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Sample file

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## STRANGE ALLIANCES

Mnemon paced a circle around the room again, as she had done for the past several hours. Too much could go wrong with her plan without any way for her to control the variables, and yet, the rewards of success demanded she take this risk. And so, she waited. The elder Dragon-Blood idly fingered the gold chain leading from her belt to the Emerald Thurible. As if in answer, a pale flicker of green light added its sickly hue to the shadowed room. The eldest daughter of the Scarlet Empress smiled thinly. Nothing would go wrong. Nothing could go wrong. And if the unthinkable happened, she was ready for that, too.

A faint whisper broke Mnemon's introspective musings, an insistent and distinctive aggravation at the edge of her mind. She relaxed her indomitable will slightly, opening a chink in her consciousness through which the pressure could enter.

"My lady," the voice spoke by way of introduction. Coils of wary hate seethed at the edge of its tone. "I bring word as bidden. The envoy arrives within the hour." Impatience joined the projection of hostility, but the creature knew better than to withdraw without instruction.

Mnemon considered framing some artful rebuke but put the thought out of mind. The demon wasn't worth the effort. Instead, she preemptorily closed her mind and almost laughed aloud as the spirit hastily broke contact before her psyche crushed it. Once her thoughts became her own again in full, the Dragon-Blood considered the demon's words. It spoke truth because she had bound it to speak truth with her. It would not dare speak falsehood by misinformation for fear of her. If the demon claimed the envoy would soon arrive, then she had best go meet him.



The pier stank of rotting fish. Mnemon pinched her nose in mild disgust and pulled the nondescript gray cloak tighter around her shoulders. She wasn't cold; the trivialities of the human body long ago ceased to have any real meaning for her. The cloak served other purposes, imparting an aura of veiled anonymity woven into its threads by some clever artisan of the First Age. The enchantment settled as she stilled, turning aside the attention of any sharp-eyed guard who saw her standing alone beneath the scant illumination of the crescent moon. Minutes passed.

As still as a statue, Mnemon stretched out her senses with Charms. If the demon had spoken truth, the envoy would arrive any minute. If not, one less demon would return to Malfestas. She felt the slight eddies of darting fish pressing on the silt floor. The echoes carried through the sunken poles supporting the pier beneath her. She filtered these ripples out. Something larger approached from the deep water to the East. It was still too far to gauge anything more than general distance, but it moved rapidly toward shore. She closed her eyes, withdrew feeling from her skin to focus her entire consciousness on the approaching object. A shape began to form in her mind, separating into three shapes as it drew nearer. A pair of monsters pulled a large and heavy box between them, swimming with powerful and tireless strokes. Given the contents of the box, Mnemon assumed they were demons. She let the creatures approach further, then casually stepped off the pier and slid to the bottom like a stone.

This close to shore, the water wasn't especially deep. Thanks to her Charms, Mnemon wouldn't need air for quite some time, so she stood on the sandy muck and attuned her eyes to the gloom as the demons arrived and set their cargo down several yards away. This close, the Dragon-Blood could see the box was an elaborate sarcophagus of marble bound shut with clasps of soulsteel. She watched as one of the piscine demons fumbled with its webbed claws to undo the first of the locks, then a dull clang echoed as the metal sprang open. A handful of stale bubbles escaped the cracks and raced to the surface. The demon repeated its efforts on the other four clasps before finally sliding the heavy lid out of the way.

Inside the coffin, a cold and apparently lifeless body lay in a position of meditative repose, his arms folded neatly across his chest. Mnemon saw through the

ruse immediately to the powerful Essence beating in the man's still heart. She waited. The Essence spread through the man's blood, warming flesh back from the cusp of death. His heart seized and beat once, paused and then again in normal rhythm. The man's eyes opened, and he sat upright. He swam upward a yard, garbed much as Mnemon, in simple gray robes. He was young and handsome, but his features had an almost feminine quality to their delicate pallor. Ringlets of black hair framed his too-pretty face. He exchanged a wordless glance with Mnemon and smiled. She did not return his smile. He looked at the demons circling closely around him and back to the Dragon-Blood. She tensed, waiting for the prearranged signal. He nodded.

Mnemon and the young man struck as one, each targeting the closest demon. The Dragon-Blood held up her palm to hurl a bolt of crushing force at one demon, while the envoy slipped his slender arms around the other demon's neck and twisted sharply. Both demons died instantly, too quickly for either to register surprise at the betrayal. Mnemon nodded back to her guest, then crouched and sprang up. Her momentum carried her out of the water and back onto the pier. The envoy followed with some Charm of his own and landed soundlessly beside her. He took a deep breath and shook the water from his curly hair. The Dragon-Blood viewed his ostentatious display with some disdain, but then, she hadn't crossed an entire sea in a coffin. She faced the envoy.

"Welcome to the Realm," Mnemon said simply. She pulled the hood back over her face, and the magic of the cloak enfolded her once more. The envoy looked momentarily confused, then wiped the suggested dream of her absence from his eyes and looked directly at her. She felt Essence flowing from him, cold and alien, and then, a sudden urge to look elsewhere overcame her. She resisted that urge. They both understood one another and the precariousness of their meeting. "You arrived on schedule," she noted as an afterthought.

"I was informed that you valued punctuality," the man noted wryly. He scanned the outline of the city against the night sky and began walking slowly in the direction of civilization. Mnemon strode beside him. Anyone who saw them might have assumed they were lovers engaged in a forbidden midnight rendezvous, but no one saw them or would have seen them if they knew where to look.

"I am the deathknight Perfected Tears Upon Alabaster Sorrow," the envoy said in a low whisper, "but you may address me as Sorrow." He cleared his throat, and when he spoke again, his voice held nothing of its previous warmth. His memorized words had the rehearsed air of cold formality that Mnemon often heard foreign dignitaries use. "I bring greetings to the sorcerer Mnemon from my liege, the Mask of Winters. He conveys his regret that he could not meet you in person and extends his hope for an alliance of mutual prosperity."

"I'm sure," Mnemon replied, not bothering to reply with introductions of her own. He knew exactly who she was. "You are Anathema?" she asked.

"To the whole world, in fact," Sorrow answered flippantly. "But not to you. Not now in this place. Here, I am the envoy of my liege. I am his hands and eyes and mouth to discern what accord of common purpose he may find with House Mnemon. That I am Anathema is of no consequence to my message."

"Well then, honored messenger," Mnemon hissed back, "understand that you *are* Anathema, and I have no intention of dying on account of our brief association. Should you be discovered in my presence, I will claim you are an assassin sent to kill me. I am certain the Immaculate Order would take great pains to make an example of you." She watched a scowl mar Sorrow's porcelain face before fading back behind his mask of feigned innocence. His violet eyes narrowed to dangerous slits, but he said nothing for a time. The unlikely pair walked through the streets toward the abandoned townhouse in which Mnemon had chosen to conduct the negotiations. She would have the building burned to the ground in the morning, erasing any evidence.





Mnemon kneeled on cushions opposite Sorrow, two cups of steaming tea sitting untouched on the low table between them. Neither had spoken in the hour since her threatening outburst, and now, the needs of diplomacy demanded they put aside their palpable distaste for one another.

"Have you located your mother yet?" Sorrow asked. He lifted his tea and sipped, closing his eyes to better savor the exotic herbs. "Exquisite," he noted in satisfaction.

"The Scarlet Empress has not yet returned to claim her throne, and the Realm stands at the brink of civil war in her protracted and untimely absence," Mnemon replied. "But then, you already knew that. Don't insult me. Ask me something you don't know, or tell me something I don't know, or better yet, make me an offer. That is what your master sent you here to do, yes?" Mnemon arched her eyebrow and took a sip from her own cup. Sorrow nodded and smiled again.

"Why did you insist on destroying my demons after my arrival?" Sorrow asked. He sounded more interested in an answer than he had previously demonstrated, almost hungry with anticipation.

"I do not wish any more record of our meeting than is absolutely necessary," Mnemon answered truthfully. She shrugged. "Demons of the First Circle are eminently replaceable." The deathknight pursed his lips in acknowledgment.

"Fair enough," Sorrow said. "You wish an offer? Very well." He swallowed the last of his tea and set the cup down regretfully. "Then hear the words of my master," he sighed. Essence burned a blackened brand on his forehead like a third eye, a circle within a ring weeping a faint trickle of blood down his ivory cheeks. Beneath, a stain of black clouded Sorrow's actual eyes, blurring whites and iris into pits of emptiness. The deathknight spoke, and his rich tenor held an echo of something deeper and more terrible. The voice held arrogance and authority such as Mnemon had only ever heard her mother wield.

"Lady Mnemon, you are wary of my offer," the Mask of Winters observed through Sorrow's borrowed voice. He spoke directly, without courtesy or insult, confident enough in his authority not to waste precious time on hollow pleasantries. Sorrow's lips turned to an involuntary sneer, an expression no doubt graven upon the face of the Deathlord.

"I would be wary if you made an offer, Mask of Winters," Mnemon responded carefully. "As yet, I see only empty expressions of well-wishing and nebulous hopes for alliance." She looked directly into the blank hollows of the deathknight's eyes and saw — or briefly imagined she saw — the robed form of the Mask of Winters himself sitting on an iron throne somewhere far distant. Her vision turned to behold the interior of a cavernous skull and then the reflection of her own face in the obsidian mirrors of Sorrow's eyes.

"What do you want?" the Deathlord asked. The trickle of blood from his vessel's forehead widened, raining spatters of crimson on the table. The effort of projecting his consciousness so far no doubt took its toll, though Mnemon couldn't tell who was paying the price of that exertion.

"I want military aid waiting when the Great Houses go to war," Mnemon began. Her eyes were hungry and far away. "I want you to keep the Seventh Legion from interfering with that war." She focused once more on Sorrow's body, sensing the wash of unclean Essence blazing from within. "I want spells," she finished.

"And in return for these things, you offer what?" the Mask of Winters asked. He cocked his head to one side quizzically and several bones in Sorrow's neck popped and ground against one another. "I doubt you offer service, as Perfected Tears Upon Alabaster Sorrow provides." The sneer deepened into an inhuman grimace. "You do not give fealty."

"No, I do not," Mnemon answered emphatically. "However, I could represent a powerful ally if the Seventh Legion decided to commit First Age weapons against you." She held up her hands expansively, first the right, then left. "More to the point,





I want the Realm. You want the Scavenger Lands. Certainly there is room for compromise in our immediate ambitions?"

"Agreed," the Deathlord said. His thinly veiled malice left no doubt that his ultimate ambitions did not include an alliance with the Realm, but neither did Mnemon intend a long-term alliance with the Mask of Winters. She watched dispassionately as blood began seeping from the corners of Sorrow's eyes and flecked his wine-dark lips. The Deathlord nodded once in final affirmation. "We will speak on this matter again. Until then, accept the gift of my servant as an ambassador of my... investment... in your success. I am confident he will serve our interests with the same devotion as he has previously demonstrated."

At the conclusion of the Deathlord's final syllable, the spectral presence withdrew from Sorrow. The flow of blood from his face halted immediately, while his eyes lightened to their previous shade of violet. Mnemon barely noticed; her attention fixated on the lingering touch of the Deathlord imprinted on the walls and floor. The room felt hollow. Tainted. She wondered if she had just made a very terrible mistake. She would have this building burned to the ground tonight and the ashes salted. Sorrow watched her look around and poured himself another cup of tea. He drank slowly, still shivering from his ordeal.

"Well then, my lady," Sorrow began speaking. He hesitated and licked his lips before continuing. "It seems we are now allies." He stood and bowed low, respectfully, but Mnemon could not help but notice the smirk at the corners of his mouth. He dabbed the streaks of gore on his cheeks and licked his fingers clean. "I look forward to the satiation of our mutual interests. For now, I bid your leave." He bowed again and vanished from sight with a faint ripple. Mnemon heard a scuffling at the window on the upper floor, then nothing. She waited until she was sure the deathknight had truly gone, then laughed aloud.

Mnemon concentrated, extending her thoughts in a pattern she had trained her spy to recognize and answer. The pressure came at once, the whisper of supplication filling her mind. *You will continue to follow the deathknight who calls himself the Perfected Tears Upon Alabaster Sorrow,* she thought. The voice of the demon rasped back from its familiar chink in her will, contentful but obedient.

"As you wish," the demon hissed silently.

Mnemon left the aging townhouse behind her without looking back, her attention directed ahead to the Imperial Manse and the empty throne of her mother. A smile crossed her cheeks.

Soon.