hill

Author's Note: Episode 7, Group A-2: Waiting on the Hill
(Group A-2: Celestia, played by Katie)

The wind rustles in the carpet of the trees and Celestia looks up at the moon which was falling low in the sky. She is beginning to shiver and she wonders when Talia will come back. She has already heard far more things out here than she feels comfortable with...

Earlier, wraiths had swirled about the glen, the glimmer of silver through their spectral bodies as they screamed the screams of the damned. She had been tempted at casting a banishment spell, but, fearing that she might end up banishing herself, decided not to risk it. Later fae like sprites had burst free from the mound and begun dancing around it on their pixie legs for hours...their song a haunting carol of happiness and suggestive of all things gleeful and happiness. And, yet, there seemed a cold edge to their wee voices that had made Celestia shiver. Eventually they had tired of their dancing and singing and had vanished back into the hill from which they had burst forth.

Now, everything is still...even the owls make no sound and no rodents ruffle the forest plants outside the glen. Celestia is just beginning to wonder when her companion will return for the fiftieth time when suddenly a shuddering is heard from the hill...then a rumbling...finally a thundering!

The hill bursts forth with an explosive force, two huge, white pegasi flying free from the otherworldly lair the hill serves as portal to. Dirt and grass blow everywhere as the two flying horses break free and then suddenly bear down upon the sorceress. They suddenly stop, flaring their nostrils in front of Celestia and she sees that, astride one of the huge beasts, Talia grins wolfishly.

"Get on and ride, girl!" Talia calls down, her long curly hair whipping backward in the moonlight and a sudden gail of wind sends her cape flapping behind her. The faerie's grin is that of a warrior who has defeated tremendous odds. As Celestia pulls up to one of the pegasi and tries to leap up upon it's wide back, Talia urges, "C'mon, my friend...the hounds of hell are on my heels and we have no time to slow."

As though to emphasize her words, five dark pegasi burst from the hillock, their fae riders full of rage and bearing huge swords. At this, Celestia all but leaps upon the pegasus' back, riding just in front of the two wings.

"Away!!" Talia urges and the huge white beasts flap into the air, quickly overtaking the trees and launching into the skies. The sound of fae arrows whistle behind them as they race toward the moon. A hammering beat thrums in Celestia's head as they ride into the night and she relishes the thrill of the ride, her own hair now snapping like whips behind her head. The wind blows against her skin, chilling her even more despite her clutch on the hot-blooded beast's mane with her legs clenching it's back.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 8, Group A: Flying into the Moon

Author's Note: Episode, Group A: Flying into the Moon
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Kate)

The creature's wings thunder through the night sky...the pegasi flying in tandem through the air. The screeching of the pursuers call from behind and every once in awhile an arrow is sent whistling after the forest faerie... Now, however, they're running out of arrows and have little more than their voices to shoot after them.

The wind whistles past Talia's hair, ringing in her ears. A grin of triumph still glued to her face as they scream toward the moon.

Minutes beat by like grains of sand in a cosmic hourglass...finally, the sound of the pursuers fade away as they rush.

"I think we've lost them," Celestia screams finally, the wind carrying most of her words away.

"Keep flying!" Talia screams back, the blood pumping through her veins like a drug. Her mind still reeling with the power of knocking Geardoisa out... And her mind still in indignant rage. How dare he think of touching her! Typical male... Caring only for their own primal lusts and uncaring of who they hurt to do it. Well, this was one person who wouldn't be hurt again! The pride burns in her eyes like wildfire and she can almost believe that she hears the horns of dead amazons playing for her...hailing her victorious in this new venture.

Finally, as the dawn brightens the sky, transforming the clouds in the horizon to a caucophony of colored cotton in its wake, Talia spies the coast of the land below her.

"Ho, look below!" She screams in exuberance.

"I see!" Celestia calls back, grinning across the pegasus' back at her friend...her face partly bathed in the reddened light, sparking in one of her blue eyes like the flame of hope.

"Follow me!" Talia shouts and the two flying animals bank as though they are attached to one another, rushing toward the coastline. The waves are capped with foamy suds that dances with refracted copper sunlight like frothed amethyst! The speed they descend at is dizzying and she can see that Celestia has her eyes clenched tightly together...

Finally, whooping like a warrior, Talia pulls back on the pegasus' mane and the two mounts land as gently as though they had planned to all along.

"I am woman, hear me roar!!!!!!!!!!!" The forest faery's voice thunders off the surrounding mountains and cliff faces, dances across the seas lapping, and causes the pegasi to neigh...

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 9, Group A: When Furies Fight

Author's Note: Episode 9, Group A: When Furies Fight
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Kate)

The north rising sun of the land is high in the sky by the time Celestia finally manages to pull herself out of her slumbers. Looking around groggily, she sees a sandy beach strewn with rocks around her. Nearby, two winged horses neigh quietly, chewing slowly on some grasses that

have been torn up from somewhere and laid down in the sand in front of them. On a rock outjutting, her gauzy wings peaking from beneath her great cloak, the forest fae sits, her copper curls falling down her back like a sunset waterfall. There is an amazing beauty to the fae now as she looks dreamily off into the sea, a light breeze playing with strands of her hair and toying at her cloak... Celestia smiles softly, rubbing her large, blue eyes with her fists, and thinks that her companion looks as lovely as a painting sitting there.

The sorceress sits there a moment, musing about life...not wanting to say anything audible, lest she break Talia's reverie and shatter the harmony of the scene. Celestia thinks how nice it would be to have long, curly hair like Talia's...it would be so delightful, in her opinion. Not that her own hair wasn't alright...or at least she supposed it was, for a number of minstrels and wandering thespians had told her she was very beautiful, with her blonde hair and sapphire eyes. Still, she quirks her lips, it would be nice to have Talia's curls... Or, now that she thought about it, her finesse. To be able to keep her wits about her and do the things that needed to be done.

Celestia reminds herself that she has the knowledge and the ability inside her. Now, if only I wouldn't get so nervous, she muses. It would be awesome to be able to whip out an awesome spell on some horrid attacker followed by a knee to the groin and then, as he fell over groaning, say to him, "That'll teach you, you garish ox!" She smiles at the thought, then pulls herself to her feet, shaking the sand from her dress and vowing that next time she needs to do a spell, it will work. Unfortunately, a small voice inside her reminds her that she has made this vow before...disturbingly loud for being so small.

"Awake, sleepy squirrel?" Talia asks, turning and smiling at the sorceress.

"Think so," Celestia replies with a smile for her friend in return. "How long was I asleep?"

"Oh, I'd say about six or seven hours..." Talia shrugs softly. "I only woke up an hour or so ago."

"Where are we?" Celestia asks, looking out at the ocean.

"On my first instinct, I'd say the beach," Talia chuckles softly.

"Oh, really? I must say, I'm shocked at your perceptivity!" Celestia smirks in return.

"Seriously, by the sun's position, I'd say the eastern coast..." Talia indicates the sun high above, which is beginning to arc toward their backs, parallel to the cliff-faces. "And, with the mountains' rising above us, that pretty much rules out the swamplands in the south...so, I'd say, we're on exactly the opposite side of Galfor than we were when we started."

“Oh, dear!” Celestia shaking her head in annoyance. “How far have we lost off our course?”

“Not much, surprisingly,” Talia points across the cliffs. “We may be in a different direction, but we’re nearly the same distance as the crow flies.”

“Accept that you forget that some of us can’t fly!” Celestia furrows her brows in irritation.

“And you forget that we have the pegasi.” Talia smiles, indicating the bewinged horses.

“Oh, yeah...I guess I did,” Celestia admits, deriding herself for not paying more attention to the beasts when she woke up... Slowly, as they had been talking, the memories of the night before were coming back to the sorceress and she remembers the entirety of the numbing flight. “But won’t the fae be out looking for us? I mean, two people flying on white pegasi aren’t the most discreet in the world.”

“True, but--” Whatever Talia was about to say is cut off as the pegasi that had just been mentioned suddenly raise up on their hind legs, whinnying in terror. “What the--?!” Talia whirls around to face the ocean and, together, she and the sorceress see that the forms of women are rising in the ocean beyond...an eery scream suddenly wailing through the night air.

With the screaming wail, a huge gout of water forms itself high in the sky, the arms of the sea women raised high. The huge water spout draws itself up over a hundred meters into the air before crashing down toward the beach! The pegasi wail in fear and, lofting their wings, fly high into the sky.

The spout crashes to the beach, drenching the sorceress and the faerie with water so icy that it knocks the breath from their lungs. Celestia sputters the water from her lungs, coughing in a fit. She looks over at Talia, who now looks like a very angry, half drowned cat...her beautiful copper curls stuck to her body. She glares angrily at the ocean furies, her hand whipping to her dagger, then, as though she thinks better of it, the fae lets go the hilt and turns to Celestia.

“They’re the sea furies.” Talia admits like a death sentence. “They are entirely magic...we don’t have the resources to even attempt to counter attack them. Unless we can escape to the mountains, we’re gonna be toasted.”

“Can you fly us up there?” Celestia asks hurriedly, seeing that the cliffs entirely block any entrance to the mountains as effectively as a wall.

“Not both of us...my wings aren’t strong enough!” Talia laments softly.

The sea furies' song goes up again, this time clouds begin to form and collect, transforming into writhing thunderheads. Lightning begins to flash within the cortex of the thunder caps.

“Let me try something...a spell to strengthen your wings!” Celestia urges.

“This isn't the time for playing sorceress, Celestia,” Talia returns, more harshly than she intended.

“I'm not playing...this will work!” Celestia returns, hard nosed now. “Besides, your magics won't help you this far out of the forest and you know only a handful of spellsongs...so you have no choice.”

“Oh yes I do,” Talia retorts irritably. “I can fly out of here myself and send your folks a condolence scroll.”

“But you won't do that,” Celestia replies with a smirk, then smiles. “I know you too well, Talia Jenea!”

“Alright, do it, then,” Talia scowls sourly, adding: “I am such a flaming idiot! Maybe those stupid Sidhe were right to throw me out...afterall, befriending humans is really idiotic!”

“Higher than the mountains' height,
May the air loan you might.
Powered wings to carry two,
Escaping those who now pursue.”
Celestia sings at the top of her lungs, the song writhing around Talia's body.

The magical tendrils envelop the fae and her cloak tears assunder as her gauzy wings burst forth, their wingspan now as vast as an angel's. Like gauze and cobweb, but magically powerful...they emerge and flap against the wind. Like an eagle, the fae soars, screaming at the top of her lungs as she arcs and loops through the air!

A bolt of lightening sears from the heavens above, just missing the aerial target who suddenly has presented herself, and slamming into the sand mere meters away! Celestia veers out of the way, peering into the sky toward her friend. At first, Celestia is afraid that that Talia will attempt to attack the furies with her new found ariel power...however, she whirls in the air and--dodging another huge lightening blast--she sweeps to the earth, catching up her friend, and arching back into the sky. With Celestia pressed to her bosom in a tight hug, Talia surges toward the cliff face...away from the now furious furies...

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 10, Group A: When Fortitude Fails...

Author's Note: Episode 10, Group A: When Fortitude Fails
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Kate)

The chill night air burns against Talia's face... Despite the fact that she has her long red tresses wrapped around her throat and ears like a scarf and--now that her lacy wings are folded back under the thing--her cloak is tucked as tightly around her body as it will go. Luckily, both her cloak and clothes are now dry...as are Celestia's. Thanks to another spell Celestia had managed to pull off after the strength spell had worn off and the two adventurers had been forced to land in the mountain pass. In the past, any attempt by Celestia to work a drying spell had usually resulted in whatever she was attempting to dry spontaneously combusting. However, something has changed in the sorceress who now walks stoically beside the fae, her head bent down to the shavings of frosty snow that are blown at them by the mountain winds from time to time.

The girl has managed to pull off in less than an hour more spells correctly than Talia ever thought the betwixt sorceress would be capable of doing in her entire lifetime. Perchance what they said was true...that the threat of death is the testing ground for mens' souls... Or womens', rather. Talia smiles wanly, the frost blowing down the back of her cloak and the fiery cold shavings smiting her skin...sending shivers through her body. Next to her, despite Celestia's lack of outer clothing besides her gown, the sorceress does not seem to be slowed down anymore by the cold than Talia is.

They say little to one another, finding that it expends too much energy to speak...the valuable heat escaping their mouths in a cloud of steam every time they open their mouths to exhale. The wind picks up power, trying to lash against them...to push them back from which they came.

Slowly, as they continue to push, Talia realizes that her skin is going numb...the cold is piercing her to her marrow and a drowsiness is starting to threaten her eyes. She knows what the drowsiness means and shakes her head against it...unwilling to even consider it. And, yet, as her feet ache and the cold continues to imbue itself into her marrow, voices in her head whisper to just give up to...to fall into the grip of sleep...and death.

"C-c-can y-y-you d-d-do that-t w-w-warming spell-l to-to us, Celestia...the on-one y-you d-d-did to the clothes?" Talia chatters, her teeth seeming to drown out her words.

"I-I d-d-don't know h-how to w-w-warm living things..." Celestia admits, looking neither left nor right--her eyes fixed forward.

"W-w-what's th-the d-d-difference?" The freezing fae asks, cursing herself for not having learned a simple warming spell at the very least.

"T-t-the o-one I used f-for d-d-drying is i-internal...w-w-we need a-an

ex-ex-external one." Celestia explains jarringly. "I-I-I do th-the one I-I did to-to the cl-clothes, a-a-and we go up into t-two flaming pyres! K-kinda, out-out of-f the f-frying p-pan a-and in-into th-the f-fire!" She tries to chuckle at her bad attempt at a pun, but her mirth is hollow and bleak now.

"W-w-we'll f-f-freeze b-b-before t-t-too l-long-g!" Talia points out, the cold robbing her of knowledge whether she was even awake any longer or simply trudging through a dream on corpse's legs.

They push forward, their pain and exhaustion slowing their pace.

"Th-there's a c-cave." Celestia sputters, pointing a frosty finger toward an opening through the night falling snow.

Without a word, Talia nods weak and the two stagger toward the opening...staggering forward with all the hope of those who expect to be saved. However, as they come within a few feet of the cave's entrance, Talia makes out a gleam within the dark recess of the medium size cave...

Two viprous, red eyes stair out at them and a mind-numbing roar echoes out from the shadows.

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Subj: Episode 11, Group A: Through the Wardrobe...

Author's Note: Episode 10, Group A: Through the Wardrobe
(Group A: Talia Jenea, played by Hilary; Celestia, played by Kate)

The red eyes smolder as Celestia glares back at them. The cold is near to cause her to lose feelings in her body, the thin dress doing almost no good... For some reason, though, she isn't nearly as numb as she should be. She wasn't nearly as about to pass out as Talia was...maybe because she has finally pulled off her first spellsongs and it has lent fire to veins. Who knows?

However, what she does know is that she is not about to let any smoldering-eyed beast keep her from taking her nearly frozen friend into the cave. And a fiery anger rises in her that it should even try to. Her words rise even as she thinks these things, slashing out like lightning. Even without knowing what she is singing, she hears the lightning crackle above her...and a bolt tears down...slamming into the cave like a spear of energy...a scream follows that would've woken the dead...and silence.

Putrid smoke and the smell of charred flesh and hair ooze from the cave... Trying not to gag from the stench, Celestia drags her now unconscious companion into the cave. Looking about, she tries to find something to make a fire with...

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 12, Group A: Transformations

Author's Note: Episode 12, Group A: Transformations
(Group A: Talia Jenea -- Hilary; Celestia -- Kate; Dragonfire -- Jeremy)

"Feeling better, Talia?" The sorceress asks, her brows arching.

"Alot...thanks," the faerie smiles wanly at her friend, the fire crackling a tempestuous cadence between them. "I wish I knew how I got so cold so quickly. I've never done all that badly with it in the past."

"You'd just had a rough night of it...that's all," Celestia smiles, sipping from the mug in her hands. It was a lucky thing she had remembered the stone alteration spells...for they had allowed the rock of the cave to become more useful to them... Hollowed out sleeping sections in the stone, a firepit, and turned excess rubble into mugs... All in all, Celestia has been amazed by how much she has been able to do with her magical skills. As though she has finally reached the bloom of her ability and is now becoming what she has always hoped -- a skilled songstress.

A rough night of it...a rough few days of it, was more like it, Talia thinks darkly. What is wrong with her?? First, she nearly passed out when she did something as simple as trying to control the forest...then she'd been so dazed when she'd left the Oracle's that she had almost allowed that maggot to rape her before she had realized what was happening...and, now, after a meager flight up onto a mountain peak, she had become so exhausted that she had nearly frozen to death afterwards. She is having to rely more and more on Celestia to bale her out of predicaments as opposed to it being the other way around like it has always been before... What if she's losing her skill? The thought haunts her... What good's a forest faerie who can't use the forest? What good's a fae who can't fly without being exhausted? What good's a fae who can't stand a few simple changes in climate? Not much, she thinks bitterly...staring at the flames.

"Besides, magic is often harder on the person who receives it than it is on the person who bestows it," Celestia adds helpfully. "Especially with me doing the bestowing... I probably mixed something up in the spell...which was why you got so tired. I'm always goofing things up, you know that."

"No, you did the spell perfectly..." Talia shook her head, staring deadly at the embers...she was in no mood to be cheered up. It's so typical, though, she thinks... Just when she thinks life is going to go smoothly, then everything suddenly blows up in her face. For all she knows, in a few days, her magical powers could be completely gone... Or

they could've just been drained by something temporary...or maybe due to something she ate, like sidhe root...that drained ability for awhile. Though she knows she hasn't eaten any of that...but, maybe, the meat from the beast has done it. Or maybe, she thinks darkly, she is just beginning to lose it for good...the way mortal men lose their hair.

She sighs darkly, then stands to her feet. The sorceress managed to clean up most of the charred remains of the cave beast when the faerie was still asleep, but Talia can see scorch marks still etched in the walls of the cave. She arches her back, trying to stretch the cricks out it... Her back pops like the fire crackles.

"Are you OK, really, Talia?" Celestia asks, concern in her blue eyes.

"Yeah, kiddo...no problem," the fae forces a smile, shaking her long, now-tangled mane behind her. "I just--"

As the words come out, they stop in mid-sentence...an electric bolt of violet light has suddenly crackled into existence...flashing across Talia's flesh and clothes. Her mouth freezes a moment and then, to Celestia's shock, her flesh and clothes begin to morph...expanding outward in an amorphous mass. Then, suddenly, the mass coalesces into the form of a huge knight...a crest of fire played across his chest.

His sapphire eyes spark as he shakes his head... "This doesn't look like my party."

"W-w-who are y-you?" Celestia asks, leaping to her feet.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 13, Group A: Stories from Abroad

Author's Note: Episode 13, Group A: Stories from Abroad
(Group A: Celestia -- Kate; Dragonfire -- Jeremy)

"So, after that, I ended up here..." Dragonfire explains, looking at the scorched cave around him again.

"I see," Celestia shakes her head with the comment, wonder in her eyes.
"That's very bizarre."

"Don't suppose you know how to reverse it, do you?" The tall, blonde haired man arches a brow, setting his visored helmet on the ground next to him.

"Fraid not," Celestia shrugs. "I've never learned that one. Must be peculiar to the rogue tribes... You said he was a rogue, right?"

"I guess so." Now he shrugs, his armor clanking with the movement.
"That's what the woman who greeted me said. He had dark curly hair,

kind of a ruddy looking guy... Looked of roguish descent."

"Yeah, well they have some different magics...different tonal balances and things like that." The sorceress explains, refilling her mug with some more of the tea from the rock "kettle". She then looks at him, frowning her brow. "How heavy is that stuff? It would seem pretty hard to move in...you must be pretty strong."

"Not as strong as I would like." He chuckles softly, mirth glittering in his eyes. "However, in answer to your question, it's not so heavy. Elven mail...did a favor for Galengran long ago and he gave me the armor out of appreciation." A glint of pride echoes in his eyes as he looks down at the glittering armor. "It never gets terribly dirty, which is a jest between me and Galengran in the first place."

"What do you mean?" Celestia asks, always curious to hear stories. This strange knight who has appeared out of the air kind of reminds Celestia of the storytellers who used to wander through her village of Barknolle when she was a kid. They all seemed to have a magic about them...their stories were their sorcery.

"Oh, he nearly got me stuffed into a dragon's maw when I helped him last!" He chuckles again, his voice threatening to convert it to a giggle. "Totally charred my last suit... Then, if that weren't enough we escaped down these two hundred foot mud cliffs above a raging waterfall. The spry elf went down like a mountain goat...not bearing in mind that a giant like me might have some problems scampering down a muddy cliff." He shakes his head, his eyes reflecting the fondness he thought of on the memories. "If nearly getting toasted wasn't bad enough, I slid down the mud cliff, nearly fell into the waterfall lanced with sharpened rocks... Managed to slam my sword to the hilt in one of the banks, the rest of me hanging over the fall."

"How on earth did you get out of that one?" Celestia asks, her eyes flashing with excitement. She guesses that the knight's probably exaggerating but she's unwilling to say anything lest she destroy the magic of the story.

"That blasted little billy goat of an elf suddenly cavorts up out of nowhere," he shakes his head with a smile. "Somehow he manages to drag my worthless hide up onto the bank. Don't know how he managed to do it, 'cause he couldn't of weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet, but there's alot more strength in those elves than you might think... Or maybe it's a glamourie or some such thing..."

"I see," Celestia nods in conclusion.

Suddenly, a crack sounds from lower in the cave.

"What was that?" Dragonfire looks down the cave toward the sound.

Celestia's pulse speeds.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 14, Group A: Through the Looking Glass

Author's Note: Episode 14, Group A: Through The Looking Glass
(Group A: Celestia -- Kate; Dragonfire -- Jeremy)

"What was that?" Celestia asks, spinning to her feet so fast that she kicks a gust of sand of sand into the fire. Celestia stops, listening intently, and Dragonfire is as motionless as a statue. The fire hisses and sputters as it tries to digest the unburnable sand, but, aside from that, there is no sound.

For a moment they stay their, frozen in a tableau of watchfulness, the fire the only movement...causing crazed shadows to dance across their forms. Finally, as time crawls away, Jeremy rises to his feet, his armor clinking softly, and he walks down into the cave, pulling his sword from it's sheath slowly. Celestia follows slowly behind him and together, they walk to the end of the cave...which isn't nearly as deep as Celestia would've imagined.

The wall which they stand in front of is smooth...not rough like the side walls of the cave. Glistening with pinpricks of rainbow light as the firelight dances off crystals imbedded in the rock. Dragonfire raises his blade and slides it to the wall...the blade resting smoothly on the wall.

Dragonfire's eyes narrow as he looks at the wall...then looks at the reflection of the wall in his sword.

"Secret passageway," he smiles softly, apparently proud of himself.

"How do you know?" Celestia asks, peering at the smooth wall.

"Look at the reflection in the sword," Dragonfire nods at his weapon and Celestia moves around to the opposite side of him, to get a better view. Within the reflection of the sword, she sees that the glittering specks of crystal of the wall seem to form runes in the warped reflection of the blade...runes of power.

"Dwarven make," Dragonfire nods softly. "Old Dwarven trick for making doors that they can't get locked out of is to hide the runes for the opening of the door in a crystal pattern in the rock...which can only be read through the reflection of a blade."

"But what if their blades were too dirty?" Celestia queries, arching a brow.

"You haven't run into too many dwarves, have you?" He smiles again, humor in his eyes. "They wouldn't have a dirty blade on them to save their souls...clean them vigorously after every battle until they gleam.

They are master metal smiths and would do not to disparage blade nor armor by not keeping it ever clean."

"You know alot about dwarves?" Celestia inquires softly.

"Yes...you might say I stayed with them a number of years after the battle of Dornex," he grits, his eyes hard now.

"OH...I'm sorry." Celestia wishes she hadn't asked for it seems to draw painful memories.

"A military coup in the dwarven power led to a lightening strike on the kingdom of Dornex. They struck hard and quickly, lashing into the countryside in the darkness of night...slaying people and destroying the land. They took livestock and children whom they planned to train as slaves." He continued numbly, as though unrealizing that he was speaking the memories aloud. "I was barely seven then. My riding instructor had taken me for a training exercise that night. He never even heard them until they plunged a dagger into him...and I was grabbed and carried away, a slave. I was made to work in their mines...for years. They thought I couldn't understand them when they spoke...thought their words were too foreign for me, but they were wrong. I heard what they had to say...I learned their tongue and how to read their words...and eventually, I managed to escape." A fierce smiles paints his face.

"Then maybe we shouldn't be poking around here...it sounds like you have alot of bad memories of these dwarves." Celestia cautions, putting her hand on his armor.

"Not these dwarves... They speak another dialect." Dragonfire nods, his smile again softening. "Not all dwarves take slaves...only those in the northeast. Most are actually good-hearted, if rather warlike...not so different than humans, really. And," he concludes, "if this is an entrance to one of their tunnels, it probably leads right out of these moutains to the elven palace lands. And believe me, underground will be alot warmer and alot faster than going through the passes."

"Well, can you decipher what this dialect says, then?" Celestia asks, shrugging.

"I believe so," he nods, then reads: "Canu b'korash tonkon bonn-crkk slckk..."

With a bare grinding sound, a doorway's outline shades into appearance and then opens up before them.

A soft light burns within the tunnel.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 16 - Groups A, B, C: A Shift of Acts

The night moon rises high and clear above the plains...the sky aglow with purpled miasma of midnight black blended with silvered moonlight. The trees silhouette like wraiths against the sky...

Below the high sky, Donoval shifts in his sleep...the shadow brooding about his form. It flits and snaps in its darkness...a caged and angry beast of prey. Bound to this mortal, it shrieks silently in the night. No one can hear it...or the rage which washes through it. The hate it feels beats so strongly within it that it is all but washing the beast away!

If only it could loose this human from it...it is tired of it. But it is as inextricably bound to him as he is to it. Unless... The shadow thinks...pouring through it's darkened mind into the lore it contains within itself. Of a long-lost spell...to push out the intruders in the land. To push this one from him...

And as the spell pours forth from the beast...shadow builds around it... And suddenly, with a gust of darkened power, energy bursts forth from it's form... Consuming with it the form of Donoval.

The gust of energy whips across the land...whipping from the face of the land other heroes...Talia Jenea...Celestia...Lodan... Dragonfire...Darshek...and many others.

And, as suddenly as they have come, they are gone. The shadow beast laughs evilly to itself. The land is it's to attack now...

"Hello, old man," the elven wizard's voice echoes suddenly near the now-unshielded shadow creature.

The beast whirls in horror...to see it's old nemesis, Dharvell. How did he find it??? The shadow-catcher the wizard holds is already activated...the prism ripping into the beasts inner portions.

And, with another silent scream, the beast is pulled into the inner recesses of the catcher...back to it's otherworldly prison to scream.

Those displaced by the shadow's spell shift through an ethereal void...pulled toward a new horizon...a new dimension in the infinitely branching tree of time and space. And, as they arrive in this reality, they forget who they were...what they used to be... All that remains, is their names...and infinite mysteries for them to discover about themselves.

In the City of New Paris...the rain drips from the broken down eaves of an duracrete builing. The sound of someone screaming tears through the

misty air of the night streets.

Talia Jenea shakes her long mane behind her, shuddering as she pulls the trench coat tighter about her silver evening gown. There has to be a better job than a lounge singer in the java dives down here, she muses nervously. She reaches a hand into the purse which hangs from her shoulder...checking the blaster she keeps cocked there. Should do, for now...she thinks. And walks down the street, stepping past the potholes...and trying to keep the hem of her gown out of the infested puddles.

----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 17: Prepared to Perk -- Groups A, B & C

Silence.

Nothing stirred in the office of Darshek Reklaw, P.I., save the second hand's slow rotation on the antiquated clock which hung on the wall and Darshek Reklaw's retinas as they looked up at the clock, then back down to his desk, then around the simple room--looking for something...anything...to happen.

Even the holo-scenes, which were projected behind the clear glass of the realistic-looking "windows" in the office and showed a street scene of the ancient city of Chicago in the 1920's, weren't displaying any action. Thinking darkly that there was probably a glitch in the projector's digital circuitry, Darshek sighed in disgust. It would be just another disappointment in an already disappointing day.

The tall, lean man rubbed his hand through his curly, brown hair, replaying over in his mind for the millionth time how this day had come about in the first place...

A floating rift which existed in a netherworld...a fragment of space and time which is completely separate from all known dimensions and is called..."The Crossroads." It is said of those who claim much, that the Crossroads are the hub of time/space from which all dimensions branch forth...a hub which inherently carries nothing. However, within this nexus of supposed nothingness resides a capsule of time and space known only as "The University." A section of a dimension long forgotten, the original founders of The University knowingly rent the fabric of space and time on which it once stood with new technologies to escape the darkness and turmoil their dimension was in over a thousand years ago. The intact section of cosmic fabric on which the University was situated, drifted toward the vacuumous nothingness of The Crossroads like a toy boat drifts toward a tub's drain when the stopper is pulled. There it has resided ever since.

It is within the buildings which comprise the physicality of the University that Darshek Reklaw resides. A student and resident, he walked the manicured lawns between the expansive, ancient brick buildings wondering what life must have been like when their was more to the world than just this campus floating in the abyss of nothingness...when he could have looked into the sky above the campus and seen stars and moons, instead of the oily black which covered the sky, oozing up from the horizons, and required that special lights be kept constantly flooding the walkways and byways of the community. At times it grew so dull here that Darshek wished for the old days...when there were more things to do...anything to break the dullness...

A rabid reader of stories of the Old World, specifically mysteries and detective stories, Darshek had been persuaded to consider breaking the monotony the University at times offered and bring back a profession which dimensions and centuries had long since forgotten: the private investigator. Basing his view of ancient investigators largely on an early 20th century fictional PI called "Dixon Hill", as well as gaining a tremendous amount from tales of Sherlock Holmes and Elliot Ness, Darshek had decided that...with the proper set-up...he too could become ensconced in the provocative and exciting life of a PI.

He had gained the use of a room in an unused building at the University from the Administration and been granted the right to refurbish it in any way he chose. With the help of his ever present buddy, and admitted "lackey", Donoval, they had remodeled the two little rooms the Administration had allotted them. Choosing to make the rooms look as though they were literally from the 1920's, they had managed to sim-fab an antique desk, a creaking leather chair that rocked back, a couple of leather, straight-backed chairs, a coat rack, and a wooden door with a glass pane in it which bore the black title, "Darshek Reklaw, P.I." and which had a pull-down blind behind the glass...not to mention the faux-"windows" which showed street scenes of Chicago and the antique clock with the actually moving "hands."

Then he and Donoval had pre-fabbed a couple of old-style trenchcoats, shoulder holsters, suits with matching fedoras, and pairs of polished wing-tips. The only things that they dressed in that did not appear to come from that time in human history known as the 1920's were the high powered blasters which they had stuffed in their holsters.

Illegally stealing a dimensional portal generator that the University still had cold-stored in a long-abandoned tunnel which wound beneath the campus, Darshek and Donoval had set the thing up in the anteroom in front of the door to Darshek's office, so that, if anyone came through the portal from another dimension, the first thing they saw would be the door in front of them bearing the words, "Darshek Reklaw, PI," printed on its glass pane. With that set up, all the two of them had to do was turn the thing on and test it out.

After a few days of testing it and Donoval, who happened to be a mathematics and circuitry genius, making a couple adjustments, they were

reasonably sure that the thing worked properly. As he had long since decided that most of his clientele would come from other dimensions where life wasn't nearly as peaceful and monotonous as it was here at the University, Darshek's desire was that the generator flash an open portal on every available world with a glowing sign above the portal which would tell where the portal lead and to whom. As there are as many different dimensions per core dimension as their are possible decisions for every sentient being in that core dimension and in its branching dimensions to make, such a plan would be impossible...however, Donoval was able to jury-rig the generator so that it could flash the portal in five million dimensions at any one time and then built in a randomizer so that it would, after the portal was open for an hour in any dimension, rotate to another dimension...and so on, thus enabling the greatest number dimensions to be served.

With this decided, Darshek...feeling a tremendous sense of excitement...had had Donoval power up the generator and waited for his first client to step out of the portal to knock on his door...

And waited...

And waited...

....and waited...

...and waited...and waited...and waited...

Now he had been waiting for over six hours and no one had come through the portal yet.

Darshek was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea after all. Why should this great plan of his work, anyway? It had seemed so cool when he and Donoval had been thinking about it...but now that it was set up, he wasn't so sure how brilliant it actually was. Maybe it was just another stupid idea come up with by a number 1 slacker and his equally slacking friend...

Darshek sighed as the old arguments he had heard all his life which had discouraged him every time he had ever tried anything once again played through his mind. Sometimes he felt like such a loser.

As he sat mired in his sad reverie, the portal in the anteroom suddenly crackled with life, flashing bright carnelian light through the plate window in the door for a moment. Darshek bolted up in his chair, his blood instantly pounding in his ears in excitement and not a little trepidation, his hand sliding beneath his suit jacket to the butt of his blaster...just in case.

The emergence from the portal was no strange creature or mysterious man from another dimension, but instead was the familiar, buzz-haired,

trench coat- and fedora-clad figure of his friend, Donoval. He now carried a couple of flat boxes covered with printing in his hands...

"Yo, man...Darshek. You gotta check this out." Donoval declared without preamble, turning his wiry figure slightly so he could bump open the door with his butt, and walked into Darshek's office, dropping the hot, steaming boxes on the polished mahogany of the desk. "Real pizza, bro! Not that cardboard crap, like they serve in the Cafeteria...but REAL pizza like our ancestors used to eat! It's da bomb, man!"

"Yo!...Yo!" Darshek stood up and slapped his friend on the back of the head, an irked look on his face. "What'd I tell you about using that portal?"

"Huh?" A dumb look flashed blankly on Donoval's face.

"I said not to use it." Darshek reminded, shaking his hand at his friend in exasperation and then continuing, "It's just for customers, bonehead!" He shook his head again and sat back down, disappointed that someone more intriguing hadn't appeared. "When did you get into that thing, anyway? I didn't leave where I've been sitting since we opened..."

"Uh...yeah, you did." Donoval shook his head in disagreement, raising his eyebrows in exasperation. "When you had to go to the john and you had me watch the portal for you. I got hungry--"

"You're always getting hungry!" Darshek interjected.

"So do you!" Donoval responded indignantly. "Just 'cause I was the first one to use my head well enough to think to use that portal generator to get some munchies--"

"The portal generator you weren't supposed to be using in the first place!" Darshek interrupted, standing back to his feet again so that he could carry on the animated conversation with his friend with less restriction.

"A portal generator I helped fix, let me remind you." Donoval pointed out.

"Well... Who found the portal generator in the first place?" Darshek in turn reminded him, making a mock-questioning expression on his face.

"Yeah, that's right." Donoval admitted momentarily and then came back with, "But who found out where the tunnel was in the first place? Hmmmm?"

"Yeah but--" Darshek's next comment was cut off in his throat as he suddenly realized that he and Donoval were no longer the only one's standing in his office...

A striking red-head in a low-cut, emerald dress wearing six-inch heels was now standing in the doorway--slits on either side of her long skirt cutting all the way up to the middle of her alabaster thighs. Darshek gulped...forgetting his next statement entirely.

"Pardon me, boys...Am I intruding?" The voice was breathed through full, sensuous lips, carrying a vague accent which neither Darshek nor Donoval could identify. They both looked over in shock at the woman. A deep green hat with a black veil partially obscured her face, yet her lips were clearly visible...crimson as fresh blood.

Gulping, Darshek tried to recover his demeanor, straightening from the slightly bent position he had just been in.

"Why of course not, Ma'am." He smiled and swept the pizza summarily off the table with his left hand. As Donoval scrambled helter-skelter for the pizza...catching it just barely before it was splattered across their new office's walls...Darshek stepped smoothly around the desk, nimbly avoiding Donoval at his feet, and extended his hand to the woman, saying suavely, "Darshek Reklaw..." He paused a moment for effect. "PI...at your service, ma'am."

She graciously took his hand, her grip feeling surprisingly chill to Darshek. Smiling again in return, he asked, "Would you like to have a seat, miss...??"

"La Chatte. Ms. Telana la Chatte." She replied helpfully, smiling softly.

"Ms. la Chatte." Darshek nodded and pulled out one of the leather chairs for her to sit on. "Of course."

With that he walked around his desk once more, sitting in his own chair. "And this is my associate," he waved his right hand vaguely to indicate Donoval who was still trying to get control of all the pizza boxes, "Mr. Leinad."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." Donoval nodded to her, having all he could do to keep the pizza boxes in his hands from falling to the ground. With that, he hurried out the door to see if he couldn't get rid of the pizza's somewhere.

"A strange chap," Ms. la Chatte observed after Donoval had left.

"But as good as they come, let me attest to that," Darshek nodded, then decided to get down to business. "So, what can I help you with, ma'am?"

"A murder." The words rolled off her tongue like the icy chill of death itself, sinking its frigid grip into the bonemarrow of all those who heard. "I need you to find the slimeball who killed my brother."

"So that the appropriate authorities can throw him into prison?"

Darshek queried sympathetically, intrigued as much by the lovely woman as by the assumed sadness of the story she was now alluding to.

"No." Her voice remained dispassionate as she continued, "I want you to find him..." She paused.

"...So that I can kill him with my bare hands."

Darshek gulped, the temperature in the office seeming to drop to zero in the span of a second.

"I'll pay you three hundred per day with a thousand dollar advance and a hundred thousand purse after you've found me my brother's killer and I've had a chance to return the favor." She continued. With that, she slid one of her manicured hands into the neckline of her dress, pulling forth a wad of money. Holding it briefly with her scarlet-polished fingernails, she tossed it across the table top so it landed in front of Darshek. Then she produced a silvery cube in her hand, adding, "This'll tell you about the rogues you'll be up against as well as a little of the history of my dimension." She sent the holo-cube skittering across the table like a di in craps, Darshek catching the metallic cube in his hand and sticking it into a pocket of his wardrobe.

"All right." Darshek nodded briefly, starting to have serious doubts about what he had gotten himself into here.

"Does that mean you'll take the case?" The woman arched her eyebrows, the movement showing through the fish-net veil.

"Yes." Darshek replied confidently, feeling allot less sure of himself than his brief agreement would suggest.

"Thank you." She nodded, then rose to her feet. "I will be back in the morning when you've had time to review the notes on the cube."

With that, she turned on her heel and walked out the door, departing through the portal in the anteroom, which crackled to life as the energy grid consumed her.

"Dimension #436321, Class #12, Type Standard." The holocube chirped to life as Darshek tapped the button at the base of the cube. Donoval, now back from discarding the pizzas, bent over Darshek's desk to get a better view of the strange device. "Nation of Origin: United Conglomeration of States...City of Origin: New Paris, Fayette..."

The box paused a moment and then a transparent globe appeared, floating in the air above it. For all intents and purposes, the globe looked fairly similar to maps that Darshek had once seen of the world the University had once been a part of. The view zoomed in close on a fairly large landmass which tapered off in peninsulas in the north and

the south. The entire continental landmass the hologram showed turned pink and the words, "United Conglomeration of States", appeared in white across it. A bright blue spot appeared on the nation in northeast section and the words, "New Paris", appeared in white next to it.

"Brief Synopsis of National History:" The box continued. "Discovered in the 1530's by the French explorer Phillippe Lacroix, the continent of New Europa was settled by French immigrants soon after. In 1682, the French Colonies gained their independence from France in a bloody war. While still staving off a scattering of privateers from Spain and the nearly annihilated country of England, the French colonists came up with a new treatise of governmental policy and declared themselves a new and separate country. Within a century, the entire continent of New Europa was a member of the U.C.S. The national language was French until, in the 1790's, the government began letting English refugees enter U.C.S. This choice would prove later to be the downfall of the French language...for within a hundred and twenty years, English had become so widely used that virtually none of the inhabitants of the U.C.S. spoke French any longer and it was no longer taught in the public schools. Later, the U.C.S. began to establish a name for technological and economic innovation and, up until the 2050's, the U.C.S. was the leading economic, technologic, and military nation in the world."

The box clicked a moment and then continued, "Summation of Directly Related National Events: In the year 2054, a drug cartel in Columbia began to realize the potential of a new drug which produced unimaginable narcotic effects in users: coffee. The coffee plant had long been thought to be only a weed to workers in Columbia. However, when it was discovered that grinding the beans of this plant down and running hot water through the coffee grounds produced a narcotic liquid which had ten times the effect of Nirvana and five times the addictiveness of the most addictive drugs, cartel leaders realized that they may have found the ultimate drug. No one had any clue of the addictive quality of those first few shipments of coffee beans as they passed through customs into the U.C.S. By the time it was realized that coffee was a powerful drug, it was too late to stop it...nearly 95 percent of the population had tried the new drink that was a fad at diners all across the country. Over 80 percent of the population had become coffee addicts, unable to control the cravings they had for the bitter drink. Customs checkpoints fell to shreds in the course of weeks as customs agents would let cartels haul shiploads of coffee into the country if they would only be allowed a few pounds of the brown beans, a grinder, and a percolator. Law enforcement collapsed as cops and detectives left their principles by the wayside to simply get another shot of the drink that was already developing a nickname: Java. With breaking the laws caring no penalties, the society of the U.C.S. declined into a state of crime, decay and gang warfare. Drug dealers dealing pounds and pounds of the lethal beans ruled sections of turf in every major city."

The box paused again. Darshek scratched his head trying to take all the information in and Donoval shook his head in disbelief.

"In the city of New Paris, the drug dealers who rule the streets are as follows:" The box flashed a picture of a beautiful blonde wearing a black silk jumpsuit into the air, replacing the map. "Melinda Kecinzer. An ex-Kroznov agent from the old Russke-Asian Union, she went free-lance about five years ago and has become one of...if not THE...most feared drug czar in New Paris. She has a reputation for extreme dispassion and ice-cold ruthlessness."

The picture of Kecinzer was replaced by a holo of a tall, broad-shouldered man with ruddy cheeks and brown hair wearing a tuxedo.

"Jacques Privette." The box paused a second, then added, "Often known by his nickname, 'The Tenor', both because it is said he has an excellent voice and because he claims he always makes his victims 'sing' before he kills them. Beneath Kecinzer, he holds possibly the most clout in New Paris."

The picture of Privette was replaced by a holo of a wiry man with brown hair and a wispy goatee, wearing leather and holding two large, wicked looking gun. He looked more like a jazz musician than a drug boss.

"Thomas Brun." The box announced. "Also known as 'Tommy Two-Gun.' He is never seen anywhere without his twin Rapid-Fire blaster cannons. He is the last of the big drug dealers in New Paris."

The holo faded and the box asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"Um...Do you have a run-down on the people who work for the different drug bosses?" Darshek asked thoughtfully.

"Only a partial database of Melinda Kecinzer's employees are available from this database. It is possible that other databases may include more comprehensive data and information on the other drug dealers you seek. Do you wish to see the data which is available?"

"Yes." Darshek responded, nodding.

The box flashed in rapid succession the list of names, faces, and jobs of the various employees of Melinda Kecinzer:

A slight man with sandy brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses appeared. "Benjamin Wahs. Personal hacker for Melinda Kecinzer."

The next holo was of a tall, muscular man with shoulder length blonde hair and matching goatee, wearing a dark, double-breasted suit and mirrored sunglasses. "Jean Ydennek. Also known as 'The Iceman.' Personal hit man to Melinda Kecinzer."

A holo of a medium-size brunette wearing a white silk blouse with black silk pants and black slippers replaced the large enforcer's image. "Jane Sloan. Commonly known as 'The Right Arm of Kecinzer.' A kung-fu master and physical protector to Melinda Kecinzer."

The one after that was of a small, dark-haired, Jewish man with glasses wearing a gray trenchcoat. "Robert Blankovitch. Coffee bean smuggler to Melinda Kecinzer."

The picture vanished, replaced by nothing.

"No other records are available."

Then there was silence.

The cluttered, falling-down streets of New Paris were clogged with misty puddles which slowly filled higher as a steady drizzle pocked their surfaces. A fog settled menacingly around the ramshackled and crumbling structures which composed the city, obscuring the night sky with its vapory grip. Lights shown uncertainly here and there in the distance, their flickering luminescence leaving hazy auras in the fog...revealing sections of the moss-grown and water-dripping concrete and durasteel which the buildings were constructed of. Somewhere, a high-pitched scream of terror sounded, its watery echo warbling for a moment and then...in deadly allusion...was silent.

The patter of the rain almost drown out the crackling noise the portal made as it appeared suddenly, its flashing luminescence bathing the fog in a bluish glow for a moment. Three figures stepped out of the portal and then it was gone.

"Uh...Donoval." For a second the hardened detective motif Darshek had assumed slipped and, due to his genuine worry, referred to his friend by his first name. "Are you sure you're going to be able to open that portal later when we need to get out of here?" Darshek ask, adjusting his fedora and pulling his trench coat tighter around his body, trying to keep out the forebodingly chill fog.

"Course I'm sure, Darshek." Donoval, then realizing that he had let his hardened detective's lackey motif slip, amended, "I mean, "Course I'm sure, Mr. Reklaw," before concluding with, "What do ya take me for? A loser?" Donoval returned archly, adjusting his own trench coat and fedora in imitation of his partner.

"You said it, man...not me." Darshek reminded him, raising his eyebrows in implication.

"Shut up, Reklaw." Donoval shook his head, his eyes narrowing.

"Follow me this way, if you would, boys," Ms. la Chatte turned on her heel and strode into the mist. The white dress and heels she now wore made it too easy to lose her in the fog, so Darshek and Donoval quickly sped up their gait so as not to be left behind.

They waded through the mist after her, stepping over massive cracks in the streets and leaping across puddles. Like shadowy wraiths scurrying through the dim night, they hurried rapidly up a number of blocks of the shattered city. Every now and then, the muted flash of blaster fire could be seen off in the distance...followed often times by shrieks of pain...and, sometimes, sickening "Thudddd!"s. Trying to ignore the chaos, Darshek walked even more hurriedly after the copper-haired beauty.

After over a dozen blocks, the woman stopped.

"This is the building where my brother was murdered." Ms. la Chatte stated, indicating a tall building which rose high into the misty oblivion of the fog, until most of it was little more than a wavy silhouette to those who stood at its base. "Room 325." With these words, she pressed a silvery card into his hands. "Knowing New Paris, I doubt the cleaning staff will have touched the room." She laughed humorlessly. "When you have found the killer, use this transponder to contact me." She handed him another metallic cube, this one gleaming golden. "You have your advance and the rest of the money will be paid you when you have found my brother's murderer and I am satisfactorily done with him or her." With that, she turned once more and vanished into the fog.

"But waittttt..." Darshek's voice faded into the darkness...answered only by silence.

"This looks like the place," Donoval pointed toward the sunken recess in which a sliding, faux-wood door was mounted, metallic streaks peeking through the wood-colored enamel in places where years of sliding back and forth had allowed the coat to be worn down by friction points in the molding on the edge of the entrance. The tarnished, brassy plate at the top of the door, while bedraggled and hanging crooked, bore the numbers "325" still etched in its grimy surface.

Looking down the long-since fallen into disrepair hallway on either side of the door, Darshek nodded in agreement. "Yes, Mr. Leinad. I do believe this is the place." The Old World accent he assumed with these words would have made Donoval laugh if the setting in which they were murmured weren't so stark...the very air seemed to suck the humor from a man's soul like a vampire sucks the blood from his veins.

"'Sherlock Holmes', right?" Donoval asked softly, sliding his hand into his suit pocket to finger his blaster.

"Elementary, my dear Leinad. Now come," Darshek's eyes flashed dangerously as he pulled forth the access card in one hand and his blaster in the other. "The game is afoot!"

Whipping the card through the scanning bay set into the side of the

door's molding, the door rumbled grudgingly to life and slid into the side recess groove, laying wide the inner room.

The stench of death assaulted Darshek's nose as he strode into the darkness, blaster flicking around the dim room...searching for anything that might present danger. Elbowing a light pad on his right, the light panels in the room flickered to life...soaking the room with an antiseptic glow--revealing the ghastly scene before them.

-----To Be Continued!-----