

Consolation

Zerafine pushed back her hood, waiting in vain for a breeze to cool her sweat-dampened hair. Even in the shade of the wild olive tree, the air was hot and still and tasted of dust. She removed her hood and cowl entirely and tried to use the crimson fabric to fan herself. It flopped heavily in her hands, barely stirring the air, and she dropped it on the dusty ground and leaned back against the gnarled tree's trunk. The dry rattling of cicadas in the silent, burning afternoon was counterpoint to the blood thrumming through her temples, as impatient to continue the journey as she was.

Beside her, his head pillowed on his rucksack, Gerrard grunted. "It was your idea to travel through the heat of the day," he said, eyes closed. His white-blond hair was dark with sweat and road dust. His longstaff lay on the hard, parched ground beside him, ready to hand.

"The morning was overcast," Zerafine muttered. "How was I supposed to know this ridiculous southern weather was so changeable?"

"Because the innkeeper said it was? Because the woman at the grocer's stall told us it would be hot by midday? Or possibly because that little boy called you mad for dressing so warmly—"

"All right, I get it, you can stop now." Zerafine picked up her discarded hood, woven of fine wool, its bright dye undimmed by three years of use in all weathers. "I did feel sorry for the boy. He was too young to know better."

Gerrard opened one eye and squinted up at her. "Thanks to his mother's heavy hand, he'll know to respect the red robe now. Not that her hand was all that heavy. I imagine he was more surprised than hurt by the spanking."

"I still don't enjoy seeing children be made to cry over whom I serve." Zerafine twisted the soft, heavy fabric in her hands. "You know, we could backtrack to that tavern. It's only a few miles away."

"I told you, I didn't like the way they were looking at us. There's no law out here between the cities, and that hood isn't a guarantee of protection. Those farmers looked like they were just stupid

enough to try to assault us. We can wait a few hours here and then move on.” Gerrard passed her his water skin. “Drink up. You look like you’ve sweated out half the fluids in your system.”

Zerafine drank, made a face at the stale, leathery taste of the water, and handed it back. “I can’t sleep in this weather,” she complained, “or I’d nap the time away.”

“I can’t sleep because someone won’t stop whingeing about how miserable she is,” Gerrard muttered. Zerafine slapped his shoulder, not lightly. He merely scooted a short distance away from her and covered his eyes with one forearm. Zerafine rolled her eyes. She shrugged out of her outer robe, woven of the same bright red wool as her hood, and wadded it behind her lower back. She shifted around, trying to find a comfortable spot, or at least one where the knots in the trunk weren’t digging into her spine. Lying on the ground with her hair as sweaty-damp as it was would only make her more uncomfortable later. Despite her complaint, she eventually managed to drift into a restless state somewhere between sleep and awareness.

The sound of running feet brought her to full consciousness, and she quickly pulled on her now crumpled robe and shook the dust from her cowl before settling it over her shoulders and pulling up her hood. A boy of about twelve or thirteen came into view from the direction toward which she and Gerrard had been traveling. He was running too fast, she thought, faster than was healthy in this heat, his sandals slapping up puffs of dust with each stride. Zerafine nudged Gerrard, who came awake in one instant and was on his feet in the next. Zerafine remained seated, watching the boy from within the depths of her hood.

The boy showed no signs that he’d noticed the travelers until he was almost past, sparing them barely a glance. Then the glance turned to a full-blown stare, and the runner stumbled and nearly fell because he could not take his eyes from Zerafine. “*Thelis*,” he said, and coughed, his voice cracked with dust. “*Thelis*,” he said again, “madama, it’s a miracle finding you here. I was sent to find men—I come from the farm just up the road—“

“Slow down,” Zerafine said, pitching her voice to carry beyond the shrouding wool. “You need my services?”

The boy nodded. “I was meant to bring back men to take it by force, if they could, because the *theloi* of Atenas, begging your pardon, but they travel where they will—“

“*Slow down,*” Zerafine commanded, and the boy fell silent. “I take it,” she continued, “that you have a ghost?”

The boy nodded. Then he began to cry. “It hurt my sister,” he said, “and it’s trying to take the tool shed apart, stone by stone. Please. Help.”

Zerafine, servant of Death, almost held out her hand to the boy, but knew he’d be afraid to take it. “Lead me there,” she said instead.

The villa lay at the top of a gentle rise, half a mile beyond the bend in the road. Gerrard caught Zerafine’s eye just long enough to deliver an unspoken but nevertheless eloquent message about how a little more endurance would have gotten them a far less dusty resting place against the heat of the day. Zerafine made a face at him.

The boy, whose name was Duiliou, was obviously impatient at keeping to Zerafine’s slower pace—running in this heat, in her woolen robe, would exhaust her. He trotted just ahead of them until the villa was in sight, then raced away to spread the news of her coming. Zerafine thrust a hand into her bag and gingerly felt the round edges of her *telamen*, their rough, stony surfaces bone-chilly despite the heat. She rarely needed them these days, but a ghost that could move stone would not go quietly.

By the time they reached the villa’s gate, several men and women had flung open the broad, low doors and were standing around in a loose, nervous knot. One of the women, her head covered with a white kerchief and her eyes reddened, stepped forward.

“*Thelis*, welcome. I—we need your help. My husband—” Her jaw clenched, and she closed her eyes briefly. Zerafine’s heart ached for her.

“May I enter?” she asked, and the woman’s face turned the same dull red as her weeping eyes.

“I’m so sorry. Please, be welcome to this house. My name is Trenya.” She made a formal bow, fist centered on her chest, her neck bent low in a gesture of respect far greater than Zerafine usually

received. The men and women backed well away from the gate to let her pass—well, that was common enough. Zerafine returned the bow, though less formally; Gerrard remained upright, scanning the villa for possible threats. Zerafine thought that, despite these people's fear of her, she and Gerrard would be safe here, but Gerrard's vigilance was part of his duties and had saved their skins more than once.

The villa and its many outbuildings were well-kept, prosperous looking, freshly stuccoed in creamy white and roofed in rust-red tiles. Zerafine estimated its population at around fifty, and by the faces of the people hovering nervously several safe feet from her, they were a large extended family. Beyond the farthest buildings she could see the rows of grapevines that were the family's source of income. Yes, there near the rear of the compound was a winepress, and the main building had large doors set into the foundation where the finished product would be stored. Many of the dwellings had sigils for Hanu carved to the right and Arieta to the left of their doors, a good combination for farmers. This was a successful vineyard. An angry ghost would have thrown them into confusion even if it hadn't been related to them.

A young girl with a bandaged head ran to Trenya and clutched her around the waist. Trenya stopped in the middle of the yard and gathered the child into her arms. "What do you need?" she asked Zerafine, and her voice was weary. "I don't even know what happens next. Should I take you to it? Do you—is there anything we should do? We had been planning to trap it, bury it if we could, but now--"

"Shall we sit?" Zerafine said, and indicated chairs arranged neatly under a trellis woven with thick vines. The mob of onlookers drifted after them as if Zerafine had sails and they were skiffs tethered to her by invisible ropes. Trenya beckoned to one of the men, who joined them with some reluctance. He was lean, weathered, with ash-gray hair and rough hands that were stained purple around the nail beds and in the deepest creases of his palms. He took a chair as far from Zerafine as he could manage without being rude. Fear of Atenas's servants was one thing; rudeness could be fatal. "This is my uncle Causiliou," Trenya said. "He's the farm manager, and the head of our house."

"I grieve with you," Zerafine uttered the ritual phrase, meaning it with all her heart. "I am sorry that your loss has been compounded this way. Can you tell me what happened?"

Causiliou took over from Trenya, whose eyes had begun to tear up again. “Giar died three days ago,” he said, “fell down the stairs to the cellar and cracked his head on the stones. We buried him two days ago in the family plot—” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, at something beyond a handful of storage sheds—“and there was no trouble until this morning. Catalia here—” he gestured at the child on Trenya’s lap— “went to the tool shed for garden shears and ran back screaming. She had blood running from a gash on her scalp, looked like a rock had hit her. Then we heard it. The shed is solid stone, but the ghost was knocking the stones loose and throwing itself against it, circling it, making this...keening sound all the while. We got it shut up inside the shed, but you can still hear it banging around in there when you’re close enough.”

Trenya covered her mouth with both hands and started to sob. The little girl buried her face in her mother’s yellow linen blouse. Zerafine risked laying a hand atop the woman’s head. Trenya didn’t flinch, which meant either that she was too far gone in grief to notice, or she simply didn’t care what a *thelis* of Atenas might do to her.

“Stay here,” she told the woman. “Keep her here,” she told Causiliou. “Duiliou, come with me,” she called, knowing he was in the crowd even though she couldn’t see him. Duiliou emerged, looking terrified. “It’s all right,” Zerafine said. “I just want you to show me where it happened. The rest of you, don’t follow.” It was an unnecessary warning.

They followed Duiliou over to the cellar doors, and Zerafine waited while Gerrard hauled them open. Zerafine took a few cautious steps down the worn steps into the cool darkness, but had to wait for her eyes to adjust before she could proceed further. Duiliou stayed aboveground. Well, it was his father who’d died here, after all. She chose not to force him. Though the light was dim, she could still make out traces of blood on the flagstones. Zerafine knelt, spat on the ground, and swabbed the stains with a small piece of fabric that she then put into her bag. Strange, that the ghost hadn’t manifested here. She sniffed the air, smelled nothing that shouldn’t be in a wine cellar, and returned upstairs. “Now take me to the tool shed,” she told Duiliou.

Duiliou led Zerafine and Gerrard around behind a smallish house and past the stables to where a broad stone building stood. It shook, just a little bit, and the sound of stone cracking against stone rattled the walls, threading through the round stones of the shed held together with, to Zerafine's eyes, entirely too little mortar. She heard Gerrard crack his neck; the popping sound always got on her nerves, but it was beyond her abilities to make him stop the habit.

The ghost wailed again, and Duiliou paled. "Do I have to stay?" he asked, and Zerafine could hear the tears in his voice.

"No. Go back to the others. Tell them I'll return when it's finished and that they are absolutely forbidden to come back here, no matter what they hear. Go on." Duiliou didn't need another reminder; he took off like a deer chased by a starving wolf.

"How close do you want me?" Gerrard asked. He set his rucksack down at the corner of the tool shed and dug through it for the lightweight, flexible plates of reddish-black *seicorum* that constituted his armor. *Seicorum* ore was created by ghosts from the matter they accreted, making it extremely rare. The superstitious wore amulets made of *seicorum* to avert the gaze of Atenas, and some people wore it as jewelry, but its true value lay in its one unique property: *seicorum* repelled anything else made of *seicorum*, metal or ore. Zerafine's robe was lined with a fine, flexible *seicorum* mesh, and Gerrard's armor allowed him to stand in the middle of the fiercest ghost as if were a mere breeze. Gerrard would need the armor if Zerafine lost control.

Zerafine approached the tool shed, watched it tremble as the ghost struck the wall from the inside. "Don't you think this is a little too strong for a three-day-dead ghost?"

"I don't think anything. That's your job. But...yes, I do."

"Something else is going on here. This is going to be difficult." She stepped away, let out a deep breath, and looked around. "Guess who gets to open the door?"

Gerrard sighed. "Just tell me when." His armor plates scraped a metallic chorus as he took up a position beside the door, a slab of oak on large, rusty metal hinges. Its handle was a simple metal ring below a latch pin as broad as her thumb that bit deep into the wooden doorpost. The door looked like it

weighed as much as Gerrard did. Whoever had built the tool shed had built it to last in a much harsher climate than the gentle southern hills.

Zerafine lowered herself to a sitting position about ten feet from the door, cross-legged, and emptied the contents of her bag in front of her. The empty bowl, the size and shape of her cupped palm and fingers, symbolizing a life now finished. The tripod, centered on the bowl, representing balance. Both were carved from blue-streaked travertine and roughened to prevent them from freezing the skin from her fingers. She drew her steel-hilted knife from the soft leather sheath at her side, then, after a moment's consideration, put it back. The violence of even a symbolic bloodletting would be useless against a violent ghost; it would either fail to draw its attention or would draw its attention far too well. After another moment's thought, she removed the knife again and laid it to one side with its point toward her. The knife edge as focus, the point as warning; she needed all the symbolism she could invent.

She upended the six inch tall tripod so the three legs pointed into the air and nestled the bowl between the tripod's legs carefully, so it would stay balanced—much more difficult, and therefore more potent a symbol, than the right way around. She folded the bloodstained scrap of linen and dropped it into the bowl, then added a few violet grains from a cork-stoppered stone vial and a dash of pale gray powder which she was careful not to inhale. She picked up her firestarter and stowed the rest of the items away, then rubbed the yellow dust off her hands onto her crossed legs where her tunic peeked out from beneath her crimson robe. “I need some water,” she told Gerrard, and he tossed her the waterskin, which sloshed as she caught it and spilled a few drops over her hand. She poured a careful stream along the ground between herself and the telamen, turning the yellow dust into a muddy paste. With her right pinky finger she drew a few quick symbols: the broken circle, the intersecting arcs, and, yes, the squared cross. Life interrupted, paths crossing, and power contained. Death had no symbol, because it was everywhere.

“Once I light the fire, open the door and get behind it. I don't want it going for you.” Gerrard nodded. He took hold of the ring with one hand and the latch pin with the other. Zerafine took three deep, centering breaths, then pulled the crimson hood low on her head to protect her face from the *seicorum* ore. The telamen and the mud-drawn symbols were all that remained within her field of vision. She snapped

the firestarter once, twice, and on the second time a spark fell on the folded linen. Where it touched the powders, it flared up with a blue flame that stank of vinegar and burnt sugar. The linen caught fire slowly, its edges curling red-orange fading to black. She heard the pin scrape free and the door slam open. The ghost screamed, and then it was upon her, drawn by the fumes and its fury at her presence.

The ghost engulfed her, its pain and anger shrieking an unearthly cacophony that rattled her bones. She could feel the *seicorum* ore sheer away from her robe, saw the stones knock the tripod on its side—it was like being at the center of a swarm of fist-sized wasps whose nest had been not only kicked but crushed underfoot. The ghost's few hours of confinement had driven its madness to a point Zerafine had never seen before. Ghosts forgot who they'd been, forgot the way to the courts of death, lost themselves in disjointed memories of the life they had once had.

It was Zerafine's calling to put them back together again.

Had she feared the ghost, her fear might have destroyed them both, but she felt nothing but sorrow for the agonized creature who struck at her repeatedly with its too-substantial *seicorum* body. It should not have been so powerful, but that was a question for another time. She opened her heart's eye wide and let compassion fill her, then reached out and picked up the cup, which had fallen out of the tripod when it was knocked over. The scraps of cloth had blown away in the maelstrom. Zerafine lifted it in both hands and held it before her, like an offering. In her heart's eye, she traced again the symbols, circle, arcs, cross, and felt her mind slip into communion with the ghost's insane, incoherent consciousness.

Giar's memories tumbled within the ghost, slamming against each other and rebounding endlessly. She called to one, opened it—a view of the vineyard at sunset—and reached deep within herself for a symbol to define it. This had been home to Giar, and the symbol for home, the circled square, resonated with it. Arieta's sign. A god's symbol had great power in a consolation; Zerafine hoped it would be enough.

With Arieta's symbol firmly pictured in her mind, Zerafine spoke to the ghost. She talked of home, of vines laden with purple-black fruit, of the light shining on the threshold at the end of the day, of

soft rain falling on dry ground. She talked, and as she talked she drew in more memories using the sign of the circled square, finding the ways they connected into a thread that would guide the ghost to its destination. Giar's life began to take shape before her, events falling in line from birth to death, gaps bridged by what her heart's eye saw as golden light. She followed him down the years until she came to a memory that choked her. No wonder the ghost was angry. Her brief lapse of concentration shook the whole construction, and she had to grab hold of it and the ghost's attention in the same moment. This time, compassion was tempered with righteous anger. *I promise*, she said to whatever was left of Giar, *that your pain will not be forgotten.*

With an audible sigh, the ghost went still and then vanished. *Seicorum* ore pattered an irregular rhythm as the stones rained around her. Zerafine could hear her heart beating, hear the rasp of her breathing, feel the knots of tension in her shoulders and wrists. She flipped her hood back and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Crying was something she never remembered doing, but it happened every time.

Gerrard stood, broad shoulders squared and tense, beside the tool shed. The door swung free; he had one hand on his longstaff and one clenched into a fist so tight his knuckles showed white even under his northern paleness. "That was bad," he said. "Twice I almost pulled you out."

"I'm glad you restrained yourself. I've told you, it's never as bad as it looks."

"It looks damn near deadly."

Zerafine untied her hair where it was gathered at the nape of her neck and shook the long mass out. She desperately needed a bath. "We're not done yet," she said. "I'm afraid the next part will be worse. Though I doubt you'll need your longstaff." She gathered the *seicorum* and dropped the rough-edged stones into her bag, then tucked her *telamen* away atop it. By tradition, half belonged to the family of the deceased, though most wouldn't claim their share; even so, half of what she'd gathered would pay for many days' travel.

Gerrard relaxed his hand as though he hadn't realized he'd clenched it. "Worse in the sense that we're going to be running when we leave here?"

“Possibly. Probably not. But they’re not going to be happy. I know I’m not.” She told him what she’d learned from the ghost’s memory. Gerrard shook his head in resignation. “Let’s get it over with,” he said.

The family still stood where Zerafine had left them, though they had drifted into smaller groups, conversing in quiet voices. They shrank back together when she and Gerrard approached, most of them fearful, a few curious. Causiliou stood to greet them; Trenya remained seated. Her eyes were dry, but her hand twisted a damp white handkerchief into a tight ball. The little girl stood beside her mother.

“The ghost has been released,” Zerafine said, and relief replaced fear in their eyes. “It’s unfortunate that you had to confine it, but I was still able to show it the way to Atenas’s court. You shouldn’t fear continuing to use the tool shed; it was just a...focus for the ghost’s madness. Something it could recognize. Giar is at rest for good.”

Trenya burst into sobs that were poorly restrained by her wrinkled handkerchief. One of the watching women went to her, put her arms around the widow’s shoulders, and they cried together. Causiliou looked both relieved and overwhelmed. “*Theлис*, thank you for your service,” he said. “We can pay you whatever you want, anything at all.”

“By Atenas’s law, you are entitled to half the ghost’s *seicorum*, if you wish,” Zerafine said. “The other half is my payment.”

Causiliou shook his head. “No, keep it, please. What else can we do for you? Share our evening meal, at least.”

“I thank you, but I’m not finished yet,” Zerafine said. She looked around. “Which of you is Lorelt?”

A short, stocky man standing to the far left of the group looked up, fear in his face. He made a jerky motion as if he’d started to run and just as quickly quashed the urge. He’d been one of those who’d feared her, and now she guessed that fear had been more personal than the natural discomfort most people felt around her. “To console a ghost, I must know the ghost,” she said, addressing the crowd, but keeping her eyes fixed on Lorelt. He looked as though he might pass out. “I know its memories, what it loved,

what it feared—very nearly everything that makes a person human, that holds a ghost together. Lorelt, do you understand what that means?”

Lorelt swallowed, his face pale, but he said nothing.

“You were arguing with Giar. The two of you argued frequently, yes? There was a long history of bad blood—I think, nothing too serious, but you would never be friends. You argued that morning, three days ago, both of you awake early, and this time it turned to violence.” Zerafine turned to Causiliou. “For whatever it’s worth, I believe it was an accidental killing rather than deliberate. They fought, Lorelt pushed Giar, Giar lost his footing and landed—anyway. I think the ghost remembered the stone, but couldn’t move the flagstones in the cellar floor, so it was drawn to the tool shed to vent its confusion and anger—it could not let go of its death. I am truly sorry to have to bring this to light, but the ghost arose from the anger and surprise of Giar’s death, and it would be unfair to deny its pain by concealing the truth.”

Causiliou stared at Lorelt in silent horror. Lorelt went from being white with fear to red with guilt. And Trenya launched herself at Lorelt, screaming fragments of words as she clawed at his face. It took three men to pull her off him and carry her away to the main house, she fighting them the whole way. Lorelt touched the bloody scratches with shaking hands.

“Hold him,” Causiliou ordered the men nearest Lorelt, though the guilty man looked as though he was too much in shock to fight back. “Put him in the wine cellar for now.” As they dragged Lorelt—he was too limp to walk properly—away, Causiliou turned to Zerafine. “*Thelis*, I cannot be grateful for this information, but you did what you had to do. We will deal with Lorelt. Will his death appease Giar?”

“Giar is beyond caring what happens in this world,” Zerafine said. “But—” She paused a moment, searching for the right words. “Atenas is not hungry for death. You won’t please Him if you kill Lorelt just to satisfy your desire for revenge. My judgment is that he should be banished. You don’t need any more angry ghosts.”

Causiliou nodded, but there was something in his face that made her heart sink. She wouldn’t give much for Lorelt’s chances. Her suspicions were confirmed when Causiliou said grimly, “Thank you

for your advice, *thelis*. Can we provide you anything for your journey? Our wine is excellent, and I believe we have fresh bread.” It was all but an outright dismissal.

Under better circumstances, she’d have requested a bath, but at the moment she felt it would take far more than water to get herself clean. Instead, she received a satchel full of bread, dried fruit, and other foods that would keep well. The plump, motherly woman who brought the food wouldn’t meet her eye and shrank back when Zerafine’s fingers accidentally brushed her wrist. Zerafine pretended not to notice. She met Gerrard in the vast entry hall. Causiliou trailed Gerrard, obviously anxious to get rid of their no longer desirable guests. He was so anxious that he escorted them not only to the gate, but to the bottom of the hill.

“Good fortune, and good harvest to you,” Zerafine told him. The traditional *Blessings upon this house* was never, ever uttered by Atenas’s servants. “And may the gods grant you wisdom.”

“We take care of our own,” Causiliou said obliquely, and turned away abruptly enough to be rude. Zerafine could have taken overt notice of this, but she felt weary down to the bone and ready to be a dozen miles away.

The consolation had taken far longer than she’d realized; the shadows were beginning to lengthen and the heat had gone from oppressive to merely uncomfortable. Zerafine gathered up her hair, wrapped it around her head and fished pins out of her rucksack to hold it in place. A slight breeze had come up, cooling her neck and face.

“They’re going to kill him,” Gerrard said.

“It seems so, yes.”

“And you don’t think he deserves it.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. They have to make the choice.”

“Think they’ll do it on their property?”

“Honestly? I’m too tired to care. But I hope the poor bastard goes straight to the courts of Death. Let Atenas give him justice.”

They walked in silence for a few moments. Gerrard said, “You could have put the fear of Atenas into them.”

“They fear the *theloi* of Atenas enough already. No sense my making it worse for the next one who comes along. Besides, what do you suppose Atenas would think of a *thelis* who uses His name to threaten people?” Zerafine shook her head. “One man’s life isn’t worth that. But it doesn’t make me happy.” She put her hood up and pulled it forward enough to shadow her face.

Gerrard stopped and reached into his rucksack. “Causiliou gave me a bottle of his best wine,” he said. “You know I’m not so much for the spoiled grape juice, but we might as well have a taste.” He pulled the cork with a little effort, took a long pull, and handed the bottle to Zerafine. She rolled her eyes at his lack of manners, pointedly wiped the bottle’s mouth with a fold of her robe, and drank.

The wine tasted like vinegar. After a silent exchange with Gerrard, she threw the bottle away.

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