

Midnight Thorns

Araxis Metathrax, Midnight Thorn

It was the final year of the Reality War, and victory was assured. We had already ripped asunder the horde of undeath walking our realm, and stood poised at the gates of Acheron. Not content with stemming the tide, infuriated and enraged by the thought that one day another Lich-King might open the door and start the war anew, we massed on the yawning iron portal and gazed into the abyss.

The Lich-King Oncarrus knew we were coming, of course. Our soldiers were not... tactful, and our intentions were clear. We had planned for nothing less than the planar extinction of Acheron. No moving thing, alive or dead or in-between, would stand when the forces of Light crossed the barrier. Never again would a master of Acheron have the opportunity to lay siege to our world. No masters of Acheron would survive to do so. In his arrogance, Oncarrus kept open the gates, and waited. He had legions of death standing guard on the other side, tireless, eyes pale in the reflected light of the gate, waiting for our forces to crash through.

He never saw what hit him.

By the time we were prepared to launch the final assault on Acheron, The Arcanum had made a finishing blow against the inner planes. They rejoiced in telling their tale, to anyone who would listen, over and over. We listened, carefully, looking for an advantage to be gained over Oncarrus, and found it. Sandwiched in amongst all the bragging, all the boasts of prowess and bravery, we found the key.

We attacked at midnight. A few platoons only, nowhere near the bulk of our strength. Volunteers, every one; those platoons had almost no chance of survival, and a great many of those volunteers rose as ghouls. They sacrificed all, and never looked back. They caused an inordinate amount of damage to Oncarrus' legions before they fell, but fall they did. We knew they would fall; our plans hinged on it.

War is chaos; even among very quick thinkers, it is easy to lose track of details. The undead suffer chaos even more harshly, minds numbed by boredom or controlled by distant magic. It was no challenge at all for us to slip free of the battle and gain Acheron proper. We slid like whispers into the halls of power, and watched, and waited, and learned.

Skirmishes broke out at the gate frequently; a small band of brave souls would step across the gate, cause what damage they could, and retreat, and every time such a skirmish launched, more of us infiltrated Acheron. On occasions, we would take advantage of a border-fight to slip out and pass information to commanders, but that was always secondary. Secondary to us, though the warleaders of the armies thrived on that knowledge, and went through it relentlessly, searching for advantage.

And so it went, for weeks. We brought all of our training to bear, all the gifts of night. We made careful notes of sentries patrolling the halls of bone, learned where the masters of the dead kept their scrolls, their components. We learned how the masters of the undead created, controlled their armies. We learned how to pervert life into undeath, and learned that the masters kept rank amongst themselves by comparing how much life they had stolen. Oncarrus

launched his assault on our world for no better reason than to increase his own social standing. He was willing to smother an entire world in a foul blackness, blot out our beloved night, and wipe free of life an entire plane, all so that the other masters would respect him. The Lords of Death, it seems, are more like men than we imagined.

A time after the first of us came across, the army of Light attacked. Pouring through the gate in a ceaseless tide, much as the undead had done to us so many years prior. They scythed through the undead with magic and steel, easily, and in years later, would come to wonder why the battle had cost them so little. They took losses, of course, and some disappeared, never to see friends or family again, but they gave far, far worse than they got.

The reason, of course, was us. While the army attacked, we struck. We assassinated leaders, stole the scrolls of undead control and creation, stole the components of magic, spread false messages written carefully in the handwriting of commanders. While the army worked to disassemble the body of the legion, we struck swiftly and decapitated it. Any army of the world's finest soldiers would have fallen without leadership and communication; the legions of death, so reliant on their masters, were doomed before the first of the warriors of light took the field.

We knew, of course, that assassinating the masters of the undead was ultimately futile. Had they not already mastered life and death, they would have been in no position to lead. All we bought was time, and a measure of disorientation, and that was all we desired. It was foregone that they would rise again, and so they did.

When they did, though, their world was a very different place. The Guardians raised columns of sorcerous light towards their skies, piercing the inky blackness. The few Arcanum that managed to arrive in time for the Battle of the Gate lit off enormous bonfires, scorching the bodies of the dead to prevent their re-use, and to force harsh, elemental heat into the cold plane of death. The army of light ranged far and wide across the blackened plains, and stood poised to march forth and raze the capitals of the dead to cinders. All opposition eliminated, almost nothing stood between the army and the end of Acheron.

Almost nothing. Two very important obstacles remained between the army and its goals: Common sense, and us. In our brief time in the halls of the dead, we had done more to advance the study of necromancy and decay magic than a thousand years of research and practice on the Prime. There were answers there, solutions to problems that had baffled necromancers back home for years. Fountains of knowledge, dark secrets the likes of which have not been seen before or since, all that and more, stood within the citadels of blood and bone. If we allowed the army to raze those capitals to the ground, that knowledge, those secrets, would be gone forever, laid waste in a murderous, unthinking rampage borne of revenge. We certainly weren't going to allow that, but neither would we allow Oncarrus or one like him to rebuild his armies and attack again some years down the road.

On the other hand, we were a small band of spies and saboteurs, and we were sandwiched between an army that had razed a plane on one side, and lords of death that had redefined death magic on the other.

The solution, of course, was more trickery. A Sea Elf called Ral was among us, a skilled forger atop being a legendary negotiator (but I repeat myself; I'd already said he was a Sea Elf). We created letters from the commanders of both sides, and snuck them into the opposite camps. Talk of treaties, of peace. Veiled threats about the grave consequences to the magic of

our realm if Acheron was unmade. We stroked the egos of both sides, and in the end, succeeded.

In exchange for their continued survival, the lich-kings of Acheron surrendered their keys to the Black Gate between the worlds. They volunteered their knowledge of the lesser shadow magics to us; they said (and we knew from studying them) that the greater shadow magics would tear normal people apart, and were of no value to us. We would let stand Acheron, and any lord thereof might summon us at need, should one of his brethren take up the sword and threaten our home again. We hoped that would remove the social advantage to an invasion of the Prime; against the combined might of our forces and his fellow lich-kings, the only thing that such an invasion could bring is ruin to the one who started it. Several thousand years later, there still has been no coordinated strike from Acheron against the Prime, so it appears that we were correct.

Why?

We tell that story to all of our recruits; every single man, woman or child that gains a Thorn tattoo has heard it. All of them, probably including yourself, bob their heads as though they understand all of it, and truth be told, it does seem pretty straightforward.

After we tell them the history, we stop and ask them why. Why did we do it? Why did we engage ourselves in the Reality War to begin with? Stop and think before you accept the first answer that comes to mind. There are no dullards in our ranks; we could certainly not only have survived but prospered in a world run by lich-kings. With them bickering amongst each other, we could easily have insinuated ourselves, selling our skills to one or the other, and avoided undeath by swearing that death would compromise our abilities. So long as we provided sufficient advantage to all at one time or another, none would suffer us to die.

It wasn't for the sheer love of our fellow man, or elf, or troll, or whatever else, either. Man (and elf, and troll, and whatever else) is a shallow, petty creature, and a good number of them deserve walking death for a wide variety of reasons. After the Reality War, a number of man-kings pushed to invade Acheron, to plunder its resources and make it a place of light and life. If you can't see the irony there, the door's right behind you, and it closes quickly. Don't let it hit you on your way out.

So why? We always drop the hints in the story; take a moment to think about it.

We attacked Acheron because Acheron threatened the *night*.

The lich-kings wanted to blot out the stars, the moon, the night sky entire, under a cloak of tar-black magic. They wished to keep us from casting our gaze skyward to navigate, to tell time, or simply to lose ourselves in the majesty. They wished to pervert the way that might affect the world by removing its opposite.

In the spirit of complete honesty, the lords of Acheron also had a lot of secrets, and not a Thorn walks the earth that could resist so many secrets in one place. We would not have attacked for secrets, though, and certainly not sacrificed so much; only dire threat to or perversion of night could field so many Thorns in one place. Bound by a common love for the

darkness in nature, we are in many ways Night incarnate; elusive, mysterious, patient. Threatening the Night is in many ways very like threatening each of us, individually, and collectively. Of course we attacked.

The Beginning

Despite what they'll tell you, it is not always best to begin at the beginning. Some stories are much more interesting begun at the end, and some are better started in the middle and told to both ends. The Thorns are one of those stories; the Reality War was our starlit moment, and it was right in the middle.

Years before then, the *Midnight Thorn* was a pirate ship, captained by a deep elven woman called Khel Nocturnis. She'd fled the underground cities of the Deep Elves, trying to find some place a woman could find respect, wealth, and power. No real luck; the world then wasn't what the world is now, and she couldn't get anything beyond whistles and invitations.

So, if you can't buy respect, or earn it, you can always take it by brute force, and that's exactly what Khel set out to do. Stole a lot of money (a *lot* of money), assassinated the captain of the finest ship she could find, and used her ill-gotten gains to bribe his crew to sail with her. In other words, she set us a great example, right from the word go.

In the years that followed, the *Midnight Thorn* became the scourge of the high seas. Merchant captains started charging double or triple for night runs out of fear of the pirate. Some wisely refused outright, and would only set sail during the day, plotting courses they knew they could complete before the sun set. Khel always attacked at night.

She didn't kill many people, which cost her some giggles from other pirate captains. Almost every ship she captured found its crew set loose in ship's boats. Every crewman of every ship she attacked returned to shore white-faced and panic stricken, terrified. Very few ever set sail again, and most bought very strong locks for the doors to their homes. Khel didn't want blood; what she wanted was more treasure, and more information. Information from captured navigators told her which routes the merchant ships ran; information from captured captains told her which ships carried prizes, which carried nothing, and which carried traps. In exchange for that information, she traded the lives of crews, a deal more-or-less satisfactory to all.

To all except the merchant fleets, who accused her of being able to see the future, or read minds. She always attacked rich ships at unexpected points; none of the decoys carrying warriors in their holds were ever touched. And always returned crews stricken with terror.

She could not, of course, be in all places at all times. The fear of her was far, far worse than the fact of her; she was generally inconvenient but harmless. She might cost some cargo, but so might a storm, and she was not nearly so deadly as her enemies feared. She was silent, patient, and elusive; Khel had *become* the night.

Her crew saw it; her first mate (but *only* her first mate) took to calling her the Night Queen. Apprehensive at first about her kindness to victims, they could not deny that over the years, her tactics had brought each of them wealth enough to buy a house in a city, or a ranch in the wilderness, and live out their lives comfortably. They marched in step with her, emulated her, and they too became the Night.

Some, of course, left her service. Piracy, even as practiced by the Night Queen, is

dangerous business, and some of her crewmen cashed out their shares to buy that house, or that ranch, after losing an arm and eye to a merchant crewer. Some retired to live out their old ages in peace and reminisce with each other about how once they had been the scourge of the seas, night incarnate. Many of them found they could not sit still on dry land and do nothing, and the disable learned quickly that wounds might keep a man from sailing, but they were no obstacle to a man *spying*.

Those spies found protégés, gifted people with the right attitude and the willingness to learn the right skills. As the networks set themselves up around the world, the Night Queen's philosophy expanded, grew beyond itself. Her crew repaid the prosperity she had shown them a thousand times over; at the height of her influence, it was said that no word could be spoken that she did not hear.

Bent towards a new aim in life, the Midnight Thorns (as her network was by now calling itself) trained themselves anew, this time for intelligence and reconnaissance rather than piracy. As the arts refined, and the philosophy grew, the Thorns started displaying odd new skills, and the world trembled as a new Order was born.

Odd New Skills?

Yes. Odd new skills. Some Orders achieve otherworldly weapon skills through relentless training. Some master mana in its purest form through meditation or harsh lessons. Ours come from a purposeful emulation of Night, from our bonds to the Night and each other.

Thorn abilities are primarily concerned with elusion. We prefer to elude detection until the moment we strike, wherever that's realistic, and where it's not we elude attack. We deal in fear, as well, following the Night Queen's example, but no Thorn ability is inherently lethal. That is not to say that the Midnight Thorns do not deal in violence, just to say that we deal violence with skills, not with the gifts of Night. The line between spy and assassin is thin, and we are frequently cross that line, whether by design or circumstance.

As we'll learn later, the night abhors a secret like the rest of nature abhors a vacuum. Locks, mundane and magical, are what people hide secrets behind, and we're graced with the rare ability to ignore those locks. Consider it very short range teleportation; with a second's thought, you simply stop being on the "untrusted" side of the door, and start being on the same side of the door where the secrets are.

Collect enough secrets, and you'll eventually find that even Wizard Locks and such magical "keep-out signs" are no obstacle. Slide up to them like a whisper, and the night will part the gates for you; you're in. Getting out, of course, is a different thing entirely until you get the hang of Passlocking twice, but most places are designed to keep people *out*, and offer no barrier to someone on the inside that wishes to be on the outside.

No one's perfect; everyone eventually slips up and mistimes a sentry's route, or gets caught in the middle of a shift change when new guards come on unexpectedly. Fortunately, there's an escape hatch; *one*. Use it carefully; there's no second chances, and it's only good for stopping one target. We call it Enshroud; it wipes you out of an opponent's vision, replaces you with an inky black mass that's no good for describing to authorities later. As you might expect, whatever poor bastard you've Enshrouded is going to have a rough time connecting attacks to

you, so you can elude him and avoid being reported, all at the same time. Just don't try to take him out; Enshroud is there to cover mistakes and elude detection, and it'll fall the exact moment that your poison impacts the helpless victim.

Best for Last: *Message*. This is the real key, the lynchpin that holds the Midnight Thorns up above and beyond any ordinary collection of people with an unhealthy interest in other people's knowledge. The Message is something all of us can do; only once a night, and only for 15 words, but that's convenient beyond words. The Message allows us to rapidly relay information across the whole of the world, call for help (if we know someone's close by), or get a lot (a *lot*) of information at our ready command (given that the people that know haven't already burned their Message for the night, in which case it might be a while before you get whatever information you wanted). Message works from any Thorn, to any Thorn, up to 15 words, and it's usually pretty fast. Some odd magic can delay it, and responses are always iffy (you never can tell who's already burned their Message for the night), but for a spy network, it's invaluable.

The Price of Power

It's not all fun and games, no matter how much fun it sounds like to slip into a darkened castle like a dream and stuff the King's recipe for spiced duck into your pocket. The world is balance, and everything exacts a price. As odd as it may sound for a group of professional thieves, spies, and assassins, we do have some rules, enforced by the Night, and by each other.

First and foremost; we don't stab each other in the back. Not literally, and not metaphorically. The world being what it is, we often find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of working against each other. WConsider two chefs who each desperately want the aforementioned recipe for spiced duck, and who individually hire Thorns to retrieve it. If there's time, we'll cross-check and find the conflict. If there's not, we have two Thorns racing for the same ill-gotten recipe.

Which is fine; any two Thorns will consider it a game, a race to the recipe. That game ends when one Thorn has the recipe in his pocket. If it's personally important to the loser, he might offer to buy the ill-gotten recipe, or work out a deal for a copy of it, but it begins and ends at negotiation. If he raises a hand to his brother, in anger or in stealth, he's out. No second chances on this point; we only exist due to our trust in each other, and violating that trust is the single worst offense you can perpetrate against the Order.

Compulsion is a horse of a different color; as much as we might like it otherwise, there's nothing beyond your own skills and good sense stopping someone from Enslaving you and issuing you orders to go out into the world and kill off every Midnight Thorn you encounter, to issue a cry for help that leads a number of us into a deathtrap, or worse. It's happened, on several occasions in the past, and if it happens to you, we'll restrain you for your own good (and ours) until we have the problem dealt with. We take that kind of action personally, to a man. The last person that took it into her head to use the Thorns as weapons against each other is still screaming her nights away in a cell beneath the Archives, and will continue to do so until she dies. Of old age.

Along similar lines, when one of your brethen's in trouble, needs your help, you're

obligated to provide it. Yes, there are times that this is not only inconvenient, but disastrous. Any trouble that a Thorn gets into and can't get out of is likely to be very serious, and very dangerous, and as spread out as we are, you may be the only one near enough to answer the call.

Thorns work on contract a lot; never sign a contract that guarantees anything, except a full refund in case of failure. Once your name hits the paper, you're bound by more than law and courtesy to fulfill the terms thereon. You're bound to the reputation of the Order as a whole, and it's difficult enough for people to trust a band of spies without stories circulating about how you signed off on stealing a duck recipe for a chef and then sold that recipe to the highest bidder when you laid hands to it. Not to say that some stories don't circulate anyway, but there's not a single drop of truth to any of them, and we punish the rumor-mongers harshly.

If you need help putting together a contract, get word to one of the older Thorns and ask, at least until you get the hang of it. There are some standard clauses, like not working against each other, a refund in case of failure, forfeiture of the fee if the conditions of the operation are misrepresented, that kind of thing. It's really not all that hard, but some Thorns can barely read, much less do the fine maneuvering of contracts, so it's important to understand that help is available. The bottom line is, if you're not completely confident that you can handle the terms, don't put your name on them.

Our skills and tactics develop over time; every generation of Thorns is better than the last, and we work hard at keeping it that way. At least once a year, more often if you feel the need, make an effort to get to the Archives and write down whatever useful things you've learned over the years. Yes, it takes some time away from your plans to unearth the lost city of gold. None of us like it, but we all understand the need to store away that knowledge, and we all do it whether or not we like it. Once a year, and it's no coincidence that December often sees a huge mass of Thorns descend on the Archives. Don't feel too badly about it; we all procrastinate on it, and no one will blink an eye. As long as it gets done, at least once a year.

By now, it should go without saying that anything that threatens the night threatens us all, and is hence to be aggressively put down. This really doesn't happen too often; outside of the odd insane ritual caster or overzealous Arcanum, the Night is perfectly capable of maintaining itself without our help. On the rare occasions where that turns out not to be the case, you'll feel the call, and you won't be alone. Bands of Midnight Thorns have swept through the strongholds of insane ritual casters like the plague, and we've done it more than once in our long, sordid history.

Secrets

Curiosity, so the saying goes, killed the cat. Curiosity has also killed more Thorns than war, plague, guards, storms, pirates, jealous lovers, offended victims, and law enforcement combined. Our curiosity overwhelms common sense, reason, and rational thought, all at once. Tell an average band of adventuring types that a recent earthquake has unearthed a cave untouched for hundreds of years, lined with runes and curses and warnings of eternal agony for all who set foot within, and they'll consider easier pickings. Tell a Thorn that same story, and he'll be checking his gear before you've even finished talking.

Sometimes, it doesn't even take that. Mention within earshot of a Thorn that you'd really

like to know how the bartender gets that hint of spice into his ale, and odds are better than even that you'll have a Thorn thinking that he'd really like to know, too. He may or may not tell you when he finds out, but consider it foregone that he'll either find out or die permanently trying.

Why? Why would a superb spy or king of thieves throw his life away, over and over, trying to learn how a bartender spices his ale? Certainly, there's no fortune to be gained with that knowledge, no advantage for the Order, and probably not even an advantage for the poor sap that keeps ramming his head into the wall. And it's even worse than that; our curiosity is our only exploitable weakness, as an Order, and it's walked us into trap after trap after trap, over thousands of years. Granted, we punish the people that set those traps *harshly*, but some people never learn, and others are willing to pay the price to avenge some real or imagined slight, or to gain a real or imagined momentary tactical advantage.

That answer stems from a couple of different sources. The Night Queen impressed upon us early the value of information, and so from the very beginning we've quested for knowledge. Over time, we've reinforced that lesson so well that it gets imprinted deeply, often before new Thorns take their first steps into the cold, cruel world. Taking blame where blame is due, we haven't always drawn a clean line between *valuable* information and information that's gained just for the sake of having it, and by the time the Reality War geared up, we'd already learned the right lesson too well, taken it too far, and there's no going back now.

But you'd think if we recognized the problem, we'd start training it out of the next generations. We're a pretty smart, practical bunch of people, curiosity aside, so why haven't we taken steps to work out our only real weakness? As I said, the answer stems from more than one source.

After years of investigating the matter, we discovered that while we could train out that rabid, self-destructive curiosity from recruits, every time we did so, we had recruits that lost the gifts of night. And then we understood.

The night is where people hide secrets from each other, and from the world. Affairs embraced under cover of darkness, assassins set loose to slay in stealth, account books buried deep in mounds of anonymous paperwork, all done under night's loving embrace. In keeping those secrets away from the eyes of man, away from the sunlit world, those secrets have been tacitly entrusted to the night. From there, it starts coming together; entrusting a secret to the night and entrusting a secret to us are things that we can't distinguish between, and the idea of hiding something from the night, and by extension from us, feels wrong, dissonant. If there's a secret, we have to have it; it's ours by right.

So, to return to our earlier example; you might not think to kill yourself again and again trying to unearth someone else's recipe for spiced ale, but you'd certainly pick up the sword to get something that was yours by right and that someone else was keeping from you. For an excellent illustration of a similar principle, find a member of the Seven Shields that carries his father's longsword, knock him over, and run off with the sword. See how often he's willing to die to get it back, when really it's just a stupid piece of metal, viewed objectively. It may not even be a very good stupid piece of metal, but it is his stupid piece of metal, and he'll come back, over and over again, in the face of all common sense but with admirable dedication, until he either gets that sword back or dies permanently trying. You've stepped on at least two of his killing points (you've insulted his honor and issued a grave offense to justice), and you've earned the mortal enemy you've made.

We're a little more practical (but not much) and certainly more patient (that secret's not going anywhere, so we've got time to plan on it). We're perfectly happy to buy information where that's convenient, certainly willing to trade it at need, but if all else fails, you'll find us every bit as dedicated to getting that spiced ale recipe as the Knight is to getting back Daddy's sword.

And yes, to answer the next question, we're willing to share our secrets. Not casually, but to close friends, or at the behest of a contract. Certainly we pass secrets freely among the Order, but none of us will violate a contract that stipulates that we keep a secret *within* the Order. If you're ever foolish enough to sign a contract that states you'll keep a secret *from* the Midnight Thorns, make sure there's an escape clause, because the rest of us will dig up your secret eventually.

Organization

The Midnight Thorns started off as a pirate crew, and then a spy network, so we're a lot more organized than the average guy on the street might think. We don't have rulers, or commanders, or any kind of tight military structure; there'll be an armed revolution and blood in the streets the first time a Thorn tries to tell the rest of the Order that he's now in charge, and everyone's going to do what he says.

We're more of a tightly interlaced collection of departments; doing things that way allows us to group our law scholars together to assist with contracts, our numbers types to handle Order accounts, and our field agents to go out into the world to do what we all do best.

Hands are what the world sees as the Midnight Thorns; sneaky types wearing black and carrying poison is the stereotype, but we also have plenty of Agents that carry large clubs and beat the secrets out of the world, and no shortage of mages that charm their way past guards, or summon all manner of nice creatures as distractions or assistants. Whatever the flavor, the Hand is the core of the organization; the guys who go out into the world, take on the contracts, and unearth the secrets.

Every city that has Thorns in it has a Second Mate; this is the guy that collects information from the Agents, collates it, sifts it for things of remarkable note, and passes it up the chain. He also takes requests from the First Mate for special needs, and helps to match contracts written by the lawyers to appropriate Hands to carry them out. He's called a mate in honor of the pirate legacy that started it all, but he's got no command authority, no power to issue orders, and no way to enforce any orders that he might take it into his head to issue anyway. All that said, the Second Mates of the various cities of the plane tend to be pretty well respected Thorns, experienced and sharp, and a request from a Second Mate for anything he might happen to want is honored a lot more often than it's not.

Second Mates, as you might guess, report to First Mates, who do the same job, but on a regional instead of a local scale. Other than scale, and the fact that requests from First Mates carry more weight with the Thorns than requests from Second Mates, there's not a lot of difference between the jobs they do. First Mates have a bit broader view, and if a lawyer writes up a contract that calls for a specialized set of skills, a First Mate may send out a call to the Second Mates to see if there's anybody around that might be particularly well suited to a given contract. The First Mates report to the Captain. Captaincy is called to vote whenever a

Captain happens to perish, or theoretically if we ever have a Captain that's hurting the Order through gross incompetence (although that's never actually happened). The current Captain is a Deep Elven woman, Arya Callistonsdotter, and there's nothing she doesn't know, nowhere she can't go, and nothing she can't do. If they ever hold a run-off for Single Most Dangerous Person on the plane, Captain'd get my vote. Throughout history, Deep Elven women seem to end up as Captains... frequently. It might be inherited from the Night Queen, or might just be that deep elven lasses have good attitudes and good skills, having grown up in a place that's unfriendly to women.

The other departments aren't so linearly organized, largely because they don't need to be. We need a solid chain to pass information back and forth for the field agents, but a lawyer is a lawyer is a lawyer is a lawyer. Same with accountants; all the lawyers and all the accountants routinely submit reports to the Captain, and she might even read them. My personal hunch is that she already knows what's on those reports before they ever hit her doorstep.

Admittance

So, you wanna be a spy. The Thorns were given life by a victim of double discrimination, a woman and a deep elf, and you might expect that we wouldn't be too keen on discrimination within the Order. You'd be right, too. We're not racists, or sexists, or classists; if you've got the right skills and the right attitude, we'll be happy to take you in and train you. If you can't form the bonds of fellowship between Thorns, or if you can't manage the connection to Night, we'll find that out in training, thank you for your interest, and show you the door.

Training lasts anywhere from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, depending on your natural talents and the skills you have when you walk in the door. It's boundless fun; we'll sneak up on you in the middle of the night and crack you on the head with sticks, we'll set you up to try and infiltrate places that other Midnight Thorns are guarding, we'll ask you to steal things that we really don't care about from places you'll consider impossible when we set you the task. Well, it's boundless fun when you're *delivering* training, anyway.

After the training stint, you'll get your very own Midnight Thorn tattoo, modeled after the same flag that the *Midnight Thorn* ran on her sails, all those years ago. A little piece of vine, with exactly one thorn on it, and a black teardrop dangling from the thorn. Congratulations; you're in.

Leaving is just as easy; following the Night Queen's example, we don't begrudge each other the right to follow other paths or to quit the field and retire. If you make that sad decision, you'll lose the connection to night that provides you with our odd skills, and you'll be gratefully relieved of the responsibilities that the Thorns have to each other. You'll also be happy to note that as soon as you walk, your curiosity will wane back down to normal levels. We don't hold grudges against ex-Thorns, and there's often still a sense of fellowship between the Order and former members. It's not unusual to see ex-Thorns raising drinks in taverns to the Order, or sitting around trading stories with current Thorns.

Some leave, and find that they can't live without us. That's no problem either, as long as you haven't been a problem during your absence, we're happy to re-admit you. We already know you have the right attitude, and that you can handle the responsibilities, or you never

would have made it in the first place. We do require that you go back through training, though, even if you've only been gone a few hours. Our way of saying "Welcome Back", and incidentally getting to whack you on the head with a stick. I did mention how much fun training was, right?

All the reassurance out of the way, if you quit the ranks, that doesn't give you a license to use your inside information against the Thorns, and doesn't give you the right to start merrily stabbing the Order or its members in the back. Of all the things that we'll pursue and punish way above and beyond the call of duty, traitors come right ahead of the compulsion people we talked about earlier. You'll at least have the happy advantage of knowing that we can find you, we can get to you, and we'll never stop. Ever.

The Archives

The Archives are the collected wisdom of the Midnight Thorns over the ages. Not from the very beginning, but from a damned good ways back; we didn't have the resources in the very early years to put together a sufficient stronghold to keep it all. It wasn't until we'd been rolling for a good bit of time. It stretches back at least to the Reality War, and maybe further back than that, if you have the patience to sit there and read that far.

The Archives are held in a fortress, sunk deep beneath the ocean floor. Cost us a fortune in time and money to get it built and placed correctly, but it was worth it. As it is, the only real avenues for assault on the Archives are to dive down a few thousand feet, and then dig a few hundred, and then commence your attack. You'll also have to do all of this using only people you can trust implicitly, because if we find out what you're planning, your ship captains, divemasters, digger team leaders, and every other crucial person is going to wind up too dead to proceed. Alternately, you could dig up from under the building, launch a complete subterranean assault. Neither has happened in the history of the Archives; not to say that no one's taken up the idea, but no one's been able to keep the secret from us long enough to get his attack organized and scheduled.

For a Thorn, getting in is a bit easier; you'll still have to navigate the water in whatever fashion pleases you, and still have to arrange to get to the ocean floor. Once you've made it that far, the resident Gargoyles will escort you the rest of the way (after, of course, you've confirmed to his satisfaction that you're a Thorn and not an assassin. Well, maybe an assassin, but you know what I mean). The Gargoyles will take you to the front door, which is about four times the size you'd expect a door to be, and no further. It's up to you to Passlock your way in (and out, for that matter, I don't even think we have keys to those locks on the door anymore, and someone was talking about adding iron rings that were never meant to have keys).

If you're only there for your annual visit, to contribute, get yourself a pen and some paper, and start writing. If you're looking for something, consulting the Archives rather than adding to them, chase down the Archivist and ask. We've got books going back thousands of years, and you have no hope at all of finding what you want on your own in the time you'll want to have it.

The Archivist is a Gargoyle Thorn, name of Iryn Tempos-Brevis. Supposedly his name's a joke on how young he is, but he's been running the Archives for... well, for a very long time,

anyway. His curiosity is sated in books, in digging and chasing and hunting the details of long ago, looking for answers to questions posed in newer volumes. Very few of us, outside of some like-minded mages, even understand how he tolerates sitting in the fortress reading all the time, but we're happy to have him there. He doesn't talk much; years of living in his books have eroded his social abilities, so he comes off shy and a little stupid. Don't buy it; just because he stutters and can't put a thought to words doesn't make him the least bit stupid, or the least bit safe. He's a powerfully skilled caster (we've been bringing him rituals and scrolls for a great deal of time), and on top of organizing and reading, he's also the final line of defense for the Archives if the walls get breached.

Over the years, he's gotten a little motherly towards "his" books; treat the books well, and never, never try to leave with one. The Archives are there for all of us, and Iryn knows that "us" is a group of people with a strong tendency to put things we like into our pockets and flee. Don't try it; it's never worth it.

The Bad News

Summed up, the Midnight Thorns work under the following list of restrictions:

- One month out of every year, each Midnight Thorn character must be taken out of play (to visit the Archives and add in whatever he thinks is valuable). Players of such characters may NPC or play secondary characters (if Plot decides that shells are going to be allowed) during this month.
- Any Midnight Thorn must, at any cost, drop what he is doing to come to the aid of another Midnight Thorn in need. In the event that multiple such calls for arrive simultaneously, the character may select which Thorn to assist. Also, a Thorn that is actively assisting another Thorn in response to a call for help may ignore further calls without penalty until his current situation is resolved.
- No Midnight Thorn may reveal Order secrets to any non-Thorn voluntarily (magical or alchemical compulsion is an acceptable excuse).
- A Midnight Thorn that has signed a contract must abide to the exact letter of that contract. *Letter*, not spirit.
- No Midnight Thorn may knowingly accept a contract that involves working directly against another Thorn; ignorance of the other Thorn's involvement is an acceptable excuse. Under no conditions may a Thorn take a contract that works against the interests of the Order as a whole.
- On the rare occasions that something threatens the night as a whole, ending that threat must be a Midnight Thorn's top priority, over and above all other listed restrictions.
- Thorns are consumed by curiosity; whenever a new experience, challenge, or secret comes up, Thorns are obligated to investigate, no matter how poor of an idea that may be, viewed objectively. Warning in advance to players considering Midnight Thorn candidacy; this can and will get you killed, probably more than once. (This restriction may be situationally waived by Plot in the interests of the game as a whole; if, for example, someone's entire character would be ruined by you unearthing his past, Plot may elect to tell you that that character's past does not inspire your curiosity).