

THE BOOK OF SHADOWS™

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"Now if we could only cooperate, we'd be in business!"
— Porthos, Drua'shi Master of the Order of Hermes

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THE BOOK OF SHADOWS™

The Mage Players Guide



The Sourcebook for Players and Storytellers of Mage

Credits

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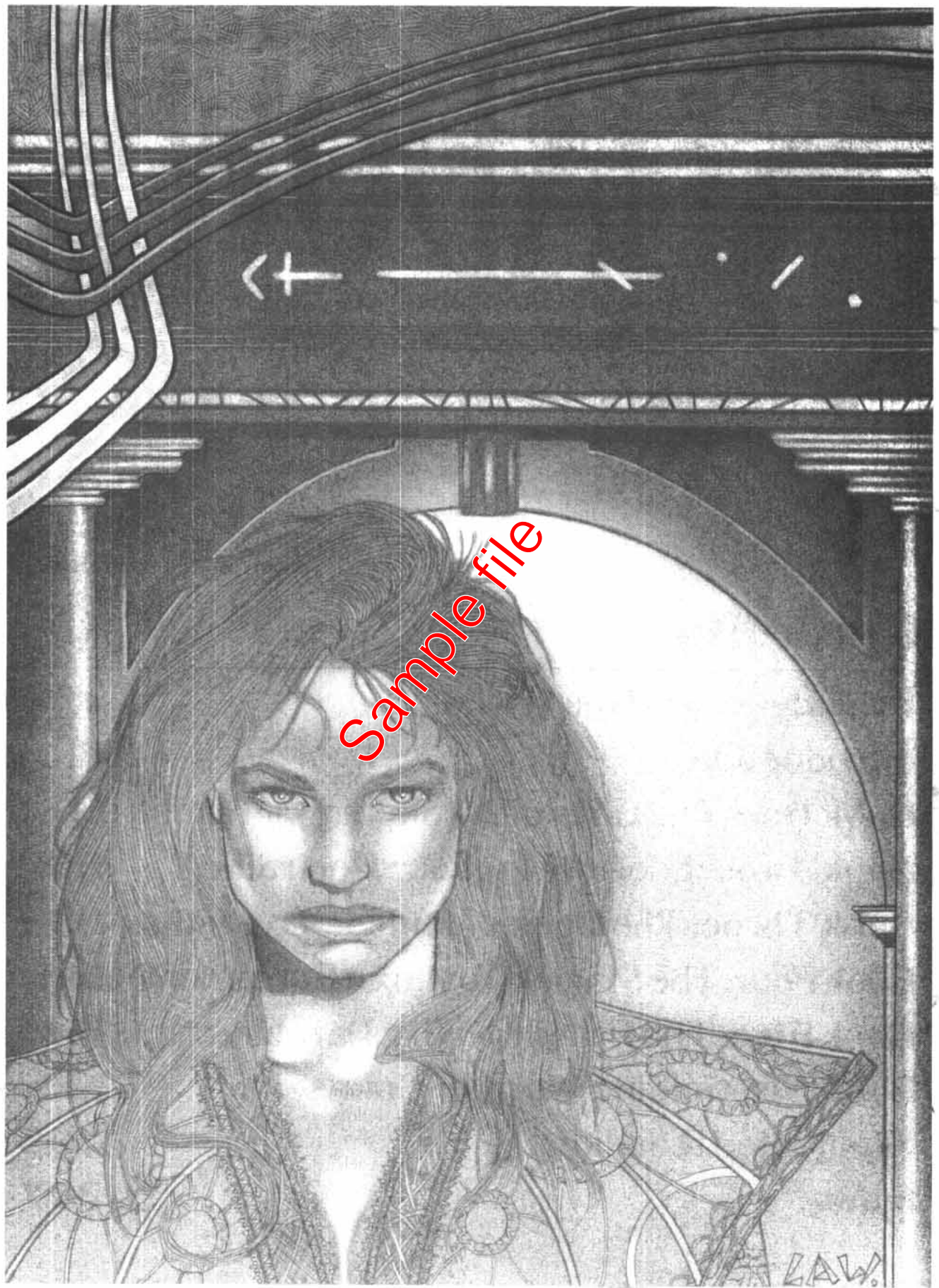
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Prelude: Behind the Wall

By Kathleen Ryan



This is an elegant house. Its patrons claim it is the finest in the state, if not the nation, and solidly, if sordidly, endorse it. They describe the furnishings as perfect, the talents of the employees as exquisite and the arrangements as painfully discreet. Perhaps these things are true. Certainly the operation is so refined as to make unnecessary any blackmail. The mayor counts the madam among his closest friends.

The police never raid this house.

On the ground floor is a restaurant as famous and as respectable as any other. Amanda slinks deliberately across the main salon, drifting slowly closer to her target's table. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees him, sees the wineglass in his flaccid hand. Twice the magick has misfired, twice this man has escaped, all unwittingly. A clumsy waiter dropped the first tainted glass; a drunken diner stole the second. Though new to her powers, already Amanda has come to distrust coincidence, and ice settles in her veins. She longs to search these vacuous faces for the enemy, to fight directly the half-suspected opposition... she curses this clumsy approach even as she neutralizes the poison of the second glass. A knife, she feels, is so much more final.

She reaches the table just as a noisy party of seven crowds past in the other direction. Jostled, Amanda leans against the table for support, smiles vaguely as the murmured apologies begin. One satin-gloved hand moves a fraction of an inch...

"Jane, darling! Is it really you?" One of the passing diners, a handsome Asian gentleman in a tuxedo, takes her firmly by the shoulders. The pressure is light, but her hands are immobilized.

"Do I know you?" She searches his face. Never in her life has she used "Jane" as an alias, but this gives her time for a moment's thought.

"I'll be so hurt if you don't remember, you know." No. It makes no difference whether this man is her enemy or not. Her adversary doubtless watches, and this is her last chance.

"How could I ever forget?" As she kisses him, she shifts space behind her, loses herself to the twisting, raw-silk feel of reality in the room, lifts the branching futures out of their

random order and reweaves them around the plate before her target. Food poisoning. She holds her control a moment longer, recoils from the shock of counter-magick, satisfied that her adversary's attention is held there. Only then does she flick the wholly mundane poison into the wineglass.

The gentleman in her embrace has cold eyes now, and there is steel beneath his pleasant tones. He takes her arm, and there is steel in the gun that presses against her ribs. The diners see only the smiles, hear only the airy chatter of old lovers; most turn back to their meals before Amanda and her captor disappear through the shadowed doors at the rear of the salon. She must play this scenario out helplessly to give the poison time to work.

They halt by a closed door on a top floor of the old brick hotel. He knocks just once.

"All's fair. I've got her."

"What?"

"Wait a minute."

"Kill the lights. What she can't see... damn it, hurry up."

Trapped in this gilded hallway, Amanda simply waits, wonders if perhaps he will kill her, wonders if she should be afraid... wonders at her own delight. She has done what she came here to do. The kill was right, and it was hers, and it was good. The feeling convinces the young Euthanatos of the worth of her Path in ways the Old Man's teaching never has. As the door opens, she fights a smile.

They trip her up, hold her down, take her knives and trinkets and cuff her. Then someone slams her into an armchair, and the questions begin again.

"Who are you?" It's the "gentleman's" voice, but rougher, and all steel now.

"Who are you?" Amanda answers back, nearly laughing.

"Answer me. Who are you?"

"Why do you want to know?" she asks, ready to play the game for hours.

"Michael?"

"I'm not touching her." This voice is very low, rumbling across the room like a tiny earthquake. "She reeks of it. We should kill her and leave. Now."