

Talia's Diary Entries

by Julie McMillin

March 1573

Thoren has sent me to follow another one of his feelings. "South," he tells me. I have weathered the past fortnight just south of London. It seems I was too late in the season for the river festival. No telling what rumors I missed. Nevertheless, between the docks and The Rose is the one place I never fail to hear a tale - from a few guards outside of Clink prison. Truthfully, has it not occurred to anyone else that these fine men could also use an ale? And why not accept it from a passing lady who simply appears too cold from the storm?

Never fear, Thoren, I am well and whole. They receive ale from me - and nothing more. And in return I learn of troubles in Italy.

It appears that this journey "south" will be longer than either of us anticipated.

April 1573

There is a freedom that can only be found at sea. Though I have traveled long roads and longer hours with the Band of the Twisted Claw before - there still remains a sense of confinement while 'twixt the land and the sky. On this ship there is the complete and utter freedom as one hangs, nay, floats suspended above endless water.

I do not say endless lightly. While on the long roads there are still trees, rocks, mountains and the like. But here in the seas there is only... sea. A blessed harmony of water and wind.

Harmony - typically. At times one tries to overpower the other: gusts of wind to snap the sails or waves to overwhelm the deck. But these trials only remind us that we are alive.

On the waves and wind, only man's wits keep him afloat between the two wild mistresses.

July 1573

I finally made it through the walls of Firenze today, Thoren. 'Twas not an easy task as my grasp on the language still has not accorded me a proper accent. Mistake me not - I can understand and be clearly understood. Still the twists of phrase that the locals entertain escape me. Thus, I am clearly marked as an outsider. The city itself is thoroughly fortified - I wonder how any evil could enter the city. The stone walls are unlike anything I have ever seen (though I am told that they are nothing compared to the doubly-wide walls of their enemy city of Lucca). Nevertheless, it seems that walls have not been enough to keep out "a demon" as the women tell me. I have searched the streets where I may, but still the rumor eludes me.

And the streets are wide, Thoren. Here they use marble as stairs for even the meanest building! It is a far cry from our villages up north. But while the city itself is beautiful - each marble pillar serves only as another hiding place for the dark story that I seek.

"Body-without-soul" the demon is called.

I will find your proof, Thoren.

September 1573

Weeks outside of Firenze and I have learned the following:

First, the tale "Body-without-soul" has more variations than the Queen has gowns.

Second, the tale always involves a small child kidnapped. Conceivably so that the demon/sorcerer (named "Body-without-soul") can have eternal youth.

Third, the creature Body-without-soul DOES have a soul. However, the soul is trapped inside an object (egg, gem, rock, duck) and usually guarded by a creature (lion, dog, eagle, wolf, griffon, etc).

Alas, those are the only common elements.

My travels have taken me so far north of Firenze that I have arrived in the town of Bologna. Here I have heard tale that the Doge of Venezia fears evil spirits.

I cannot cross the mountains before winter sets in, Thoren. So you will forgive me as I follow this rumor. I have a 'feeling' that the evil spirit of Florence is the same spirit now in Venice.

November 1573

I have traveled to the river's end, Thoren and find myself in the seat of the great republic of Venice. Each alley is smaller than the last and even the meanest shop is three stories tall. The buildings lean upon one another and if you are unwary and make an ill-advised turn you would find yourself dropping into the depths of a canal. The canals serve as roads, the gondolas as horse-and-cart, yet the smell remains the same - foul. Each tiny boat is more grand than the last. The colors are as varied as the smells in the alley. Yet it is easy to tell that all is paint. I do not wish to see what lies under the gilt and paint.

I traveled all the way to the great Plaza of St Mark. There I beheld the strangest assortment of half-finished buildings. Even half-complete they still dwarf any structure found on the south bank of London.

Despite the grand squalor of the rest of the city, the Basilica of St Mark shines as a golden beacon on the streets.

If only I could enter the basilica and ask St. Mark for guidance - perhaps he could aid me in finding the trail of the rumor.

December 1573

It is called the "Bridge of Sighs". I fell asleep beneath the bell tower - yet late a night a single lamp woke me. I watched a black gondola pass through the Grand Canal and turn directly between the Doge's palace and the prison. A lamp appeared on the bridge. A sign and a countersign were exchanged (how I wish I could have heard them!) and a rope ladder was lowered from the bridge.

A figure ascended the ladder and the two practically sauntered into the palace itself.

I have been unable to gain access to the palace as of yet. It seems that all the servants to the Doge are men. Heaven only knows why. Bloody Venetians.

March 1574

One year since I left. From the steps of the Basilica it was announced that the Doge has been freed from his plague of evil spirits. I never gained access to the palace itself.

Not a week later the gossip arrived from the north: Bloodtharcken awoke and was slain.

The two are related. But I know not how. All that crosses my mind is that I was chasing rumors when the Band needed me.

I'm coming home, Thoren. I'm tired of this fool's errand.