

The Sweet Side of Death

an Avarthrel tale by
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Anchorfall, 11.XI.630 AR

From: Faira Ativel, Wilhelmsroad 20, Anchorfall (A.Pr.)

To: Marita Ativel-Ramshead, Ram's Run, Mill Hill-by-Arichryg (E.Pr.)

Dear little sister,

I know it is a strange thing to apologise for, but I have to apologise anyway if Thalimve's courier causes too much commotion in a little town. If the Royal Postmen make people exited in your happy and tranquil home, I can't even begin to imagine what sort of whispering a courier from a Furinelian duke can cause. If anyone asks, just tell them this was a pretty ordinary letter from the weird big sister of yours, who has gone insane with power... and if they want ducal couriers to carry the letters, all they have to do is to either save the kingdom a few times, or maybe just ask the embassy to deliver the letter. Well, it usually works if you ask really nicely - they usually have to deliver a bunch of letters anyway, and a few more won't make any difference. Being a Hero and all just gives me additional nice perks: If I had really wanted to turn the letter delivery into a memorable spectacle, I could have got trumpeters and flower girls and all that if I had simply asked, but all this would have been just a tiny bit silly. So, here's just the basic service - a handsome elf on a shiny white stallion.

I had my reasons to use the official courier, however. Frankly, I wasn't in the condition to get worried about whether or not you'll get my note any time soon, so here I am, abusing my new privileges like no tomorrow and using up the scarce tax money of the Kingdom of Furinel to send a bit of non-diplomatic diplomatic correspondence—even when I'm not technically supposed to be allowed to do this yet. But the elves tend to be rather flexible what comes to this sort of things, and me getting the official post in a few more months probably means the same thing to them as if you would tell a human employer that you are starting tomorrow.

A lot of things have changed since summer, but I have to say that a lot of things have stayed the same—all the better for my nerves.

First, I have to thank you for letting me know about a shrine and new memorial stone to the victims of the Storm of the Century in Altme. Is it really six years already since that horrible storm, or am I just remembering wrong? I'm sure the new memorial will help everyone in our family to remember Father, and it will help everyone in Treglin to heal the wounds. It is good to hear that you have also visited the big, beautiful monument in Lyrchan. I was there at the unveiling, last year, and hoped you would have been there too. You wouldn't believe Lyrchan was devastated! The city has been completely rebuilt in such a short time, and the only unusual thing that you notice when you come to the city is that everything in the waterfront looks new and shiny. I have not visited Altme for a while, and I do not get news from home as often as I'd like. I will visit the Altme shrine myself at the earliest possible opportunity next spring. If you visit Altme before I get the chance, I hope you give my warmest wishes to Mother and Grandpa while you are there. If I get there first, I will give them your regards, too.

Jaana is doing well, and is growing so fast. She's busy playing games of all sorts with the kids from this street, and as far as football goes, she's got some mean kicking power, considering she's almost 3 years old now. I don't think she or any of the street kids quite understand the rules, but all of them have so much fun playing ball. She wants me to add here that "Jaana loves Aunt Mari". (...and also that if and when you come to Anchorfall, please bring King's Mints. She loved them and they're pretty hard to find here in Anchorfall.)

The Company is also doing well. I suppose you still remember our leader, Facyr - he was the shy man who almost turned to jelly when you went and hugged him? Believe it or not, he got married a few months back - to a real Aiecaertean princess! Well, she's a more or less ordinary commoner right now, as far as law goes - but she's still a princess through and through, believe me! Cassandra Arthailia de Tai - she's been extremely helpful for both the Company and the City Guard. You can bet Facyr is quite a lot less shy nowadays!

I also surprised everyone here by buying an old ship while I was in Bluebrook - *The Springing Cat*, as she is now known, is only a small caravel, but still good enough for what I intend to do. Not really all that expensive, either, considering the amount of money we earn as mercenaries. It also couldn't have been a better time to get a ship, because at the beginning of last month I got my Letter of Marque back - all hail the Regent, yo-ho-ho and bottle of rum, and all that.

I really had to pause for a moment and think of what exactly am I doing here: I'm again a Privateer captain... and next year I am supposed to become a Duchess and a Special Envoy and just keep forging on with the Company. On a related note, I know you were shocked by the news that I'm marrying Thalimve, but listen to what I have to say - don't you worry about me mingling with the nobility too much: Thal will relinquish the crown in a few years, and move to Anchorfall with me... besides, these days, being a Privateer is much better job than being a Duchess! I've not let down my old friends in

the Twilight, either, and I sometimes help them to do good deeds for the poor and miserable... though Facyr and Cassandra sometimes keep grumbling about making the job of the City Guard harder.

I sometimes wonder just how am I supposed to handle all this! You said that I'm not really a hero, just a professional trouble solver. I'm finding that more and more true. One of the reasons I love the rest of the people at the Company is that all of us are trouble solvers, not heroes. We all know that accomplishing something isn't all that important and we all know that we have to keep fighting on.

Oh well—the Company has already survived a few “great honours”, and people have always more or less forgotten about us. The Company will be going on, and I'll go where they go. Everyone except Jenyr (the chest holder of our Company and a Captain of the City Guard, I don't think you've had the chance to meet him) will probably be happy to follow me on a few expeditions to the far seas. (Oh, as a side note, we had great fun in Facyr's and Cassandra's “honeymoon cruise” - short but ever-memorable trip to the Sandhjolm in the Gerthines and a few other nice islands on the way back!) And like I said, I'm not terribly worried about having a lasting impression as a Duchess and a Special Envoy of Kingdom of Furinel. Well, I'm sure someone at *the Times* will make a joke or two about “grappling-hook diplomacy”, but...

I want to be perfectly honest, though - I long back to the days when I was a Privateer of Varmhjelm, with nothing but a ship, open sea, the crew buzzing around, and adventure just beyond the horizon. I am happy that everyone is supporting me to attain that goal - especially you and Mother.

But this is not really why I am writing to you. You probably knew already what I think of these things. Life's too short to worry, dear Marita.

What I'm about to tell may worry you. But don't worry, Marita. You're always worried about change, and—of course—you *don't have to change*. Well, since I left, you've gotten married (at a proper young age, no less) and moved to Varmhjelm and you're with a family of your own... but that's just building up from what you've been doing, not changing the whole *direction* of your life. I, on the other hand, have had to change before, and I'm not afraid of change. Well, yes, I know I was scared to tears, so many years ago, when I trust you the secret that I was going to run away rather than getting married. The thing is - I've been shocked by change, but that's not the same thing as being afraid of the change itself. The change is never really all that easy, but I always trust that everything will be all right in the end.

I am just writing this letter to say that there are things you can rely on when you think of me. I am, and always will be, on the side of the good guys. You know this, I know you do. If something goes wrong - which isn't going to happen, I know it, by Old Notty's Dice - I know all of my friends will say the same thing in my defence.

I am basically writing to tell you that I've done something that might cause some ruckus. I've done a thing that people do not ap-

prove of when they find out. I might get blamed for it, for good or ill, and I hate it when that happens when I'm just the initiator. At least this time I can tell you of it beforehand - and all the better, because this time people might not be happy. This time, It's not about restoring order. It's not about defeating the sworn enemies of all good people. It is not about saving people from horrible things.

Oh, to hells with it - without beating any more around the bush, I'll just say I've awakened an ancient, horrifying goddess, and presented her, on a silver platter, a new continent to take - one that she was driven out of millennia ago. Gosh, it sounds *bad* when I put it that way, doesn't it? But you know me, and I think everything is under control.

Late last month - 30th day Deadening, exactly - I was with my friends from the Order of Torch. I was in a place called the Prowler's Vault. As with other matters of the Dwellers of the Twilight, I cannot regrettably tell much more about the place no matter how much I'd like to - it is such a wonderful and quaint place, and I'm sure everyone would hate to abandon it right away. But I hope this tells you something: I'm not saying I don't trust Thalimve's well-paid courier, but in the unlikely event this letter is read by some outsider, releasing a terrifying goddess upon a continent is, in my opinion, a *less* grave matter to divulge than the whereabouts of a relatively benign group of thieves!

The Prowler's Vault is an ancient hall that lies somewhere deep under the foundations of Anchorfall, and it was probably built millennia ago. I don't think anyone knows for sure yet. The Torch has made detailed maps of the halls, but the natural caves that connect to it are not yet well understood - and no one has yet mapped all of the *other* ancient vaults, halls and catacombs the caves lead to. Well, to make a long story short, I told the Bearers that that the Order of Torch should concern itself with robbing the rich and making the poor people happy - and leave the spelunking to more experienced adventurers, such as yours truly.

After several days of careful mapping, I finally discovered a vast underground hall - a cathedral, almost, that reminded me of the Covenant's cathedral back home in Altme. This one, however, was much bigger... and with no sunlight shining through the centuries of dust.

Finding the cathedral was... a life-changing experience. I wish I could have a better expression for this. It might be socially awkward to say it was "moving" or "uplifting", because some people might think I'm sick for saying such positive things about an obviously *evil* thing. But please bear with me!

I have only visited a long-lost temple of a "lost" deity once before, and the Great Temple of Megyntia did not leave a big impression on me. When I was there, it was as if Megyntia himself had abandoned his fortress and now lived, in the most emphatic sense of the word, among his scattered and ardent worshippers. The ruin just testified something about the might of a *living* god, who could not be driven from hearts of the faithful followers, even by petty, hateful tyrants

on a quest for gold.

But whoever inhabited this particular cathedral was *right there*, her presence strong, and she beckoned me in the flickering shadows of my lantern. I could easily feel that whoever inhabited this hall was truly a lost goddess, now without worshippers, driven to obscurity and ruin, hungry for attention from mortals who dared to face her. I felt the world was a poorer place without people knowing about a goddess that governed an important part of its functioning. This was a deity that was misunderstood, left alone, neglected, all for wrong reasons.

And in the light of my lantern, a sight unfolded before me. The light reflected from a great stained glass window - I do not know what possessed people to build one here deep under the city where daylight cannot ever reach. On the window was depicted the image of this goddess and her deeds. The Lady of Withering! I was definitely touched by the long-lost Goddess of the Moment right then and there. Her name was written in a dusty velvet banner, too fragile to touch: Carriglana—*oh, our beautiful and terrible Carriglana*, beloved daughter of my revered Changer of Luck, beloved daughter of my revered Daughter of Night, Granddaughter of Strife Itself, the Grain that Tips the Balance... and ironically, she was also known by some of her long-deceased worshippers as the Thing We Forgot.

As I stood there in front of the great subterranean glass window, I felt something I had never before felt. Or maybe that is a bit wrong way to put it: it was something I did not think about too much, something that was way too obvious for me to pay any attention to. I understood the very essence of Carriglana, her Word, her *meaning*. I was happy and sad at the same time - happy to understand the world more, but sad and puzzled for liking something that other people might not appreciate. There was grim beauty at work here, and I wondered if people would see things the same way I did.

I felt her immediate message to me, the chilling but sweet touch of the ice of her words in the depths of my mind. Quite simply, it was what I already wrote earlier: I *must* be one that fixes problems, not one to stay and bask in the glory, because life is too short and fickle for enjoying little triumphs too much. And she had more words of comfort and guidance for me - so many words...

As I studied the rest of the cathedral, it all became more clear to me. I was even more in awe, even more fevered, as I studied the dry scrolls of parchment that had probably lain in the shelves of the cathedral since the fall of the Old Empire. I knew next to nothing about the supposed child of Nottomwah and Nyxeen. I had heard, long ago, from Brother Colvovan—bless his memory and may he always find a reasonable substitute for his quiet reading corner again in the Heavens—that a child of Nottomwah was worshipped in the Imperial days but all records had been lost, and some believed this was a god or goddess that had brought unspeakable terror to people. In the Imperial days, there was an era when it was forbidden to worship gods of death and destruction. Yet, in the mad games and mysterious fancies of some of the emperors, who knows what kind

of gods were declared unfit for worship?

After consulting the Academy of Divine Studies library last week, I found out that there had been haphazard rumours about this child of Nottomwah being worshipped in Tachur, but the sources stating so were hundreds of years old and could not agree on even basic things, such as whether it was a god or goddess or a genderless being, or whether it was a true deity or merely a daemon or a similar supernatural being claiming to be one... and as you can guess, the folks of Tachur generally don't want to engage in religious debate with anyone from the North - they just grab their sword and go for your throat, as they have done since the ancient times.

In the end, who knows the real truth about her history? I certainly hope we will find out once the evidence is carefully analysed. But perhaps this really is the first time anyone has spoken of Carriglana in the last millennium - She made me feel so honoured and special for finally finding her. Maybe I should be proud of that, even for a little bit - she would not appreciate if I had the mind to do what most other people might have done. As with all great discoveries, this is just the beginning of the long road.

However, believe it or not—discovering Carriglana, my dear sister, was not the strangest of my discoveries, nor the strangest changes of direction that I had that day.

The most shocking thing was that such beauty could bloom in the house of murderers. This is why I am worried about the rediscovery of the Lady of Withering. People should not have easy justifications for murder. People, in all likelihood, *could* come to this cathedral, see a goddess worshipped by long-gone assassins, and that's the end of it all - they shall bury this terrible goddess in a footnote in the dusty annals of history, where all "goddesses of murder" belong, and rightfully so.

But the Order of Dried Petals, the group that had dwelt in this cathedral centuries ago, was no ordinary group of assassins or murderers. Nor is Carriglana a goddess of death or murder. Morhyonn, May He Stay In Our Mind, doesn't care what happens before our transition to the netherworld... and murder, it seems, needs no true god to govern itself. While Brother Colvovan had strange ideas at times, he was quite clear and rational about that.

But how could I even begin to describe the work of this Order, without sounding completely insane? I do not try to make things sound prettier than they are, but I have to be clear, up front, about my own opinions. The Order of Dried Petals tried to fight hard for things I believe in - things I have always believed in. You know me; I don't really care about ideology, everlasting values or everlasting truths. Fanatics may be right at times, but their fall is that they can't change when they are wrong. Truth is never simple and beautiful, and people who try to pretend it is simple are wrong, often without realising that. What I believe in, and what the Petals believed in, is that people have to do *the right thing* - and the right thing isn't necessarily a good thing, and not even the most beautiful thing imaginable.

Carriglana spoke to us, even in centuries-long state of our denial, but we can't always listen without having a reason. The Order of Dried Petals killed hundreds of people in its time, and people truly *listened*. Some of the killed people were evil... some merely misguided. Some were innocent. Assassins who lament the innocent deaths cannot be completely insane - even if that is just my somewhat weak opinion. Yet, if a death of an innocent can make a hundred thousand people realise they are only digging their own grave, is that not a sacrifice that is worth it? It took exactly that to bring and end one of the ancient wars in Colemanian desert.

There are more tales of this kind: A brilliant young musician, confident he had created the greatest masterpiece ever, met a tragic end one day - spurring violent debate in the local guild of artists, ending all apathy and resting on the laurels, bringing forth an unprecedented era of creativity. And the most glorious example of the Petals' work... Cagrer-Coragh the Conqueror, who styled himself the Warlord and Ruler of all of Grycia, gathered his generals one fateful day to give a long speech where he proudly claimed he had built a Reign of Terror that would last a millennium and beyond, and in the end of the speech, he all of a sudden dropped dead, and as the next week came, the troops of the Empire had brought the Emperor's Peace to those lands once more. None caught the assassin that day, and none looked, for it was the warlord's dying words that made people think: evil men may rightfully promise bad things, but none can escape that which is eventually coming for them.

I feel so strange now. I am writing about terrible and wonderful things, but it is not anything new, really - just things that make me think. When it really comes to basic things, I'm an adventurer and, yes, maybe even a thieving scoundrel, but definitely not a murderer or assassin. Yet, this experience has made me look at murder in a different light, and maybe not think of death as such a final thing any longer. Nor can I say murder would be always out of question. By gods, I can't believe I'm *saying* that, as I revere life above all, but on the other hand, in the light of my experience here *and* before this, I'm also not believing why I should be disagreeing right here and now. Carriglana isn't telling us to go out and murder people on whim if that makes the world work better, but perhaps I have misunderstood a part of the whole life-reverence thing, perhaps I have been overly zealous without realising it. Sometimes preserving life does require *action*, and often, I have sat right where, not doing my part, when I should have been doing things. Me, a woman of action, taking no action at all!

I dared not keep the discovery a secret. I spoke with Thalimve, and he understood me perfectly, and promised not to let the word out just yet. The Company listened to me, and have kept the secret so far, but something tells me they elect to avoid the whole thing - and I can't blame any of them for that decision, as every one of them respects the lawful order of things much more than I do. The Order of Torch was just as enthusiastic about my discovery as I was. They certainly understood; I know exactly why, but I'm not at the liberty

to tell you why - all I can say is that their predecessors did not understand the meaning of death. There is even talk about something called the New Order of Dried Petals. I sincerely hope they can keep to the old Strictures of the old Order.

I sometimes wonder what really caused the downfall of the old Order - it seemed to have survived the Imperial prohibition just fine. Can humans really hold on to beautiful rules such as these, or will someone go overboard? But even if they do, that is just one of the lessons of Carriglana - if human tendencies doom the New Order of Dried Petals, it is a lesson to be learnt from, and the lesson isn't always "do not ever try this again". The second most profound thing, to me, in Carriglana's Word was that *life goes on*. One way or other, everything will be fine. No bureaucracy can keep down a good idea, no tyrant can forever keep the truth from finding its way to the public eye. Sometimes, justice is not done, but often, whether the wrong-doers want it or not, the justice is *rendered*.

You wrote to me about our Father and your first visit to the memorial stone, and I hope this all will comfort you, especially now that I've told you I will go to the seas again - my ship riding the same fickle waves that claimed Father's life. Remembering Father will make me sad, that is true—but he is gone forever, and our time here is limited as well. Mourning cannot go on forever. So long ago, when I heard about his death, I was not comforted, personally, by the Covenant's vague promises that he was in the Heavens now... It was good for him, of course, and made me not worry about him as much, but I knew *we* would stay here suffering. Now, I can tell you two things: there was nothing we could have done to prevent the forces of nature from doing what they did, and ultimately, there is no such thing as a death without a purpose. All of us learned a thing or two from our horrible loss. The people of Altme now have bigger respect for the weather-teller, and I know I will head ashore at the first hint of an ill wind.

The memory will never die if we strive to learn from them and do the right things - whether the loss is due to our fault or someone else's.

Lastly, I hope you have peace in your neighbourhood and find your comfort in your loving husband's care. I must say I am sometimes envious of your simple life, but I have to do what I do best. I hope you stay safe, my dearest sister and best of my far-away friends, apart of Mother and Thalimve.

With all the love and worries,

your sister Faira

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