

---

## [055] (special)

---

Aisha sat in her dimly lit chamber, her hands trembling slightly as she tried to focus on the texts scattered before her. Every time her eyes closed, a surge of fear jolted her awake, her heart pounding like a drum in the quiet room. The rust-moss' ever constant glow from within the glass lamp flickered whenever the table was jostled. The shadows danced around the room, mirroring the turmoil in her mind.

Outside, the night was deep and still, the city of Doeta slept silently, the gardens of her estate calm and peaceful. The cool breeze that slipped through the window carried the distant sound of rustling leaves. Aisha's eyes darted over the scripture once more, desperate for answers, yet finding none.

That morning she had been the storm, she had been the unstoppable force. She'd thought lifting her ignorance would be like removing a fog. And now she realized that she stood between two precipices.

The door creaked open and she jostled, shuffling the parchment as if afraid it might fly away. "Is everything alright, my sayyida? I called, but..."

Aisha barely glanced at the servant, the old draxani, one of the very few who'd been at her side since before she'd taken her station. "It slipped my mind, Grauch." She answered truthfully with a wave of her hand.

"I've brought chia and a package, my sayyida."

"Yes, leave it here." She thoughtlessly declared, fingers brushing over the cold, rough parchment.

The scents that wafted from the small tray were meant to soothe her, but she found herself unable to calm down. They almost choked in her throat, and left Aisha torn between openly despairing or only doing so quietly.

Each word in the scripture seemed to mock her. A demons' corruption was a chameleon, its nature entirely dependent on the demon themselves, twisting flesh and mind alike, bestowing gifts as cursed as they were powerful. A recipient of this corruption could see their hearts and minds changed completely while under its influence... or not at all. When she'd read that the corruption would not be removed, even in the event of the demon's death, elation soared through her.

Liam would not awaken the next day, suddenly a changed man.

Aisha would've slept soundly if not because of the passage that followed: *Only in death is a mortal truly free of corruption.*

It was driving her insane. The Weaver and the High Priestess had either intentionally kept this from Aisha, or knew of a method that had been kept secret from normal mortals.

Perhaps someone with more air than brains would've bowed down and cowed at the blasphemous thought. Perhaps someone more pious than Aisha would've jumped to the conclusion that this was not her place to question the divine, that she should do as told and she would be rewarded. Perhaps Aisha would've agreed, if not because of the hole that gnawed at her like a worm eating an apple from the very core.

"Grauch." She called out, stopping the servant before he'd turned to leave. "If the Sultan came to you, personally, and ordered you to kill me, would you?"

"Ah, for someone of my station to be addressed by the Sultan... that would be terrifying." Grauch mused in that way that he did when trying to avoid a question in that way only he could. "I do not believe I would be able to work up the courage to obey."

"Even if it would displease the Sultan?"

"***Epecially*** because it would displease them." He emphasized, bowing low.

Aisha bit her thumb, unable to find comfort in his words. "Yes, thank you Grauch, you may leave."

"My sayyida." He gave a small nod of deference, and the door clicked shut.

The problem spun within Aisha's mind like a dancer that had taken too much to drink. It spun and spun, until all that was left was someone dizzy and unable to take a single step. Aisha felt herself wobbling as the uncertainty ate at her. There had to be an answer, a solution.

"I am only an Amil, what can I do in the face of a Goddess?"

Biting her lip, she paced, ignoring the cup of chia that gently rested on her desk. Hours marched by relentlessly as she kept looking for a loophole somewhere.

"I am only an Amil, I..." Her steps slowed, eyes slowly widening. The beverage on her desk had long since gone cold, her eyes passing over the little black wooden box, mind too wrapped up in sudden epiphany to register its presence. "I am only an Amil." Aisha

spoke the words slowly. “Why would a Goddess care about my existence? Is a gnat to me not what I am to the Weaver?”

Though it hurt to admit, in the face of the divine, Aisha was insignificant, a speck of dust in the wind. Yet, why had the Weaver spoken to her? Her, specifically? A fool would’ve answered that this was a test of faith, that it was impossible to comprehend the machinations of the divine.

But Aisha knew better. Had she not been as if a Goddess herself that very morning? Squishing bugs in her wake and having the insects obey and act upon her own self-interest? The Weaver cared not for Aisha, nor Liam for that matter. The only possible reason the Goddess had bothered to even give her a message was because Aisha was merely a necessary tool against the demons.

“The fate of a God is the destiny of a mortal...” She whispered, remembering her conversation with Liam, looking at the papers once more.

It had been a problem of scope. A few hundred mortals dead were of no concern to a God. By the same token, a mortal’s life being saved was equally insignificant. The ones that could care would be other mortals, priests, knights, and that High Priestess from the capital.

This was the gap she’d been looking for.

With the first rays of dawn falling upon her personal garden, Aisha steeled her resolve as she left the room to commence the operation she’d been tasked to fulfill. If only she didn’t intend to commit the highest form of blasphemy immediately afterwards, she might have been less nervous.

---

Wolf’s mortal form panted, heaved, and trembled as it reached the peak of the smaller half of the beak right as dawn broke over the horizon. Mortal lungs burned and heaved, mortal mouth parched, mortal lips cracked. A mortal fleshy heart loudly pumped blood through veins, its race through every vein and artery producing a sound not unlike lava flowing deep underground. It was a cacophony mixed in with the ragged sound of her necessary breaths.

Though the form she’d taken was that of a male orc, though every inch and every cell of her body was a near perfect functioning replica, Wolf’s mind was the one thing that was

not. Her consciousness took every detail from every one of her senses, each one heightened far beyond mortal limitations, yet trapped in this needless sack of flesh.

She could have tuned out the details, but to do so would be to leave blind-spots where she could not afford them. The sooner she finished this mission, the sooner the torture would stop.

Wolf meandered with falsely trembling steps, aware she was being watched by mortals through magical means, she pretended slight disorientation and exhaustion as she approached the structure that stood at this summit: a metal box the size of a head.

Within there was, unfortunately, no heads. It was merely a fistful of roset-moss, one that'd been sealed within a glass sphere. Wolf took it within her hands, watching as it began to glow, and waved it over her head, until the glow stopped.

Mortal eyes could not see what was happening further below, but Wolf's gaze pierced through every detail. It would be nearly an hour before she sensed someone casting a spell, a mage of a meager third-circle. The details were lost to her, too far away to truly catch the nuances, but seeing how the mage began to float upwards after a few minutes, it was clearly a flight spell of some kind... a slow one.

Wolf sighed.

She reached into the mind of her vessel and plucked out exclusively what was necessary for what was to follow. Wolf's inability to forget made it so every thought, every memory, every little instinct she drew from her vessel would be a memory that would potentially last for eternity. The mere thought of having to contaminate her existence with that of the filthy mortal she'd absorbed was repulsive, and yet necessary.

Perhaps she would ask Origin to erase anything that was irrelevant upon the discarding of this flesh.

It took the Emir of Doeta two hours to reach the peak.

Wolf, according to mortal protocol, knelt down, forehead pressed against the ground, not looking upon the Emir lest it draw insult and ire. "I greet the Emir," she said with the ugly orcish voice. Her other senses reached out, carefully observing the protections the man wore.

Most of the enchantments on the mortal were laughably useless, but there was a bracelet upon his person that wove a fine thread of detection against ephemeral attacks. A divine tool, carrying the smell of the Sentinel, meant to send out an alarm were the protections breached.

Wolf had not sensed this divine tool during her initial scouting of the city, which was concerning.

“Raise your head, lad, you’ve won the race faster than anyone’s achieved before.” The Emir spoke amusedly. The clothes he wore were richly made, and undeserving for someone with so ugly an aura. It was a stench of debauchery, of gluttony for riches, and of a complete lack of self-discipline. A mortal whose greatest redeeming quality appeared to be the station he occupied, if only because it might be snatched by someone more deserving. “Earned me good money too.”

“Th-the reward?” She mimicked the nervous hesitation someone of her station would have when faced with a mediocre mage.

Wolf’s memories and experiences had been as a huntress in the jungle, and not once had she tasted the presence of something so foul. A part of her wished to return to Liam’s shadow, if only to be spared this filth.

“The very first thing you ask for is gold!” The Emir laughed. “Good head on your shoulders, it seems. Don’t think of it, you’ll get your reward during the ceremony. Now come along, you need to be cleaned and clothed properly.”

Wolf bowed, scraped, and ushered thanks as the mage cast the flight spell once more. Her body floated alongside that of the Emir as they began their descent, at just the same slowness as it’d taken the mortal volar to come up to the peak.

Briefly, Wolf wondered whether she could just sabotage the spell and plummet to her vessel’s death.

The thought was dismissed and she sighed internally.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? Not many get to see Doeta like this. You should be honored.” The Emir drolled on, speaking empty platitudes as they continued on their way down.

There was one thing that Wolf noticed, however. Activity down in the streets, guards rushing through in coordinated movements as they spread out through the city. They were trying to be discreet, dressed with large capes and hoods, moving in groups of two or three. But Wolf had memorized the cadence of the steps of each guard on her way up, and a great deal of them were now moving all at once.

“*Bunny, something’s happening.*” She sent the telepathic command.

“*I hear it, they’re all over the place.*” The fellow aspect answered instantly. “*Liam?*”

Wolf spared a glance at the Amil’s estate. “*No activity there.*”

*"I think... shit!"*

*"Yes, your thoughts usually are."* Wolf couldn't help but make a jab, sending over what she was seeing in case Bunny could spot anything. As much as Wolf loathed to admit it, the horny aspect had a far better grasp of social dynamics and civilization.

There was no direct response, only a sudden spike of panic.

*"Bunny?"*

*"Unless they're doing a courtesy visit, they're about to raid the betting dens!"* The aspect's thoughts gave the distinct impression of being in a hurry. *"This is bad, really bad."*

Wolf hid her scowl, sparing a glance at the Emir, the man still rambling on and on about useless things. *"Explain, it's just coins."*

*"It's not just...!"* Bunny's thoughts cut off, when they connected again, she was already half-way across the city. *"The problem isn't just the coins. Most of the bets were made with Liam's money, money he didn't receive yet because all he was given was an IOU from the Amil!"*

*"That's the-"*

*"YES! That's the paper he gave me during the coffee date."* She growled. *"It's complicated, ok? His name isn't in any of those dens, but there's a parchment-trail, one the mortals could use to piece things together."*

*"Why leave a trail?"*

*"How else am I supposed to prove the promissory notes are worth a damn? Mortals are obsessed with money and validating it."* Bunny growled. *"Oh, also, it's most of the gold we were meant to spend on hiring mortals! Origin will be pissed!"*

Wolf understood some of the concern, but not all of it. If worse came to worst, couldn't they just kidnap mortals on the road or somesuch? Well, she wasn't about to try and impose her judgment on this, Origin had been clear, so long as a fight didn't break out, Bunny called the shots.

*"Do I do anything?"* She asked, hopeful to be ordered to act. *"The Emir has a divine tool on him, influencing him is not going to prove easy. Killing him will be easier."*

*"Just stick to the plan. I can't stop the raids without making this worse, but I should be able to erase our tracks and maybe steal some of the gold during the chaos."* Bunny's

thoughts carried with them a frantic edge. *“If I do it right, the only proof will be pointing at Liam and the legal dens, and we still end up with a tidy sum.”*

There was a mild sense of disappointment that coursed through Wolf as she heard this.

Things would've been so much easier if a fight broke out.

---

Bunny flew through the shadows of the city, her form flickering in and out of the mortal plane of existence as she crossed the complex terrain at a speed only an aspect would be able to. Her goal was not the dens, but several of the buildings the scribes used.

That was the linchpin of their paper-trail, the place that connected the illegal betting dens and her made-up name with Liam. Fortunately for her, the city was still in the middle of one big party, so the number of mortals near and around her target were minimal.

She could've just burnt the place, but to do so would draw too much attention. Origin had been clear to keep things discreet unless ordered otherwise, thus Bunny obeyed. She emerged within the scribe's personal library, a place where all important documents were archived and copied.

There was no point in searching the shelves one by one, she'd tagged the piece of parchment when she'd signed it, she knew exactly where to find it.

The moment she pulled the piece of parchment from the shelf, her ears caught the sound of a soft metallic “clink”.

The room around her shimmered with a wave of mana and divinity. Bunny was at the door that very instant, yet the moment her empowered fists met the flimsy piece of wood, the force bounced back, throwing her across the room like a rag doll. Thrice more she tried to pierce through barriers that should not have been able to contain her, and thrice more she was met with just as much force. Silence surrounded her, the sounds of the city were gone, similarly she could not reach out with her senses. Trying to contact Origin or Wolf to sound the alarm proved similarly futile, as did any attempt to jump into the extraplanar spaces, such as the shadow-world.

Gritting her teeth, she pressed her palms against the floor and began weaving a lattice of mana, spreading it out, soaking it into the wood, sensing how far it went.

It didn't.

There was an invisible wall, it lay barely a fraction of a hair's width above the wood, mimicking its texture and shape, made out of something that rejected all else, a surface that took everything she sent at it and reflected it back. Trying to make an attack that covered a large area of effect did nothing, trying to focus it down into a singular narrow needle-point of pressure did nothing. Hitting it with different spells of different natures at the same time did nothing.

Trying to look through it did nothing, trying to sense anything past it did nothing.

It was as if the world beyond this room was gone.

Or, more concerningly, as if the room had been plucked out of the world entirely.

"Ok, you caught me. This is a pretty nice box you made!" She called out, looking around, defenses raised and every sense sharp, pushed to the extreme. All around her the scribe's personal library lay in ruins, smoldering paper no longer to ignite now that all the oxygen had been burnt out (not that she needed to breathe anyway). "Are you going to finish the job? Because I'm not going down without a fight!"

As if in response to her challenge there was a shimmer, the barrier vanished, the world returned to existence past the door. She sent out a flurry of information to Wolf and Origin as she barrelled through the flimsy wooden door.

Liam was in danger.