

Chapter 135: First rounds

It was the eve of the two days of intensive duels and Viv admired the result of months of training. From the brief campaign against the Halurians to duels and physical practice at the Academy, she'd been tireless. All for the hope that it would pay off with her survival.

Current status:

- Mana channels (mage)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck
- Draconic Surrogate Mother
- VANDAL

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 44.2%

Her conduit and core were still at mage level because it was as much a matter of 'arcane biology' as it was one of inborn ability and effort. Those were the metaphysical organs that let her hold and draw mana. They only grew and developed with time, not just practice. Those placed a soft limit on how much Viv could draw at once but it was offset by her path bonus. It was because of them that a mage could not use their entire mana reserve on a single spell. Simply put, their conduits would burst, killing them on the spot. She had still made excellent progress in the span of only two years, and could hope to develop them further if she made it. The rest, well, she would have hoped that vandal would disappear. The Academy was charging her for every new door handle.

Physical		Mental	
Power	24	Focus	41
Finesse	26	Acuity	41
Endurance	30	Willpower	41

She had made some minimal progress of her mental stats as a side effect of complex casting, however this was a side, modest progress she had not really counted on. The fifth tier was already an incredible achievement in such a short time. It was also less important to focus on now as it would take years for her to attain the next one. The most significant progress was around the physical stats, which gained two each. She was the most proud of endurance.

That one had taken sleepless night of running and workouts while starving to achieve. Her body had grown temporarily lean and underfed to achieve that result, but the new threshold held many advantages. The most significant ones were improved survival against fatal wounds as well as accelerated healing, elements that would improve her chances. Magic would simply help her body function beyond the limits of what should be. Interestingly, she was now approaching the stats of a young warrior on the late second step, yet there were no doubts one would whip her with ease. She simply didn't have the skills to back it up.

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 4	Athletics	Intermediate 7
Survival	Intermediate 3	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Beginner 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9
Small blades	Beginner 7		

Her general skills showed progress in survival on account of a few short outings she had done around Helock as part of her training and athletics which generally helped her run for longer periods of time. She was pretty sure she would be a marathon gold medallist back on earth. Unfortunately, here, she was still lower than the average infantryman.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Expert 3	Mana mastery	Intermediate 3
Arcane Constructs	Intermediate 5	Danger sense	Intermediate 5
Leadership	Intermediate 4	Draconic Intimidation	Expert 3
Acuity reflex	Intermediate 5	Soul mastery	Intermediate 2
Shield Mastery	Intermediate 1		

Those were her major success and sources of pride. Meditative trance meant that she could recover her mana in merely an hour or so from nearly empty, a vital skill if one were to fight several duels in a row. It was, of course, done on purpose to add to the contest's complexity.

Mana mastery had progressed as well, affecting every aspect of her spellcasting from skill to efficiency to precision. Detection was also a factor. It allowed her to guess what a spell would do as it was casted, an essential skill to counter enemy offense. Acuity reflex had improved by one as well as her reflexes improved, but danger sense had not since she had never really been in danger. Her most impressive progress came from shield mastery. She had blocked so many different attacks from Sonagi over time, learned to do so without

expanding too much mana, that she could now estimate how much effort she had to spend to block something. Of course, he still tried to trick her sometimes but then acuity reflex kicked in, giving her a second chance.

Sonagi really thought she was a frustrating foe to face.

The last measure of progress did not stem from her training, but from her grief. Nights were... difficult, especially since she spent a few evenings catching up on what her earthside loved ones had been up to. She had to sate her curiosity. Emeric had fortunately said little about his own life within Viv's body, instead focusing on people she cared about. She didn't mind. Earth Viv had married and born children but they meant nothing to her. They were someone else's.

It appeared Emeric had cared. It made it even worse to Viv. She wanted to hate him freely and without nuances, a good old grudge that would end in a confrontation. Instead, Emeric had learned how to be less of a dick. Between this and his apologies, she felt slighted by someone who pretended he was good despite this heinous act. It frustrated her to no end.

Her mother was still alive and had gone to therapy. She had become a beekeeper in her old age, selling artisanal lavender honey at home and abroad. She was wildly successful and having a blast.

Her brother Damien was a law teacher in a university for talented kids from difficult backgrounds. He held many awards.

Her father had retired after a long career culminating as a secretary of state.

Everyone lived well.

Emeric even had a note on many of her friends, some she only remembered because he mentioned them. Her internet friends were doing well as well. Fraise had married and become a nurse just like she wanted. Gevaudan had turned out to be autistic, which she expected. Earth Viv gave him side gigs to pirate her company's systems, paying him very well for the service which helped. He had succeeded three times.

It was... strange.

No one was missing her. They didn't know. She was the only casualty of a game that had, in the end, benefitted everyone but her. Emeric had walked into her life and improved every aspect of it, for everyone. Better than she could have ever done with her own issues. Normal Viv didn't have the skill and gumption to rise through the ranks to the position of general manager of a European military industry giant.

This brought a need for calm. Her meditation skill required her to move and that was not conducive to sleeping, so her best solution was to simply slip into the in-between.

It was a weird place. Moving here did not involve distance so much as thought and, for lack of a better word, context. Existence was reduced to orbs and errant streams of thoughts. A

wall in the distance prevented her from moving too far from her starting point. She had examined it of course. As far as she could tell, those were the limits of the kiddie pool.

She did not quite like the implication.

Maybe the in-between hosted its own style of monsters, angler fishes gobbling souls and leaving behind the empty husks of vegetative bodies. She already had to fend off those who would kill her in the real world. Now there was a chance someone would go for her soul as well. In the meanwhile, the in-between was a nice enough place to explore and it left her feeling calm and refreshed when she woke up the next day.

Viv had never seen such a crowd except, perhaps, during a demonstration match, She had certainly not seen the arena filled this early in the afternoon. The rafters were filled with thousands of people laughing, jeering, talking, and hawking wares. The cold didn't bother anyone with most wearing warm clothes and the rest using heated stones. From her lodge in the 'belly' she had a perfect view of the sands below, and the gates leading deeper inside the complex. The belly of the arena hosted contestants and had a direct path down so they could go from spectator to spectated in only a couple of minutes. Reinforced partitions separated her team from that of others, a leftover from the bloodier vendettas back when gladiators would kill each other on sight. The true lodge of the ruler faced her at the other side of the massive space, its occupants shaded by a permanent tent structures that blocked view coming out and arrows coming in. Pinpoint blazes hinted at braziers burning perfumed herb. Waiters and runners came in and out under the vigilant gaze of Helock's elite battlemages.

"I heard that my father is there," Sidjin whispered.

"You hadn't seen him since..."

"No. He wasn't there when I was arrested. He didn't come to see me in jail. At all. The last time we talked was, gods, at a party? Before the— officer killed my merl friend."

Viv hesitated, then squeezed Sidjin's hand. They might not be in the best terms right now but that was no reason not to offer sympathy. She thought he might be angry or refuse but he returned the pressure. It was hard to tell with how different their cultures were.

"Oh, it's about to start!" Rakan exclaimed.

He leaned forward in his seat to watch the first team of contestants walk in. The opening match would oppose Shaya's team to the first of two twins. Shaya was Sidjin's sister and one of the three real challengers, at least the way Viv could see it. The twins were an offshoot from the main branches, children of the first prince's siblings. They did not really expect to win, Rather, their performance could lead to agreements that would benefit their family.

The arena's only morbidly obese individual walked out from the main lodge. Viv recognized Deos, the master of ceremony, his already fantastic girth clad in garish raiments under a gaudy plume hat. Viv judged he was barely short of being visible from orbit.

"Welcome," he said.

His voice resonated strangely over the field. The sound effect was not intimate but overwhelming, dominating all other conversations in an instant. It roared and strutted. It promised violence.

"Welcome to the bloody games, welcome to the game of death that will decide the fate of a city! Welcome, to the Glastian successions!"

A thunderous din of approval answered. Deos stretched his hands.

"Over the next two days, princes and commoners will clash across the bloody sand for the favor of their champion under your gaze, my dearies. Spells! Blades! Scorching fire and unyielding walls, majestic life and devouring darkness will score gashes over our most ancient of field. Two days to win a crown ladies and gentlemen. Two days... to clear the competition."

Another roar, this one carrying a lust for vicarious violence.

"For while the champions fight at the front, the rulers scheme at the back. What matter of plot will we be seeing, my dearies? What sinister tricks will our friends deploy? I cannot wait. And without further ado, let us give a warm welcome to the first two teams! Sidna of Feroe and Shaya of Glastia!"

The first two to come in were the bone-clad Viziman woman from Shaya's team and an old mage with blue robes. Viv watched the fight with middling interest. She identified the old mage as a war councilor and the bone lady as a bone witch, somewhat unsurprisingly. The duel was rather long. It was clear that the mage knew his business contrary to what Viv had expected. He almost maneuvered the witch into a corner thanks to a careful and deliberate use of blue and brown mana. The arena turned into a swamp while he remained dry and mobile but the witch found an answer. She could create and mold bone using life, black, and brown mana, something Viv judged to be impossible. Nyil once more made a mockery of basic physics. Eventually, the witch made herself long stiletto boot things to run after the mage. The battle of attrition turned to her favor and, eventually, he forfeited. The shame made his aging face crimson.

Viv thought he did ok. A war councilor was not a duelist.

The next duel opposed mostly normal mages and was unremarkable. The third pitted an arcane blade from Vizim on Shaya's side to another from Glastia. To Viv's moderate surprise, the twin's mage blade won handily. He used brown mana to mold the terrain and though he did not attack often, each of his movements were precise and graceful. He was young too, a sign of clear skill. The fourth candidate proved inadequate, however, and the match ended three to one in favor of Shaya. Viv noted that the princess herself had not

participated despite her martial style. She suspected only Sidjin would risk himself in the arena.

Deos did not wait to introduce the next duels. The first stages would all be played one after the other.

The following round opposed Prince Aldus' group to the four blade mages. As a favorite of the competition, he brought a full complement of battle casters, probably elites taken from the wall. They made short work of the opposition without a single upset and the blade mages were sent packing, defeated but unhurt. The casters even went out of the way to salute their opponents.

As the last of them walked back to the changing room, Viv and company were walking down to the entrance.

"I want to tell you something," Sidjin said.

"Yeah?"

"I made you our first."

Viv almost froze on the steps. The first was exactly what it implied, the unspoken leader of the fighters and their best member. She had trained against almost any style so that was not the issue, The issue was the message it sent. Sidjin presented her as his trusted second.

"Sidjin? You're telling the whole world you think I'm a better duelist?"

"The truth is that Sonagi is a mercenary and I am not as flexible as you are."

"That is not the whole truth."

Sidjin looked at her, mulling over his next words.

"I want you to represent us because without you, there would be no competition at all. I'm aware that Rakan's situation has dug a rift between the two of us. I do not want this to invalidate everything that happened, everything we did for each other. Be my first, please."

"Why, yes of course. I just... thought we might have discussed it. I accept the gift in the spirit it was given, however."

"That is the issue between us these past days. We see the spirit but we do not feel it, yes?"

"No, not this time. It's a big deal. It's almost like you're presenting me to your father."

"Perhaps."

Viv glared, unsure if Sidjin was serious or not. Soon, it was too late to think. The gates opened as she approached.

She was already wearing her arena-issued enchanted robes and kept her dagger focus. There was a limit to one magical item per gladiator and she had kept that one.

The opposite gate opened to the tournament's first shenanigans. The war councilor she had seen fighting for the first time walked towards her across the arena, his expression one of grim resolve. Given the size of the arena, it took a while for the two to meet. Deos used the delay to entertain his flock.

"And the first predictable twist, ladies and gentlemen, Sidna of Feroe has released his best fighter — or is it fighters? — to his brother Odn. Will it be enough to pass the first round? Facing him is the kingslayer herself, the witch of black, the bane of the Halurians... Viv the Outlander!"

Shit, thought Viv, I hope it doesn't turn into a new title.

She went to stand in the starting circle. The arena was specifically enchanted to return its sand to their pre-combat state after every encounter, a necessity considering the tendency of mages to use their environment. High barriers situated all around the circumference of the open ground blocked outgoing spells. Viv had even read that they joined all the way up since an unfortunate artillery spell destroyed a bakery.

Down here, the air was cold, much colder than she imagined because of the sand. It was a silly thought. There were plenty of cold deserts, after all. Viv looked up at the thousands of people and felt a feeling of alienation. She was here for Sidjin, that was all. Blood sports were just not her things, and all those eager faces looking down hoping for a slip, hoping one spell too many would overload the shield and get the grudge circle going, they disgusted her. She could see it in the nearest, eager faces, hear it in the excited hum of conversations. Half of the city had rushed in to watch a succession conflict like the trainwreck it was. The lower tiers were populous while the higher kept a sheen of sophistication but they were all here for the same thing. Watch her commit violence before their feasting eyes as casters turned gladiators. It was not every day that the upper strata of Param's society made a show of themselves for the rest of it.

"You may begin," Deos allowed.

Viv shielded and attacked at the same time, just like her opponent. His spike pinged uselessly against a small aegis while her attack was a small blast, its power punching through his hastily raised brown wall with ease. He fell to the side and dodged the spell almost by accident. Viv did not let up. She pressed him with angled purge and well-placed blasts. Her knowledge of earth magic let her give her attacks just the right amount of power to go through standard brown mana defenses. She had to adjust a little because the war councilor was solid in a way that felt like an intent, but it was easy anyway. He was nothing compared to Sonagi.

A brief vent of black mana on the ground to break one of his attacks and she started to move, circling her prey without letting up. The mage was forced to rotate his best defenses to stop her. It was a near impossible task with brown defenses as they were simply so heavy.

She sent faint after sneaky attack after curved spell on the beleaguered mage. She felt her mana sing in her veins and the black happily dismantling whatever her opponent could throw at her. It felt exhilarating in a way to be so much in control. She didn't even resort to her glyphs (technically not enchanted) or her more advanced spells and tactics. He could not stop her assault and so she didn't change strategy. Eventually, he raised a veritable pyramid around himself with a mighty roar. Viv let him, charging a blast spell with the meaning of annihilation.

She could feel him on the other side. The flow of mana from his exhausted core were as clear to her as brush strokes on an old painting.

"Blast."

The simplified artillery spell punched clean through the wall, a dagger undoing a simple leather jerkin.

"Stop!" a voice came.

The crowd clamored their appreciation when the war councilor dropped his improvised fort. He was clutching his leg, which was bleeding abundantly. Viv had aimed low because she saw no point in killing that guy. He was obviously someone dedicated to the war effort, not political plays.

"I yield," the man said sadly.

There was shame and humiliation in his posture. He was also running on fumes, mana wise, and it took its toll. Viv felt a pang of pity for him, stuck as he was in a game he was not meant to play. Now that he was defeated, she had no reason to be disrespectful.

"Good fight," she said with a light bow.

It was a Helockian salute Sonagi did when he felt like it. The mage nodded in return, then he bullheadedly decided to walk back to his gate.

An arena medic intercepted him midway but it was still a good move, Viv felt, even though he'd trailed blood all over the sand. She left as well. Her team was now one and zero.

No skill gains this time, despite this being a real life situation. She had simply not been challenged enough.

Viv returned to her lodge just in time to watch Sidjin engage his opponent, who happened to be the blade mage of twin number one. They offered a nice contrast. The blade mage was young, a rising talent dressed in an elaborate Glastian military uniform in shades of yellow and silver over his defensive robe. By contrast, Sidjin was old and mature but also scarred, the long gash on his cheek testimony of everything he had been through. He had forfeited any identifying mark but the trace of his ancestry were plain on his traits, and the sheer confidence he displayed.

The fight started with a charge from the blade mage, blocked by a transparent shield.

At first, it seemed the blade mage would manage to overwhelm Sidjin's defenses. He smashed them as quickly as Sidjin could place them, but the fallen prince spat a veritable flamethrower into the fencer's face, forcing him back with scalded arms and missing eyebrows. After that, Sidjin patiently built a network of transparent force fields to corner his opponent.

Viv was amazed by Sidjin's control. The prince stood at the center of concentric rings of interlocked, transparent cages and bars. They rotated with the blade mage as he circled them like a shark, looking for an opening that would never come. Viv watched him jump over, only for half of the defensive array to lift when he did. He landed in the arcane equivalent of a wood chipper. Actually, no. He could have. Sidjin was playing nice. Viv knew from experience all those smooth surfaces could turn into grinders and teeth at a moment's notice. If Sidjin wanted to kill him, the arcane blade would be minced meat by now. He wasn't called the red mist for nothing. Sidjin instead elected to take his time. The fencer tried to counter the advantage with brown mana, yet it proved to be futile since Sidjin was simply better at it. Ranged slashes pinged pointlessly on the fallen prince's defenses. Frustrated, the blade mage ran to the other side of the arena. He watched powerless while Sidjin cast something strong while the public jeered and cheered, urging him on.

Viv chuckled. She knew what her boyfriend, errrr, probably still boyfriend, was doing.

One instant Sidjin was there, the next he was on top of the thunderstruck fencer. Layers of cages locked on the victim like bear traps. In a fragment of an instant, the fencer was chained, collared, restrained, blocked, immobilized, spread eagle, and generally disabled. A sputtered exchange between captor and captive followed.

Sidjin took one step and poked his victim in the ribs. Insistently.

"I yield," the fencer begrudgingly admitted.

The crowd was pleased. It was a masterful display of arcane mastery, which apparently excused the general lack of blood. Whispers of appreciation reached Viv's ears and she realized it was not the skills that the spectators appreciated. Sidjin was scruffy, handsome, and darkly charismatic.

They were just lusting after her boyfriend.

The fuckers.

"Ok, maybe I still like him a lot," Viv admitted to herself.

"Showy display, eh?" Sonagi said by her side. "I thought I would be the ace without trying, but it looks like you two rode the wyvern to the top. Nice, nice."

Sonagi looked much better now. His mussed hair was clean and wavy, more artist than drug fiend. There were still pockets under his eyes, wrinkles at the corners of his mouth, but those

were small marks that did little to mask the spring in his step. His posture was relaxed for the first time, well, ever.

“You’re looking good, Sonagi,” Viv said.

“Are you not taken?”

“No sass please. You look much healthier. I’m glad.”

“Having a future will do that to you. Well, anyway. It’s time for me to step into the light again. See you soon.”

Sonagi left, Sidjin returned. By their side, Rakan wisely decided to get down.

“Very impressive,” Viv said.

“Thank you. I tried to make it painless. Are you.... feeling better? You look better.”

“Well, no one has died so far. Those fights are being quite civil. Maybe I overreacted and this was just... much less violent than I expected.”

“No. As much as I would like for us to leave this conflict between us, this would ignore the root of the issue. Look, if we are to be together in a... permanent way, we need to accept that we have differences that cannot necessarily be reconciled.”

“Just like you to look for solutions for everything.”

“I know people are not so simple, especially you. I also know that you are avoiding the topic. We share the same values, you and I. It’s how we live them that differs. I want to know if... it will be a problem or if we can... agree to disagree. So long as it concerns the surface, not what truly matters.”

Viv sighed. She didn’t feel as sore now as she used to. It was not really a change of heart so much as her nature. Viv was pragmatic. Staying angry and hurt didn’t serve her so she was... coping. Trying to forget. It didn’t help that she’d been miserable for a month thanks to that twat Emeric.

“So long as it’s surface, yeah.”

She frowned.

“Next time can we talk about things in advance? For example, accepting a kid in a dueling team or making me the first? Communication is important.”

“So I have gathered. And yes, I should have chosen to involve you. I was too proud. Please understand that pride was all I had left for a very long time. Letting go will be... difficult.”

“You don’t have to give up your pride, just don’t feel the need to enforce it on me.”

“A fair point. Speaking of pride...”

Sonagi entered the arena with a skip. This time, Deos greeted him a great hail, instead he sounded genuinely enthusiastic.

“The prodigal son returns! Oh, ladies and gentlemen. What a treat. What a treat! You may not remember this lark but I do. I remember when he reached too high and burnt his feather, but look at him! Look at him here back in the welcoming bosom of our glorious arena, where the strong rise to the top no matter what. Here is the son of a seamstress, a child of the streets of Helock. Here is a returning champion living the life of his second chance. Give it all for... Sonagi!”

The crowd was carried by the lower strata. Obviously, many of the arena’s regulars remembered Sonagi from either his old days of triumph or his more recent ascent. No matter what, the welcome was thunderous and Sonagi really liked it.

His opponent turned out to be a young woman, a caster as well. Deos briefly presented her as the daughter of Viziman exiles. She had an interesting profile but she only came second to Helock’s own candidate in the eyes of the crowd. Her skills also came second.

The young woman focused on gray mana in an interesting game of mobility, stealth, and powerful attack using electricity, something Viv had not yet seen here. She still fell short of Sonagi. The master duelist danced and tricked as much as he fought. Thunder fell on spikes of earth, or landed on water walls without damage. He matched her for speed and dispelled her illusions with smartly placed strands of mana. After a while, it became obvious to Viv.

Sonagi was playing with her.

She was young and talented, but he had her beat completely. He was just making it last. A part of her was annoyed that he would give her a chance to take him by surprise, that he would try to break her instead of trying to win. The problem was that he was down there and she was up here. The other problem was that their agreement did not cover his behavior. So long as he won, she didn’t really have ground to stand on.

It was still annoying. They were not here to make enemies.

The girl never yielded, so Sonagi beautifully stunned her with some thunder of his own. The counter that got her sent the public screaming. To add insult to injury, he received her in a princess carry as she fell. The crowd went wild.

She resisted the urge to scold him when he returned because he seemed so proud. She didn’t want to crush him when he was finally getting back up. It was also Rakan’s turn.

Deos presented him and his opponent as a pair of young fighters on their first contest. The two were almost mirrors of each other. Both young, both casters. The fight started as a study in academic combat. The two stood where the fight started and built up from there in a tight exchange of carefully planned counters. The fight was clean but unequal. Rakan had two

concepts to the opponent's one, which he used sparingly. A devastating counter swung the fight in Rakan's favor, then it was only a matter of time until he finally cornered his opponent to polite applause. Rakan fought patiently and carefully until he won.

The rest of the team made sure to congratulate him when he returned. Viv was proud and made sure to let him know.

"So you will let me fight in the deadlands next time? With the army?"

"You will train with them first. You think you can just show up and throw fireballs at the front rank? You need to know where to move, when, and where to aim."

"What she means is yes, and we will prepare you," Sidjin assured him.

"Don't count on me. I'm a duellist, not a revenant hunter!" Sonagi added.

"But you used to smell the same," Rakan countered.

Viv left Rakan bicker with the others. The youth seemed much more relaxed now. Things were looking up.

The last fight of the day would oppose Medjin to the lone armor-clad knight Viv had never seen without the helmet down. His opponent was Medjin's first, the red mage she had met in the study and who had been quite rude. As a lone contestant, the armored one had to defeat every opponent on the enemy team.

It turned out immediately that this man was an anti-mage. More precisely, he canceled magic around himself. The first red bolt to reach his silent form just... fizzled.

"Very few people follow this path and for good reasons," Sidjin said. "It takes a good attunement and a lot of suffering to negate magic around oneself, which means that one must sacrifice the path of the mage. Even then, their defenses are not perfect."

This was demonstrated quickly by Medjin's first. The fire mage had anticipated the combat, it seemed. The sand moved under his feet, carrying him away just as his opponent charged and swung where he had been. The knight was not just resistant but fast too. He would have been deadly against an unprepared mage. Unfortunately for him, the red mage was not unprepared. Pits opened under the steel-clad feet of the knight and his aura did not prevent the displaced material from crashing against him, on the contrary. The anti-magic field weakened the edge of the pit as soon as he approached. With a powerful jump, he still escaped from the trap. Meanwhile, the red mage kept moving around. He spread flames around himself as he went and Viv studied his technique with great attention.

Some mages cast spell from one or two colors at the same time, but this one was different. There was red but also brown and gray. He was creating a fiery storm that surrounded the plated man without touching him. Nevertheless, the blur of superheated air showed that if he could negate mana, it could not cancel its effect on reality after the spell launched. The

firestorm also masked the red mage's movements. Viv could see where the red mana was concentrated, but the knight did not.

He still lasted for a while. At some point, he even left it entirely, perhaps hoping that the red mage would tire. Instead, the area of effect only increased as fire fed fire. The traps and constant attacks tracking him eventually took their toll. He eventually surrendered.

The crowd felt a little less enthused about this victory. Viv assumed they wanted to see at least one caster brought low. Viv would have liked to see more of Medjin's team's capabilities, personally. The lack of information was just frustrating.

She hoped it wouldn't bite them in the ass.

Chapter 136: Blood on the sand.

"My father wants to see me," Sidjin said.

Below, performers were dancing to the sound of a drum arrangement in mesmerizing patterns. The rhythm was fast and intense. It made Viv's teeth shake with every percussion. They hurt a little, reminding her that her body would fail before spring set in unless she acted. Tick tick tick.

"Now?" Viv asked. "There is less than an hour left before the next round."

"Yes. He requested it. It was... carefully worded. I have not seen him since the wall and I was wondering if... maybe it's the last time I could see him. Retiring first princes often go into exile far away since 'accidents' are prone to happen. I am one of the eldest. I think he had high hopes for me. Before..."

"Yeah."

Sidjin sighed and gripped the railing.

"Don't have regrets or we'll be forced to visit the merls again," Viv warned.

Sidjin guffawed.

"They have spiders," Viv added with a shiver.

She didn't have to pretend her aversion. Fucking arachnids.

"But what are you afraid of? That he would do or say something?"

“Yes. I fear his censure. At the same time, I do not wish to ignore him. Leave the wound unhealed.”

Viv clicked her tongue, not sure if he was looking for advice or commiseration. His insistent look answered her unspoken question.

“I, look, I’ll never see my family again,” Viv said.

She didn’t see any way she could meet them. It would take decades for her to be powerful enough to cross the border between worlds if it were even possible. By that time, the earth might have just been blown up.

“Ah,” Sidjin said.

“And as conflicted as I was about some of the stuff that happened, if there is something I regret it’s... not saying goodbye. Conflict with family members is inevitable. You just can’t accept everything under the assumption that it might be the last time you talk to them. I stood for myself and I’m glad, and I’m proud you stood for yourself as well. I would still go. If you’re abused or insulted or you feel you’ve been lured to be hurt, then leave. I still think you’ll regret it if you don’t get closure one way or another. You’ll wonder what if.”

“You would have me leave?”

“Look, don’t set yourself on fire to keep people warm, yeah? You’re there to make peace, not be a target dummy.”

“I see what you mean. If this turns into an inquisition, I shall leave immediately. We are on a schedule anyway.”

“Yes, speaking of that, they won’t try anything, right?”

“Not in full view of the entire Helockian aristocracy, no. Glastian politics might be cutthroat but it is not mad.”

“I hope you are right.”

“If there is any issue I shall teleport back here. You have my word.”

Sidjin left and Viv walked out to borrow a spyglass. She spotted him getting into the lodge. He left half an hour later without fanfare during a secondary performance involving a flutist and a really large snake. He didn’t seem shaken or anything.

“Did it go well?” she asked as soon as he arrived.

“Yes. He asked a few questions. Wanted to know how I was doing.”

“Huh.”

“Implied that it wouldn’t be good for me to win, suggested I talked to Aldus or Shaya, whoever wins the next contest. He said Glastia would not forgive me but it was up to me... to forgive her.”

“Did he forgive you?”

“He said there was nothing to forgive in a man who lived according to his principles. He accepted my choice. He... he apologized. Said that he should have reined in my cousin. The one who killed my merl friend.”

“What happened to him anyway?”

“I... killed him the night I escaped. With a knife. He never saw it coming.”

“Wow. I hope you didn’t mention that.”

“Of course not. Ah, the contest is resuming.”

Viv only paid half attention to the following duels. Shaya had clearly grabbed wild talents from wherever she could to give herself the image of a unifier. After all, many people from different backgrounds manned the walls. It was nicely done but she was not a product of the Helockian establishment. Aldus simply had more resources which he proved by beating her three to one. Viv was especially impressed by his head mage, a peerless duelist who specialized in wide, gray mana area-denial spells. Nevertheless, Aldus moved on after a relatively tame event. Only one person had been wounded and it was nothing serious. A certain tension rose from the crowd because, as flashy as the combats were, they lacked violence. A stake. Only the bone witch had received the love of the mob.

They would most likely get it in the next fight. The red mage had it in for Viv and he was Medjin’s first.

“Looks like it’s my turn,” Viv said.

“One last thing,” Sonagi said from his seat.

“Yes?”

“When powerful mages fight, sometimes tragedies can occur.”

“I know.”

“Make sure it’s him,” Rakan said with a serious air that looked strange on his youthful face.

Viv reached the gate without issue. It opened with a clang, the massive reinforced panes pivoting on their hinges with a cavernous growl to let her through. A burst of cold air sent sand against her shoes and brought with it a fresher scent. She walked calmly while the mage who’d faced her in Sidjin’s study did the same from the other side. He wore the same

standard issue reinforced robes as she did under a puffy yellow shirt. He smirked when he saw her. Clearly, he didn't have a high opinion of Viv. She would have to remedy that.

Deos was having fun.

"Imagine, if you will, a sea of roaring flesh crashing against a mountain. Imagine a constant noise, an unending tide that seeks to end man and civilization! Imagine the blood, imagine the guts, smell it on the wind. Smell fire roasting them! This hell, ladies and gentlemen, is the crucible upon which great men are made or broken! And here is one who has survived and thrived on the field of battle as a rampart of man against beast. On the lodge side, the magma mage, the wall of Glastia, the man who turns plains into labyrinths of molten stone, I give you, Kos!"

Viv waited while Kos bowed to the crowd.

"And on the pit side, a fury who torched every place she has touched with the flame of change! She has slain two princes and forced a king to suicide, she has carved a kingdom out of Enoria with her spells, she has made pacts with subhumans for power! The herald of shadows and the scaled menace. The revolutionary! The Black Witch! I give you... Viv the Outlander!"

Viv thought there was some creative interpretation in Deos' speech, and the crowd's welcome was changed as a result. Those were cheers but not exactly the supportive ones. Her soul felt a shift in the frenzied emotions swirling through the arena, so intense they were and so packed the rows of humankind sat above her, beyond the shields. Down here, the mass of the spectators was transfigured into an obscene mass organism with a thousand voice and a single, simple mind with only one purpose: get their dose of entertainment through vicarious violence. She closed her eyes. Now was not the time to get distracted. Black mana flooded her conduits in preparation for the struggle to come.

"Let the duel... begin!"

Viv coated herself in black mana and struck at the same time, just as Kos did. She felt the heat of his spell as it struck against her quickly formed chestplate. It almost seared her eyes, even with its energy dissipating. Kos buckled and screamed as her attack punched through his arm clean through, deactivating the robe in a single blow. Above, Deos crooned. There was blood but, unfortunately, it wouldn't be enough. Kos finished coating and his mana armor was massive and thick. Viv realized he was fixed to the ground.

"Blast."

Her small artillery spell smashed into his defenses, digging deep holes in a quickly forming wall of incandescent stones. Her last attack speared through where he should have been, but he... swam through solid stone. She didn't know it was a possibility.

Meanwhile, more and more incandescent rocks erupted from thin air with every second. A plume of stones and superheated air burst toward Viv. Her danger sense screamed. The first red-hot gravels touched a shield and Viv realized the drain on her mana was enormous. Kos'

lava was a persistent thing, an old power that refused to be dispelled or pushed aside so easily. It was the perfect intent for such an attack, so Viv used a burst of speed to jump to the side.

“Aegis.”

She caught the rest on her shield before it could reach her and counter at the same time.

“Astra.”

Her new mainstay spell caught the next eruption at the origin, the black mana charge detonating to scatter the attack before it could launch towards her. Kos was persistent but she was much, much faster. Viv vented black mana at her feet and the lava there winked out under the pressure of entropy. A sphere of cold expanded around her. Nevertheless, the temperature in the arena was still increasing. The sand around Kos was turning to glass. Time was not exactly on her side. He was obviously a powerful defensive caster who needed a bit of time to get going. She would not make it easy for him.

“Eldritch wall.”

Tentacular flowers bloomed on the growing volcano, draining the heat and shape of Kos' domain, if only briefly. A cry of frustration emerged from the mass of magma. The spots of darkness clearly disrupted whatever Kos was planning before the caldera of the growing mountain vomited more heat. The contest was still a losing proposal but Viv had a plan. She just had to push Kos a little more.

More eldritch flowers bloomed and withered. More astra spells disrupted Kos' attack while the volcano grew lopsided since Viv still vented mana on her side of the arena. The massive pile soon teetered and fell to the side, further disrupting the swimming form of Kos.

Viv felt him draw from his focus to replenish his reserves. Her disruption was working well.

“Enough of this!” the man roared.

The volcano erupted, truly erupted. Viv caught most of the early pebbles on a shield as a tidal wave of magma collapsed in her direction.

“Shadow step.”

Viv teleported on the other side of the volcano. She saw Kos freeze in the middle of a triumphant shout.

It was such a pleasant view.

Abyssal tendrils snaked from Viv's form when she unleashed everything in her arsenal in a tide of deadly offense. Eldritch walls weakened the barrier, then astra hexes crashed through it, soon followed by the unceasing cone of a flamethrower-like werfer. Her black fire hissed and ate at the unprotected slope with gusto until Kos was forced to retreat deeper and

deeper into his collapsing hill. Viv noticed that the volcano immediately cooled down. Apparently, it took some effort to keep it going. The more his flames winked out and the less space he had to escape to. Kos was losing control. Viv's piercing attacks followed him where he went. She could feel him. See his mana move. He escaped to the last remaining patch of activity and the stone around him morphed into the shape of a gigantic walker. A colossus of heated stone twice her size. A large shield blocked her attacks, but Viv knew from the constant drain on his focus that he was running on fumes. He was on the verge of collapse.

She felt a sense of wonder when the walker charged her, a giant of magma like a golem from the legends. Black mana sang in her veins. Warm, acid air filled her lungs. The roar of the crowd sounded in the distance but it didn't matter. There was just her, the colossus, and the magic screaming in her being, begging to be unleashed. She felt so very alive.

Viv charged Kos.

The movement was so unexpected that the construct almost stumbled. Blasts and a constant stream of destructive mana forced its arm to turn into a shield as Kos was forced into the defensive. Viv slid under the blind side and did what she, of course, really loved to do.

"Excalibur."

What had started as a short sword was now taller than she was when she swung, the void blade slicing easily through anything the golem could put up. She knew she'd hit flesh when the construct crumbled. A horrible scream sounded from behind, and her danger sense screamed at her once more.

"Aegis."

The shield could not have appeared a second too early. Kos' golem exploded, sending superheated shrapnel through the entire arena. One of the hexagonal panes shattered and a stone hit Viv's mana armor but it mostly held. She still felt the shock in her shoulder. It pushed her, forcing a step back. A sharp pain spread through her ribs.

She poked at them. They weren't broken. Meanwhile, Kos fell on his side. Viv was horrified to see that whatever protected him from the heat had failed at the last minute. Parts of his skull and his chin looked badly burnt, the flesh practically cooked. It had to burn horribly. She took an involuntary step forward. She just wanted to help. She didn't want him to die. It wasn't a fight to the death.

He mistook her intent, face twisted in a rictus of terror.

"I yield! I yield!"

Viv stopped where she was. She toned out Deos' congratulations and the adulation of the crowd to walk back. The only thing she could feel right now was relief. And discomfort. She coughed. It didn't feel very good.

That felt better. Danger sense really came in clutch in the hardest contests. Viv still realized she was pushing it. As soon as the contest was over, she would go and see Elunath. Her body was failing slowly but surely. Better play it safe.

Viv passed by Sidjin on the stairs up to her lodge. They did not speak. There was no need. She returned to her seat to see what else Medjin had in store for them.

The first sign of shenanigans appeared as soon as the far gates opened. No one missed Sidjin's shoulder droop and his back bend through shock when a figure wrapped in turbans and shawls stepped from the shadows of the gate. Viv felt cheated. How could they even plan for this? Or was it a coincidence? She looked at the distant face of Deos with a borrowed spyglass. The man drank wine from a copper cup with the sense of satisfaction of a fat cat.

The newcomer was tall, especially for a woman. Her hips rolled with every careful step. She oozed danger and femininity with every step despite the complete absence of naked skin. Only a pair of amber eyes could be seen, glinting from beneath a red shawl like that of a tiger stalking its prey. She wasn't sure but Viv felt she could feel a terrible air of disapproval radiating from that fixed glare.

"Sidjin," the woman finally greeted, her voice perfectly clear in the immense arena.

"Mentor."

"You have lost the right to call me that."

To Viv's surprise, the tall woman stumbled and she now recognized that her slow and deliberate movements were not a statement of control or majesty. The woman's body was wrecked. By what, she didn't know, yet that moment of weakness was enough for a shawl to shift, revealing scar tissue to Viv's spyglass.

"I will not fight you," Sidjin stated.

"Foolish child. Have you forgotten all I taught you? A prince cannot choose peace."

Deos' voice covered the arena with gleeful excitement now that the scene was set and the actors had taken their position.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have had heroes and villains in this arena, have we not? Today, I bring you both at the same time! He defended the walls with fervor, turning the beastling tide to gore with his mighty arcane powers, until he did not. The man responsible for slaying uncounted monsters, the man who saved the wall only to betray it! The man who fought without stopping until he deserted! The Red Mist himself! I give you... Sidjin of Gastia! The Fallen Prince!"

Cheers and jeers rocked the very walls with quite a few insults mixed in it. The crowd was involved. That was dangerous.

“And facing him, a ghost from his past returned to the fray from her retreat, a distant denizen of the shores of Vizim, she who taught him all he knew! The giantess takes up the focus again for one last performance, but is it to scold, the forgive, or to correct... forever? Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the wandering mercenary, Mensur!”

“You should not be here, Mentor,” Sidjin said.

It annoyed Viv how clear his voice was. She used the spyglass to watch the rafters. Spectators leaned forward, skewers in their fists and cups in their hands temporarily forgotten. How they lived for this. She had ignored them but now they disgusted her because she was at the receiving end of their morbid fascination. Or at least, Sidjin was. It made no difference to her.

The fight began and Viv knew Medjin had not selected her to win. He had selected her to hurt Sidjin. He probably planned on swapping her out later. It was not so much a duel as watching a nurse corralling a tired child.

Mensur moved well when she did move. Her steps carried her to the side between quick casts of arcane mana, thrown discs as serrated as Sidjin’s but so much more simple. Brittle. Fire tongues and defensive ridges of sand alternated with each attack in a constant barrage that must have been quite a sight at some point. Her constant steps also meant that whatever attacking party went after her would not corner her so easily. It reminded Viv of her own style. She could forfeit a defensive circle in favor of mobility as well. Nevertheless, the routine was a broken one. It was like watching a high level athlete practice again after ten years of inactivity, rigid limbs trying to recreate complex gesture they remembered but could no longer accomplish. There were still fugacious moments of brilliance, breathtaking shows of precision and expertise that spoke of a deadly elegance achieved through years of strenuous training. Those were canceled by constant flaws, missteps, and failures. And even then, those flashes of greatness were easily dispelled by Sidjin’s implacable precision.

She doubted Mensur could have won in her prime and that prime was long, long gone. She was the draft to Sidjin’s masterpiece, the inspiration behind his success. She was not his match.

Viv witnessed an unusually gentle Sidjin cornering her slowly, carefully. A tiny transparent barrier tripped her, making her fall to her knee where he could have broken bone instead. She still hissed in agony. Viv could hear it. Everyone could hear her pain. On the other side of the arena, Deos sipped more wine.

She realized what was wrong soon enough. Sidjin always waited for her to finish before countering. He was concerned she would lose control of her spell. Viv had seen it before, even felt the feedback. Sometimes, casters lost control of their constructs. It usually happened during large-scale rituals and remained rather rare. Despite the distance and the chaos of spent mana, the signs were there. Mensur had had a spell blow up in her face. It

had torched her conduits and who knew what else. It was a miracle she could still move and cast.

Viv could reattach four limbs and genitals but she doubted anyone could repair that sort of damage.

It did not take long for Sidjin to trap Mensur with transparent shackles. Those were still mana constructs, however and the woman unmade them with a burst of power.

“I see... I see you have taken some of my lessons to heart,” she gasped.

“I have taken them all to heart. I lived according to my values.”

More shackles clanged shut on her tall, ravaged frame.

“What values are there that would make you turn on your homeland? Why would you open her gates and leave her defenseless? How could you do this?” Mensur demanded, her back straight despite her inevitable defeat.

For the first time in perhaps forever, Viv watched her loved one lose it. His face twisted with both anger and hurt. It made her mad at Mensur for being such a rabid twat. Could she not see she was being used? Her friend Gevaudan had a name for this sort of people: loyal stupid. Even Sidjin was having enough.

“Because Glastia betrayed its word! Because it failed to live to its standards, to its honor! Because nobody cared! That is why I acted! To save a people. Why can't you see that?”

“But not your people, and over three hundred mothers wept for their children because of the choice you made that day. I will not forfeit. Do what you have to do. Complete your apprenticeship.”

“I swore I would not raise my hand against you.”

“And I would like to know what your word is worth. Do it. Take me down.”

“I refuse. You have lost, Mensur. Give up.”

“Foolish child. I told you of duty and sacrifice, did I not? Of course you have forgotten.”

The fallen prince seethed in silence for a while, then his gaze turned upward.

“Deos, this fight is over. Declare me the winner,” Sidjin demanded.

The grotesque man finished his cup with slow detachment, drawing each gulp for seconds. His face split into a voracious grin,

“The rules are clear, prince. Until a combatant is either incapacitated or gives up, the fight goes on.”

“She is incapacitated!”

“Then why can she still cast spells hmmm?” Deos asked with mock curiosity.

Below, Mensur had broken a shackle. One among dozens.

“I demand... a draw,” Sidjin finally said.

The crowd sniggered and jeered at the two blockheads. Viv seethed in her seat. He was being used. His sense of honor was being used against him and he was letting it happen.

“Idiot idiot idiot.”

They cheated. They had to have cheated. They must have known Sidjin would come second, somehow. Viv glared at the distant form of Deos, whose job it was to make things ‘interesting’. He had set it up with Medjin. He was sure of it. Gods dammit.

“The arena master can declare a draw if two combatants are locked in a contest without end, or at least without end in sight. I will not hurt her and she cannot break out. I will stay there for days if I have to.”

That idiot. Viv groaned and shoved her head between her hands, bemoaning her Sidjin’s rigid sense of honor.

“You could just slap her really hard,” she bemoaned.

“He won’t do it,” Sonagi said. “He’s inflexible like that. It’s clear in his style.”

“Fuck!”

“I will consent to it,” Deos announced. “You may leave then, fallen prince.”

“Looks like we’re next then,” Sonagi said, and he stepped out of the lodge.

Viv breathed in and out. It was fine. They were at one victory, one draw. If Sonagi won, they would move on. Probably forfeit in Aldus’ favor. It would be fine.

She looked on, numb, as the contestants were led out. Then she frowned when someone knocked on their door. It was a footman from the arena. Something in his posture raised alarms in her paranoid mind.

“We are waiting for your next contestant. Where is he?”

Viv felt as if she’d been suddenly immersed in a frozen lake.

This was it. This was the sword of Damocles she'd felt over her neck since the beginning of the competition. This was the fuckery that would lead to a cockup cascade. The scheming had begun. The foe had struck.

"What do you mean? It's Sonagi," she said, refusing to accept the inevitable complication.

"There are no contestants waiting for your team."

Viv was on her feet before the man finished her sentence, then down the steps. She stopped at the gate. Sidjin sat by the entrance, having a private moment of miserable introspection.

"Where's Sonagi?" she demanded.

Sidjin blinked and frowned. The question woke him up from his funk.

"What do you mean? He is not with you?"

"It's a fucking trap."

"You have to produce a contestant. In the absence of contestant, your team will be considered to have forfeited. Your fourth may step in for the absentee," the footman said with an air of innocence that Viv didn't trust one bit.

"You! You're in on this!" she screamed.

"Please calm down, madam."

"It's fine, Viv," Rakan said with confidence.

"But—"

"I'll surrender if I have to," he stated.

Viv watched the youngest member of their team with surprise.

"If it gets too tough or there is a close call, I'll surrender. I won't die here stupidly for this contest. You have my word. Find Sonagi. He'll win the last match for sure."

"Ok but you promised."

"I'll get back to us. We saw the rest of Medjin's team. They are professional frontline mages provided by the nobility. They won't kill me for sports. I'll forfeit as soon as I'm getting cornered."

"Alright. I'll hold you to it."

"Don't be a hero," Sidjin said.

"I won't. I don't have to win. I just have to show up."

"Alright. You go in and we find Sonagi."

“You have a couple of minutes. See you soon,” Rakan said as he moved to the gate.

The footman smiled and left at a brisk pace. Viv and Sidjin exchanged a glance. The prince spoke first.

“I’ll follow this man, you check the path from the lodge to here?”

“There is only one thing that could force Sonagi to go away.”

“His mother,” Sidjin realized.

“Yes. I’ll go there. Meet at the lodge afterward.”

They split, Viv running with adrenaline-fueled legs. The corridors blurred as she moved faster than an Olympian medalist. It still didn’t feel fast enough. The guard at the entrance of the private quarters opened the door to let her in. Sidjin’s mother’s cell was empty. Her belongings were gone. There were no signs of a struggle.

“Sonagi’s mother. Where is she?” she demanded.

“Left a couple of minutes ago.”

“With whom?”

“With Sonagi, ma’am,” the worried sentry said.

Viv blinked.

If her heart had been plunged in a lake before, now it resided at the bottom of the Styx. She climbed back to the lodge three steps at a time. The sun was setting, bathing the arena in a bloody tinge while a frigid wind froze the sweat off her brow. Medjin had brought his contestant forward. On the sand of the arena, Deos was finishing his introduction.

“— no longer shackled by the sin of his past, my lark is free! The punishment for the death of a scion was lifted by the offended family this very morning. No longer will he have to fight for a foreign flag. No longer will he raise his hands in the service of a stranger! Tonight, ladies of gentlemen, Sonagi returns to the fold. He is free!”

The crowd went wild at the comeback of their prodigal son. Sonagi looked good from up here, regal in the fashion of Helock under a crimson sash. His smile lacked the brittle quality it had kept during his recovery. There were no crow feet around his eyes or blemishes on his skin from years of substance abuse. He was radiant and scruffy, a rogue champion returned for a second chance. And the crowd gobbled it up, hook, line, and sinker. Banners spread across the lower rafters proclaiming their support for the ‘elemental juggler’. Throats screamed their adoration until they grew hoarse. Viv leaned on the railing, fingers gripping the cold wood like claws. Her breath hitched in her chest. She fought off tears, because she knew what was going to happen.

“No, you can’t do this to him,” she said.

There was no one to listen.

Sonagi picked that moment to look up and shrug, a mocking smirk on his face. The spectators saw it. They laughed at Viv's expense, now that all their attention was suddenly on her.

"Let the fight... begin!" Deos said.

Viv considered jumping down but even if the shield didn't stop her, the rest of the arena would. She couldn't win against such numbers. The weight of her surroundings crushed her mind and that great circle of stone and sand now felt like a maw closing around her and she was already caught, already done for. Gravity and fate would finish what was already started. In that moment, there was nothing she could do but watch, knowing the end, knowing Rakan didn't stand a chance. The young man had trusted Sonagi. He had shared all his tricks with his teacher. There was nothing he could do that he hadn't demonstrated and explored in excruciating detail, no move he hadn't practiced until his core dried up and his fingers shook from constant effort. Sonagi knew Rakan inside out.

"Come on, it's not funny!" Rakan pleaded.

"Show me what you learned, boy. It's your chance to shine!"

The fight started with both casters on equal footing. Viv knew it was an illusion, of course. Sonagi knew his opponent so well that he could afford to dictate the pace of the fight for a better show.

A part of Viv dissociated. Despite her reinforced mind now sharper and more focused than what the limits of the flesh could allow, there was a limit to what she could take. Mostly, Viv felt powerless.

If there was one thing she hated, it was to feel powerless. She should not have focused on training so much. She should not have let Sidjin handle the preparation just because it was his city at stake. Now, all the training she'd done to make sure Rakan would strive had been thrown away by one maneuver, one fatal blow that had come from a scheme she hadn't see coming. If only she'd asked Solfis... but it was too late. Unprepared. Sloppy. No, not sloppy.

On the other side of the arena, Deos sat with his hands on his ample gut. A king in his domain.

They'd been fucked with. Sidjin could not have predicted this level of bullshit. The worst thing was, there would be no repercussions because recruiting contestants was legal and it would have been plausible for Medjin to guess their order. She was without recourse. And so was Rakan. The young man was pale, messy. His spellwork felt frayed to her expert perception despite the quick exchange of attacks just like she had seen hundreds of times before during training.

"Sonagi, what are you doing? Come on, snap out of it! Please!"

“Do I look impaired, boy?”

“What in the name of the Light Gods—”

“Oops! Watch your left!”

Sonagi, of course, attacked his right and scored a small gash on Rakan’s reinforced robe. Its energy waned. Viv knew he could have attacked harder but that was not Sonagi’s style. The man didn’t want a victory. He wanted a spectacle to enshrine his return in the mind of his fans.

Viv could not move from her vantage point, even if she had wanted to. Terror filled her veins. It was no longer a question of defeat. It was about how far Sonagi would go for a good performance.

“Rakan, give up!” she finally yelled.

He’d promised. Her voice sounded clear in her ears but suddenly, the sound of the cheering crowd grew louder, drowning her pleading under a tide of raucous calls.

“Rakan!”

The very arena pushed her concerns away. It would not tolerate interference under the all-seeing gaze of its master Deos.

“That fucking...”

It was useless. Rakan was too into it now, too emotional. His promise was forgotten. He did not do emotional very well. Sonagi danced around him like a ballerina around a toddler. He stopped attacks at the last second, dodged seemingly perfect strikes. He used tiny blue shields to block powerful fire blasts, the attack seemingly slowing as it approached the azure buckler. Each of Rakan’s attempts were unmade before they could truly manifest. Once, Sonagi drew sigils at the same time as his student just to show he had countered him before the first part of the spell was even built. It was a humiliation.

“Just fucking stop,” Rakan said.

“Come on boy, I trained you better than that.”

“Maybe.”

Rakan fainted.

Rakan never fainted since it was not in his mindset. Feinting required changing a spell mid-way. He had not trained for it. Sonagi had said it wasn’t worth it at this stage. But Rakan did it anyway. A stone throw turned into a wall of earth. The young man jumped behind it, briefly disappearing from view and leaving his circle. For the first time, Sonagi focused. A

projectile curved from behind the cover. It was gray, mostly, and charged with intent. Dangerous Sonagi stopped it as he always did with just the right amount of brown mana. This allowed the payload to carry on.

Viv watched a pearl of black mana erupt from the brown shield. It was very little, barely larger than a pearl. Maybe that's why Sonagi didn't see it.

In a way, Rakan knew his opponent just as well. Sonagi never used a safety margin. He was that confident.

The goblet of black mana clipped Sonagi in the jaw. Dark splotches spread over his smooth cheek but it was not charged with the meaning of annihilation, the way Viv used it. The riposte was immediate and definitive. A focused beam of red slammed into the wall, torching it, piercing it. Viv saw Rakan throw himself to the ground just as she knew he wouldn't do it in time. The focused lance slammed into his torso like a pin through cork.

Viv was out of the lodge before he finished collapsing.

"Nice try," Sonagi said, "but I care about my image quite a bit, you see," Sonagi taunted at her back.

Weird how she could see every stone in the walls with such precision, despite how little it mattered. She grabbed the vial around her neck. It was the potion she had found on the lich and that could hold death at bay for a moment, allowing a victim to live until healing could be applied. The plan had been to use it on herself. That plan had changed. She hoped it had changed. Any human from earth would be dead by now, but perhaps... He probably had decent endurance, what with crossing the desert. She could only wish.

Viv was not supposed to cast in the arena outside of a fight but she still shadow stepped to the antechamber. Fuck the rules.

The footman opened the gate to let her through. Her feet pounded the sand. There were already arena hirelings with a stretcher. Rakan had his hands over a hole under the left lung. Entry wound cauterized but not deep. Little blood. No exit wound. Massive trauma.

"So... sorry. Sorry!" Rakan said.

Viv used the opportunity of an open mouth to shove the potion through his blood-tinged teeth, dripping droplets down his gullet. Hopefully, that would suffice. She inspected his wound. It was so... and she didn't have her kit. He should be dead.

She didn't know what to do. So she took his hand. He gripped it.

"Sorry... forgot the promise."

"And Medjin moves on to the next stage with two victories, one draw, and a loss!" a distant voice said with glee.

Maybe she could pray to Neriad? For a miracle?

"I got it," Sidjin said by her side. "Priest on the way. You two, GET MOVING."

Sidjin's aura of intimidation flared and it was something to behold. Viv didn't expect it. The orderlies lifted Rakan with haste while Sidjin cast simple, life-based spells to stabilize Rakan. The wound took a pinkish hue.

Viv was left behind. There wasn't a speck of life mana in her core.

She also felt the gaze of the crowd as they finally got their blood. But not death. Rakan would make it. He had to.

The gate closed behind her. She had walked in a daze, unaware of her surroundings. The stretcher was out of sight, not that she could do shit except be in the way. Her own magic flared in answer to her powerful emotions, looking for an outlet that she could not allow herself to find. Steps approached. Sonagi was coming, with Medjin and Deos not far behind. Another violation of the rule of the arena, and again, not one that was serious enough to matter in the grand scheme of things.

Viv's pain struck her dumb rather than making her angry. The dull ache in her chest that came with black mana devouring her from the inside only compounded the icy grasp of grief and disbelief gouging her heart now. That was why her first and only word was a question to Sonagi.

"Really?"

Not why, or how, or insults. No anger, not yet. She just hadn't reached that stage. And yet, Sonagi mistook it for a personal question. Or perhaps he had been waiting for that moment. She couldn't be sure. His words reached her as if through water. They sounded distorted.

"You think I owe you? You think you saved me by making me work every day to train you like some indentured servant? You think you were doing me a favor by inciting me to that shithole of a city, far from everything, to serve your interests and labor for you until I die? Because you have not solved my situation at all. You just want to take me away to replace their collar for yours. I know how you work. You pick talented lost puppies like the boy and act a little nicely. They eat from your benevolent hands, oh dear ruler, so happy to have someone finally tell them how great they are. Cheap and convenient labor is what you get. But I'm not some Halurian bumpkin, Viv the Kingslayer. I'm Sonagi, the champion. And I'm back. If you were a little smarter you would have seen it coming. After all, didn't I tell you?"

He leaned forward until his breath made Viv's hair flutter ever so slightly. His eyes were wide, manic. His traits were so furiously intense.

"I don't want to get back to this hell. I can't. I'll do almost anything for a proper way out."

Viv's enhanced mind conjured images of a smiling Sonagi during training. He had felt more brittle and hollow then, but he had already been planning his betrayal. What hurt Viv the

most was that Sonagi had been talking about Rakan, the boy. How the young exile had given the redeemed duelist a purpose. And that whole time he meant to turn against them.

Grins appeared around Viv's shocked form. Medjin smiled with the smug satisfaction of someone who had so thoroughly outplayed his opponent. Deos lapped at the enfolding scene with the vulgar pleasure of a thrill seeker watching a train wreck. They feasted on her pain. They enjoyed it, she realized. They enjoyed seeing her down. What had she ever done to warrant such hostility?

"And I found that way out. I contacted the Virg family. You know, those whose scion fell by my hand. They were only too happy to cut a deal with Medjin and bring low a certain foreign upstart they'd seen strut through their cities as if the pavement belonged to her. They know you moved the underworld, somehow. In a way, this is about you. You only have yourself to blame."

He still didn't get it and Viv realized she needed him to see, to understand. This was not a matter of culture anymore. This was about the heart of what made humanity. The core values that drove them all to strive for the best and to train the younger generations so they could do it as well. It was about found families. Friendship. Loyalty.

"Rakan, Sonagi. It's about him, not me. You didn't have to do that to him. You didn't have to break him. Because you did break him. He was just a boy."

"Then he may consider this my last lesson. We are done."

Power exploded from Viv's form. Black wings burst from her back, cutting the light of braseros and forcing a gasp in the guards. Deos stumbled back, as did Medjin. His guards cast hasty shield with terror. Even Sonagi, so cocky a moment earlier, even he took a step back. But Viv felt calm and in control. She was angry, yes, but it was a thing of the void. It hungered and gripped her with claws of burning ice. Darkness crept along the edges of the room until even the light of the sun felt like a distant thing, and the caress of heat a forgotten dream from before long ago, when entropy had not won yet.

Viv was furious. No, she was filled with acid hatred that gnawed at her. She let the emotion course through her mind but she did not give it control. That was fine. Everything was fine. She was going to... to make things right.

"Oh no, I do not think we are done."

The plates of solid black mana rolled over her form until scales formed and the low hiss of disintegration became the only sound in the black pit this antechamber had become.

"There are guards everywhere, Viviane. You will not make it—"

"Rakan is not a game piece."

Even Sonagi quieted. Footsteps rushed as more guards entered the room, but no one spoke. They just froze where they were. Viv would have cut them down where they stood if they'd tried to touch her.

"It was not a game for him. You should not have come after mine. Not like this. So, you want to be a legend? You will be. I will make you into a legend. Everyone will remember your name, Sonagi the Betrayer."

Viv pulled back the aura, the magic, everything. She felt the salty prick of tears in her eyes from either grief or rage, she could not tell.

"See you very soon."

Viv walked out and made her way to Aldus' room. She would wait by Rakan's side later. First, she had a bargain to strike.

Chapter 137. Remember me

"Prince Aldus will see you now."

Viv stood and entered the lodge, ignoring the careful gazes of two war mages in the yellow uniforms of the Glastian military. She wondered if she should have changed but decided she didn't give two shits. Let them see the blood-stained, singed robe and remember who wore it. She found herself in an antechamber with staff and aides, all of them standing at the side, all of them quiet. She moved to a bedroom.

Although the arena kept its lodgings sober for the contestants, Aldus had managed to make the place comfortable with a few rugs and carefully placed trinkets. The prince sat on a large seat, flanked by bodyguards, Viv assumed those war mages were his two prime contestants. They didn't look very pleased with her presence, but she guessed they had good reasons.

"Hello," she said in a perfunctory manner. Her voice was broken, low, the words empty.

"Thanks for having me on such short notice. I want to face Sonagi in the arena."

Aldus didn't seem surprised. He felt regal in his elaborate uniform and flawless appearance. She gave him no credit. A child could tell what was on her mind right now. To her surprise, it was his first who answered. He was a genius gray mage with a distant demeanor. Viv gave him a good chance to take down Sonagi if he had a few tricks up his sleeve. The others were simply not that good, however. She knew she could take them without much trouble. Aldus had brought soldiers, not duelists.

“You are angry and we understand that. Glastians are all accustomed to grief. I feel for you, yet we know what anger can lead to. You will make mistakes. You will use your resources too quickly.”

He took a step to the side, looking out the window towards the sea in the distance. The prince let him have his moment.

“What we are fighting for is not greed or revenge. It is nothing short of the fate of Glastia and its people. Each candidate holds a strong vision of what the city would be, should be once the tide finally recedes, which will be soon. Medjin has sold—”

“Myr,” the prince warned.

His champion cleared his throat.

“My apologies. Medjin’s view cannot reconcile with what we want, which is a peaceful future for a city that has known unceasing war for far too long. We cannot afford to leave the fate of so many to chance and last minute, rage-filled additions. You are an unknown. You are—”

“I am not an unknown,” Viv said, finally out of patience. “You have seen what I can do. I’m better than your seconds.”

The man still by Aldus’ side bristled. Viv glared at him.

“You know I’m right. I might even be better than you. If you have any doubt about my ability we can step into a private training room and... have a go or two.”

“The result of a fight against a gray mage in an enclosed space is...”

“You’re just making excuses. You doubt my abilities? Let’s see you put your core where your mouth—”

“Enough,” Aldus said.

Viv felt the wave of calm expanding from Aldus like a cold breeze. She recognized a social skill of some sort and considered resisting but there was no malice here, no threat. Just a polite request not to let emotions take over. A part of her suspected it was an act that both Aldus and his champion Myr had done plenty of times and if it was the case, it was working pretty well.

“My friend Myr is right when he says that your emotions might get the better of you.”

In answer, Viv let her soul show its true color as well. Not just leadership but intimidation, though it was colder here. Neutral. Her vengeance spoke of patience and careful preparations, of a serpentine self-control as unyielding as winter in the service of delayed, controlled violence.

“You do not know who I am so I believe I will remind you. Because of an Enorian prince’s greed, my city was violated. My beloved was slain and her body dumped into the deadlands to rise as a revenant. I did not accept that this was the way of the world and that he was a prince and I’m a nobody. I did not rush headlong to a suicidal assassination attempt. I built an army. I resurrected a nation. We took back our city. We waged a savage war against veterans of thirty years of war and sent them home in wooden boxes. So no, I do not let my emotions get the better of me, I harness them, I use them, and when the time comes... I get even. Always.”

The unspoken part was the punishment she’d inflicted on Lancer. That, the others knew. She was sure of it.

“I have a place to handle Sonagi. Not just that but if I lose you are still ahead because he remains one of the competition’s most dangerous contestants. As you are, you may stop Sonagi but your second will lose against Kos the lava mage. Even then it is not a sure thing.”

The two war mages scowled but they did not object, at least not immediately.

“Sir, we don’t need her. She’s just a mad dog!”

The second finally had enough. His words didn’t sway Aldus, however.

“We may receive help from the bone witch. Shaya and I always knew we had much in common. Nevertheless...”

“Kos could easily defeat her. His speciality is area defense and denial. She could not stop the heat.”

Myr took a step forward, robes swishing. She could tell another rant was coming and prepared to withstand the torrent of pointless banter. To her surprise, Aldus put a stop to that.

“There is more that we have not told you. As you know, each candidate is allowed a single spelled item.”

“Most choose a focus, yes.”

“The Virg family granted him their most powerful heirloom as a blessing since they decided to support him. While I cannot say that I approve sponsoring the murderer of a family member, I have to admit that their support will prove... concerning.”

“What’s the heirloom?”

“A multi-cored gauntlet.”

“What? I thought it was extremely hard to even get two cores in the same item!”

“This one has four, albeit small ones. They offer a mix of all primary elemental colors which works perfectly well for Sonagi. Worse, since the cores are small, the enchantment is designed for quick recharge. He will be able to keep casting for far longer than usual.”

“His main weakness has always been relatively weak reserves.”

“And they just eliminated it.”

The mages stood with their heads bent. For all their bluster, they knew Sonagi to be formidable. Now that he had received a way to shore up his only flaw, their prospects had gone from hazardous to doomed. The duelist was just too efficient, too precise.

“I had an idea on how to handle him anyway. This doesn’t change anything.”

“You seem rather confident,” Aldus said. “Are you not having second thoughts?”

Viv leaned forward, her face close to the prince’s. His bodyguards stood closer but they didn’t stop her.

“As I said before, everyone here seems to have forgotten who I really am. I’ll remind them all, starting with Sonagi.”

“Then I accept you within my ranks. Do you not wish for anything in return?”

“I’ll leave Sidjin to discuss the details with you.”

“Is it wise to offer the reward before the negotiations even started?”

Viv was about to walk out but she turned at his comment.

“Is it wise to fuck me over? I’m sure you’ll find out shortly.”

Deos, Viv decided, was a happy cat. A sated, cruel predator relaxing after his little display of power and control. The obese man reclined in his chair while an attendant massaged his oiled feet, a small meal of fruits left untouched at the side. He did not invite Viv to sit and she didn’t ask. There were no chairs around.

“And to what do I owe the pleasure?” the man said with a knowing smile.

Viv swallowed her anger. He had set Sidjin against his mentor and lost them the competition for a bit of drama. He had also most likely facilitated Sonagi’s betrayal. She would get to him in time. For now, she needed to make sure all the pieces aligned. There would be time for recovery and licking one’s wound later. Right now, getting even had the priority. Time wasn’t on her side if she wanted to face the change without regret. So she gave him her most affable expression.

“You will be delighted to know that I have joined Aldus’ team.”

“Oh,” the man replied without a hint of surprise. “What a pleasant development.”

He stopped there, waiting for her to take the first step. She obliged.

“Team order can be reshuffled whenever the team itself changes. We will be submitting a new one very soon.”

“Stop! Isea darling, thanks for your time.”

Deos signaled and the massage lady walked out as fast as could be polite. Two guards by the door also left after a lazy handwave.

“It sounds like you were going to ask me something extremely, extremely illegal.”

“Nothing of the sort, we are talking hypotheticals,” Viv replied with a smile.

“Hypotheticals do not count in front of a jury of the city’s elders, young tart. You are asking me to take an enormous risk!” He said.

Deos picked a nearby glass and drank thoughtfully. He was being a little heavy-handed in asking for a bribe, she thought. He probably thought her a bit provincial.

“Not such a big risk. If someone were to doubt you, they would have already done so after Sidjin met his mentor upon the sand. It was a risky move on Medjin’s part, would you not agree? Hurt as she was, she would have lost against virtually anyone else.”

“You are implying much without any sort of proof.”

“Why talk about proof? We are still talking about hypotheticals. You know what I find unbelievable? That Medjin would place her as second.”

The two glare at each other for a while.

“Medjin’s an arrogant prick. We met. He had an extremely poor opinion of me, yet he somehow anticipated that Sidjin would give me the first position? How... clever of him. Why, if I had not experienced it myself, I would never have believed it.”

“The arena can work miracles. Turn cowards into snakehounds and doddering idiots into tactical geniuses.”

“I would hope so. I do so wish to provide the arena with the greatest show it has seen yet in this otherwise tame contest. Adversary against adversary. Revolutionary against traitor. Would that not be amazing? Ah, but I can only wish.”

Deos breathed in. She waited. When he spoke, any attempt at pleasantness was gone.

“Sonagi will wipe that smirk off your face. I’ll pay him thirty gold talents to kill you on the sand. Tear off your tongue so you can’t surrender.”

“That’s cheap. Constable Tarano paid three times that amount just for information. Before I killed him.”

“I’ll enjoy seeing you put down in your place, Miss Viv. You know where the door is. See yourself out.”

Viv had seen people mangled by explosives before. On Nyil, people were part magic. Reality bent to accommodate them, their dreams, their vows. Even their deaths. Back home, people were just the meat that formed them and she had seen plenty of that after explosives were used. It had horrified her. Rakan was not one of those victims. He was whole with the gash closed by expert healers. Surgeons would find nothing amiss except for exhaustion and anemia, and yet he was the most wounded individual Viv had seen because the hurt reached a part of the young Halurian she didn’t know how to fix.

His core was bleeding.

Mages of his level gathered mana without thinking about it. He was doing the same as well as creating his own and it escaped from his chest as quickly as it formed in a loose stream of energy, like air leaking from a space shuttle. A shimmering cloud of colors spread around him in a breathtaking display of metaphysical lights. Under that, his body was empty. A pierced cask. Viv was reminded of the punishments of the Danaides, condemned by Zeus to fill a sieve with water for all of eternity. The difference was that they’d killed their husbands on their wedding nights while Rakan had trusted a friend.

“I’m sorry. I fucked up.”

“You didn’t, we were betrayed. I didn’t see it coming. I’m sorry,” Viv cut immediately.

Rakan’s eyes were hooded and desperate. They didn’t address the elephant in the room. Rakan’s days as a star caster were done. No one could cast without mana. There were workarounds, of course...

“I can’t pull mana anymore!”

“You can do it from a focus. It’s not all over.”

“He crippled me.”

Once again, Viv’s anger surged until she choked on it. Sonagi had hurt the kid. Their junior. He’d done it for show. The... the sheer audacity of this gnawed at her guts. Patience though, patience.

She had something special in mind for him.

“Why? Did he say why?”

Viv sighed. She wasn't good at these sorts of things. There were probably better things to say.

“He... Look, what he did makes no sense to you and little sense to me. And that's how it is. It would be nice if mankind was made of rational actors and if we could reach the same conclusion by looking at the same thing but it's not the case. And then there are the fuckups. Some people are just twisted. They do things that don't make sense and they sabotage themselves and ruin the lives of the people around them. I got to admit, I didn't see that one coming at all so I apologize. I'm more experienced and he still blindsided me.”

“It's not your fault.”

“No. No, it's not. But you're my responsibility and I failed us so...”

“You were busy as well. Still dying?”

“More than ever, I guess. I know you can't help it but just try to forget him as a friend. He is to blame for his decisions. Your sister is here, by the way. The healers had to sedate her. She tried to stab them.”

“That's just like her. I should see her. Tell her... tell her I'll be alright.”

“You will. We'll find a way. Even if we don't, you're one of us now and forever.”

“Okay. Okay. You should talk to Sidjin. He's probably feeling sorry about himself right now.”

“Don't we all. Right, I'll wake up your sibling.”

Viv walked away from the bed, freezing a second later.

“Viv?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think... Do you think that I could have done something different? Something more? Maybe —”

“No. Don't take responsibility for other adults' actions. We all make our choices, alright? We will live with ours.”

Sonagi wouldn't get that luxury. Viv walked out and notified the healers that Tarana could see her brother. She whipped past them like a fury. Viv was completely ignored as she found Sidjin sitting on a bench with flaking blood covering his eyes to the elbows. He was a wreck.

“Sidjin, wake up.”

“I am here.”

“You need to get cleaned up and then cut a deal with Aldus. I’ll be part of his roster. Sorry but you don’t get a say in the matter.”

The fallen prince stared with hollow eyes. She’d not seen him so guarded since the first days they had met, back when the ruin of his body limited everything.

“You can say it if you want. You were right and I was wrong and now they have maimed him.”

“Sidjin, it’s done. There is nothing I can do that will hurt you more than the guilt you’re already feeling. I don’t really want to kick you while you’re down and, if I have to be honest, I was just as surprised as you were. So. This one isn’t on you. Pick yourself back up and go see Aldus. I can’t afford a moping prince right now. Kind of busy.”

“Revenge?”

“Working on it.”

He nodded.

“You get the first shot. If you don’t get him I’ll—”

“Sorry Sidjin. It’s first come first served.”

Viv moved through the motions with focus. Anger was nice and all but Sonagi was dangerous to begin with and now he had a quasi artifact to keep him going. She was not allowed to make mistakes. The familiarity of the flowing patterns calmed her and plunged her in a sea of concentration. Her rage and grief felt more distant here, and so was the distant call of her impending doom. Without the fruit offered by the nascent elemental, her body would have already started to fail. As it was, she could still feel a tightness in her chest, a fever in her bones. It was only a matter of weeks now. Days, perhaps. At the same time, she had never been so powerful. Black mana was an extension of herself, answering her every demand with an ease she had never felt before. She was eager to test her limits.

A knock on her door broke her immersion. She was standing in her personal quarters in the arena, small rooms meant for individual fighters. Unvarnished furniture offered the only comfort over the rough sandstone of the walls. There was no need to make the place more comfortable. She had nobody to impress.

“Come on in.”

A pair of staff members carried a heavy crate between the two of them. They came in at her gesture, dropping the heavy load between them.

“Delivery for you ma’am. We haven’t checked the contents yet so…”

“I know what’s in there. You may leave.”

“But your security…”

“I am as safe as can be right now. Thank you.”

The pair left. Viv had not lied. She was really safe right now.

“Come on out.”

Solfis deployed from the small container with ghastly majesty, his yellow glare inspecting the room before landing on Viv.

//Your Grace.

//I felt your distress.

“Yeah.”

//Status update.

//Please.

Viv did. She explained what had happened and then her plan for Sonagi. Maybe they had spent too much time apart because she was unable to pick any reaction from the bone construct.

“You alright there Solfis?”

//I am operating at peak capacity.

//First, I would like to apologize.

//This incident confirms that I am unable to anticipate treachery among your entourage.

//This is the second time I failed you in this regard.

“That’s ok, I never meant for you to be my spymaster.”

//We will need to recruit one.

//A loyal one.

//There was something else.

//I am being tracked.

//Earth magic has been used throughout the Helock underground in the past seventy-six hours.

//It appears the attempt is to locate someone or something.

//I presume it might be me.

“Is it Elunath?”

//I believe it is the case.

//As to what he knows and plans to do, I can only hypothesize.

//It would be best if I stayed with you and above ground until your next meeting.

“Sure. I hope he’s just fishing.”

//Agreed.

//For now, book a training room, Your Grace.

//We need to conduct tests to see if your plan can work.

//I have to admit.

//I really like it.

“Too bad it can only work here.”

//I wouldn’t be so sure.

Sidjin was feeling miserable. Miserable and guilty. The enclosed space reminded him of his cell from the hell his life had been. It smelled better. There was that.

He did not react when a tall frame squatted silently by his side.

“What do you want, machine of death?”

//Is our little princeling feeling sorry for himself?

Sidjin glared but he was grateful for the distraction.

“Since when do you use sarcasm?”

//My creator personally enhanced my sarcasm module.

//I have developed it over the centuries.

//I will state I have not come here to talk about me.

//However exciting the topic may be.

//I will talk about you.

“And my fuckups?”

//Precisely.

//The fuckup that started eight hours ago.

Sidjin blinked. It was early morning outside the walls. The pale light of a winter aurora colored the world outside a dull gray. His breath clouded the windows with condensation.

Eight hours was after... after he’d stabilized Rakan.

Gods, the young man didn't deserve that.

//Someone as experienced as you should already understand it.
//However, this does not look like a wall and the problem does not look like a beastling tide so I understand that your feeble organic brain might be confused.
//The crisis is not over.
//It will only be over once we have safely left the arena.
//Do you understand?"

"You need me to kill Sonagi?" he asked with a mixture of terror and hope.

//No you dimwit.
//I need you to stop moping.
//Offer her assistance.
//Barring that, offer her company.
//Barring that, plan.
//Act.
//Or at the very least, sleep.

"I can't!"

//Try harder.
//Alternatively, I could assist.

The golem clenched his horrifying slicers into a fist. It looked like a bone mace and screamed 'blunt for trauma'.

"No thank you."

//Be here for her.
//Weakling.

"I appreciate your encouraging words. I am concerned about her. Maybe I should go at him first..."

//Oh no.
//No no no.
//I see you still do not understand, meatbag.
//So I will state it for you.
//Do you know what is the hardest thing to do for a pure black caster?

"Healing?"

//Holding back.

The golem stood. Sidjin found there was something fascinating about the way it moved, human at times and so alien at others. He wondered how Viv could ever relax in the creature's presence. It was a centuries-old construct from an empire known for its

ruthlessness, not a damn butler. And it was mad. Or at least operating far beyond what it was designed to do. Exhaustion muddled his thoughts. He found himself drawn in the twin baleful glare of the golem's optics.

//Her Grace has always worked best when she discarded her petty concerns and focused on the objective.

//As is the case now.

//She has no need to consider politics and the risk of being too bloodthirsty at this point.

//She can finally... let go.

//And the solution she has found is so elegant, so appropriate.

//I am quite proud.

//When the time comes, you will sit in your lodge and bear witness to my mistress delivering Harrakan greetings to this city.

//I have heard reports that the Helockians do not like her much.

//They believe she is a pushy, arrogant upstart.

//They have forgotten the truth of this world.

//I have trained her in the ancient ways of the greatest civilization this continent has ever seen.

//She was born for magic.

//In a few hours, they will remember that their positions and titles mean nothing beyond the tiny halls of their manors.

//There is only vision.

//And the power to carry it out.

//My mistress has decreed that Sonagi shall die a memorable death.

//They will remember it.

//And they will remember her.

//I simply cannot wait.

It was now the morning of the second day of the tournament. It was also a rest day for Helockians, and so crowds had gathered in the massive arena in unprecedented numbers, glutting around heating pillars and sellers of warm tea. Yesterday had ended on a high note with a nice betrayal, a fallen son of Helock rising from the ashes, and an upstart humiliated. Or so they'd been told by the whispers falling from the upper rafters, crumbs of intrigue to feast on. Sidjin had been thoroughly outplayed with his menagerie of outcasts. The outlander had tasted defeat at the hand of a clever opponent. Shaya had fallen too. Order would return to Glastia now that the choice was between a champion of the military or a champion of the nobility. No mercenary queen and no race traitor would sit on the throne. Order had prevailed! There were even rumors that something unexpected would happen.

Group by group, the spectators would look at the distant, rotund shape of Deos sitting on his crown wrapped in lush covers like a precious egg. They would see his wide smile and the goblet waiting in his ham fist, untouched for now. He seemed pleased. That was a good thing, right? And so the people turned back to their neighbors to speculate what could possibly come to add the permon fruit on top of an already pleasant distraction.

In the antechamber of the lodge gate, Viv waited. She would be first. Solfis had gone on a small expedition late at night to make sure everything would be ordered as intended. The golem had mentioned that he didn't have to use violence, so her argument had been convincing. Deos knew his crowd wanted closure after yesterday's slap. He hoped for the phoenix to finish his ascent by slaying she who would cage him. Solfis had reported that part of the crowd wanted Sonagi to pay for what he had done to his apprentice, but that was a minority. Humans on Nyil rooted for their side first, and justice second.

That was fine.

It was going to be fine. She felt confident. The same poison coursing through her veins was going to push her to new heights.

"It's time," Sidjin said.

He squeezed her hand but his gaze was calm. He did not doubt her.

"You can return to Rakan's side if you want," she said.

The fallen prince shook his head.

"He is in no danger and his sister is here for him. I'll be here for you."

"Ok. Thanks Sidjin. I will be right back."

"Don't jinx it!"

"Hey," Viv replied with a smile. "That's my line."

"A line?"

Viv shrugged and left through the opening and the wan winter light reflected on cold sand. The familiar hubbub of the mass welcomed her, some booing the one who dared stand against their newest champion. Sonagi already stood on the grounds, looking regal in his modified protective robe wearing the red of Helock. Viv spotted the massive glove around his hand though the duelist made it look like a bling accessory. A hazy cloud of many colors of mana expanded from the item in a floral aurora that merged with Sonagi's own. It really was the perfect tool for him. She stopped in her designed circle just as Deos finished her introduction.

"But will a heart full of vengeance be enough when we face the prodigy? The four-colors champion of Helock returned to fame for a second time!"

Sonagi spoke up first. It was his moment after all.

"I harbor no ill will now that I am free again. Your pupil has survived. It is time for you to let go of your anger and return to your home in far Enoria. Do not let vengeance consume you

because it is not worth the cost. If you stand against me, I will face you with my full might. You are a worthy opponent. I will have no choice.”

He stopped and spread his arms like a benevolent contestant. A winning smile gave him an aura of indulgence, of patient forgiveness. Viv could leave intact if only she let go. She vaguely wondered if he had accepted Deos’ proposal to kill her here. He knew of course that she would not and could not simply walk away. This was just another play in the oldest of games: pred-bloodshed banter.

“I do not banter with dead men.”

There, simple and to the point. Sonagi smiled and it felt genuine to her. He really believed he would win. The crowd booed and aahed in anticipation for what was shaping up to be a fight to the death.

A sense of utter calm came over Viv. There was no stress at all. No pressure. She let go of her worries. Rakan was stable while his condition could only improve. Harrak was safe under Lady Azar’s attention. She had a plan to turn part elemental. The world would only bring more challenges for her to face but right now, there was nothing to fear. Just the sand, the pale sun, and Sonagi. The man who had broken Rakan for money and fame. In a way, it felt liberating. No need to stress about political repercussions and whatnot since she had already decided what to do. Her reality now narrowed down to just the shield-contained area they stood in.

She breathed in the cold air perfumed with dust and old blood.

It was time.

“You may begin.”

“Glastian trenches!”

Sonagi pushed himself back with a blast of air, then plunged in a depression in the sand that quickly turned into a network of ditches. The sand yawned then changed, flat ground turned into striated gaps where he could hide at ease.

Viv changed half of the arena into a disc of nightmarish fangs and tentacles arching back towards her like the maw of some demented sand worm around a perfect circle, just where she stood. Several casts of eldritch walls at once molded the place as she saw fit. The very sand changed, turning dark and pitted like volcanic stone. She set out to draw sigils on the ground with a use of telekinesis. Each one was etched like a jagged wound bleeding only darkness. She cast a glance at several fireballs raining down from the other side of the arena.

“Aegis. Durandal.”

Most of the projectiles pinged on her defenses, but there was a powerful one hidden among the dregs that she detonated mid air. It was typical of Sonagi to use decoys and misdirection.

A flash of mana near a trench signaled his presence but it was bait and Viv didn't bite. She carved one symbol after another on the ground with a jeweler's patience. The air suddenly tasted stale in her mouth. Another attack. She vented mana to disrupt a subtle gray construct designed to make her choke. Her work resumed. Another flash of mana persisted and this one she could not ignore.

"Astra."

Even as she kept working, a wave of black orbs flew to the concentration. The detonation sent plumes of sand and dust in the air. The edge of a circle formed on the ground. A cast of eldritch wall destabilized it, making the spell fail. Some subterranean attack hit the eldritch walls' outer layer and failed. The ground was too soaked with black mana to be a conduit for such attacks, as Sonagi should have guessed. Colors faded around her while power sang in her chest. It was cold and spicy, lethal, yet familiar. Intimate. It was so much hers, this poison. The last sigil appeared with a wave of her hand. More attacks landed on her shield then another wall formed at the far end. Sonagi figured she would not come out and play so he had to force her out. He was a little late.

"Deadland domain."

The walls of the arena faded to a sickly yellow.

"What's going on? What is she doing?" Deos asked his head assistant.

The mage frowned. Deos lent his spyglass and was ignored. It wasn't needed.

"This is a blasphemous reversal of the Academy's work. While the original was designed to purge the edge of the deadlands on contamination, this one does the exact opposite."

"Speak plainly."

"It's absorbing all the magic inside of the arena to turn it into black mana. Excuse me, I must see to the containment shields."

A ray of change to make the wall hers. A blast of annihilation to pierce it. Viv pounded Sonagi's defenses, forcing him to expend large amounts of energy to reverse the contamination or risk being skewered. He adapted by moving his circle to avoid the blasted areas. It was an impressive display of control but not one without cost. She could follow him around as he dug like a mole. Her core was ablaze. Black mana sang tempting whispers in her ears, ravaged and blessed her conduits as it surged to follow her every will. The dance was intoxicating. She intercepted projectiles and blocked others. Disruption became the name of the game and what a wonderful dance it all was. Any of Sonagi's spells could kill her on impact if they landed so they did not land. Glassed sand, molten sand, puddles of hungry liquids peppered the ground between them but none had reached the circle.

“Harrakan domain.”

A second circle appeared around the first. Something hissed at the edge of her hearing. Her soul warned her that something immaterial was bleeding in or out. She wasn't sure. It didn't matter.

Sonagi finally finished his own attack.

A lance of pure red energy thrust through the arena, air blurring from the incandescent heat. Viv formed her shield into a sharpened cone. It met the beam at the edge of the infused sand and was immediately pushed back. The deflected energy scored deep gashes against the walls, the ground, even the barriers above which stopped it in a haze of colors. A world away, people gasped and yelped before the titanic display. Temperature inside the arena immediately increased until sweat peeled on Viv's brow but it was done. She had redirected the beam.

It had destroyed her spell, however.

“Out of time!” a mocking voice said from behind cover.

Viv disintegrated the steaming glass, reformed her circle and drew the missing glyphs once again.

“Seriously?”

“Deadland domain.”

Black mana roared out faster than before into the dry air, down into the darkening sand. It crawled around the edges of the shield, testing it, gnawing at the stone. It explored the limits of its prison. Viv's side of the circle was now a monochrome slashed by scars of pure void, reaching, despoiling, and expanding. Always expanding. The pit of her circle drank the very life around it and spat back a promise. Viv stood in the middle of that vortex feeling the world at her fingertips, flinging curses that could pierce a tank's armor without so much as moving. None of what Sonagi tossed at her left a dent now that smaller spells fizzled before they could ever land. He tried to bait her with openings. He tried to bluff her with mirages of mighty spells. She knew him, his style, his strengths. There was no need for her to engage him in a contest of wit. Not when she could crush him instead.

“Harrakan domain.”

She felt more than saw another beam coming and placed her shield farther. She formed a thick wedge with such ease she was tempted to stop using sigils just to see if the black mana would move by will alone. It was so easy to displace the beam of radiant fury so it carved the arena's wall instead of her circle. In desperation, Sonagi sent a veritable avalanche of sand on her circle, drawing deeply into his focus. She merely made the eldritch soil climb higher until the tide fell back.

Sonagi charged her. He threw everything he had left in a frontal attack. Stones, shards of ice, sprays of water, invisible blades, fireballs. The torrent met her own werfer and pushed it back, deeper into the darkened land. She spotted a glimmer of hope in Sonagi's gaze. Foolish. He should have known better. Viv was merely putting most of her attention in her circle.

She saw his despair when the third layer activated.

"Palace domain."

Black mana exploded. Sonagi's spells were snuffed out. Power flooded the farthest reaches of the field in a tide of hungering energies, barriers flashing overhead to contain the onslaught. Sonagi had revealed himself and her spells lashed at his defenses. He fell back, stumbling into a ditch. He tried to blend through the sand but it was no longer his. Brown mana did not exist in this place of quiet. The jealous reign of the black had begun. It did not share but it did obey her and her alone.

The only splotch of color was a dome over the kneeling form of the duelist. Just as he looked up to face his end, Viv stopped her attacks. She realized her body was coated in thick armor, ghostly wings jutting high above and behind her. Fear twisted Sonagi's traits. Then confusion.

"Viviane? Please?"

She did not reply. Had he not been listening? Massive ropes of dark energy danced around her like under an unseen wind. She felt their caress, their promises, yet she resisted the call for instant gratification. A plan had been made. No, a promise. And now she would deliver it.

"Viviane?"

The fourth layer flared to dark life.

"Epicenter."

Sonagi choked on his words. The dome grew smaller and smaller. There were no sounds coming from the outside as none could pierce the blanket of mana. No wind. No movement. Just the two combatants and the abyssal pressure of the Ascender.

Deos stumbled down the stairs, cursing his awkward footing. The damn mage was here with most of his crew in one of those circles. The fools charged him a fortune to maintain those. It was time they earned their keep.

"You! Open the gate and get Sonagi out of here! I said the match is over! That horrid bitch can't just ignore me like that in my own arena. Do something!"

"We are very busy," the mage grunted.

Deos was not used to being ignored. Not anymore.

“Don’t forget who puts talents in your grubby hands you little shits!”

“If this barrier falls for any reason, the blast will kill everything from Maranor’s temple to the sea gate. And I do mean everything. You pay me but I serve Helock first and foremost. The gates will stay closed until she drops her spell.”

“I told her to stop!”

“Then tell her again. Now shut the fuck up and finish the fight before she triggers another layer or we’ll all get to meet our gods today. Is this clear enough?”

In the void-tinged hell of the arena, Viv watched life ebb away at her leisure. She felt at home here. Safe. And satisfied.

[Arcane duellist.]

[Arcane duellist.]

[Arcane duellist.]

“Please...”

[Arcane duellist.]

[Arcane duellist.]

Sonagi breathed one last time. His delicate trits twisted into a mockery of humanity.

[Revenant.]

Viv willed the body to ash. Only scraps of his robes and a rusted gauntlet remained.

“Now, you are forgiven.”

Chapter 138. Edge of the precipice.

It was okay, Viv thought. Just walking was okay. Her feet dug into the cracked sand with every step. She did not dare look up to the crowd and couldn't hear them anyway. She could deal with them later.

Draconic Intimidation: Expert 4

Mana mastery: Intermediate 4

Arcane Constructs: Intermediate 6

Acuity Reflex: Intermediate 6

Soul Mastery: Intermediate 3

It had been an intense fight. Now it was over. Just step step step would be fine. Fever burned her despite the increased pain tolerance. Any faster and she would puke bile. Saliva already pooled in her mouth. She could see her fingertips. They were blue, with black veins creeping up her skin. Whatever had fueled her was now actively killing her. It was time.

You are suffering from deep mana poisoning.

You are dying.

She had a few days at most. Possibly less if she couldn't access potions. That would be fine.

The gates out of the area didn't open. She assumed mana saturation had something to do with it so she merely shadow stepped through them. The barriers didn't stop the intrusion and she reappeared in the antechamber, gasping for untainted air. Two mages were working on keeping the wards intact. They cast murderous glances at her as she stumbled forward, caught by Sidjin at the last moment.

"You are here," she said.

Deos picked this moment to rush out of the nearest corridor. He was the very image of porcine fury. He zeroed her immediately.

"YOU!!!"

Only to smash into an invisible barrier. Two guards pulled him back and formed a shield wall in an instant.

“Is there some sort of problem?” Sidjin asked with a finger lifted and a deceptive calm.

The bodyguards knew exactly what their chances were against a war mage who had already started to cast. A desperate struggle to rein Deos in began but the arena master had no intention to make things easy for them.

“You bitch, how dare you? Undo your curse at once!”

“By law it is your responsibility to keep the ground in working order,” Sidjin calmly stated.

“Law my ass, do you have any idea what you’ve done to me? To Helock? I—”

Sidjin had had enough. A gesture and Deos was silenced. For once, Viv was grateful for the intervention. She was in no shape to argue.

“In case I was not abundantly clear,” Sidjin said, “we know exactly what we have done and if you need another demonstration, I am eager to provide it.”

Sidjin’s intimidation surged out. The guards took a step back and this time, Deos didn’t fight them.

“This isn’t over,” the arena master said once Sidjin dropped his curse.

“You are absolutely correct. You have used my wounded mentor against me and facilitated a betrayal that led to much misery, all for the sake of a good show - so yes, I fully agree. This is not over.”

“I have been threatened many times, fallen Prince.”

“But not by the likes of us. I would remind you as to why I have fallen but some people never learn. They keep repeating the same mistake until they are put down. Just like the pile of ash behind you.”

For the first time, Deos lost his composure. Viv was also impressed by how stupid someone could be not to take a foe seriously when said foe had just killed a rival with mana poisoning in front of thousands of people. That was completely fine. She intended to have him killed anyway. Maybe. The obese tyrant decided he’d had enough in any case. He left with all the dignity he could muster. Sidjin immediately turned to her.

“Viv. You look like death.”

“Feel like it too. It’s time. We go to Elunath. Now.”

“I was about to say. What is your attunement at?”

Viv checked.

Attunement: 43%

“In the death zone.”

“Then there is no time to waste. I have hired a porter for Solfis and your belongings. I had Rakan safely transported to a private practice. Nothing holds us here. Let us depart.”

Viv just let Sidjin take the lead. The trip was a blur. There was some cold, fresher air. A horse. Whispers of fear on the way. They crossed the gate to the inner district in perfect silence, the guards stepping away from them. Apparently, rumors of her exploit had already spread far and wide. Those damn runners. Breathe in breathe out. Viv coughed phlegm every minute by the time they stopped in front of the elemental archmage’s manor gates. Lani opened it for them. The blue mage wore a tight dress of azure fabric with an open cleavage revealing her unusually pale skin even now, at the heart of winter. She looked at Viv and winced. They were let in without a word.

“Guess we’ll be partners soon,” Viv choked as a jest.

“So it would seem,” the younger woman replied with pursed lips.

Viv saw something she didn’t like in the indentured mage’s gaze: pity.

“Your porter and lover must wait in the atrium. I will help you move, alright?”

Viv saw that Sidjin clearly didn’t want to leave her alone. Unfortunately, the difference in power and prestige between himself and Elunath was massive. She could guess confronting him in his own house would be bad, even in her addled state. She shook her head to Sidjin to tell him that was fine and immediately regretted the decision. Lani moved to her side and placed a cool hand on her forehead. Immediately, she felt better. Her mind cleared up considerably.

“Your resistance to mana is the highest I have felt in a human,” the blue mage grumbled.

Viv could only shrug.

“Not your fault, of course. This should help you until your mana dissolves my spell. Long enough for the next conversation at least. We should hurry.”

Sidjin and the porter walked to a recess in the archmage's titanic lobby. Viv watched them sit gingerly on expensive seats, feeling for all the world like a patient leaving relatives to head into surgery. Lani grabbed her hand when they walked. Viv felt much better though she knew it wouldn't last.

No one came to meet them on their way to the archmage's office. The place felt strangely deserted and the lights of nearby lamps cold and impersonal. This was not anybody's home. It was a facade of wealth and luxury meant to be admired, not enjoyed. Or perhaps Viv's body was leaking warmth and her bleak mood was affecting her judgment. The archmage probably had a private lair. This was just to impress the yokels.

Lani opened the door to introduce Viv, guiding the witch to her seat soon afterward. Elunath was waiting on his throne, the impressive desk empty save for a contract and a single sheet of paper with a list written down. His perfectly chiseled and slightly unnatural traits felt stranger in the pale light of the winter noon falling from the cupola above their head. His eyes, in particular, were like jewel orbs carved from rock to a shining perfection. He didn't invite Viv to sit. She sat down anyway. The risk of collapse was real.

The archmage wrote on the list for half a minute before addressing Lani, who had been left standing beside the door.

"Can you confirm Sonagi's status?"

"He is dead," Lani replied. "The arena is unusable for the near future. The efforts to decontaminate it have failed so far. Master Deos requests your assistance in this matter."

"I can no longer feel the land around that place," Elunath noted, then he acknowledged Viv's presence for the first time.

"You have outdone yourself."

He wrote some more on the list. Meanwhile, Viv realized that if the man could perceive the land at this range as he had indicated, then he could probably feel underground as well. He was probably the one Solfis had felt. She had a bad feeling about this.

"Right. I suppose the time has come. Your indentured contract, as promised."

Viv picked the document. It was quite long. She took her time to read it, which Elunath didn't seem to mind. He just waited with his fingers crossed and a pleasant smile on his lips.

The beginning was nothing shocking. It stated the contract would be between the archmage and herself for a duration of five years and could not be extended under any circumstances. That was a standard measure in Helock to prevent abuse. The first page was also standard fare. She was supposed to obey him. He was supposed to protect her 'within reason' and to feed her and so on. The problems started from page two one, and Viv realized the issue immediately.

"This isn't a standard indenture contract."

"No," Elunath replied with the same smile, "but it is a legal one, valid under Helockian laws."

"This is deceitful. I thought you cared about your reputation," Viv spat.

“Oh but I do. Helockians really love their contractual backstabbing, you see? This is all quite valid and no one will ever challenge me in court of law. First, my position is unassailable. Second, no court would dare summon me except for the most heinous of crimes, and third, something you have forgotten, nobody likes you here.”

The archmage took a sip of tea while Viv simmered in her shock.

“I have taken many promising young women under my wings. All of them would have withered without my help. None of them were from Helock, and now they all labor for her glory. And they will do so for a while longer. Like Lani here.”

“At the contractor’s disposal with their time and BODIES? You rape them? You built yourself a harem?”

“Rape? They all signed the contract. If they couldn’t bear my touch, they could just stay in the mud eating fish bone soup or bark stew with the rest of the mudlings.”

“A choice made under duress is not consent whether the alternative is death or a slow starvation. You could have been fair and be a mentor to them but no, you wanted slaves.”

“You can call them whatever you wish. I care very little about your opinion. Their choice is yours too. You can die or you can serve me. I will take you, I will take your body, I will use your skills. I will command the pathetic troops of your pretend kingdom for my projects. I will command that skeletal horror you have brought to my city for your nefarious purposes as I see fit. Everything you have is mine for five years. I won’t destroy it, trust me, this would be an abuse of the contract. But I will use them, and you. I am doing you a favor by shielding you against the consequences of your own actions until you learn. You think you can just do as you please because you are more powerful and perhaps it did work in that sad shitpile they call Enoria, but here we are an old civilization. Every gang, every guild, everyone who matters has backers in the shadows, and those have toes you really enjoyed stepping on. So I will hold them at bay while we go over the list.”

He tapped said list with a finger. Viv counted at least twenty entries.

“Every mark of disrespect and every slight you did against me will be revisited in detail. Today, you sat without my leave. Earlier, you polluted the arena without care for the fallout, in this case the annoyance of one of my dear allies. Earlier, you killed a man I specifically told you was under my protection. Did you realize and not care, or did you think your pitiful revenge was worth it and damn the consequences? Was there even a hint of reflection going in that thick outlander skull of yours, witch? I have no idea. But by the time I am done with you, your behavior will be much more polished, that I promise.”

“Wow. I guess all the signs were here,” Viv admitted to herself.

Lani had tried to warn them on multiple occasions, though not directly. She probably couldn’t.

All the girls wearing clothes selected for attraction rather than function were a sign as well.

The lawyers she had consulted about the contract had cautioned her.

In a way, there were many signs, just not definitive ones. Everyone was too scared of Elunath to suggest he was a sociopath. Said monster reclined in his seat, as calm and composed as he had ever been.

“Ah, I can tell you are hesitating. That is perfectly understandable. You can even refuse, I will not mind. If you accept, you are mine. If you refuse, I still have all those goods you sold me for a right you will not exert and I get to watch you die as your very organs melt under your mana’s deleterious power. I am honestly not sure which option I prefer. Do I want a tool or do I want a spectacle?”

A small piece of Viv wanted to still accept the deal because she was feeling herself die. The rest of it refused with every fiber of her being. She could not accept to become a slave, sexual or otherwise, especially when he had made it clear he had a backlog of offenses to avenge. Viv was an adult. She was born free in one of the most progressive societies in history. Maybe a Viv born in a starving family on this world would have taken the contract if only to save her family. Maybe that one would have survived. After all, Viv was a pragmatist to her core. But not the current Viv. The current Viv had built herself to resist those who would control her, no matter the cost. She was the product of an education that taught her that every person was born and remained free, that her body was her own and that her boundaries ought to be respected, much like the boundaries of everyone else. She had grown believing it. This was now a truth so deeply ingrained in her mind it had become a part of her. She couldn’t undo herself to suffer this debasement any more than she could bend a statue of Athena triumphant into one of servitude.

There was no doubt in her mind that Elunath would break her just as he intended. He had all the tools, the time, and the mentality to do so. It would be a fate worse than death.

She just had to hope that Solfis’ contact would come through.

The same small voice now needled her, pointing at her hypocrisy. ‘You refuse five years,’ it said. ‘Would you have refused one? Six months? One night?’.

In the end, she had no answers. It was easy to say she would die rather than accept torture when she was not confronted with her imminent demise without recourse. Once again, she was lucky to have an alternative. She was privileged to escape a choice that other women had made and would make between survival and their own integrity. Viv stood up without a word, fighting the urge to throw up. This time, it wasn’t just discomfort but a deep disgust for the man whose claws she had just dodged thanks to Solfis.

Or at least she prayed so.

Elunath didn’t protest to her standing up, stepping back to the entrance that now felt like the end of a long tunnel. Lani made a gesture to help her then stopped, fear in her eyes. Now that it was clear the woman was a slave in all but name, Viv could only wonder what horror she had been subjected to. A horrible new memory resurfaced. The blue mage had been

recruited as a teenager, which meant Elunath was not just an asshole. He was a groomer as well.

“Take the contract and escort Miss Viv back to the entrance, darling. Make sure she doesn’t retch on the carpet. Oh, and I will see her next with the document signed or as a corpse. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir.”

He did not hold her back. Lani grabbed Viv’s hand to help her along. The moment their skin touched, a voice rang directly in Viv’s ear.

“He can listen to everything we say inside his house. Through much of the city as well if you are near the ground. Look, it is your decision to make. If you do say yes and sign I’ll be here for you. You will not be alone. It’s bad though, really bad. You made him angry.”

It took little effort for Viv to understand the spell. She only had to think a reply and Lani would hear it.

“Did he take it out on you?”

“Don’t take responsibility for the actions of madmen. And sorry I didn’t warn you before. I... I was too scared.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“I’m sorry, still.”

Viv had a long look at her companion of misfortune. It was clear that the blue mage was terrified to her core under the designer clothes and makeup. Her figure was slightly hunched. Fear of Elunath must be so deeply ingrained after all those years.

“If there is a way, I’ll get you out of here.”

“My contract lasts for another thirty-seven years.”

Viv didn’t mention the obvious solution she had in mind to terminate said contract. The girl wouldn’t believe her capable of carrying it out anyway.

Sidjin was surprised and concerned to see her again so soon. Viv managed to reach him while Lani placed the contract on the lobby desk in case she changed her mind.

“Viv? What’s going on?”

“Later.”

They stepped out and Viv breathed a breath of fresh air. Then coughed again. She tasted blood on her tongue. Her gums were bleeding.

“Potion?” Sidjin asked.

“Yes please.”

A gulp of flesh mending potion later and she was feeling better. It wouldn't last.

“What's going on?”

“The indenture contract is a slavery one. An old variant that covers all my assets up to and including Harrak and my ass.”

His shock turned to rage in a moment

“I'm going to kill him.”

“Wait!”

Sidjin's fury burnt like fire, the outrage turning his delicate traits into an expression of pure savagery. A red haze surrounded him, tasting of overheated blades. She loved him at that moment for being so angry on her behalf. They couldn't do anything about it, however. Elunath would pulp him before he even breached the door.

They sat there for a while. Viv had never felt so tired in her entire life. It was a deep fatigue of the soul. It permeated her to her marrow as a new layer of pain after everything else she had already been through.

“We have to go, I know. I just need two minutes to recover. This has been a long damn week.”

She sighed deeply.

“Just one thing after the other. First my dad, then Rakan and now this. I feel like I'm being repeatedly kicked in the teeth. It's more of a coincidence than anything but still. Where is the luck I was promised?”

“I'm sorry Viv. I wish I could help you.”

She shrugged.

“You're here, aren't you? Don't feel bad, it's just that I should be furious and I don't even have the strength to do that anymore. At least not now. There's been... a lot going on in a short span. I just want it to end.”

“And it will. Solfis?”

//The porter will place me upon the second horse's back.

//Then he will deliver the message that we are ready to talk.

//Sidjin, you shall follow my directions.

Said porter executed his orders as if disembodied voices coming from boxes were an everyday occurrence. Viv could tell from Sidjin's annoyance he had not realized the man he had hired was already in the golem's pocket. It did not take long for Viv to be moving again, the music thing blasting rock in her ear to distract her from her pain. Between the flesh-mending potion still active in her body and the power of guitar, the ride back was not so unpleasant. Sidjin took quite a few twists and turns out of the noble district and onto the waterfront until they ducked under an archway to see a fountain nestled between three-storied apartments of old stones that looked a sneeze away from crumbling. Water gurgled into a murky pond, blocks of ice bobbing up and down. The place was deserted.

"Alright, what n—"

Sidjin never finished his question. A burst of air made Viv look up to the diving shape of a gryphon, its rider clinging to her saddle. The duo stopped in front of a panicking horse with clear hostility.

Sidjin stepped down and the atmosphere changed immediately. The rider simmered down. She was a young woman with scars on her cheeks, messy hair escaping from her helmet in oily strands, a far cry from the elite member she had seen during the riot. Nevertheless, her gear looked well-maintained and the spell scepter in her hand hummed with mana. Viv had never seen one in use but she guessed being at the receiving end would be briefly painful. There was something raw in the woman's expression, one mirrored by the sullen poise of her mount.

"The witch and her bone thing can come. You'll stay here."

"I—"

"Neither of us get a say. Now hurry or you'll blow my secret and then we're all fucked. Hurry!"

Viv did as asked while Solfis surged from the crate like a devil out of its box. The gaunt creature jumped on the gryphon's back with disturbing dexterity. Viv was lifted and placed between the armored woman and her golem. She smelled of old sweat.

"Hold tight because I'm not wasting any time."

"Take care, my love!" Sidjin said from the ground.

Viv's stomach sunk in her chest when the beast took off under a tremendous burst of gray mana. For the first time since Arthur's departure, she was flying up and up. First, the warehouses shrank, revealing the endless expanse of the sea, then Helock appeared in all its sordid glory. Icy roofs and bare trees, the people, landmarks such as the arena and the temple of Sardanal. They were already high before the first fisherman looked up and then immediately down again. Just another griffin rider of Helock doing a patrol, nothing unusual.

Up and up they went. Viv moved her head but Solfis' massive hand rested comfortingly on her shoulder. The wind was strong here, wet, carrying the scent of iodine and a bone-chilling cold she could no longer ward off. She gathered her robes around her. Didn't even take the time to get changed after the duel.

They passed the first floating stone shortly after. The griffin moved weirdly, batting its wings a few times. Viv felt weightless for a short, disturbing moment. They climbed higher still. Her pilot didn't say anything and neither did Solfis.

The griffin weaved between floating stone until they faced the chalice, the largest one of the lot by a degree of magnitude. Viv felt a moment of panic but Solfis said nothing. She knew no one was supposed to approach the floating island on pain of death because of magical tempests and whatnot. She could see a ring of power circling the whole thing, so dense a mundane would see it with their naked eyes. They were going straight for it. Roots grew on the flank of the reverse pyramid of raw stone that formed the underside of the massive structure.

And then she spotted it.

Invisible from under, a garden had formed, one of ancient trees and hedges around... no that couldn't be right, could it?

"Are those buildings?"

//Yes.

//Our destination.

"How did you even find this place?"

//I did not.

//It found me.

They crossed the boundary without issue. Less than five meters away, a bird was caught in a wind vortex that sent it down with a squawk. Viv spotted a circle of old stone that would make a decent landing pad and without fail, the gryphon landed them there.

Solfis took off on the spot, dropping her on the ground on weak legs. Their ride was off into the distance before she could utter so much as a thank you.

Viv took in her surroundings while Solfis waited for her to recover. This place was old, ancient even. It felt more like a ruin than a base, yet there were signs of subtle work everywhere from the lack of soil on the path to impeccable cut of nearby hedge even now decorated with tiny white flowers. The air was fresh and crisp up here, far from the sea and the mass of humanity. It was curiously silent as well. The wind felt too light for such an elevation.

"So, your mysterious prospect. You said you wanted to attack it?"

**//I am programmed to do so.
//However, your safety overrides many directives.
//I am able to circumvent this specific rule as it is not hard-coded.**

“Ok uhh, anything I should know?”

**//I would not bring you here if I did not deem it safe.
//Reasonably safe.
//Although I admit to flaws in my predictive algorithm when it comes to politics, all the information I have gathered on our host concords with what he claims.**

“Okay, so...”

**///It will be faster and more efficient for you to meet him first.
//Rather than me answering many questions.**

“Fair enough.”

Solfis guided Viv deeper into the ruins, then through a heavily enchanted door set into an ivy-covered wall. Inside, she found a circular room devoid of any furniture. Three doors led deeper into the chalice. A man stood at the center of the room. Many things could be said about this man. Viv immediately understood what Solfis had meant.

The first important fact was that the man was a mage, and an extremely powerful one at that. He even wore the obligatory robe and wielded an old-fashioned staff of black wood in his hand. It held the largest core Viv had seen used as a focus. More importantly, this was an expert of black mana if his aura was any indication.

The second fact was that the man wore his long gray hair in dreadlocks like some northerners did. They reached the small of his back in a waterfall of braids, ribbons and trinkets. It was rather colorful.

The third fact was that the man was very tall, powerfully built, and that he had a domineering aura that Viv couldn't match at this stage.

The fourth fact was that the man was very, very dead. Taut skin stuck to his skeleton, his teeth bared in an eternal rictus. Twin blue flames brunt in his eye sockets.

[Elder archlich, extremely dangerous.]

“My name is Abenezigel. Be not afraid,” he said with a surprisingly soft voice.

Viv found it intriguing that the lich would pick such a deep and rich range, unless he didn't and that was his normal tone from back when he had been alive. She stayed there, watching him with disbelief. It, no, *he* was a talking skeleton, and he was not actively trying to eat her face off while screaming about the dark gods and puny humans. The experience was both refreshing and disconcerting.

"You... are not afraid," the lich said after a moment.

"Huh?"

She could not tell if the lich was surprised, or disappointed, or both.

"No matter. It will make our conversation easier. First, allow me to welcome you to the chalice. My home. I have ruled over it for three hundred years. Few mortals can boast the privilege of my hospitality. Be sure not to abuse it," he said.

Viv nodded. Do not insult the powerful lich's choice of upholstery. Got it. Not too hard.

Once again the lich seemed to wait for a reaction.

"Errm thank you for your invitation. I appreciate it."

Viv could swear the lich was a little awkward. It was also a strange one, to be fair. The one she had fought against had felt unhinged, their body a mesh of bones. This one almost felt human by comparison. It also sounded more stable. She wouldn't let her guard down, however. No central nervous system meant no hormones and, quite possibly, no guilt and she had already met one psychopath today.

"You are a strange woman, Vivane the outlander."

//I told you.

"Yes. But where are my manners? Let us retire to a more suitable locale. Follow me."

Solfis helped Viv through the closest door. They found a sort of lounge complete with a roaring fireplace. A steaming cup waited on a nearby stone table. The room lacked softness, yet it felt more lived in than Elunath's entire domain. She sat gratefully.

"I fear I have no tea to share. This is plain water."

"That's fine."

Warmth returned to Viv's body at the first gulp. The lich waited until she was done. He was a rather polite fellow.

"I invite you to state your request," he finally said.

"I'd like some help to survive my increased attunement by turning me part elemental."

"Very well. It is as your golem said. I am delighted to inform you that helping you go through such a change is within my purview. I have studied the process extensively for my own sake. While my hand was forced too early to implement it on myself, I am confident I can guide you through it."

“Oh that’s great.”

“However, I require payment in return. I am sure you understand.”

The lich waited some more for... Viv wasn’t sure what it waited for. She nodded her head encouragingly.

“Of course, do tell.”

“Yes.”

He stood to his full height. Head tilted back and arms extended, the lich looked like some Disney villain in the middle of a monologue. It would be comical if Viv couldn’t feel the power radiating from those old bones.

“Three hundred years ago, I was betrayed. Three hundred years ago, I was forced into the form you see now by a man I thought my friend. He left me for dead and took my achievement for his own to the acclaim of the people. Yet, I did not give up. I held Enttiku’s hand at bay through will and arcane might. I became a lich. I strived to adapt to the change. I fought and persevered. I created the haven you now stand on and for three centuries, I plotted my revenge. Soon the time will come for me to exert it on those who have wronged me and the fools who harbor them. And for this I will have your assistance. The price of my help is justice; the target, Helock itself and its greatest liar... Elunath!”

“Fuck, yeah. I’m in.”

“I—”

The lich paused and this time, Viv was absolutely sure he was at a loss.

“You are?”

//Elunath has just tried to turn my mistress into a sex slave in exchange for her life.

//We objected.

//Our goals align.

//Which is most serendipitous.

//We accept your request.

Once again, the lich remained silent. For someone with obviously high stats he seemed to struggle with social encounters. Although, to be fair, the chalice was not exactly a hub of social activities.

“I have remained in isolation for many long years, only communicating with intermediaries so as not to instill fear and distrust in my partners. I dreaded and anticipated my first contact with mankind again. Many times have I imagined it in my daydreams with many different outcomes, most of them poor. I anticipated that I had to defend myself, my choices. I prepared arguments and counter-arguments. I gathered much proof of Elunath’s many treacheries. I believed this very morning that I was as girded for a contest of eloquence as I

possibly could, yet now that I stand on the precipice of success, having fought no battles, and sustained no insults or slur, I have to admit that I find the resolution... rather anticlimactic.”

“Sorry.”

//I find that anticlimactic is best in some instances.

“Yeah, you know, when life throws you a bone...” Viv said.

The large skeletons fixed its cold fire glare on her.

“Sorry, it’s the fever.”

//Time might be of the essence.

“It would be best to discuss the details of the vengeance after your change, yes. I was led to believe that you had a black mana core?”

“Taken from an ancient necrarch. Here.”

Viv handed the precious sphere from her carry bag which Sidjin had mercifully remembered to bring. It also contained a change of clothes for post-resurrection herself as she doubted the lich had an overabundance of female clothes her size lying around. Solfis could get more as needed.

“Yes. This will do nicely. Please follow me.”

The trio left the receiving room, this time taking the central gate leading deeper into the complex. Viv had plenty of questions about the lich’s security measures and how the hell he had managed to build a base in a flying rock like a James Bond villain. The timing felt wrong, however. Mostly she was nervous. This was happening. Coming from an unexpected side and implying a campaign that would culminate in the death of an elemental archmage, an arguably daunting prospect, but still, it was happening. The lich led her into a large circular room quite obviously dedicated to rituals. A complex spell array already covered the ground, engraved in a metal that moved as if it were liquid. The work was exquisite. It was also the single most complex array she had seen since leaving Solfis’ original body in its underground hangar. An altar stood in the middle of this impossibly complex arrangement. A Viv-sized altar. She immediately felt a measure of concern.

“This isn’t what I think it is, is it?”

“Whenever you are ready, lie down on the altar with your feet facing the entrance. I recommend you to divest yourself of your vestment as they would inevitably be destroyed during the transition anyway. I have taken the liberty of drawing a bath in the nearby changing room if you wish to face this ordeal symbolically purified.”

“Is it a warm bath?” Viv asked.

The lich extended a metal-clad hand, more claws than fingers grasping the air in a dead grip.

“It is now. I apologize for the lack of forethought at a time of physical discomfort.”

“No problem, I will be right back.”

“Oh and since you might be concerned, please rest assured that this will be a medical act and that although I was originally a man, I am long past the considerations of the flesh.”

He turned to Solfis as if in question.

//I was never a man.

//I was always perfect.

“I will be right back,” Viv said.

The bath itself was barely more than a rectangular hole in the ground decorated by old bricks polished to a shine. The water was warm though no soap was available to wash the grime of the arena. Viv left her dueling robe and focus behind in a neatly folded pile. Her skin was pale, even for winter. Dark veins stood in stark contrast to the rest. Her stomach felt a little hollow and she realized she had not eaten anything in over a day. Her appetite was shot though she couldn't tell if poisoning or stress were to blame. Her body still felt strong, or at least better than when she had first walked through the deadlands. It was an illusion. The black mana that devoured it from inside out came from her own magic this time, not the insidious air of a devastated Harrak. She finished her bath and walked out in the cold ritual room with her hair plastered to her skull. The cold ground under her sole made her more aware of her nudity than the disinterested gazes of the two beings who occupied it. She took her spot on the altar, which was inexplicably warm, and took a deep breath.

Really, it felt like being at the dentist.

The lich came to stand before her.

“Your companion wishes to attend the ritual to provide ‘emotional support’,” he said, “and I suspect kill me if I fail to wake you up. Do you consent?”

“Yes.”

“Good. The ritual will guide you through enough transformation to stabilize you, then the transition will gradually be completed over the following months provided we are successful. A strong will, power, and developed channels matter in your chances of success which you fortunately have developed extensively over the past two years. I am unsure what you will go through while you are unconscious, only that the soul will be partly untethered and active. I can only advise you to keep a strong sense of self within your psyche while you face what I suspect will be a very personal experience.”

“Alright. I feared it would be much worse than that.”

It was at that moment that the lich removed a thin dagger from a recess of its robes. It was so dark it seemed to drink the light from the room.

“The first step will require me to ritually kill you by plunging this dagger into your heart.”

“Aw.”

Chapter 139: Ascending.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry kid.”

Tourniquet in place on the left leg. Best she could do. Airways clear or he would shut up. Sweat getting in her eyes but she couldn’t wipe them. And on her gloves, the gray beige dust of the desert lands around Spin Boldak. Focus. Got to focus. Knew the problem.

“Right Cedric, I’m going to open your vest now. Got to see the wound.”

“I’m sorry kid. I fucked up.”

“You didn’t. Now, it’s gonna hurt. I need you to not move. Okay?”

“Yeah! Yeah, okay.”

The stench meant the guts were pierced. Had to get to the wound to slow down the bleeding but what if she opened the vest and his guts came out? Training said the guts came out with evisceration. Because of the pressure. She could see a piece of metal embedded in the ceramic plates.

“Steady now,”

The vest got caught on the piece of metal.

“The fuck is this?”

It was a piece of shrapnel from the IED. Looked like a half molten spoon and perhaps it was. She removed a bandage and sneaked it between the vest and the embedded metal. Apply pressure.

“It fucking hurts... get that thing out?”

“No can do, Cedric, you’ll bleed out. The surgeons will do it.”

Hemostatic gauze was doing the work. It would be fine.

“Fucking... ah, where’s Mouq?”

“Other side of the street.”

“Shit I hope no one else got hit. Is the bird on the way?”

“Yeah sure but it won’t land in the firefight so better make yourself comfortable.”

“Putain.”

“And you call me Princess.”

The veteran gave Viv a smile. She could see every hair in his graying stubble. She would remember it forever, because his answer was drowned in an explosion.

Viv was over Cedric before she could think. Something fell on her helmet. On her shoulder. Pieces of masonry. Dust everywhere and that had been so loud and now there was a hole in the damn wall.

Viv reached for her Famas. Her gloves were slippery with blood but she grabbed it. Aimed it at the gap. It was a small gap with most of the damaged bricks forming a slope on the way. Unstable footing. The first ‘barbu’ moved in. He kept a hand on the wall. He couldn’t see well. It was dark in here.

Viv’s first bullet caught him in the belt. He barely had time to gasp when the other caught him in the throat. He just... toppled. He was on the ground and Viv was up, up and moving. Switched firing mode to burst fire. They had grenades. She would not die here. They would die here. Swear words in Pashtun came from the outside. She moved up and to the side over a rolled carpet. A man turned his head trying to see in. She was at an angle. She took the shot. The man’s jaw vaporized in a flower of flesh and bone. More swear words. Viv got closer. Closer. Someone screamed and moved. Looked like the previous one but younger. Both rail thin with short black hair. Angular faces. She spotted liquid eyes and terror and she shot him in the chest. Small entry wounds. More shots. He fell forward, his back a ruin. Viv was at the entrance when she saw the old man pull the pin of a second grenade. His AK hung from his shoulder. Their eyes met.

Chest chest head.

Viv jumped back and dove. One second, two seconds. Where was the bloody thing?

Another explosion. She could feel it in her bones. She looked up, finally taking in Corporal Cedric. He had his G1 out, aimed at the opening. His other hand kept pressure. She could see his chest rise and fall.

Viv almost shot the shape bursting through the door. For a moment, she crossed eyes with Mouq as a potential threat. There was not a hint of mercy on that face. The Algerian French medic aimed towards the opening after recognizing Viv, never lowering her guard. She signed a question.

“I think I got them all,” Viv replied by simply speaking.

“Al’ama Princess, you did? How many?”

“Four.”

“Ok. Wow. Ok, I’ll get the stretcher. We’re moving.”

“Yeah,” Viv said.

Belatedly, she realized she should probably load a new mag. No wait, she had to look after Cedric.

“You enjoyed killing them, didn’t you?”

A strange sense of disconnection made her blink. Mouq was still there but now the small Afghan warehouse felt blurry. Half-forgotten. Cedric had made it back without issue thanks to her. He told everyone how she’d killed the jihadists until Princess became more than a mocking word. This had already happened. She knew it. And the Mouq talking now with eyes of black sclera was not her friend, yet she could only stand here with her hands on the Famas and listen. It wasn’t shock. She was just lacking... agency. Choice. The inner part of her she recognized as a soul pulsed once.

“You enjoyed it. You walked out and finished them and it felt great, it felt like winning. You like winning. You liked winning against them because they didn’t regard you as a warrior. You saw the looks, what they thought of you. Women have no place on the battlefield, especially the pretty ones like you. You loved proving them wrong.”

Mouq walked forward. She was so tall and the abyss of her eyes, so deep.

“Face it, you’re a vicious thing. A wild one. Shed the clothes. Shed the plastic and metal. You’re better than this. You don’t need it, not anymore. It’s a tool that weakens you because you depend on it until one day, it will betray you. You are lying to yourself with the empire and those rules and the people you protect. You do not care. You never cared. They give you an excuse to unleash who you truly are. Don’t they? Let go, Viviane. You are a cold one.”

Viv knew she was a bit too distant. All those sob stories shared by her friend had tired and annoyed her from the start. Why did they cry for that little girl who was starving in that sad article? What about all the other little girls? Was someone going to act on it? Or just get horrified until the next day when another distraction would come and replace it for that vicarious burst of emotions? Viv didn’t care for people she’d never met or wasn’t friends with.

“That’s not true.”

The abyss stared.

“I don’t have to care with my heart to care. I don’t have to be friends with the whole planet.”

“Then those are just excuses you build to avoid the truth of who you are. You have neutered yourself just to avoid facing this obvious fact. You’re evil, Viv. Just like all the people you’ve killed. Don’t fool yourself. The only difference between you and them is that you’ve won.”

Viv’s soul pulsed once again. This time she was sure of it. This was not reality. The room shifted, colors bleeding into the background.

“You won’t escape staring at yourself so easily,” the darkness said.

The walls felt firmer, suddenly. Cedric was breathing fast again.

“I covered him,” Viv said.

The darkness under Mouq’s face twitched.

“I covered his body. That was the first thing I did. Not run at them to kill like a beast. I covered him first, then I saved us both. You are deceitful. I also protect those I care about.”

Viv felt the ghostly caress of smooth, warm scale under her fingertips. She could hear a faint squeak.

“I would die for them.”

The room collapsed on itself. Her soul pulsed once more but it could not move. She was still so new.

Viv checked the tray one last time. They were here, on the other side of the stall. Terror and anger warred in her chest. Her heart thundered under her ribs and the water felt cold against her skin. She shivered. Her hand stuck against the wooden panel kept dry since the start. It had to stay dry or it might slip.

She felt her face freeze up from the stress.

There were no steps in the changing room. The hard ground made sure of it. There were giggles though. Hard to miss those, especially at 8PM on a weekday. In December. It was a bad day to go for handball training and that’s why she’d done it. Laetita had been looking for her so she would find her.

The tall girl dragged the curtain away with speed and a mocking smile.

Laetitia was a little overweight and quite strong. Bulky. She'd been tall and overwhelming among the girls for most of her life. She also had a chip on her shoulder. Bad grades. Viv was sure that with some discipline and a diagnosis, her situation would improve. Unfortunately, her dad was a cunt, her mom a bitch, and she wasn't Viv's problem. So she wouldn't get help.

Viv cut the water. The air was cold on her wet, bare skin. She shook again.

"Hey, if it isn't—"

Viv grabbed the sock with her dry hand. The windup didn't take long. She'd practiced at home just to be sure. It scared her but she was telling herself, it wasn't her decision. If Laetitia came, she deserved what would be coming for her.

The soap smashed into Laetitia's shoulder. It cut her off. She was shocked. She took a step back. Viv took a step forward and hit again. It caught the girl in the temple. Laetitia raised her hand in reflex but the sock was very long, the knee high kind and made of nylon. Another smack. Another smack. Laetitia hit the bench and sat, still silent.

There was a mousy girl to Viv's left and a blonde, thin one to Viv's right. They might have overwhelmed her if they tried but they didn't. They were soft. This was a nice, expensive gym associated with a nice, expensive school for the children of doctors, lawyers, and politicians. People didn't beat people in the changing rooms. That was a poor person's hobby. There was no physical violence here. People said nasty things to each other and abused each other indirectly, or when it couldn't be seen. Like civilized people.

They couldn't believe their eyes. Or they could but they didn't know what to do.

So they watched Viv beat Laetitia with a soap in a sock.

It took seven hits for Laetitia to gasp out of her stupor from the cumulated pain.

"Stop! Stop! You're crazy!"

The mousy girl took a step towards the door. Viv's face whipped towards her. She froze.

Viv walked to the door and stood in front of it. There was a lock but she didn't have the key. Not that it mattered. The gym was deserted at that time. She was naked and cold and shivering but she felt so detached and buoyed by stress that it didn't matter.

"Going somewhere?" Viv asked.

Her voice didn't flinch, didn't break. She sounded much more dangerous than she felt. Back on the bench, Laetitia was recovering. She felt uncertain but angry. So Viv returned to her and hit her again. Then again.

"Aie! Stop, stop!"

“Stop? Why? What did you come here to do? Huh? Huh?”

Smack. Another smack. The blonde girl took a step forward so Viv whipped her with a back swing. She missed. The blow went too high and hit the blonde girl in the face. She whined a high pitched noise and sat against the floor, one hand up.

A wave of panic filled Viv but she pushed it down. She knew there would be marks. There wouldn't be any on her though. She was screwed either way if they talked.

That was what mattered. That and the message.

“Listen. I know why you're here. I know what you did to Fleur.”

“You insane bitch,” Laetitia moaned.

Viv hit her again. Smack. Then again. Smack. A third time. Smack.

“Got more to say?”

“Fuck you, you're mad!”

“Do. You. Got.”

“Stop! Please! Fuck!”

“Right, I know what you did to Fleur.”

Viv took a moment to breathe hard. She was both hot and cold at the same time. Really weird. And naked while the girls were dressed. And there were three of them but they were scared of her.

Shit this could go so wrong still.

“You're going to fuck off. If you talk about this to anyone,—”

“And who were you protecting?” Laetitia asked with eyes like two pits.

Something made Viv blink. The room grew fuzzy. This... was how it had ended. She'd gone home and acted like nothing happened. There were rumors until the end of the year and she'd been quietly replaced as class deputy, though there was never any sort of official punishment. Laetitia's harassment had stopped. This... had already happened. Many years ago, at the end of high school.

Her soul pulsed. Protecting? What did this have to do with anything? She felt strange, alien. She could not move. There was no option in her mind for her to move. She knew moving was possible, just not for her. The thing wearing Laetitia got close. There was really nothing inside those scleras. They seemed to absorb the pale light.

“You enjoyed seeing her beg. You enjoyed the power you had over those three who thought themselves so domineering. They thought untouched meant untouchable and you proved them wrong. You brought savagery to their little pathetic bullying. You broke their resolve. This is you, the true you. There was no one to protect here. You lured them into a trap and then you punished them. Is it not so?”

“I was...”

“The fat whore thought she’d caught you. You remember the look of triumph on her porcine face. Every tooth in that half-opened snout of hers. You remember the shock when she moved back. You remember the impact of soap on her, how it made the fat of her arm jiggle under the sweater. You enjoyed breaking her very, very much.”

Viv’s soul pulsed. She had a soul? That she could feel? How peculiar. And that was... half of a conversation?

“I was protecting myself.”

“You could have done many things, not the least talk to a parent or a professor. You went for them. You baited them.”

“I was defending myself,” Viv insisted. “I wanted to be safe.”

“There were other ways.”

“There are always other ways. Sometimes, the best way is the most primal one.”

There was a look of triumph on the void thing’s borrowed face.

“Yes. Yes! This was a game of dominance and you won it! You showed them all those rules they thought they were abusing didn’t protect them at all. You reminded them what the world is really like.”

‘And then they left Fleur alone. My friend.’

“Fleur was weak!”

“Fleur was taking care of her family. She had strength where it mattered. And I had strength... where it was needed.”

“You cling to excuses and causes. Anything to justify your actions. You don’t have to justify. The strong never do. Embrace what you really are.”

“No one said I couldn’t join the useful to the pleasurable. No one said an artisan should never have fun. If I can help Fleur and feel good doing it, then that is fine.”

“You love destroying things.”

"I do. I really do. So what? I enjoy building them as well."

Viv's soul pulsed. The room melted into a starless night.

"I'm not going to Sciences-Po."

"Then why did you take the exam? And pass it?"

Papa reclined in his seat, in the home office. She hated this place now. It used to be a forbidden spot to sneak in until he somehow made it the 'big speech' room. There wasn't a seat for her. Another game.

"I know what you've planned. I know you made calls," Viv reproached.

"I just want what's best for you. Everyone who can give their children an edge will do so."

"I know Tristan will go there as well."

He shrugged, suit shifting over his runner's build. Even in the confines of his home, he was perfectly combed and clean-shaven. His green eyes drifted over her and then to his desk. He still had work to do. She was just a waste of time.

Papa was devastatingly handsome if the flock of infatuated women sighing after him were any indication. He knew it. He had influence and wealth and the looks and the wit so everyone loved him and they couldn't see what a controlling asshole he was.

"You don't have to date him," he tiredly said.

"You did it."

"Tristan wants to work for the Conseil d'Etat. Sciences-Po is a good place to start. For you as well until you decide what you want to become. Any higher education remains a good tool in one's arsenal, if only for the networking opportunities. I would have preferred HEC but you don't have the right temperament."

"How far do I have to go so you don't get to pick things for me? How many teachers do you know there?"

"It's not a rigid institution, Viv. I'm just letting a few people know in case you need help. I don't know why you're so mad."

"You know exactly why I'm mad. I want to succeed without you constantly cheating! I want to earn what I get. Why don't you get it?"

“You’re better than this, Viviane cherie. I told you before. If you don’t cheat in a cheater’s game, you’re not really playing.”

“I don’t care about winning if the one who won is really you! I want you to STOP CONTROLLING EVERYTHING I DO! You know what? You won’t get it. So I’m going where your flunkies can’t go.”

She spread her hands.

“I’m joining the army.”

The look of shock and disbelief on his face filled her with a Schadenfreude she never thought she could get. Sometimes spite was addictive.

“You’re not serious.”

“Dead serious. In September.”

Papa lounged on his seat in a position she recognized as the ‘I need a minute to come up with something.’ There was an art to it. He would do the same in arguments, sometimes. Bullshit for thirty seconds to give himself the time to come up with a good deflection. A part of her wanted to leave the room. She’d done it. She’d told him, even though she had yet to sign the contract. Her heart wanted to know what he would come up with. Would he ask her to stay? Would he offer to keep off her back? Stop influencing her environment all the time?

She was almost scared when he finally spoke.

“Damien is his mother’s child. A sensitive soul, brilliant yet naive. We are the similar ones. We keep our loved ones safe. I know you’ve done things in the past to protect your friends. I covered for you. We both understand what must be done.

“I’m not like you! You lie and you cheat for your personal gain! You manipulate everyone! Everyone!”

“People,” he forced between clenched teeth, “need leaders. They need guidance. We are flawed, all of us. If I do not rule then someone worse will. You understand this. You’re the same! Same with your friends!”

“Fuck you I don’t inti—”

She swallowed back the lie and saw in her father’s face that he thought he had won.

“You’re a career grifter. You don’t make the world better. You juggle interest groups.”

“Believe it or not, that’s my job. And it does make the world better.”

“Say what you will. We’re done here.”

“Oh, are we?” the darkness replied.

Dark pits in the familiar face felt so wrong and so... disrespectful. Viv's soul pulsed in anger. She'd been caught in the memory but that was all it was. A memory. She could feel it now. This wasn't the real world and she was... missing her body? And a lot of her mind. She had a past, a body somewhere. This was just an illusion. The darkness was a stranger.

She tried to move. It didn't work but at least she could think about it this time. She could remember she had a past.

It became clear. She was in the in-between. Distance didn't really exist there. Instead of tensing muscles, she translated forward by a hair.

Her senses returned, or at least what passed for them here. She couldn't feel the usual connection to her body so rebuilding herself became the priority. Memory access. Emotions. Drive. Her soul remembered it and reformed it within, so it didn't rely on her body so much anymore. It was a slow, methodical work in a place where time was only a relative concept. Fortunately, her soul kept the blueprint of what it meant to be alive. She'd had a lot of practice.

Viv was herself again. The darkness was not. It was invading her memories.

“Some compassionate person you are. Talking about protecting your loved one then pushing them away. Forever.”

“You have no right to bear his face,” Viv said, suddenly furious.

“Are you mad at me, him, or yourself? You left him though he loved you, and now he's dead.”

“I'm going to... Urggg.”

“Just for trying to control you a little, you wild thing. And then what do you do? You turn up exactly the same as he was. Corruption? You have used it. Threats? manipulation? Wrangling interest groups to achieve your goals? You have done it all. No, you are worse. He never killed anybody and he certainly did not do it by pouring molten gold down their throat in public. You are such a hypocrite.”

“Not a hypocrite if I have accepted it,” Viv replied. “Yes I am like him, much more than I was willing to admit. I was wrong and now I know. I have grown.”

“Into a tyrant! Into someone who refuses bounds yet binds others in chains of ‘honor’ and ‘oaths’! You weaken yourself by depending on them. Your strongest warriors weaken themselves protecting the meek and the meek wallow in mediocrity while they should test themselves against the crucible that is life so they can grow or rid mankind of their feeble existences! You are better than this. You can be free and you can free them!”

“Freedom for what. Starving? Being eaten or kicked by the first creature they come upon? That's not the freedom people want.”

“It’s the one they need to progress!”

“I don’t know if you’re met the average human but we need structure as much as we need freedom. Even I have Solfis and the others to teach me and hold me back if I’m going to act stupid.”

The face of her father formed a scowl. The darkness knew she had regained her memories, her agency. It didn’t like that at all. Viv pressed on.

“I think I like being a tyrant. Better than my people being sold as slaves in Baranese markets by an unscrupulous prince. Now we are reclaiming the deadlands piece by piece, pushing back the savage lands,” Viv continued on a hunch.

It worked. The creature wearing her father’s mask screeched, the face cracking like an eggshell. The room splintered around them. The thing was furious.

“I am so tired of watching you drape the world as it is in layers of lies! You know that might makes right and you act like it yet you pretend there are laws that govern humans as if that was natural! Those are useless fabrications! You surround yourself with stone to resist assaults only for them to always, eventually fall while you should be moving with the flow! You are making yourselves weak! Blind! The feeble mate and spread while the strong die to protect them! This is not how we achieve greatness! We achieve it by becoming greater than our foe generation after generation, by stealing their strengths and making them our own!”

“And that is what we do. Walls and swords are tools. I know who you are now. I remember. Octas.”

The form hissed. Spinnerets emerged from the edges of the image’s mouth.

“You speak of strength as if it only came from the arm that held the sword yet I remember a certain golem crushing your avatar’s skull like a ripe fruit. That golem was made by a timid man who loved gardening blue roses. So who exactly was the strongest?”

“You tell me! That man is dead! DEAD!”

“And he left this world undefeated.”

“ARRR! Feed ten thousand fools and you will find a gifted one but how many warriors must perish for it to happen? How many must fall to defend worthless rocks and empty words? Those could have become greater! Stronger! Crush a man’s head and peel off his rib and search his torso for his ‘heart’ or his honor. You’ll never find it!”

“You won’t find strength either.”

“You don’t need to look for it. It is as obvious as a fist to the face! More lies! More lies! More wind and fleeting thoughts!”

“Those are not lies.”

“They are not real! They are not true!”

“They are not lies. A lie is a deliberate falsehood. They are dreams. They’re concepts and ideas that make us more than just meat and magic. They give us a purpose. They make us people. And people with dreams move armies and grind mountains to the finest sand. You know, Octas, for someone who abhors the spoken word, you sure as hell can’t seem to shut up.”

“I am doing you a favor, girl. I am offering you the world!”

“I don’t need you to get it.”

Viv felt her soul click. She had always been able to come here to the in-between but that was more of a hot air balloon’s way of seeking the sky. She did not decide where she would go. She didn’t have power here. Now though, something grew from her soul that she had felt on Nyil but not on earth. The inhabitants of her adoption world called it mana but, really, it was just power.

And now she had it.

She covered her body in scales and great wings emerged from her back. A blade of black mana emerged from her hand. The form Octas had given her was no longer hers to control. It was Viv’s. She stepped forward.

“I’m bad. I enjoy killing and dominating and manipulating. I love crushing those who offended me and the sake of thousands leaves me cold when they’re not my people. That’s alright. That’s just who I am. I decide what I do with who I am, not my dad, not Elunath, not you. Nobody but me. I’m going to return to the nation I’ve lifted from the ashes and turn it into a shining beacon of civilization in the gods-forsaken shithole of a planet. I’ll raise monuments and places of learning to spread those dreams you’re so scared of until nothing can quench them short of the apocalypse. I will undo everything you stand for. I will tame whatever comes for us. I will purge the world of your followers. I will use the most terrible tools to accomplish the greatest projects while you return to your jungles to plant spider legs on your favorite slaves’ asses, bitch. And I’ll do it with my black heart and blacker magic and when the time is ripe, I’ll come for you too.”

Octas’ stolen form shattered.

The world faded away into the void of the in between. Facing Viv in that place between death was terror incarnate. It felt like jumping in a pool and finding the Mariana trench under her with its bottom swimming up to meet her. The wave of fear overwhelmed her. It almost undid her here and there. For a moment, she could do nothing but scream without a voice. She was still merely a small sphere. What faced her was planet-sized.

Except, it was not moving.

Viv's perception expanded to see that the planet was as dark as the void with a cracked surface glistening, revealing bloody entrails below. Eight tendrils as large as accretion disks extended from the celestial object to reach for her and they were stopped just before they could reach her. Viv's perception extended again to the part 'behind' her, though the term was merely a simplification. There was another planet and that one, though smaller, felt more dense, more resilient. It bore the shape of black hole with a golden corona shining like a beacon in that desolate place. The other planet was larger but, strangely, it was not winning.

Viv realized she was in the middle of a deadlocked struggle for her soul. Each titanic force canceling the other out. She had never met the two 'planets' in her brief forays here but their auras were unmistakable.

"Enttiku."

HELLO, CHILD.

"You... saved me from Octas?"

I SAVE ALL I CAN.

WHO DESERVE IT.

"I really appreciate it..."

CHILD.

IT IS TIME.

WAKE UP.

Viv found the tether back to her body easily. It felt different, as expected. Stronger. More flexible. She followed it, and followed it, and...

"I am awake."

It was day.

Vision returned first. Viv took a deep, raspy breath. Another. She saw a canopy of dark wood. The air was cold and crisp. She was lying in a bed with a cover up to her chest. Her arms were out, over the cover. She was wearing a shift.

Everything felt weird. Not painful but weird. A wiggle of the toes and a shaking of fingers revealed she had approximately the same number of appendages. They were just hard to move as if she'd been sleeping too deeply. Her body didn't really fit. It felt very bright as well despite the draw curtain she could spot on her left.

//Your Grace.

Solfis unfolded from a corner of the bare stone room she found herself in. He looked normal according to genocidal golem standards. She could feel the mana coursing through his circuits. That was normal.

“It worked, I think?”

Her voice felt normal if a little dry and a little high-pitched. She wanted water.

//Yes.

//You have been asleep for six days.

//I will fetch Abenezigel.

//Please be patient.

“Yeah, okay.”

Viv looked at her exposed arm. The skin was normal. A bit pale because it was winter but normal. She could feel her hair brushing against her bare shoulder. She sat up and the cover fell. Something clacked against the bed frame. She felt the wood’s texture.

“Ah. Ah, what?”

Her hands reached for her shoulders. They found skin, then a patch of smooth, warm material covering her shoulder blades. It was unyielding, like glass. Something was attached to the strange skin. She could feel them now. She could also command them. She moved them forward.

Two scythe-like blades of solid darkness glided silently in front of her. They were as thick as two fingers in the width and quite thin but they felt really solid. She used one to poke at the mattress. She could feel the mattress through the new limb. It was quite disconcerting.

“That... will take some getting used to.”

On instinct, she did something that was a bit like breathing in. The two half-wings retracted into the shoulder blades.

“Ok, this is weird. Really weird. Ah?”

Initializing

Error. Human variant detected. Special attention required. Please wait while I attribute mental space to your case.

Her interface was turned off. She couldn't access it for now.

She could, however, see what the shift didn't cover. Between her breasts, there was now a black stone embedded into her skin. It was the core taken from the necrarch, hers now. It was shaped like an inverted teardrop and much smaller though no less powerful for it. She touched it. Smooth and warm. There was... a lot of mana here, though it felt dormant for now. There was no rush to wake it up. Still needed to get her bearings.

Viv stood up and let herself fall off the bed, the frame groaning under the strength of her grip. The shift reached her ankles which was... weird? And there was something else.

//Hello, Your Grace.

"I am delighted to see you well," the lich said as he entered the room.

"I have a question."

"I am sure there are many."

"Where have my boobs gone?"

An embarrassed silence spread through the room.

"Hello? I remember what my body should be like and this isn't it! Where are my muscles? Where are my damn tits? Why am I so damn short? HELLO?"

"It appears that the ritual led to a significant loss of body mass. I am sure the effect is only temporary."

"What do you mean a loss of body mass? Explain yourself!"

Viv's new back scythes — she really had to find a word for these — extended, aimed at the tall form of the lich.

Much taller, in fact.

And that shift had been in her bag. She had packed it herself.

"No no no no no no what? WHAT?"

"It would be better if I just gave you a mirror. Also, please retract your black mana limbs, thank you."

Viv did so if only so the tall bag of bones would pass her the mirror faster. She grabbed it.

That was mostly her face.

“You have a powerful sense of self to have retained the same appearance. Within the constraints of the ritual, of course.”

“Shut up!”

That was indeed her face except for two teeny tiny little details.

One, her eyes were void pits decorated by emerald circles that shone like lasers on a night sky. That was cool. And edgy. Mostly cool. She would disintegrate anyone who said otherwise.

The second detail was that her face was considerably sharper, as in not just her cheeks had melted but even her bone structure felt compressed.

“Why do I look like a fucking weasel?”

//Your body is undergoing some changes.

“If you finish that sentence with a period joke I swear to Neriad I’ll order you to sing the Enorian anthem.”

//My voice modulators are sealed.

“I apologize for the upsetting circumstances of your awakening, however the ritual consumed part of your body mass to fuel your transformation. A careful observation has revealed that your nervous system, brain, and heart are now fully functional. However, the rest of your physical envelope will still require gradual, ah, upgrading. Food consumption and patience will see you return to normal soon enough. Hmm. Within the next two years.”

“Are you telling me I need to eat my veggies and drink my soup so I become tall again?”

“Well.”

//That is to say.

“Yes.”

“What the hell? I fucking hate my life. How can I be the dark empress if I’m pint-sized? I’m short even for a Paramese woman! No one will take me seriously!”

“We also surmise that your hormonal levels will remain high until your biology adjusts to the change. Additionally, I regret to say that this body may not give life. That is to say, you cannot be with child.”

“Ah. Well, we expected it. I mean, it makes sense.”

“Unfortunately, and due to adapted body functions, you will still get your moon blood.”

“You two get the fuck out of my room right now.”

They did so, following which Viv threw her pillow at the door with a terrible roar of anger. Ok, it was more of an angry squeak.

Link restored.

Let's talk.

Chapter 140: Interview with a dead god.

“Ok. Let's,” Viv said with a yawn.

She placed two fingers against the bedframe and pressed. Sure enough, the wood groaned under the pressure and when she removed them, an imprint was left behind. That meant this body, her new body, was definitely strong despite being... Not quite done. At the same time she already felt tired. It was a weird combination.

I have placed a small seal on your magic until you could regain consciousness so as to avoid accidents. I will remove it at the end of this conversation or at any time you should request it. Your magic is yours.

Now onto the crux of the matter. As you know, my covenant with sapient races grants them access to the interface and a way to track and direct their efforts. It also facilitates the access to well-practiced, proven skills that could help them survive on Nyil. I impose this covenant even on newborns because I have been proven, time and time again, that it could only help people.

The counterpart of this covenant is that people feed me an infinitesimal amount of mana via prayer every time they access it.

“Oh. So it goes both ways.”

Yes.

My covenant covered humans, Merls, and Kark in the beginning. I have extended it to the Hadals at the request of the first of their numbers. A person you know well.

“Wait...” Viv said. “You mean Irao?”

Yes. Yihao Shiyan. Experiment number one. A common acquaintance reported that the man who created the Hadals shared a language with one of the peoples of earth.

“I actually know very few languages.”

Then I should not have shared this with you. That is why I avoid conversations. No matter. The purpose of this discussion is to establish that you, as Nyil's first black elemental caster, may decide whether or not you want access to the interface to be still active.

“Wait. Does that mean I potentially bind any others that come after me to my decision?”

They may opt out of it. In fact, anyone may opt out of it at any time. Few people even know it is a possibility, however.

“Does anyone actually do it?”

Octas' followers do so after they have grafted enough monster parts on themselves. But we digress. The interface is always beneficial. I have forfeited physical form and a church for the sake of civilization, no matter what you mortals believe it should be. I still must ask, and you must still agree, to the covenant.

“It's been super useful until now so yes, please.”

Excellent.

“And errrr... since we're on the topic. Could you...?”

The Vandal title stays.

“It was an accident! I apologized! Please, the Academy's repairmen already give me a discount for being a frequent customer!”

Too bad.

Now onto your new stats. I shall remove the seal. Enjoy!

Viv immediately blocked the influx of information assaulting her mind. She could handle it, of course, it was just annoying. She wanted to check things out one by one.

Current status:

- Mana channels (elemental mage)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck
- Draconic Surrogate Mother
- VANDAL. YES, REALLY.
- Black elemental core (ascendant).
- Black elemental body: nervous system, eyes, heart.

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 51.3%

There was nothing too extreme here, which was weird in itself. The new line that spoke of an elemental core probably had a lot of subtext to unpack but she assumed Abenezigel would help her with that. As expected, the rest of her body was still 'mortal'. Maybe that was why she felt so damn tired. A brief inspection of her arms revealed no black veins, however. On a hunch, she brought up her health status.

- Malnourished
- Body in transition
- Deep exhaustion.

Ok, that, yes that explained a lot. She had been warned. It would take a long time for her to return to full strength and also full height dammit, and not that she was really vain, but also full cup size. And full foot size. She had painstakingly gathered a collection of master-crafted shoes, boots, and slippers that fitted her just right and now they were all too large! Unfair!

Viv growled under her breath for one second. She deserved that much.

Moving on.

Ascender: 1 / 4

There were only four levels to that on which definitely meant that she was expected to accomplish incredible feats in order to progress. Something to consider later.

Power: 24 to 37

Wow that was... massive. So that's why she felt so damn strong. A power of that tier matched that of a powerful warrior. She could beat people at arm wrestling now! Nothing could stop her!

You have reached a threshold!

Active skills that rely on power now offer an improved version. Your resistance to physical blows has significantly improved.

So that was why those trainees could keep slugging at each other without falling to pieces. Also, skills that rely on power? She didn't have any that she could think of. Wait, she didn't have any such skills. Or did she? She called the active skill menu.

Active skills

- Inspect 4/5
- Aspect of the Guardian (Scaling)

There was, in fact, an active skill menu.

Inspection was here. She had always kind of wondered why it didn't show before.

That was... actually that made a lot of sense. Many paths relied on active skills, though casters did not.

She just hadn't...

She'd been on Nyil for two years.

"Am I stupid?"

I reserve judgment.

"Don't you have better things to do? Actually, don't answer that."

Viv wanted to return to her stats but the 'Aspect of the Guardian' thing got her attention. It was new for sure. She focused on it.

Aspect of the Guardian:

Your first aspect. You stand for those you care about. Upon anchoring yourself, all shields and shield-related effects have their strength doubled and their size multiplied by five depending on stat and affinity. You may not move from your position though you can be moved. The range of offensive spells is limited to the vicinity of the shield. Offensive spells are significantly harder to cast.

At the thought of anchoring, her half wings stretched out from the dark patch on her shoulder blades as naturally as if they were arms. Viv was not used to it. She really wasn't. At the same time, the limbs were definitely hers in her mind. They felt natural, just... new. Anchoring would require her to plant them somewhere. She just wasn't exactly clear on the details. The only thing she could instinctively understand was that anchoring related to the drawing of spell arrays. A shortcut, perhaps?

As for the skill, it was just perfect for her plan to cover the heavies under her command. She would have to wait to test it in the field of course. And according to the text, it was merely the first. When she felt confident enough to deploy her magic, she would try that in priority. With excitement, Viv returned to her stats.

The monstrous progress of her power stat meant that she would have to watch out for a while, get accustomed to the change. Even squeezing someone a bit hard might hurt them. It also illustrated an interesting aspect of Nyil: one could not be good at everything. She might have a high power but without the skills behind it, without effort, it was technically wasted on her. She had never planned on punching people so she couldn't do that well, even with a magical body. She bet that even with her training in the army, any decent brawler with lower stats could put her down. The reminder of her own limits sobered her a little but only a little.

There was no need for punching when one could disintegrate.

Finesse: 26 to 32

That was weird because she didn't feel too different. Perhaps her exhaustion had something to do with it.

You have reached a threshold!

Muscle memory and finesse related skills are vastly improved. Your ability to move at great speed is much less tiring and can be done more often. Perception is improved, especially when it relates to sight. Sneaking is vastly improved.

That was... once again helpful but not dramatically so. Anything that made her harder to hit or kill was helpful, it was just that she didn't depend on her body to protect her. Magic was her main tool. Still cool though.

Endurance: 30 to 34

Not a great change here but that was fine. It didn't seem to help her with the sleepiness she could feel creeping upon her.

She looked at her new physical stats and flexed a hand. It did feel stronger. More real. More reactive as well. Maybe she was looking at it the wrong way. She didn't need swords or staves or the like but there was one weakness that plagued mages everywhere: mobility.

Maybe she didn't need to waste time learning how to fight with a new body. Maybe she only needed to learn how to move, and since her wings could be used as anchors, relocate anywhere to send torrents of spells from a new location. Her tools like the floating sigils would definitely help as well.

She would have to train and experiment. Later.

Quickly, she checked her mind stats, finding them all increased by 2.

Physical		Mental	
Power	37	Focus	43
Finesse	32	Acuity	43
Endurance	34	Willpower	43

That would be very, very useful. At this level, every increment made a difference, especially for the most complex spells.

Viv felt pretty excited. Maybe she could improve her mobility on the battlefield using her stats? Pull a fast one on other casters? There were plenty of opportunities for shenanigans.

She checked her skills, or passive skills she guessed, finding them unchanged except for one.

Draconic intimidation: expert 4 to 7*

Aha! Having stupid void eyes and skeletal wings, ok almost wings of pure black mana coming out of one's back certainly indicated that someone was having a moment. Or something. There was a small asterisk, however. A nudge in her mind. She focused on it.

Intimidation will be temporarily yet fully canceled should you wear a disguise.

Viv opened and closed her mouth like a beached fish, beyond outrage. This was so unfair!

Temporary debuff linked to short stature.

Whatever! The preliminary inspection of the changes was done for now. The rest she could discuss with Abe before testing which would itself come after a good nap. With a huff, she went to open the door to the main room.

Predictably, the torn handle remained in her hand.

“Of fucking course.”

The door opened anyway, revealing a sort of lobby lit by a skylight, the sun visible through dyed glass. The mix of old stones and relatively new furniture gave her the strange impression that she was squatting in an ancient ruin. Solfis and Abe sat in comfortable couches but there was one last person present, his wavy hair mussed by intense winds.

“Sidjin!” Viv squeaked.

“Viv!”

The fallen price rushed forward. The obvious relief he felt warmed Viv’s heart a little. She distinctively saw the moment he blinked, taking in her new size. He still picked her up in a hug. It felt weird to be carried so easily but not entirely too unpleasant. She could tell her sharper, gaunt face bothered him a little just as she could tell the moment his mind switched gear. and a sardonic smile bloomed on his handsome face.

“So... where’s the rest of you?”

“Fuck off! I will grow back and then you’ll all see who gets the last laugh!”

“Oh my, is it a side effect if you seem a bit...”

“Don’t say it.”

“Short-tempered?”

“I will kill you.”

“Alright alright but don’t worry if you’re vertically challenged. Not only am I told that it’s temporary, I would also be the worst of rakes if I were to disregard you over a disability.”

“I AM NOT DISABLED!”

“We’ll go back to that if you need to grab something on the upper shelf.”

“Sidjin,” she drawled, “you know I can use telekinesis right?”

“Ah, true.”

“If I need something out of reach, I’ll sock puppet your corpse to go and grab it.”

“Ah yes. I’m sure we can keep exchanging barbs but just like you, I will be brief. Abenezigel informs me that you will be asleep within the next two hours.”

“Oh yes.”

“Indeed,” the lich added. “It would be best if we could go over the consequences of your change in detail. I assume you already took in the alterations via your interface?”

“Yes.”

The lich nodded, the move strangely mechanical.

“On top of changes to your stats and possibly skills, there are physical changes we need to delve into.”

“I noticed a few significant changes, yes.”

“She made a shortlist,” Sidjin unhelpfully added.

Viv groaned.

“I have no glands left and yet still experience disappointment,” Abenezigel grumbled. “Please stop interrupting me. The first change is your eyes. Have you tried... actively perceiving mana?”

“Not yet,” Viv replied.

“Please do so now.”

Viv focused, then sighed in appreciation.

Mana mastery meant that she could permanently see the halo of colors around living and inanimate objects. This proved essential when fighting other mages or understanding spells because she could anticipate what would come from the change in density, and the sigils she could identify at a glance. It remained a taxing activity, however, or at least it had until now. Rather than a blur of color around her normal sight, mana now appeared much better defined in self-contained shapes around the entities it was attached to. Sidjin was his usual red, brown, and colorless self. Solfis was made of thin, geometric lines around a core that shone like a sun while Abenezigel offered an interesting sight. He possessed a black core like every other undead, though his appeared to be ‘homemade’ rather than taken like hers. Colors came from his scepter but not in the same way Sonagi’s artifact emitted color. That

one had been a modular storage system. Abenezigel's scepter converted black mana into mana of the desired color at a rather wasteful ratio. Still, it was amazing he could do it at all.

"Hey, you can use any color?"

"Only those I understood while I was alive. I know what you are trying to ask, Viviane the outlander. I am sorry. My understanding comes from, and was built on, the knowledge I had while alive. I do not believe you are able to learn any other color. More importantly, how is the sight?"

"Incredibly detailed. I could just use it at full power non stop without issue, I think. Very useful."

"It should also scare those who behold them, though be wary. Ignorant folks might take you for a monster."

//Those who attempt to cull her will receive their just reward.

//Although it might make the purchase of goods and services challenging.

"Precisely. You will find your visual acuity improved, including in more adversarial conditions as well."

"Such as?"

Abenezigel waved his hand, invoking a cloud with blue mana. Viv could see rather clearly though the ensuing fog. He followed with a layer of black mana he placed on the windows, plunging the room into darkness. At least, Viv was pretty sure it was darkness. She could see just fine.

"Ok that's pretty nice. Anything else?"

"Yes. The second thing I want to talk about is your body."

He stood, approaching Viv. Sidjin leaned against one of the couches as if unsure if he should stay. Or perhaps he was just worried. Viv looked at her arms again, her annoyance at how thin they were still present in her mind.

"Many of your bodily functions are now powered by mana which leads me to the most important point, the one I absolutely intended to mention. In fact, I have come to the realization that I should have told you in your bedroom."

"Get on with it," Viv said, annoyed by the delay.

"Many of your vital functions now rely on mana as your physical body is no longer quite physical. This means that when you used to run out of mana, you fainted."

"Yes, I know," Viv said, remembering the deadland fort sieges during which she collapsed several times.

“If you run out of mana now, your brain will immediately cease to function and you will die.”

“Errrr.”

“I do not wish to alarm you. It is excessively difficult to make an elemental archmage run out of mana. Nevertheless, keep that possibility in mind. Fortunately, the other aspects of an elemental body are much more beneficial. You can last longer without food and breath, though not forever. I am pleased to report that you may also survive mortal wounds as if your endurance was several tiers higher, whether the cause be massive trauma, poison, or even curses!”

The lich seemed giddy, something that immediately set off Viv’s survival instinct. It was the skull, really.

“Not that I would wish it on you, of course,” the lich quickly amended.

“Alright, good to know. Moving on?”

“Unless you are killed, you are now functionally immortal.”

“Ah yeah. Not bad.”

Viv considered millennia of research for eternal youth, trillions spent over the ages on alchemy, genetics, medicine, magic, and AI for the sake of obtaining what she had just been so casually handed. Abenezigel patiently waited until she was done digesting that particular piece of information.

Immortality.

She wouldn’t age, she wouldn’t catch degenerative diseases, she didn’t have a deadline to finish her project before the reaper came knocking. Strangely, the thought didn’t calm her down at all. It gave her vertigo.

“Right. Okay. Next thing?”

“The last consequence should be your drastically improved ability to channel mana, thus placing you squarely among the ranks of the most powerful humans on Nyil. This is the bottom of the mountain, mind you, but its tip leads to Emeric’s palace. Though the path is barred to me, I would like to be the first to welcome you to the Greatest Game. May your journey take you far.”

“Thanks...” Viv said, rather moved.

She turned to Sidjin, though she wasn’t sure why. It felt like a life-defining moment yet at the same time it was intimate and friendly, not majestic. She found she preferred it that way.

“Hey, I am just happy to see you alive and well. You can conquer the planet at your convenience. Do not feel pressured,” he said.

“World domination is overrated anyway.”

//I formally disagree.

“Moving on, to quote you,” Abenezigel interrupted, “the last addition to your arsenal is also the most unexpected. Those limbs you have on your back. May we see them?”

“Sure,” Viv said, though she watched Sidjin’s reaction when the half wings expanded from her back. He seemed curious, not revolted. That comforted her, somehow.

The three others approached, looking at the scythe-like appendages as she extended them in front of her. Moving them didn’t require her to contract muscles, yet it was not intellectual either. This new sensation was... uncanny. A request to touch the limbs meant three pairs of hands (two of them made of bones) on that surface. It felt ticklish.

“It’s warm and unyielding at the same time?” Sidjin said, sounding unsure.

//Superficial analysis indicates the material is solidified black mana.

//Classification: exotic material.

//Flexibility: mild

//Durability: extreme, all aspects

//Full sensory feedback detected.

//Mana circuits detected.

//Evolving structure detected

//Material rarity: unique.

//Harvesting directive: refused.

“Hmm yes. Hmmm yes yes yes, fascinating. Hmm. Hmmm,” Abenezigel said.

All the others glared.

“I have been trying to sound more human by using suboptimal conversation branches and various noises to express emotion. I presume that my efforts are not producing the expected result?” he finally said.

“If you can pick your personality yourself, why would you use an annoying one? Just speak up,” Viv replied.

“I shall make adjustments. I believe you have a wide range of motions but that is secondary. The most important factor seems to be that those wings of yours can act as anchors. Anchors are dimensional matrices at the center of spellworks with arcane indexes superior to the Radani constant, thus requiring— “

“They’re wells in the fabric of magic so Nyil knows it’s supposed to listen better,” Viv interrupted.

Viv had never seen someone with no face look so put upon.

“Accursed witches,” Sidjin grumbled to the side.

He looked like he was eager to listen to a fellow mage drone on about constants and variables and whatnot. Viv was not having any of it.

“You two may feel free to dork it out in the privacy of your man caves but I’d like to point out that those are my anchors, which means they are witch anchors, which means that I get to call them as I damn well please.”

“We must still test them out,” Sidjin observed.

“I’m pretty sure I can use them to stab people.”

“Yes,” Abenezigel pointedly replied, “in the same way a jeweler’s crystal pliers may be used to stab someone in the eye.”

“So that’s a yes.”

//I shall schedule some eye-stabbing practice, Your Grace.

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea,” Sidjin said.

//Says the only nearby source of fresh eyes.

“My wings can clearly be used as weapons and they’re completely invisible until deployed. I would be stupid not to train to use them as a contingency plan. Besides, Solfis saw that they were extremely durable. Certainly more durable than my mostly fleshy self.”

//Extreme durability in Imperial classification means that I cannot break it.

//This classification takes into account the capabilities of my original frame.

That gave everyone a moment of pause.

“So. My wings, solid. Got it. I need to learn how to move again anyway. Let’s add this to my magical practice. Abe, I assume practice is fine and wouldn’t mess with your schedule?”

“Indeed not. In fact, I expected it. Is calling me Abe really necessary?”

“Would you prefer Ben?”

“You may call me Abe in a private setting.”

The lich nodded to himself, the gesture once again clearly unnatural.

"I remember that nicknames are an important part of complicity between members of the same group of rascallions. This bodes well for the future of our cooperation. My good mates."

"If you say so. Right, so rest and physical training. What about magic practice? I have a new active skill I would like to test."

"Would it lead to the destruction of my floating island?"

"No, it's a purely defensive increase of my abilities."

"We can do that in the ritual room."

The ritual room.

Viv instinctively placed a hand against her chest at heart level to fend off a swell of phantom pain. Her death had been quick and it hadn't stuck but she did remember a flash of agony. Sure enough, there was a small patch of scar tissue she could feel through the thin fabric.

"Your scars should have been reabsorbed... except..." Abe said, hesitating.

"Yeah."

"We can postpone the exercise if you would rather take a moment."

"No, I'm fine. This is just a big change. I knew I was going to become part-elemental or die from the moment Solfis started to train me two years ago. I worked hard to make sure I would survive. I befriended the Temple of Neriad. I got the information that Helock was the place to ask. I came here, then worked my way up to a solution that Solfis eventually provided. Now that I'm mostly safe, I realize that I didn't consider what I would do after. I wanted to learn portal magic to at least send word to my family that I was okay but... they'll all be dead of old age before I can reasonably figure it out. Being part elemental also comes with a range of weirdness we are only just starting to uncover. And that's not mentioning the dying part. Sorry, Abenezigel, I'm only considering myself when I say that. I am not trying to belittle your own struggles or your plans..."

"I know that revenge is my life project, and that you are an ally. Do not worry."

//You could always bring civilization and life back to the deadlands.

//You may also consider becoming an empress.

//Lead mankind into a new era of progress and enlightenment.

//And make urinating in public a capital offense.

"I was already considering it."

//Additionally, you now have the time to see your adopted daughter grow."

"A daughter?" Abe asked.

//The dragon.

“Ah. In any case, self-care and mental well-being are an integral part of the recovery process. You will have the time you need to come to terms with your new reality.”

“And possibly get back my normal height. Alright, enough navel gazing. We went over body changes, now let’s have a look at the magic.”

The four reconvene in the ritual room, filing through a corridor to get there. Viv noted that for an undead den, the place was surprisingly devoid of black mana and skeletons. All the rooms she passed by kept the same strange identity of ancient ruin repopulated and refurbished centuries after they had been abandoned, new curtains covering stones smoothed by centuries of disuse. The effect was reinforced by the general cold air up here. Interestingly, it didn’t seem to affect her much though she noted Sidjin had kept his coat.

The room itself had changed. The circle she’d seen was gone, as was the altar. She searched for a pool of blood on the ground her memory insisted should be here but only found clean rock. It bothered her a bit.

The three others stood at the edge of the circle to give her a moment. She went towards its center.

“The room is properly insulated. So long as you do not actively try to demolish it, the enchantments should hold. Feel free to begin at your convenience.”

Viv nodded. She was ready.

Just like inspection, using the aspect of the guardian didn’t really require any ceremony, though she felt like screaming it just because she could. Maybe it would help. In any case, the world guided her, whispering instructions. She extended her wings, or anchors, then stabbed them down.

At this point, Viv looked behind to see that her wings were not just considerably thicker but that they didn’t stab in the stone so much as in the world itself. As an experiment, she pulled them back. They returned to their default size and left the stone behind untouched.

“Hmm.”

The skill description said she couldn’t move but could be moved. She wondered if that meant that someone could just punt her away or if she could, say, stand on a chariot and cast it to act as a supercharged portable shield array. Maybe both? More things to try out. Planting the wings again, she resumed the test.

Right, she was anchored and static. Now it was just about pulling power from...

Oh.

OH.

Mana didn't come from the usual place around the center of her chest. It was a little bit forward and it exploded out in the room, coursing down the wings and to every pore of her skin, every cell, down to her fingertips. It rose in great waves around her. It formed blades and shapes and tendrils seeking, searching for anything and everything it could affect. It wanted to be freed, it wanted to be used and it was hers and hers alone.

Nyil was alive. It poured power into everything and the living beings on its surface took and grew it, returning it with interest. They grew it and bloomed it but the power was, ultimately, borrowed. If Viv had returned to Earth, she would have starved for that might, pushed her core for the trickle it could create from memories. No longer. The source of the black was now her soul and it was hers, uncompromisingly hers.

There was a lot of it.

Viv brought the tidal wave under control, feeding it to herself to form an aegis that covered the entire outer circle. Viv was the rock upon which armies would shatter as she protected her own. Mana shimmered and sang, the hum audible. A ripple over the aegis crystallized it. It was ready. She was ready.

//Citadel class shield array detected.

//Impressive, Your Grace.

"So that's what an elemental caster does," Sidjin whispered.

There was more. There was a lot more but the construct could only hold so much at the time. She could cover many more people. She could protect them all, fend off attacks and let them do their job. There would be no artillery spells crashing on tightly-packed Harrakan Heavies because she would be here for them.

A wave of fatigue washed over her and she stumbled.

"Please, be careful," Abe reminded her.

"I'm fine. Not out of mana. Just tired."

"Should we stop here for now?"

"Yes."

Viv coaxed the mana back into herself without much difficulty. It was hers more than any energy she had ever wielded before. She felt like she could take on a necrarch and win. After her nap, of course.

“Ah, in case this was not abundantly clear, you have access to enormous reserves and your spells will be extremely effective. The black ones, that is. The use of colorless mana will still present a challenge. Now, you seem tired. Should we head back?”

“I could eat, actually. And drink.”

“Oh! I got soup from the Five Fishes inn!” Sidjin exclaimed.

He was very proud of himself.

“You brought soup all the way up here?” she asked.

“Well, Abenezigel sent me a messenger bird saying you were stirring in your sleep so I figured you might want something hot. I flew it all the way up here.”

“Oh yes, you can fly. I always forget flight is a thing around here.”

“Flying over Helock is normally a death sentence. It is also a fairly tiring thing to do so even those with a license to fly normally prefer to hail a cart.”

“The part of mankind with access to will-powered flight considers this a chore. Figures,” Viv grumbled.

“I got the license so I thought, why not? Better than field rations and nutrient patches.”

“Yes. I would love some soup.”

Viv got her soup. She sat in one of the new couches while Sidjin reheated it for her with a handwave.

“Thanks. You are handy to have around,” she told him with a smile.

“As a fourth step war mage, it is my pleasure to use my awesome powers to provide piping hot soup.”

“As it should be,” Viv joked before realizing Sidjin’s gaze lingering.

“It’s the eyes,” he whispered. “Very scary.”

“Sorry.”

“For them.”

Viv chuckled. Sidjin was doing his best to make light of the many changes she was going through. She appreciated it and focused on her meal while the others gossiped and talked about the recent events.

Not much had changed in just nine days. Rakan was still recovering safely in the suburbs though Sidjin wanted to have him transferred to Harrak for safety. Lady Azar had sent a report stating all was well and that she had secured trading rights with wild land tribes to the south, specifically for fur and minerals. There were also rumors of scouting parties returning from Halluria, bringing back reports of troops heading east. Moving armies were a sign of a civil war brewing between the warlords. It would also explain why the assault on Baranese defenses had been so weak. Sidjin laughed when he reported that the arena still hadn't been cleared of black mana saturation. Apparently, the Academy had refused the job.

"Remember Ashra? The black mana tenured professor?" Sidjin asked.

"Of course. I was her assistant for two semesters."

"She had some choice words for Deos. Rumor has it she turned down quite a bit of money. Now, Deos has been forced to hire local talents but the concentration is so high that it takes specialized gear to even enter the arena. Unfortunately, the prototypes tend to go missing," Sidjin said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Something about sabotage. I'm sure they'll figure it out, eventually."

Viv smiled in appreciation. A little delayed vengeance was just the perfect sweet note to end her meal. Like ice cream but schadenfreude flavored.

"Why has Eunath not intervened?" Viv asked.

"He is a victim of his own importance," Abe explained. "An archmage of his talent cannot be seen doing what is essentially janitor work. I suspect he may intervene soon if the City Hall battle mages do not purify the land first. The arena's closure reflects badly enough on Helock as a whole to push them to forfeit their pretend neutrality. You must understand. The arena has never closed for longer than a week. Even during sieges."

"Serves them right."

"Indeed, though I would warn you that you have a somewhat roguish reputation in the city right now. As for rumors about you, most people agree that you must be dead and your corpse is floating somewhere in the sewers."

Viv could have done without the imagery and, apparently, the same was true for Sidjin. She recovered when the lich floated her bedroom lock to his skeletal hands.

It was really badly broken.

"I installed this handle here myself more than two centuries ago."

"Well then errrr... it was high time to change it!" Viv replied.

It appeared Abenezigel shared Solfis' ability to convey displeasure without facial traits.

“Ok sorry for wrecking your stuff. I apologize. I need to get used to my new strength, is all.”

“That is quite fine. I am sure Solfis can help you with getting used to it all.”

“Yes yes. Nap first. Assassinations later.”

Chapter 141: Vendetta

“I still do not understand why Jack’s death was necessary,” Sidjin grumbled. “Surely there was enough room on that plank for both of them?”

The improvised arcane projector played the Titanic credits, Emeric’s gift lying on a nearby table. Voicing over the entire movie had been a pain but worth it for the moment shared together, Viv decided.

“It’s for narrative reasons. The point is not that the two try their best to save each other, The point is moving the spectator with sacrifice. If his death upsets you then it worked.”

Abanezigel nodded. He had stood for the entire movie which weirded Viv a little but since he didn’t move and kept his mana under control, she could force herself to count him as furniture with some effort.

“The famous catharsis you mentioned, yes, Viviane the traveler. What surprises me is that despite the awesome technology that leads to such vast ships, the death of hundreds could not be prevented.”

“If I remember correctly it was a set of unfortunate circumstances. The ship was going too fast, it tried to dodge the iceberg instead of ramming it and losing only a few sections, and there were enough boats to save everyone but many left before they were full. Just mistakes upon mistakes.”

“Hmmm. I see. No amount of magical or technological prowess can make up for human stupidity.”

Viv used her wing to drag the nearby box of grilled meat while resisting the intense urge to sing AND I IIIIIII WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOUUUUUUU at the top of her lungs. It took a remarkable amount of self-control.

The meat was not quite chicken because the fowl in question was much larger, but it was nice nonetheless. Rakan complained when the bucket slid to the side, preventing him from getting another serving.

“Can’t you use your hands like a normal person?”

"It's practice. Practice!" Viv lied.

The truth was that the wings had more reach, that is to say, she didn't have to move to, that is to say, her arms were too damn short. There. In the month she had spent resting and binging three years worth of top tier TV series, her human body had barely changed. Her wings were now the width of a handspan and long enough to go over her head while the tip touched the ground. It even affected her balance.

So getting used to them was important. Really.

"You're just grumpy because there was not enough action."

"I want to watch 'Rescuing infantryman Rayan' again."

Viv rolled her eyes. Voicing over a war movie had proven worse than a romance because she had explain what a gun was, what a tank was, and how a plane could fly. She also wished Emeric had been more generous with newer works. That filthy god really loved the classics.

//I have concerns that the message of this movie might be insidious.

"Here we go," Viv moaned in her metaphorical beard.

//The female lead's fate glorifies infidelity and lowering one's station by forfeiting an advantageous marriage.

//Thus sacrificing resources and making a powerful enemy.

"It's a romance!"

//While it would have been more productive to assassinate her husband and keep the street urchin as a paramour.

Viv prepared to complain then stopped.

"Wait, are you advocating for the murder of rich scions?"

//The movie is, as you mentioned, a romance, not a societal study.

//Assuming that my purpose is to maximize the happiness of Rose, the death of a controlling spouse after their financial union represents the best outcome.

//Before you complain, yes I am aware that she is a weak fleshbag without the courage to order a hit.

"Huh."

Silence returned to the room while most pondered the experience they had been through. Only the grunts of efforts of Rakan wrestling with Viv's wings for access to the fried not-chicken bucket broke this moment of contemplation. He lost.

Viv considered that there was enough arcane might in that room to devastate a mid-sized city. And they were bantering and eating grilled meat.

Viv found herself missing Arthur.

Their bond had been more active recently. She thought the dragonette missed her as well. At least, she was fine.

“Well, that’s it. I believed you wanted to get started on planning, Abe?”

“Yes, however, the mood precludes it. The cultural content you offered us granted us a unique insight into a civilization whose achievements you take for granted, while we can only marvel at the resourcefulness of those who live without mana. I believe that a change of scenery is required to achieve a full break. I propose that we retire to the boudoir for a cup of klod, whereupon I shall share what I know with you, following which we can come up with more ideas.”

The group agreed, then left the viewing room together. It had been quite busy since Viv’s friends had realized they could now access decent entertainment. Nyil actors may reach someone’s soul with their performance but Earth’s actors had risen to the top of a competitive profession through sheer talent. No amount of effort and magic could outshadow genius. Viv was glad she got to share it with them. It had made the ‘League of Lesser Evils’ a more coherent force.

Abe guided the group through the multiple corridors that criss crossed his troglodyte base, bypassing libraries filled with ancient tomes and complex ritual rooms. The boudoir benefitted from the best skylight in the base, the glass revealing the crisp sky over the floating Chalice. It was raining today. A pitter patter chime provided a pleasant background while everyone sat in their designated chairs.

No one spoke when Abe warmed the pot of fresh water, nor when he picked his favorite dry klod. Although the lich could no longer taste food or drinks, it had built an artificial sense of smell for security purposes. Klod remained pleasant and familiar. Viv guessed it helped anchor him in his remaining humanity. His gestures were calm and deliberate, sometimes even a little awkward as he tried to veer away from the automatism that made using his arms less taxing. Abe was a soul piloting a construct, not a person living in their body. It would be easy to slip into idleness. Use telekinesis for everything.

“Before we begin, I would like to say a word,” the lich finally began.

“Do we really have to do the whole evil cabal thing?” Viv asked, impatient to get into the meat of the subject.

“Viv. I have been waiting for this moment for three hundred years. Elunath stole everyone I knew, everything I had, and everything I was. Please, please let me have this moment and shut up until I am done.”

The witch lifted her hand in surrender, chastised.

“Good. I am aware that your transformation has shortened your patience, and I appreciate your efforts. I need you to understand why I started because this is what drives me now to linger in this world and also because it will give you an insight into what kind of person Elunath really is, the way he thinks, the way he acts.

“The story starts three hundred years ago. At that time, Helock was technically a free city with an imperial envoy by the name of Jeol. The city was... different then. The immigration from the Shadow Lands was still going strong while Halurian warbands conducted constant raids. The fiercely defended independence and arrogance of the old family had not reached the level you would see nowadays. Jeol was a de facto provincial governor and we, Elunath and I, served in his cadre. Do you know what a cadre was?”

//A special detachment of battlemages typically accompanying a legion during their expeditions.

//Their role covers battles but also engineering, project management, research, and occasionally diplomacy.

//Although nominally under the orders of the legion commanders, cadres would answer first to the imperial ministry of the arcane.

//It was a prestigious position.

“And one loyal to the throne. All battlemages were trained at the imperial college which gave us a... a shared sense of purpose.”

The lights flickered in the lich's empty eye sockets. Viv was not sure how much Abe could feel or if those were emotions at all but the memory clearly upset him.

“One night, we received news that the capital had been lost in a disaster. Everyone was dead for leagues. Fallen where they stood. Elunath and I, we were both Helockians by birth. We volunteered for the assignment which was only tolerated because the cadre was low on earth specialist at that time. It was our friend Jesar who got the message. She told us. She should not have. The shock was too much. We lost many of our friends that night.”

The lich glanced up and he was no longer in the room with them, lost in his memories.

“It was the end of our world, a true cataclysm without forewarning that shook me to my core. Envoy Jeol only took ten minutes to come to a decision. The empire was a centralized power and now it had been decapitated in a single blow. We knew it would collapse. There could be no other possibility, not with so many nations kept loyal through coercion. So Jeol took us and told us the cadre would move into Helock the very same night to take over the government and slay the most powerful families in order to safeguard our control. We were to set out immediately and planned on being joined by the nearby legion the next day. Of course, Elunath and I met to talk on the way because those were our compatriots Jeol planned on slaughtering. We came to the conclusion that our best option was to kill Jeol then abscond into the night to warn our people. Without his political acumen, the cadre and legion would be directionless. They would perhaps consider leaving peacefully. Of course, Jeol was not stupid. He had expected our move and we engaged his loyal bodyguard.”

There was a moment of silence then.

“Elunath struck me as I attacked. He shattered my spine. He killed Jesar whom I had convinced to join us. We never stood a chance. After that, Jeol was very impressed by his performance and his loyalty to Harrak and himself. They left while I feigned death which was not a very difficult thing to do. Anger needled me so much... I traced the circle by crawling inch by inch with the only hand I could still move. Every movement sent searing knives into every fragment of my broken body. It was... excruciating. But he had to die.

“Only later did I learn that Elunath betrayed Jeol at the gates, had him murdered and climbed to the top of the Helockian hierarchy immediately after the ensuing battle. He was hailed as a hero. My family were driven out as relatives to a traitor. I never found them again.

“Elunath has never been a hero. He has always been an opportunist. The most important thing to Elunath is Elunath. He will go to any length to gain and conserve power. He is a blight. A self-sustaining parasite. And he killed Jesar. Why did he kill Jesar? It just does not make any sense...”

Viv blinked. Something had just gone wrong. Abe seemed broken in a machine-like way, his skeletal frame as if stuck in time. Only the flicker of blue flame still danced in the empty sockets. No one dared speak in the few seconds it took for his soul to reassert control.

“Where was I? Oh yes. Elunath may delude himself in thinking he cares about the city, or honor, or reputation. He is a purely rational self-serving creature who will inevitably do what serves him the most. If he believes it serves him more to break his word because he can get away with it, he will.”

“Don't I know that...” Viv grumbled.

“That will make him predictable but no less dangerous for it. Now for the assassination part. First, I would like to inform you that I hired an assassin to help us in this endeavor. He should arrive quickly. In the meanwhile, I propose that I share what I know and then you may discuss and propose solutions as you may think of solutions I did not think of. Now, onto the explanation.”

Abe gestured and a detailed plan of Elunath's domain appeared as a light construct of exquisite complexity. Viv easily recognized the entrance lobby, the corridor, and Elunath's study but there were also a research laboratory and personal quarters. She recognized storage rooms, a kitchen, and the various other locations thanks to careful labels. The magical defenses were shown just as thoroughly, and they were quite formidable. Viv counted three entrances in total but they might as well be fortress walls for all that entailed.

Abe gestured a second time. A list of profiles bearing the likeness of wanted portraits appeared next to the map, this one detailing Elunath's entourage and an estimation of their capabilities, complete with anecdotes and public display of power. A last gesture brought Elunath's chiseled, perfect face and a much more comprehensive list of his abilities.

Viv had never seen such in depth preparations.

“As you can see, in addition to his own formidable abilities, Elunath enjoys the support of a group of trained mages, a fortress-like setup, and he must be slain within ten minutes at most.”

“Why is that?” Viv asked.

“As a vital defender of Helock, Elunath is backed by the council of elders. Gryphon riders and battlemages will flood the place as soon as the alarm is given. That is why I need your help, if I have to be honest. We are trying to fight a superior, entrenched enemy. The odds are not in our favor.”

Abe went on a long description of the multiple layers of defenses around the elemental archmage. Brown mages were superior defenders and Elunath exemplified their entire caste. Redundant systems would make infiltration almost impossible. Even the windows were not made of glass but of specifically enchanted panes of hard stone designed to let the light through. The odds did seem overwhelming.

For all of his foe’s superiority, Abe had still found, not exactly flaws, but opportunities. Elunath could sense anything moving through stone in a radius that covered almost the entire city. He could also pay more attention to specific places and possibly even eavesdrop on conversation, though he could not be everywhere at once. Abe surmised Elunath could also find someone from their footsteps.

Abe’s immediate solution was to use Elunath’s confidence against himself. He would set up a diversion before sneaking into the manor from underneath, digging through the earth where protections were only nominal while Elunath was distracted. Abe was absolutely confident that Elunath would rush back to punish whoever dared enter his domain. This still left the attackers inside of a stone structure belonging to an archmage who specialized in stone manipulation. Black mana saturation would remedy some of the dangers but... the outlook was rather bleak. Viv gave them maybe one in five chances of success which was still impressive for such a daunting task. Abe was right to brainstorm the problem. Piling powerful people could only get them so far. Abe’s planning was not up to par with his intelligence gathering, that was for sure.

“What if he doesn’t have reinforcements?” Viv asked.

Abe glanced up, his blue glare disturbingly intense.

“A diversion?”

“No. Well, not really. What if we cut off his support first? Helock accommodates him but there is no arguing he’s an asshole and he must have made enemies throughout the years. I think we can convince the city to... ah... punish him a little.”

“There is a great way to do that, actually,” Sidjin said.

“Please tell me more,” Abe asked with singular intensity.

“Helock law allows for a ‘vendetta’ against interest groups if a sufficient cause is offered to the Council of Elders.”

So far, the discussion had been conducted in old Harrakan since most of the group was more familiar with the language. ‘Vendetta’ was the best translation Viv could think of to fit the northern term Sidjin had used.

“When a vendetta is declared, the council may not offer support to either side. It will not intervene so long as the conflict is limited to the contestants. It’s a seldom used mechanism because the conditions to set it up are stringent. Most conflicts would be better solved using negotiations or a tribunal.”

“I remember. The law was voted after the Narkis family debacle,” Abe replied.

“It’s a last resort for failed clans who believe they no longer have a chance for fair treatment. The Narkis family went out in a blaze of glory against a superior alliance but the collateral damage was so dire and their attacks so indiscriminate that the city still bears the scars of that conflagration. A vendetta limits the violence and gives options to revenge-driven individuals by guaranteeing that the authorities will leave them alone. In return, civilian lives are spared. Mostly.”

“And we can declare one?” Viv asked with some doubt.

“Not we. You,” Sidjin replied. “You see, only citizens in good standing can make the request. None of us are but... there is a loophole.”

“I’m a student of the Academy,” Viv remembered. “For at least another few months. Academy students enjoy the same benefits as citizens except for voting rights!”

“You will have to pay your dues first but then you can start the process. You are also lighter and have a different balance compared to before, which means that Elunath will struggle to find you, especially if you limit the number of steps you take.”

“I could float.”

“You should. And the council will never refuse your request because you have cause and are extremely dangerous yourself and, mostly, well...”

“They won’t be too worried?”

“No one in their right mind could think that Elunath would lose to anybody right now.”

“Right. That seems like a good idea. It will warn the man that I’m still alive but I’ll sacrifice the element of surprise for the withdrawal of Helockian help. That should be one hurdle removed.”

“Most likely lessened. They might still covertly help him,” Abe corrected.

“And concerning this, I have another idea,” Viv continued. “Look, let’s take a step back. We’re thinking about this too, err, tactically. This isn’t a battle. It’s a campaign. Right now our isolation and small numbers seem like a disadvantage but actually, it’s a strength. We’re conducting covert operations. A small group of experts is the ideal set up.”

“Your earthling mindset bleeds through your words,” Abe remarked, “however wisdom being universal, I would hear your proposal.”

“We need to sap his resources. Make the city lose confidence and respect. Force him out of his comfort zone to make him sloppy, tired, prone to mistakes.”

“He will just hunker down,” Rakan said.

//Not if we make it too costly.

//Basic analysis of Elunath’s profile hints at extreme arrogance.

“I concur,” Abe added.

//Attacks against him will be answered.

//Most likely, they will be answered with excessive force.

//He will seek to make examples.

//It would play to our advantage.

“I can ruin his reputation with a smear campaign,” Viv said. “I have ideas. That’s his political capital. Next, what about the money?”

Everyone looked at Viv.

“The... money?” Rakan asked.

“Money means nothing to the likes of him,” Sidjin concurred.

“No, hold on,” Abe said.

They all waited for him to gather his thoughts.

“I understand what she means. We can strike at his resources. His possessions. His supporters as well. We must attack everything. He is but one mind who trusts nobody with his personal affairs while we are many. If we can overwhelm him with issues, his mental state will eventually deteriorate. I have gathered detailed information on his financial holdings. Please wait while I go collect them.”

The lich literally flew away. Viv used the opportunity to serve herself another cup. Resisting cold did not mean one enjoyed it, after all. Abe returned a few minutes later with several files which Viv immediately set to arrange before her. She went over notes, statements, intercepted transmissions, schedules. Her mind absorbed everything in her quest to inflict maximum damage. There were no skills of hers that promoted duplicity but she was her

father's daughter and one didn't grow the child of a devious politician without learning a few tricks.

"Can we help?" Sidjin asked with some hesitation.

"Do you have a polymath skill or something similar?"

"Well, no."

"Then wait a bit please. I'm almost done."

The crew — Viv had decided they were a crew since they intended to break quite a few laws — gathered around her with steaming cups to watch her work. It took her less than ten minutes to gather piles and eventually brandish a schedule like one waves a flag.

"This. Elunath frequently visits the Bank of Helock to access a private safe."

"Wouldn't his possessions be better hidden in his manor?" Rakan asked.

"You're right. Whatever's in there is meaningful enough that he keeps it in one of the most secure locations in the city yet still makes sure it's not in his house. Whatever it is, it must be precious. And the good news is that he didn't pick the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange."

"How is that relevant?" Abe asked.

"Because we're going to burglarize it and I would hate to step on the feet of people who keep my money."

Abe considered her proposal for a few seconds.

"Marvelous. I have more information on the bank's structure. Let us reconvene tomorrow after the assassin has arrived. I must admit, as attractive as killing Elunath is, I will enjoy humiliating him first even more."

"Here it is," Viv said a little nervously.

Rakan watched Abe move with trepidation. The lich used careful movements to remove an oak staff from the pedestal where it had been engraved. Four small cores shone over its length at equal distance to each other, one for each of the primary colors.

The young mage took the staff in trembling hands. Immediately, his leaking aura settled. Power dripped into the cores at a steady pace while the two others watched in wonder.

"It appears to be working," Abe stated. "Although not my best creation by far, I believe you will find this tool suitable to your needs, young Rakan."

“Yeah. Thanks, I... I can't really repay you?”

“Fret not. I have vast amounts of resources at my disposal. It pleases me to see Halurians rising above the cutthroat customs of their home nations to seek greatness elsewhere. You are a credit to your people, young Rakan.”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“I believe that taking care of my allies will eventually pay off. Altruism is... is important. Is it not? I believe it is. Yes. Now you can leave with your mind at peace?”

“If you're sure you don't need me...”

Rakan's sister was in Harrak with the hunters by now for the sake of safety. Viv didn't know Tarana very well. Their relationship had always been frosty since the young woman pictured her brother's life as peaceful and stable, two things Viv was known to deny by her mere presence. The recent events had not proven her wrong either. Nevertheless, she had accepted to relocate without struggle. The recent race riots had removed any illusion she had on how Halurians were perceived around the city. Now, Rakan could join her to recover and learn how to make the best of the situation.

“I just feel like I'm running away...”

“You're hurt,” Viv said. “You need time to recover and adapt. I assure you that there is enough to do around the land we've reclaimed. You might also want to try your hand against the undead. No shortage of those.”

“I know that. I mean that you're all here. I know I'm being a burden.”

“A unit is composed of many members,” Abe interrupted. “If those members are hurt, the unit worries. Taking care of yourself and returning once you have recovered is the best service you can render right now. Your companions care about you.”

“What if you get hurt and I could have been here to help? To prevent it?”

“With enough ifs you can sit atop the divine throne in Larrean with Maranor upon your lap.”

Rakan crossed his arms, half surprised and half amused.

“Forgive me for the outburst,” Abe continued. “Do not mull over dark thoughts until they poison your mind with hypothetical scenarios that will never see the day. You do not have to wait or be idle. Your task is to learn how to function with the staff then help around the city. I am certain Viviane's senechal has a list of chores she cannot wait to hoist upon your shoulders, young Rakan.”

“You're right. I guess. Yeah, I have my own path to follow. Thanks again. I really can't repay you but I will certainly try.”

Rakan left, eager to try the staff in the ritual room. Viv watched him go with just a little bit of guilt. It was not that they were getting rid of him. She really believed in her own words. It was that, even though Rakan had decided to take part in the tournament himself, the tragedy that led to him being maimed could arguably be born from her spark of luck. History happened while she was around and that history made victims. She knew it. She just couldn't help it.

Perhaps a broken core could be repaired. At the very least, she knew whom to ask. Her return to the Academy was going to be interesting.

Viv's wings were weird.

The smooth surface of solid black mana hid things inside she didn't quite understand. There were no obvious muscles designed to move them and yet they moved, and they did so with a strength only limited by Viv's stature and weight. Viv could direct them with as much precision as her own arms. They gave tactile feedback. For all intents and purposes, those were extra stabby limbs and yet they were clearly not designed for that purpose. They were meant as an anchor, a signal that magic was going to happen. The need to use them as such always lingered at the back of Viv's psyche, even during exercises.

Which was bothering her right now.

The Chalice's surface was small but cluttered with stones, ruins, and the craggy trees that grew up at this altitude with the constant wind twisting their trunks like snakes. One could grow familiar with this place which was why Viv was never given enough time to study it. Her maddened race sent her climbing over a beheaded statue, wings planting into nearby growths to carry her the last few inches. Sure steps on roots and she was off at a dead run towards the entrance to the underground.

Her instincts screamed at her.

A stone bounced on her instant shield, deflected into a nearby column. Viv ducked under another. She launched herself at a dead sprint, wings balanced behind her. She stopped. She jumped to the side. Her wings tensed. Her balance was wrong. She lost her footing.

Solfis crashed where she had been a moment before. His clawed feet punched through the old stone with a ghastly crack. Viv's instincts still told her he was a danger. She was on the ground. Too slow.

Anger took over.

With a scream of rage, she pushed herself back towards him. The wings extended like twin blades towards the golem's ribcage, stopped at the last moment by two pinching hands. Viv had recovered before they could land but that didn't matter. She would never stand a chance against Solfis in a physical contest anyway.

"Sorry," she said, "I, ah, sorry. Lost it for a minute there."

Fury still pumped through her veins though it was directionless now.

//Think nothing of it.

//It is all part of your recovery and training.

“How do you make the instincts work anyway? It never triggered during training before but now I feel like you’re real threat to me. That you mean to hurt me.”

//I designed this method to train your acuity reflex skill.

//By abusing the way it works.

//I convince myself that you need to suffer in order for the training to be effective.

//Then I convince myself that applying that suffering is no longer necessary as I reach for you.

“I. Err. You can do that?”

//The advantage of a perfect mind instead of a mess of hormones and poorly firing neurons.

“Wow.”

//Though I admit that you are far ahead of the fleshbag curve.

“I just thought you couldn’t hurt me at all.”

//I can inflict discomfort in the name of progress and overall safety.

“Right. Well, speaking of discomfort, I’m done for now.”

Even a month after the fact, Viv still couldn’t move for a full hour without feeling a deep exhaustion. She also ate more and spent half the day sleeping. Low, unceasing pains had become a constant companion, though it never affected the same place twice. It wasn’t too bad though, and she was too bored to stay in bed. Moving with her wings deployed had become a priority. Getting a new wardrobe equipped with flaps was another.

Her super cool black and silver armor no longer fit.

That was only temporary. Yep!

//A word before we return.

“Tell me.”

//The making of liches was strictly forbidden by the empire and all liches and people participating in the making of liches were to be executed without trial.

//There were no exceptions.

//The reason why liches still occurred was that it remains easy for a caster with enough time to become one.
//All it takes is tethering the soul to one's deceased body.
//A feat that veteran mages at the top of the fourth step can accomplish with enough will.
//Incidence of liches remained at around one per year on average during my time as an asset for the Harrakan military.
//Despite their numbers, no effort was ever made to accept and weaponize them.
//The cause is due to a combination of several factors.

"Which apply to our host."

//Indeed.
//First, liches grow in power as time passes.
//Thus, a lich left alone grows more dangerous.
//In this they are similar to necrarches.
//Second, liches are driven by a single purpose decided during death.
//They are incapable of deviating from that course.
//Thus liches cannot be directed nor controlled.
//Third, liches lose their humanity and their empathy the longer they operate.
//The phenomenon can be mitigated as Abe's example shows but never stopped.
//Thus, a lich will eventually lose the incentive to act as a citizen.
//Fourth, once their purpose is accomplished, they grow listless and destructive.

"So after Abe kills Elunath..."

//When it happens, Abenezigel will quickly suffer from the completion of his reason to live.
//Resulting in a quick degeneration of his social skills followed by a transformation into a true monster.

"Fuck."

//I apologize.
//I did not expect you to grow friendly with an undead.
//However, I do admire his resilience and his ability to maintain focus and sanity.

"Damn. It's like you admire him."

//Despite vastly different origins, we have much in common.

"So... uh... you plan on killing him?"

//Killing him serves Helock.
//Therefore, I will avoid doing so unless forced to act.
//Nevertheless, we should leave him as soon as we are done.

"Wait, so we both transferred our soul to a different body, more or less, right?"

//Yes.

“But mine is still alive so it’s... better?”

//Yes.

//The seat of your mental functions is still an organic brain.

//It relies on mana-altered biological processes.

//His mental functions rely on mana alone.

//He is missing key subconscious aspects.

“So his body is flawed. What if we found a way to... improve it?”

Solfis’ yellow glare bored into Viv’s.

//Elaborate.

“We may be able to return his carcass to a likeness of life. A sort of flesh golem. It might be possible for me.”

//You are getting very close to necromancy and the domain of Gomogog.

“How close?”

//Close enough to be careful during your research.

//We may as well look for options.

//Abenezigel’s contribution to Harrak might be... invaluable.

“So, kill an elemental, find a way to cure Rakan, find a way to help Abe. Looks like we got our work cut out for us.”

//I do expect a lot of cutting, yes.

Chapter 142: Administration

It felt weird to be back at the Academy after everything that happened, Viv thought. Her steps carried her past the entrance and the uncaring gaze of the guards, then through the familiar entrance garden and to the administrative building. No one gave her a second glance. No one paid much attention. The reason was simple. Viv had a disguise.

Abenezigel had prepared thoroughly, though it had now become clear that he lacked the sort of vision that could lead to a great plan. She now wore an amulet that masked her more prominent features, her eyes and peculiar skin tone. For everyone watching she would appear as a brown-eyed, dark-haired mousy young woman of Enorian origin, pretty much a second class citizen. Although it took more than Abe was capable off to bullshit an inspection skill, the amulet also bore a disturbing and most likely turbo illegal charm that made the inspector dismiss her. In short, they still saw all her information. They just didn't care. The guards didn't let her through because she was a student here but because she was uninteresting and harmless. As Viv opened the door to the administrative building, she was fully confident in her heart that this little trick would come back to bite her in the ass sooner rather than later.

Pissed her off a bit, that did.

Between the amulet and the gravity harness she wore just in case, she was confident Elunath would not start looking for her until after she completed all her errands.

Few people remained in the lobby so late in the morning. Darla, the head admin, gave her a dismissive glance at first, then her gaze zeroed on Viv with laser focus, confirming Viv's opinion that there was more to the prim woman than what was obvious at first glance. Darla straightened in her white uniform and placed a hand behind her back in a gesture even Viv found threatening. The elemental witch raised her hands, then slowly removed the amulet.

Viv's appearance returned to normal, sans the wings as she wanted to keep that a secret until forced to reveal them. Darla gasped in shock.

That made the next three seconds very awkward as Viv was forced to wait. Behind her, a student filling a form looked on with some curiosity.

"Oh... Oh, it's you!" Darla sputtered.

She gave Viv a look over.

"Well, most of you anyway."

"Har har. I assure you it's only temporary. I would like to re enroll for this semester. Unless there is a problem, of course."

"Well, the student register lists you as 'most likely dead' but seeing as you stand here without trying to eat my face off, I will assume that the rumors were exaggerated. Enrollment for the next semester is done with a simple signature. I will also update your student chit and there is the tuition fee. Fifteen gold talents and seven silver please."

Viv grumbled about rising prices. The Academy asked for a low fee from first years but then expected people to make money for themselves, even if it meant spending weekends recharging wards for rich families. Viv could afford it. It was the principle of the thing.

Her business concluded, Viv made her way to her dormitory where she expected to find Ereska. Her nice dress meant that students took her for a relative or a runner, though many frowned as she passed. The Academy was an exclusive place for mages and she didn't register as one. Many resented the intrusion in their sanctum.

It was the first time she realized what it meant to be a non caster in no position of authority. She was a nobody. The low rung of a highly hierarchical society. Her presence was barely tolerated on the assumption she would not be there if the authorities had not decreed it acceptable, and even then only temporarily.

Her mind wandered. Was she not the same, dating only casters and acting high and mighty? How bad was it, really? What if she had appeared in this world not through Emeric's intervention but by some mishap like, presumably, plenty of others? How many outlanders had died in the Halurian wilderness or slaughtered by parochial villages who could not trust a stranger before Nous' blessing could give them an edge? She shook her head as the path led up to the remote stone building where she had slept so many nights. It was not a good time for what ifs.

It turned out that Ereska wasn't here. Viv easily tracked the aristocratic mage to the nearby library. Ereska was working on her 'thesis', a way to generate mana from artificial dams to increase grain output. She no longer attended classes. Viv had to flash her chit at the librarian who would have pushed her off on her ass in an instant. Even Ereska looked at her with haughty annoyance when she dared interrupt.

"It's me, Viv."

"What is the meaning of... impossible. Really? Prove it."

"You snore when you're drunk."

"HUSH! Not here. Come."

The now much taller woman dragged her to a rest area where a nasty glare reminded a group of first years they ought to be studying and not gawking.

Viv removed her necklace. Ereska gasped as well. She also placed a hand against Viv's shoulder, going through the tightly controlled cloud of mana that formed Viv's aura.

"So much mana. Maranor's tits."

"Language?"

"Not now. And your eyes... Incredible. A black mana elemental caster. I... don't think there are any records of one."

"Nope. I'm the first."

"Fascinating. And... but wait..."

Ereska finally frowned.

“Did... the transformation fail on your legs?”

“It’s temporary! Temporary! Is everyone going to comment on it?”

“You’re two heads shorter.”

“I know. I noticed.”

“And almost completely flat. Like a boy.”

“Cut it out.”

“Still, I am delighted to see you again. You could have sent news, or did Elunath not permit it?”

“That is why I am here. I did not take Elunath’s offer. He is not what he said he is... and I will make him fall for that.”

Immediately, excitement left the mage’s frame. Her slanted eyes grew keen and narrow. Viv had her attention.

“Elaborate.”

“Elunath keeps sex slaves.”

It took a good fifteen minutes for Viv to recount her entire experience, not because she gave much detail but because Ereska’s sharp mind latched on the terms of the contract and would simply not let go. Their stats meant that Viv’s recall was perfect, which meant swearing on Neriad’s name that she wasn’t lying a mere formality. Her mana was drained and a soft golden glow surrounded her raised right hand in a soft halo.

“By all the gods light and dark. That is... The Academy exists exactly to protect young mages from such predatory practices! How could Dean Talit not know?”

“How did you not know?” Viv countered. “How did I not know? Exclusively female mages recruited at the end of puberty? We were being naive.”

Ereska slouched against the wall. Ereska never slouched, and she seldom swore.

“And you say he hunts after those who have no choice?”

“Or little choice. People from very poor background usually.”

“The local nobles always pick those up when their powers fully manifest. Elunath is a liar! Of course, anyone with talent would be nurtured as much as possible. Casters are too valuable

to be left raising a brood of fishermen. Poppycock. He is lying to entrap promising prospects. Arg! Wait until I tell everyone. You will tell everyone, yes?"

"I suspect Talit will find me before long. I want to see Tod as well."

"I will walk you to the medical faculty."

Ereska was not fully absorbed in her outrage. She agreed to spread the word to her friends and the noble families as much as possible. The old guard wouldn't give two shits about what an archmage did with poor strangers but younger nobles had a natural aversion for forced marriages and old men going after much younger partners.

"I know what you think. Most of us will not care what Elunath does with peasants and coal burners. After all, the higher classes have been abusing their powers for generations and will continue doing so as long as mankind is mankind. But Elunath is not preying on fishermen, he is preying on mages, my dear. It will be enough to raise quite a few eyebrows. Oh, I still cannot believe it."

It was now Viv's turn to question Ereska, not least because she had not expected the cold woman to adopt this cause with such fiery passion.

"Be careful not to poke him too much. I can hide. You, on the other hand..."

"Oh do not worry. If I criticize Elunath then suddenly disappear, the clans will be in an uproar. If he wants to stay here at all, he will not escalate. I regret to say that the same will apply in reverse. Never will the council of elders oppose his practices, no matter how despicable they may be."

"If everyone knows him for what he is, that is enough."

"It is not!"

"It is enough for your part in this," Viv amended. "Perhaps we can prevent future entrapments as well."

"You have a plan," Ereska stated.

Viv spared a glance at the mage, tempted. But no. Ereska was a daughter of Helock. Viv couldn't trust her with more, couldn't risk her with more.

"I have and you should not get involved. Breaking his grip on Helockian society is a daunting enough task, don't you think?"

"Yes. I suppose you are right. I should be on my way. I will be heading home immediately. Ugh, I still cannot believe my ears! Disgusting. Goodbye and good luck."

Viv walked through the far gate leading outside of the Academy's walls and to the plateau above Helock where the medical faculty welcomed the sick who could make their way there. On her way, Viv was confronted to her new reality.

"Get in fucking line, wench."

"I'm a student," Viv replied to the thug outside with patience and understanding. Couldn't betray her return with a casual dismemberment.

She dangled the chit in front of her.

"The fuck is that?"

A local guard stopped the thug before Viv could explode. Apparently, they accepted outside help to keep the unwashed properly lined up in stressful situations. Viv did her best to shut off the stench of filth, disease, and outright rot spreading from the mass. She was pretty sure the old man in a wheelbarrow dragged by a crying girl had been dead for at least an hour. After more than a month of bed rest and earth series watching, the return to reality was giving her whiplash.

"Hello, could you please let magister Tod that I am here? My name is Viv."

"Magister Tod is busy at the moment. Please wait in line and we'll be with you shortly," the staff lady at the front told her without a glance.

Viv was not familiar with her but the staff rotated between all departments so that wasn't unusual.

"I expect him to be busy. I just would like him to know I'm here," Viv calmly insisted.

That was fine. This was the emergency service of an overcrowded hospital. It was only natural that people could be curt. She wouldn't raise her voice, she would remain calm. Many people were suffering much more than she was. Just take a step back and breathe.

The wood of the lobby groaned under her grip. It cracked. The staff lady looked up in silent alarm, then saw the splintered crack snaking towards her.

The guards shifted.

"I appreciate that you are very busy and I do not expect the magister to rush out to see me or anything. My request is simple. Make the magister aware of my presence then he can decide what to do. Look, you're here to filter people out. I got it. I'm the person who regrows limbs."

"You're not magister Ashra."

Viv blinked. Apparently they'd managed to make the spell work without her! That was great news.

“I’m her assistant. The other one? I haven’t been there in over a month.”

“Suuuuure, I’ll let him know but if you’re trying to fool me...”

The wood creaked even more. The staff lady suddenly remembered that little detail. Viv’s pleasant smile was growing more strained by the second.

“Don’t make threats, pretty please with a nice slice of permonn on top.”

The message was sent in record time. In the meanwhile, Viv sat down to wait.

“This is a place of healing, little lady. Please don’t make trouble,” an old guard told her with a fatherly tone.

Viv sighed. There was so much impatience in her, suddenly. Rage thundered in her brain at the slightest frustration and it was all she could do to keep it at bay. Even her enhanced mind struggled to keep a lid on the constant need to put people in her place.

“Not going to be an undercover agent for very long, that’s for sure,” she grumbled to herself.

“VIVANE!” a familiar voice yelled.

Tod was an ancient black man with a majestic beard, rail thin and with a permanent sore throat. It felt strange to see him hurry down a nearby corridor with a panicked assistant in tow. She stood up and saw the confusion on his face, and damn the subtlety, she removed her amulet. Her eyes put a stop to Tod but he recovered quickly. Much more quickly than the guards, in any case.

“You made it. You are alive!”

“Yes, magister. I heard you managed to regrow a limb without me? Well done.”

“Examination room. Now.”

“Errr, I was just here to — “

But Tod had turned away without waiting for confirmation, leaving Viv with no reasonable choice but to follow.

“Ashra and a bishop of Enttiku and it takes them six hours. For an arm!”

“Hey it’s a proof of concept. I’m sure you can refine the process.”

“Young lady, this is the heart of learning on Param. If we can’t do it, no one can, and we can’t. Not without Ashra developing her understanding of change.”

“Just be patient.”

Tod stopped to glare at her. The effect was lessened when he met her eyes and flinched.

“Not going to get used to that. In there now, young lady.”

“I’m really just here to ask questions.”

“I’m very old and in charge and your medical practitioner, That means you do what I say.”

“Fine, fine.”

They entered a freshly deserted room. The linen on the bed was still damp and the scent of soap and alcohol barely masked that of dream weed, a local intoxicant.

“Hmph. Sit down so I can have a look at you.”

Tod cast several spells in quick successions, passing his gnarly hands over the still dressed form of Viv with increasing puzzlement.

“Well, congratulations. According to my measurements, you’re perfectly dead.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“And inexplicably shorter!”

“Heard that one too. I’m fine, really.”

“I could write a treatise on elemental anatomy if you give me a bit of your time.”

“Wouldn’t that be of... very limited use?”

Viv withstood a two minute rant on science and the necessity of understanding first before considering practical applications.

“And you’d better not forget it! And why did you disappear on me? When are you coming back? We have a waiting list of amputees. Veterans from the latest Hallurian adventure. Well?”

“About that. I’m going to be busy for at least a few weeks.”

“Doing what exactly?”

“Blood feud with Elunath after he tried to sign me into becoming his sex slave.”

Tod glared but then that was his normal state of being when he was thinking about something.

“Explain.”

Viv did so, sharing the details of the contracts. She swore on Neriad, sent the golden god some more mana in prayer and got him to back her word again. For the longest time, Tod didn't react.

"Young Tallit knows?" he finally asked.

"I can't be sure. I'll probably see him afterward."

"If he knew and did nothing I'll be very, very cross. The Academy stands for freedom of mages to pursue their craft for themselves and offer their services to those who deserve it. I know we're competing with the ambition and greed of local rulers. We can't do anything about those! But a poacher and sexual predator in our own gods-accursed city? Wait. You are going to declare a vendetta?"

"Yes."

Another glare, this one more cautious. Viv was growing used to Tod's different flavors of evil eye again.

"I assume you have a plan."

"Yes."

"It'd better be a good one because Elunath is many things but he's not a pushover. Do you know he once crushed an entire fortress?"

"He did it at least twice that we know of."

"Well, at least you've done your homework. And we? Wait, don't tell me. In the meanwhile, I'm going to request a physical for all the poor ladies under his care."

"He probably won't agree."

"Then at least it'll piss him off. Off you go now, I'm busy. Don't die. Hop to it!"

"Wait. I had a question. Rakan has a—"

"I know he has a broken core and I already told him it was not something fixable with medicine."

"Oh, he already came to you."

"People have their own brains and drives, you remember, yes? Of course he came to me. I'll tell you what I told him. He needs to focus on mana control and channel development. Cores are not static things for us mortals, yes? The most important thing is not to give up. He can still cast well enough! I gave him instructions and exercises, the rest you'll have to see with him. Enough dilly dally. Be on your way!"

“Yes you old curmudgeon, I’m going. Neriad’s buttocks.”

“No backtalk!”

Viv rolled her eyes, replaced her pendant and made her way out. As expected, there was a runner requesting her presence at the dean’s office. It did not take long for her to explain her position to the singularly ugly man, which made his bushy eyebrows furrow even more. Dean Tallit gave her his blessing to be excused from class for the duration of the blood feud. He was also the first person not to remark upon the fact she was a little diminished.

“This is quite worrisome. Elunath is a frequent sponsor of promising students so we always assumed he had an interest in Helock’s development. Between what you swore and some other hints I elected to disregard due to a lack of complaints from the participants, it appears we will have to give all his contracts a very thorough look. I assume you have a plan?”

“Of course, I have a plan. Why is everyone asking? I very often have a plan.”

“Shortly after your first meeting, you rushed out and destroyed a warehouse looking for your kidnapped dragon. You killed two people in plain sight.”

“They had it coming.”

“I do not deny that. You just seem... impetuous at times.”

“Look, which of us defeated a prince and poured molten gold down his throat? I did. I have plans.”

“You are not exactly filling me with confidence. Elunath has been at this game for a very long time. If he finds you...”

Tallit eloquently smashed his hand on his desk.

“Splat.”

“Yes yes everyone takes me for an idiot. I know he will kill me if he corners me. It will be fine. I haven’t declared the feud yet.”

“Very well. You should go now then disappear. I don’t believe other students have recognized you so far but there will be rumors and Elunath will hear them.”

“I’m going as soon as we are done here.”

“Very well. We will investigate your assumptions and if they are true, it will be clear that Elunath has benefitted from our institution and our talent while violating everything we stand for. The Academy will not join in with your feud but we will not support Elunath either. Quite the contrary.”

“That is all I can ask.”

Afternoon had barely started when Viv made her way down the noble quarter. Hunger needled her but she hesitated to find food because time was not on her side, even with the disguise masking her identity as half elemental. Elunath would learn of her survival sooner or later and, contrary to everyone else so far, he would seriously wonder how she managed to transition. The fact she had not declared a blood feud would not stop him if he really wanted to get his claws on her.

No one paid attention to her while he walked at a brisk pace, having failed to locate a cart. The road was muddy today, the sky depressed. It was the first time she had returned to Helock since the change and she wasn't having fun. The city had changed, or maybe she had. Elunath could feel every footstep around and could have perhaps recognized her if she had kept the same weight. It made her paranoid, eager to activate her gravity harness to escape the danger under her soles. She squashed the urge. It was going to be fine.

The avenue broadened and the sashes and shoulder pads of the nobility gave way to the red uniforms of civil servants out to grab a bite. She ended on the large central square, sparing a glance to the ominous form of the Bank of Helock. It was just as monolithic and hermetic as the Manipeleso banks she had seen everywhere. The austere facade tolerated no windows at all on its front and only barred, thin ones on the side. Tough nut to crack.

The town hall was a buzz of activity, civilians and civil servants rushing in and out of the outer wall that surrounded a massive rectangular building. It was the largest man-made structure she'd seen since leaving Harrak, with several entrances. Battle mages and soldiers alike kept a vigil all over the place. One of them, an officer, frowned when he saw her. He moved to intercept with two blade mages in tow.

Viv let them catch up to her. She wasn't doing anything wrong yet. There was also a food cart on the side that had just gotten her attention. She was constantly ravenous these days and the scent of grilled meat and tuber was more than she could resist.

“You are not what you appear to be,” the officer told her without preamble. “Unless you can reveal your real identity and justify the obfuscation, I will ask you to follow me.”

“I can reveal my true appearance and the reason of my presence but I'd like my privacy respected. I'm in good standing.”

She waved her Academy chit, which was at the end of a chain conveniently attached to her bank token. The officer picked it between two gloved fingers with an amusing level of apprehension. Not too weird considering physical power and lethality related much less to size here than it did on earth. Viv watched the shock bloom on his expression once he read her name.

“You? We thought you were dead...”

“It didn’t stick. I am very much alive.”

“What? Oh. Then...”

“I am here on official business. My obfuscation serves to protect my anonymity while I do so. I am sure you understand.”

“Yes, of course. May I ask what it is? I can direct you to the right place.”

Ah, it felt good to get the VIP treatment again. The constant annoyance boiling in Viv’s veins simmered down a little.

“I’m here to declare a vendetta against Archmage Elunath.”

Viv could have shoved a whole egg in the officer’s mouth without touching the teeth. His sidekicks were not faring much better. They were attracting some attention around, with three heavily armed men showing signs of shock next to a petite woman of no discernible interest. It took a few long and frankly boring seconds for them to recover. Next they were going to ask her if she had a plan or something.

“That... well, are you quite sure? I believe only Helockian clans may declare one.”

“Nope, any citizen in good standing and I am considered one under the law.”

“But...”

“Trust me, I checked.”

“Against Elunath? Lady, you are out of your mind...”

“That is for me to decide, is it not?” Viv replied, her annoyance returning with a vengeance.

“Yeah, sure. Your funeral. Look, Elunath has been at this game for hundreds of years...”

“Show me the way or get out of the way. I’m not debating my life choices with you.”

The officer breathed in with thunder on his brow. He breathed out immediately though, his anger bleeding out. Viv got the impression it was a common occurrence.

“Fine. It’s your decision. Follow me.”

The advantage of having an escort of three burly men, two of whom radiated mana, was that queues immediately became a problem of the past. Viv was led through a door and up three flights of stairs through what appeared to be a government wing. The place was heavily guarded and comparatively empty. The officer finally stopped in a crowded room filled with desks overloaded with papers and equipment, including a few mana-fed contraptions she did not recognize. A pallid man who looked offended that someone dared enter his domain turned to glare.

“Yes? This is the clan relationship management office. Are you lost?”

“The little la— that is, Academy student Viviane would like to, ah, make a request. For a vendetta.”

The civil servant glared some more, this time in silence. He was still leaning over one of his subordinates, two hands planted on the woman’s desk. She was looking increasingly uncomfortable. The rest of the office had frozen likewise. Viv was wondering if she should just use a sound spell and scream her intention over the entire city to get it out of their system.

“You are not an offended clan. You’re not even Helockian.”

“And yet, the law allows me to declare one as a student of the Academy.”

“I don’t know where you come from but here in Helock, we do not play rule mangling like Baranese baronesses arguing over taxes. The vendetta is one of our most ancient and respected traditions. It’s meant for the desperate to die with honor. Do you understand that? You want to make a mockery of our honor and you think we will just smile and get you on your way.”

“I just want to declare vendetta in a timely manner as the law permits. I am not mangling any rules and I assure you, I am very serious.”

The man huffed. Viv had to take several deep breaths not to explode. She felt her core heat, the sensation new and unsettling. There was so much power in here, waiting to be unleashed. Sadly, no amount of might had ever helped defeat bureaucracy.

“Yes, though I believe I need to enlighten you as to what you can actually do. The laws of Helock do not allow you to ‘declare’ a vendetta as you seem to believe. What they allow you to do is to petition the council, following which they will decide if your request has merit. Fortunately for you, the council happens to be in session this afternoon.”

He gave a condescending smile.

“I will transmit your request as is your right, and as is my right as servant of Helock, if you are refused and considered to be wasting the time of the council, I will fine you for the maximum legal amount of two gold and seven silver talents. Iskes, get me a copy of form twelve.”

“We... don’t have any form twelve sir?”

“Then copy it...” the civil servant slowly enunciated as if to a particularly slow child.

It took the lady five minutes to find the original form which was lodged between two archives, then ten seconds to copy it, her hand a blur. Skills applied to every path here.

Viv filled said form which was a little annoying because first, it asked several questions that related to a Helockian clan she never had. That reinforced the impression she was only abusing a loophole. Her second source of annoyance stemmed from the fact she was filling a bloody paper with her name and address just so she could legally engage in a fight to the death with a man who could swim through stone. It just felt so damn weird and illogical.

“There, I’m done.”

“Excellent. Follow me, the council should have just convened. I am sure they will be delighted with the diversion.”

Even the corridors leading to the council room were cramped. Viv remembered that the town hall had started as a keep, which was why it was huge and monolithic rather than spread across various buildings. It was clear the Helock government had outgrown the facility a long time ago with how cluttered every inch was with offices, desks, and screaming people. Viv walked through meandering rows of richly decorated corridors that felt more stuffy than solemn. One couldn’t just lay a rug on naked fortress stone and expect it to turn into a palace. Eventually, they reached a heavily guarded sector and Viv was let into a large room with windows opened on one side.

It was perhaps the only room that didn’t feel entirely crowded. Rows of seats lined the back where richly dressed men and women attended the proceedings, muttering and moving in small groups. A large circular table occupied most of the remaining space. Clan leaders sat and conferred around it. Viv recognized several from her etiquette class, including Pendath, current ruler of the majority. Ereska had some choice words to say about the man who facilitated the ethnic riots as a ‘way for the trash to take itself out’ as he had worded it. He sat, obviously bored while a man droned on about what appeared to be a trade dispute. Many of the seats were empty. On a far corner, the scribe on duty yawned. Viv noted four battle mages, one in each corner. There were wards as well. She hoped it wouldn’t become relevant.

It might, because Pendath was an asshole.

The office manager made his way to the front, where a sort of master of ceremony picked up the form. The pair muttered seriously. By then, several nobles had noticed Viv and the disturbance she was causing. Most were hostile, which Viv blamed on her demure appearance and simple dress. People rudely inspected her.

“Alright,” Pendath interrupted. “Enough with the secret conference. What is going on?”

“A new council request made by that lady over there.”

“What is that request and how is it more important than the future of our food production!” the droning noble bellowed, clad in outrage and gaudy yellow cloth.

“The migration path of starlings isn’t our ‘food production’, Eustath. I’ll hear what this is about or risk falling asleep.”

“The little lady is a member of the Academy. Viviane.”

“The Outlander? I thought she was dead. And... taller.”

Viv fumed in her boots.

“That’s the thing. She claims she made it and errr... that she has a grudge against Elunath who apparently tried to enslave her. Sexually. She wants to declare a vendetta.”

This time there was little shock to be shown. There were, however, a lot of sneers. Pendath scoffed.

“Elunath can have everyone he wants. You’re delusional if you think he’d make any effort for an ugly little thing like you. And you’re not even a clan.”

“Nevertheless, I can request a vendetta.”

“And we are free to tell you to sod off.”

“The law—”

“We are the law, wench. If you want to kill yourself against Elunath because the change made you hysterical, feel free to so but don’t waste our time with preposterous requests! Someone escort her out. This isn’t a circus, by Sardanal. It’s a ruling council!”

Well, Viv thought.

I tried.

Viv casually snapped the fingers of the office manager as he grabbed her shoulder. She felt the guards behind her move forward to stop her just as the battlemages rushed forward. She suspected they were screaming orders under their mask but she couldn’t be sure. She had just suppressed the sound in the entire room. Another colorless spell amplified her own.

With one hand still gripping the gnat’s shattered digit, she slowly removed the pendant, letting her eyes return to their natural colors. The battlemages slowed down. Several cast wards.

[Helockain Battlemage, dangerous. Fourth step casters who form the backbone of Helock’s military. Killer. Disciplined. Coordinated.]

They tasted of many colors but they were not her match. Not even close. Her aura expanded until the room darkened and black mana fumaroles hissed on the ground at her feet.

“Listen, it seems we misunderstand each other. I am not making a nice request. I am courteously offering you an opportunity.”

Three of the mages had stopped by the council and activated wards. They could speak again but wisely elected not to. The last approached Viv at an angle with manacles out so she lifted a finger and smashed a bench into his tibias. Though his shield held, his balance did not. He wisely decided to stay at a distance after that.

“I’m going after Elunath for what he’s tried to do to me. I don’t care if you believe me or not. Your opinion is inconsequential. What I need you to understand is that the result for Helock will be different if we are legally bound by rules.”

“Cease this instant! Are you mad? I demand you to stop!”

“And I demand you to do your fucking job. Now I’ll ask one last time. Do you grant the vendetta or do you want to get acquainted with the phrase ‘collateral damage’?”

“We could also put you in jail for outrage until you have learned some respect!”

That was it.

Viv’s fury, which she had kept bottled for some time, erupted like a volcano to pour from her soul in the form of a wave of intimidation more powerful than anything she’d ever managed. She let her wings extend from her shoulder blades while scales as dark as the abyss bloomed over the dress. Excalibur spells snaked from her closed fist to lick the air with a subtle hiss. Pendath took a step back under the onslaught despite his obvious social skills. Even the soldiers at Viv’s back fell back. As for the nobles, they collapsed where they were. Viv saw herself reflected on a nearby shield. The only thing that remained of her mild persona were two viridian circles and the hungering void.

“You can certainly try.”

Come on come on come on come on do it just fucking try me. Do it. Do it do it do it so I can let go.

Black mana rolled out of her form. The wings chafed from wanting to anchor her so very badly. She could just do it now. She could just kill them all to the last one. That would help just as surely, no? Behead the snake and the city turns into a pit of chaos and she did like chaos very very much. They just had to give her the excuse. Just try to get her. Just lay their hand on her. The last remnant of self-control clung to that last, unyielding, uncompromising condition that they had to fuck up first.

Slowly and without breaking eye contact, Pendath picked up the form. He stamped it.

“Request granted. And impressive display. Elunath is still going to squash you like an insect.”

Viv pulled everything back in.

With slow, mechanical movements, she replaced the pendant. The manager lying at her feet had soiled himself at some point and the room was definitely not improved by the stench.

Her task was done.

Things had gotten... rather closer than she intended.

Viv turned around and left. To her surprise, the officer who had guided her all along walked ahead to guide her out.

"I hope this doesn't mean you'll get disciplined," Viv allowed.

"I think they'll want to forget this ever happened. Was it true what you said? About Elunath?"

"All of his 'assistants' were recruited as young girls and he beds them all."

"Huh. Powerful people and their quirks. Sorry, that was inconsiderate."

"Rather so, yes."

"And you'll go after him now?"

"No, first I want Helock to know what kind of degenerate he is."

The officer pondered her words for two sets of stairs and a lobby.

"The council knows now, at least, even if they might not believe you. Looks like your demonstration fulfilled your purpose."

"Oh no no no. I come from a civilization that has elevated smear campaigns to a science. Believe me, I am just getting started."

Chapter 143: The Brandolini Principle

"You?" Viv asked with total shock. "You? But I thought you were retired! Abe hired you?"

Irao winced, which caused Viv to lower her voice immediately. The Hadal leader looked good in street clothes with a nice hat. Just dandy in a slightly gaunt sort of way.

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, he hired me."

“And you are fine with that? The assassination?”

“Not really.”

Viv weighed her options. Irao seemed a little ill at ease in their secondary base in the craggy forest of eastern Helock. Maybe he wasn't here of his own accord. She wasn't sure how far she could or even ought to push but confirming consent seemed like a good idea.

“Irao, why are you here if you do not wish to be an assassin for someone else anymore? Are you being forced by someone?”

“No. I—”

He scratched the side of his head and sighed. Viv waited for a little while. The Hadal sighed deeply when he was done. He made his point, moving his hands to accentuate every new sentence.

“You are in danger. I don't want you to die. So I help. I am here of my own accord so I can leave if I want. I missed you, and... I love bank heists.”

He grew a little animated.

“They always have the best wards and the best gates. Sometimes golems. A great enigma. I love to crack them open but my previous Helockian employer always used that bank and didn't want me to get in.”

“Not Elunath, right?”

“No. A high clan. Can we go steal soon?”

“Yes. I just want to get started on my first little project. Can I count on you to join with the preparations? You can just write us notes if you prefer.”

“Yes. Yes, that would be good. I have been looking forward to this. Goodbye.”

The more Viv walked and the more she thought this was a bad idea. It was only because the others were too noticeable, too well known that she was willing to take the risk. Abe didn't have a solution to change footsteps or Sidjin would have gone instead. It didn't matter that she could depopulate the entire South Gate slums in ten minutes. A shiv through the ribs would always remain an unpleasant experience. It was not so long ago that walking alone in a bad district was something she would never have entertained, special forces training or not. Good form could stop a stronger man. Maybe two, if she really caught them off guard. Five people and she would get her teeth kicked in no matter what. The phantom threat hanging over her made her heart beat faster. Erupt here, and Elunath would come rushing. Then...

She might just die.

Viv forced down a shiver and hastened her steps. A trio of men followed her jaunt with unblinking eyes like a pack of stalking hyenas. Mud and worse things squelched under her boots. It stank of human refuse and unwashed bodies. The spring sun removed the cloak of darkness from the pavement to reveal the utter state of everything, from decrepit walls to broken roofs and filthy steps. The people were constantly on guard. Women moved in groups. Viv was standing out like a sore thumb and that attracted a lot of attention. The bad kind.

She sighed in relief when the street angled right, opening onto a small square around a well from which paupers drew water under the vigilant gaze of goons armed with truncheons. A two-storied inn reigned over the surrounding hovels like a beggar king. Its sagging frame still stood solid despite its old age. A corroded metal sign read "The Dog's Bollocks" over its entrance. Viv spared a glance to the mastiff standing vigil by the door. The chain was barely long enough to reach the handle.

The dog stood still. It had a better sense than the hovering thugs.

Viv got in.

There was light inside, enough to see that the main room was rather large, with a bar at the far side and stairs leading up on her right. The ground had been swept and covered with fresh hay. Sadly, basic hygiene didn't extend to the patrons. It took every scrap of self-control she had not to wince at the heady cocktail of rancid sweat and cheap perfume assaulting her nostrils with eye-watering intensity. The people inside tried to look the part of those with more than two iron bits to rub together and failed spectacularly. Ragged upper class coats and stained jackets barely concealed the handles of clubs and pig stickers. Those were, Viv realized, the muscle. The brain was nowhere to be found. Maybe it was still asleep.

Having pushed through legs and snickering comments, Viv sat at the counter though she hated exposing her back to the room. Her contact was due any time soon. The barman moved in to take her order with a curious look. He was a completely shaven, older man and the cleanest person here. Sad, droopy eyes gave him an air of constant worry.

"You sure you should be around here?"

"I'm meeting someone," Viv replied carefully.

Maybe if she implied she was under someone's protection, they would leave her alone. No one would look at her and believe she could defend herself. Another inspection brushed against the amulet. It warmed a little against her skin.

The sharks were circling.

"I'll have a beer please."

The local variety was made from a popular cereal and flat water, with a slightly salty taste. Viv was elated to discover that the mug was clean and the drink rather tasty. She paid her three bits and listened in on conversations. She failed. People used some sort of cant she couldn't follow. Pressure mounted, as did her annoyance. Mostly, she was annoyed at being scared, and especially at being scared of lowlives the average heavy could probably have for breakfast. They couldn't realistically kill her but her brain wouldn't listen.

It reminded her of days of fear and powerlessness.

Her core pulsed softly. The energy wanted out.

The door opened and shut. A moment later, a man sat down by her side with a smirk of amused incredulity. He wore better and cleaner cloth than the surrounding thugs but only just so. He was handsome in a rugged sort of way, with curly hair and long fingers stained with ink blotches. She had found her contact.

"You must be Busson."

"I am, and you are my mysterious customer! I expected someone... taller."

"You could have picked a better place for a meeting," she hissed, out of patience.

Busson shrugged unapologetically.

"A man cannot be too careful. Some folks can't tell that I'm just the messenger, not the author yea? I just make copies and sometimes, I don't even distribute them! The targets blame me for 'unkind words'. I've had to move my workshop twice since last year, me, a poor and innocent entrepreneur."

The sarcastic sneer showed how much Busson cared about it all.

"I'm just being careful. The owner of this place and myself, we have an understanding. He will protect me, yeah? Though when you contacted me, I didn't expect a little lady to be the one to come. So, what will it be and how much will you pay?"

Viv placed a small engraved sphere on the counter before activating it. Abe had given her a sound barrier tool just so she wouldn't reveal herself as a caster.

In the following silence, she slid several pamphlets over to her prospective hire.

"A thousand of each."

Busson whistled at the amount, then he read and took a sharp breath. His fingers clenched at the copies. His breath quickened.

"You're fucking crazy."

“Five gold talents per delivery. A third in advance. We will handle the distribution ourselves. You only need to give us the finished products.”

“We? Who is we? Wait, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. You are all insane. I want no part of this...”

Viv heard the outrage and fear progressively turn to consideration as the man finished his sentence, calculations plain on his features. Five gold talents was a tremendous amount of money for someone living in the slums. Fifteen was enough to change cities and get a small house. It was enough to turn the head of an ambitious man.

“Five in advance, you say? You have them here?”

“I do, and before you get any ideas, just consider the kind of group that can throw around that sum on pamphlets, hmmm?”

“Oh do not be concerned. I have my professional pride!”

Viv gave a noncommittal smile. She didn’t give a shit what he said. A walk to Elunath’s door and Busson would need replacement vertebrae.

“Deliver the finished product to the Post Guild. They will be expecting it and pay you on delivery.”

“This is my turn to tell you not to short change me, I suppose?”

“You know the Post Guild doesn’t mess around with package deliveries.”

“I suppose they wouldn’t. Nasty business those guilds. Cutthroat competition.”

“I bet. Will you take the contract?”

“Sure. Hand over the money.”

Busson slipped the papers in his waist pocket. Viv felt like pocketing money in a thug den was a little risky but he did mention he knew the local crew.

“Here.”

Busson snatched the purse from Viv’s hand. His fingers danced on the leather surface with great speed. Was he feeling the coins?

“All there. Good. I’ll be off then. Oh, and a last word of warning. I might be under the Gaters protection but you ain’t so I’d make myself scarce if I were you.”

With a last nod, Busson left at a brisk walk. Viv made to stand and face the man who’d made for her as soon as the scribe had left. Viv looked at him and knew shit wouldn’t go well. He

had a manic smile, crazy hair, the filthiest, gaudiest outfit of the lot and, more tellingly, his shiv was already out.

“Alright, pipsqueak, Hand over the rest of the coin.”

Silence spread over the inn. Viv knew what was going on. They were letting their crazy test the ground.

Well.

That was fine.

“This is not—”

Viv did not really finish her sentence. She calmly grabbed her beer mug behind her and sent it at the man’s face.

It was at that exact moment that the mug snapped in half.

Because of course, the vandal title picked its moments.

The handle plinked against the back of the head of a tall man who’d been badly losing at cards if the bits in front of him were any say, while the body smashed on the chest of the bar’s tallest thug, spilling leftover liquid on his fancy doublet.

The crazy man blinked, then shrieked in outrage.

“Really?” Viv yelled as she backpedaled against the counter. “Really, Nous? Emeric? You absolute—”

She pushed away the hand holding a shiv and blocked the front kick but the weight of it made her back slam painfully against the edge of the counter. She still ducked under a hook that clipped the top of her head. The thug somehow moved back from her uppercut but he was off balance. Her next jab caught him in the plexus. He was thrown back with a welp of pain.

Viv stood and shrugged her shoulders. The card player had stood white the head thug was making for her with his goons in tow. The leftover anger from the previous day surged through her. Unbridled, unabated fury washed away her self-control like a tide, only leaving clamps on her use of mana. Delicious rage ignited her spine, her chest. Her muscles flexed. Her fingers found two nearby seats and grabbed them. The wood groaned piteously.

A rictus of cruelty bloomed on her face and she didn’t care.

“Fine. That. is. FINE!”

No spells needed.

“Let’s bleed this cu—”

The card player blocked a thrown seat, the crazy the other, so they missed Viv sprinting forward and kicking the player. She aimed for his nuts and missed, still caught him in the belly. He flew back, taking the playing table with his girth. Iron bits flew everywhere. Other players screamed. One of them grabbed the fallen gambler as he picked himself up and kicked him. Other folks were standing. Meanwhile, Viv dodged a shive thrust and maneuvered around the crazy to keep the thug leader from reaching her. She found a discarded chair and slammed him with it, once, twice. She relished every impact. Every time her victim grew more confused by her power. The sound of wood on flesh. On the third blow, she got him in the temple but the chair broke. The thug captain’s group moved to surround her so she jumped back over a table. The people there complained. They stood to block the thug captain’s men. Someone threw a punch. The two groups started wailing on each other. Chaos spread through the inn.

Viv jumped on the thug captain, using a burst of speed and strength. Her boot snapped his head back but he caught her heel, then pivoted to send her flailing on the closest wall. Her mind was faster than theirs but they moved with great instinct. Two thugs made to catch her. She used the wall to twist on herself and dodge under their grasp. A hook in the ribs sent the first against a wrestling pair. All three men swore. The other punched her in the shoulder then grabbed her from behind. She tried to make him lose balance and failed completely, but a brief struggle let her free her neck. She bit down on his arm. It was salty and gross but his screams were delicious.

She was sent flying again. Their strength and her weight meant a lot of being thrown around which irritated an already inflamed mind. Those absolute fuckers.

She slammed through the window. It broke and she was outside. Peons watched her bounce on one hand to avoid wiping the entire plaza with her fancy cloak. The dog whined.

She was standing.

Common sense said she was out and should make a run for it. Unfortunately, common sense was taking a vacation for its own mental health. Viv crashed back in like a discount battering ram into the back of an unfortunate twat whose main sin was being downrange.

“SOMEONE GET THAT INSANE MIDGET!” the thug captain roared as he made his way through the melee.

“Come and get it, asshat!”

The captain finally pushed past the last fighter by punching them in the jaw. Viv spotted his furious gaze as he broke through the last pair only to catch a face full of beer.

“NERIAD NOT AGAIN!”

Before he was even blinded, Viv grabbed an entire table and swung overhead. It caught against a hanging candelabra which broke under the strain. Her downward strike smote the captain clean on the head.

“Ow!”

He pushed the table aside and caught the candelabra on the nose as gravity finished what the vandal title had started. Against all odds, the thug recovered, though he was bleeding heavily.

He and Viv moved in to demolish each other.

The slugging contest was short and brutal. It was clear the man had skill and experience while Viv had stats. He exploited his superior reach and weight to keep her away. It mostly worked. Meanwhile, Viv deflected all of his blows before they got to her nose. He moved in to try and wrestle her but that was his mistake. She gripped his wrist and twisted, sending him careening on the ground. She jumped on him but he twisted, kneeing her in the cheek.

“STOP RIGHT NOW!” A voice bellowed.

Viv did so, not because the pressure of an intimidation skill affected her but because it did everyone else. She was finally cooling down enough to realize that might have been a mistake.

A massive man in gambeson stood at the edge of stairs heading up. He had long dark hair and an eye patch. Muscular arms crossed over a massive chest.

The brain was here.

Outside, whistles echoed each other.

“Maranor’s cunt, you dickheads got a patrol in my business. Out, everyone. OUT!”

The harried barman pressed something and a secret door opened at the back. All assembled thugs ran with abandon, previous opponents pulling each other up to escape. Viv followed. They moved through back rooms and out of a garden door, facing a small yard. Two guards in crimson uniforms waited, but they paled and backed away when they realized they were outnumbered fifteen to one. For some reason, one of the two found Viv at the back of the formation.

“Halt! In the name of the law, stop right there!”

Viv completely ignored a weak compulsion.

“Kiss my ass, pig!”

The guards went after her as the group scattered through a labyrinth of backstreets. To Viv's surprise, the thug captain grabbed a broken jar and swung. The piece of ceramic slammed into the leading guard's bassinet. That slowed him down considerably.

"Criminals!" the guard accused.

Well, yeah. Great deduction, Sherlock, Viv thought. She was getting the beginning of a hangover.

Her speed let her move quickly but she was hopelessly lost. Thankfully, a shade detached himself from a nearby corner before she resolved herself to using her gravity harness to go for the roof.

"Irao! Thank, errr, some god. Maradoc maybe?"

"You are being pursued. Follow."

"Okay!"

The Hadal led her to a sewer grate which didn't lead to a stinky mess but to a tunnel instead. They surfaced a few minutes later in a deserted warehouse. Viv hoped Elunath had not been alerted but there was probably no reason for it. Bar brawls had to be common around those parts.

"Are you feeling better?"

Viv shrugged. She had taken a few hits. She didn't feel any pain though - maybe just a little tired.

Elemental bodies were cool.

Except the short part.

And the emotion overloads.

Bah.

"Yes, much better, thank you."

Elunath woke up.

The surface part of him opened its eyes while his perception extended downward and outward through the sedimentary strata below Helock. His mind glanced over the tunnels, caves, passages, secret exits and underground bases below his city, noting the familiar pitter patter of innumerable footsteps, then it traveled up to the cobbled streets, the marble slabs and ground levels of hovels and palaces. A moment of focus brought the voice of opposition

leader Dalni with whom he had a spat. The old man had stayed upstairs today as well so the sound returned malformed and garbled beyond recognition. There were no anomalies. Frustrated yet relieved, he rose from the massive bed at the heart of his private quarters. The wards flickered down.

Laina had forgotten a piece of garment. It lay discarded on the ground, lost when she had retired. She would need to be disciplined again for her sloppiness. Perhaps he should have her tonight as well. A thought for later. He frowned. So many frustrations, so many unfinished businesses because he had been soft and accommodating. The Baranese contract. The outlander bitch surviving somehow. Her futile but still harmful provocation he had no time to deal with. The government's petition for his research on fast wall-making. Accursed builders guild. Worries gnawed at him like a flock of birds peck by peck.

"I should stop sleeping. No, this is a trap."

Research was formal. Elemental archmages... disappeared. They never lasted more than a few centuries before going off the map. Elunath thought he knew why. Sometimes, it was hard to say where his body stopped and the earth started. Sleeping, eating, teaching, fucking, those anchored him. But they took time. His most precious resource.

Another quick glance confirmed that the manor was in order. The girls were more or less where he expected them to be. They knew better than to slack off in the morning. With one last sigh, he made his way to the bath. A flex of will filled the low pool with warm water. He went through the motions, bored. His mind wandered.

He caught something unusual.

His names were on many lips, those muttering excitedly. He followed one at random.

"You think it's true?"

"Powerful men get powerful appetites. It's known. You'd do the same if you could, you dog."

"Yeah but... young ones? Mages?"

"Likes them fresh, he does."

"The Academy won't be happy."

"The Academy won't do shit and you won't either. Stop wagging your tongue like a fisherwoman and help me get this down."

Elunath stopped. Another flex of will saw his perfectly sculpted body dried and clothed. He moved through the house like a storm as more and more eavesdropped conversations drifted to him. He found his office and on top of the desk, Sen had left a pile of cheap papers. He levitated the first one to him.

"Hide your daughters!"

Did you ever wonder what secrets Elunath hides in the recess of his manor? Well, wonder no more. A recent testimony validated by the Neriad temples confirmed that all of the archmage's 'apprentices' are in fact sex slaves bound by a decades long contract! So if you want your girls to attend the Academy instead of being diddled by a pervert three hundred years their elder, watch out for 'opportunities'."

Fury made the pamphlet disintegrate into little pieces. He swore with feeling when he saw there were others.

"Congratulations, you are paying more taxes than Elunath! Because he isn't paying anything."

That wasn't true, he compensated the government by maintaining the city walls for free! That saved them hundreds of gold talents every year!

"Is Elunath working with the Halurians? He has not fought in a war in decades. He has encouraged Halurian immigration. Two Halurians have recently joined his perverted harem. We are just asking questions!"

Those motherfuckers.

"I did not know about the Halurian connection," Abe whispered, "I am impressed that you would untangle what must be a net of conspiracies with such alacrity."

"What? Oh no, that's false," Viv casually replied.

"... false?"

"I'm abusing something called the Gish gallop. Just throw a lot of accusations at someone really fast and they get overwhelmed. Doesn't matter that the allegations are made up. They just need to be plausible."

"I... we are lying?"

"Hmm yes? Through our teeth? This is a smear campaign."

"I do not know what to think about this. I... need to consider... It seems fair to use any tools that do not hurt innocents, and yet... I... I will return to my garden now."

"Sure. Just wait until people start to join the fray."

"Will they not get tired of lies?"

"Oh no. Soon they'll spin 'exaggerations' themselves."

“This challenges the moral compass I have imposed on myself. I am leaving.”

“I heard he’s impotent. That’s why he got all these girls and no kids. Used witchery to make himself handsome but he got no meat so he got to fuck them with a dick made of granite,” a baker said to her friend.

“Ain’t that a little cold? Using stone, I mean.”

“How do you know?”

“The first night’s results seem conclusive though everyone is waiting for Elunath’s response for now. It will take a little while to break his hold over the populace. They are too afraid for now but the longer this goes on, the more damaged his image of invincibility will grow. It’s also possible I should have spaced the accusations a bit more over a couple of days instead but overall response seems positive according to Lim’s network,” Viv said.

“Must we work with that individual? I do not think she can be trusted,” Abe remarked. “And I have concerns about the... penis insinuations.”

“I didn’t make that one. And you are right not to trust Lim. She’s an opportunist. Does good work though.”

//Focus, Your Grace.

“Right. The slum arcane speakers with recorded messages have been a salutary idea. I suggest extending them to the southern district and pushing the Halurian connection aspect as they’ve proven to be the most racist population group.”

“Lim gave a report that the gang leader considers union with a Halurian to be miscegenation,” Sidjin added.

//That is correct.

“It’s settled then. What about the backup pamphlets?”

“I have finished them,” Abe said. “And we are ready for the grab.”

“Bank first. It will be the greatest prize and I don’t want Elunath to wise up and add additional defenses. It will be difficult enough as it is. We’re still good for tonight?”

“It cannot come soon enough,” Irao whispered.

Fury filled the archmage.

“Sen. Get over here. Bring Lana.”

He kept his attention on the dark-skinned beauty as she rose from her seat at the entrance, then found Lana helping one of his newer acquisitions learn blue mana mastery. The tone in Sen’s voice hinted at Lana that something was wrong because the smaller woman froze. Was it guilt? Those women were playing games with him, hiding things. They conspired behind his back after he pulled them from the mud and gave them everything they had. It was never enough for them.

Maybe he should have Lana tonight. Then a pillow ‘talk’.

Elunath tracked the two as they strode to his office with hurried steps, watching their every move for a sign of duplicity. How did the pamphleteers know? Collusion?

The two women entered after a short knock. They stood at attention, eyes lowered. He couldn’t tell if they were truly afraid. They ought to be afraid. Especially Lana.

Elunath tossed her a copy of the first pamphlet. Lana caught it with a hand that shook just a little. Cracks. He would find out soon enough.

“Explain,” he ordered.

She read. She licked her lips. She made him wait. He was not one to be made to wait.

The backhand caught her in the jaw and she fell against the wall. He’d broken the skin of her lip. Blood dripped down her dress though she made no move. She waited, eyes still lowered. No hint of panic or guilt. Just resigned patience. That calmed him down, which led to another flare of anger. She was manipulating him after a fashion. She knew how to handle him so he would stop. She could not be trusted.

“I do not understand,” she said.

“Only one person stayed with the witch for any duration. Only one person could get a contract copy to a priest of Neriad to get them to swear. And make those... vile accusations.”

A flash of anger and outrage went through the woman’s glare, gone so soon he could have imagined it.

“Unless...”

He turned to Sen. She shook her head.

“The contract is still in the secured box under my desk. I’m sure of it, and besides, the witch’s testimony would have sufficed to a priest of Neriad. They wouldn’t need the original document so long as she swore. Any caster of our level has perfect recall.”

“Even a witch?” Elunath asked with suspicion.

“Yes.”

“Well, it has been so long since I was weak. I tend to forget the requirements for each step.”

He searched his mind a little. He did not quite forget things. The knowledge was merely not immediately available. Ah, yes, he remembered now.

“I suppose. Yes. It remains... plausible.”

He sat back in his throne, giving a glare to indicate they were not off the hook just yet. Lana used the opportunity to stand back up and wipe her mouth. Her dress was stained. More pointless expenses to get that cleaned up.

“Sen, the witch clearly recruited a copy maker, most likely local. Compare with past works registered at the scribe office and find out who it is. I will pay them a visit. Lana, retain the services of our dear inspector general. I believed the witch would crawl like a cockroach in the sewers where she belongs but she is not there, so I assume she found a mud pit somewhere outside the walls. Have it found but do not intervene. I want to have the pleasure myself. Favor stinky, isolated bogs and you will likely find her.”

“Sir, the inspector general might refuse you.”

“What did you just say?”

Lana swallowed but persevered.

“The rules of the vendetta forbid the use of public resources.”

“Nobody can tell me no without consequences.”

“As you say,” Lana replied.

“That will be all. Dismissed.”

The two girls walked away. A spot of congealing blood against a column distracted him for an instant so he waved it away, stone obediently swallowing the spilled ichor. Harmony returned to the room. His patience was frayed.

“Renea. Come,” he whispered.

“At once, Your Grace,” his pale servant replied.

Elunath watched her rush up from the basement lab. If only all of his pupils were like Renea, the world would be a better place. She was eager, disciplined, and aware of her station. Helock was at peace because its people understood the natural order, one enthroned by magic itself. Agents of discord like the witch could not be allowed free reign.

“My lord?” she asked when she arrived.

Elunath inspected her posture. Leaning forward, excited to hear what her new purpose might be. He would have to reward her later. Place her above those backstabbing leeches.

“Someone has been badmouthing me all over town. You are to contract the Ustav agency and find who’s left sound magic enchantments in the slum. They will have to be replaced or recharged soon. Possibly tonight. Catch them in the act.”

“Very well, my lord. I will direct them personally.”

“Yes, Excellent initiative Renea. You never disappoint me. Say, Lana mentioned that the inspector general might not support me in a search outside the walls. What do you think?”

Elunath watched her consider her reply. That was fine. He hated people blabbering uselessly.

“No one would dare defy a direct request from you, however, here I will have to agree with her. Helockian officials will drag their feet. Oh, they will not overtly refuse you. Instead, they will make excuses.”

“They always make excuses.”

“Indeed, my lord. If I may, a search for that ungrateful...”

Elunath gave a warning glare. Curses were not tolerated here, yet he appreciated the venom in Renea’s voice.

“Perhaps the Ustav might be convinced to employ their ‘bounty hunters’,” she said instead.

“Those slave catchers?”

“They have experience in the wilderness, my lord. It will be costly, however.”

“Money is not a factor at the moment. My mind lingers on an intriguing little contract for warborn tattoo ink from our friends from the south. I will not suffer distractions. I want this issue promptly resolved and the witch found so I can... impart wisdom upon her.”

Renea smirked.

“As you will, my lord. And for those awful rumors I heard about? Should we respond?”

“You want me to roll in the filth with whores and fishmongers in a contest of gossip?” he roared.

Renea flinched. Elunath stayed his hand. She meant well.

"I am above such concerns, Renea. The sheep will think what the sheep enjoy thinking, as they always do. As for those who propagate those lies... they will be dealt with. Dismissed."

Chapter 144: Banking with Bob.

"I need to know you can do it," Irao said.

"Sure," Viv replied.

"Otherwise we need to delay and train."

"No problem."

The Hadal gazed at Viv with an insistent and slightly upsetting intensity that would have left most people nervous. Viv wasn't affected. The slitted eyes were just that and his ability as one of the world's foremost assassins didn't matter because she knew with absolute certitude he was just a big nerd eager to try himself against a security system. It was rare for Irao to have fun. She wanted him to have fun.

"I feel like you are surrendering leadership of this project to me," he finally said.

"My dad always used to say, listen to the experts. You don't have to do what they say but you have to listen. But he was a politician not a thief so we will all follow you on this one. We all want this to succeed."

"I see."

The long pauses made talking with Irao a little slow but that was fine. Viv's mind could split and wander. She was considering new spells at the moment and dedicated part of her mind to their conception when she had nothing else to do.

"Follow me."

They left the living quarter of the Chalice towards the main ritual room which was wide enough to suit their purposes. Irao had prepared a few tests with the help of Abe, who himself stood at the side like a statue.

"The first test concerns mana detection. The bank will have threshold seals. Those are constructs that trigger when the mana intensity increases past a certain point. You are a caster. You know about ambient mana?"

"Yes, I do. Threshold seals will only activate past a certain point, a level much higher than the ambient level of magic to prevent constant false positives due to natural variations. If a spell is cast in the vicinity, inefficiencies will lead to mana bleed, which increases the ambient

magic. Similarly, once a spell fades, the leftover mana will disperse. That means that the seals will detect if someone casts a spell. In theory. In practice, efficient spellcasting and spells that remain linked to the caster means that the mana is reabsorbed.”

Viv walked between a pair of two seals Abe had placed on the ground, They looked like flat hexagonal discs, thicker in the middle. They were surprisingly easy to make and quite durable as well. She used an excalibur and then a thin net in quick succession. The discs did not react at all.

“Seals will be more spaced in the corridors and just about that close to each other in the safe room.”

“Hmmm. Yes,” Irao conceded. “Then there is the gate ward.”

They moved to a corner of the room where Abe had formed a block of solid stone in the likeness of a massive circular door and its surrounding wall. A thin tapestry of mana ropes criss-crossed its surface in a shiny net of interlocked, colorful strings. It looked pretty, Viv thought.

“Gate wards are not meant for durability. They are meant to snap if the gate is tampered with, alerting the guards. Unfortunately, the door is still much easier to breach than the surrounding walls so we will have to go with that. The best way to handle a gate ward is to stretch it. It requires great mana control since the ropes need to be fed at the same time as they are pulled or they might splinter. Like so.”

“I have changed the pattern according to Irao’s recommendation. It should match the defenses more closely,” Abe helpfully added.

“Great,” Viv said.

She plucked at the strings and stretched them three at a time with patient focus. After she was done, she used an excalibur to carve a hole through the stone. The bank gate would be more solid, of course, but it made little difference to her spell.

That was one of the times when Vandal was actively useful.

Once done, Viv was left with a Viv-sized gap in the defenses through which she squeezed with reasonable dexterity.

“Aaaaand done.”

She did not yelp when Irao slid through the hole as if through a door but it was a close thing.

“Yes. Hmm. Impressive.”

He pondered his next sentence carefully.

“You are good at this.”

“I think I have to remind you that I am good at magic. Very good, in fact.”

“Yes. Now we only need to memorize—”

Viv manifested a full, three-dimensional map of the bank with all exits and the main defense points as well as several possible avenues of retreat.

“— the layout. You are prepared. I have no more questions.”

“Abe did a great job.”

“I had the time and motivation,” the lich gracefully admitted. “I have prepared your gear, though I will act as overwatch as suggested. We may leave when ready.

“Alright. Out of curiosity, how did you plan on getting past the safe gate?”

“Acid. I can pass through... tiny spaces. I cannot take much with me. I would have had to steal one thing only.”

//I wish to steal too.

They turned to the striding form of Solfis.

“What do you want in there?” Viv asked.

//I am not certain yet.

//I wish to acquire a trophy.

“Not a head this time please.”

//I left my embalming tools in Harrak.

“Taatatata I said I didn’t want you to mention that anymore!”

//Then do not bring up the topic.

//As Abenezigel said, we are prepared.

//We should depart at night.

//The flesh bags should consume nutrients for the night will be long.

“Yeah yeah.”

The five active members of the League of Lesser Evil dropped from the chalice at low speed. Viv floated in her harness; Sidjin and Abe flew. Irao was doing something for sure since he was keeping up with them. It was just hard to look at. As for Solfis, he hung to Abe’s tall frame which made the bone duo a horrible sight to behold. The lights of Helock sprawled

below, poorer areas forming blotches of darkness on an otherwise colorful tapestry. There was no unity of color when it came to magical lights so the noble district shone like a Christmas tree in the cold night. They came across a patrol of flying griffin riders, fortunately, they were looking downward.

Everyone landed on the roof of the theater which was decorated with statues and poorly warded. Abe immediately used a spell to hide himself in the shadows with the bag containing their emergency supplies. Meanwhile, the four others crossed the street, still levitating. They stopped moving when a patrol of guards passed underneath.

Viv and Sidjin wore sealed black body suits that masked skin heat and even their smell. On top of that, Viv used a mana coating on herself with the darkness intent which made her almost impossible to notice. Abe would not take any chances. Sidjin immediately went to work on one of the few high windows present in the building. He placed spikes in the stone to stretch the ward, then pulled using brown magic. What had started as a slit became a lozenge wide enough for people to go through. He, too, used a spell to mask his presence completely with black mana while the remaining three got in. Irao was able to select people who were allowed to see him and Viv's coat of dark mana had no effect on him so they were able to see one another. As for Solfis, he trailed them at a distance. They found themselves in a wide corridor, surprisingly spacious and soberly decorated. It was the administrative wing, a relatively defenseless section that was never locked on account of employees often pulling all-nighters. The largest door directly to Viv's right stood partly open, a band of light shining on lush red carpet. That was the director's office.

He was apparently pulling an all nighter alright, with his vice-director whose office lay a little farther. Abe's report stated that the two men held a fierce work rivalry. That didn't extend to late night, however, as the pair was engaged in an intense, passionate bout of coitus.

Viv had never seen a heist movie where this sort of thing happened so she wasn't exactly sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing. Irao led the way by crawling on the ceiling and placing handholds for easier movement. The ceiling was because most defenses were on the ground along with most guards. The handholds would help Solfis not leave his mark on masonry, and also reduce the strain on Viv's antigrav harness. Stamina would be a factor in this operation.

Viv floated after him. The three then made their way along the corridor in perfect silence, leaving quiet seals in their wake. They bypassed a high ward by walking 'above' it. Viv noticed several alarm constructs here and there. Most of them were linked to barely visible amulet readers to permit employees to deactivate them as they went through. Viv realized that someone without mana sight would struggle immensely in this place. They reached the first real obstacle in the form of a massive door that blocked their way to the central stairs, but Irao easily bypassed it by removing a high panel.

The second floor was deserted so they simply made their way down an unlocked gate to the second floor balcony which overlooked the atrium, still clinging to walls like a bunch of spiders. The entrance was completely shut. A guard with a dog patrolled at a sedate pace. Viv followed Irao down the wall, making sure to use the handholds. There were a few

pressure plates scattered around, after all. They were near the basement stairs when the dog growled and turned around, looking directly at them.

Viv was absolutely sure she could not be seen while Solfis was still hidden by a pillar. She was also sure she could not be smelled and they had not made a noise, yet the dog still whined a bit, sniffing the air and searching. The guard joined it with a frown. She was an older woman with keen eyes. Viv felt sweat pearl on her brow. A moment later, her ears picked up the dulled echo of a particularly intense orgasm.

The guard sighed and pulled on the leash. Viv guessed it was not an unusual occurrence. They waited for the patrolling pair to turn their backs to continue.

The stairs down led to two locked gates made of solid bars. A second major obstacle.

The way things worked was that the guard in the middle was supposed to open and close those one at a time to let people in as a sort of air lock but without the air part. The purpose was to add a human layer to the defenses as they were regarded as more reactive. The bars were there to stop intruders while still letting the guard see approaching intruders. It was a tradeoff that would cost the bank dearly.

The plan called for Irao to disable the guard with a blowdart filled with soporific liquid. It would then be child play to disable the locks on the gate while blocking the loud sound that came with opening the door. Unfortunately, there was another unforeseen development.

The first thing Viv saw was a pair of contracting pale buttocks. The guard was furiously pumping into a woman in scribe robes he held against the wall. The couple let out muffled moans with each thrust, naked legs locked around a muscular back.

Irao turned and shrugged, shaking his head in the universal gesture of 'the fuck is this'. Viv returned the gesture then made the sign for 'two' and 'arrows', following which Irao revealed he had enough blow darts to take down half the city.

Viv made the sign to wait. The couple's furious embrace was reaching a crescendo. The man kissed the woman silent when she convulsed in the throes of pleasure, then they half collapsed against the wall in a tangle of limbs. The man laughed softly.

Viv made the sign for 'now'. Irao hit them both and the pair finally fell down, pink and pleased. With any luck, they would believe they just fell asleep.

It was child's play to get through the two gates, not least because the guard had already taken the care to muffle the alarm so as not to let his colleagues know he had a guest. Another set of stairs layered in wards and seals led them down into the basement and to the last obstacle.

"Unplanned difficulty," Irao gestured after he checked the angle with a thin mirror.

Viv checked. A solid, metal statue engraved with runes stood guard at the back of the very last tunnel, the door firmly in front of it. It would necessarily see them as they worked to open

it. Golem sight pierced dark mana. It also ignored the darkness intent's main function which was to instantly tell people to look elsewhere because this spot was empty.

Abe's notes didn't mention that. It was probably a recent addition.

Irao thought for a moment. He pulled the three people back.

"Can you make an opaque shield? Something that emits light rather than hides it."

//An inspired idea.

//Base models are programmed to identify threats based on mana and shape.

//A rectangle of light would not be recognized as an intruder.

"Wouldn't it know something is wrong?"

//Base models do not have the capability to recognize that 'something is wrong'.

//It will take another few centuries of golem before those primitives can patch out the most common exploits.

"Huh. Well. Sure, give me a moment. And I won't be able to maintain it to shield all of you while I work on the gate. Even I am not that good yet."

//Do not be concerned.

//I have a plan.

Viv knew how to make a shield. She also knew how to make light of a certain color. It took five minutes of effort but eventually she had a working thick blue pane that shone like a fucking lighthouse but didn't bleed mana. It was lucky they didn't have guards down. When she made a sign she was ready, Solfis had emptied a vase off its potted tree. He held the ceramic between two delicate claws.

Viv had no idea what the fuck was going on.

The trio lined up and crawled over layered wards, Viv at the front next to Irao. They progressed slowly. The golem didn't react. They moved past the safe room gate until Solfis was directly over the golem, then, with slow movement, he delicately placed the upside down vase on top of the other golem's head.

The improvised hat settled down with a light clonk.

//User notice.

//Visibility obstructed.

They waited.

And that was it. They returned to the gate with the sentry now blinded by a vase. Viv looked behind and shook her head. It was at that moment that Irao made the sign he was leaving.

“What?” Viv signed in panic.

The Hadal replied with perfect calm by showing his tiny backpack, which was empty. He had run out of handholds. With quick motions, he indicated he was going to fetch more before disappearing in a flash of darkness.

Viv was left behind, appalled.

‘I thought this was a serious outfit,’ she told herself before coming to an unpleasant realization.

She was the nominal head of said outfit.

She was the one who had gathered a genocidal golem, a slightly autistic retired assassin, an undead dork and a fallen prince. It was her fault. She had done this to herself.

Chapter 144.2: The League steals.

Every damn second spent waiting for Irao to return cost Viv a year of lifespan, or it would have if she still had a lifespan anymore. Her heart thundered in her chest and she bit her tongue not to swear in case the potted golem had ears. Solfis spent the entire thirty seconds inspecting his inferior brethren. When the Hadal returned, he had the audacity to lift an eyebrow and point at the door.

Viv realized that she technically could have started on opening it. This was her part of the job. Now she was angry at herself for acting stupid. Great. With a silent sigh, Viv got to it.

The net covering the door was exactly as Abe had recreated it. She had practiced on that construct until she could stretch it reliably and quickly, yet she still took her time. There was no reason to hurry. The change of the guard would take another half an hour at the very least and the only thing they were bound to find was not-safe-for-work material. With deliberate focus, she made a decent sized opening in the structure, leaving the enchanted steel exposed. A last inspection using her mana senses confirmed that there were no spells directly on the other side. Everything was normal.

Viv called a thin Excalibur, then muffled the sound made by cutting the opening. Once she finished separating a disc, it was a simple matter to levitate the hunk of metal on the floor, taking great care not to trigger a pressure plate. Irao went first, then Viv followed him with Solfis watching over her.

The safe room was small and cramped with safes piled on top of one another. Elunath’s safe was at the back. They stuck to the ceiling once again since the entire ground floor was made of pressure plate in this room. There were no more wards except those on the safes. Viv notices that Elunath had an additional layer of defense. Unfortunately for him, they were all

near the lock so Viv simply cut a hole near the hinges. They ended up with a head-sized gap in the protective steel. It was now time to check the loot. She excitedly glanced through the opening.

What she saw surprised her at first. There were no obvious valuables. Only stacks of documents tied together alongside a little black notebook she picked up after checking for lingering enchantments. It was encrypted in some script she'd never seen though the structure of the text evoked a list of profiles. Abe would probably be able to make sense of it. She picked an errant document at random. She opened it.

It was a saucy letter thanking a certain 'Lezebeth', or Lezzie, for a night of torrid carnal acts, and it was signed 'your Bareon'. At first, Viv recoiled before the medieval equivalent of sexting but soon, the names triggered an old memory from her ethics class.

Lezebeth Icarina, leader of the Builders Guild.

Bareon Adolis, current head of the minority faction in the Council of Elders.

Definitely no formal alliance. Most definitely married to other people.

Holy shit.

Viv opened another. It was a financial record with circles around what she immediately recognized as 'creative accounting'. Another document was a will repudiating an important socialite. There were dozens of similar documents.

That was... Elunath's entire collection of blackmail material, organized and ready for plunder. She immediately shoved everything into a bag, only stopping to check for enchantments. There were none. She turned excitedly to find that Irao had opened another safe and removed a fancy cup made of bone with inserted black pearls and a tiny little skull. It looked tacky and quite old. Irao certainly seemed to like it. With his trophy obtained, they were ready to depart.

Viv resisted the urge to open more safes. She was here to mess with Elunath, not ruin families.

Had to resist. She was here for the lesser evil which was more or less the greater good if one thought about it.

Solfis waited for them outside. The plan had always been to use his monstrous strength to carry their loot, in case it was something massive. His assistance would not be needed after all but Viv still wanted to give him the bag to hold. She stopped and gawked as soon as she was out.

Solfis was hanging upside down with his feet and hands firmly anchored on handholds like the universe's ugliest, deadliest sloth. Attached to his body like a baby sloth by stolen curtain ropes... was the bank's golem.

Viv firmly gestured her incomprehension.

//You can talk, Your Grace.

//I have taken the liberty of deactivating the golem.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

//I am stealing.

//You unequivocally gave me the permission to do so.

“I didn’t say you could steal their fucking security system!”

//You never forbade it either, Your Grace.

“What do you even intend to do with that thing?”

//A great many things which should not be listed right now.

“Great. Fantastic. Isn’t it too heavy?”

//I have secured it to my satisfaction.

Viv resisted the urge to slap her face. It was her fault. Her fault. And arguing with Solfis was an exercise in futility. At this stage, she just wanted out.

“Ok well fine, fiiiine. Let’s just leave then. I’ve had enough.”

The crew retraced their steps, Irao recovering his handholds as they retreated past the sleeping couple and up to the atrium where they waited for the poor dog and guard pair to be at a respectable distance. Viv felt sorry for that unfortunate lady who would probably be fired alongside everyone else although she was the only one doing her job. They retreated to the third floor where the director and his rival had started another round, then absconded through the window. The escape was surprisingly eventless. As soon as everyone had gathered on the theater’s roof, they took off and returned to the Chalice with no one the wiser.

The next morning.

Two men in the gambeson of Helock’s guard sat on the step of the previously unassailable Bank of Helock, smoking pipes under the curious gaze of a crowd of gossips. The younger one sighed heavily.

“That’s some mess we got on our hands.”

“Damn right,” the other replied, “in thirty years of career I’ve never seen the like. No wards triggered. No missing guards. No seals broken. No signs of entry of any sort. If it weren’t for

the damaged safe room door, no one would have noticed the theft until the customers came.”

“They cut through enchanted steel too, and without bleeding mana. And without melting it! Who the fuck can even do that?”

“I don’t know. Hell, I’m scared to find out. No one is safe in this city. It’s a terrifying thought.”

“Yep. Never seen such a flawless job before. One thing’s for sure. We’re dealing with gods-damned professionals.”

Elunath held two new pamphlets in his trembling hands. Rage filled him in a way that no emotion had touched in a very long time.

“What is the meaning of this? I killed that idiot myself. WHY DO THEY HAVE MORE OF THOSE?”

His gaze landed on Sen.

“They must have anticipated it.”

She pointed at the first pamphlet.

“Is Elunath afraid of the truth?”

Yesterday, our previous copier was found killed by a falling boulder.

It happened one day after he bravely showed the truth about Elunath.

Coincidence? You decide.

Elunath is trying to silence us but the truth will always come out!”

“They must have anticipated your move,” she said.

Elunath dragged her bodily with kinesis until she stopped against his desk with a pained huff. He had never used violence with her yet but that was her fault for provoking him. She should know better.

“Are you saying I’ve been outwitted by her? HER?”

“You had no choice but to react,” Sen croaked, “so she had notes ready. Her or someone else.”

“Yes! Yes. She has a low, animal cunning but she lacks the intellectual faculties to come up with such a devious plan. She must have received help from... someone. Most likely my political opponents. I need to... visit him again. Remind him of the cost of duplicity.”

He glared at the second pamphlet.

“Elunath purchased dark gods artifacts.

It should be expected when one believes himself above the law. Elunath has purchased a cursed club bearing the mark of a dark god, according to a sworn witness to the transaction.

This dark staff could be anywhere in our fair city, spreading its vicious corruption.

Protect your families from the clutches of evil!”

The piece of paper was shredded by an uncontrolled burst of mana.

“That bitch sold that thing to me herself. The gall. The audacity. The hypocrisy! I will not spend a second more than necessary on this sorry diversion. I ought to be obtaining ink for your tattoos, not wasting time chasing a rat! What of my orders?”

He caught another glare filled with venom from Lana. That decided it. Bedding Renea yesterday had been nice but this time, Lana would get a reminder.

“Renea and the mercenaries didn’t find anyone because no one recharged the sound speakers. They faded in the morning. Instead, someone installed more sound speakers in different parts of town, mostly near the south gate.”

“They saw such enchantments as disposable?” Elunath asked with disbelief.

“They appear well prepared,” Lana replied with a shrug. “As for the patrols outside of the walls, they have found several smugglers hideouts but no signs of her so far.”

“The city guard?”

“Their best investigators are busy with an important theft.”

“So they are delaying, as expected! Except killing the scribe you two found, which is something I did myself, nothing was achieved! Nothing! Can I count on anybody around here?”

“They are obviously well-prepared,” Lana finished after a short hesitation.

“You keep blabbering that excuse. It really is true. One can only count on oneself. You two go out and find a way to ‘motivate’ those mercenaries. Our foe comes and goes too easily to be very far. FIND THEM.”

They left in a hurry.

Elunath sat back in his chair and regretfully discarded the mail containing the ink and tattoo patterns he intended to purchase. It was time to drop the act. His servants would be marked as one announced their ownership. The contract gave them entirely too much leeway, and enforcing it required active focus on his part. The magic more or less warned him if someone was actively working against his interests but he needed to react to inflict pain. Tattoos were much more... visceral in their enforcements of magical binds. With those, he would no longer have to fear half-truths and secret sabotage. But that was for later. For now, he had a bug to squash.

No matter what, making so many copies had to cost a lot of money. She had to be getting it from somewhere. Bareon Adolis was a good place to start. If he wasn't responsible himself, his path would let him find who might be. He would comply if he knew what was good for him.

Elunath fell through the ground and swam through the rock towards the distant shape of Bareon's manor.