

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: Episode 1, Group B: Palace at Galfor

Author's note: Group B's first episode of the Fantasy Serial.
(Group B: Darshek, played by Jeff...Galengran, played by Jon)

"How long before more reinforcements come?" Darshek asks softly, his brow rising with the question.

"I don't know." Galengran shakes his head, an intense tiredness sunken into his bones. Despite Darshek's mercenary reputation, Galengran had found that he kind of liked the curly-headed rogue...who had been the first person who had shown up at Galfor with the intent to help. Even though Darshek had demanded a huge price to fight for them, Galengran knew he was well worth the price and was exceedingly loyal after he had been hired...plus, he had some special skills which might be extremely useful with this particular need.

"Where did you send the summons to?" Darshek queries, readjusting himself on the pile of pillows he is sprawled across, his dark clothes standing out from the scarlet satin of the pillowcases. He pulls forth a knife and tests the edge of the blade with his thumb, musing silently that this job might not be so bad. Provided he can survive it, the price the Elven Prince is willing to pay is exorbitant... Now, if only any reinforcements would actually show up.

"Everywhere!" The elven prince shakes his red head, changing his seat in the golden throne as he mused angrily at life. "Lord Jex...Eladaine...the Sidhe...I even sent out a summons to Talia Jenea via a dwarf." He makes a face of disdain. "Not that it'll probably get there, what with the reliability of dwarves and all."

"Dwarves aren't so bad! I've met some good ones." Darshek points out.

"Bloody few." Galengran shakes his head. "It's just so annoying...all this happening with the kingdom in such disarray."

"How did it get loose, anyway?" The rogue asks curiously.

"Moron apprentice wizard tried to mix a few song-spells...all but killed himself in the process and released the monstrosity." Galengran reported dismally... "And now I've got to deal with it...and call in any favors I have."

"Well, it's taking awhile." Darshek nods, then gets a thought. "Hey,

how many more of those elven babes can you bring in?"

"Quite a few..." Galengran chuckles softly. "I think that might just be the thing to get our minds off our problems! That one blonde is pretty nice, isn't she?"

"Yep." Darshek nods.

"You think the blonde's into princes?" Galengran asks, quirking an eyebrow.

"Maybe." Darshek smiles. "We'll see."

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

Subj: Episode 2, Group B: The House of Relor

Author's note: Episode 2, Group B: The House of Relor
(Group B: Darshek, played by Jeff; Galengran, played by Jon)

"Now, Cantrice, tell me the whole story...how did the shadow beast get loose?" Galengran asks, trying to get the answer he has been looking for from the assistant sorceress. He looks around at the fairly small family room they are in...fairly minimalistic, at least for Elven standards. A few pillows and lounges arranged neatly around the room...a silver mirror on one of the walls and a crystal candelabra. Nothing else...quite interesting considering the power of the Relor clan. In fact it was due to their power that their daughter, Cantrice, was ever taken into apprenticeship with Xegialle, one of the most powerful sorceresses in all Myarinnayn.

Of course, due to Cantrice's utter stupidity, the shadow beast called the Nyrtzian had been released. Now, it was up to Galengran to figure out what exactly she had done to release it. Darshek has a bored look on his face as he lounges back against the pillows. He's only along for the ride...which is annoying to Galengran, who would love to change places with the rogue at this moment.

"...So, I was trying to combine the spell for washing laundry with the summoning spell for the water elemental, Nyrzial. Y'know, so you could summon the water elemental to do your laundry? Right? Well, as I was singing I saw Beaurnonce walking across the street...and you know how gorgeous he is?" For a second she reverts to a teenage girl and Galengran rolls his eyes in exasperation. "Well, what with all the thought's going through my mind, I guess I confused the water elemental's name with the name of the shadow beast... And all of a sudden, this huge shadow appears and..."

"Like that?" Darshek suddenly points out a window and Galengran notices that a shadow has past over the sun.

Cantrice runs to the window, Galengran following.

"Exactly like that!" Cantrice points toward the sun, in front of which a huge shadow is coalescing.

"Oh, great." Galengran mutters. Darshek rises to his feet and pulls out his scimitar, walking over toward the window.

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

Subj: Episode 3, Group B: Help Wanted!

Author's note: Episode 3, Group B: Help Wanted!
(Group B: Darshek--Jeff; Galengran--Jon; Telanna--Bethany)

"Where did it go?" Galengran asks, the shadow suddenly fleeing toward the horizon and then vanishing.

"Don't know," Darshek shakes his head, his eyes unknowing. "But it's gone."

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

Subj: Episode 4, Group B: An Unknown Answer

Author's note: Episode 4, Group B: An Unknown Answer
(Group B: Darshek--Jeff; Galengran--Jon; Telanna--Bethany)

The bed was soft as air beneath Galengran as he rolled over, glaring at the intruder who had woken him from his midday nap.

"Wh-what do you want?" Galengran asks groggily, the dark shape in the doorway slowly coalescing into Darshek as Galengran's sleep-blurred focused.

"Uh...Galengran, we have a visitor." Darshek's voice is hesitant, as if afraid of how much to mention aloud.

"What sort of vi...Yaaaaawwwwnnnnn!...visitor?" Galengran asks, slowly waking up and coming back to himself. He manages to slump forward into a sitting position on the ensorceledly soft bed, stretching softly.

"A visitor from the Chrrandlish," Darshek replies minimally.

"The...what!?" Galengran exclaims. "An emissary from the Chrrandlish hasn't been reported by a single member of the elven race in nearly two centuries. What on earth is one doing here...now?"

"She claims to be a sorceress...but why she is here, she refused to say

to any but you." Darshek shrugs, his black uniform rustling with the movement. Though, she IS quite attractive, the rogue muses silently to himself...the faintest glimmer of a smile on his lips.

His weariness at once abolished by the revelation of who his visitor represented, Galengran leaps from the bed, his slippers swishing on the polished marble floor as he lands and walks rapidly toward the door. The name of the Chrrandlish ring both fear and hope in his soul, for the Chrrandlish are as much considered base legend as considered an actual race. Galengran remembers the stories he heard as a child less than a hundred years prior: '...they come from far across the Zyrlan Sea...where it is said that they live in a huge, paradise-like island. But no one knows, for the sea furies guard the Zyrlan Sea jealously, allowing passage only to the Chrrandlish...' There were other stories he had heard...about how the people supposedly turned into all manner of beasts, even those who were not sorcerers or sorceresses...that they were powerful--some cruel and others helpful... But the one thing that was predominant in his mind was that they were never to be angered...for they were supposed to have the fieriest of temper.

All these thoughts swirled through Galengran's head as he charged down the halls toward the entrance hall of the palace, Darshek stealthy as a shadow behind him.

Whatever he had been expecting from the emissary of this fabled race, the copper-maned woman standing in the entrance hall was not it. Far from gigantic and looking all powerful, she was a bit shorter than Galengran...and just as slim, though her diagonally-lined green gown concealed most of her body.

"And may I ask you what you want with me, fair one?" Galengran queries, examining her for moments as he does. She appears human at first...though, as Galengran looks at her more closely, he sees that her eyes are oddly green and they each appear to have a single, feline slit biforating the retina. Tiny flaps of skin around the eyes and the slight curve of her mouth make her remind Galengran even more of a cat. As she regards him in turn, her eyes piercing into his sole, he now sees the basis for which the legends he has heard have come...and finds that he is starting to believe them.

"I am Telanna." The woman returns softly, her voice more a purr than speech. "And I have come to help."

Galengran and Darshek both look at one another in surprise.

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

Subj: Episode 5, Group B: A Purrrr-fect Solution

Author's note: Episode 5, Group B: A Purrrr-fect Solution
(Group B: Darshek--Jeff; Galengran--Jon; Telanna--Bethany)

"The Chrrandlish Dianoto has decided that now is the time to return a debt long due the Elven Nation." Telanna explains as she lounges on a pillow, a feline position to her reclining body. She sips a cup of tea that Galengran's servants have prepared for her.

"Dianoto?" Darshek asks curiously, looking straight into the emissary's eyes from the pillow he occupies diagonally from her.

"Like the Elven High Counsel," Telanna similes softly. "Or the Sidhe of the Fae. The Dianoto leads the Chrrandlish."

"Ah...I see." Darshak nods. "Do you work for them? The Dianoto, I mean?"

"I'm their 'shadonkarru.'" She purrs the word, her green eyes sparkling in amusement a moment and then are sober. "Their high sorceress."

"We must be owed a great favor, for them to send someone as powerful as you," surmises Galengran from his throne.

"Or someone as lovely..." A smile flickers across Darshek's lips.

"Why thank you, I'm sure," Telanna's eyes flick from Galengran to Darshek, a pink tint coloring her ivory skin.

"And in what way do you plan to help us?" Galengran queries, wonderingly.

"By capturing the shadow creature which you have let loose." Telanna replies simply.

"Can you so simply do it as you imply from your tone?" Darshek's eyes narrow in appraisal.

"Not without help, no," she admits, turning her head at an angle and returning his look. "However, if it can be herded to me, I can capture it...in this." She reaches within a small pocket in her ornate green gown and pulls forth a diamond that is as white as light itself.

"What is that?" Galengran wonders allowed, on the edge of his throne now.

"A 'rhourshhaw,'" She hisses softly. "A shadow catcher."

"What'll you do with it after you manage to catch it?" Darshek asks, his dark eyes probing. "Destroy it."

"I admit that my reason for coming here is two-fold," she smiles in abashment. "Both to help you and fulfill my people's debt to your nation. But also because the sorcerers of my land have long theorized of the power of shadow...the chance for them to retrieve one of these

shadow creatures that has escaped from limbo, would be most helpful to them."

"For testing?" Galengran assumes, nodding.

"Yes." Telanna nods briefly. "Perhaps they can find a way to destroy them in the future from this study."

"That which is destructive is rarely studied in order to learn how to destroy it as much as it is studied in order to learn how to destroy FROM it." Darshek philosophizes and he and the emissary's eyes lock for a moment, before she looks away uncomfortably.

"Well regardless, it looks as though are problem is just about solved." Galengran sighs relievedly, nodding in proposed agreement. "Perhaps we can have the whole beast swallowed up and on it's way over the sea with our guest by the time the other reinforcements arrive...and we can have a dinner party for them. Maybe bring out the dancing girls...a feast...theater...the works."

"Something tells me it won't be that easy," Darshek surmises.

The emissary says nothing.

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

Subj: Episode 6, Group B: Dance in the Dark

Author's note: Episode 6, Group B: Dance in the Dark
(Group B: Darshek--Jeff; Galengran--Jon; Telanna--Bethany)

"The shadows cling to the trees in twilight," Telanna looks over her shoulder, pointing toward the shadows.

"So you come up here to dance, do you?" Darshek asks, looking into the shadows of the woods near the plateau... Galengran sent the rogue to guard the emissary while she performs some ritual. Why he was here exactly, he didn't know. It wasn't like the emissary was likely to get attacked or anything. Oh, well, he thought, it was just another thing to do to pay the bills... Besides, if Tellanna managed to trap the shadow creature herself, he wouldn't have to risk his hide doing it and the money for his services was already guaranteed as soon as the beast was captured.

"Sort of...it's called 'arrata,'" she nods, her hair swishing with the movement. "It's a dance...sometimes for training, sometimes for spell song dance, and sometimes for sensing... I use it now to sense whether or not their are any approaching."

"Sounds good." Darshek replies briefly, a bit uncomfortable around the use of magic.

"Just a few moments," Telanna says briefly. She pulls her heels together, bows, and begins a rhythmic dance...a meld of control and movement in her. She hums softly, singing quietly as she moves. Her feet slash blurs and her arms whirl around she dances...moments pass as the ritual goes on. Darshek finds himself captivated by her feline grace as she moves through the dance...odd creatures, these Chrrandlish, he muses.

Finally, the dance stops and she bows once more. A worried look is on her face.

"Sense the shadow beast?" Darshek queries, uncertain of her expression.

"No..." She shakes her head. "However, we're gonna have company...and not anything good." She heads across the plateau in the direction of the palace.

"What do you mean?" Darshek inquires.

"A band of assassins...on their way here!" She shakes her head, not stopping.

"Great." Darshek speeds after, then under his breath he remarks: "Why can't I ever make money the easy way?"

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

Subj: Episode 7, Group B: Dusk Before Dawn

Author's note: Episode 7, Group B: Dusk Before Dawn
(Group B: Darshek--Jeff; Galengran--Jon; Telanna--Bethany)

"OK, all together!" Galengran calls as he physically helps three of the palace servants pull down the huge crossbar to lock the palace gates.

Telanna bursts breathlessly into the courtyard, having run down the flight of stairs from the upper stories. "All windows are closed and barred, with their shutters securely latched."

"Good," Galengran grunts as they finally heave the crossbar into place.

Darshek appears from another corner of the castle. "Lookouts appear clear...all guards are in their assigned positions. The lookout hatch is now shuttered and barred." The rogue's voice assumes a military cadence in the time of trouble.

"Good!" Galengran nods as he looks from the sweating rogue to the emissary, then he turns to the servants who still wait by the doors. "Send all the servants and maids down to wait in the dungeons until I signal that all is clear."

"Alright." A swarthy looking elf with silver hair and big silver eyes nods, turning toward a side hallway which exits in the darkness.
"C'mon. Let's get to work."

"Any wenchin'?" One of the servants whispered in a voce soto as they left.

"No, Sendarin!" The leader bites out as they're voices fade away. "Get your mind on your work. They're'll be time enough..." His voice dims to inaudible as they move out of range.

"So, now what do we do?" Telanna asks, looking from the rogue to the prince.

"We go to the throne room and wait," Galengran shrugs. "You said these men who approach are assassins...if so, they are here to kill one of the three of us. If we hide, they won't give up...they'll simply kill anyone they find until they find us. I won't let those in my care be killed by those who would kill me."

"You don't think the guards are going to be able to stop them?" Darshek queries, an eyebrow raised. "Or the battlements or locks?"

"Not really, no." Galengran shrugs again. "It's a chance they will...but I doubt it. If they're any kind of assassins at all, they'll get in. So, we'll just have to defend ourselves when that happens."

"I suppose so," Telanna nods, her eyes widening softly in thought.

Together the three pad into the sitting area of the throne room and sit down upon the pillows to wait...with even Galengran giving up his throne.

"Telanna, would it be possible for you to put a guarding spell on us?" Darshek asks, surveying the room. "Or a warning spell, in case we happen to fall asleep."

"I believe so," Telanna nods, then begins singing a melodic tune in her native language. The music is exotic and the words are unknown and feline, but, in a few moments, a crackling green envelope of energy surrounds them.

They sit down to wait, wondering what will attack from the shadows....time starting to drag even now. With every creak, they look around...wondering.

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

Subj: Episode 8, Group B: Deep Thoughts

Author's note: Episode 8, Group B: Deep Thoughts

(Group B: Darshek--Jeff; Galengran--Jon; Telanna--Bethany)

"...And, after my parents died, I was raised by the Dalnyr tribe." Darshek concludes, his hands folded on his lap.

"That must have been a hard thing," Telanna reiterates, her eyes glimmering softly in the soft light.

Hours have past since the candlelit vigil started...and still no sign of the assassins. Calm has rested so fully on the throne room that Galengran has curled up like a puppy on one of the pillows and fallen fast asleep. Like fugitives in a storm, the emissary and the rogue are huddled on their pillows near one another, chatting tersely over the past. It was odd how hours of uncertain waiting could cause people who had no reason to trust one another to start talking about some of the most personal aspects of themselves.

"It was...I always missed my parents," Darshek admits, playing idly with a dagger in his hands.

"I'm sorry," Telanna's brows furrow in sympathy.

"Yeah, well...it's just the way it is," Darshek looks away uncomfortably, trying not to admit his feelings. "Wished it hadn't happened." He shrugs softly, then looks through the candlelight at her. "How 'bout you? What was it like growing up with the ca--um..." He pauses a moment. "I mean, Chrrandlish."

"The 'cat-people', you nearly said?" She queries, arching an eyebrow.

"Well, um," he stutters, looking down at the floor.

"It's OK, I understand that our people are unknown and many names we are called by." She smiles understandingly. "I'm not offended."

"Good," he smiles honestly back at her.

"It wasn't so different, I guess," the sorceress raises her copper brows again. "Except that I was taken away from my parents...as opposed to them dying."

"Why were you taken from them?" Darshek asks curiously.

"Because the Dianoto recognized me as a nearly perfect match for a potential shadonkaru," she shrugs simply. "They took me away when I was barely five...raised me as a ward of the Dianoto, trained me as a sorceress. Eventually, I became the best of any of those who received the training and was forced to take my place when I turned a score of rotations."

"Was that very long ago?" Darshek queries.

"No...very little time ago," she shakes her head sadly. "This mission is supposed to be my first official act as the Shadonkarru." She looks up toward the ceiling. "You know what I remember most before I was taken?"

"What?" He wonders.

"My mother's hair...long and straight and glossy, like the wings of a shalla," she smiles at the memory. "A bird like one of your ravens, I suppose. She was very beautiful and--"

CRAAACCKKKKK!

The sound was unmistakable, and both looked up toward the ceiling...in time to see shadows swinging out into space above them!

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

Subj: Episode 9, Group B: Shadow Boxing

Author's note: Episode 9, Group B: Shadow Boxing
(Group B: Darshek--Jeff; Galengran--Jon; Telanna--Bethany)

The assassins fall to the ground like shadows...the first two consumed in a screaming wail and incinerating green flame by the magical shield around the three inhabitants of the throne room. The rest fall beside the shielded groups, their masks making them all but impossible to identify as human...dark as pitch they are and seeming without shape, though it must be a trick of the candlelight.

"Up! Up, Galangren!" Telanna yells, rousing the slumbering prince and jumping to her feet. "The shields can't hold much longer and we are surrounded! Keep your wits about you and fight!"

At these words, the prince leaps to his feet, rips his sword from its sheath and prepares to fight...even as another one of the assassins attacks the shield. While the assassin is consumed in green flame, the shield evaporates finally with the attack...and like waters through a suddenly broken dam, the assassins pour in on the group.

Darshek's long scimitar is already out and parrying wildly, slashing back the assassins.

"Back to back, boys, lest they surround us!" Telanna yells, drawing a long, straight sword from beneath her gown...it's hilt nearly a foot long and a bronzed circle it's guard. it's gleaming blade only on one side.

Knowing no better strategy, the two men agree and they all push their backs together, even as their swords parry and strike. Telanna's long

straight sword flashes like lightening...crackles of fire glancing as blades clash. Despite their severe outnumbering, they are doing well...dispatching the dastardly fiends rapidly, even as more poured in.

Suddenly, even in their successful strategy, a man drops from the roof above...his feet kicking into the heads of Telanna and Darshek as he falls. As the emissary and rogue go flying, the dark man lands behind Galengran, wraps his arm around his kneck, and pulls a dagger to to the prince's throat with the other hand.

As the Telanna and Darshek look up dazed at their suddenly captured prince, the assassin who holds him says: "Give me the shadow beast or your precious prince dies!"

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

Subj: Episode 10, Group B & D: On the Fly

Episode 10, Group B & D: On the Fly

(Group B: Galengran -- Jon, Darshek -- Jeff, Telanna -- Bethany)

(Group D: Krembo -- John Coody, Torgall -- Doug Zirby, Jenu -- Wesley Skiles, Fliton -- Chris Harrell)

The knife draws lower on Galengran's throat... The shaved-headed assassin grits his teeth, his eyes flashing fire.

"Now, are you gonna tell me where it is, buddy, or am I gonna have to give you another hole to breath out of?" The assassin chuckles, his black silk clothing rustles with the movement. In the shadows of the grand throne room, the three remaining assassins huddle amongst their slain colleagues.

"I don't know w-what you're talking ab--ughhh!" The assassin presses his thumb against the elven prince's throat, causing Galengran to abruptly gasp for breath.

"I think ya' do...least, that's what me and my mates are banking on," the assassin grits his teeth. "The Nyrtzian will bring a fair price to our employers... We know you released it. Just cough it up and you go back to breathing the way God entended."

As these words were uttered, Darshek slowly rises to his feet. Telanna looks at him worriedly, wondering what he's about to try.

"Oh, buddy, tell me your boy isn't going to try to attack me..." The knave shakes his head. "I don't want to kill anymore people than I have to, OK? Tell him to drop the scimitar..."

However, the words are barely out of the cutthroat's mouth before Darshek's scimitar clatters to the floor, his fingers releasing them. His mouth forms words and a chord of music like a deepened harp rolls from his lips.

“Send forth elven prince to someplace hence,
Bring forth in place someone who shall not wince.
But see restitution for the wrongs of these knaves,
And run them out, kill them now, or make them slaves.”

The words trumpet like a wacry and magic stirs forth...coalescing as amethyst light and wrapping around the feet of Galengran. As the magic occurs, the rogue--unused to doing anything magical--falls to the floor, exhausted.

The flesh of the elven prince ripples and the clothing transmutes into something harder...inflexible and glittering. The morphing figure is much larger than Galengran...taller in height and wider in breadth...and the assassin is pulled into the air as the figure grows taller. The strange play of light stops flickering and the man who now stands in the elven prince's place is a massive knight...his chest plate branded with a flaming dragon in chartreuse and crimson and his mail glittering in the candlelight. His eyes gleam like cut sapphire through the helmet which wraps over his head in a mass of intricate carvings. The sword which hangs from his hip is nearly four feet long and glints silver.

“What the heck!” The man intones, quickly realizing that wherever he was a minute ago, he is no longer. He reaches his massive, gauntleted hands to the now-seemingly insignificant forearm which vainly attempts to cut into his chain-mailed throat...bowing forward, the knight throws the man off his back as though he weighs nothing at all. The assassin flies forward, rolling like a sack of meal across the throne room floor. “Where am I? What wizardry is this?”

“Necessary wizardry!” Telanna yells, rising to her feet with her sword. “Now, attack!”

The knight's eyes narrow a moment, but he draws the tremendous sword from its sheath, spinning on his heel even as the remaining assassins attack. His broadsword's massive blade shatters through the weaker ones of his opponents. Apparently misliking the thought of killing, the fighter then proceeds to punch his opponent in the head with one of his gauntleted fists...knocking them to unconsciousness rather than to their deaths.

Telanna's blade whirls about her like quicksilver, clashing with the blade of one of the tall, spindly assassins that attacked. Her mouth begins to form words to a song of sleep, even as she fights, and she lets go the magic...the assassin falling asleep even as they fight. She wishes she had thought to use the spellsong before in the fight...but her mind had blanked. Now, Darshek has sent the prince away in his effort to protect the man...and has exhausted himself... And who knew if the replacement warrior that has been summoned would be trustworthy after this loan fight was completed.

She glances over at Darshek...who is still out cold...then over at the

knight, who is just dispatching the last assassin with a heavily mailed foot to the head.

“Frappez-vous vous tête avec ma piéd!” The knight mutters in some strange language, glancing around to see if their are anymore. Seeing that there are none, he turns on his heel and asks Telanna, his voice soft but dangerous: “Now, just out of curiosity, would you mind telling me where I happen to be?”

“Right now?” She arches a copper eyebrow, her blue-green eyes glinting. “You’re in Galfor.”

(First Appearance in Group B: Dragonfire -- Jeremy)

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

Subj: **Episode 11, Group B: New Transitions**

Episode 11, Group B & D: New Transitions

(Group B: Talia -- Hilary, Darshek -- Jeff, Telanna -- Bethany, Dragonfire -- Jeremy)

(Group D: Krembo -- John Cooty, Torgall -- Doug Zirby, Jenu -- Wesley Skiles, Fliton -- Chris Harrell)

“As I say, we appreciate your help,” Telanna reiterates, smiling. “However, we can’t really have you staying here right now, for we need the prince back if we are ever to capture the Nyrtzian.”

“So, you want our help capturing this Nyrtzian? That’s why we were summoned?” The knight brushes a hand past his brow, curious. “Isn’t that like a Water Elemental or something?”

“Why, yes, yes it is.” Telanna’s eyes narrow slyly, and she pierces Darshek’s eyes with hers lest he contradict her. “Isn’t that right, Darshek? A simple water elemental?”

“Uh...yeah...I guess.” Darshek shrugs, confused by the deception. After waking up, he has been introduced to the knight and the situation has been explained. However, why they are lying to someone who is on his way to ally himself with their search for the shadow beast anyway, he doesn’t know. But he keeps his mouth shut, nonetheless.

“So, while we will need your help when your group arrives here, we don’t need it so much yet...but we do need the prince, so that we can begin preparations.” Telanna concludes. “Sort of preproduction...that way, after all the troup arrive, we will be able to go right from their.”

“So, what do you need me to do?” Dragonfire asks, his brow arching again.

“Just stand there...while Darshek sends you back to your realm, bringing back the prince in your place.” Telanna explains, smiling smoothly.

“I...I will?” Darshek sputters, unsure that he will be able to do any such thing. He’s never been highly magical and that spell he tried was only one of a handful he had picked up in the band of traveling rogues in his youth. Trying to repeat it again scares him greatly... Far better to use a scimitar which can be held in the hands than some intangivel magic which can barely be controlled.

“Sure you will...you must put right this,” Telanna explains softly, a touch of exasperation touching her voice. “After all, you did summon him.”

“Alright,” Darshek nods and stands up straighter, feeling a bit queasy as he looks out. He then feels the song in his mind and it unfurls like a banner...the reversal song which must be sung. It flows from him freely, pouring out...connecting to his strength like lifeblood and ebbing his strength with the song.

At the end, he slumps to the ground...for the second time in less than 12 hours. And the purpled light coalesces, wrapping around Dragonfire’s armor...

The knight’s armor warps and morphs, shrinking in size as he goes... Down to the size of Galengran... And then, smaller still!

And, when the morphing finally stops, the battered visage of a red-maned faery looks out at the rogue and the emissary. Her green eyes flash and she whips forth a dagger from beneath her flowing cape, her leather bodice rustling. She glances at the marble floor of the throne room...taking it all in...the pillows...the unconscious assassins...the dim light...

And, for the second time in less than twelve hours, someone new grits out: “Who are you and where in the world am I?!”

“Long story,” Telanna sighs...looking at the unconscious Darshek. “We can’t keep doing things like this.”

Following the emissary’s eyes, the faery looks down at the unconscious rogue...and, to her mild surprise, she smiles softly, her eyes pricking in interest as she breathes: “Well, what do we have here?”

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

Subj: Episode 12, Group B: Warriors

Episode 12, Group B: Warriors
(Group B: Talia -- Hilary, Darshek -- Jeff, Telanna -- Bethany)

Darshek mentally counts things off in his head... He's throne the three living assassins in the dungeons. The bald headed assassin wasn't among

the living or the dead, so he must have escaped in the melee, the rogue surmises. Of course, he cleaned up the bodies of the dead, throwing them outside to decompose or maybe be used as fertilizer. He's already attended to the servants and released them...

Now he slumps against a pillow, tired. It would've been a lot easier to accomplish these feats if the emissary or this new faerie that had appeared last night had helped... But they hadn't. When Darshek woke up, they were already up. They weren't cleaning up or anything...no, from what Darshek could tell, they were fighting.

Not really, or so they would gasp every time he queried them...just trying to "relieve some of the tension with a little sparring." Sparring with blades, it should be noted! Darshek shakes his head at the thought of it, the cool floor chilling his back which is sprawled off the edge of the pillow.

They had been relieving their tension for well over four hours...scarcely taking time off every so often to catch their breath before they were at it again--Telanna with her single-edged sword and the fae with her daggers. The grit in their teeth and the gleam in their eyes didn't seem like they were relieving any tension while they battled across the floors of the palace--rather the tension between them seemed to build.

"Are you sure you two don't need anything?" Darshek asks curiously as the battling duo staggers past him. "I could get some water or something if you would like?"

"No," Telanna grits out, whipping her sword at the fae's head.

"I'm fine," Talia, the fae, agrees, her daggers blurring as she deflects the blade.

Darshek shrugs, watching them fight. Both women are in gear for the fight, with the fae stripped down to a leather bodice and breeches while the emissary is wearing a jerkin of emerald and pants of forest green. Both are drenched in sweat, their clothes plastered to them as they battle back and forth, their long manes soaked and hanging in wet tangles down their backs.

"Nothing like a good fight, after all," Talia throws out spontaneously, feinting with a low blade while whipping the opposite blade at Telanna's head.

"Really works up the adrenaline," the emissary returns, blocking low then high before counter attacking.

"You two gonna be done before long?" Darshek asks, growing rapidly bored with the ceaseless skirmish.

"Maybe...don't know." Telanna shrugs, her mind on catching another

dagger blade with her sword.

Darshek stays around and watches them for a few more minutes until they battle their way out of the room, then, stretching he gets up and wanders off. Maybe those servant girls Galengran introduced him to the other night might be interested in talking with him.

The fae and emissary fight on, unrealizing.

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

Subj: Episode 13, Group B: Misdirected Interests

Episode 13, Group B & D: Misdirected Interests

(Group B: Talia -- Hilary, Darshek -- Jeff, Telanna -- Bethany)

(Group D: Torgall -- Doug Zirby)

The blades flash back and forth...weakly now, for the sun is setting and they have rested little all day. Telanna wonders what on earth the fight is for...she has long forgotten and she can no longer feel her feet, for they are numb from slamming into the marble floor of the palace all day as she has dashed here and there.

She vaguely recalls the forest faerie implying that she wasn't good enough to truly call herself a warrior. That she had received all her power through her magic and would be helpless without it. Perhaps, the fae had implicated, the rogue wouldn't have had to try to summon anyone if Telanna had been better able to fight in the first place. The emissary had angered easily at that and, before either knew exactly why, they had decided to prove their skills in a slashing duel to first blood. Neither really wanted to kill one another, but first blood would prove who was better...and, for some reason, Telanna desperately wanted to prove that she was better.

Maybe if she was better...maybe things would be better. The emissary had always felt the need to prove herself...always felt that she never was quite as good as she needed to be. And, suddenly, after years of being doubted and second-guessed, this fight had become almost pivotal in her existence. What the fight had started for or why it continued was of little importance, so long as she won. Maybe, just maybe, if she won this 'bout she would feel like a champion...like she was special, maybe. She shakes her head--not wanting to think about it--her soaked hair snapping like whips with the violent movement.

Her arm feels like lead as she raises and parries with her chrrinda...again the jolt like fire goes through her arm as the blades clash and her nerves scream in protest. Everything on the edges of her vision is starting to dissolve into blackness with the tunnel vision focusing before her at her opponent...the blades the only players in the theater of her sight. If the fight doesn't stop soon, she's going to pass out.

Even as the blackness of exhaustion overtakes her body, a strong arm suddenly wraps itself around her neck.

"No one moves...or this one dies!" The words are hissed through clenched teeth and Telanna realizes where the bald-headed assassin finally ended up.

-----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 then 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. "Pl...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!-----