
[037] (special)

Rania Yulvenir, the third-born dark elf of the Yulvenir clan, right-hand of the Yulvenir patriarch, and mage of the third circle, was lost. It wasn't a sense of being lost in the way that she did not know where she was; she might have been in the middle of the Grand Lakes, but she knew her exact location in relation to the other cities of the Caliphate. No, she was lost because she did not know where to go.

The Yulvenir patriarch had given her a most important task: to find the pale human who had saved him from the Sultan's assassination plot. To fulfill this task, she'd first attempted what any reasonable person would: to ask for aid from someone blessed by the Weaver. She who wove the tapestry of Fate would no doubt hold at least some insight into the matter. But that failed right away; seemingly, the stranger was either as fateless as the Yulvenir patriarch had become, or the Goddess herself was seeking to hide this mortal's presence for some reason.

With peering into fate leaving them so thoroughly blind, her options had begun to narrow down. Other forms of divination were sought and paid for, each one more esoteric and rare than the last. Since they'd known the man to be human, blood-seeking had been the next likeliest match. Humans were scarce in this part of the continent, after all. Then they tried for people who spoke strange, unknown tongues. Then for those who were extremely pale.

Attempt after attempt, each one failing more spectacularly than the last, either giving them too many potential targets, or none at all. Rania had effectively burnt through a fortune in her endeavors, spending months traveling to the four major cities of the Caliphate to contact expert mages and their families. The Yulvenir clan opened many doors, and Rania had used them all.

Their final and most desperate clue had been, strangely enough, through the pink slippers the man had worn. One of the minor noble houses in the city of Vatia knew sympathetic tracking spells, the sort that would've normally been deemed worthless in the face of fate-based divination. But it had been their strongest lead, even if it appeared to now have failed them.

"Well?" the dark elf asked the divination mage with a voice cold enough to freeze the warm waters under the barge they sailed. The crooked old elf clutched the pink slipper,

smearing aether between his fingers as he traced the knots into the air. His craftsmanship was beautiful, his work precise, his gestures fluid and graceful like a trained performer. The spell curled into existence, an intricate delicate thing that had a flow to it Rania could only assume meant the man was a fourth or even fifth circle mage. Why he'd chosen to rot with his noble family rather than join a more prestigious house was beyond her, but she cared not to ask; the man's obsession with his bloodline's secret spellworks had proven a boon in her search.

"The tie between owner and object is strong; I can sense that he is near the waters of the Great Lakes, but..." Wrinkled lips curled. "We are too far to get anything more precise."

"Near the waters of the Great Lakes, he says..." Rania's pale brows lowered until they became a singular line. "The Great Lakes occupy a third of the Caliphate's borders; we might as well be looking at several kingdoms' worth of territory to pore over."

"Excuse me, my Lady, this is the best I can do without something more closely tied to your target."

"He is not a target!" Rania roared out, startling every sailor, soldier, and hired help present. "The Yulvenir patriarch owes this man his life, and I will not tolerate any of you besmirching our intentions."

"If I may speak, Lady Rania."

A soft voice drifted from within the cabins, a robed figure stepping out into the sunlight. High Priestess Ilana did not appear to be in good health; the elf's visage had grown paler by the day ever since insisting on joining them in their expedition. After failing to give them any information about the Weaver's plans, the woman had adamantly insisted on lending aid in any other way she could. The patriarch had agreed to send her off with Rania, if only to decapitate the Church of Fate's political power within the capital.

"I believe that, in the face of spells failing, we might do well with a more traditional approach."

"What do you suggest?" Rania had not been thrilled; it was hard to miss that the high priestess had some ulterior motive of her own, but thus far, the high priestess had provided no reasons for them to throw her away. In some instances, she'd even helped open a few doors that might have otherwise remained tightly shut.

"Use the locals." Ilana smiled demurely, her lips cracking as her sickly visage wavered. "You have the resources; you could either use or establish an information network. If we know he is somewhere near the Great Lakes, then it shouldn't be impossible to set

something up. After all, he is a pale human, not something frequently found in these parts.”

Rania gritted her teeth, not liking the sound of that.

To establish a network could take months, even years, but did she have any alternatives aside from having to report her failure to the patriarch?

“Very well. Do you recommend we start anywhere in particular?” The question was asked as Rania pointed at the crude drawing on the map she’d acquired of the Great Lakes.

Ilana smiled bitterly. “In times like these, where all options are equal, I often use the most rudimentary form of fate-reading possible.” From her robes, she pulled out a simple object: two six-sided dice.

“Chance?” Rania scoffed.

“Fate works in mysterious ways; sometimes one just needs to trust the Weaver’s designs, even if one cannot see it.” She rolled the little cubes.

“And what do your dice say?” The dark elf raised a brow.

“A six and a five.” Ilana carefully moved her fingers over the map, segmenting it into six columns and six rows, then picked one on the far end, a section that was in the sixth row and fifth column. “Doeta.” She picked the dice back up.

The others shared glances, and Rania scowled. “That’s on a far corner of the Great Lakes, it doesn’t make sense to go there, if he shows up elsewhere, we wouldn’t be able to respond in time.”

“And the dice could have just flailed and pointed at water, that would’ve been the likelier outcome after all.” Ilana’s smile was a brittle one. “But fate rarely makes sense until observed in hindsight.” The high priestess gingerly pocketed the dice. “In the end, it is not my choice to make.”

“But you would endorse going to Doeta.”

“Seeing how we have no clues leading anywhere else? Yes.”

Rania glared at the map for a moment longer. “Fine, Doeta it is.”

Imani Sharpclaw woke up to a grand hangover, her head throbbing with such intensity she might have suspected someone had trapped a rampaging brufol within her skull. She blinked blearily, the world focusing into stark sharpness even though her body felt numb and lethargic.

A great heat washed over her, and the sound of crackling fire drew her attention.

The sight of the burning house brought back memories, and suddenly everything snapped into place. She realized all six of her limbs were tied, her four paws clumped together and immobilized, while her arms were placed against her lower back.

“Before I untie you, I need to check something first,” the voice came from beside her, boots crunching against dirt, and the pale human crouched in front of her. “Do you recognize this?”

He held a tiny ball of black fluff in his hands, a rabbit. The little prey was eating a leaf, its eyes blank and distant, like all prey. Imani scowled at it, unsure of the origin of this question. “I... attacked you.” The memories were hard to put together, blurred through the same impenetrable fog from having drunk too much.

“You were possessed,” the man answered, putting the tiny beast on his shoulder. “One of the items contained something dangerous, it drove you to a bout of madness.” His gaze focused on hers. “What’s your name?”

“I told you my name,” she frowned.

“I must ask. There might be some lingering effects and I’d sooner keep you tied for another hour than take the risk.”

Imani bristled. This human had bested her in combat!? That shouldn’t be possible. She’d smelled the weakness clinging to him like rot. Even now, she could sense no threat coming from him, the man was as devoid of killing intent as the rabbit on his shoulder.

The mercenary struggled, trying to break free of the bonds. Yet as she struggled, the rope dug deeper into her flesh, and with a yelp, she froze, realizing that if she kept at this, she might cut off her own limbs. “What have you done?”

“I tied you up, and I plan to free you, once you tell me your name.”

“Imani Sharpclaw,” the leonid hissed through gritted teeth.

Shame welled within her as the human moved closer. With but a flick of his knife, the ropes were broken, and Imani instantly jumped away. Her eyes lingered on his body, gaunt and weak, thin and wiry, she'd heard of humans, but had never seen one herself. He wasn't too different from an elf, she concluded, and by the standards of elves, this human was far frailer than the average.

She would've mistaken him for a noble of this land were he not dressed like what a child would imagine a hunter of monsters to look like. The thought was tossed aside when she noticed that night was falling. She glanced at the corpses of her companions and employer and grimaced. "I must perform the rites on my own."

Liam didn't argue, giving her space.

Steeling her resolve, Imani approached the people with whom she'd been traveling for the past three moons. One by one, she put down the objects she thought were of importance to them, gathered from the belongings found within the tiny caravan. One by one, she knelt in front of them, closed her eyes, and tried to imagine what they would have wished for in life.

It was a role she had not wished to take, to pray to the Warden of Souls and describe the deepest desires each of these strangers held. Umari, the archer, had described his love for a family, aspiring to start a farm one day. Fory, the client, was a merchant, seeking to build a fortune so that he could one day marry a noble. And a dozen other names joined the list. On and on, Imani scoured her memories, trying to provide as accurate a wish as she could. She wasn't certain if the Warden might think them undeserving, but it was not her place to judge. Though they were not friends, these were strangers who had done her no evil, and she was, in part, responsible for their untimely deaths. To not pray for their happiness would have been dishonorable.

After she'd prayed for each of them, she lit the pyre and stepped away.

With the first part of the ritual done, her time for contemplation began.

Imani closed her eyes in meditation.

As the ways of the Sharpclaw demanded, she drew upon her life as a warrior, slowly reviewing each battle she'd lived through. From the first time she'd trained with her father to the bandits she'd hunted on her twelfth birthday, all the way to the chase and murder of the collector. One by one, she savored them, confirming that she was staying true to her path. The victories were seen through the lens of experience, drawing in details from what she'd gained. The losses were looked at through more critical eyes, attempting to squeeze out anything that might help her survive the next encounter.

Each memory served to forge her into a better warrior.

And then she reached the last battle, the one she clearly lost.

She remembered Liam rescuing her, the subsequent revenge, and then helping him extract items from the collector's abode. But everything after that was a vague sense of frustration and blurred concepts within her mind.

Imani's hackles rose, her temper flaring.

Her eyes snapped to the human as he watched the pyre burning.

Rising to her paws, she approached, intentionally stepping with a slight twist so that the ground would crunch underfoot. The sound drew his attention, and as she prepared herself to demand they spar at sunrise, something tickled at the back of her mind.

"You know of my people," she declared, certain she'd heard him call out the name of one of the holy rites of her tribe.

"I've read a bit about them," he shrugged nonchalantly, turning to look back at the pyre. "I'd like to accompany you to Doeta, and once you finish your contract, I'd like to hire you."

Her first instinct was to turn him down, but Imani was mature enough to recognize the impulse was childish. The annoyance she felt was out of the humiliation of being defeated, surely she'd learn more of how she'd been beaten given time. "What for?"

"Mostly? I'd need your help to find and hire mercenaries and laborers."

Imani looked at him skeptically. "How many?"

The human shot her a smirk, standing up and heading towards a cloth-covered pile that had not been there last time Imani checked. The human pulled at the cloth, revealing several chunks of gold, each one at least twice the size of the human's torso. It glittered under the firelight of the pyre and the house, scattering odd flickering golden lights in every direction.

Imani choked on air. "Where... where did you get this? It was not inside the house; it couldn't have been!" She'd checked the place over already, enough to be certain that such a ludicrous amount of gold could not have been hidden there.

"You did say that asking questions wasn't in line with your job." He patted the mound gingerly, chuckling in amusement. "But to answer your question, a powerful friend of

mine is in need of as many helping hands as she can get. I'm just playing the middleman."

The amount of wealth on display in front of her was greater than what she'd be able to gather within a decade of well-paying mercenary work. There was enough of it that she felt a worrying thought worming its way through her mind, asking herself why this man would willingly show it to her.

Did he not know how easy it would be for her to kill him and take it all?

Yet, as she met his gaze, she found something worrying within the confines of those dark eyes, a flicker of blue that made her wince at a memory of pain.

Imani's gaze drifted down to her tunic, to the spot where the memory originated. There was a scorch mark, not even wider than her thumb, a spot that felt tender to the touch. Despite her memories being foggy, this singular jolt of pain became clearer the more she thought of it.

The human had used lightning without a spell, the only possible explanation for such an ability being that he carried the blessing of a God.

It was only upon thinking this that she noticed the rabbit on his shoulder, the black creature with luxuriously dark fur, that had not moved from its spot as it kept the entirety of its focus on her. But as she looked at it, truly studied it, she realized that the creature had no heartbeat, did not breathe, nor did it have a scent.

Imani's eyes widened with shock and apprehension in equal measure, dawning horror creeping in.

The rabbit grinned.

There is something amusing about watching the fully geared, fully armed and highly capable mercenary dance around and visibly struggling to be tactful. Imani had very quickly agreed to take them to Doeta, and the leonid had been just as fast to offer to load everything up into the three wagons.

Even the slag of gold.

Was it a little petty that he felt some marginal vindication after she'd attacked him while under the influence of the pendant? Yes. Was he going to stop? Also probably yes, though only once Imani had relaxed a bit. The leonid was like a coiled spring around them, anything and everything would get her to answer in a rush.

Just implying he might be thirsty had her bolting to the lake shore to refill their waterskins.

"I think this is getting old fast." Liam thought out the words, aware of the spy currently poking into his mind as he frowned. He watched Imani run off ahead so that they could have camp set up as the trio of wagons continued steadily forward. The city wasn't that far off, they would probably reach it the next day.

"You say that as if there's an alternative." Bunny languished in a pillow, munching down on a carrot. *"Your attitude around my divine self and the boss is the odd one out. If only we could guarantee such adequate treatment all the time..."*

"Keep getting 'adequate' treatment and you'll get fat enough you'd make a proper meal." He flicked at her ear. *"Despite what you might think, people don't habitually go as far as Imani has without good reason."*

"A fragment of a deity being within her presence isn't a good reason?" Her tone was offended, her ears canted in irritation at his physical transgression. *"Mortals have been killed for lesser crimes than the lip you're giving right now."*

Liam rolled his eyes. *"Only the truly stupid deities are so full of themselves they'd smite someone because they didn't scrape the floor with their tongue."*

"Are you implying you would not scrape before one of them if one showed up?"

"I'm not suicidal, I'd scrape and even offer them a toe massage. My life's worth more than... something like 85% of my pride."

"That sounds strangely specific."

"Let's just say that, for a time, I had to pick between starving and ass-kissing, and I ended up discovering how empty flattery is a great way to disguise malignant compliance." His lips curled into a grin, but quickly dismissed it. *"Anyway, my point was that mortals don't typically go about scrapping and bowing like this. At least not without either being a sycophant or from having at least second hand experience watching a deity doing some smiting."* He poked her head, scratching her between the ears. *"And I'm not sure if you've noticed, but deities have attempted to minimize contact with mortals for a very long while now."*

"I know, I'm just being tactful and trying not to divulge her secrets." Bunny declared with a shrug.

"Oh?"

"I might not be the Goddess of Secrets herself, but I'm still her aspect." The lagomorph commented idly, ears twitching to point towards Imani's figure as she was preparing a campfire further ahead. *"That kitty's secrets flare out every time she looks at me."*

Liam blinked rapidly. *"Should you... be telling me about this?"*

"I won't say more, but in case I do say too much and you think I overstepped, you can just erase the memory." Her ear twisted in a very non-ear way to slap his boot right on the knife's handle. *"Also, this way you now have no option but to go talk to her while I happily go off and be mysteriously gone."*

"Wait, you didn't-"

She was gone.

He frowned at the cushion she'd been occupying, tentatively poking the spot to make sure she hadn't just made herself invisible. What was her deal? Trying to figure her out had become increasingly harder, so much so that Liam was starting to have some suspicions about Bunny being more than just your run-of-the-mill aspect.

Placing those thoughts aside, he led the wagon towards the camp Imani had already set-up. The leonid hurried to lead the wagons so they'd carefully lock into place as a three-sided wall around the camp. This effectively made their camp a very tight space,

but it also doubled as one easy to protect from outside attacks as the wagons would provide easy cover against anything ranged.

“Would you like me to cook an easy dinner... sir?” Imani’s overly demure tone felt like a stab in the gut.

Liam winced, as he sat down next to the fire. “You haven’t accepted my job offer yet, I’m not your boss.”

The leonid shifted, glancing at his empty shoulder, and then at the empty cushion. She swallowed. “But contract or not, you are still... **important**, no?” She emphasized the word as if she was precariously hanging from a tight-rope, paying closer attention to her surroundings than to him.

Liam regarded her for a moment, the tension was impossible to miss, as was how it practically bordered on terror. What was his end goal here? Though he respected Imani, she was a mercenary. If someone paid her enough gold, she’d do her best to put his head on a platter. By pretending to be Maridah’s Chosen, he was effectively guaranteeing Imani would not willingly cross him without bumping the price-tag by several zeroes.

There was a tricky part, however, in that he had to be extremely careful to toe the line of plausible deniability. Otherwise, Maridah’s plan involving this little trip to Doeta could very well turn into a disaster.

“This is a bit of wisdom I’ve read in a book, once.” He sat down, carefully keeping his tone neutral. “There’s basic respect, and then there’s respect to authority. So when you greet someone with authority, you’re expected to bow and scrape after them, and to not do so might be seen as disrespecting them.” He shot her a meaningful look. “I’d much rather not have others scraping the floor after me.” Immediately he raised his hands. “And before you ask, the rabbit doesn’t mind either. She just enjoys carrots.”

Imani did not relax, but she did give a very tentative nod. “I... will endeavor to keep this in mind.” Her eyes were focused on him, but her ears were swiveling every which way, tail perfectly still.

Liam grumbled inwardly. It seemed like this would take more than just one conversation to pull off. His only consolation was that, unless something derailed their plans, then there would be plenty of time to build some rapport.

Unseen and unheard, hidden within the shadows underneath the wagons, Bunny felt a bit bad for what was to come, but everything was going as planned.

The city of Doeta had, on a map, nothing particularly interesting about it.

It sat at the very edge of the Caliphate, occupying that fuzzy place one might call a “border”. The definition wasn’t quite so stringent in this part of the world, not when there was little else but mostly wilderness in all directions but one. Similarly, there were no resources within the area that might make it attractive to trade, and there weren’t any routes from it other than to the Caliphate itself, making it a metaphorical cul-de-sac. Historically speaking, Doeta once did hold great interest, as it was one of the dozen or so fortified cities on the northern side of the Grand Lakes. Near the start of this very Age, a “few” million years or so ago, it had been built with the express purpose of holding the line against the monsters pouring out from the Blue Mountains and the Twilight Jungle.

In short, aside from being the local trade hub, there wasn’t much that would’ve drawn anyone to give the little dot on the map more than a cursory glance.

And yet Liam could not look away.

There was a gigantic beak sticking out of the ground, colored a deep ochre and at least a kilometer tall, and its width being two thirds that. The monstrosity teetered at the edge of being nearly closed up, being just open enough to have perhaps a few hundred meters of separation at the widest point.

Doeta was inside that beak.

The beak was as if a state-sized creature had been frozen right before breaking out of the ground and swallowing up the city in a single bite. And during this unfathomably long time since it’d remained unmoving, the Caliphate had built its fortifications within it. After all, with the beak being nigh indestructible, who needed walls? The only fortifications were sandwiched between both halves of the beak, narrow but tall, effectively looking more like dams nestled deep within a canyon. The northern entrance was connected to the road they were currently traveling through, while the southern one was annexed to a bare-bones port just a hundred meters past the safety of the beak’s wall.

“Do you know of that monster?” Liam called out, drawing an interested ear from Bunny, and a jumpy if brief headshake from Imani.

“I heard it was killed by the Gods, but not much else.” The leonid hastily commented, trying to not stare at Bunny as she spoke.

“It’s not dead.” Liam grinned as his eyes lingered over the ochre smooth walls. “The monster holds the power to expand and compress space, itself alongside it. But so long as it’s not at its original size, it can’t be harmed. This was a bit of a problem, because the Gods didn’t know what size that was, and thus couldn’t risk wasting energy in dealing blows that could potentially just get shrugged off.” He gestured at the gigantic beak. “The Celestial Sentinel came up with a solution: to let it starve to death. He and the Weaver worked together to design a way to keep it physically immobile, while the others worked together to make sure it couldn’t use its powers, and basically left the thing to rot. This being back in the day when the pantheon was still on friendly terms with one another.”

There was an intense feeling of Bunny’s gaze boring holes into the back of his head, but he ignored it in favor of the confused look Imani shot his way.

“What happens to the city once the monster dies?”

“It’s a very slow death.” He commented excitedly, bouncing a little on his seat, marveling at the city’s exterior as they got ever closer. “The monster and its beak is shrinking ever so slowly as it goes, in a dozen million years or so, it’ll be the size of a thimble. By that point it’ll be truly and fully dead.”

Imani regarded him for a moment. “That... has to be a huge pile of dung.” She quickly turned to look ahead. “Who’d ever believe you would know the designs of the Gods?”

"Yes, Liam, what insane person would believe such claims from a mere mortal?" Bunny threw the words at his mind with a glare.

Ignoring the personal attack, he did the very adult thing of crossing his arms and pouting. “Maybe I’m just insane, then.” He grumbled a little, shaking his head. “Once we get there, how do we proceed? You’ve got to drop these wagons off, right?”

“My contract is to hand them, and their cargo, to the client. But I must also report on the fates of the others to any next of kin.” She spoke with a heavy tone, though eyed him as if to confirm neither of those things would cause needless friction. With no comments from him, she gave another nod.

Liam felt like poking Bunny just for whatever game she was pulling, but the rabbit was pretending to be just a well groomed animal. Their approach to the city meant that there were a few other people traveling as well. Very few had horses or beasts of burden to

pull on their wagons, instead they would typically be pulling on their own, or travel heavily loaded.

“Is it just me or are there a lot more people than a city like this would warrant?” He commented, frowning at the literal crowd of people waiting at the gates. Some of them had even set-up at the side of the road, presenting their wares, and bartering with one another.

“There must be a celebration of some kind.” Imani commented without commitment, moving closer to their trio of wagons, grip tightening on the handle of her blade.

“I can go ahead and ask while you guard the wagons.” Liam hid the little bubbling excitement at the prospect of having arrived at a time when some sort of local festivity was about to start.

Imani glanced at him, and then at Bunny.

“She can help guard the things too.” He quickly added, earning a betrayed look from the lagomorph.

The mercenary relaxed slightly, nodding in affirmation. With her blessing, he jumped off of the wagon while she maneuvered to take the reins of the leading horse. Liam walked ahead, paying close attention to the conversations around him.

The locals weren't talking in the accented Caliphate-common that Imani used, but rather some variant of the same tongue that'd been spoken in Torum. Liam wasn't entirely sure on the name of the language, though he suspected it was related to Belleman since that was the more common tongue at the other side of the Blue Mountains.

Once the translation-blessing kicked into full gear, he began to pick up on the general tone. There was clearly an important event, and the mood was definitely a festive one, but there was also an undercurrent of concern. Rumors of monster attacks were spreading, and some of the people swore of having seen a few themselves. Fortunately, nothing major seemed to have transpired, as the rumors would be mostly argued against by the rest.

Liam knew there was truth to the rumors, monster activity was on the rise, and would continue going up from here on out. It wouldn't be too long until everything went to hell with the meteor, and after that point things would just push further down the drain. He had some plans on how to mitigate the impact, but there was only so much one could do in the face of something at that scale.

Reaching the gate, he found at least a hundred guards, easily recognizable by the flimsy and worn brown tunic depicting the beak on the coat of arms upon their chests. They were spread about in groups of two or three, inspecting wagons and interviewing the people leading to the gate.

One of them spotted Liam and approached, his steps were light, and there was no clattering of metal armor, but he did have a spear, and what appeared like leather armor. "Halt." The volar commanded in Caliphate-common, fins twitching slightly. "Don't see many humans around these parts. Purpose of visit?"

"I come for trade and to spend a few nights, my companion is protecting the goods, and I wanted to make sure we had everything in order." Liam used his most professional tone, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. "I heard there's a celebration going on?"

"Yes, it is the day of the Claw," the soldier nodded.

"..." Liam blinked. "Claw?"

The fish-guy looked no less confused, turning to look at the sheer wall of ochre that rose high into the sky. "That one." He pointed.

"But that's... no, nevermind." Liam sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Maybe all of this was some sort of mistranslation, maybe the word for 'beak' in their native tongue meant 'claw' in some different tongue and the blessing was messing things up. "Can anyone join in the festivities or is it local exclusive?"

Kind of like how the "Grand Lakes" actually had a more exotic sounding name, but was getting jumbled up.

Yeah, that had to be it.

"It's open to everyone." The soldier didn't look particularly excited about that fact. "And there's even a contest. Anyone that can climb to the tip without cheating their way there gets to meet the Emir in person." That part did seem to get some enthusiasm out of the guy, he was all grins. "There are betting pools, if you're interested."

He could've held some interest in the contest, and he certainly wanted to try it out to test how much his physique had improved, but he wasn't particularly interested in the prize itself. After all, he and Maridah had hashed out a good strategy for him to get some one on one with the Emir.

"That sounds nice."

The guard was probably trying to find if the stranger could be scammed, and Liam didn't mind one iota. It would make passing the gate smoother, and it would help him learn who was who amongst the participants, as well as where the money was flowing from.

Cracked Bay was in desperate need of labor, and the main objective here was to hire as many people as they could. A cult wasn't built in a day, and it was always better to get your hands on good talent from the get-go.

The things he did for a friend.

Still, he felt like he was forgetting something.

“Good news is that we... what happened?”

Liam was staring at Bunny, comfortably surrounded by a small pile of carrots. Next to her was Imani, her feline half was sitting atop a young volar man. Lying face down against the dirt, the man writhed and groaned, holding on to the stump on his right hand.

“He tried to steal from us, and your...” Imani glanced over at Bunny. “The guardian retaliated.”

“*I am a Guardian now.*” Bunny preened.

“You took his hand?” He tried to keep his tone calm and collected, he knew the laws of this land were not kind to thieves. A hand was a mercy compared to what they would’ve been entitled to.

Hell, he’d witnessed worse with the collector.

“*You... do not appear happy.*” The lagomorph tentatively sent the thoughts his way.

“*Just... not used to it.*” He sent the thought out.

There was also the question of how Bunny had done this, last he’d checked she wasn’t able to cause such damage. That, and she’d also never shown the ability to just go invisible until very recently... it left him feeling like he’d missed something, had Maridah just unlocked those powers to her and not told him? Shaking his head to dismiss the train of thought, now wasn’t the time.

He switched to actual spoken words. “Just let the guy go, I think he’s been punished enough.”

“That is very lenient of you.” Imani glanced down at the young man that had made an effort to pretend he did not exist. Raising her haunches, she kicked him off. “We will not be so kind if we ever see you again.”

The man bowed profusely, clutching his cloth-covered stump as he scraped and bowed and thanked them. The moment he’d made it a few steps away, he broke into a full sprint to vanish into the crowd as best he could manage. Liam had to figure that it wouldn’t be long before he found his way back into the city, and word would spread of the supremely violent black rabbit.

“Anyway.” He rubbed at his temples, trying to avoid thinking too much about if he should feel some mild responsibility for creating poverty in this world. It was frankly a hole he’d much rather not dig into. “We have priority since our cargo needs to be declared and reviewed by the Emir’s people.” Liam said. “Bad news is that the cargo needs to be reviewed by the Amil, the Emir’s tax-man.”

“Why?” Imani frowned. “I have the papers for everything we carry.”

“Not the gold and other loot, and some of it will catch their attention.” He answered. “By law, just about anything and everything that we looted belongs to the Caliphate. They will either let us keep it after a tax, or pay us a reward for bringing it in.” He pointed at the wagon he was on, ignoring her scowl. “We can’t really hide the solid slab of gold, nor some of the more flashy items, the guards at the gate will take note. We ought to take those to the Emir’s people and play nice. The rest? I’d say we can do some minor tax fraud and look for a fence.”

Imani’s scowl deepened. “What do fences have to do with this?”

“A fence is someone willing to buy random stuff, usually doing so without getting the authorities and taxes involved.” Liam was slightly surprised at how readily Imani’s nervousness evaporated the moment money was on the table. “I can handle the Emir’s people. It’s standard stuff, a quick interrogation enforced by truth-detection enchantments, and then we’re on our way.”

There was a tiny risk that they could find out the gold came from a non-pantheon deity, that was to say, a demon; but Liam wasn’t afraid to maneuver his way around technical-truths. That, and he’d gotten a bit of coaching from Maridah, this was a crucial step in her operation.

It had all been well organized, though some of the details had clearly been kept from him since the last thing anyone needed was a telepath accidentally plucking something out. Still, if everything developed as it should, Cracked Bay and the people therein would hopefully become a blindspot to every deity in the pantheon. Maridah needed to restart her religion free of outside influences, Liam needed a safe haven that couldn’t just be freely spied upon by anyone with access to the Triumvirate Throne.

This was a neat agreement of mutual convenience. The kind of clear and well defined boundaries Liam appreciated.

“You speak of thieves. It would be better not to entangle ourselves with them.” Imani proclaimed with a stiff look around them.

“She means that she sucks at subterfuge.” Bunny threw the thought his way like a suckerpunch. *“I can find what you need. Boss-bitch does want us to set up some contacts wherever we can.”* She looked up at him with what could only be a devilish grin. *“I do need permission, however.”*

He poked the rabbit, causing the tiny furred creature to groan out. *“Is this whole permission thing something where you’ll seek to take broad interpretations of my instructions?”*

“What would make you think such a thing?” She batted her eyes innocently at him, the words carrying a sickeningly sweet taste.

Liam’s brows furrowed. *“You’re plotting something, but I’m not your handler. If you get into trouble, make sure to at least give us a heads-up.”* She was an aspect, Liam had little doubt she was perfectly capable of nibbling her way out of any trouble she might get herself into.

Bunny let out something halfway between a giggle and a cackle before vanishing.

Somehow, Liam felt certain he’d come to regret letting her loose upon the city. His only consolation was that Wolf was supposedly shadowing him, so there were very few things she wouldn’t be able to rip apart.

“Well... I guess that’s one problem solved in exchange for, probably, a worse one.” Liam muttered under his breath, glancing over at Imani. *“Anywho, how about I handle the whole tax thing while you finish your contract?”*

“That would be adequate.”

It took them several hours of waiting, with everyone in the crowd giving the glaring leonid and her cargo ample space, but eventually it was their turn to get inspected. The guards marched right up to their trio of wagons, congratulated them for how they handled the thief incident, and then gave their stuff a cursory look-over.

Anything that wasn’t in Imani’s papers got written down, and a few of the items they’d taken from the collector that they couldn’t just hide away got a bit more scrutiny. They were handed two pieces of parchment and two sets of instructions. The first was for Imani, certifying that the mercenary’s cargo matched with her documentation. The

second was for Liam, boiling down to “go talk to the Amil for review ASAP. They will handle review and reward for the goods you brought”.

And with that, they were given entry to the city.

While the outside of Doeta might have appeared slightly drab (though how “drab” a giant freaking beak was up to debate), the inside was a whirlwind of color.

Massive lengths of violently green rope connected both ends of the inside of the beak. Each rope was as thick as a semi, and together they formed five spider-web-like platforms. The first platform hung barely twenty meters off the ground, with the second one being roughly at a hundred, the third at three hundred, the fourth at six hundred, and the last one nearly half-way to the top at over a kilometer off the ground. Though it was extremely hard to judge the distances.

The ropes were not merely there for decoration. The first three levels were occupied with small structures. Watch-towers and small houses, with every other inch of space used for walkways and small botanical hanging gardens of some kind. Further up, where the ropes were more closely knit together and less prone to swinging, there were actual buildings. Liam could only spot a handful of them, but they were beautifully decorated with glowing rust-moss and flowers.

For a moment, he felt *déjà vu*, as if he’d returned to the jungle’s upper canopy. He half expected a shimmer-chicken to pop its head out somewhere and try to eat him.

Dismissing the thought, he glanced to the “ground” level of the city. The architecture was not unlike Al-Zahra’s, with mud-brick buildings splattered with whites and blues, with the infrequent thin tower. Though the towers here appeared to be more akin to staircases, a needle thrusting out of the ground and through the first three levels of rope, connecting the ground-level with the upper ones.

Liam’s gaze coursed through the scene unfolding before him as they traversed the packed streets. A manic grin was plastered on his lips. His mind was buzzing with possibilities. This wasn’t a city he was familiar with, he’d designed the monster, placed it there to fulfill its role, but had done very little to imagine what else might have grown here.

Everything he focused on was a tiny mystery. Was the city’s interior design somehow influenced by Maridah’s jungle or had it been pure coincidence? Who had made the ropes? They had all the signs of being enchanted, yet it was hard to believe the city would see a need to put them there... no, wait, it couldn’t have been the Gods. The beak

was ever-shrinking, had the ropes been there from the start, they would've sagged plenty by now.

And the celebrations! The streets were rowdy, crowded, and to the brim of people that had all the aspects of crowds that Liam hated. Yet he couldn't stop imagining what he might find amongst the locals! The air was so packed with rich scents that he couldn't wait to get the gold turned to coins and start looking for the best meal in the place.

All too surely, he wished he could just make a hundred copies of himself and send them everywhere all at once!

"We should drop you off first." Imani interrupted his thoughts, the feline had put herself atop the middle wagon, hands on the hilt of her blade as she openly growled at anyone that dared so much as look at them.

As much as Liam would've probably enjoyed walking around before the meeting with the Emir's tax-man, she was right. It would be impossible for him to walk around with the lumps of gold. Not for his safety or anything, it just weighed too much for him to feasibly carry half-way across the city.

Though their destination was for him to speak with the tax-man, they weren't headed to some government building. Despite appearances, this was still a small city in the corner of bum-fuck nowhere. Which meant that the Amil did business right where he lived.

The building was relatively humble... if you considered having a small complex within a city where most houses were packed wall to wall as "humble". There were three buildings, surrounded by a garden fence decorated with rust-moss that glowed a pale blue. All three structures were squarish, adorned with the same kind of hanging gardens that were present overhead. The tallest of the trio had two floors, and also happened to be the widest and furthest from the gate.

"State your business." The volar guards here were fancier than at the city gate, wearing chain-mail tunics underneath their leather armor. They also had pointy helmets and swords.

"Gold and goods." Liam handed over his paper while Imani unloaded the stuff they were seeking to get appraised. The flash of greed, confusion, and curiosity was unmistakable, even when the guard's faces were fish-adjacent. "Now take me to your leader." He whispered in plain English under his breath, entirely for his own amusement.

They triple checked his paper, then the pile of gold, one of them ran inside. After a hot minute, ten or so servants approached in haste, Liam frowned at the sight of them. Each of the ten servants were of a different race, none of them being volar... or human. For a

moment his gaze lingered on them as they hurried to bring in the “merchandise” into one of the secondary buildings.

The servants had nothing about them that appeared odd or out of place, they were well groomed, and their clothes were neat and clean. But the fact that each of them was of a different race, one of them even being a valkyrie with another being a centaur, nagged at Liam as if there was some detail he was missing.

Leading into the secondary building, Liam expected some basic amenities, but was slightly surprised to find it to be the opposite. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit chamber, but he was left slightly surprised at the modest luxury it displayed.

The room was a study in contrasts, blending the austere elegance of the Caliphate’s geometric architecture with the lavish grandeur. A high ceiling decorated with ceramics following a pattern of kaleidoscope-like lines and shapes, while the walls were adorned with ornate tapestries depicting scenes of gardens and rivers. The air was perfumed with the subtle scent of oud, its source entirely hidden from view. The center of the room was decorated by a simple low wooden table, sporting a small spread of dried meats and fruits.

And on one of the corners of the room was a small fountain, bubbling softly, water gently cascading down and out of the room through a discreetly hidden drain.

As he took in his surroundings, the heavy fabric of a tapestry opposite to where he’d entered was drawn aside, and the host stepped through. The Amil, for it couldn’t be anyone else, was a human woman with most of the ethnic traces from someone born in the Sub-Saharan area. She was dressed in a traditional deep blue abaya, the dress-tunic adorned with golden embroidery, the fabric rich and silky smooth to the sight. She wore a simple golden necklace, her hair was concealed beneath a hijab of matching color, its fabric lighter, almost ethereal. But it was her green eyes that caught his attention, piercing and discerning, yet with something else hidden just beneath, something... sharp. A sharpness that was amplified by the pair of black silk gloves she wore.

Liam’s mind stuttered, and he hurried forward. “I greet the Amil.” He bowed his head hastily, trying to remember if he’d fumbled somewhere before a simple gesture from her hand signaled he could rise.

“I am Aisha al-Hakim, you may refer to me as Aisha.” The woman stepped closer, gesturing at the table. “Please, sit, eat, and excuse my urgency in having you brought over without giving you the opportunity to refresh yourself.” She gingerly took her spot on one of the cushions next to the table.

Urgency? Liam thought that what the guards had told them at the gates had been just to “preferably” come over here soon, not that he was under any obligation. Seeing nowhere to sit other than the cushion next to Aisha’s, he took the offer. “I thank you for your hospitality, Aisha. I am Liam Carter, just Liam will be fine.”

“It’s the least I could do.” The woman carefully took a wooden cup from the table, right as the servant elf approached to fill it up from the jug she carried. “Let us talk about what you’ve brought.” She took a long sip, glancing at the pile of gold and jewels.

He smiled back.

“Certainly.”