

VALERIOUS

Sample Scene: To Catch a Phantom

Hadria silently pursued the cloaked man as he crept through the twisting halls of the keep.

She followed at a distance, just able to see his long leather cloak whip around corners as he tread stealthily over the red carpet. He must have known exactly where he was going, for he moved through with a swift and determined pace, never second-guessing the directions he chose.

Despite the ironshoes having all day, and despite them being united under Sir Derrick, they were incapable of finding this intruder. And Hadria was going to capture him. She was going to accomplish what all her father's men were incapable of. That would prove that she could defend herself better than all his soldiers. There would be no reason for her father to keep her trapped in Pax Thivio. He would have to let her leave.

This was just like in the epics. What a coincidence it was that, exactly a hundred and twelve years after Hadria's grandfather defeated the the Red Dragon, Hadria was now going to defeat the intruder. But even more eerie were the similarities between the intruder and the *darker man* from the Epic of Alexander, as the fourth stanza read:

*Alexander, didst the fair maiden sayeth
a darker man than thee thither is
to whom doest the Red Dragon bow
and none can stop him but thee*

According to legend, there was a *darker man* than Sir Alexander, who was identified in stanza eight to have been the wizard *Alvethorn*. At the anniversary of Alexander's defeat of Alvethorn, Hadria was now going to defeat the intruder. Perhaps this was not a coincidence. She had wanted to be a knight all her life. Never had she wanted to be a trembling maiden fearful of danger – she wanted to be the hero.

The intruder moved swift through the hallways. Hadria struggled to match his speed while keeping her footfalls silent under her long, flowing gown. Why did she have to wear this one? She lifted the fabric before her feet to avoid tripping on it again.

The intruder passed through the grand hall and darted up the stairs. The swift thuds of his leather boots echoed from the thick red carpet. At the keep's highest floor, the footsteps ceased. Hadria froze. With a cautious step, she silently peered over the top of the stairs to find the cloaked man standing before a door at the end of a hall. There was a short hallway with gold patterned carpets, decorative suits of armour, and a single pine door at the end. It gave access to the roof, and it was locked.

The man reached into a pocket under his cloak and pulled out two tiny metal tools. He knelt before the door, blocking sight of his hands, but Hadria could hear a light tinkering of metal. He must have been picking the lock! She should have stopped him, but she did not know how dangerous he was. Her father told stories of dangerous criminals. Bandits who robbed people with swords, assassins who planted poison in kings' wine, underground merchants who traded women like cattle... but why should she listen to her father? All his stories were just meant to scare her into staying in the castle forever. She could handle herself. In fact, she hoped this man was dangerous!

Looking around, she found that one of the suits of armour had a sheathed sword on its belt. The intruder's hood blocked his sight from behind, so Hadria tiptoed to the armour. She dared not breathe, her ribs clenched around her heart, for all he had to do was turn his head and look behind him. She would have been caught, and most likely killed.

Was this even worth it? Should she risk death, or risk being trapped in this infernal castle forever? Which fate would be worse?

Six suits of armour, three on either side of the hall, stood like motionless sentinels before the door to the keep's roof. She flattened herself against the wall and brought her hand to the armour's sword. The handle was wrapped in black leather with extravagant golden lacing. With her left hand over the scabbard and hilt, her right hand untied them from the belt.

With the lightest grip of the handle, she started drawing the blade. However, the metal of the sword ground against the scabbard with a sharp ring.

She froze. The intruder stopped working and turned silent. His breath was slow, quiet, calculated. He seemed to scan all sounds in the hall. Hadria held her breath and hoped beyond hope that he would not turn around.

After several silent moments of her racing heart beating painfully in her ears, the intruder took a breath and continued picking the lock.

A silent, shuddering breath escaped her nose. Her racing heart and burning lungs relaxed with the air. She could not ready the sword now, for unsheathing it would alert the intruder to her presence. Instead, she would have to wait until the exact moment when she was ready to strike to finally draw her weapon.

The lock gave a deep thud and the man re-pocketed his tools. As he rose from kneeling and pocketed his tools, he reached to the wall and retrieved a staff. A smoke-grey stick, about as tall as him, with curling wood wrapped around a brazen compass rose at the top. It looked as if the staff were holding down the compass as it yearned for freedom. The compass rose was a mark of cartography, to be found on maps. Why did the intruder have it?

He was a tall man, his head three inches higher than Hadria's. But his shoulders were not wide enough to be very muscular. In fact, he didn't look like a warrior at all. He had good posture as he stood straight with his shoulders back and his chin up.

A lump of doubt formed in Hadria's stomach. Most peasants — especially criminals — tended to slouch. It were as if this man was a proper gentleman.

But this was no time to second-guess herself. She was going to capture him. Now was her chance!

Hadria's heart leapt as she boldly stepped out from behind the armour and, with the sword hilt in one hand and the sheath in the other, she was going to draw it and give the intruder a stern command to surrender.

However, as she strode forward, her foot landed upon the fabric of her gown. The sudden weight on her waist yanked her forward unexpectedly and she fell. The sword flew from her hands as she tumbled to the ground.

A sharp thud echoed through the halls as her elbows hit the floor. She struggled on the carpet, fought with the fabric, desperate to return to her feet. How could anyone fight in a six-foot-wide tripping hazard?

The intruder turned to her. A glint of metal under his black leather cloak made Hadria realize she dropped her sword. Whatever evil smirk he must have had was concealed by the shadow of his hood. The oily leather odour of his cloak stung her nose as his staff thudded against the carpet beside her face. She frantically felt for her weapon as he looked down at her, his eyeless gaze creating a wave of searing cold through her body.

The intruder spoke. Despite his cold, deadly appearance, his voice was smooth and warm.

"I apologize for my inability to catch you in your fall, my lady, but I was unaware of your presence and was thus startled by the discovery. I pray your unfortunate collapse has left you in no harm?"

What did he say? He spoke like a noble. No, even higher than a noble. He spoke with the words and accent of a scholar. But that meant he was smart, which made him even more dangerous. Too often did the epics tell of an honourable knight tricked by the silvery tongue of a liar. The intruder, under the dark shadows of his cloak, looked to Hadria with what must have been false sincerity. He held his hand out, an offer to help her return to her feet. He was just trying to gain her trust. He was going to kill her.

"G-get back, don't come closer!" Hadria shouted as she shuffled back, even more frantically searching for her sword. Behind her back, she felt an object of cold metal. She pulled out her sword from behind her back with its sheath still on and held it between her and him.

In response, the man retracted his offered hand of assistance and, with a dilatory motion, pulled his hood back to reveal his face. He had a neatly combed, jet black goatee that was long enough to graze the top of his collar and his carefully groomed hair from his head touched the tops of his shoulders. Though, it was not his hair that she noticed first, but his eyes. His irises were the colour of fire and they danced around his pupils like flames.

Even though she was holding him at the end of her blade, he taunted her with a sly smirk. "Your blade can do nothing against me miss. Your threats are unavailing."

Shuffling to the brick wall behind her, Hadria leaned against it to get to her feet. With her gown uncomfortably twisted about her stomach and chest, she stood defensively and said, “if you come any closer, I’ll fight you. I know how to use this. I won’t hold back.”

She grasped the case and drew the sword, but there was no blade. The handle only had a short metal rod attached. It was just a decoration. Whatever hope she had of escaping alive had been replaced with dread.

“As I said,” the man taunted, “your blade can do nothing against—”

The handle hit his forehead as Hadria tossed it, knocking him back a few steps. Claiming the opportunity, she bolted for the stairs. However, to avoid another trip, her speed was lessened by the gown. Easily passing her, the intruder blocked the staircase, holding her captive like a wolf preying upon a doe.

He spoke quickly and with fierce restraint. “I see your point my lady, and I rescind my previous assumption of imperviousness to the decorative hilt, but I implore you to remain here.”

Hadria stopped running forward and sprinted to either side, searching for a lapse in his defense. “Let me go! You’re just going to kill me so I can’t alert the guards!”

“No miss, I would never do so. Death is the greatest injustice of all.” He slows his words, catching her attention. “Never will someone claim I brought death upon such a fair soul, especially one as *enchanting* as your own.”

With Hadria’s mind a hurricane of broken glass committed to escape, the man’s words pierced through the gale of determination and wrenched it towards him. Her pounding heart forfeited to the man’s soothing voice. Hadria stepped back but kept her eyes on him, ready to bolt at any moment.

Removing his leather cloak, he revealed the rest of his body. He was wearing a dark olive-green tirtaine robe. It may have been like a wizard robe, though it was tight to his body, which was slender yet well-muscled. His face was tanned, as if from years of travel, though he was not much older than Hadria. He was, perhaps, handsome with his long, neatly groomed, ink-black goatee and his eyes of unbridled ambition. His spotless robe closed over his left side and a leather belt sat over his waist with a brass buckle matching the compass of his staff. A leather satchel hung over his shoulder. Hadria had seen many people who had come to the castle, but never someone quite like him.

“Who are you?” Hadria asked.

As he stepped closer, she could see deeper into his dragon-like eyes. He looked deep into Hadria’s eyes, burning past her thoughts, into her soul, demanding her undivided attention.

“I am a phantom, with an undying name. You may call me... *Valerious*.”

Hadria stepped back as Valerious approached.

“Why are you here, Valerious? Are you here to steal something? Are you here to kill me?”

Valerious paused for a moment, his eyes squinting in thought. He appeared to be judging her with keen precision before he spoke. “I have come here for an artifact lost to time, sealed in this castle like a carrion man to a casket. Much has been spent to keep this dangerous artifact hidden from the world.”

He had come here searching for a dangerous artifact. That was perfect! If she could help him find it, then he would come to trust her. And that was when she would strike.

She turned to the unlocked door and walked through it. “Hurry up Valerious. You need to steal the artifact before the guards return. You don’t have all night.”